Old Man by the Bar

by Varmint

Summary

All it took was one school teacher's decision for the reality of Konoha to be altered in a way that no one could have imagined. Follow Kiba Inuzuka, Sakura Haruno, and Chouji Akimichi as they grow as individuals, friends, and ninja. All with the help of that grumpy old man with all of the cool war stories.
Chapter 1

"Just what do you think you were doing, Kiba?" Iruka asked with his eyes narrowed just slightly, focused on the young Inuzuka in front of him. "You're not going to be making any friends if you keep scaring all the students away."

Kiba Inuzuka was not pouting. He never pouted. An Inuzuka never sulked. His bottom lip merely jutted out as a sign of disdain at being scolded yet again by the scarred chunin. He was merely kind of put off by not being able to complete the prank he had begun to set up.

Damn that loud mouthed Naruto.

"He's a jerk, Iruka Sensei! I don't want him to be my friend!" The boy growled, then spit out, "He ruined my prank!" before he could really stop and think about what he was saying.

As soon as the words had left his mouth, the Inuzuka had paled. He had not expected himself to be dumb enough to give away such valuable information without even a threat from his teacher.

The shout had Iruka quirking an eyebrow, scar crinkling slightly with the movement, "And what prank might that be, Kiba?"

With a nervous chuckle, the boy slightly shirked away from the man, "Uh... No prank?" But the lie rang clear enough and left the chunin shaking his head.

"You know better than this, Kiba." The man sighed in disappointment. "Planning pranks, starting fights, interrupting class, skipping class. This is nothing like you."

"I'm not the only one that skips! And you know that, Iruka Sensei!" Kiba shouted impulsively, once more forgoing thought for action.

"I am well aware of that, young man." Iruka frowned at the boy, slightly worried by how easily he had shouted, "And I will deal with your three accomplices after I've finished with you." He crossed his arms over his chest as he said this, making himself seem even more serious in the boy's eyes.

But Kiba, instead of backing down like a normal student would at the threat in the man's voice, merely continued glaring at the scarred chunin. "They're not my accomplices." He answered as he too crossed his arms over his chest, the fire in his eyes clear to his teacher.

Iruka could go two ways about this: Either he could show his dominance by threats, or he could back down and not risk an Inuzuka tantrum.

The choice was rather easy to make.

"Whatever you say." The man waved easily, then smirked at the boy. "Detention for three hours. You know where to go and what your menial task will be."

"Damn!"

"Oh, Sakura... you really shouldn't let those girls pick on you."

Iruka sighed softly as he spoke to the sniffing pink haired girl, feeling rather bad for having to have her sit down in front of him as if she were about to get scolded.
"I... I know, Iruka Sensei..." The young girl sniffled, sounding as if she were just a wrong move away from bawling. "But how am I supposed to stand up for myself? I don't know how!"

The tears brimming in her eyes were literally a millimeter away from spilling and Iruka found himself really hating his job for the fourth time in the day.

First he had to deal with the unruly Inuzuka brat that had gotten in a fight with Naruto. Then he had been forced to deal with Naruto himself because he couldn't let the blonde get away with what he had done to Kiba in retaliation. Getting him to accept his detention time had not been any easier than getting Kiba to shut up. After that, he'd found himself having to scold and punish Shikamaru for skipping on class, even though the Nara didn't care at all. And now he was supposed to be scolding Sakura for a trick she couldn't have possibly come up with, much less planned and executed.

Iruka knew it had been the group of girls that were always picking on the small girl. But he never had the evidence to give them the scolding they deserved. Unfortunately, he could say they were rather adept at hiding their tracks and pointing the evidence on a scapegoat. And that scapegoat was always the meek and much too kind Sakura Haruno.

"How can you ever be a proper kunoichi if you aren't able to stand up for yourself, Sakura?" Iruka shook his head softly as her big green eyes somehow widened further at his words, "Listen, you can't allow Ami and her friends to bully you. You are stronger than that, Sakura. I know you are."

"... I am?"

The whisper was barely loud enough for the scarred chunin to hear, but he was still able to catch it.

"Yes, Sakura. You are." He smiled earnestly as he said this, secretly hoping she would take his words to heart. "Now, I won't punish you because we both know the truth of what happened. But how about, if anyone asks, I had you dust the erasers? Does that seem like an appropriate punishment?"

The broad smile the girl gave him made up rather well for the fact that he still had one more troublemaker to deal with before the lunch break was over.

"Chouji, do you know why you are here rather than outside with the rest of your classmates?"

Five kids. Kiba, Naruto, Shikamaru, Sakura, and now Chouji. Why couldn't he ever have a quiet lunch? Seriously, sometimes it felt as if he didn't get paid enough to deal with most of the things he was put through on a regular basis.

"Because Shikamaru and I skipped class?"

Iruka couldn't help the soft smile that found its way onto his face. He had, at least, been lucky enough to deal with the calmest and most bashful of the kids to get in trouble last. The two most fiery ones had begun this whole scolding session, and then things had been rather simple once Shikamaru had strolled in. Although nothing was every truly simple when it came to children.

"Yes, Chouji. Because you skipped class."

Iruka knew that the child was a follower, not a leader. But he had to learn that his actions were his own and had their consequences. He couldn't continue referring to himself as 'Shikamaru and I'. That just wasn't healthy. He needed to create his own identity, one separated from his best friend.

"I'm sorry, Iruka Sensei. But Shikamaru and I were bored and-"
Iruka raised his hand calmly and the boy immediately ceased talking. "You can never truly excuse cutting class."

"I'm sorry, Iruka Sensei." The boy repeated quickly, shutting up immediately after having said this.

The boy was honest about his apology. That had been more than either Shikamaru or Naruto had felt about having gotten caught skipping class for the third time this month.

"I know you are, Chouji. But this is your third infraction of this kind." The scarred chunin told him softly but sternly, "I am going to have to tell your parents about this."

The way the Akimichi's face paled let Iruka know that he really didn't want his parents to know about this. And he felt slightly bad for this, because he hadn't even threatened Shikamaru with his parents yet. But Chouji was a good kid. He understood right from wrong. And he should have known better than to listen to his friend's bad influences.

The next time the Nara skipped, Iruka would tell his parents. But he would need to tell Chouji's parents as soon as possible to try and help the boy before it was too late.

"Now go back to your lunch. You have five minutes left."

The boy couldn't have ran out of the room any faster.

As soon as the door had closed after the boy, Iruka breathed out and pinched the bridge of his nose.

Kiba had once been a good student. But something had happened that had made him the exact opposite. Sakura was much too kind and shy for her own good. And Chouji would need to step out of Shikamaru's shadow to show the world that he was his own person.

Naruto and Shikamaru were a whole different matter to deal with and they would take much longer. But... Maybe he could help push these three kids in the right direction before it was too late.

The following day brought on new kinds of difficulties for the young school teacher. It had begun in a rather calmed fashion, for his most troublesome students had seemingly decided to give him a small break for once in their lives. Even Kiba had paid attention in the first class. But come snack time, the Inuzuka was back to his aggressive ways and if Sakura hadn't fallen in front of Naruto when she had, another fight would have broken out in the classroom.

Chouji somehow managed to talk Shikamaru out of cutting class today. But the Nara snored rather loudly and distracted the children around him, which meant that Iruka had to give up on scolding the boy to instead scold the other kids.

At least Sakura and Hinata were still the quiet and kind girls that never caused him any trouble... Maybe he should move them so they could sit together... No! He already had a game plan set out and it was perfect.

When the last class, History, rolled around, Iruka was just about ready to throw the fiery Inuzuka and high spirited Uzumaki out of the window. They were always at each other's throats. And Iruka knew that it was only because they were both too hard headed to ever truly listen to each other and find out they were almost clones of one another!

"Now, for your assignment."

Huh, look at that... Kiba and Naruto could stop their incessant glaring to groan along with the rest of
the class. Iruka was slightly amused by this.

"It'll be a group project to be turned in at the end of the week. You will have two days to complete it." Iruka continued to speak even through the groans, moving to the front of his desk to lean against it and cross his arms over his chest, "And I will be assigning the groups."

He had a list, even. He'd prepared it last night over coffee and a headache, the papers of the past test underneath the list he was creating, just waiting to be graded. He had mulled over the whole classroom with a critical eye, hellbent on getting the kids into the best groups for this kind of assignment.

So he began to call out the names of the groups he had formed, earning mixed reactions from each kid as they found out who they were to work with. Then he got to the group of nine kids that worried him the most.

"Sasuke Uchiha, Hinata Hyuuga, and Shikamaru Nara." He called out, then looked at the way the three kids reacted.

The dark haired Sasuke looked at both his group members with slightly widened eyes, while Shikamaru continued sleeping- he'd really have to find a way to wake the Nara up... This was just becoming ridiculous- and Hinata had her eyes closed, her cheeks tinted with red. These reactions made Iruka smile almost nervously. He really hoped the cool demeanor of both boys rubbed off on Hinata. And that she would be able to open Shikamaru's eyes to his schoolwork and somehow open Sasuke's eyes to the fact there were more people in this world than just his clan.

"Ino Yamanaka, Shino Aburame, and Naruto Uzumaki." He called after, an extremely loud groan immediately ringing out.

"Why can't I be with Sakura?"

Iruka merely ignored the shout from Naruto and looked at Shino, who didn't seem even the least bit fazed by his group mates. And Ino's eyes had widened, looking from one boy to the other only to throw her head onto the desk and curse her life. Iruka hoped that the two blondes' sunny disposition would help bring Shino out of his shell. And maybe Shino's own calm demeanor would rub off on the blondes and help them become just a tad bit more calmed down and thoughtful.

"And, finally," The scarred man smiled up at the group of kids in his care, proud with what the groups he had managed to create, "Sakura Haruno, Kiba Inuzuka, and Chouji Akimichi."

Kiba glared at Iruka almost venomously. A reaction that both irritated and didn't surprise his teacher. All the while Sakura's cheeks colored lightly and she looked at both boys with wide eyes. And, finally, Chouji glanced at Shikamaru with worried eyes, apparently looking for him for what he was supposed to do.

This group was the one that he really wanted to work out the most. The other six could be mixed up in a different manner to get them to work out if this formation didn't work. But these three were the ones Iruka desperately needed to influence each other.

"The assignment is that of an oral presentation about any of the Great Shinobi Wars." Iruka began to explain the assignment once all the teams had been told, "I want you to- as a team- investigate and find a story about any of the wars. It can be from a great-grandparent, neighbor, distant cousin, anyone that isn't related to you too closely. So no parents, grandparents, or first generation cousins. I want you kids to go out and search for these stories."
The class was divided. Half was intrigued and other was not interested. He wasn't surprised to see that Chouji and Sakura were part of the intrigued half. But he was kind of surprised when he saw Kiba actually paying attention to him rather than sending spitballs at Naruto.

"Then I want you to turn these stories into a presentation for the rest of the class. Call it a play of sorts. Be creative and bring your imagination to the project. And remember that it must be historically accurate. You can't add any dragons or elves just for flair."

After he had said all of this, he finished with, "Now you have what's left of the class to get together in your groups and begin to plan."

With these words he walked to the back of his desk and sat down, taking out the tests that he hadn't graded the past night to continue correcting them.
Kiba hadn't wanted to be part of any assignment at first. Not with crybaby Sakura or fatso Chouji. He didn't want to be pulled down by those sissies. They were cowards. And an Inuzuka didn't spend time with weaklings. They were too strong for that.

But then... Well, then Iruka Sensei had told them they'd have to find out about the old Shinobi Wars from people that had lived through them and he couldn't help but get excited.

His mother and father both had war stories... They had made sure that Kiba knew about these stories as the years had passed and he had grown. But Iruka Sensei had asked them to go out and do an actual investigation with someone that wasn't family. And this had made the Inuzuka immediately make up his mind about the kind of story he wanted to find.

It had to be from an old person. Man or woman, didn't matter. But not old enough to be completely senile. And they'd preferably have scars and a dark demeanor. Like all of the Uchihas running around the village... Just less snooty. And it had to be an awesome tale of heroism with lots of blood and dead enemy ninja!

The mere thought about how awesome the story they were going to find would be had Kiba jumping up from his desk as soon as the scarred chunin had told them to get together into their groups. He jumped over desks to get to Sakura, all the while shouting at Chouji to get his ass over and meet them by Sakura's desk.

Iruka Sensei had scolded him over the crass word. Kiba had been too excited to bite back with the customary "Bite me, old man!" that would leave him in detention on other normal days.

"We are not going to ask our parents!"

He was excited. Sue him. He never got excited over school projects. If anything, Iruka Sensei should be proud. Not giving him that glare that promised of many detentions if he didn't calm down.

In his rush to get to Sakura's desk, he had knocked over quite a few notebooks and pens, garnering shouts of annoyance and dirty looks from the rest of his fellow students. But he didn't give a damn. He was much too excited to give any!

Once had had finally reached her desk, he had grabbed the nearest chair and pulled it up to her. Then he had sat himself right beside her, a large grin plastered on his face as he shouted out the first thing that came to his mind. And once he had finished shouting, he took note of Sakura whimpering slightly, her eyes wide and focused directly on his smile.

He couldn't blame her. The Inuzuka had great smiles.

Chouji appeared to his right a few seconds later, pulling up his own chair to sit in front of Sakura's desk. He looked unsure of himself as he moved the chair, as if he weren't sure if what he was doing was right.

As he looked from the pink haired girl that could only stare with wide eyes over to the plump boy that chewed on a piece of gum nervously, a thought struck the young Inuzuka.

Iruka Sensei had given him the best yet worst team. Sakura Haruno was smart and quiet, which meant she could most probably deal with smoothing out any edges in the project, but she was always getting her ass kicked because she was weak. And Chouji Akimichi was always following
Shikamaru around, which meant he most probably wouldn't have any trouble letting Kiba lead the way. But he was a giant wussy. He'd gotten his ass kicked by a few girls a couple of weeks ago.

So, they'd listen to him without trouble. But it'd be annoying having to deal with their wimpy ways of being... Only until the project ended. He'd have to deal with them only until then.

"B-But Kiba, I know that my dad's cou-

"No family!" The Inuzuka interrupted the pink haired girl with a dangerous snarl, eyes narrowed in her direction.

With a whimper, Sakura hid her face by covering it with her arms, down by her desk. And Kiba smirked proudly at the show of submission. His Inuzuka heritage swelled with pride.

"I know what kind of story I want to find! And we're going a step above the rest of the idiots in this place!" He announced, then grabbed the back of Chouji's shirt to bring him in close, forcing his and Chouji's face to get real close to the still hidden Sakura. Then, he continued in a whisper, "We're going to do some actual detective work."

Chouji looked at him completely caught by surprise, most probably wondering why he had gotten so excited over anything school related. Sakura, though, just kept her head down. Smart girl. Don't do anything that might be seen as questioning his dominance. Inuzuka didn't like their dominance insulted. Even in his young age, Kiba knew this.

"What do you mean, Kiba?" Chouji asked softly, keeping his voice low like the Inuzuka.

This caused the boy to smirk cheekily.

"I mean we're going to find the oldest person we can find to tell us all about the war!"

When Iruka Sensei had called Kiba's name after her own, Sakura had felt her heart drop. The boy was the wild child. He was scary. And he had told her on more than one occasion to ninja up and grow a backbone. He was mean. He was crude. And he didn't care about how she felt.

She had known that, by every person Iruka Sensei called out before her, there were only two possible candidates as to her group members would be. And while Chouji didn't scare her, he was much too nice and had once even shared a small piece of a cookie with her... Well... Kiba was terrifying.

Her mother always told her if she was faced with someone from the Inuzuka Clan, she just let them do whatever they wanted. They were feral. They acted like wild animals. They most probably had fleas. They were the exact opposite of what a proper clan should be.

Then he had come running up to her with his teeth bared and Sakura had found herself terrified for her life. His teeth were so sharp. Especially those fangs! He could most probably rip her apart without even a second thought!

The pink haired girl hadn't dared to speak up against him. She knew that her father's cousin had done something during the war that was spectacular enough for her father to tell her she should ask him about it whenever she got the chance, but Kiba had been adamant about 'searching' for a story and she hadn't dared try and say anything after he had interrupted her.

Maybe if she played possum when he got angry, she wouldn't get too beat up...
Once the bell for the end of class had rung, she had found herself being forced to hurry up and pack all of her things away as quickly as possible so she could go with Chouji and Kiba in search of their story. She hadn't wanted to go. She just wanted to go home and forget about all of the mean things the girls of the class had said... But Kiba had insisted they should go to this part of Konoha he knew always had old men in it.

His mom had said they were a bunch of dead beats. His dad had said they were veterans.

Sakura had no idea why anybody's parents would have such different views of the same thing.

So the group of three had set off, running out of the classroom without even a proper goodbye to their teacher. Sakura had felt bad about it. She always said goodbye to Iruka Sensei. He was a nice teacher and deserved his students to be as kind to him as he was to them.

It had been hard to keep up with the Inuzuka. Even Chouji had been huffing and puffing at the unbelievably fast pace the boy tried to set. And he continued shouting at them to stop being so slow, to stop holding him back. And Sakura hadn't found the strength in herself to tell Kiba to stop being such a jerk, so she had just pushed her aching and burning legs to continue and not give up on her.

The sun was beginning to set by the time they reached the spot Kiba had told them about it. It was getting dark and Sakura had only a few hours to get back home before her parents became worried.

"Here's where we'll find our story!"

The fact that the streets were mostly deserted and the whole place smelled pungent, nasty, and like her uncle's favorite 'adult' drinks didn't give Sakura much confidence.

"I don't think we'll find anyone here, Kiba..." Chouji voiced her doubts softly, only to have the Inuzuka shake his head with a determined smirk.

"I know what I'm doing, Chouji! Trust me, why don't you?" He chuckled softly at this, then pointed at his nose with his thumb, giving the two kids behind him a one eyed look. "Just let my nose do all the work and we'll find the story that will blow everyone else's out of the water!"

Then he'd begun to sniff at the air, apparently unaware of the confused looks both Chouji and Sakura gave him. He went off on his own and Sakura didn't follow, somewhat convinced that the Inuzuka really were as insane as her mother had said.

"He's... Not right, is he?"

Sakura blinked at Chouji after he had spoken, a blush beginning to spread on her cheeks. She hadn't been expecting anyone to want to talk to her. And she had no idea how to answer.

So she said nothing.

Instead, she looked down at her feet and begun to scuff at the sand beneath her, kind of wishing her bangs weren't pinned back so she could hide her face behind the hair. She didn't like being out here. Chouji was nice, but she didn't know him.

... She didn't know anyone.

With a soft sigh, Sakura closed her eyes. She really wished she could make friends. But she was scared of it.

"Hey! I found an old man!"
Her eyes snapped open as soon as she heard Kiba's shout, then she looked up to find the boy running off in the same direction they had been heading in the first place, getting really close to the edge of the village.

"Wait! Kiba! I can't go too far!" She found herself shouting before she could stop, then took off running after him. "My parents don't want me too far from home!"

But she chased after him for some reason. And when she finally found him, she found him looking up with wide eyes at a man dressed in a dark cloak and large hat that covered most of his face. He had been coming out of what her uncle had once told her was called a bar- or was it a tavern? Well, it was supposed to be a place that kids couldn't even get near! But there was the Inuzuka, only a few feet away from the door with a determined look on his face.

"You, old man! Tell us war stories!"

As soon as he had shouted that out, the old man had growled softly. And Sakura's stomach began to sink... Her mother had been right... The Inuzuka were insane!

Sakura was very quiet. Chouji found himself hoping it wasn't because she didn't like him because he actually liked being around her.

The girl was quiet, like Shikamaru, but she wasn't lazy. And she was really smart and did her job in class, which was one of the reasons Chouji thought she was so smart. Because she always got A's and B's on her test scores unlike him and Shikamaru. And she kind of smelled like his mom's kitchen after she baked those delicious vanilla cookies, which made him wonder if she did much baking.

He remembered that he had once offered her a piece of a cookie of his mother's as a show of friendship. And she had smiled and accepted it, but he hadn't been able to talk to her that day because then Ami had taken her away to show her some kind of game. Maybe Ami had been nice that day. She was really nice to Chouji. She'd never called him out on his plump figure. Neither had Sakura, though. Some of the girls in their group were actually really nice. But others were just as mean as some of the guys.

He'd tried to make conversation with her, he really had! But she was very quiet and had apparently been too afraid to speak to him because she'd just looked down and ignored him. And Chouji had no idea what to do with himself after that because he wasn't used to making small talk with people he didn't know. He was used to being around Shikamaru. And he sure didn't deal with small talk.

Ino kind of chattered a bit whenever their fathers forced them into a 'play date' of sort. But that didn't happen much because their fathers barely ever got together for that sort of thing anymore. Although he had never minded listening to Ino talk about whatever she deemed important enough to say. He liked hearing people talk.

He'd dozed slightly and kind of checked out of reality as he thought about the loud Yamanaka girl and his Nara best friend. Their parents wanted them to be the next Ino-Shika-Cho. They had all made sure that all of their kids knew that they were supposed to keep the legacy alive. But Chouji didn't know if he would want to be on a team with Ino. She was cool in class and at home, but he had seen her out in the playground with the other kids and she was sometimes a really big bully.

He'd been forced away from his thoughts by a sudden shout from their wild group mate, Kiba, and Sakura's own answering yell. Then they'd both been running away and Chouji hadn't wanted to stay alone with the sun setting, so he'd run after them too.
It was kind of fun, running so much. Shikamaru never wanted to run because it was too troublesome and Ino didn't like playing the rougher games because she was a 'lady'... Whatever that meant.

When he caught up with both of the other kids he had been assigned to work with, he found a very large and scary man glaring down at an all too smiling Kiba, even though Sakura was looking up at the man with wide eyes and seemed a bit pale. They were all in front of what looked a lot like his, Shikamaru, and Ino's fathers favorite place to get together, although much more broken down and less inhabited.

"Buzz off."

As soon as Chouji heard the man's voice, he was kind of scared. It was deep and gravelly and sounded kind of like two stones grinding against each other. While on fire. It was a weird image. But it was the only one Chouji could truly think of to explain how scary the man's voice sounded.

"No! I know you have awesome war stories! Now tell us one of them so we can kick the idiots' asses!"

His father had once told him that the Inuzuka Clan was filled with passionate and overly active individuals. And from the way Kiba always seemed to have an endless well of energy, Chouji guessed that his father's words had held some kind of truth to them.

"If you don't get away from me, I'll be kicking your asses." The man's answering growl came with a shove at Kiba's head, causing the boy to stumble backwards.

Sakura yelped at the sight of the Inuzuka being pushed and Chouji felt a sinking sensation in his stomach, although neither of them moved to help the boy. Chouji couldn't. That man was huge! He must have been even taller than Shikamaru's father, and Shikaku was really tall.

"Don't touch me!" Kiba growled with a swat at the man's hand, then placed his left hand on his hip and pointed at the man with his right, eyes narrowed and a sneer on his face. Chouji was pretty sure if Shikamaru were here, he'd tell the boy to calm down and stop being so loud. "Now sit your ancient ass down and tell us all about how you were awesome in the war and decimated a whole enemy platoon!"

The man's face was almost completely covered by a large hat with white-thread thingies attached to its brim. From what Chouji could make out, he also had a mask beneath that. But he wasn't completely sure because of the shadows the large hat was casting. Aside from that, he wore a dark cloak with pretty white and red cloud designs. They were rather nice looking. It was a bit odd that the clouds were red, though, because he was pretty sure those only came in white.

"Boy, you are pushing my short patience-"

"And you're pushing my nonexistent patience!" Kiba finally shouted out, marching up to the man to raise his right leg. "Now give me a war story unless you want me to hurt you!"

Chouji was amazed to see the Inuzuka actually threatening the much larger man. Clearly, this was not the kind of person that enjoyed many things from his grumpy demeanor. And he didn't seem like the kind that would enjoy having a little kid threaten to kick him and ask for a war story.

"Boy, you really are- Hey!"

"Kiba, don't kick him!"

"I do what I want, crybaby! What are you going to do if I don't do what you say? Drown me with
The scene before him unfolded way too fast for Chouji to stop anything from happening.

First Kiba had been kicking the man's shin and stopping him from talking. Then Sakura had run to try and stop Kiba from kicking the man, only to fall in front of them both and begin to get ridiculed by the Inuzuka. And, finally, as Kiba had continued to taunt Sakura, the man had grabbed him by the back of his shirt and pulled him up and away from the ground, so he could glare right into the boy's eyes.

"You're a brat."

"And you're an old man."

"You have weak friends."

"And you have old man breath."

Chouji could only stare in awe as the man held Kiba up to his face by the back of his shirt, the boy with his arms crossed over his chest and a proud smirk on his face.

"Uh, Kiba... I don't think-" He began, terrified of getting glared at but even more scared of Kiba getting killed, only to get interrupted by the man asking a rather odd question.

"Got any money?"
"Got any money?"

The man was a weird one. He looked really cool, though. And Kiba'd just managed to snag a few coins from under his father's nose that morning without him noticing, so Kiba didn't feel like he'd be losing anything by giving the man any money. If he got an awesome war story out of it, it'd be worth the pay. And if the man proved to be a hustler that only wanted money, then Kiba would just tell his father that a weird man had tried to touch him earlier that day and he would dish out the deserved punishment.

With a broad smile, the boy stuck his hand into his pants' pockets and fished those coins from inside, then pulled them out and looked down at them. They seemed to be enough to buy a stick of dango. But he was willing to give that up for an awesome story. He was still suspended in the air, but, really, he didn't mind. It was kind of cool. He was just floating. Although the pressure on his throat was becoming somewhat restricting.

Without any hesitation, Kiba jutted out his hand and offered the money to the man. Both of his teammates' jaws dropped, the man merely seemed to quirk an eyebrow from beneath those strands attached to his hat, and the Inuzuka only grinned slyly.

"Now... About those war stories?" A second passed in which nothing happened. Then the man raised his hand so it was just below Kiba's fist, open so it could catch the coins. Then the boy dropped them into his hand and the male closed his fist around the pieces of currency.

"Get comfortable." The man grunted as he let go of the back of Kiba's shirt, sending him to crash down on the floor below. "You wanted a story, then I'll give you the bloodiest one I can."

The promise of a very bloody story had Kiba immediately picking himself up and dusting himself off, only to sit by the man's feet to stare at him with wide eyes. And when he noticed that neither of the kids he had come with had sat down, the Inuzuka patted at the spot beside him and smiled broadly, "Come on, you idiots! I paid and we're all going to enjoy this!"

Chouji looked from him to the old man with wide eyes, but began to move without needing any more prompting from the Inuzuka. Sakura, on the other hand, was staring at him with her eyes wide and her mouth open, apparently completely surprised with what Kiba was doing. Which didn't make any sense to him. He had wanted a story and found a way to get the old man to tell them what they were looking for. So, why weren't they eager to sit down with him and listen?

The girl was still on the floor from the moment she had fallen. And the boy couldn't help the scoff that escaped him and the rolling of his eyes.

She was such a weak kid. And it wasn't even because she was a girl. She was just weak. It was pitiful.

"Hurry up, Sakura!" He growled, annoyance tinting his words as he glared at the girl.

Kiba was really mean!

And Sakura couldn't understand why.
What had she ever done to the Inuzuka? Nothing! They didn't talk inside the classroom because he was always too busy either arguing with Iruka Sensei or trying to pick fights with Naruto. Aside from that, Kiba was just a rude person. The kind of person that her mother had warned her against because he was poisonous to the environment.

... Quite frankly, her mother was kind of weird. How could one person poison the environment? But Kiba was mean and had yet to be nice and Sakura couldn't understand why!

With her knees and palms stinging at having been chaffed by the fall, Sakura looked down at the floor and sniffled. Her eyes burned and she felt really close to crying. But she knew she couldn't! If she did, Kiba would just start calling her crybaby again. And she really didn't want that to happen!

"Well?" The old man asked as he turned his covered face to the young girl, voice tinted with annoyance. "Hurry up, girl!"

The shout from the man had Sakura scurrying over to Chouji's side, not wanting to be too close to the already annoyed Inuzuka. Then, taking off her backpack, she opened it up and picked out a notebook.

From the way neither boys had their own writing utensils out, she knew that if she didn't take notes, they would not have a perfect retelling of the story the old man was going to tell them now. And her mother had always said that if you wanted something done right, you would have to do it yourself.

So with tears still stinging slightly at her eyes and her palms bothering her a bit, the pink haired girl looked up at the large man as he sat himself on a bucket that happened to be resting by the bar-maybe-tavern. He took a few seconds of silence to grab his hat and pluck it off his head, allowing them to finally see his face... Well, the visible part of his face. It was mostly covered too. If anything, all that Sakura could really call 'visible' were the bright green eyes with (oddly enough) dark red where there was supposed to be white.

He also had a forehead protector. But she couldn't tell from what village it was. She didn't know that much about the rest of the hidden villages outside of the Village Hidden in the Sand and her own home. And that was just because her father loved to head down there because of the amicable trade relations between both villages.

"This happened during the Third Shinobi War..." The man began, eyes narrowing just slightly. "And it is not a story for the faint of heart."

For some reason, Sakura felt that the man was speaking directly to her when it came to the whole 'faint of heart' issue. And this saddened her because she knew that if it really was that scary, she'd most probably end up leaving the story telling.

But she didn't want people to keep thinking she was weak... Even though she knew she was...

The fact that Kiba had given the old man money really had surprised Chouji. But the boy was even more surprised when Sakura actually sat down beside him and pulled out her notebook, apparently set on sitting through the violent tale the old man had promised on delivering.

Quite frankly, Chouji had no idea what to think of the man. The village symbol on his head had a gash across it, but he was much too young to understand what that could mean. He was only six! Most information about the hidden villages wasn't told to even the clan heirs until they were at least a year from graduating... Or, that's what his parents had told him when he'd asked when he'd finally be taught how to be a proper clan head.
Sakura pulled out her notebook with a snuffle and the Akimichi felt somewhat bad for not having spoken up for her. He knew how bad it was to be insulted for feeling too easily. It happened to him a lot too. Just not with the frequency that it happened to the pink haired girl.

But the man began to speak before Chouji could garner the confidence to try and comfort the girl and soon enough he found himself enraptured in the amazing tale the man was spinning.

It began like those fairy tales his mother loved to tell him and Shikamaru on the nights he stayed over at the Akimichi home. There was a black warrior with a dark heart that wished for nothing more than to save the love of his life, a woman dressed in green with the power to buy anything she wanted. Or, at least, that's what popped up in Chouji's mind as soon as the man had began the story.

Even though he had seemed like a grumpy old man that didn't like to do anything, the man that Kiba had payed to tell them a story about the Third Great Shinobi War sure could weave story!

Vivid images of crossing through all kinds of arduous terrains, only to meet with an impossible challenge when everything seemed darker than ever before, filled Chouji's mind. The young boy was so taken aback by the man's spectacular way of weaving words together that he didn't even try to take out his notebook to take any notes. He was much too focused on the story being told to ever stop to think that they might need notes about it later on.

His mother should take lessons from the old man about how to tell stories... Chouji thought this as the old man's voice changed into something akin to that of a monster's, deep and guttural. For even though his mother told excellent stories... This really took the whole cake!

"And then came the worst challenge I had to face during the war." The man's voice lowered into almost a whisper, eyes flickering to each child before he closed them, took in a big, dramatic breath, and said, "Then I was forced to face ten squadrons of enemy shinobi. With that traitor by my side.

"Whoa!"

Chouji couldn't help the gasp of admiration that left him after the man had continued. This whole story was just amazing! He knew that Iruka Sensei would really appreciate it once they presented it in front of the whole classroom!

Taking a break to chuckle at the awed faces of the three kids, the man nodded. "Yeah, pork chop. 'Whoa'."

The Akimichi had been so enraptured by the amazing story that he hadn't even noticed the insult.

But then the man had continued talking. And soon the amazing storytelling he had been using, with the same vivid images and precise language, turned against the children. The man's eyes narrowed dangerously and his voice darkened considerably, his words becoming chilling and striking Chouji right in the heart.

With each sentence that left the man's lips, the more Chouji's amazement became horror. And by the middle of the explanation of just what he had done when he was surrounded by those oh so foolish enemy ninja, Chouji couldn't help himself any more. He hugged Sakura close to him, causing her to drop her notebook. But she didn't mind and instead hugged him back tightly, looking much too green to be fine.

"And there I held his still beating heart, blood oozing from the severed arteries and veins," The old man whispered chillingly, "And BAM!"

"Aah!" Chouji and Sakura both let out bloodcurdling screams as they tightened their grips against
each other, eyes closing in pure fear.

Then the plump boy dug his face into Sakura's shoulder, feeling her do the same with his own shoulder. He could feel her shaking softly and a wetness appearing on his shoulder, but he only held onto her tighter.

"The traitor came out of nowhere."

Faintly, Chouji noted that Kiba grabbed the notebook from the floor. But he didn't know why, nor did he care. He was much too busy trying to keep himself from crying. How could anyone betray such a good friend? How could anyone forsake their brother?

"I almost died. It was a miracle I lived through that onslaught..." The man stopped then, but Chouji still didn't look up. "It's getting late. Aren't brats like you supposed to have a curfew?"

It took a few seconds to figure out that the vivid story had been cut off abruptly. But when the man's last words registered in his mind, the Akimichi looked up at the sky and noticed that it was already night.

"Oh no!" He shouted, momentarily forgetting the fear that had seeped into his bones. "My mom's gonna tan me for having missed dinner!"

"Your mom?" Sakura whimpered, wiping at the tears in her eyes. "My mom's gonna murder me and hide the body!"

They both began to get up hurriedly, terrified of the consequence of getting home so late. But as they did so, Chouji noted that Kiba seemed almost reluctant to have to get up.

"Kiba, don't you have to get home?" He asked curiously, causing Sakura to halt in her picking up of her supplies for a second.

The Inuzuka sighed and handed Sakura's notebook over to her, then stretched lazily and shook his head.

"Nope." He answered with a pop of the 'p'. "Mom's off on a mission. Hana's staying with a friend. And pop's working. He doesn't get off 'til very late at night."

Even though he seemed completely okay with what he was saying, Chouji couldn't help but feeling like Kiba wasn't as relaxed as he made out to be. For some reason, he thought he saw sadness tinting the other's eyes.

"Oh. Okay." Both Chouji and Sakura blinked at the admission, then looked at one another. "Well... We have to get going."

"Yeah, yeah." The boy waved his hand as he stood up, then turned to the old man. "You'll finish the story tomorrow, right?"

A low growl left the man, but he soon tsk'ed and nodded stiffly. "Bring me some more money and I will finish telling you about how the battle ended."

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He didn't want to go back home. There was no one there. But Chouji and Sakura both 'needed' to go back (Please, they were just too afraid to face their parents wrath) and he couldn't stay in this part of Konoha by himself. Even though he was brave and courageous, he wasn't completely stupid. And being a little kid in an area like this at night was just about a level of stupidity worthy of Naruto
himself.

"Alright. See you tomorrow, Old man!" Kiba waved in goodbye as he began to walk back in the direction they had come from, shoving his hands into his pockets as he heard both weak kids follow after him.

Mom was off on another mission. Like always. And sis was staying over at the Uchiha compound to finish up with some project or another with that one kid... What was his name again? It was Sasuke's brother, if he was correct. Kiba just couldn't remember the dude's name. And, finally, his father was most probably still at the hospital working his ass off... So when he got home, it'd be completely empty. Like always...

Fighting back the loud sigh that wanted to escape him, the Inuzuka trudged alongside a rather fast Sakura, not having any trouble keeping up with her.

Just what was her problem, anyway? Couldn't she take one night of punishment?

... So weak.

And then there was Chouji, who was keeping pace with them both but seemed to have a thoughtful look on his face.

... Just two more days. Then he'd never have to speak to these two again... Just two more days.

Her mom was going to kill her! It was one thing to not come back home straight after school without giving any warning. But it was something even worse to not come back home straight after school and not return before night!

She could already see what her grave would say: 'Here lies Sakura Haruno. She was a good girl, but didn't follow her mother's rules. Now she's dead.'

With hurried breaths, Sakura walked as fast as her legs could take her. For some reason, the boys weren't running like they had earlier. And, really, she was too tired to break out in a run again. But she had enough energy left to walk really fast, so she was just going to do that until she was a few blocks from her home. Then she would break off into a sprint and hope her mother wouldn't be too angry.

The images of the bloody story the old man by that one bar had told them flashed across her eyes every now and then, a vivid crimson red overshadowing everything else. And with a squeak of fear, the girl hid her face in her hands, although she didn't stop walking.

Great! Not only was she late, but now she was going to have nightmares she would have to explain!

Damn that Inuzuka!

Well, at least Chouji was there. And he had hugged her when the story had gotten really scary.

... Did that mean he wanted to be her friend?

The thought made Sakura's chest warm and her cheeks redden.

She'd never had a friend before.

For some reason, both of the other kids he was with were really quiet as they walked back in the
direction of their homes. Chouji could understand why Sakura was so quiet. She was most probably too afraid of getting punished to think about striking up any kind of conversation. But even Kiba was quiet, and that boy usually seemed as if he were ignorant to the definition of silence.

It was really weird.

When they reached the busiest part of Konoha, he looked from Kiba over to Sakura. The boy had his hands in his pockets and seemed totally relaxed. But Chouji couldn't shake the thought of there being something hidden behind that demeanor. And Sakura's eyes were wide and fear filled, although her cheeks seemed slightly flushed.

"Hey..." He began, swallowing down a lump in his throat when both kids looked at him. "Sakura, do you want us to take you home? I know the dark can be scary."

Kiba quirked a curious eyebrow at his words. The Akimichi had said 'us' rather than 'me', after all, but kept his mouth shut. And Chouji was both glad and slightly confused by this. Wouldn't he proclaim he was too awesome to walk anyone home?

"Y-You would do that?"

The soft squeak had Chouji smiling as warmly as he could, "Of course we would. Right, Kiba?"

There was a beat of silence in which nothing happened, then the boy nodded slightly. "Yeah... Sure... Whatever."

"Thank you!" Sakura gasped out, then pointed in the direction of her home. "Let's go!"

And so the group of three continued walking. Even though Chouji knew he'd get in trouble for getting home so late, he just didn't feel right leaving Sakura to walk home alone. So, when the time came, he'd gladly take the punishment his father would give him. But now he was just glad to see a soft smile on the pink haired girl's face.
Chapter 4

Iruka noticed that his students all seemed just about the same when they returned to class the next day. They all went about their usual routines as soon as they came into the classroom and all of the old group of friends got together like always. Chouji drifted over to Shikamaru and smiled broadly as he told the Nara something or another, all the while the lazy boy dozed softly. Ino bounced over to the group of girls she always hung around, a soft frown on her face, and proceeded to whine about her group. And Naruto made his way over to Kiba to piss the Inuzuka off. So, on that front, nothing had changed.

Seriously, it was getting ridiculous just how much those two fought. Couldn't they just already become friends already? They had so much in common they could even be clones!

But, as he thought this, Iruka saw a few changes that made his eyebrow quirk and a stupid smile make its way to his lips. First of all, Sasuke made his way over to the free chair beside Hinata and sat down there, giving the shy girl a small smile before he began to pull out all of his school materials. Hinata, in return, squeaked and hid her face, although Iruka saw a flash of a smile before it was hidden by her arms.

Almost at the same time that this happened, Sakura quickly made her way over to the desk beside Chouji with a determined look on her face and a bright blush on her cheeks. Then she asked if she could sit down beside the Akimichi, getting a broad smile in return from him and an uncaring wave from Shikamaru. After this, the girl sat down with the broadest smile on her face Iruka had ever seen.

Okay... So maybe just one afternoon wasn't enough to make big changes. But at least some of his students were trying. And that made a warmth spread in the teacher's chest.

Maybe by the end of this project, there would be new groups of friends made.

"Alright, class!" He called once mostly everyone had settled down. The only kids that were still out of their chairs, all the while fighting over a snack, were Kiba and Naruto.

Taking a moment to sigh dejectedly about both boys, Iruka then glared at them and silently told them to sit down if they didn't want to get stuck in detention. Because of having faced his ire before, both kids immediately knew what he wasn't saying and ran to their desks, leaving the snack forgotten on the floor.

"Let's begin today's lessons."

Kiba couldn't help but glare at his teacher as the man began the math class. That cookie had been his! His father had bought it for him and left it on the stove early in the morning for when he woke up! And the Naruto bastard had then tried to muscle his way into stealing it from him! And after having had to walk two babies home and return to an extremely empty house, Kiba deserved that treat!

If there was something you didn't do to an Inuzuka, it was try to steal his food.

But the Uzumaki jerk had tried to do so! And he'd gotten lucky when Iruka had stopped them both. If he'd continued insulting Kiba, the boy may have just broken his nose.

*No one* insulted his family and got away with it! Naruto had just gotten lucky that the damned Iruka Sensei had glared at them when he had. If not, the boy would *not* have a face anymore!
Huffing as he made his way over to his desk, the Inuzuka couldn't help but glare at where his cookie had fallen. It was his favorite kind. The vanilla cookies the small bakery close to their house sold them, but they were usually sold out by the time Kiba would walk past it to get to the Academy. And having it waiting for him on the stove during the morning meant that his father had woken up early specifically to buy one for him so he could eat it during the school day.

If he did something especially brutal to the blonde today, it would only because the idiot had earned the pain.

The first class of the day was math. The one thing Kiba never paid any attention to. He sucked at math. And he kind of hated it too. But it was okay because math hated him, so it was a mutual case of hate.

... Iruka Sensei was glaring at him again. But it wasn't Kiba's fault that he couldn't stop looking longingly at his favorite snack! It was all Narutard's fault for taking it away from him...

The thing about being a teacher was that it was almost impossible to not form some type of attachment to one's students. Even though professionalism was preached up and down to every single chunin that had a teaching position, every single person Iruka knew could easily say they had favorite students.

Having kids in favor was not a problem. Favoritism, though, which was the act of holding your favorite kids on a pedestal and ignoring the rest, that was the actual problem.

He was proud to say that he never had succumbed to the pressures of having a kid held above the rest. He always managed to keep a level of professionalism in his work that allowed him to treat all of his students equally and never hindered the molding of young, impressionable minds.

Even though he liked a few students more than the rest, he had never allowed that favor to show. Because even though he couldn't stop himself from liking a few more, that did not stop him from being professional and fair to all of his students. It was only human to find a few more interesting than the rest, after all. But it would be more than just a mistake to allow that interest to be seen.

It was because of this deep-rooted sense of professionalism that Iruka never did anything in front of the whole class that might be seen as an act of favoring one kid over another.

But he had noticed that Kiba kept glancing at the dropped snack throughout most of the first class. All the while Naruto didn't even spare it a single look.

With an internal sigh, he assigned his kids to begins to work on some math problems so they could practice adding and subtracting on their own.

It was in times like these that Iruka wished that Kiba was more thoughtful. If only he had called on his teacher, rather than try to fight with Naruto, then the man would have been able to get him back his snack. All without getting either of the kids in much trouble. And, in turn, giving them both a rather not sour start to the day.

As the kids got to work in silence, the young teacher made his way over to where the snack still lay. It was a medium sized packet with a giant picture of a cookie in front of it. This brought a small smile to the man's lips because they were his own favorite brand. But after he had thought this, Iruka picked the cookie up and went back to his desk, only to place the snack on top as he sat down to look over his group once more.

He would give Kiba the snack once lunch rolled around and the rest of the kids were out in the
playground.

With this thought, the scarred chunin looked around the room to make sure his instructions were completed.

Shikamaru was asleep once more. But Chouji and Sakura were busy sharing quiet conversation and actually doing the work. The sight of both kids sharing soft laughter brought a small smile to the man's lips. But after a few seconds of looking at them, he turned his sights onto the rest of his students.

Hinata worked slowly on her paper with narrowed eyes, her face pulled in with a look of determination. All the while, Sasuke looked over her shoulder with a hand scratching over his paper, although he only looked at it every now and again. Without a doubt, he was copying off the young Hyuga heiress. But Iruka didn't feel like singling him out just yet. He was one of his brightest students, after all. If he continued copying on the rest of the assigned practices, though, he would speak to the young Uchiha.

Ino was too busy whispering with her group of friends to get any work done, and this made Iruka shake his head softly. And to her left, a small group of four kids—two girls and two boys—were having fun throwing pieces of eraser at each other. But the bits never fell to the floor and they turned every now and then to work on their problems, so Iruka would allow it for the meantime. But if any of those pieces hit the floor, there would be hell to pay.

Shino sat quietly in his corner of the classroom with his hands stuffed into his pockets and his back straight, dark sunglasses covering his eyes. Undoubtedly, the Aburame had already finished working. But, fortunately for his teacher, he was the quiet intelligent kind that didn't seek trouble as soon as he had finished working. Naruto, on the other hand, was writing away at a paper on his desk... And immediately the scarred chunin knew he was not working on the assigned problems. Naruto hated math. He would never work so passionately on it.

Most of the rest of the class were working quietly on their paper and for this the young teacher was grateful. He had quite the colorful group of kids in this classroom. And most of them were clan heirs. So he always felt as if he were walking on eggshells when it came to the more personal issues.

How could he tell Hiashi Hyuga that he thought that, maybe, if Hinata had a friend other than her clan members, maybe she would slowly break out of her shell? How could he tell the proud man that Hinata was a soft and shy soul and not the warrior soul the man undoubtedly wanted? Or, worse, how could he tell the even prouder Uchiha clan head that Sasuke needed a friend other than his own brother? Or tell the Aburame clan head that Shino needed a soft yet happy hand to get him to socialize? Or tell Tsume Inuzuka that Kiba wasn't making any friends because he was simply too wild?

Those all seemed like suicide missions!

As the man thought about this, he noticed he hadn't counted Kiba in his mental relay of the classroom. And he turned to look over at the boy's desk and found that Kiba was... Nowhere in sight.

Her mother had given her the mother of all scoldings after Sakura had gotten home. She had been worried about her and had even been ready to call on any nearby chunin to help find her. But once Sakura had explained having been late getting home because she had been busy working on a school project, the woman had toned down just a bit on her anger.
She was grounded for a week, though. Because she couldn't be running around Konoha without some type of supervision around. Which made no sense because she hadn't been alone! But, apparently, neither Kiba nor Chouji counted as 'supervision' for some reason... Next time they needed to go out and fetch answers, they would have to go back to Sakura's house and fetch her mother so they weren't out and about in the village like 'juvenile delinquents'.

And this kind of threw a wrench into the whole 'Get the old man to finish telling us his story!' plan, seeing how her mother would most probably not want them anywhere near that part of Konoha.

But, apart from scolding her, her mom had congratulated the young girl on making friends. Sakura hadn't had the heard to tell her who the boys were... Or that they were only hanging out because of a school project... So instead, the girl had just allowed her mom to create a whole image of her new 'friends' in her mind and just rolled with it.

As she had gotten dressed for bedtime, though, the girl had thought about Chouji and his kindness. And through a fitful night's sleep (she had been right about the nightmares... She had woken up in a cold sweat three different times!), Sakura had decided to talk to the Akimichi first thing in the morning.

So, with her heart beating faster than what was healthy, the girl set off to the Academy the next day and forced herself to approach the slacker duo of the classroom.

Even though Kiba was a big meanie, Chouji was nice. And he'd given her a bit of his cookie before! And he'd offered to walk her home! If those weren't things friends did for each other, then she'd never find a friend!

Chouji had been so nice! He'd smiled and even offered a bit of the cookie he had been eating after Sakura had asked if she could sit with him. Shikamaru had barely said a thing, but this hadn't bothered the young girl. She had just been happy to be allowed to sit with them!

Then Iruka Sensei had begun the class and she had paid attention like a good students to the whole lesson. But, as she had taken note on what the man taught the group, the girl noticed that Shikamaru snored rather loudly.

Just how did Chouji put up with that in every single class? Did he even learn something? It was hard to believe he was able to hear anything through all of that snoring!

He didn't know how the Inuzuka managed to escape. And this left him somewhat uneasy. A six year old should not be so adept in the art of escaping. But this was the four time Kiba pulled the vanishing act in the classroom, so, unfortunately, Iruka couldn't say he was wholly surprised by it.

But he was getting just about sick of the clan heir always being so eager to leave the classroom. He was only six! He should be inside the classroom, completing his work and making friends! Not running around and playing hookie!

"Class, it seems that one of you has decided to escape." He spoke calmly as he got up from his desk, looking at every single kid in the eye before he began to walk out. "You are to stay here and complete your work. Once I come back, I expect it to be finished. Have I been understood?"

A groaned chorus of 'Yes, Iruka Sensei' sounded off. Then the man set off to find the runaway Inuzuka with a soft frown on his lips.

Once Iruka Sensei had left, Sakura sighed heavily and shook her head.
"What's wrong, Sakura?" Chouji asked the girl beside him, looking at her with curious eyes.

He had been very happy when she'd come to him and Shikamaru earlier in the morning. After they had walked her home last night, he and Kiba had walked off in the direction of the Akimichi Compound as soon as Sakura had disappeared through her door. But, even though they had been a small distance away from the home, they had still been able to hear the shouts from Sakura's mother. And he had felt very guilty over the pink haired girl getting in trouble.

Kiba hadn't said much of anything on the walk to Choji's house. He'd merely whistled softly and looked up at the night sky, never turning his eyes on Chouji. Not even once.

Chouji had thought there must have been something up with the boy to not be talking, but hadn't dared talk to the other boy. There had just been something off about the Inuzuka that had made the Akimichi feel like that moment wouldn't be the best to start asking questions.

So, instead, Chouji had just walked on in silence with Kiba behind him. But once they had reached his home, the plump boy had gathered the nerve to smile softly at the boy and give a shaky goodbye.

Kiba had nodded once before he'd turned away, still silent with his hands still shoved into his pockets.

Chouji's eyes had followed after him, a feeling of wrong surging up in his chest. But before he could try and run after the boy, a large hand had clamped down on his shoulder and he'd immediately known his father was behind him.

Choza hadn't been angry. He'd just been worried as to where his son had gone off to without Shikamaru. But after the boy had explained everything and told the man they were just working together on a school project, the man had warned Chouji that, next time he wished to run off for a school project, he would have to stop by the house and tell his mother where he would be going. It just wouldn't do to have his parents worry for him if he was going to be fine.

When he'd seen Kiba fighting with Naruto, Chouji felt like he should have done something. But he hadn't known what to do, so instead he'd just kept quiet and sat between Shikamaru and Sakura without moving. He'd felt bad over not doing something, especially after he had seen the pout Kiba had worn. But after a while of taking class, that bad feeling had given way to happiness once more because he had a new friend! Sakura actually wanted to sit with him! That meant they were going to be awesome friends! He was sure of it.

Once their teacher had assigned them work to do, Chouji had expected to work peacefully on the slightly daunting problems while Shikamaru snored. But... He had kind of forgotten that Sakura had sat beside him and that she was one of the smartest kids in class. He'd set to work like he always did, fully expecting to not finish the problems. But, as he bit on the end of his pencil and glared at the third problem, he had felt a small poke on his arm and looked up to see Sakura fully prepared to help him out.

Working with Sakura had been fun. She laughed at his small jokes and helped him out without scoffing or rolling her eyes whenever he did something wrong. It was really fun.

But then Iruka Sensei had run off to fetch the escaped Kiba and Sakura had sighed really heavily, like his mother would do when something was bothering her.

"I... I just don't get him, Chouji." Sakura answered with a small shake of her head, "Why is Kiba so different?"
"What do you mean, Sakura?" The Akimichi asked, blinking slightly as he looked back at her.

Because of Sakura being so smart, they had both managed to fish all of the work before Iruka Sensei had run off. So they didn't have to worry about getting in trouble at all when he came back in a fouler mood. Like he always did whenever any of them somehow managed to escape.

"I mean how he is!" Sakura whispered back, lowering her voice as she looked around the classroom. "He's so weird! And really mean too! And he's always being such a jerk to all of us! What have we ever done to him, Chouji?"

Staring into the girl's green eyes, Chouji couldn't help but be stricken by the question.

He'd... Never truly thought about it that way. He didn't think anyone was weird. He'd always seen them as unique.

But maybe Kiba was weird... He was the only kid Chouji had seen that would ever dare call Iruka Sensei 'old man'. Not even Naruto did that, and he was an even bigger trouble maker!

"I... I don't know, Sakura."

Iruka hadn't found Kiba at all. Ten minutes had passed, only thirty were missing for snack time, and he had yet to find the escaped Inuzuka.

He knew that he would have to make a choice if he didn't find the kid in the next five minutes. He would have to find someone to substitute for him while he hunted the kid down... Or he could send a tracker after the boy and get him in all kinds of trouble with his family.

A sigh left the young teacher as he looked at the end of the hall, where the teacher's lounge's door stood.

He didn't want to get Kiba in too much trouble. And if he sent someone after the boy, word would undoubtedly reach his father. And if there was one thing Daishi Inuzuka didn't tolerate, it was his children giving the civilians reason to believe the Inuzuka clan was wilder and less disciplined than the other clans in Konoha. He was a proud member of the Inuzuka Clan, after all. And he knew how great they truly were. But he was very much aware of the village's image of them and did everything in his power to turn it around.

Making his way over to the teacher's lounge, Iruka couldn't help but shake his head. He really didn't want to have to ask for help. But Kiba had gone off the school grounds and really pushed his hand.

He really didn't want to have to ask for help. But Kiba had gone off the school grounds and really pushed his hand.

Math was stupid. His classmates were stupid. The Academy was stupid. Everything was stupid.

Kiba kicked at an unfortunate rock as he thought this, an angered frown pulling at his lips. The rock was sent flying with enough force to crash against the side of a building, startling a pompous lapdog and making it turn to growl at Kiba. But the boy merely bared his teeth and growled back, much too irritated to stop and think about how he'd almost hit the otherwise peaceful dog. With a yelp of fear, the small animal ran off, its collar jingling rather loudly.

Normally, the boy would have been happy to try and make friends with the dog. He had yet to get a nin-dog, he was still much too young to get one, and enjoyed being around all kinds of dogs. But because of that Narutard, he hadn't been able to eat the cookie he had wanted. And then Iruka Sensei
had dared pick it up and take it for himself... After the man had taken it, Kiba hadn't been able to keep his anger to himself anymore. So, when the dolt had been busy smiling like an idiot down at the cookie, the boy had taken his chance and run clear out the window.

Sitting by the window was always a good idea. If he stayed in class, he was able to cloud watch and spot a few birds. And if he wanted to escape, it was rather easy to do so. Especially because these windows were well taken care of and didn't make any noise whenever opened.

The thing about being out at this time of day was that no one that recognized him was out and about. All of his clan members were off in their own jobs and the kids were all in school. And because it was still a bit too early to be going out to the market, he didn't have to worry about being found by any of the usual buyers that he got in trouble with when he took some kind of grocery from them.

He especially enjoyed stealing from one woman that he had seen kicking a puppy once. She bought the best cuts of meat and he always found a way to take one away from her. His sister had once asked where he'd gotten it from, but his parents hadn't cared at all. They were always too busy to notice when something they usually never bought found its way into their fridge.

"What can I do?" The boy asked himself as he looked over the streets of Konoha, taking in the lack of people on the streets still. "... Maybe I can try to find the Old Man..."

There was nothing else to do, after all. And he really didn't feel like having to play a game of dog-and-fox with the chunin that did know that he was supposed to stay in the Academy. So he began to make his way over to the seedier parts of Konoha, never once stopping to think just how dangerous it could be to go all alone.

"And you're sure this is where you're smelling Kiba from?"

"Ma, Iruka Sensei, why don't you just trust me? Pakkun knows what he's doing. Right, Pakkun?"

"Right, Boss! Now, Iruka Sensei, your wandering pup is here. We ninken have very potent noses. We can smell-"

"I understand, Pakkun. I know just how good you are." The teacher interrupted the small dog's oncoming speech, then looked up at the bars and unsavory establishments Kiba had apparently made his way into.

He hadn't gone and told any tracker that was affiliated with the Inuzuka Clan. He hadn't found it in himself to rat the boy out. So, instead, he'd told Mizuki to look after his group until he was able to get back and had gone off to try and find Kiba himself. The search had been rather fruitless until he'd ran into the Copy Nin himself, Kakashi Hatake, that had been doing nothing other than reading those books of his. And once the silver haired man had seen Iruka running around, he'd decided to help out just to have something entertaining to do.

It wouldn't surprise Iruka at all if he was supposed to be in some kind of meeting or heading off to some mission and was only stalling. But he knew that Kakashi had that pack of his that would undoubtedly find Kiba's scent in no time and so had accepted.

"Just what could he be doing in these parts?" Iruka asked in slight worry, light brown eyes looking every single establishment to see if he could see the unruly mess of dark brown hair.

But all he could see were the bodies of those men and women that drowned their sorrows early in the morning. No wayward Inuzuka.
"Don't worry." Kakashi patted at the younger man's back softly, his one visible eyes crinkling slightly in what Iruka guessed was supposed to show he was smiling comfortingly. "We'll find the kid."

Pakkun began to sniff at the floor again and move over to where Iruka guessed he was smelling Kiba's scent, and so began to follow. But before they could get too far, two men came flying out of the windows of one of the bars, only for a third to tumble out of the opening now created in the wall. A commotion began to break out then and some of the men that had been littering outside ran in, most probably to join the fighting, but in only a few seconds they were being launched themselves.

Through all of the screaming and sounds of fighting, Iruka swore he could hear some kind of cackling that kind of reminded him of Kiba's own.

"Please tell me he's not in there, Pakkun." Iruka mumbled as he felt his heart clench just slightly, worry beginning to eat at him.

"Then I won't say a thing."

"Kiba!" The teacher shouted as he ran to where all of the commotion was coming from, stopping only to look through the large gap that had been created in the wall from whoever had launched all of those men.

With eyes wide and breath heavy, the man looked over the whole bar. Only to find that it was completely deserted aside from one lone figure on a stool by the bar, cackling wildly and completely unscathed.

"That was great, Old Man!"

"Kiba!" Iruka snapped, his worry giving way to anger at having been forced to chase after the young boy all through Konoha, only to find him in such a dangerous place.

"Huh?" The laughing and cackling stopped then and Kiba looked at Iruka with wide eyes, "Iruka Sensei? What are you doing here?"

"What am I-? Kiba! What are you doing here?" Iruka shouted, eyes narrowing.

He stepped through the hole created in the wall and made his way over to Kiba, only to stand in front of the boy with his hands on his hips. "Do you have any idea just how dangerous it is here?"

Blinking at Iruka, the boy nodded once. "Yeah, I do. But the Old Man killed those guys that tried to touch me. So everything worked out well."

With a stern frown and narrowed eyes, Iruka didn't even stop to wonder just who this 'Old Man' could be. He merely grew angered at the boy concocting a story to try and explain him running away and getting caught.

"Come on, Inuzuka." Iruka growled, motioning for the boy. "You are in so much trouble."
Chapter 5

Iruka Sensei had been really mad when he had come back. So mad, even, that he hadn't even thanked Mizuki Sensei for having stayed with the group when he'd returned. Instead, he had just pulled Kiba in by his ear and thrown him into his chair, giving the wild boy one final glare before he made his way back to his desk.

"I hope you have all completed the work I assigned."

All of the kids had nodded silently without daring to say a word, never having seen the man so angered before.

"Please bring all the completed work here so I can make sure you have done it all. Then we shall take the rest of the day to correct it all."

Chouji had stood up slowly with a lot of hesitation, much like Sakura. He had never seen his teacher so serious... And he'd certainly never heard the man so strained.

Shikamaru had been slow to get up too... But that had been because he had just been getting up from a good ten minutes of sleep.

The man's face had been pulled into a severe frown the whole time he had looked at his students papers. A few of them hadn't finished the assigned work, and he'd given them glares so vicious that they had shrinked away.

But, for some reason, when his eyes met Chouji's own wide ones, the man's features seemed to soften... And, then, when Chouji had shown him that he had finished up all of the work assigned, the man had smiled.

"Good job, Chouji." He had said as he quickly skimmed over the boy's work, keen eyes making sure every question had been answered.

And Chouji hadn't been able to hold in the smile that broke out on his face. Even though Iruka Sensei had been in such a foul mood, he had let Chouji know he had done a good job. And that had made the boy's day!

After this, the man had begun to write the answers for everything they had done on the board, beginning the discussion part of their work. And Chouji had, for once in his life, felt up to raising his arm and answering some of the actions.

Sakura beside him, with her own arm raised, kind of made him feel like he too should be answering. And by the way all of his answers were correct, the Akimichi couldn't help but smile broadly for the rest of the class.

It felt good to do things right!

Sakura knew that Chouji was happy. And because he was happy, she was happy.

Shikamaru's snores were really annoying... But she could deal with them as long as she was able to make friends with Chouji.

They had even talked about going to each other's houses at some point! Sakura's mom made really
good miso soup while Chouji's made delicious cookies! They could, maybe, one day go from eating lunch at Sakura's home to eating dessert at Chouji's!

And all this talk of doing things that friends usually did had Sakura ecstatic because she had never had a friend to talk to about this before!

"Now, we only have a few minutes left in class. Those that did not complete the work, I have assigned you homework. But for those that did do it have nothing to do for tomorrow other than to continue working on your history projects. Have I been understood?"

"Yes Iruka Sensei."

"Grab your things. Inuzuka, you know that-"

"Yeah, yeah... Detention and shit."

Sakura frowned in the Inuzuka's direction.

Just how were they supposed to complete their project now? Kiba was in detention and she couldn't go out without telling her mother.

She'd talk to Chouji about this once they were out of the classroom.

The scarred Chunin had not been lying when he'd said Kiba would be getting in trouble. The boy had forced him to leave his teaching duties and chase after him, all to wind up in one of the most dangerous parts of Konoha and make him worry!

"This is abuse, you bastard!"

"Another hundred repetitions for using such crass language. You are to call me Iruka Sensei."

"Bite me, you son of a-"

"Think about your words before I end up having to stay here even longer with you, Inuzuka."

On a normal day, Iruka wouldn't have been so short with Kiba. He usually was more patient with the hot head. But after having to run around all of Konoha with worry gnawing at him, then having been forced to go to the seedier parts of Konoha with an amused Kakashi, Iruka believed he had more than a right to not take all of the kid's shit.

... Great! Now he was even using cuss words! Even though it was in his own mind, Iruka didn't like using them. This was how far the Inuzuka could push him.

A growl and a sneer were both sent his way by the angered Kiba, but the man merely glared back at the kid.

"If you don't complete those problems, Kiba, I am going to have to tell your parents." Iruka finally threw down the ultimatum, much too tired to continue this back and forth banter with the boy.

He didn't like bringing parents in when it came to behavioral problems. Not when he could work with the children hands on and help them get better without having a second set of opinions and criticism weighing down on the kid. But Kiba had shown that, no matter how stern and understanding Iruka was, he'd never truly listen to him.

The threat of parents being involved immediately stopped the boy from shouting another obscenity.
But, because he was such a vocal person, the boy did growl something out. Something that caught Iruka's attention.

"Try it... They won't care anyway."

It was an odd thing to hear from a member of the Inuzuka Clan. Iruka knew that, out of all the clans of Konoha, they seemed to be the warmest. And they always seemed to have a more deep connection between clan and family members when compared to the rest of the other clans.

"Just finish your work."

The retorting 'Bite me' was whispered rather than shouted, though. And it made Iruka begin to wonder just why Kiba seemed to have such low expectations for his family.

Iruka Sensei was quickly becoming the man hated the most by Kiba.

The Old Man, though, was quickly becoming his favorite.

Iruka Sensei was boring and cared about rules. But the Old Man hadn't given any damns when he'd stopped those men from trying to touch him. And when Kiba had offered him some more coins, he had actually begun to tell him the rest of his story!

But then some annoying people had gotten in the way of the storytelling and the Old Man had been preoccupied being awesome and dealing with those people. So, even though Kiba hadn't finished hearing the story for the presentation, he hadn't really minded all that much. And that was because he had been treated to an amazing fight that had left many people groaning in pain and it had been awesome!

Then Iruka Sensei had come in and ruined everything! And the Old Man had left before Kiba could properly tell him how amazing he had been... So he'd have to let the man know he was awesome later.

Not only had Iruka Sensei stolen his cookie and stopped the awesomeness that had been the Old Man defeating all those drunkards, he'd also shouted at Kiba throughout the whole walk back to the Academy. "You shouldn't have run away!" "You're supposed to be learning!" "Are you even listening to me, Inuzuka?!" "Your sister was never this problematic!" "Blah, blah, blah!"

The chunin was so annoying Kiba kind of wanted to just run off once more, just to get away from his voice. But he knew that if he tried to run, the man would stop him, and then the scolding would become even more unbearable.

So the boy had just listened to the man rant with his face pinched in and his arms crossed over his chest. He sure didn't like getting shouted at, especially not by someone that had just cost him the ending of the Old Man's story, but he had no other choice. Well, he had another choice... But it would most probably end up with Iruka dragging him straight to his father with all of his whining. And Kiba really didn't want his father to find out about just how many problems he had caused the teacher.

If his mother was scary whenever she was angry... His father was terrifying.

Looking down at all of the papers on his desk, the boy breathed out and allowed the pencil to fall from his cramped and aching hand. He had just spent a whole hour working nonstop. All because Iruka Sensei had decided to get pissy today.
"I'm done." He muttered as he began to pick up all the papers and organize them.

"Bring them here." Iruka Sensei ordered without a glance up at him.

The Inuzuka groaned in exasperation but still stood up and walked over to the man. Then, once he was at the desk, he handed the papers over to the teacher. Iruka Sensei looked at him for a second but looked down at all the papers without a single word. And, without any words, the man began to correct the papers.

Knowing that it would take the man some time, Kiba sulked his way back to his desk and threw himself at the chair. Then he lifted his arms so they were resting on the desk and cushioned his cheeks against them. And, like that, he closed his eyes and began to doze slightly. He could still hear Iruka Sensei correcting, huffing, and striking things as wrong all the way from his desk.

After what seemed like an eternity of boredom, the man spoke up once more.

"Kiba, would you come here, please?"

He just wanted to leave this evil place! But he knew that if he said that, the man's already short patience may just explode. So the boy merely slid out of his chair and stomped his way over to the man, making sure that his disdain for everything that was going on was clear to him.

"Why did you run out of class today?" Iruka Sensei asked once the Inuzuka stood in front of his desk, his dark eyes boring into the boy's own. "You are very much aware of how trouble you will get into for doing that. Not only that, but you decided to go into a tavern. Do you even know how old you must be to go into that place?" The man asked with a quirked eyebrow, a frown pulling at his lips. "And then you concocted a story about an old man being with you. Kiba, you know I cannot stand being lied to."

This had the boy bristling, "But I'm not lying, Iruka Sensei! The Old Man was there and he-"

But the man raised a hand, signalling Kiba to cease in his arguing. The boy pouted at being treated like a child (he may be one, but that didn't mean he liked to be treated like one!) but remained quiet.

"For running away, heading into a dangerous part of town, and lying, you shall be staying with me here after school for a whole week. If in that week you cause any kind of disruptions to my class, I will hold you back in this grade. Have I been understood?"

"What?! Iruka Sensei, that's not-" Kiba began to fight, but the man interrupted him with a heated glare.

"No, Kiba! What's not fair is me having to stop my class whenever you think it's too boring for you! What's not fair is that you continuously and unrepentantly impair their chances of learning because you're just not interested!" Iruka Sensei shouted, stunning the boy into silence. "Now I have corrected these papers. Take them home, study them, practice. Leave."

He shoved the papers close to the boy. And Kiba didn't need to be told twice.

With tears stinging at his eyes, the boy violently grabbed the papers and ran to his backpack, only to bolt out of the room after he had it.

Sakura and Chouji both stood outside of the Academy, waiting for Kiba to leave his detention. They would need to get together to speak about the project that had been assigned to them, especially now that they both had gotten scolded over not warning their parents before they set off on a wild
adventures.

"At least the man's story was interesting..." Chouji muttered softly as Sakura huffed and shook her head.

"Yeah, but I'm grounded, Chouji! For a whole week! All because Kiba couldn't wait for me to tell my mom where we were going!" The pink haired girl argued, then crossed her arms over her chest in annoyance. "And now mom wants to tag along with us wherever we go. She doesn't want us getting kidnapped or something stupid."

Chouji sighed too, but didn't try and fight her. "I know... Dad wants me to at least stop by the house before we do anything."

"You see? Kiba got us both in trouble! He's no good! Just like my mother said!"

Sakura knew the boy was dangerous because of how bad her mother spoke of his clan. They were a bunch of savages that didn't care about how what they did might affect others! They were insensitive, rude, smelly, mean-

"You two waited up?"

Hearing Kiba's voice was a surprise. He wasn't shouting. And he seemed honestly surprised to see that Sakura and Chouji had both waited up for him.

Turning around, the pink haired girl saw that Kiba seemed... Different. She wasn't sure how. But... Maybe it was because the tip of his nose was kind of red.

"Yeah... Listen, Kiba, our parents both scolded us yesterday for getting home so late." Chouji spoke up after a second of Sakura remaining silent.

Her cheeks burned red as soon as she noticed that, for some reason, she couldn't bring up the heated words she had been shouting at Chouji before. She didn't know why. And it bothered her that she felt so uncomfortable around the Inuzuka. But, it would make sense. The boy was a brute. Who knew what he might do to her if she dared speak up against him?

Kiba looked from the girl to the boy, then scoffed and shook his head. "You two are wussies." He commented, but soon sighed and looked at Chouji. "I got a bit more detail out of the Old Man. But I wasn't able to get the whole ending. Listen, just fifteen more minutes of story telling and we'll have our project complete."

It was odd to hear Kiba not yelling. But Sakura just chalked that up to him being weird. Again.

"And he told me that we would be able to find him in this shop real close to the village gates. We go there, get the rest of the story, then we go back to one of your houses so we can set up the whole project. That way your parents won't get angry with you for not being around them."

Sakura immediately looked at Chouji. She couldn't agree to this plan! Her mother would get angry for not going to her first! And she'd get punished even worse!

But, from the way Chouji was looking down at the floor with his eyebrows drawn in, she could tell he was actually thinking about going through with the Inuzuka's words. Then, before she could stop him, he looked up at Kiba with a broad smile.

"Sounds like a solid plan! Let's go!"
Internally, Sakura shouted at Chouji for being an idiot, Kiba for being a jerk, and herself for being a coward. But on the outside she merely followed after the two boys without saying a single word.

Kiba had said that after getting the last of the story from the old man, they could go to either Chouji or Sakura's homes. But he'd never even mentioned his own. And this struck Chouji as odd. Why would he be inviting himself to a house he had never been to before?

Still, he wanted to finish listening to the old man's story. And if they stopped to warn his and Sakura's parents, they would most probably not be allowed to hear it. So, in a moment of uncharacteristic rebelliousness, the young Akimichi decided to go along with Inuzuka's plans and hope for the best. If things happened like Kiba had said, they'd be able to go back to their homes without any difficulties. And if their parents asked why they had taken so long to leave the Academy, the could just say that they had waited for Kiba to leave detention.

They ran all the way to the village gates with Kiba leading them once more. And once they were really close to them, the boy turned left and entered a small shop Chouji had never gone into before.

He barely visited this part of the village after all. But maybe Kiba did because he seemed so relaxed and comfortable with his movements. Sakura, on the other hand, looked like she was about to bolt and go back to her house.

"Come on, Sakura, we're really close." Chouji grabbed her hand with his own as he stepped into the small shop, smiling comfortingly at her. "It's just a few minutes. Then we'll go to my house, tell my dad we'll be working at your house, and everything will be fine!"

She stopped walking then, her eyes widening. "You... You want to go to my house?" She squeaked out and Chouji immediately noticed he had really messed up.

"I'm sorry! That was rude of me! We could go to my house, if you're more comfortable! My mom loves cooking and she'd be happy to give us dinner and..." He drifted off when he noted that she began to giggle softly.

"We can go to my house, Chouji." She whispered, smiling softly up at him. "My mom loves cooking too."

With this, both children smiled at each other. They both rejoiced in having a friend. Especially because they spoke so easily to each other.

"Hey, love birds, are you going to listen or what?"

"Yeah! I already paid the old man the last of my money!"

"Did you seriously waste all your money on story telling?"

"Yup!"

Chouji and Sakura turned around to see that the man and Kiba were sitting by a table at the corner of the small tea shop, a steaming mug in front of the old man. Then, sharing one final look, both friends nodded at each other and moved to the table to listen to the last of the man's tale.

He... Honestly had no idea what he was doing telling kids about one of his greatest most bittersweet victories. Especially snot-nosed kids from a village of idiots that seemed about as stupid as Hidan himself.
But he had never said no to money. No matter how small. And the coins the tattooed idiot had given him had been enough to catch his eyes, no matter how small the true value of them actually was. And then the kid had offered to buy him tea before he left the village and, for some reason, Kakuzu just couldn't pass up on the chance for a free drink. So he had wound up here, with a mug of tea in front of him, the kid sitting excitedly to his right.

These kids parents should really get some advice on parenting or something. He wasn't the one to talk, he was very sure of that, but he was also pretty sure that kids weren't supposed to be allowed to run loose. Especially not to the part of the village that held all the bars and taverns and not to the village gates. Couldn't they easily escape and run off?

This village was filled with idiots, after all. He shouldn't really be all that surprised to learn that they allowed their kids to run free like animals.

He would never really admit to it, but it was kind of refreshing to be surrounded by these stupid kids. Sure, they were idiots. And it wasn't as if Kakuzu would ever see them again. But it was rather amusing to see them terrified of the story he was telling. It brought great joy to his heart to bring great fear to them.

Once the fat one and the pink haired one (Just what kind of hair color was that? Did her parents hate her or something? Did they forcibly dye it for her?) had sat down in the remaining chairs around the table, he had begun to tell them the ending of the tale. The one with the fangs on his face seemed to be about ready to jump for joy at the epic finale that was coming, even though the weaker two seemed a thousand times less excited.

By the time he had finished telling them his story, only a few minutes were left before he had to meet with Hidan on the outskirts of the village.

The pink haired one was crying.

The fat one looked really close to it.

And the one with the too big tattoos on his face was scribbling wildly at his notebook, eyes wide and full of wonder.

Clearly, these three weren't together because they wanted to be. The one with the tattoos was the complete antithesis of the other two. They were just stuck together because of a school assignment. One that had somehow wound up with them meeting and asking for Kakuzu's help.

He didn't particularly enjoy being called an old man at all times... But it was a thousand times better than having to listen to Hidan's incessant blubbering about his nonexistent god.

The thought of the irritating Jashinist brought a frown onto Kakuzu's face. But then he looked down at all three kids and... No. He didn't feel a single thing. His heart didn't warm and his pride didn't swell at being the cause of so much distress in two of those kids.

He didn't feel a single thing. And the advice he gave them didn't come out of kindness. It came out of pity.

"What lessons can be taken out of my tale?" He asked them with a clear of his throat, raising his hand to lower two fingers and leave three up. "Three very important ones."

Bring his index finger down, the man looked directly at the pink haired girl. "No matter what happens to you, never give anyone the satisfaction of tears. Crying in front of an enemy is a form of giving up. It's waving a flag of defeat and curling up to get beaten up. Never cry."
This girl was annoying with her constantly teary eyes. If she really wanted to graduate the academy, she would have to toughen up. If not, she would never be worthy of the title of kunoichi.

Then he looked at the fat one, bringing down his middle finger to leave his thumb standing. "If someone hits you, hit back harder. If they think they're strong enough to take you on, prove them wrong. Prove everyone wrong. I sure did."

This boy wasn't as weak as the girl, but he needed to find his own voice. Along this boy with that dopey tattoos on his face to string him along was a clear sign of a weak will.

And, finally, Kakuzu turned his intense eyes onto the boy that had started all of this, then finally brought down his thumb. "And when someone does something you don't like, don't tolerate it. Do something to make sure they'll never be able to do it again."

This boy was the wrong kind of strong. He was quick to act and brash. But he was also rather easily insulted.

After he left all three kids with the advice, the man stood up and began to walk out. "Thank for the money and drink, kid."

He would never see these kids ever again. Leaving them with this kind of advice couldn't hurt him. Besides, it was kind of amusing to see their stupefied faces after he had told them what they would need to do. Did the truly expect for their deepest secrets to remain secret if they wore them on their sleeves?

Stepping outside of the shop, Kakuzu took one last look at the surprised kids by the corner. Then, without a pang of worry in his chest, the man walked towards the village's gates so he could meet with Hidan.

He would never see these kids again. And he was Kakuzu. He didn't get attached easily. So he could walk away from those three kids without feeling a single thing. Not one thing.
Kiba's mood had improved considerably after he had been allowed to leave Iruka Sensei's classroom. And hearing the epic finale of the old man's tale had been completely worth it. And he was real proud to have taken so many notes! He was sure they would have the greatest story to retell out of the whole class! It would be a thousand times better than dumb Naruto's own!

Sakura and Chouji had both waited for him, even though they hadn't had to. And then they were actually able to go and find the old man before he left the village, ensuring being able to hear the ending of the old man's riveting story. Everything had been pretty cool and everything had been going great, even after Iruka Sensei had been a complete jerk to them.

And then that old man had said something really interesting: "And when someone does something you don't like, don't tolerate it. Do something to make sure they'll never be able to do it again."

He had looked at Kiba directly when he had said this. And he'd said something different to both Sakura and Chouji. Which meant that this bit of advice was directed solely at him.

... They were good words to live by. Even reminded him of something his grandfather would have grumpily said before he had died in battle.

But he couldn't help but be a bit amused at what the old man had told the other two kids with him. He'd basically called them out on their weaknesses! And from the way both Chouji and Sakura looked so perplexed, they were most probably actually thinking about his words. Which would be a very good thing. Maybe he'd finally have to stop hearing Sakura whining like a baby all the time.

"So, which house are we going to?"

He looked at both kids expectantly, although Chouji didn't seem to register that he'd said anything and Sakura blinked just slightly.

With a sigh and a shake of his head, Kiba got down from his seat and walked over to Sakura, snapping his fingers in front of her face to repeat his question.

"Guys? You hear me? Which house are we going to?"

Sakura blinked dumbly in Kiba's direction as fingers snapped in front of her face, a bit perplexed that he was actually talking to her. She had been left reeling after the old man had left and had not expected anyone to try and tell her anything.

"Never allow anyone to see you cry. It's a sign of weakness."

Crying had always been a show of weakness in her mind. But, for some reason, she had never truly seen herself crying as a sign of weakness. Her mother had always told her it was okay to cry... Although her father told her that no shinobi ever cried... But when he'd say that, her mother would smack him over the head...

How had the old man known that she cried often? Was she really that easy to see through? Was she really that weak?

"Yo, Sakura. Chouji. Come on, weren't you two worried about your parents getting worried?"
Sakura had been busy worrying over how truly transparent she was to remember about their time restriction. But when Kiba reminded her about their parents, she remembered that her mother wouldn't be too happy if she returned home late again.

"Yeah!" She gasped, then looked at Chouji. She had told him they could go to her house because her mother wouldn't mind. She really hoped the woman wouldn't mind. "Let's go to my house, quick!"

But when she looked at Chouji, she noticed that he had not moved at all. And this made her poke him in the arm softly to grab his attention. "Chouji, don't we have to tell your parents first, though?"

That got the plump boy's attention immediately.

"Yeah, we do! Let's go fast, though. Your mom will have food ready for us, right?"

Having heard the old man tell them all a seemingly personalized bit of advice, Chouji had been left in complete disarray. "If someone hits you, hit back harder."

Why had the man been looking at him when he said that? Did he think that Chouji needed to get stronger and fight back?

Sure, Chouji was the first to admit that he wasn't the kind for confrontation. But how had the man figured that out so quickly? They'd only met twice. How had been able to see that Chouji was weak so quickly?

It kind of hurt to figure out that he was so completely transparent to people. But... Well... He should take the old man's words to heart. He should be stronger and stand up for himself.

Now, though, he couldn't focus on that. He needed to get to his house so he could tell his father where he would be. Then they'd go to Sakura's house and finish their project on time. It would be fun! ... Hopefully...

He led the the two kids to his home without much difficulty, then barrelled through the door, calling out with a booming, "Mom! Dad! Where are you?!"

For a second, neither of his parents said anything. Then his slightly startled mother appeared in the doorway to the kitchen with wide eyes.

"Chouji? What's going on? Are you and Shikamaru okay? Is it anything with Ino? Do I have to go and find your cousin?"

The woman's worry had Chouji smiling uncomfortably. He knew that his relationship with Ino and Shikamaru was no secret. But, for some reason, it felt odd to hear about them when he was actually working with Kiba and Sakura.

"No, mom." The boy shook his head softly, "Dad told me to come here and tell you guys if I'd be going out for any reason. So Sakura, Kiba, and I stopped here after class so I could tell you we'd be going to Sakura's house."

The plump woman took a look at her son, then at both kids standing outside the doorway, and quirked an eyebrow at them.

"You just left the Academy? It was supposed to have let out an hour and a half ago."

His mother may not be a ninja, but she wasn't an idiot. Chouji had known this. Luckily, Kiba was
there as their excuse.

"Ah, yeah, that'd be my fault, lady." The Inuzuka spoke up at this point, making the woman look over at him. "I got caught in detention and these two had to wait for me so we could work on the group thing."

The boy's manner of speaking... It was so crude even his mother was surprised by it. But she kept her features composed and barely showed her surprise.

"Okay. So you two waited for him?" She asked, looking at Sakura specifically for reassurance. And when Chouji and the girl both nodded, the woman nodded as well. Although she didn't seem relieved by much. "Alright. So you're going to head over to...?"

"My house, ma'am." Sakura responded politely, smiling kindly at the woman. "So we can go ahead and finish our group project."

With the emphasis on the word, the pink haired girl spared a look over at Kiba. But the boy didn't even spare a glance back at her as he continued to look around the extremely well decorated and warm feeling home.

Chouji's mother looked over at all three of them for a moment longer before nodding and turning to head back into the kitchen. "Would you kids like a snack before you go? I just finished baking a dozen cookies."

"Hell yeah!"

Kiba was running after the woman before even Chouji could express his excitement at the food.

As they all munched happily on the delicious food, Kiba couldn't help but think that Chouji's mom was pretty cool. She had yet to scold him over his 'foul' (Please, Iruka Sensei was just a wimp) language. And she'd given them delicious cookies. And, as if all that hadn't been enough, she had even allowed Kiba to lick the spoon clean of raw cookie dough after she had finished up with her last batch.

It must be really nice to have a mom like her around all the time.

But Kiba wouldn't know about any of that. His mom was never around. Neither was his father... Or his sister...

Sighing over the cookie he had been nibbling on, Kiba remembered how things had been before his grandparents had died. But after they had gone for good, things hadn't been the same. Mom didn't smile much anymore. And his sister seemed to always be out, never wanting to spend time with him like when they were younger. And it was as if his mother and father always found a way to get into a fight when they met. Which was why they barely spent time together anymore...

"K-Kiba?"

Looking up at the sound of his name, Kiba found that both Chouji and Sakura were looking at him with wide, almost scared eyes.

This made him cock his head in confusion, "What?"

He was honestly confused as to why they would want to talk to him. Hadn't they already come up with a plan that had worked? Chouji's mother hadn't asked them anything aside from the standard
parental questions. Why were those two looking at him like that? Why did they seem like they were afraid of something.

"Uh uh... K-Kiba..." Sakura stuttered for a second, then breathed in, closed her eyes, then opened them with an odd look inside of them. "You need to change clothes before you go to my home!"

No one said anything after Sakura shouted that out. Chouji's mother froze behind them in the washing of the plates, although the water continued running. And Chouji and Sakura both looked as if they had just killed someone, completely fearful. But Kiba... Well, he was just confused as to why they were acting so weird. He had known they were freaks and weirdoes. He just hadn't known they were this weird.

"Why? What's wrong with my clothes?" He peered down at himself, analyzing his clothes, but couldn't find anything wrong with it. His pants were somewhat ripped up, but that was completely normal in his clan. So were the broken sleeves of his shirt. And his jacket may smell a bit weird, but that was because he still didn't know how to wash his clothes.

"B-B-B..." Sakura and Chouji were both idiots.

"Spit it out." The Inuzuka hissed, curiosity quickly giving way to annoyance with the two stupid kids. "I don't have all day!"

Behind them the faucet stopped running water and Kiba suddenly found Chouji's mother standing beside him, placing one hand on his shoulder.

"You have a few stains on your clothes from the snack. I can't possibly let you run around after I helped get those dirty. Why don't you take those off and put on some of Chouji's things?" The woman asked kindly, making Kiba blink at her, then down at his clothes again. He didn't see anything odder than usual. "Chouji, go and find something for him to wear."

"Yes, mom."

Chouji jumped out of his chair quickly and ran off to what Kiba guessed must have been his bedroom, all the while Sakura hastily looked down at her milk and cookies to continue eating.

Kiba looked at the pink haired girl that refused to look him in the way (which was nothing new, but still felt somewhat odd) then over at Chouji's mom. Both girls were acting weird. And he couldn't understand why.

Oh, Chouji's mom must hate her! From the way she had looked at both her and Chouji, Sakura could just tell the woman hadn't appreciated her asking for Kiba to change his clothes!

But she really wanted Kiba to make a good impression on her mother! And wearing those dirty rags would only make her mother's doubts and fears of the Inuzuka clan become even more concrete.

Sakura knew that she should have a been more discrete about her petition. But Kiba wouldn't have understood any clues because he was so thickheaded.

With a sigh, Sakura looked up to see that Chouji's mom had returned to washing plates and Kiba had gone back to eating his cookies. The woman had been kind for not calling Sakura out. The pink haired girl had no idea what she could have said if the woman had questioned her petition.

When Chouji returned he had a set of his clothes in hand and showed them to Kiba. "You're a bit smaller than me, so they might be big on you..." He apologized, but only got a shrug back from
Kiba.

"Doesn't matter. It's not like I'm keeping these." The Inuzuka muttered, then grabbed at the hem of his shirt to remove his shirt.

"What are you doing?!" Sakura gasped, eyes widening almost comically. "You can't change in front of a girl!"

Both boys froze and looked at her with surprise. And, much to her dismay, it was Chouji that questioned her.

"But... Why? We change in front of each other all the time."

"That's because you're boys!" She gasped in exasperation, "You can change in front of each other! But not in front of girls!"

"But... Why?" Kiba stressed the question, which made Sakura almost shout out in frustration.

"Chouji, Kiba, you cannot change in front of girls because it is not decent." Luckily for her, Chouji's mom was around to explain it to them. "Now, come along Kiba. I'll show you to the bathroom so you can change properly."

The boy jumped off of his chair and followed after the woman with a soft grumble about how stupid it was to go somewhere to change when he could just do it at the kitchen table. And Sakura couldn't help but shake her head sadly. It was just sad. Had he never been taught manners?

"I didn't know that about girls and boys..." Chouji muttered to himself after Kiba had gone, and Sakura looked at him with sympathy. "Well, at least you know now. You can't make the mistake ever again. You should be happy you learned now rather than later. Imagine if you tried to change in front of the girls at school! You'd get in trouble with Iruka Sensei!"

The very idea made Chouji pale and Sakura felt her heart swell. She had just saved her newest friend from quite the predicament!

"Okay mom! See you later!"

Chouji gave his mother one final wave of goodbye as he, Sakura, and Kiba all walked away from his home. Kiba now wore one of Chouji's favorite long sleeved, green shirts and a pair of dark blue pants. It was weird to see them on him because they were a tad bit big on him, the pants ending lower than his knees and the sleeves of the shirt going past his hands. It was really odd to see Kiba looking so different. Chouji had gotten used to seeing him with that odd smelling jacket.

"Be careful kids! And come back before eight, Chouji! You don't want to miss dessert!"

The idea of his mother's dessert had Chouji's mouth watering. But he knew that he would have to finish the school project with his friend and Kiba today, so he couldn't spend too much time thinking on how delicious it would be.

He and Kiba followed after Sakura without saying much, a comfortable silence falling over all three of them. Kiba fussed over the length of his clothes for a bit, but didn't say much about it.

When they reached Sakura's house, Chouji couldn't help but blink up at it. He had only ever visited the Clan Compounds, and so only been exposed to homes in the outskirts of the village. But Sakura lived in the heart of the village with busy people bustling about at all times. Even though he had
already come here once before, he had been much too worried over being skinned by his family to really take everything in. But now he was able to see that these houses were built one beside the other, leaving only space for a small garden in between.

"Mom! I'm home!"

Sakura opened the door and was immediately grabbed in a hug by a tall, strawberry blonde woman. And when Chouji looked at the woman, he could see that she shared Sakura's face shape. But, aside from that, she shared almost nothing.

"What took you so long, my little blossom?" The woman questioned immediately, placing the girl back on the floor.

Her face was pulled in with worry as she looked down at her daughter. And from the way she hadn't mentioned either him or Kiba, the woman he guessed must have been Sakura's mother hadn't noticed them yet.

"We had to take care of some things first, mom." The girl answered, motioning to the two boys. "Meet Kiba Inuzuka and Chouji Akimichi. I invited them over so we could work on our school project."

It was with this that the woman finally looked at both boys. And her dark green eyes widened when she finally saw the boys and she moved quickly to them.

"Welcome to my home. Please, enter." She ushered them in hastily, "I didn't notice you, sorry."

Chouji couldn't understand why she would be apologizing. But he allowed himself to be pushed inside without any hesitation. Sakura's mom seemed nice enough. If just a bit worried over her daughter. But it made sense because parents were usually very attached to their kids. He would know!

"For school work? Then, Sakura, won't you take your guests over to the living room? I'll move the coffee table so you can work on the floor comfortably."

"Okay, mom!" Sakura smiled over at her mother, who then looked at both boys.

"Would you kids like anything to drink or eat?"

Chouji shook his head respectfully and was about to say "No, thank you." like his mother had taught him to do, but Kiba was faster.

"Got any soda lady?"

Sakura yelped and paled suddenly, making Chouji worry about why she may have done so. But Sakura's mom only smiled, although it looked just a tiny bit fake, and nodded.

"I'll serve three sodas. Sakura, move along."

With this, the woman walked off and left Sakura with both boys. But she didn't say anything as she looked at Kiba with wide eyes. Chouji couldn't understand why. But Kiba didn't care much and snapped his fingers in her face once more.

"You heard the woman, crybaby. Get to moving."

That snapped Sakura out of whatever had frozen her.
The pink haired girl took them into a cozy living room with nice sofas inside of it, telling them to place their backpacks on one of them while her mother prepared their drinks because she would be making more space once she came in.

A few seconds of silence passed between the three of them once more and Chouji felt somewhat awkward. This was his first time in a friend's house. Aside from Shikamaru and Ino, of course, but that had always felt different. His parents knew their parents. But he was sure that his parents didn't know Sakura's.

"Nice digs." Kiba complimented as he looked around the room, eyes catching on all the family photos. "That your dad?"

"Yeah." Sakura nodded, looking at the man in the photo. "He's out working right now. He works as a merchant and goes to neighboring towns and villages to sell all kinds of things."

Kiba nodded while making a soft noise of taking note of what was being said. But he said nothing else.

Sakura's mother walked in with a tray of two sodas and one cup of what seemed like water, handed it to Sakura, then pulled the coffee table out of the middle of the room to allow the kids to work on the floor. Then, once the table was against the wall, she took the tray from Sakura, set it on the table, and turned back to the three kids.

"I will be in my room if you need me for anything, Sakura. Chouji, Kiba, don't be afraid to ask for anything. And I'll begin making dinner in an hour."

All three kids nodded at her words silently, then watched as she walked off.

Then, once she was gone, Kiba looked at both kids.

"You have an odd mom, Sakura."

Chouji didn't blame Sakura for groaning in annoyance.
So, working with Sakura hadn't been completely bad. And Chouji kind of knew what he was doing. And the fact that Sakura's mother began to make dinner for them about five minutes after she had brought them their drinks, which made the wonderful smell of delicious food waft towards them, certainly didn't hurt.

"So, you're going to be the great betrayer, right, Kiba?" Chouji questioned as they drew up the plans for the presentation of the old man's story, which made Kiba nod sagely at the two kids.

"I'm a badass and he had tattoos on his face, didn't he?" The Inuzuka answered the question with a question of his own, a smirk finding its way onto his face. "Besides, I like being the bad guy. Makes me look all tough and shit."

He smiled broadly at this, then pointed at Chouji, "Which means you'll be playing the old man. Toughen up, pork chop. You know how scary the old man was!"

The other boy's eyes widened at the idea of being the old man, but Kiba didn't care. He knew that there was no way Chouji could ever believably be the big bad guy of the story, the tattooed shinobi that had betrayed the old man in a fierce and horrible way. And it wasn't like Sakura could play the traitor either. She wasn't mean enough to shout at Chouji like what would be needed in the classroom.

"How are the designs for the costumes coming, Sakura?"

Kiba had delegated jobs at the beginning of the whole thing because he knew just how he wanted with their project to be. They would put on a show worthy of even the greatest of actors! And for that they would need spectacular costumes that made them seem as if they were ready to step onto a battlefield. Luckily, one of Sakura's father's specialty was cloth and her mother was really good at tailoring (Sakura's words, ones Kiba hoped were true), so the job of designing and creating costumes was given to her.

That left planning and writing their script to Kiba and Chouji. And because Kiba had written down rather crude, yet completely understandable, notes about the man's story, they were assigning characters and giving Sakura ideas about costumes.

"Chouji will need a mask and head cover just like the old man. And maybe a coat like his too." Kiba offered, "But without the clouds. Those are girly looking. He needs to be scary looking."

The pink haired girl quirked an eyebrow at Kiba, then looked at Chouji, who hummed softly in thought. "Maybe you're right, Kiba..."

This made the young boy smile broadly and jump up on the floor, planting his hands on his hips. "Of course I'm right!" He shouted, then pointed at himself with his thumb. "We Inuzuka are always right!"

He noticed that Sakura and Chouji exchanged unsure looks, but he didn't care. The fact of the matter was that his clan was awesome. And being part of the clan meant that he too was awesome. And awesome was always right. So, really, he was always right.

His logic was flawless!

"Who's going to be the enemy ninja?" Sakura questioned after a few seconds of silence between
them, then lifted her notebook to show the sketches she had created for what they were to wear.

The design for her own costume was what Kiba would expect of a dainty woman to wear, although he'd never seen any of the female members of his clan ever wear something so impractical. Then the one she had made for Chouji was on point, with a long coat for him, a mask, and head cover that looked just like the old man's. It even had a plate cover on his forehead, although it didn't have any design on it. None of them could remember the design the man's had held, so they would wing the design when the time came for making it.

And, finally, the design she had made for him left Kiba smiling broadly. It looked perfect! Just what a fierce warrior would wear. And it even had the chains the old man had told them his greatest enemy had worn! And he could see a sword peeking out from what was supposed to be his back, one of the traitor's favored weapons.

"I mean, Chouji will be the old man, Kiba will be the traitor, and I will be the woman in green that helped the old man out in his toughest times. But... How are we going to act out the final scene? The one with the ten squadrons of enemy shinobi?" Sakura questioned, tapping her drawings thoughtfully.

The doubt was genuine. And she really seemed to want to get this to work out well. Which was why Kiba became even more excited as more thoughts began to run through his head.

"I know who can be the enemy! I won't be able to bring in the same number of enemies, but at least ten should be good, right?" He asked, which made Sakura nod once. "Yeah, I can do that! I'll just ask some of the pack dogs to come to school with me. We'll need disguises for them, though."

Sakura's eyes widened at Kiba's genius idea, then she nodded. "I should be able to make at least a headband and maybe an eyepatch or two for the dogs. If you bring them now, I'll get their measurements and have everything ready by tomorrow."

Kiba was psyched to hear that. So he nodded, then jumped over all of the work they had done on preliminary designs and scripts, only to jog over to Sakura's door. "I'll be back in a minute!" He called out, throwing the door open to run outside without waiting for a reply.

Chouji didn't mind being the old man. Especially in the way Kiba offered as a possible way to portray him. And it really made sense that the Inuzuka was to be the main antagonist of the whole story. He was fierce and knew a few taijutsu moves, which were perfect for the reenactment they were to perform in front of the rest of their class.

They would only have time to perform the middle part of the old man's story, the one that dealt with the enemy shinobi and the traitor, because they knew they wouldn't have time to perform anything else. But, because that was most exciting part, Sakura had conceded that it would be the best to show. Kiba hadn't like the idea of cutting so many things out of the story, but had agreed.

Now the Inuzuka was off looking for ten dogs, leaving Sakura and Chouji to continue working on everything else.

Once she had completely finished the costume designs, Sakura picked up the script Kiba had been working on, read it over, and sighed heavily.

"What's wrong, Sakura?" Chouji questioned, only to have her flip the notebook over and show it to him. The Akimichi squinted his eyes, reading what Kiba had managed to come up with. "Wing it and be awesome?"
Had he read that correctly?

From the way Sakura sighed and placed the notebook down, that really had been what the boy had written. And he understood why Sakura was so disappointed. But... Kiba seemed to know what he was doing.

"Do you know how to sew, Chouji?" Sakura asked softly as she got up from the floor, beginning to move towards the far hallway of her home.

"Yeah. My mom taught my when I kept ripping the knees of my pants by running after Kiba and Naruto. Why do you ask?" He asked in return.

"Because we're going to need to get to work on these things as soon as possible. It was a real big set back to wait for Kiba and now we only have a few hours to get to work on our costumes." She explained, only to walk out of Chouji's sight.

The boy took the time she was gone to look over their designs and hum to himself. His design was pretty simple. All that he'd really need to do was make the stuff that the old man had worn over his face and head. The cloak could be any dark ones laying around, they didn't have to make it.

Although Kiba had said that they had to look awesomer than everybody else...

But Sakura's dress could be one she already had! She most probably had something green already. And, if not, they could change the color in the story!

... Although Kiba really wanted to be as faithful to the story as possible...

With a soft sigh, Chouji shook his head. This was a lot of work to do in just a few hours. But if they really tried their hardest, they should be able to get everything done before the night was done!

"Chouji?"

Sakura's mom stepped into the room from the kitchen to find her living room in a complete disarray with only one child, even though there were supposed to be three. And Chouji immediately stood up with a nervous chuckle to speak to her. "Hey, Mrs. Haruno! Sakura went off to find things to make our clothes for tomorrow!"

The woman looked at him with the same expression his own mom wore whenever he and Shikamaru got in trouble because of Ino, and asked, "And the Inuzuka boy?"

It was like she could see straight through him!

Sakura's mom kind of reminded him of Ino's mother. Both women seemed so serious!

"He went to find some dogs to be able to do our presentation."

For some reason, hearing this caused the woman to drop the look that so similar to his mother's own and looked at him surprised. But, a few seconds passed and she soon shook her head softly and smiled at Chouji.

"Dinner should be ready in an hour. Is there anything I could do to help?"

Working with Kiba hadn't been easy. When he wanted something, he made sure to get it. He was extremely loud, too! But, Sakura had to admit, he had some pretty good ideas.
But making his clothes would be the hardest. And she highly doubted that the boy knew how to sew. The state of the clothes left behind with Chouji's mother had been a testament to that.

He wanted chains and a sword. Did they even have any of that for him to use? Because there weren't many weapons in her house. Just one old sword that her father had told her to never touch because it was supposed to be some priceless artifact. Even though she was studying to become a ninja, her parents hadn't thought it a good idea to buy any weapons just yet for some reason.

Well, at least he would just need a dark colored vest, shirt, and pants aside from those weapons. And he was bound to have some of that.

As she walked back to Chouji with her green dress in hand- one that one of her father's friends had bought her for her birthday, complete with a light green scarf- along with some supplies to begin to work on the mask and cloak Chouji would wear.

She heard her mother ask Chouji if there was anything she could do and immediately the girl hurried up, and looked at her mother from the opening of the hallway.

"Help us sew stuff!"

Her mother turned to look at her with mild surprise, then looked down at her hands and quirked an eyebrow.

"Are you planning on wearing that dress tomorrow, Sakura?"

"Mm-hmm." The girl nodded as she walked over to her mother, then set down the supplies in her arms on one of the couches. "I need to be dressed in green." She explained, then ran over to her notebook and pulled it up, showing the design of the clothes to her mother. "We need to be dressed like this. See?" She pointed at each different design, then gasped slightly. "Oh! And we need to make forehead protectors for Kiba's dogs too!"

Okay... She had to admit it. Even though she hadn't liked the idea of Kiba taking complete control of things, she was kind of excited. It was fun to be making things! Especially because Kiba had made sure to tell them that their project would be the best around.

Her mom grabbed her notebook and looked at the designs, then looked at all of the papers strewn along her floor, some crumbled up, others allowed to remain their straight shape.

"Well, if you would like to get to work on this, you're going to need to clean all of this up."

"Yeah, yeah!" Sakura bounced with a bright smile, then looked at Chouji. "Help me so we can start working fast!"

The plump boy nodded immediately and began to pick papers up, and she soon joined in.

Once all of the paper mess had been cleaned, her mother took control of the making of the costumes and began to take measurements for Chouji, deciding that making a cloak for him shouldn't be too hard.

It had been fun rounding up ten dogs. A bit difficult because all of his dogs wanted to go to school with him and get out of the house for a day.

"Take me! Take me!" A small gray dog barked as he jumped on his chest, trying to grab his attention.
"No! Me! I'm bigger and more scary looking!" A dark brown pitbull growled as he bit at the boy's foot, all the while his female counterpart tugged at his hand.

"Wait! I should go with you because I'm the biggest around!"

"No! I should go because I'm the fastest!"

"I'm the smartest! I can speak the human's language!"

"Your teacher will love me!"

And like that the shouts and barks continued. Because he was an Inuzuka, Kiba did not mind being at the very bottom of the dog pile. But he did get kind of worried over the clothes Chouji had lent him.

Would it be okay if he returned the clothes with scratches and holes?

He didn't really know...

"What is going on here!?"

The desperate barking from the dogs ceased as soon as the dark voice pierced through the sounds, shutting them up immediately. Kiba craned his neck slightly so he could look at Kuromaru from his spot on the floor, and found that the large dog was alone. He didn't see his mother.

"Hi Kuromaru!" Kiba greeted, although he didn't try to get up. "I'm trying to choose ten dogs to take with me to school tomorrow."

The large dog huffed at the boy's answer and glared at him and the other dogs. Just like they were supposed to when Kuromaru was around, the dogs hurried to stand in attention, leaving Kiba alone on the floor.

"Does your father know about this?" The dark animal asked as he stalked over to Kiba, then dropped his head so he was looking right into the young Inuzuka's eyes.

"Not at all!" Kiba smiled broadly, "But it's not like either he or ma will notice! They're never home." Kiba reminded the large dog. "It's for a school project. You do want me to get a good grade, right?"

Kuromaru's eyes narrowed at the boy's taunt, but he didn't say anything. Instead he barked out, "Aki, Akio, Akia, and Akira," The four white and gray spotted siblings stood at attention as soon as they heard their names, "Shin and Shig," Both bulldogs perked up, "And Ryo, Sora, and Takeo." Finally, the three brown haired, large dogs were called, leaving the rest of the dogs to sadden at not being called. "You will be accompanying Kiba and I to his school."

For a second, Kiba was pleased with himself for having gotten Kuromaru on his side. Then he processed the last thing the large dog had said and bit his lip to stop himself from groaning.

"What about mom, Kuromaru? Don't you need to be with her?" He tried, hoping that the dog would just go ahead and leave him alone tomorrow.

But Kuromaru was a rather scary dog that accepted as much bullshit as his mother did (so, none) and he glared at the young Inuzuka.

"Just be happy I am allowing you to take any dogs." He growled dangerously, which made Kiba sigh and frown.
He wouldn't be able to win this. He knew it. So he may as well just allow Kuromaru to come along. Hopefully he'd be scary enough to terrify the rest of his classmates.

"Fine, fine..." The boy breathed out, then stood up and dusted himself. "If you'd be so kind, please come with me. I need you guys to get measured for what you're going to wear."

"Wear!" All of the dogs shouted out in fear and horror, all the while Kuromaru's glare turned even darker.

"Not like that, you bunch of babies!" He sighed, "It'll be a forehead protector, like the one the ninja wear. It's for a presentation we're going to give."

All of the dogs were immediately soothed by this. For some reason, no dog liked the idea of wearing human clothes but they didn't mind accessories.

Dogs could sure be weird sometimes. Just like humans.

It seemed that everyone was weird. He seemed to be the only normal person around.

"Now let me see the back."

Chouji did as instructed by Sakura's mother and turned so his back was facing her, his arms stuck out to either of his sides.

She whipped up a dark cloak exactly like the one the old man had worn in less than thirty minutes. Sakura said it was because her mother was a clothes ninja. The woman said it was because she had lived through quite some interesting experiences. Chouji just thought it was awesome.

"It looks really good, mom!" Sakura smiled as she walked up to Chouji, the mask she had made for him in her hands. "Now try these on, Chouji. I want to make sure these are right."

The boy did as instructed and pulled on the cloth.

It felt weird to have his hair held down so tightly. And the cloth around his face was odd to breathe through. But from the way Sakura lit up, he guessed he looked good.

"It's perfect, mom!"

The woman fixed up the boy's mask minutely, but nodded and smiled softly. "You look good, Chouji. Now, Sakura, go try on that dress while Chouji takes off his things. We need to make sure it fits."

The girl nodded and ran out of the room with the dress in tow, all the while her mother began to help Chouji to pull off the head coverings. Then, once that was off, he carefully unclasped the cloak and slid it off of his body. After he had finished with that, he handed the things over to the woman with as much care as possible, not wanting to accidentally damage any of her hard work.

Right when he was about to thank the woman for having helped them with their work, there was a sudden slam of the house's front door. They both looked in its direction immediately and were stunned and shocked when Kiba ran in on hands and feet, running like a dog.

Behind him were nine more dogs.

"Sakura!" He called as he jumped into the room, "I brought the dogs!"
Chouji counted at least seven different dogs running into the home to begin to roam and sniff around, not caring for anything they may knock over. But just when Sakura's mother was about to move to stop a dog from getting too close to some rather fragile looking tea cups on a table to the far side of the room, a harsh and loud bark broke through all of the commotion, immediately ceasing it.

"Stand at attention beside the pup if you don't want to get neutered!"

In less than a second all of the dogs were sitting in a line beside Kiba, panting with wide eyes as they looked in the direction the voice had come from.

"Boy, you cannot run in like some savage." The same voice scolded Kiba, who merely crossed his arms and sighed. "What would your parents say if they saw this?"

Chouji had expected to see a rather tall and muscular man come in. He had not expected a large, wolf-life beast to stalk in with an eyepatch over its eye.

Kiba didn't answer as the large animal moved to stand before the Inuzuka clan members. And the scary animal ignored the boy to instead look at Chouji and Sakura's mother, looking over both of them before bowing its head slightly.

"I apologize for my pack's lack of control. The pup is still not too accustomed to the ways of the rest of the village." It apologized to Sakura's mother, "If any harm came to your home, I will make sure he makes up for it."

There was a wolf that could talk... There was a wolf that could talk!

Chouji was amazed and didn't try to hide it. His mouth hung open as he stared at the large and terrifying animal, caught between pure horror and pure amazement.

Sakura's mother was just as shocked. But she managed to get over it much faster than the boy.

"Th-thank you. But there's no need to worry about that. They didn't seem to break anything." The woman let out a soft chuckle, although it sounded somewhat strained to Chouji's ears. "May I ask, though, what so many dogs are doing in my home?"

"Of course, Mrs...?" The dog allowed to hang, asking for the woman's name.

"Mebuki Haruno." The woman told, which had the wolf nodding.

"I am Kuromaru. I am sorry to meet in this manner, but the pup told me that he would need ten dogs for a school project. And that we would need to get measured for some kind of accessories." The large animal explained, "If that isn't the case, though, I shall see that he gets due punishment."

"I didn't like, Kuromaru!" Kiba groaned, then pointed at Chouji. "Tell 'im, Chouji!"

Kiba... He actually wanted him to speak up? To a wolf as big and scary as this one?!

With a nervous gulp, the boy looked from the large animal to the confused woman.

"Uh... He-He-He..." He stuttered out, then closed his eyes tightly. He didn't like being put on the spot. "He's telling the truth!" He made out quickly, keeping his head down and eyes closed.

A moment of silence in which nothing happened passed, and Chouji felt a dark dread begin to settle in his chest.

"For forehead protectors." Kiba informed the adults, making all of the information turn on him once
more. "And maybe an eyepatch or two to make them seem cooler."

"Hey! We're cool enough!"

There were dogs that talked too?! The Inuzuka Clan was so cool!

"You'd look cooler with an eyepatch, Sora." The Inuzuka smirked over at everyone else in the room. "Now we've got lots of dogs to measure! Let's get to work! Chouji, you'll take care of Aki and Akio. They're the nicest ones out of all the lot of bitches."

"I'm not a bitch! I'm a male!"

What seemed to be the rest of the male dogs that had come with Kiba growled at the boy, but he merely waved them off and sent two dogs in Chouji's directions.

After that, all of the humans in the house began to work on measuring the dog's heads.

Kiba had been right... The two, medium sized, gray and white dogs were rather nice. They even licked his hands and face... Although that may have been because of the chips he had snacked on before...
you can get to work on the rest of us."

The large animal walked off then without saying anything else, but Sakura could only blink after him.

That wolf could talk... And he wasn't afraid of yelling at Kiba... Wow...

"Let me see your dress, honey." Sakura heard her mother, then stepped fully into the living room to see that her mother was in the middle of getting measurements of a bulldog's head. "Aw, it's beautiful." She smiled with a nod. "Alright. It's perfect for tomorrow. Now go ahead and get Kuromaru's measurements. Once we're done with all of the dogs, we can eat some dinner."

The mention of food had all of the dogs riled up and immediately asking for some, but that was quickly stopped by a sharp growl from Kuromaru. Then he motioned for Sakura to walk over to him so they could finish up with what it was that they needed to do.

The girl went on shaky legs, somewhat terrified of the large and scary looking animal.

But he laid down on the floor and sit perfectly still while she wrapped the tape around his head, then told her that he would prefer the protector around his neck rather than on his head. So she moved so she was taking the neck's size, marveling at how soft his fur was.

Okay... He was scary, Sakura was sure that he could kill her without any problem. But... Well... He didn't yell at her when she accidentally squeezed too hard with the measuring tape. Instead he softly told her to loosen it.

... He was actually kind of nice... And from what she could see, the rest of the dogs belonging to Kiba were nice too.

But that didn't make any sense. If they were so nice to humans, why was Kiba so mean?

It just made no sense.
Sakura's mom, just like Chouji's, was an amazing cook! The food she made ended up making Kiba's taste buds dance in excitement and joy. And he knew that all ten Inuzuka dogs agreed with him. Even Kuromaru had thanked the woman for allowing them to eat some of the delicious food she had prepared.

"This is damned good, lady!" Kiba commented as he finished up with his food, a broad smile on his face.

The woman smiled softly at the compliments, but didn't say anything. Kiba didn't mind this, but he did whine softly when he felt Kuromaru smack him against the arm with his snout.

"She has a name, runt." The large dog growled, "Call her Mrs. Haruno or don't talk to her at all."

The boy didn't like it when Kuromaru tried to discipline him. It was stupid and annoying. But he returned to his meal instead of biting back at the large animal because he knew it wouldn't be worth it to try and argue with him. He was just like his mother. Barely ever present in his life, but when he was, it was most probably to scold him and call him stupid.

One could tell they were Inuzuka partners...

"Thank you for the food, Mebuki. From all of us." The dog continued, which made the woman nod in answer. "Finish up, pup. I'll walk you all back to the compound."

Immediately Kiba wanted to argue. He didn't want to go back home yet! It was so early! It wasn't even ten! But a sharp glare from Kuromaru had him shutting up. He knew that if he fought, the dog would tell his parents. And the last thing he needed was them finding out about his love for the night life.

"Fine..." The boy grumbled, then chanced a glance over at Chouji. "Yo, Pork Chop, want us to walk you home?"

"Kiba." Kuromaru growled at the boy making new plans, but the boy merely smiled at him.

"The Akimichi compound ain't too far from our place, Kuromaru! Besides, would you really feel right leaving a kid like him walking back home all alone at such a late hour?"

From the way Chouji's eyes widened in surprise, the Akimichi wasn't completely on board with the idea. But the rest of his dogs were agreeing with Kiba immediately, barking at Kuromaru and telling him that it would be negligent and down right mean to not make sure the boy arrived back safe.

With a sigh, the large dog nodded. "Fine, fine. Porky, you ready?"

He couldn't really understand why Kiba and Kuromaru called him by those nicknames. He had a name! And he wasn't fat!

But... Coming from a wolf and Kiba, they didn't really feel like insults. He'd heard Kuromaru call Sakura kit before. Maybe he just assigned nicknames to new people whose names he didn't know?

But he called Mrs. Haruno by her name... Maybe the nicknames were only for the younger kids?
That would make sense for the wolf. But why did Kiba have to call him that? Why did he have to call him something so insulting?

With a soft sigh and a strained smile, Chouji nodded. "Yeah, I can go now."

It would be rather interesting to go back home with the Inuzuka's dogs. It sounded exciting, even. And from the way Aki jumped and ran to Chouji, he guessed that the dog also liked the idea of him tagging along.

"Thank you for everything, Mrs. Haruno." The Akimichi bowed respectfully at the woman, who returned it with a soft and earnest smile of her own.

"It was nothing, Chouji. It was a pleasure to meet you." She told him, then looked at the Inuzuka. "It was quite... interesting to meet all of you as well."

For some reason, even though she had been smiling at Chouji, now her smile didn't feel as honest anymore. But that didn't make any sense to the young boy. Why would she have been happy talking to him, but not with the Inuzuka.

"Thank you for tolerating this much stupidity." The wolf answered with a bow of his head, then nudged Kiba with his snout. "Get moving, kid. It's bad enough you're making me go join you at school. Now you've got me taking an Akimichi back to his compound..."

Kuromaru... He seemed like a rather grumpy wolf.

Chouji jumped off from his chair at the dining room table and followed after the Inuzuka dogs, but turned around before he was out the front door to wave at Sakura.

"Bye, Sakura! I'll see you at school tomorrow!"

She smiled back happily with a wave of her own, "Bye Chouji!"

After that he ran after the Inuzuka dogs, only to have Aki jump at him, lick his cheeks, and motion with his snout to run.

"You want me to run?" He questioned with a blink, caught off guard.

That was when Kiba made his presence known, "Yeah, we like to run a lot, Chouji. You wouldn't mind, would ya?"

Aki was motioning happily and rapidly with his head, clearly wanting Chouji to run. And at the excited tails all around him, Chouji couldn't help but smile. "Sure! Let's go!"

"Sakura, next time you'll bring friends over, I would appreciate it if you warn me. Okay?"

The young girl blinked up at her mother as she dried the dishes handed over to her, somewhat confused.

"Why, mom? Didn't everything go well?"

The woman sighed softly as she turned off the faucet, facing her daughter. "It did. But I wasn't prepared to have so much company. And I now have to clean up after all those dogs."

Sakura listened to the words and tried her best to understand them, then offered, "I could help cleaning up, mom!"
"No you won't." The woman smiled down at her, although it didn't look quite right. "You have to go to bed to prepare for your presentation tomorrow. Now go along and bathe. I'll be up to your room in a few minutes to tuck you in."

The young girl nodded at her words, but couldn't help but glance at her mother once more before she left the kitchen.

Her mom had been acting so oddly... While with Chouji, she had seemed fine. But after Kiba had appeared with all of his dogs and the wolf, Mebuki Haruno had been acting differently. She seemed stiff, uncomfortable. But that made no sense. The Inuzuka dogs had all been really nice.

Why did her mother seem so off, though?

With a huff, Sakura decided to ponder about all of this later. She would have to prepare her part of the project for tomorrow so everything would be perfect.

She could think about her mother later.

Just like he had expected, all of the groups had used stories that were told to them by people they knew. No one broke Iruka Sensei's rule of close family members or friends. But no one else had been as unique and ingenious as Kiba had forced his team to be. None of them had performed any heart pounding stories found through actual investigation. They were all just the regular shpiel about a Konoha ninja fighting for the good of their village.

Rather boring, really, after getting a different kind of story from the Old Man.

Sasuke, Shikamaru, and Hinata were all dressed really nicely, which was expected because the Hyuga and Uchiha were such high strung clans. But their performance was less than stellar. Sasuke tried to be all the characters, Hinata didn't speak at all, and Shikamaru ended up falling asleep, even though he had the easiest job around, to narrate.

Ino, Shino, and Naruto all looked differently. Ino looked as pristine as a princess even though she was the kunoichi that happened to be the main character in the whole telling, Shino wore his usual attire, although with a belt wrapped around his waist with a sword on it, and Naruto wore cardboard armor that was supposed to be a warrior's costume.

The rest of the group was a mix of okay looking costumes and costumes that were clearly made at the last minute. Which, in Kiba's eyes, all looked like utter rubbish when compared to his costume.

He was wearing what the old man had told them his old friend had once worn. Pants down to mid shin, sandals, a kunai pouch on his left leg, a scabbard with sword on his back, and a black vest that showed off the rest of his body. There was a chain wrapped around his waist, much like the one the old man had said his friend had used before.

Most looked like second rate ninja in Kiba's eyes. While he, Chouji, and his dogs all looked as if they were ready for slaughter, all the while Sakura had such a frilly dress put on that even the bitch Ami had taken note of it and not done anything to her during their breaks. Kiba guessed it was because the dress was so nice, everyone would notice if something had happened to it.

"Kuromaru, what are you doing here?" Iruka Sensei asked in surprise when the large dog walked into the room by the end of one of the last presentations, his eyes wide.

Upon hearing the name, both Chouji and Sakura perked up, knowing that they would finally get their chance to perform their amazing story. The rest of the group gasped in awe at the large dog.
which made Kiba smirk while Kuromaru merely huffed at the attention.

"I'm here for the project, Iruka Sensei." Kuromaru explained himself, "Pup, you better perform now if you want me to be part of this! I've got more important things than entertaining a bunch of snot nosed brats to do."

Kiba jumped up immediately and smiled wickedly at the distrustful glare Iruka Sensei sent his way, then nodded at Kuromaru.

"Get prepared to be amazed!" He shouted at the whole group, then pointed at the dogs, "You know what to do. Sakura, put on Kuromaru's costume. Chouji, help me prepare the blood."

"Blood?!"

"Don't get your panties in a twist, teacher man."

Both Kuromaru and Iruka Sensei sneered at the insult, but Kiba merely rolled his eyes and moved to Chouji so they could prepare the fake blood. It took them only a few seconds to prepare the bag for spewing, then, with a mischievous smile, Kiba jumped to the front of the classroom.

While all of this happened, Sakura tied Kuromaru's forehead protector around his neck and made sure that all of the dogs had their own tied correctly and in place. After she had done this, she reminded them of their queue, and finally ran to the front to stand on Kiba's left while Chouji made to stand to his right.

"Good afternoon, you stinking louts!" Kiba shouted out, prompting a glare from Iruka Sensei and a warning growl from Kuromaru. "You know who we are, so I'm not wasting any breath introducing us. Today we're going to perform the greatest, most amazing war story you'll ever get to see in your stinkin' lives!"

With this, he nodded at both his teammates, prompting them both to get into their positions.

Both children positioned themselves in front of Iruka Sensei's desk, allowing the whole room to see them. Chouji looked very different with the clothes that hid all of his body, and Kiba was proud of how mean he looked. Sakura turned her back to the Akimichi, her green dress flowing softly as she did so.

"There once was a black ninja with a dark heart, there was no room for love in it for no one…" Kiba began mysteriously, stepping off to the side of the room to not interrupt the scene between both kids. "That is, for no one but a green beauty with the power to buy anything she wanted…"

"P-Please, don't leave!" Sakura gasped out, turning to Chouji with wide eyes. "I love you! Please! I'll buy you anything you wish if you'd just stay with me!"

Chouji, trying to act as mean and dark as he knew the old man was, shook his head softly, and in a gruff tone that mimicked the old man's own, said, "I'll bring you nothing but ruin."

"I don't care!"

Kiba stepped forward now, looking at both his fellow students with a feral grin.

"I see you have the woman's love as your own." He noted with a shake of his head. "I want her powers for my own."
Chouji turned to glare at Kiba, sticking a hand out to push Sakura behind him. He knew that the old man was a quiet and stern kind of guy, so he said nothing, instead keeping a steady glare on the Inuzuka.

A few seconds passed in which Kiba waited for him to do something, then noticed what the boy was doing. This made Kiba shake his head softly with a tut of his lips. Then he looked up at Chouji with a glare, pulling out the sword he had managed to take from his home without Hana noticing.

"Then you leave me no choice, old friend."

He 'stabbed' Chouji with the sword, careful to make it pass between the boy's arm and body rather than actually hurting him. Chouji gasped out and fell to his knees, sword stuck between his body.

"You… You traitor!" He made out before falling to his knees, clutching at the sword. Then he fell to the floor, allowing his head to fall softly.

Sakura screamed in surprise, causing a few of the kids in the room to jump at the sudden sound, then had Kiba grab her by the arm and pull her off.

Iruka Sensei looked at them all with confusion, and seemed ready to question what they were doing. But Sakura stepped forward with a solemn expression on her face and began to speak before the man could get a single word in.

"The ninja with the black heart had been betrayed by his oldest, greatest friend." She explained, pointing at Kiba, who waved at the group. "Left with nothing but his weapons to his name, the man left the village he had once called his home and roamed the world, alone and angry."

Chouji stood up from the floor, patted himself off, and placed the sword on Iruka Sensei's desk so it wouldn't disturb the rest of their performance. Then he walked to the middle of the room, standing beside Sakura.

"He did not know it, but the Third Shinobi War had broken out among the Hidden Villages. Ninja were fighting and dying, but he knew nothing of it because he had not allowed himself any contact with anybody that wasn't his green beauty. Then, one day, as he walked among the forests in the Land of Fire, he heard a branch snap behind him."

Sakura walked out of the space they had set as their stage and Kiba stalked in.

"Old friend… It has been some time…"

Chouji looked at Kiba with wide eyes, then glared as darkly as he could. It wasn't easy to look mean, but he really hoped that it was working.

Kiba chuckled darkly now, "Even after all this time, she still has your heart, doesn't she? You old fool!"

Chouji seemed ready to attack Kiba, but they both suddenly stopped when Kuromaru stepped into the scene, an irritated scowl on his face. "You are trespassing on our territory. You will not live to see the sun rise."

Then Sora stepped forward from the other side of the room, trying to keep from giggling, "Wrong, you Leaf Trash! They are to die at my hand! They both have a good bounty on their heads!"

"You are both wrong! I shall not be dying tonight!" Kiba proclaimed, then turned to look at Chouji. "What do you say, old friend? One last time?"
Chouji said nothing and instead fell into a fighting pose beside him, glaring at the dogs that began to come in.

Sakura stepped forward, calling attention to her once more. "There the black ninja stood surrounded by ten squadrons of enemy shinobi, with no help other than the man that had betrayed him. All seemed hopeless."

Then she stepped back, signalling that the dogs could begin their part.

A flurry of dogs and attacks came next. Chouji did his best to not accidentally hit one, while they did their best to not hurt him. But Kiba was laughing almost maniacally as he flung himself into a very real fight with the bigger dogs, rolling around the floor before 'killing' them. When the dogs died, they'd bark sharply and drop onto the floor, although Sora didn't.

Sora was the last dog Chouji was to dispatch. And when he did, he grabbed the bandanna that they had tied around his neck, aside from also placing a forehead protector on his head, and prompted the dog to scream out, "My heart!"

Crushing the blood bag inside of the bandanna prompted it to be soaked in red, and Chouji looked at the rest of the classroom.

"And there he stood... With the enemy's heart pumping in his hand..." Sakura whispered out, acting surprised and horrified by Chouji's actions.

Kiba knocked Kuromaru down, who glared and lay down softly in a show of displeasure with being caught in the school to help him with his project. Then the boy turned to Chouji with a broad smile, and, with a shout, jumped over to him. Chouji, though, was prepared for this and turned around and, with his other hand, reached into Kiba's cloak, grabbed the cloth wrapped blood bag, and squeezed, pulling it back.

With a shout Kiba staggered to the floor, hands reaching up for his 'wound'. "You... We were friends..."

Chouji, though, said nothing. Instead he looked first at the 'heart' from the enemy shinobi, then to Kiba's own. Finally, he looked up at the horrified faces of his fellow classmates, shaking his head softly before allowing it to fall once more.

"From that day on, the black ninja was not the same... But that is a story for another time."

A moment of silence passed between all of the classroom. Kiba and the dogs stood up and smiled at each other, and Chouji nodded at the praises Sora was singing. Sakura even walked towards them with a broad smile on her face, pleased by how well their project had gone, even with Kiba winging his own lines.

But their moment of celebration was cut short by Iruka Sensei.

"Kiba Inuzuka, Chouji Akimichi, and Sakura Haruno!" He shouted, glaring at the kids and planting his hands on his hips. "How could you have totally disregarded the only rule I gave you?!"

Their celebration died down immediately at the man's shout and Kiba glared at him.

"Hey, that's not fair! We got this story straight from one o' the allowed sources!" He shouted.

Sakura nodded, worried and agitated by Iruka Sensei shouting at her. "We really did, Iruka Sensei! We didn't make this up!"
"Yeah! We're not lying!" Chouji defended, "We met this old man-

But he wasn't allowed to say more by the man. Iruka Sensei raised his hand with a glare, cutting them all off.

"I would expect a trick like this from Kiba. But for you and Sakura to allow him to do this to you…" The scarred man shook his head sadly, looking at Chouji, then Sakura, "I am heavily disappointed."

Sakura was hit hard by the words. Just like Chouji. Both of the kids' faces adopted crestfallen looks. But Kiba, being the hot blooded boy he was, growled at his teacher.

"Hey, you old fart, listen for once in your life! We aren't lying! We met this guy by the tavern area of Konoha! He told us this story and a lot more!"

He glared at his teacher fiercely.

But it wasn't the scarred chunin to answer him. Instead it was Kuromaru.

"Pup, what were you doing in the taverns of Konoha?" The dog growled, taking one step towards him. "And how dare you speak to your elder in this manner? If you didn't follow the rules of your project, you cannot whine about him scolding you!"

"But we're not lying!" All three kids shouted together, only to have Iruka step forward with a deadly glare.

"All of you, outside. Now."

She couldn't believe what was happening.

They had worked so hard... They had done such a good job... Everything had gone as planned... Yet now they were in trouble...

Why were they in trouble? They had followed all the rules!

... Maybe it was because of the blood? Maybe they gone too far because of using such a gruesome thing... But... They hadn't lied!

"This I would expect from Kiba." Iruka Sensei glared at all of them from his desk, the disappointment in his voice heavy and thick. "But for him to influence you in this manner... Sakura, Chouji, you have both let me down."

Tears stung at the young girl's eyes when Iruka Sensei finished. And she had to fight the incoming sniffles that wanted to be heard.

She had been nervous, yet excited. But when she had gotten to the front of the classroom, all sense of fear had left her. She had worn a beautiful dress that made her feel beautiful. And she was going to performing one of the greatest projects, hands down. She had thought the A was going to be automatic because of all of the hardwork they had put into what they had done.

They had been forced to stand outside of the classroom, silently, until the rest of the presentations finished. Then, once the classroom had been emptied by the other students, they were called back to sit before Iruka Sensei.

Kiba's dogs had all left. But Kuromaru had not left before telling them how disappointed he had been to hear they had chosen to cheat on an assignment.
But they hadn't! And Sakura couldn't understand why that was so hard to believe!

She did her best to stop the tears from falling. But there was a tightness in her chest and a burn in her eyes that she couldn't ignore. Softly, she allowed a few tears to fall.

She didn't want to cry. Not after what the old man had said... But it was so hard!

"I've already sent for your parents." Iruka Sensei told the three kids, and Chouji chanced one look at him, noticed the pure betrayal in his eyes, and had to look away.

They hadn't lied... But he felt horrible.

Maybe they should have listened to Sakura at the beginning of everything and just asked someone close to them for a story...

Hands down, their presentation had been the most interesting. He had loved being the old man. He had felt mysterious and powerful because of what he had worn. But nobody believed that this could be a true story.

It hurt to not be believed. Especially when they were all telling the truth.

Seconds of silence passed. He didn't dare look up at Iruka Sensei, he couldn't face the disappointment in them. And he couldn't look at Sakura either because he knew that if he did, he would try and comfort her. She was sniffling softly, fighting tears. And Kiba sat with his arms crossed and an angry look on his face, but he didn't say a single thing.

He couldn't understand why their teacher wasn't believing them. Weren't people supposed to listen to the truth?

There was a knock on the door to the classroom and Iruka Sensei looked up, but Chouji didn't dare to.

"Come in." He called and had the door slide open. "Please, come in. We need to have a small talk about your children."

"Kiba, what have you done this time?"

The harsh female tone surprised and kind of scared Chouji, but he didn't react. Sakura whimpered minutely, but Kiba just huffed in anger.

"I tried to do something right for once... Last time I try it." He growled back, only to have his very wild looking mother appear beside him, a fierce scowl on her face.

"Iruka Sensei, what happened?" This time it was his father that spoke up, and Chouji felt a huge sense of guilt begin to grow in his stomach.

If his father was here, it meant that he'd had to interrupt his daily schedule and leave some of his work unfinished to come here. And if there was one thing his father didn't like to do, it was leave work unfinished.

"Your three children were given a history project." Iruka Sensei began to explain, giving the three kids one more look. "They were to find a story about any of the Great Shinobi Wars from someone they weren't directly related to. It couldn't be stories from parents, aunt and uncles, or grandparents. This was like this to make them investigate a little."
As the man spoke, Chouji felt a heavy and warm hand fall over his shoulder. But, even though he knew his father was an understanding man, he didn't dare look up at him because of how guilty he felt.

"I wanted these kids to be creative and present the stories in front of the class. But these three decided to go their own way for the project and fabricated a story. And I do not know if they were aware of it, but they even depicted the murder of at least a squadron of Konoha shinobi. And they depicted it as if they had been the villains in the story."

"Hey, you got your information wrong! The Konoha ninja wanted to kill the old man! He was just defending-"

"Old man?" Tsume interrupted her son with a hiss, glaring down at him. "Who is this old man?"

Iruka Sensei said nothing and instead motioned for the children to answer. Kiba glared back at his mother and kept his lips sealed tight, which left it up to Chouji or Sakura to answer. Chouji kept his head down, refusing to look up at any of the adults. Which left the terrified Sakura to stutter out an answer.

"Th-the o-old m-m-man that to-old us th-the story..."

Mebuki Haruno was looking at her daughter with soft yet sad eyes, then sighed. Stepping up to her, she softly passed her hand through her daughter's pink hair, hoping it offered some comfort for the clearly scared child.

"You thought glorifying the death of our comrades was a good idea?" Chouza questioned with more surprise and hurt than anger, feeling Chouji flinch under his hand.

"It was what the old man told us!" Kiba growled, moving to stand and defend himself and his teammates, only to have his mother force him to sit back down.

"These lies you're feeding us about an old man, pup, are inexcusable!" She growled down at him, "Does this old man even have a name?"

"He never told us his-" He tried to argue, then had Iruka Sensei interrupt.

"How could you think we would believe a story about a nameless man that supposedly defeated ten ninja squadrons with the help of just one other man?" The scarred chunin shook his head, then looked up at the three parents. "This was an end of the semester project. That means that it holds a lot of weight for their final grade. It may be the difference between them passing or being held back."

Both Chouza and Tsume nodded in understanding, but Mebuki couldn't hold back her concern.

"But, Iruka Sensei, I helped them with their fabrication. Their costumes and planning for this whole thing... They gave it their best. Could they not get some points for that?"

She was worried of having her child held back in the grade. Even though Sakura had great grades, she was terrified of the idea of her getting held back. Especially because this great offense had happened with two clan children. If any of them were to take any fall, it was undoubtedly going to be the civilian.

"We put on an amazing presentation! Everyone was looking at us! No one fell asleep like they did with the rest of the presentations." Kiba growled at their teacher, "Even Shikamaru was paying attention. And he never pays attention!"
The dark haired man looked at a very angered Kiba, then at Chouji and Sakura, both whom refused to look up at him, then up at the parents. Finally, he sighed.

"If they make up for this project with a written essay about why lying is bad, I could substitute the grade." He offered, which immediately received a grateful nod from Mebuki. "I will expect your essays by Monday. You have a weekend to write it." Iruka told the three kids, then looked up once more at the parents. "I believe that is all discuss. Anything else?"

"Not at all." Tsume answered immediately, then grabbed Kiba harshly by the arm. "This one will be writing something worthy of a literature class. I promise you that, Iruka Sensei."

The fierce woman forced her son out of the room, all the while Kiba glared down at the floor with a clear frown on his lips. Then Chouza patted his son on the shoulder, prompting him to stand up.

"I am sorry that my son caused you so much trouble." He apologized as Chouji stood up without a word, "This will not be happening again."

The chunin smiled softly at the jonin, nodding. "Thank you. He's got a good head on his shoulders. It was most probably just a lapse in judgement."

"One that will hopefully never happen again." Chouza finished, signalling for Chouji to walk ahead of him.

Then, once both of them were gone, Mebuki sighed softly and looked at Iruka with a tired smile. "Thank you for giving them a second chance, Iruka Sensei. I know what they did was wrong. And Sakura will not be causing you any more grief after this. Right, hun?"

The pink haired girl nodded without looking up at the adults, then stood up and began to walk away.

Mebuki felt horrible for the tears falling from her daughter's eyes, but she wasn't going to coddle her straight away. She needed to understand what she had done was wrong. Especially when involved with clan children.

"Goodbye, Iruka Sensei."

The man nodded, looked at Sakura with worry, but said nothing.

They both understood. It felt bad to allow children to feel so down. But it was for their best.
After having been blamed for something that wasn't really their fault, all three kids avoided one another.

Kiba didn't like being around them because it reminded them of the beating his parents (mostly his mother) gave him when they found out from Kuromaru in just how much trouble he got into.

Sakura didn't like being around Kiba because she blamed him for having gotten scolded and having been forced to write an essay for lying. And while she didn't mind Chouji, she didn't seek him out. She really liked him. But it hurt to remember how excited she had gotten over having a new friend, only to get in trouble.

And Chouji wished to be friends with both kids. But Kiba actively avoided him now and Sakura didn't seek him out. So he was at a loss for what to do when it came to both kids.

Chouji had thought that he would make new friends from this group project. Sakura had hoped Chouji would be her new friend. And Kiba had just wanted it to be awesome and possibly get some minions out of it. But none of this had happened and everything had returned to normal by the Monday they were to hand in their essays on lying.

There was only one more day left of class before this school term was over. And all three kids were eager to being their winter breaks and leave school for a while. But until this day was done, they were stuck in class, learning with Iruka Sensei to very last minute.

Kiba had not skipped class since they had all gotten in trouble. He had been forced to straighten up by his mother, who warned a much worse beating if he dared cause Iruka Sensei anymore trouble during the rest of the semester. This meant that it was somewhat difficult to avoid Sakura and Chouji, but he managed by plain old ignoring them if they tried to get too close or running off to another side of the room to occupy himself with something else to do.

Iruka had noticed just how little the kids interacted with each other. And he was rather let down that his plan to bring a few kids a bit more happiness through new friends had not worked. He had really hoped it would. But none of them wanted to get close to one another, seemingly terrified of what might happen if they got together once more.

Well... At least Kiba paid attention in class now.

It was lunch time on their last day. Kiba was ansty, just ready to get the hell out of school and go ahead and celebrate his freedom for the few weeks he would have it.

Currently he found himself in the playground during their recess, already done eating his food.

The Inuzuka looked over the grounds of the playground, taking in the brightly colored play places specifically placed for children to use, and the kids that were having fun.

Chouji was with Shikamaru, sitting by the sandbox while Ino tried to tell them something or another that clearly bored them both. Naruto was trying to prank a group of kids with something he had inside of a bucket, but Kiba couldn't be bothered to annoy him by stopping him. And the rest of the kids were doing what they would normally do in this place... And he was bored.

Wait a minute... That was different.
Sitting up from his spot by the farthest fence of the playground, Kiba looked over at Sakura and the group of kids surrounding her. One of them was Ami, the girl's number one enemy, and another was a boy that had pushed Chouji around at least twice.

Focusing his hearing on what was being said, Kiba couldn't help the frown that found its way onto his face.

"Does Billboard Brow Crybaby want to cry?! You can cry, baby! We'd understand!"

Ami was a mean bitch. Kiba had hated her scent from the first day of school because she smelled mean and used too much perfume. And the boy beside her had always smiled whenever he, Chouji, or Shikamaru got in trouble, as if happy to see them getting scolded. Both kids gave off very bad vibes.

"What? Are you so terrified that you don't have your dumb guard dog around you anymore?" Ami continued to taunt Sakura, shoving her by the shoulder.

This caused the pink haired girl to stumble closer to the sand box, catching Chouji's attention.

What had that bitch called him?

With a growl of anger, Kiba stood up and stalked towards the group.

"Hey!" He shouted, moving so he stood a few feet beside Sakura. "What did you call me?!"

Ami was a big jerk. So was Haru. And the rest of the kids glaring at her and making fun of her everything.

But Sakura was proud of herself. She had yet to waver her gaze. She had yet to look away from the mean kids. She just looked at them, although she said nothing in retaliation. Sure, she had tears in her eyes because of the mean words, but they had yet to spill. And that was an accomplishment!

Her mother had begged for her to not get into anymore trouble in the Academy... But the old man's words still rang loudly in her head.

And she wasn't about to let anyone see her cry.

The weeks after getting in trouble with Iruka Sensei had been growing experiences. Ami's insults hadn't hurt as much in the following days after she was forced to write such a long essay to make up for a grade. Neither had Haru's. For some reason, she just didn't feel the need to listen to them.

But they had noticed that their insults weren't as effective. So, little by little they had begun to push her boundaries, trying to see how far they could go before she began to weep once more. Which was why now she found herself surrounded by them. Because it was their last day, they seemed dead set on making her cry at least once more before they went on break.

She had tears in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall.

After getting shouted at by their teacher, she had resolved herself to never allow anyone to see her cry. Not for something stupid. The old man may have gotten her in trouble, but she didn't care. His words struck her. And he was a man she could look up to: strong, quiet, sure of himself. She didn't really care about the horrible grade, she had made up for it. But the man had made her aware of a great flaw she held, one she could fix with time.
They were insulting her, her family, Chouji, Kiba, and everything they believed to be dear to her. And while she didn't really care what they said about Kiba, it bothered her that they would call Chouji so many mean names. He was a sweetheart. Why would they be so mean?

But the old man's words echoed in her mind, his deep and gruff voice chilling her heart just like it had the first time.

Sakura wouldn't give these kids the pleasure of seeing her cry.

It was when she thought this that Kiba stomped over to them, hissing and glaring at all of the kids. Ami, though, smiled back at the Inuzuka in that sickly sweet, 'I don't care about you', way.

"And the guard dog has appeared!" Ami smiled broadly, only to have Haru nod in agreement.

"Where you find one mutt, you'll find the rest of the retarded pack." The dark haired boy then smirked at Kiba, shoving at him with his right hand, "So, Inuzuka, happy being a bitch?"

The insult wasn't even that great. Sure, he used a curse word. But it didn't mean that much from a bully like him. Or, at least, that was what Sakura had thought.

Apparently, though, Kiba took great offense.

One second he had been standing beside her, fuming at the insults. The next he was jumping on Haru, trying to punch his face and silence his mouth permanently.

Chaos broke out because of the wild Inuzuka.

Chouji had been content to just cloud watch with Shikamaru on their last day of school. Really, he would have been fine just laying there with a bag of chips by his side, spending a lazy afternoon together with his best friend.

But midway through his watching, he noticed that Sakura was being hounded on by a group of kids, led by Ami. He had worried, knowing just how little love there was between both girls, but Sakura had seemed in control of the situation by barely even reacting to what was being said. So he had done nothing.

He had wanted to form a friendship with the girl when they had first started off on their project. But he didn't know how to approach her anymore, not after the scolding and grounding they had all received from their parents because of the old man's stories. He was worried of getting shrugged off by her or insulted, so he just didn't try anything.

And Kiba still kind of scared him... Especially because all he seemed to do now was glare in class. He barely even smiled anymore.

His plan of inaction and patience, one worthy of a Nara, was thrown out the window when Kiba jumped on Haru. The Inuzuka punched at the boy, but was soon grabbed by the other kids aside from Ami.

They then began to hit him. Four on one. And that wasn't fair at all.

"Don't hurt him!" Sakura shouted, trying to push one girl off of the boy, only to have Ami grab her by the shoulder and shake her head.

"Why are you so worried, Sakura?" The girl then emitted a clearly faked gasp of shock, "Is he your
"boyfriend?" Then she shook her head, acting sad. "Billboard brow, that dog has to be put down." Then, without any prompting, Ami's hand lashed out, striking her across the face. "You have more important problems."

"Sakura!" Chouji gasped, eyes wide.

But the girl didn't look at him. Instead she turned her head to glare back at the girl. Ami, in turn, began to laugh at Sakura, apparently humored by slapping her.

Just like Kiba, Sakura jumped on Ami out of nowhere. Then began to wail on her as if there as no tomorrow.

"Hey! Stop it! Get off of them!" Chouji yelled in alarm as he stood up from his spot beside Shikamaru.

The Nara's eyes were closed, for he was dozing, but he did jump slightly when he heard Chouji scream out. But the Akimichi didn't stop to explain himself and instead ran to the two fights occurring at the same time.

"You guys aren't being fair!" Chouji ran over to Kiba, trying to pull two kids off of him and help the boy in some manner. "You guys have to be fair!"

"Stay out of this, fatty!" One of the boys shouted, turning to him to shove him backwards.

The Akimichi faltered back at the insult... Why did people keep pointing out his weight!? He was tired of it!

He wasn't used to being angry. But he had listened to too many comments about his weight as if it were a bad thing. And these two were being huge jerks! So, for the first time in his life, Chouji grew angry and decided to actually do something about it.

"I'm not fat!" He shouted, grabbing the boy again, "I'm husky!"

"You're the bitch, Haru! You need an entourage to hold me back! Why don't you be a man and fight me on your own?!" Kiba spit at Haru's face as two of his minions held his arms back, enraged at the cowardice the boy was showing.

The Inuzuka Clan was a proud one filled with loyal and honorable shinobi. He had been raised around them. And that meant that he had been taught that when the battle called for it, he was to be as honorable and fair as possible. It was only when the enemy started playing dirty that he could.

It was a good thing Haru had started playing dirty, though. Now he wouldn't have to hold back.

"So?" Haru questioned with a smirk, "You have your own friends. Don't you see?"

The boy motioned behind him, stepping aside just slightly to allow Kiba to see. And what he saw... Made no sense.

Sakura and Ami were exchanging blows, screaming and screeching like only girls could. It was quite the sight. Sakura's clothes were getting torn, her hair was being pulled, and her face was getting scratched. yet he saw not one tear on her face. And Chouji (When had he gotten involved in this mess?) was fighting off two different kids, trying his best to not get hurt and not hurt in return. But that didn't mean he didn't look like a badass with that glare on his face.
Both crybabies were... He couldn't believe it... *Both of them were fighting! And they weren't crying!*

"Yeah." The Inuzuka smirked cockily, proud of what he had seen. "And my friends are kicking your minions' asses."

"You bitch." Haru sneered, aiming a punch at Kiba's head.

But the Inuzuka dodged at the last second, making him punch his friend. The kid shouted in pain and let go of Kiba, which gave him enough space to drop down, scoop up some dirt from the floor, and throw it in the face of the other kid that was holding him. And once those two kids were screaming out in pain and taken out of the fight, he jumped on Haru once more, knowing he didn't have to hold back with the bastard.

Haru belonged to a minor clan that was known for their taijutsu. Which meant he was the only kid that could possibly give Kiba any difficulty. They traded blows and insults. But the more the boy insulted his family, the more Kiba's anger grew. But when he dared insult his sister... That was when he snapped.

His sister may not be at their house much. She had learned from their parents, so Kiba couldn't blame her. But she sometimes brought him treats and trinkets from her small travels. And she tried to be a big sister for him when she was around.

No one could insult her.

"And your sister is as much a slut as- AAAHHHHH!"

Haru's insult was interrupted by a sickening snap and a blood curdling scream. Kiba had managed to overpower him and get him into a submission move, applying pressure to his arm. But the boy had continued running his mouth. And he'd remembered that all of this began when Haru had decided to insult him and place his hand on him.

What had the old man said?

When someone did something he didn't like, he should make sure that they weren't able to do it ever again.

Haru had shoved him and insulted him. And while he couldn't really rip the bastard's tongue out, he could stop him from touching him ever again.

The smile that made its way onto his face as Haru screamed and cried was an honest, victorious one.

"What is the meaning of this!? Kiba, get off of Haru! Haru, why are you- Kiba, did you break his arm?!

Sakura had been scratching, punching, kicking, and clawing as if her life depended on it. She had heard more than seen Iruka Sensei when he'd come out to the playground to fetch his group. But she hadn't been able to stop fighting. She was too angry and needed to punch Ami harder. And the other girl was punching and pulling at her just as well.

"Hey! Break this up! Break it up now! Dammit! Mizuki! Get out here!"

Ami managed to roll them over and slam Sakura's head against the ground, but the pink haired girl wasn't about to give up. She reached up, grabbed one of Ami's hands, forced it close to her mouth, and bit it as hard as she could.
Ami screamed at this and Sakura took her moment of distraction to flip them around and continue punching at her. She raised her fist to continue fighting, but found that it was suddenly stopped by a large hand wrapping around her wrist.

"Stop this right now, Haruno." She heard Iruka's friend, Mizuki Sensei, growl at her, pulling her off of Ami.

"She started it!" Sakura bit out, knowing full well that this would somehow be pegged on her. "She and Haru were bullying me and they threw the first punch! They started it all!" She made sure that the truth was heard before Ami gave her own version of this story.

She had been burned by Ami's theatrics before. And she refused to go down without a fight. The burst of fire in her veins made her brave and didn't allow her to worry about what might happen for speaking out. But she would be damned before she didn't get to say what she needed to say!

"They attacked me! Kiba only jumped in to help me!"

Chouji was getting rushed by a boy and a girl that didn't know how to fight at all. They were throwing punches and kicks at random, as if they didn't know what to hit exactly.

Instead of trying to counter the easily countered attacks, Chouji took them, thinking on what he could do.

He didn't want to get in trouble... But Sakura and Kiba were both fighting so much! And they would undoubtedly get in trouble... He didn't want to just be a victim... Even Sakura was fighting back, and she never fought.

With these thoughts, the old man's words made their way back into the Akimichi's mind.

He hadn't thought about him since their presentation. He had decided to just forget about him and that horrible day. But now he remembered his strong words, the ones that had been directed only at him.

When someone hits you, hit back harder.

Chouji had been bullied by these kids a lot from the beginning of the school year. They called him fat, lazy, and stupid. And they never got in trouble for it because they acted like little angels in front of their teachers.

It hadn't bothered him before because everyone else that had gotten bullied by them had just accepted it.

But now Sakura and Kiba were both fighting. He was the only one that wasn't. And that didn't feel right.

So he hit back. And he did so harder.

Both kids fell to floor, crying out and clutching at their arms after the powerful punches Chouji delivered. And even though it didn't feel good to see them crying, it did feel good to stand up for himself.

When he looked up, he found three teachers rushing out of the school after Iruka, one heading straight towards him. And like the respectful little boy he was, he bowed softly and apologized.
"I didn't want to fight. But they hurt my friends."

Kiba had stood up for Sakura. Sakura had tried to help Kiba. Maybe they didn't want to be his friends... But Chouji knew that he would not mind if they actually ended up being friends.

"What were you all thinking?!" Iruka slammed his hands against his desk at the three kids sitting before him.

He could not believe what he had found when he had gone out to fetch his group from the playground. After their disastrous group project, Kiba, Sakura, and Chouji had all tried their best to stay away from one another. And while it disappointed Iruka that he hadn't been able to make much of a change in the lives of his students as he had wished, he had taken it in stride. He couldn't force kids to become friends. That was just how the world worked.

After the mockery that had been their presentation, all kids had straightened up. Sakura continued being a good student and managed to stay away from the girls that always got her in trouble. Chouji actually completed his school work and tried his best to keep Shikamaru from snoring too loudly. And Kiba even sat still and actually paid some attention in class.

Even though they had not made friends, Iruka believed that they had straightened themselves up.

Then he had walked out to find a warzone in the playground.

Two boys were sobbing loudly, one clutching at his cheek, the other at his eyes. They were writhing around on the floor in pain a few feet away from where Kiba had Haru held as a hostage underneath. And the dark haired boy was screaming bloody murder, trying to grab at his arm. It had taken Iruka no time to figure out the Inuzuka had broken it.

Then he had found Sakura rolling around with Ami, both girls seemingly prepared to kill one another.

And as if that hadn't been enough, Chouji managed to incapacitate two kids in front of him before he had managed to make complete sense of what was happening.

With shouts of dismay and worry, Iruka called upon a few more teachers to help him deal with the damage, stop the kids that clearly had the upper hand, and take the ones that were injured to the school infirmary. And all of them had wound up injured enough to end up there. All but three.

And those three sat in front of him once more, unfortunately reminding him about their presentation and fabricated old man character.

They all looked rather worse for wear. Sakura and Kiba more than Chouji. All three looked like they had just been in a schoolyard brawl. But the way they looked was nothing compared to the state they had left the other kids in.

Sakura sniffled softly at the man's shout. Kiba crossed his arms and glared up at him in a blatant show of defiance. And Chouji looked down bashfully, before looking up with slightly wide eyes.

This surprised Iruka slightly. He had expected that Kiba would be the one to answer him. But he allowed Chouji to say what he wanted to without interrupting. He would need to understand just what had gone on, after all.

This would be so much paper work...
"Ami was bullying Sakura. And when Kiba went to help her, they ganged up on him." The Akimichi answered honestly, then moved his gaze away from Iruka over at the kids he spoke of, a soft yet honest smile winding up on his face. "So I went to help them. It wasn't fair how they all jumped on Kiba."

Both Sakura and Kiba looked at the plump boy with surprise clearly written on their face. But that seemed to just make his smile grow wider. "I didn't want my friends to fight alone."

"Chouji..." Sakura breathed out, a soft smile finding its way onto her own face.

"Hm." Kiba nodded over at the boy, then up at Iruka. "They had what they got coming to them."

Iruka couldn't believe what he was hearing and seeing. Where these kids really having a friendship moment after having started a brawl that had wound up with at least six kids in the nurse's office? And he couldn't forget about the fact that one of them had a broken arm!

"You broke Haru's arm!" The chunin growled, glaring down at the three kids.

But instead of making them jump or cower as the teacher had hoped, his growl merely made the Inuzuka smirk dangerously, "He pushed me, Iruka Sensei. I was just making sure he never did it again."

Then he looked over at Chouji, smirk still in place. "You hit back harder, Chouji." And then he looked at Sakura, "You notice something odd, Sakura?"

"Wait a minute, you can't ignore me..." Iruka muttered softly, but shut himself up. Even though he was supposed to be scolding them all for having caused so much trouble, he was intrigued as to what the boy would tell the pink haired girl.

Sakura blinked dumbly at Kiba, seemingly surprised by him addressing her, then slowly shook her head. "No... What, Kiba?"

"The old man was right! This feels awesome!" Kiba jumped up on his chair, planting his hands on his hips. "Ain't no one ever bringing me down ever again!"

"I didn't cry! Kiba..." Iruka growled softly, but was ignored by all three kids.

"I didn't cry! Kiba, Chouji, I didn't cry!" Sakura continued to jump around, eyes alight with pure happiness. "And Chouji, you were strong! You took two kids down!"
"Sakura, Chouji..." He tried once more, only for Kiba to stomp his foot softly and shake his head at the two kids.

"Hey, so did I." Kiba whined, looking down at both kids. "But, still, the old man was-"

"Sit down right this second!"

Iruka finally lost his cool. Were these kids really celebrating over having gotten involved in a fight? They had the audacity to celebrate right in front of him!?

The bubble all kids had been floating on was burst by him slamming his hands against his desk once more to shout at them "I don't want to hear any more about an imagined old man!" He hissed, glaring at all three kids. "What you kids did was extremely wrong! Kiba, you broke a boy's arm!"

But the boy's smile never faltered. And Iruka didn't know how to react to that. He was at a loss. These three kids had just committed a horrible infraction that could hold them back in the Academy. Yet they were dancing and cheering as if they had just passed their final exam and were fully fledged genin.

"I'm going to fetch your parents."

The man stiffly stood up from his desk and began to walk out of the room, feeling odd and lost. But before he had closed the door behind him, he heard Kiba call for Sakura.

"Hey, pinky... No tears!" He sang, sending the girl into another round of whoops.

"The old man was right! The old man was right! The old man was right!"

He just... He didn't know what to do with these kids...
He hadn't expected to actually like being around Sakura and Chouji.

After having avoided them for weeks, he had thought that they would want nothing to do with him, just like he wanted nothing to do with them. But he had been wrong.

They weren't so bad now that they'd seemed to grow actual backbones. And, when he thought about it, it really wouldn't hurt to hang around them. Even though the adults around them didn't seem to be ready to believe in an old man with the skill to defeat ten enemy shinobi squadrons, it had brought them together. Especially because they didn't believe them.

"You know, now that I think about it, maybe we should have asked the old man for his name. That way we would have at least had something partially believable for the presentation."

Kiba scoffed at Sakura's words, shaking his head. "Name or not, they wouldn't have believed us!"

Then he looked at Chouji, quirking an eyebrow. "You know the Yamanaka's right? Maybe if we get one of them to go through our mind, they could tell the truth about the old man!"

But the plump boy only shook his head softly. "Mr. Yamanaka once told Shikamaru, Ino, and I that his clan's techniques are only supposed to be used for the most... Uh... What was the word he used?"

The boy faltered for a second, his face drawing in tightly in thought.

"Bitchin'?" Kiba supplied, only to have Chouji shake his head.

"Strenuous?" Sakura guessed, which had the plump boy nodding his head.

"Yeah! Most strenuous of situations! That's what he said." Then his momentary happiness at finding the correct word faded and his shoulders slumped softly. "He said that they couldn't go waltzing around someone's mind just to get them out of a punishment. Their powers shouldn't be used for kiddy things."

This made Kiba frown at the boy, but Sakura hummed in agreement, making the Inuzuka turn to her and find that she was nodding at the boy's words. "Yeah. Shinobi aren't supposed to abuse of their abilities simply to get out of a punishment."

"That's stupid." The Inuzuka murmured with a cross of his arms, "It would get Iruka Sensei to believe us when we talk about the old man. And we would most probably not get in so much trouble."

Talking to Kiba had somehow become easier. She was still kind of scared of the boy. But it was less now.

Maybe it was because he had been the one to point out her lack of tears. Or maybe it was because he had stomped up to stand beside her when faced against all of those bullies. They had stood together before bullies. And that made them have a connection.

They all had a connection now. One that was deeper than just hearing a story from an old man for a failed school project. They were united by a schoolyard brawl. And there was nothing like getting in trouble together and celebrating to really bring people together.

She knew she should have felt bad for having gotten into a fight. But Sakura didn't feel the least bit
guilty. Instead, she felt oddly light. As if she had just been freed from whatever it was that had been weighing her down. And even though her mother would be extremely disappointed in her, Sakura decided to just enjoy these last few moments with the boys that had helped her out when she had needed it.

No one else would have stood up for her. Not like they had. Maybe Ino would have spoken up against Ami if she had been feeling merciful... But she never would have gotten her hands dirty like both boys had.

And there was something extremely admirable in the boys getting in trouble just because Ami and Haru had begun to harass her.

Thinking on the Inuzuka's mumble, Sakura was struck with a crazy idea. So crazy, in fact, that she was surprised she had thought about it. But, then again, today had been a day full of new experiences for it, hadn't it?

"You know..." She began slowly, mulling over her thoughts before she voiced them out. "We don't really need them to know about the old man..."

"Huh?" Kiba's voice immediately twisted in confusion. All the while Chouji's eyebrows quirked in curiosity. "What do you mean, Sakura?"

"I mean that they're not going to believe us, no matter what we said. You said it yourself, Kiba, they would only believe us if a Yamanaka proved it to them." Sakura explained herself, "So why don't we just keep him between us? It's not like they'll believe us. So why not just have something between all three of us?"

It must have been the adrenaline and happiness that made her say this. Because if she hadn't been so elated by the fact that she hadn't cried once, she never would have offered such a plan. But she didn't regret voicing it. Not when Kiba's face changed from one of questioning into an amused and conspiratory smile.

"Pinky, that sounds like something I would come up with." He nodded in approval, then said, "You know... Maybe you're not as bad as I thought."

This made Sakura beam. Kiba was actually being nice to her! And all had taken was for them to get into two huge troubles together!

"What do you say, Chouji? No more talking to the old man to people that don't know about him?" Kiba turned to Chouji with the question, who glanced from Sakura then over to the Inuzuka.

Sakura didn't blame him for hesitating. But that didn't mean that she didn't believe it was worth nudging him.

"Come on, Chouji. What's the worst that could happen?"

Chouji had wanted to be friends with both Sakura and Kiba from the beginning. And now that they were actually talking like actual friends... Well, he couldn't help but smile like a doofus the whole time.

Or he had until Sakura had proposed keeping a secret between all three of them.

"But... Isn't lying bad?" He asked, unsure of even Sakura's assurance.
"Yeah. It is. We had to write a whole damn essay about it." Kiba's smile faltered softly at this, but then he shook his head, "But that doesn't matter because we wouldn't be lying. It'd be a secret. Technically, lying is the act of saying things that aren't the truth. We wouldn't be saying anything about it at all."

Chouji blinked at the boy in surprise, caught off guard by the boy being so... Well... Intelligent. And he wasn't the only that was surprised by his words, for Sakura looked at him with just as much confusion.

"You... Wow, Kiba. You're actually pretty smart."

"What's that supposed to mean?" The boy glared at her, although Chouji could see the beginnings of a pout. "I'm smart enough... I was the one that took us to the old man..."

"And had us go to a dangerous part of Konoha." Sakura reminded in an almost sing-song, although her voice held no real malice.

At the way Kiba's pout became clearer, Chouji couldn't help but join in. "And broke Haru's arm... Getting us all in trouble with Iruka Sensei and our parents..."

With a huff, Kiba looked away from both kids, "I'm smarter than both of you."

Sakura and Chouji both shared a soft laugh at his incorrect conjugation of the word, but before they could say anything about it, the boy frowned and sat up straighter.

"Iruka Sensei's coming back." He told them, then smirked, "No more speaking about the old man, yeah? It'll be our secret."

Chouji knew that it wasn't much of a secret if they had already talked about him to their teacher and parents, but... Well... They could just stop talking about him completely. And if they did, chances were that they wouldn't get in any more trouble with their parents for supposedly blaming their 'insulting' project on a made up person.

"Our secret." Sakura nodded with a small smile, then they both turned to look at Chouji.

"Well... I guess it wouldn't hurt..."

The smiles both sent his way were enough to dash away any doubts Chouji had.

"And what are you supposedly teaching this kids?! How to roll over and get their asses beaten by the enemy?!!"

That wasn't his mother's voice. That was his father. And he sounded pissed. But what he was saying... It didn't seem like his anger was turned on Kiba.

Craning his head to look at the room's door, Kiba first saw his father storm inside, his large wolf-like gray and black dogs, Sokudo and Chikara, sauntering in after him.

Quite frankly, Kiba was more used to seeing his mother so angry. His father was more of the soothing river that could quell his mother's raging fire. But he seemed on the verge of Tsume level anger as he growled at Iruka Sensei, who entered behind him.

"Not at all, Daishi. Far from it. But I'm also trying to teach these kids that fighting with allies will get them nowhere other then stuck with a probation warning." Iruka Sensei replied calmly, already used
to the Inuzuka's rage.

He was a well liked teacher among the clan because of his tolerance for their oddities and connection with all the students. Along with being one of the few teachers that didn't lose his patience quickly, with parents or students. He was rather sought after for the children of his clan.

"My son would not have fought those kids unless they had given him a good reason to fight." His father remarked, crossing his arms over his broad chest. "Isn't that right, boy?"

"Yup. They called me bitch, said I should be put down, insulted the clan, and called Hana a slut."

"A slut? What's that? Like a slug?"

He snickered softly at Sakura's innocent question, although shut up by the cold, one-eyed glare his father sent him. Like the white haired dude that brought his dogs over a lot to the Inuzuka care clinic, Kiba's father wore his hitai-ate over his eye. Although it was his right one. And the scar that had taken half of his sight away was somewhat visible for the world to see.

"Iruka, they insulted my family. My pack. You know an Inuzuka cannot stand down after such a thing." The man's voice was strained, although he wasn't yelling anymore.

"And I understand that, Daichi. But violence against who may as well be someone's future ally cannot be promoted." Iruka Sensei argued back, then moved out of the doorway to allow Chouji's dad and Sakura's mom to enter the room. "Much less breaking his arm."

"You never said anything about a broken arm." Daichi's anger was replaced by slight confusion, then, in a split second, it was replaced with exasperation. "Don't tell me Kiba broke a kid's arm."

Sokudo, whom had a black spot over his left eye and right ear, while the rest of his fur was gray, barked at Daichi, then growled. Chikara, whom had a gray spot on right eye and left ear on a mostly black body, turned to Kiba with a shake of her head.

"You're right, Chikara. Sokudo, Kiba can't go around breaking kid's arms. I understand defending our family and getting in a fight. That I can accept." The man passed a hand through his pulled back black hair with a sigh, then looked at Kiba with a disappointed brown eye. "Kiba, I could have defended you if you hadn't gone so far."

"I know, dad." Kiba nodded, then looked at Iruka with a smirk. "But that don't mean I'm going to say sorry."

"Kiba!"

Sokudo barked and nodded in agreement, only to wind up getting bitten on the ear by Chikara.

And even though he knew he was in trouble, Kiba couldn't help the chuckle at his father's insulted shout. He was really easy to mess with.

Kiba had a really odd family. His mother was terrifying. But Mr. Kuromaru was actually kind of nice. His father had seemed just as scary when he had entered the room... But he seemed to calm down and become less scary as he had continued talking.

He seemed to be the calm that both Kiba's mother and Kiba himself lacked.

She was still wondering what a slut meant... Maybe it was a kind of slug. That would be pretty mean
"Kiba, Haru is now in the hospital because of his arm. It needed immediate attention from a jonin level medical nin from all of the muscle you somehow managed to tear through." Iruka Sensei told the Kiba in an almost disinterested voice. But soon his face softened, just like his voice. "Kids, I am more than aware that these kids have been bullying you. Especially Sakura. And I am proud that you stood up for one another. I really. But you cannot be fighting like wild animals. You can't cause lasting damage."

"Sakura's been bullied?"

Oh. Oh no. Sakura hadn't wanted her mother to know that.

She shook her head quickly, hoping Iruka Sensei would understand. But he merely shot her a small scowl that clearly said 'The truth's coming out whether you like it or not'.

Iruka Sensei turned to her mother with surprise blatant on his face, "You didn't know. She told me that you had both talked many times about how to deal with bullies and not give in to what they were saying."

Her mother nodded softly, but then shook her head. "Yes, we have talk about that. But she never told me that it was her that was getting bullied. She told me that it was a boy in her class." Then she closed her eyes, bringing her hand up to her head. "Oh, I should have known it was her... I should have known..."

"But that doesn't matter anymore, mom!" Sakura jumped up from her chair and run over to her mom, tugging at the hem of her shirt to make her look down at her. "Ami's never gonna bother me again!"

"It was Ami?" Her mom gasped, "I have tea with her mother every Sunday! Sakura, how could you not have told me this?"

Sakura flinched at her mother's tone, then sighed and released her shirt. "I'm sorry, mom."

"But don't worry about it, lady! After the beating we gave them, none of those bastards that were pissing me off will ever bother her again!"

Kiba's shout made Sakura smile softly. But from the way his father glared at him, Sakura guessed that his words had not been the correct ones.

Kiba sure had a way with adults. But Chouji wasn't all that sure if it was a good way to act around them.

Throughout the whole conversation that had been had with Iruka Sensei, his father had not said a single thing. Instead he had just stood there silently, arms crossed over his broad chest and eyes closed. And Chouji wasn't sure if that was a good or bad sign.

"Iruka Sensei." Chouza finally spoke up for the first time since entering the room, grabbing the teacher's attention. "What will their punishment be?"

The scarred man sighed softly, scratching at the back of his head. "Well, I do have a few witnesses that will attest to the other kids being the ones to instigate the fight. Haru pushed Kiba first. Ami had been egging Sakura on for a few minutes. And all Chouji was trying to do was stop Kiba from getting hurt."
It felt good to hear Iruka telling their parents the truth. At least he didn't allow them to look like some delinquents that had sought out this fight.

"So they will all be getting punished for starting it. But the problem is that Kiba, Sakura, and Chouji walked off with, at most, a few scratches. Haru has a broken arm. Kosuke won't be able to use his eyes for a few days because of the dirt Kiba threw in his eyes. Ami ended up with a lot more cuts and scratches than Sakura. And Mei and Rai were hit so hard by Chouji that their arms will ache for days." The man prattled off the extent of the injuries caused by them, which made Chouji begin to feel a bit queasy.

He hadn't wanted to hurt anybody... But he had needed to fight back. Those kids had hurt his friends.

"So what you're saying is these kids went overboard." Kiba's father pointed out, which had his own nodding.

"If it had been a less disastrous fight, we wouldn't be worrying over our kids getting into too much trouble. Isn't that right?" Chouza questioned, which had Iruka Sensei nodding solemnly.

"If it hadn't gotten past a few smacks or hits, we would not be having this conversation and they would have all received similar punishments. But... Things went too far." Iruka supplied, then sighed. "They're not going to get expelled. I already talked this over with the other teachers and they agreed that if the kids had not pushed them so far, they would never have done something so violent. But they're going to be on probation for the following semester. And, depending on that, we will see if they will be allowed to continue in the Academy."

"So either they behave next semester, or they won't be able to become genin." Sakura's mom breathed out, although it wasn't a question.

"One semester to straighten up." Kiba's father nodded, then looked at his son. "Your mother is certainly not going to be happy when she hears this."

"Neither will your mother, Chouji." Chouji's father said, looking at his son with disappointment clear in his eyes. "Is that all, Iruka Sensei? May we leave?"

"Yes. I am sorry things went so far." Iruka Sensei nodded, then looked at them all. "You may go with your parents."

All three of them exchanged one look before jumping out of their chairs, beginning to walk towards their parents. But, when they were halfway there, Sakura made a really good question.

"And will be the other kids punishments?"

"Sakura!" Her mother scolded, but Iruka merely calmed her.

"Sakura does have a right to know this. They had been pushing their luck with her after all." Then he turned to the three of them, "Once they've all healed up, they will come to the school for a whole week and assist teachers in whichever way we deem fit. Don't think they're getting away with everything without any repercussions. This time, there were witnesses."

Then, the oddest thing happened. He winked at Sakura.

This made her smile broadly and nod, then she began to walk towards her mother, prompting him and Kiba to walk over to their own parents.
"So... What did your parents do to you?"

Sakura, Chouji, and Kiba were all walking down the streets of Konoha together, enjoying their vacation now that they weren't in school. Three whole weeks had passed since they had gotten into that fight with Sakura and Chouji's bullies, but they hadn't been able to see one another until today.

"Mom tanned my ass. And by tanned, I mean kicked. And by kicked, I mean that I wasn't able to sit for a few days." Kiba answered Chouji's question with a soft scowl, remembering how badly his mother had beat him after his father had told her what he had done. "She gave my points for standing for the clan. But she said that breaking Haru's arm was going too far."

Both Sakura and Chouji nodded at what he said, then he turned to Sakura. "And you? Your mom seemed more terrified of you getting kicked out and disappointed than angry."

The pink haired girl nodded softly with a shrug. "She was extremely disappointed that I hadn't told her about the bullying. Then she grounded me for a week, I was stuck in the house helping her clean and cook until today. This is my first day of freedom." Then she smiled at Chouji, "Thank you for looking for me, by the way, guys."

"No problem 'bout it." Kiba waved her off, then motioned for Chouji to speak up. "And you, Chouji? What'd they do to you?"

The plump boy thought about his answer for a few seconds, "Nothing as drastic as your mom, Kiba. But not as easy as cooking and cleaning. I had to follow after dad during the mornings and help him out with paperwork and keeping the dojo pristine. Then I had to help my mom in the kitchen for dinner."

"That sounds exactly like what I had to do, Chouji." Sakura pointed out curiously, Kiba nodding beside her. "But cooler because you got to go to a dojo and weren't stuck only doing sissy things."

Chouji's face paled at this, then he looked away from them both. "That would be what most would think... Until they figure out that going to the dojo means having to be a moving target for flying kunai."

"What?!

"That's so cool!"

It was interesting to see how both kids could be so different from one another, really.

"You guys hungry?" Chouji changed the topic of the conversation, his stomach rumbling allowing them to know that he was hungry.

"Yeah. But I ain't got no money." Kiba told them, "I may have wasted it all gambling."

"Gambling?" Both Chouji and Sakura repeated, which made him nod with a shrug.

"Yeah. Down by the taverns. Those old men don't really mess with me anymore and allow me to play sometimes. I may have lost all my money betting on racing dogs."

Both other kids blinked at him completely stupefied by what they had just heard. But then Sakura smiled softly, "I guess I could pay for your food, Kiba. I just got my weekly allowance."

"Seriously?" He gasped, then smiled broadly. "You're awesome, Pinky!"
So the three kids began to make their way to Ichiraku's because, even though Kiba didn't like it as much as a steak place real close, both Sakura and Chouji really liked the ramen there.

As they walked in silence over to the eating place, Kiba jammed his hands into his jacket's pockets. And when his hand made contact with a smooth surface inside, he remembered one of the things he had wanted to ask the other two about.

"Hey, you guys gotten anything weird recently? Like a necklace and a card with some writing on it?"

Chouji and Sakura both looked at him in alarm, which, for some reason, made him think that they had.

The three stopped walking and Kiba pulled out a leather chord that had a light green stone tied to it. "It came with a paper that said it was an adventure-something. And that it supposedly stimulates wisdom and thought."

Kiba looked down at it, then up at both kids. And he noticed that Chouji hesitated for a second, before he pulled out a necklace of his own, the chord the same as Kiba's own. But the stone was different. It was a darker green and seemed composed of horizontal lines to the side.

"My card said that it was called a jade. And that it's supposed to give good health and fortune." He told his friends.

"That's fucking weird." Kiba murmured, then looked up at Sakura. "And you?"

"A bloodstone." The pink haired girl answered with a mumble, then reached into her dress to pull out the necklace. She had been wearing it the whole time. "It said that it gives strength." Her stone was the darkest green, almost black, but had bright splashes of red running across it.

They were all in a different shapes. Sakura's was a glossy oval, reminding Kiba of the stones to be found at a bottom of a river. Chouji's was glossy as well, but in triangular shape. And his own was a less refined stone, in an almost tear drop shape, but not quite.

All three kids looked at each other as they looked at one another's necklaces... Then Kiba burst out into a smile and pulled his necklace on.

"Well, I don't know about you two, but I'm sure I know who gave us these things."

"What? You do?" Both Chouji and Sakura gasped, which made him smirk and nod.

"Of course I do. I'm smart and awesome. But I'm also hungry. So let's get to Ichiraku's so I can tell you."
Chapter 11

Shikamaru had been acting kind of weird for the past few weeks. Even after Chouji's punishment had ended, the Nara had been acting distant and he didn't come around as often as he once had to the Akimichi compound.

Kiba had told him that he shouldn't worry. That Shikamaru was most probably just being a big baby and that Chouji didn't have to fill his head with worry for people that didn't matter. But this had left an unpleasant taste in Chouji's mouth because, even though Kiba and Sakura were now his friends, Shikamaru and he had been best friends since, essentially, birth.

And Sakura had said that Shikamaru was most probably just trying to come to terms to him having new friends. She had explained to him that, after years of being only his and Ino's friends, Chouji was going through a period of adapting that might confuse his old friends. She and Kiba weren't having any difficulty because they didn't have any other friends to worry about. But Ino and Shikamaru were just now getting used to having to share him. Something they had never been forced to do.

"You know... If you're all that worried about deer boy, you should just invite him to hang out with us."

The three of them had been hanging out together ever since they had compared notes on their interesting necklaces. Every single day, Kiba would appear at Chouji's door and shout for him to get his ass in motion. After Chouji was dressed and rushed out his home's door, giving his mom and dad a speedy goodbye before they could try and stop him from spending another day with his friends, they would both run over to Sakura's home and pick her up.

For days now they had been doing this; picking one another up and then heading over to whichever place caught their attention the most. Often times it was Kiba that chose where they would go, leading them on some sort of 'adventure' that usually wound up with all of them tired, sweaty, and extremely hungry, returning to either Chouji's or Sakura's home to get food from their parents. Sometimes, though, Kiba had no plans of fun and so allowed Sakura and Chouji to choose where they would go.

When their decision came, usually Sakura wanted to go to the library or playground, simple places that didn't leave them exhausted, and Chouji wouldn't have any problem going along. But, today had been different. Today he had chosen where they would go. And he had chosen a bakery run by one of his distant cousins, one that had a small play room at the back with a comfy garden and a few tables to be able to use.

Currently, they had all been gnawing on a few of the pastries his cousin had brought to them with a broad smile on her face. They hadn't really been talking about anything, just enjoying the silence and being around one another. And Chouji had been busy thinking about Shikamaru.

"What do you mean?" The plump boy sat up, confusion clear on his face.

The Inuzuka flicked one of the used napkins over in Chouji's direction, although it fell to the floor harmlessly, with a roll of his eyes. "Shikamaru, you idiot. You're always worrying about him and how you don't hang out anymore. So why don't you just invite him to hang out with us?"

As more time passed and she hung out with both boys, Sakura found out that Kiba in school was a
thousand times different Kiba outside of school. First of all, he was actually smart. He knew how to navigate all the streets of Konoha, how to talk his way out of just about any kind of trouble with shop owners, and which places to avoid if they didn't want to get caught while doing things they weren't necessarily supposed to do.

And her opinion on Chouji had just been cemented the more they hung out. He was nice, kind, understanding, and hadn't ever raised his voice at either her or Kiba. He was a bubbly boy that allowed her to get her way and treated her like she deserved to be treated, with respect. Even though he wasn't street smart like Kiba, he was book smart like her. It just took a bit of digging to make him notice that he wasn't lacking in education.

She understood that Chouji's best friend was Shikamaru. And that he had hung out more with Ino back in school. Their parents were all good friends, so, in effect, they all were good friends.

But ever since they had begun to hang out, she hadn't seen him anywhere near Shikamaru. And they had spent just about every single day together for the past week. But no sign of Shikamaru anywhere near.

Kiba's words managed to stun Sakura. They hadn't even been talking before he'd said Chouji should invite Shikamaru over to spend time with them. But he'd said it, clearly managing to stagger Chouji as well.

Thinking about his words, though... Kiba had a point.

"Yeah... Kiba, you're right..." The girl muttered with a soft nod, then looked at Chouji with a smile. "You know, if you really miss Shikamaru, then we should go get him and invite him to play with us."

Chouji's face was one of pure shock. But it soon melted into one of happiness that had both Sakura and Kiba smiling broadly back at him.

"We could do that? Really?" Sakura nodded without any hesitation, getting up immediately. "Really? Then, let's go! He should be at the Nara Compound!"

Kiba didn't mind Shikamaru. The Nara was lazy and could be kind of boring, but he had never insulted his clan, which made him not mind the boy. But he didn't think Shikamaru could ever possibly be any fun.

Ever since they had started their school days, he had always thought of Chouji and Shikamaru as always being together. They were one-in-the-same in his mind.

But now that he had gotten to know Chouji as a person as separate from Shikamaru. They were different. They weren't always together. And they didn't really need to be around each other 24 hours of the day.

Chouji was clearly always thinking of someone that wasn't either him or Sakura. And the Nara and Akimichi clans were known for having members always being good friends, the Yamanaka one added sometimes as well. And who was he to stop Chouji from being happy? If Shikamaru made him happy, why would he keep the boy away from him?

Besides, Chouji was excited. It was undoubtedly the idea of hanging around Shikamaru, Sakura, and Kiba all at the same time. He had even begun to run from the excitement, even though he was the kind that would usually enjoy walking everywhere rather than running.
"So, Sakura, ever been to the Nara compound?" Kiba asked conversationally as he jogged comfortably after Chouji, even though the girl was struggling just a little bit.

... If she wanted to be his friend, she would need to build a better resistance to running. So would Chouji. He was always running around. And if they wanted to keep up with him, they would need to be able to not make him stop to make sure they were still alive.

The pink haired girl shook her head, chest heaving just slightly in exertion. "I've never really gone to any clan compound but the Akimichi one."

That would make sense. It wasn't really normal for civilians to be taken to a clan's home. And even though the Nara, Akimichi, Yamanaka, and Inuzuka were rather nice compared to the likes of the Hyuga or Uchiha, and even more welcoming than the odd Aburame one, it wasn't really something normal to invite people that weren't of the clan over.

It made sense that Sakura had never really gone to any except for the Akimichi. And if he had it his way, neither she nor Chouji would ever go to his own.

"I think you'll like it, Sakura!" Chouji supplied, smile broad. "They've got deer running all around and the that part of the forest is really peaceful. And sometimes, if he can, Shikamaru's father takes us out for a small scavenger hunt. Shikamaru usually always wins, but when Ino's part of it, she doesn't really let him win."

Kiba didn't have a good opinion on Ino. The blonde girl was loud, annoying, and reminded him too much of the kind of girl that always insulted him. He had even heard her saying that he smelled like wet dog one day. And he swore that he once saw her deny a puppy food. So he didn't like her. Not like he'd tell Chouji, though, who clearly respected and liked the Yamanaka heir.

"A scavenger hunt sounds like fun!"

When they got to Shikamaru's home, Chouji knocked excitedly on the door. Then, he waited patiently.

After a minute had passed, Kiba made to knock loudly. But Chouji stopped him with a shake of his head, "There's no need for that. They already heard my knock. And they'll come. Shikamaru and his dad just take his sweet time."

From the way Kiba looked at him, Chouji could tell that the boy clearly did not like the idea of patiently waiting. But Sakura merely cocked her head to the side slightly.

"Can't his mother open the door for us?" She questioned, which made Chouji smile softly but shake his head.

"She's off doing a few errands for the house during this hour. It's much too early for Shikamaru or his father to wake up, so she takes the time to be productive." He repeated what his own mother had told him when he had asked this very question a few months ago.

The girl blinked at him, then nodded once. "That makes sense, I guess."

When she said this, Chouji also heard the latch on the door unlock. Then it opened, revealing a rather groggy looking Shikaku never. He and his son were almost clones. The only differences were the scars and clear age difference. But, aside from that, they were exactly alike. Even when they were tired and didn't want to be woken up, they had the same facial expression.
"Huh? Chouji?" The man's eyebrows raised just slightly when he saw the Akimichi, and they raised even more in a show of confusion when he saw the other two kids with him. "Hmm... I don't recognize these kids... Who are you?"

Usually, Shikaku Nara was a rather serious and calm individual. He barely ever asked any questions. But Chouji had found out that, much like his son, when he was tired, he was more prone to allowing others to explain things he didn't understand rather than try and figure them out himself.

"These are Sakura Haruno and Kiba Inuzuka." Chouji answered, "From the academy."

The man's eyebrows drew in as he looked over both kids, then nodded.

"Civilian and an Inuzuka. Tsume's kid?"

"What's it to ya?"

Chouji was taken aback by the boy's rather rude answer and he knew he paled slightly. But Shikaku only looked at the boy for a second longer, nodded at himself, then looked back at Chouji.

"Shikamaru's still sleeping. You should go wake him up and see if you can get him out of the house. His mother's been harping about how a boy his age needs to spend more time outside and having fun." The man told them as he stepped to the side, allowing the three to walk into his home. Then he yawned, eyes closing as he closed the door behind them. "Go ahead and get him out of the house. Yoshino should have some snacks ready for you by the time you get back."

Nodding at the man's words because of how accustomed he was to hanging around the Nara clan, Chouji began to make his way past the home's receiving room and towards the hallway that held Shikamaru's room. Shikaku, on the other hand, just threw himself on the couch in the family room, which let Chouji know that he had been kicked out yet again from the bedroom by his wife.

It would be rather interesting to hear about why the man had been kicked out this time.

As he led the way down the long hallway, Chouji felt a soft tug at his shirt. And when he craned his neck slightly to look behind him, he found that both Sakura and Kiba were looking at him quizzically.

"Was that Shikamaru's dad?" Sakura whispered, which, because of being Kiba's friend, made him drop his own voice into a whisper. He was used to, whenever someone used this hushed tone, it was because what was to be said wasn't to be overheard.

"Yeah. You've never met him before?"

The girl shook her head. But Kiba merely shrugged.

Chouji found this odd. Had Kiba met Shikaku before?

But before he could ask the Inuzuka, they arrived at Shikamaru's door, a simple wooden one with a paper that read 'Anyone troublesome stay out'.

Seeing the familiar door made Chouji smile broadly. So he stepped forward, knocked on the door as strong as he knew would be needed to rouse Shikamaru, waited a few seconds, then opened it.

Shikamaru was not a morning person. Nor a noon person. Nor a night person... Now that Chouji thought about it, Shikamaru was the kind of person that shouldn't be woken up. When he awoke by himself, he was fine. But when someone, no matter who, did the waking, he looked like he could be
a dangerous shinobi that would murder the person that was annoying him.

The first thing Shikamaru did was glare at the person that had dared wake him up.

He had just gone through yet another fitful night's sleep and had just been able to finally get some rest. But right when he had managed to get his body into the most perfect and comfortable position, there was a knock on the front door. And if there was one thing he'd always hated about his home, it was the way that it echoed noise. Which meant that, even though the knock had been rather far away, it was still rather loud in his room.

Luckily for him, today was one of his father's days off. So the man had answered the door, leaving him to try and drift back into sleep.

And now someone dared knock on his door. It was as if whoever ruled up in the sky decided that today would be a horrible day for him, starting off with a horrible sleep and annoying people keeping him from sleeping.

But the anger he felt at being awoken kind of dissipated when he noticed just who it had been that had awoken him.

"Chouji?" His voice was clouded in confusion and fogged in sleepiness. "What are you doing here?"

He hadn't seen his good friend in the last week. And it surprised him to see him again, especially with the pink haired Sakura and always angry Kiba standing behind him.

When their vacation had started, everything had been normal. Chouji and he would hang out and Ino would join the sometimes. But after a while, Chouji had stopped coming by. And when he had done that, Shikamaru had begun to worry about why. But, one day, he'd gone off and searched for his friend. And found that he was enjoying playing hide and seek with Sakura and Kiba... Having fun without him.

It had immediately hurt. And instead of talking to his friend about it, Shikamaru had decided to just not speak to him at all. If Chouji had new friends, then he didn't need him. He had Ino and his bed. And that was all he really needed.

"Hi Shikamaru!" Chouji smiled brightly, taking a step into his room, looking as if he didn't know just how Shikamaru had felt when he'd seen his friend running around without him.

Logically, if Shikamaru hadn't told him anything or even allowed him to see him, then Chouji would not know. But, even though he was a Nara, he was still a kid. So he was allowed to not always be thinking rationally.

"We were wondering if you wanted to play with us?"

Shikamaru was sitting up on his bed, eyes glued on Chouji. Then, when he heard this, the Nara sighed, looked at Kiba and Sakura, taking in their own emotions. Sakura was smiling and looked like she really wanted him around. But Kiba looked more bored than anything.

Could... Could Chouji still want to be his friend?

"What do you want to play?" The Nara asked cautiously, pulling the comforter that rested over him back to throw his legs over the edge of the bed.

Chouji thought on the answer for a moment. And, if he was still the same person Shikamaru had
been best friends with, then he knew he wouldn't be able to make a decision immediately.

Kiba, though, spoke up with an almost feral smile. "Extreme hide and seek?"

"W-what makes it extreme?" Sakura questioned, eyes going wide.

Well... She hadn't changed at all either, it seemed. Still scared. Like always.

"We'll use kunai and explosive tags!"

And the Inuzuka was as hyperactive and dangerous as always.

They all seemed to be the same... But, if they were... What were they doing hanging out together?

Shikamaru's father looked exactly like Shikamaru!

...Maybe they were clones...

Sakura had been kind of shocked by how murderous Shikamaru had looked when he'd woken up. She knew that he had always been a very lazy and sleep loving person. But she had never expected him to look so evil just because he had been woken up.

And then there was Kiba talking about using explosive tags and kunai in hide and seek! She didn't even know how to properly hold either of those weapons! Much less use them!

"We can't play hide and seek with those things, Kiba." Shikamaru scoffed with a shake of his head, standing up to stretch his body lazily.

... He kind of reminded Sakura of a cat, now that she thought about it.

"What?! Why?" Kiba immediately growled, glaring at Shikamaru. "I use them all the time with my pack!"

Shikamaru yawned slowly, then leveled Kiba with an almost disinterested look. "Because we're six and have yet to be trained to use those things."

"Bullshit! You're part of a clan!"

"But Sakura isn't. And, even if she miraculously knew how to hold a kunai, it wouldn't be fair. Chouji and I know the Nara forest like the back of our hands because of how much time we spend here. But Sakura's never even been here. She would be running around like a chicken without its' head."

This must have been the most Sakura had ever heard the Nara say in her life. And what really shocked her was the fact that he was actually defending her! Not Chouji. But her! Then, as if that hadn't been enough, Shikamaru added one more thing.

"Besides, playing hide and seek with an Inuzuka is unfair. You have enhanced sense of hearing and smell, which would give you an edge in both finding and avoiding us."

This was the first Sakura had ever heard of these traits of the Inuzuka. She had always known they were odd and different. But she had not known how different they truly were.

Was there more to what Kiba could do? Were these the reasons why he was so wild and feral and rather rude?
"Well? What do you propose we play?!"

Sakura winced softly at Kiba's extremely clear anger. He hadn't lost his temper with them in a long time and she'd almost forgotten how scary he could get. But whatever had made him not get angry while it was only three of them seemed to have left him now that Shikamaru was with them.

Shikamaru barely reacted to Kiba, though. Instead he pursed his lips slightly and shrugged. "Let me get dressed."

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That insufferable, lazy, retarded bastard! How dare he question Kiba's hide and seek plan?! And how dare he stay so calm when Kiba clearly showed he wanted an argument?!

People like him pissed the Inuzuka off.

They thought they were all high and mighty just because they analyzed before they did anything. His mom was right. All Nara were the same! And they were fucking annoying!

And now he dared kick them out of his room so he could change?

With a scowl, Kiba stomped out of the room. But as he did so, he caught sight of Chouji. And the Akimichi seemed torn between following him and Sakura out of the room and staying to talk to Shikamaru. Which made Kiba feel somewhat guilty because of having gotten so angry so fast.

He was here because of Chouji's friendship. He was here because the Akimichi, while kind of bland, was a good kid to have around. He just had to remember that. If he could do that, then maybe he could be able to tolerate Shikamaru's irritating ways.

The three of them stepped out into the hallway, Shikamaru closing the door behind them.

With a glare and a cross of his arms, Kiba couldn't help but have to remind himself that Chouji was his friend and he was there for him.

Shikamaru may be a prick, but he was Chouji's best friend. And he couldn't try and tear them apart. That would just be wrong. You didn't break friends apart. That was like trying to turn members of a pack against each other. Just wrong.

From the front of the house, Kiba heard footsteps. And the more time that passed, the closer the footsteps became. And a few seconds later Shikaku Nara, clad in his boring pajamas, appeared in the hallway, eyes tired but a bit more alert than when they had met him at the door.

"You kids drink coffee?"

The question made Kiba crinkle his nose and scowl at the man. If anyone should know how little Kiba needed coffee, it was a man that had to deal with mother on a monthly basis.

"None for the Inuzuka. I already learned my lessons years ago, kiddo." The man muttered with slight humor in his tone, "Sorry. I'm tired. Kids shouldn't be drinking coffee. Want any water or milk or age appropriate drink?"

For a split second, Kiba felt like giving an inappropriate answer. Like some kind of alcoholic drink. But then he remembered that, even though his mother and Shikaku didn't get along, they had a steady friendship and she'd beat him if she heard he was more disrespectful that what was usual of him. So he merely shook his head and allowed his friends to answer.
"Could I get some milk, please?" Chouji asked politely, followed by Sakura asking for juice. They were so polite and proper. Kiba would have to fix that.

"Follow me then." The man motioned for them to follow after him.

Kiba waited for both of his friends to walk before him. He followed after him quietly, looking around the simple yet furnished home that belonged to the Nara clan head's family. It was interesting to see wooden walls without any kind of scratch marks or weapons littered all around. This place was pristine and clean compared to Kiba's own home.

They were taken to a spacious kitchen, when they were then told by Shikaku to sit at the island counter near the stove. Kiba jumped up without any difficulty, although Chouji and Sakura both struggled because of the height. It didn't really annoy him to see them struggle anymore. It actually kind of amused him at this point.

They were short because they were kids. One would have expected them to have already adapted to living in a world of tall people by this point.

Shikaku moved sluggishly around the kitchen, fetching three cups and a mug from one of the cupboards above the stove before placing them down on a counter and moving over to the refrigerator. There he took out the milk, placed it on the counter, then grabbed a jug of water and one of orange juice, turning around with a clear yawn to set them down beside the milk.

He served one cup of each drink. Chouji thanked the man respectfully, just like Sakura, before they both took a drink from their cups. But when the man set a cup filled with water in front of Kiba, the boy quirked an eyebrow at the man, wondering if he was dumber than his mom said he could be.

"Why're you giving this to me? I didn't ask for anything."

The man didn't even look at him as he began to work on making his coffee, "You've got dry lips, kid. And if you want to run around all day, you should hydrate yourself."

Kiba didn't like being told what to do. Especially when someone avoided looking him in the eye, as if he weren't worth looking at. But before he could give the Nara a piece of his mind, the man was interrupting with a casual enough comment.

"So, Chouji, I'm free today. If you managed to convince Shikamaru to leave his bed, I could be able to help you kids set up a game of scavenger hunt."

Sure. They couldn't play extreme hide and seek but they could allow a Jonin to set up their games for them. These kids could be such babies sometimes!

"Really, Mr. Nara? That would be so cool!"

Grabbing the cup in front of him with a soft growl, Kiba acknowledged how excited Chouji sounded.

Okay, the Nara's were annoying... But that was a huge piece of forest that would be amazing to run around... He'd play along for now. If just to have some fun in that place before he had to leave this place.
Chouji liked the idea of being able to have a scavenger hunt with most of his great friends.

Even though Ino wasn't here, the rest of his friends were.

Maybe they could invite Ino over the next time they did this. Because he was sure that Sakura and Kiba would love this so much that they would eventually want to have a scavenger hunt with Shikaku Nara again.

Shikamaru took his sweet time getting dressed. But seeing how they would have to wait for his father to get ready as well, Chouji didn't really mind the wait. Especially because he was already extremely accustomed to the Nara way of life, which was one that prided itself in taking things easy.

He was kind of worried, though, about how Kiba was reacting to both members of the Nara clan. He didn't seem to like either Shikaku or Shikamaru all that much. And Shikamaru certainly hadn't helped by being uncharacteristically chatty when it came to Kiba's demands.

Did Kiba already know Shikaku? From where? Chouji didn't remember the Inuzuka ever being around the Nara whenever the Clan Heads got together.

"Okay, kids. I'm going to go ahead and change so we can get started on that scavenger hunt. Shikamaru should be here in a few minutes, so just stay put." Shikaku told the kids after he had finished eating his breakfast, getting up from the kitchen table with a heavy sigh.

The Nara had taken his sweet time eating his food. Just like Shikamaru was being extremely slow getting dressed. Which didn't surprise Chouji, considering how much time he had already known both males.

Once Shikaku was gone, Kiba huffed beside him, pushing at the barely touched glass of water he had been given.

"You're lucky I like you, Chouji."

This made the Akimichi quirk a questioning eyebrow at the Inuzuka, who merely crossed his arms on the counter before him and rested his chin on them.

"You said this scavenger hunt would be fun, right?" He questioned, "Cause I don't want to do nothin' that won't be fun."

"Of course it'll be fun, Kiba." Sakura murmured as she sipped softly at her own drink. "Chouji wouldn't lie to us."

"Yup. What would I get out of lying to you, Kiba?" The Akimichi questioned, then smiled broadly. "I promise it'll be fun! Mr. Nara really knows how to make things fun and balanced for us! Promise!"

Sakura smiled softly at him with a nod, clearly believing his words. Kiba though, just huffed and continued to push his cup around.

Sakura could tell that Kiba didn't like waiting around for a game. He didn't like waiting around for much, actually. He could be incredibly impatient at times. Unbelievably so to her, considering how she actually knew how to wait for things without growing annoyed. It was something he should
really work on if he wanted to grow up to be a good ninja in the future.

But, in all honesty, she didn't mind waiting too much for Mr. Nara or Shikamaru to get ready. She wasn't the most athletic kid around and wasn't too eager to lose against people that clearly knew more about the terrain they would be playing on than her. And seeing how Kiba was with them and he was supposed to have an unbelievable sense of smell and hearing, she wasn't all that eager to get started.

Although she had to admit, if she wanted to continue running around with Kiba, she would most probably need to become more accustomed to running around. Especially if she didn't want him to make fun of her. He hadn't done so yet, but she was sure it was only a matter of time before he tired of having to wait up for her.

As they waited for both Nara's, Sakura kicked her legs from her seat up on the very high chair. She enjoyed swinging them, it was always fun to do. She didn't really know why. But it brought her great joy and she had yet to get scolded for it by anyone other than her mother. (It was her little guilty pleasure to do this whenever her mother wasn't around.)

After ten minutes of waiting for Shikamaru, Sakura stopped paying attention to the time. Then when he did arrive, it took his father a good ten more minutes to appear as well. But while they waited for Mr. Nara, Chouji struck up a conversation with his friend.

Sakura felt a bit left out as Shikamaru and Chouji began to speak about past experiences in these scavenger hunts, but she didn't say anything about it. Instead she focused on the still frowning Kiba and decided to make that frown turn upside down.

What did Kiba enjoy talking about? He liked dogs, chasing after cats, using bad words that usual ended up with adults glaring at him, and thinking up of ideas for pranks. He also really liked running around and going down to the parts of town kids weren't supposed to go to.

Hmmm... Ever since he had started hanging out with them, Kiba hadn't gotten into too much trouble. Of course that had only been a week, but it was odd to not see the boy getting into trouble every single day of the week.

... Would it be wrong if Sakura wanted to see him create one of his famous pranks? Or to find out about how he managed to sneak out of class without their teacher finding out?

His pranks were the best in the group. Naruto's were good, but they were sloppy. Kiba's were rough and sometimes crude, but he'd managed to get away from their teacher's scolding more times than Naruto had. And they were always hilarious. Whenever one of them came to life before her eyes, all Sakura wanted to do was burst out laughing. Although she managed to compose herself to not glared at by her teacher.

She knew her mother wouldn't want her to learn how to misbehave... But... If she learned how to misbehave, then she would know what not to do if she didn't want to get in trouble.

Yeah! That was a good plan! And it would undoubtedly get Kiba to smile to speak about the things he enjoyed doing.

"Hey, Kiba? Have you planned out any good pranks for when we go back to school?"

The question was sudden and Kiba hadn't been expecting it. Especially from Sakura Haruno. Hell, none of the kids he knew wanted to get in trouble by pranking people. They were too much of cowards to do anything they considered 'dangerous'.
Kiba quirked a confused eyebrow as he turned to look at Sakura, only to see her cheeks begin to redden softly even as a small smile came onto her face. "Do you want to get me in trouble or something, Haruno? Do you want to snitch on me?"

That was the only true answer for a goody-two-shoes like Sakura wanting to find out about his plans for the future. And this made a displeased frown tug at his lips as his eyes began to narrowly dangerously. He hated snitches. They were traitors.

"Not at all!" Sakura quickly shook her head, then looked at him with wide eyes, "You just always do things that make us all laugh a lot! I was wondering if you'd still be doing that and if you had any planned." She admitted softly, then shrugged, "It'd be kind of sad if you didn't do any this year."

If Kiba had been shocked to hear Sakura asking about planned pranks before, he was stunned beyond belief at what he heard now. "You... You like my pranks?"

They'd been hanging out for quite some time now, but the topic of pranks had never been one they had touched. Kiba didn't talk about them because the other two kids were cowards that didn't want to get in trouble. The others most probably didn't bring the topic up for the same reason.

But Sakura had thrown him for a loop now.

"Well... I mean... They're funny." Sakura hesitated, face reddening completely, then shook her head. "Do you have anything planned or not?"

_Sakura_ wanted to find out about pranks... It was weird... But Kiba smiled proudly over at her, then nodded. "Do I!"

Then he began to explain to her the greatest prank he had ever planned in his life! It would be amazing and leave all of the Academy stunned! The only true problem he had when it came to planning it was masking his tracks so well that he couldn't even be considered as a suspect for it. He didn't really know how to fix this one problem and so didn't think of going through with it as soon as the semester started.

Considering how they were supposed to be on probation when the semester began, he didn't want to risk getting into trouble. His mom had beaten quite a bit of fear into him. And he was more than sure if he went through with this prank this semester, he may not live to see his seventh birthday.

"You just need to buy your supplies outside of the village and make it look as if someone else did it."

"Huh? What are you talking about, Shikamaru?"

They had been catching up on everything they had done during their break when Shikamaru had suddenly turned to look over at Kiba and talk to him. Chouji was confused by this seeing how his two other friends had been speaking to each other and not to _him_. And he wanted to find out just why Shikamaru had said what he had.

The Nara looked over at him and explained himself, "Kiba's 'master prank'." He muttered with air quotations, which made Chouji cock his head to the side. "What he's planning on doing is big and could get him into a lot of trouble. The way to avoid people finding out it was _him_ to do it he'd need to buy the supplies outside of the village to make sure nobody in here could point the finger at him. And he'd need to make it look as if _someone else_ came up with the whole thing."

Chouji blinked at his best friend in shock and confusion. Was Shikamaru really helping Kiba out with a prank? Did he know he was doing it? Or was he just trying to get a rise out of the Inuzuka?
The Akimichi turned around on his seat to look over at Kiba, completely ready to see him glaring at the Nara. But instead he found the tattooed boy with his hand on his chin, face scrunched up in thought. Chouji had come to recognize this face as the Inuzuka's thinking face for he used it a lot when he wanted to decide on something he deemed important. One time he'd seen him using it when trying to decide on which cut of steak to order for lunch.

"Out of village you say?" Kiba mumbled out in thought, raising his eyes to look at Shikamaru. "That could actually work. Especially if I make it like Naruto did it. It shouldn't be too hard. The idiot's always leaving clues as to him being the one to make the pranks."

His best friend nodded, then sighed softly, "Although should you really do it with Naruto? The kid's always getting himself in trouble by himself. And by your plans, this sounds much too sophisticated for you. Even more so for someone like Naruto."

There was a flash of insult on Kiba's face as he processed the words, but he soon looked away and over at the kitchen's stove, his face scrunched up once more. "Then I'd need another sucker..."

"Or..." Sakura spoke up from beside Chouji, making all the boys turn to look at her in surprise.

She wasn't really the kind to pull pranks. Knowing her, she would most probably try to talk Kiba out of pulling whatever he wanted to do to avoid him getting into trouble.

"You could wait for Naruto to evolve?" She offered, managing to surprise Chouji. She was helping Kiba out with a prank. Just like Shikamaru.

Today was just full of surprises!

"I mean the only two pranksters in our grade are you two. You wouldn't really be able to blame anybody else. Besides, he's always fighting with you so I guess you wouldn't mind getting him into trouble."

What Sakura was suggesting... Chouji didn't like it. Even though they didn't get along, Kiba didn't need to frame Naruto.

He really wished he had heard Kiba's ideas to be able to follow this conversation completely...

"If he ever gets smart." Shikamaru scoffed, but then shrugged. "Wouldn't hurt to wait, though. Would give you some time to get everything you want without raising suspicion."

With this, Kiba nodded. He wasn't glaring at Shikamaru anymore. Instead he was actually smiling.

"Thanks, Nara! Who would have thought you could actually be useful for something?"

Her heart was racing after she had given her two cents for the elaborate prank Kiba was planning. She had never helped anyone that they knew would get them in trouble. And, she had to admit, it was an amazing feeling!

She'd never felt so alive!

Kiba was smiling and Shikamaru didn't look as annoyed anymore. Chouji, though, seemed unsure about what was happening.

"Don't worry, Chouji." She smiled at him, offering him some comfort. "Like Shikamaru said, it'll most probably take some time to get everything Kiba needs. And it'll undoubtedly take a lot more
planning than what Kiba already has if he wants everything to go perfectly."

From behind her she could hear a displeased sound come from Kiba, but the boy didn't say anything about it. Instead he allowed Chouji to speak.

"It's not right to frame people for things you've done, Sakura."

His words were honest and heartfelt. They instantly made her begin to feel bad.

"We're ninja, Porky!" Kiba suddenly jumped up onto the counter in front of them, making them all look at him in surprise.

This wasn't his house! What was he doing jumping up onto places he shouldn't be standing on?

"We can't feel bad about hurting our enemies. And, I don't know if you haven't noticed, but fox boy and I don't necessarily get along." Kiba frowned down at Chouji. And when Sakura turned to look at the Akimichi, she found him frowning back at him. Kiba soon sighed and rolled his eyes, then sat himself on the counter in between both his friends. "Okay, how's about this, Porky: If Naruto isn't as annoying as he is now by the time I've got the prank all ready to be done, I won't frame him?"

This was actually a rather kind offer considering how much Naruto and Kiba truly hated each other. They couldn't be in the same classroom without getting into some kind of argument if they so much as made *eye contact*. But Sakura guessed that Kiba was offering it just to not have to listen to Chouji tell him off about being dishonest.

Although... He had a point... Ninja shouldn't feel bad about hurting their enemies. Even though Iruka Sensei would most probably tell them that Naruto was their *ally*, not an enemy to fight.

Chouji's frown lightened once he heard this, but he didn't smile. Instead he just huffed and nodded once, "I would really appreciate it if you didn't break this promise, Kiba."

At this Kiba smiled toothily, nodding at him, "Inuzuka don't break promises! We're too awesome to be dishonest, Porky!"

After he had finished shouting this out, Kiba suddenly heard the clearing of a throat from the opening in the kitchen that led to the rest of the room. And when he turned his head to look in that direction, the boy found Shikaku Nara standing at the doorway, a lazy look on his face even as he frowned.

"The counter is used for food and drinks, kid. Not to sit on it."

His brightened mood darkened upon hearing the slow as all hell Nara go through his words as slow as *humanly possible*, then Kiba frowned and glared over at the man.

"What you gonna do 'bout it, old man?"

Using the insult felt wrong. Like the term old man just didn't fit the clearly aged man in front of him. And Kiba couldn't really figure out why that was.

"Nothing really..." Shikaku sighed with a shrug, then motioned for the kids to follow after him. "Let's get going, yeah? I'm sure you kids would like to play while there's still sun out."

"There'll be sun out for more than five hours, dude." Kiba groused with a roll of his eyes, even though he moved to jump off the counter as he noticed his friends getting out of their seats.

At this the man shrugged once more, even though he didn't turn to look to make sure the kids...
followed him. Instead he just continued to walk away. As if he was sure they would follow along like good little soldiers.

Kiba *hated* these kind of people.

Forget how much better he was feeling after Shikamaru had helped him make his prank a thousand times less dangerous for himself. The Nara still sucked.

"Fine, kid... If you don't move now, I'll go back to bed and there'll be no scavenger hunt for you to go on."

Kiba really felt like biting back at him and answering sarcastically. But then he felt Chouji's hand fall on his shoulder and when he turned to look at his friend, he found the Akimichi shaking his head softly.

"I *really* want to go on this hunt, Kiba..."

Kiba couldn't get himself to care about being proper when around people he didn't like... But he liked Chouji. And he had been the idiot to offer to allow Shikamaru to tag along just to have the plump boy smile... Him and his stupid, sappy emotions.

With a huff, the boy crossed his arms over his chest and grunted out, "... Fine... I'll play nice... *For now.*"

As Chouji promised, Shikaku delivered an exhilarating game of scavenger hunt that pitted Kiba and Sakura against Chouji and Shikamaru. Both teams had to work together to be able to solve mysteries and get to items as soon as possible with the warning that if they didn't hurry up, Shikamaru's father may just fall asleep and not want to wake up.

Chouji and Shikamaru had honed their skills in working together over years of friendship, so they were an exceptionally good team. Especially with Shikamaru's intelligence and knowledge of the Nara forest.

In the beginning, Shikaku had offered that both kids that usually spent their time around the forest should team up with the kids that had not been there before. But Sakura and Kiba insisted that they could be a good team, even though Chouji felt as if they would be cheating because they knew the place so well.

Well, he *would* have felt like that if Kiba and Sakura hadn't somehow managed to beat them to the first item. When he'd seen that both of his new friends had gotten their hands on the rare flower that could only be found in the cooler forest areas of Konoha, Chouji knew that this would not be a regular game of scavenger hunt. In his mind, it was going to be more fun.

And that it was.

Running around with all three of his friends had been amazing. And after their game ended in a tie with equal amounts of assigned objects having been found, Shikaku decided to call it a draw and call the kids in for lunch. After they had eaten the meal prepared by Shikamaru's mother, Kiba had asked if the rest would like to go out and have some regular kid fun without adults. Sakura and Chouji agreed to it without much problem, although it had taken some convincing to have Shikamaru accompany them.

The rest of the day had been spent running from one spot to another, chasing after Kiba as he deemed having fun was more important than waiting for his friends.
At one point, in between lunch and dinner time, Sakura, Chouji, and Shikamaru had sat down on a bench in a park and allowed Kiba to run loose. They lost sight of him pretty quickly, but none of the kids were too worried. If any of them knew Konoha, it was the wild Inuzuka that explored their home as often as possible.

While they caught their breath and relaxed, the three kids spoke of whatever came to their minds. They compared notes on school, spoke about what they had done during the break, and wondered about the upcoming semester.

At one point, during a silence between them, Chouji decided to ask something that had been on his mind for a little while now.

"Hey, Shika, where's Ino?"

The Nara had his face turned up to the sky as he lazily watched over the cloud and didn't seem to react other than the one shrug he managed, "She's accompanying her dad on something outside of the village... Diplomacy or something..."

The answer was lazy, but Chouji understood it well enough. The reason why Ino wasn't pulling them around to follow behind her was because she wasn't in the village to do it. But if she were, there was no doubt in his mind that she would have appeared at his house various times to make him hang out with her.

Sharing a conversation with Chouji and Shikamaru was peaceful. Both boys were really calm and nowhere near Kiba on a hyperactive level. They just liked to talk and think, not run around as if the world were about to end any given minute. She enjoyed being with them. Although it was odd to not have to run behind Kiba even though he was (supposedly) close by.

The pink haired girl would not be surprised at all, though, if they were to find out that the Inuzuka had left them far behind to chase after some cat or vendor and wound up far away from them.

Ino was pretty lucky. She was able to leave the village with her father to do clan stuff. Her father didn't let her accompany him whenever he left the village because he said it was much too dangerous. Which, if Sakura was being honest, was pretty annoying. If she was going to be a ninja, she needed to face danger head on! Not run from it!

With a soft sigh at her thoughts, Sakura looked around the park they were in. She took in the sparse trees, much too colorful playground equipment, and lack of kids accompanying them. It was getting dark again and Kiba was nowhere to be found.

"Are you guys hungry?" She asked suddenly, looking over at both boys accompanying her. "I'm starting to get hungry."

Chouji nodded immediately. Sakura had to suppress the urge to giggle at the way his eyes lit up, but then she turned to Shikamaru and waited for his answer.

Upon noticing that her eyes were on him, the Nara sighed dramatically and shrugged once more, "I guess I could eat something."

"Alright!" Sakura smiled broadly, "Let's go find Kiba and then we can decide where to eat!" She jumped off of the bench as she said this, then pointed in the direction she had last seen Kiba heading towards. "Let's get going!"

Shikamaru groaned as he got up, but Chouji just followed after the pink haired girl without any kind
of whining. And this made the girl smile broadly because it made her feel like, just maybe, this might be Shikamaru's way of showing he was comfortable around her. Or maybe it was just how he acted around everybody. Still, it was kind of funny to see him so extremely grumpy.

At first, she was very sure that they would find Kiba pretty quickly. But after a few minutes of searching without any kind of results, she began to wonder just where the Inuzuka had ran off to. But, luckily enough, she didn't have to wonder too much, for the hyperactive boy bounded up to them with a broad smile on his face. One that Sakura immediately knew meant he had a secret.

"Kiba? Where did you go?"

His friends needed to get stronger and more used to running. They were too slow and too unused to running. He really had to train them up to be as awesome as him if he wanted to keep them as good friends.

Luckily for him, because they had decided to bail out on him because they were too tired, Kiba had run into one of the most awesome people in the world. Even bought him a drink.

"To the bar." He answered Sakura's question with a toothy smile, then motioned for Chouji and her to get closer to him. "I gotta tell 'em something quick, Nara."

The Nara quirked a curious eyebrow at this, but took a step back to allow the three to speak without him listening in. Once his friends were close enough, Kiba told them, "Guess who I just found."

Both kids were confused by his sly whisper, and Sakura questioned, "Who?"

"Didn't I tell you to guess." Kiba huffed, but soon shook his head. "The old man!"

Immediately both of his friends gasped in shock and began to ask him questions. Kiba knew this would be their reaction and he was proud to have convinced the old man to stick around for a little while.

"Come on! He's over at that little tea shop we went a while ago!"

"But... Kiba, we can't leave Shikamaru alone..." Chouji mumbled, which had the Inuzuka scoffing.

"He's a big boy, Chouji! And the old man isn't here every day now is he?"

"But..."

"We promised we'd keep the old man a secret, porky," Kiba growled, becoming annoyed with the Akimichi. "And we can't really keep him a secret if you bring the Nara along."

Chouji looked down at the floor regretfully, but soon breathed out and nodded. "Okay... I'll tell him to go home..."

"Good." Then Kiba looked over at Sakura, "Come on. We'll get a head start to make sure he doesn't run out on us or something."

Sakura nodded shakily, unsure because of how sad Chouji suddenly looked, but followed after the Inuzuka quickly enough.
"What was all that about?"

"Nothing, really." Chouji mumbled as he tried to swallow down the guilt he felt rising up in him that came from lying to his best friend. "Kiba found something interesting..."

It wasn't right to lie to his best friend. It felt all sorts of wrong and he hated it. But he had promised to keep the old man a secret all that time ago, to make sure they didn't get into trouble for mentioning him ever again. He was supposed to be their greatest secret. And even though Chouji didn't like the idea of lying about him, he had agreed to keeping quiet about the man.

"And I can't go because it's supposed to be some big secret between you three?" Shikamaru's eyes were narrowed in that way that let Chouji know he was smart enough to figure out what was happening around him, "Alright. I won't get in the way of your big secret." The Nara grunted, and then sighed, "We're best friends, Chouji. You don't have to lie to me just to spare my feelings. Just tell me what's going on and I'll be fine."

Shikamaru was much too smart. And while Chouji enjoyed this most of the time, his best friend was great for conversations and an excellent source to learn from, it made keeping secrets from him extremely hard. Not like Chouji constantly needed to hide things from him, but when he did, it was extremely hard.

Turning his eyes onto the floor before him, Chouji breathed in. He couldn't really tell Shikamaru why it was that he was leaving him. Kiba and Sakura would get angry with him if they found out that he had told them about something that was supposed to remain hidden. So he would have to lie to his best friend if he wanted to keep his new friends... This wasn't really fair.

"It's a secret, Shikamaru." The plump boy muttered, keeping his gaze on the floor. "Go home. I'll... Uh... We can hang out some more tomorrow. I'll go and get you and we can have some fun, like today."

He knew that his best friend was looking over him, eyes boring into him to try and get answers out of him. But Chouji couldn't tell Shikamaru about the old man. What would he think? What would he say?

Even though Shikamaru was calm and nice most of the time, there was no telling how he would react when it came to the old man. He could tell Chouji to stop hanging around him, that he was a bad influence that didn't care for any of them. He could even tell their parents about him and then the old man would be in a lot of trouble.

Chouji couldn't risk that.

After a few seconds of avoiding all kinds of eye contact, Shikamaru let out a puff of air and spoke up, "Alright. I'll see you tomorrow then."

Guilt gnawed at Chouji's insides as he watched his best friend walk away from him. But he still tried to comfort himself with the thought of being able to see the old man once more.

"I didn't give you any stinking necklaces. Why would I spend time of my life finding gifts for you brats?"
Sakura pursed her lips at the old man's growl, then looked over at Kiba to find that her friend was outright glaring at the old man.

Her favorite necklace hung proudly over her chest, for once not hidden by the clothes she wore. Kiba's own was also out, for he had told her that the old man had been the one to leave them. And Kiba wanted the old man to admit that he actually liked them enough to give them the necklaces.

The old man glared down at the both of them, then crossed his arms over his chest.

"Why are you incredibly annoying?"

Sakura did not like being insulted. But the man wasn't growling in anger, so she guessed that he wasn't completely annoyed with her and Kiba. Instead he sounded more tired, as if he didn't have enough energy to deal with them.

"Because I'm an Inuzuka. We're stubborn and awesome." Kiba answered with a smirk, then shrugged, "That's just how it is."

If there was anyone that could back up the 'stubborn' claim, it was Sakura. But before she could tell the old man just how truly stubborn her friend was, the man was breathing out heavily and allowed his arms to drop from his chest. "Stubborn or not; it doesn't matter. Don't you kids have anything better to do other than just annoy me?"

"Nope."

Sakura honestly wondered how it was that Kiba could answer things so quickly. Did he think before he answered? Or did the Inuzuka just spout off the quickest thing that managed to arrive at his lips?

"We want to spend some time with you, though. Where have you been all this time, old man?" Kiba questioned as he walked up until he was even closer to the man, forcing him to crane his neck to look down at him. "And do you have any name? 'Cause old man's not a pretty good name."

Sakura could hear the old man let out a sound that reminded her of a groan, but could also be taken as a growl. Then he grunted out, "You can call me Kuzu."

The pink haired girl's eyes narrowed slightly at the name, but she didn't question it. There were names of all kind. Even though this one didn't sound like a proper name, she wasn't about to tell the man. What if he really loved his name and felt insulted by anyone questioning him about it?

No, it wouldn't be right to tell the old man that Kuzu didn't sound like a good enough name for someone as awesome as him. And her mom had always taught her to respect people and try her best to not hurt their feelings. So she wouldn't tell him about how his name was a really weird one.

"Alright. Kuzu." Kiba tried the name out and found himself smiling soon after, "Wanna go get some dinner?"

The old man with the coolest eyes in the world had been a gem to find. Kind of like the gems he refused to admit to having brought to them. But Kiba knew that it had been the old man, his scent had clung to the necklaces for a good month before it had been taken over by his and his friend's own scents.

From his place seated at one of the tables in the very back of the tea shop, the old man growled softly down at him. But Kiba wasn't affected, he'd faced much scarier people and dogs before in his life after having gotten into trouble. The old man growling at him now over being an overly grumpy man
did nothing to him.
"I'm not going to spend any money on you mongrels."

Kiba frowned at the insult, but didn't have to point out that he was the person inviting. Sakura decided to speak up at that point, "That's alright. Kiba and I can pay. Right?"

With a wide smile, Kiba nodded. "Of course we'll pay, Old Man! We offered, didn't we?"

At this point, Kuzu grumbled something or another that was too low for even Kiba's ears to pick up. But the Inuzuka did not care to understand the words too much; they sounded more like grumbles of annoyance than actual anger.

"Now let's go!"

"Don't we have to wait for Chouji?" Sakura stopped him from running off by quickly pulling him back by the corner of his shirt, making the Inuzuka frown as he was thrust back.

… She was stronger than she looked…

Sniffing at the air, Kiba looked over in the direction that he had smelled the Pork Chop's smell coming from. And in a couple of seconds, the plump boy appeared, eyes going wide as he saw the old man sitting down in the table behind him.

"He's right there." Kiba pointed at the last boy to arrive, then looked over at Sakura. "We can go now, right? Let's go!"

"Yeah! Let's go, Kuzu." Sakura nodded as she smiled at the old man.

The grumpy man merely mumbled wordlessly, took his sweet time standing up, and finally began to follow after all three of them.

It was when they had all walked into the streets that they noticed the biggest problem with going to eat with the old man.

"Where are we going, Kiba?"

"To eat, of course."

Chouji rolled his eyes at the immediate answer, but still spoke up his worry, "Where are we going to eat, Kiba? I thought you wanted to keep the old man secret… All of the owners of the places we usually go to will ask us what we're doing with him."

He was somewhat annoyed over having to leave Shikamaru behind. His best friend deserved to be a part of his life after all. But he had promised to keep the old man a secret with Sakura and Kiba. So he would. Because he had promised. And if someone broke their promises, they were the greatest scum in the world.

Kiba's hurried and energetic footsteps slowed down to a complete stop as soon as Chouji had pointed this out. Then he let out a loud curse and groaned loudly.

"You're right! And we're not supposed to be going to the bar area of the Village anymore!"

When Chouji looked over at Sakura, it was to find her with a very large frown of disappointment on her lips. But when he looked up at the old man, it was to only find his eyes narrowed in what Chouji
guessed to be annoyance.

The man was grumpy.

"We can't take him to any of our houses for dinner either..." The pink haired girl whispered dramatically, then looked up at the man with wide eyes. "We can't take you anywhere, Kuzu!"

"Hn... I told you kids I don't care about any of this..." The man grumbled out, but soon sighed and offered them a solution. "I don't like restaurants or anything of the like either."

Chouji thought about how odd this was, especially because they had seen him inside of the same tea shop at least twice now. But he didn't question it and instead began to wonder just where they could go to buy some food (he was hungry) without having to worry about people they knew ratting them out to their respective families.

The problem with him and Kiba being part of two of the biggest clans in all of Konoha was that they were easy to point out. And if any of their clan members saw them running around with a man like the old man... Well, they knew that problems would arise. There was no doubt about that.

"Then what're we supposed to do? I'm hungry and refuse to let Kuzu leave us again." Kiba hissed in irritation, crossing his arms over his chest with a stomp to the ground. "What're we supposed to do?"

Normally, Kiba was the one to offer solutions. But because he seemed incapable of it, Chouji decided to give it a try.

"Well... How about we go to that park we went to a couple of days ago?" Chouji questioned slowly, still thinking of his idea as he voiced it out. "We could stop at a food kiosk, then go there to eat. Because it's so quiet and secluded, we shouldn't have to worry about people seeing us with him."

"Hey... That's actually a good idea!"

Chouji beamed at the proud smile Kiba offered him, then nodded in gratitude. Kiba nodded in turn, but turned around to point up at the old man.

"Follow me, Kuzu! And don't lag behind; I'm not slowing down for any slowpokes!"

Chouji could see the eye roll the old man made. But Kiba didn't; he was much too busy running off to see it.

With a small smile, Chouji began to follow after Kiba.

Okay, even though he didn't have Shikamaru with him, he was just happy that he was able to see the old man again. Especially because now they had an actual name to call him, rather than the nickname Kiba had assigned him all that time ago.

Before they arrived at the park at the edge of Konoha that they had only gone to once before- during the second day they had run around together-, Sakura and Chouji went over to one of the food kiosks near the tea shop they had left to buy some food. There they bought all kinds of fried foods and a few sweets, then ran back to Kuzu and Kiba with twin smiles of excitement.

Sakura had worried that Chouji wouldn't be as enthusiastic about seeing the old man again because he had wound up having to say goodbye to his best friend. But after a couple of minutes of being together and telling the old man all about their adventures together and how their project had gone, Chouji was smiling as broadly as he deserved to.
Sakura liked seeing him smile. It was such a pure and energetic smile… Not many kids smiled like that when she was around. Even Kiba's smile looked more like a smirk whenever she was with him.

"And then I pulled out his heart, just like you did!" Chouji just about shouted in pure joy through the stick of dango in his mouth as he bounded beside Kuzu, all the while Sakura struggled to run after them all with all of the bags in her hands.

At first, she and Chouji had taken turns carrying the two large bags stuffed with oily and delicious foods. The old man hadn't offered to help, and they hadn't wanted to bother him, so they had not asked him to aid them. And Kiba was busy sniffing out the trail to the park he was taking them to, so he couldn't be bothered either.

Sakura didn't mind carrying the things. Really, she didn't. Chouji looked really happy, Kiba was busy, and she didn't want to annoy the old man. So she followed them as best as she could without making a single sound to show off how much she was struggling.

Luckily for her, Kiba wasn't setting a brutal pace like he usually did. Not because he was being nice; no, he would never slow down to make sure the rest was following him. He was being slow because he said the terrain around the park was dangerous and they needed to be careful if they didn't want to lose their feet.

Sakura wasn't completely sure if what he claimed was true. But she did her best to follow in Kiba's footsteps just in case what he said was true.

As she hefted the bags up higher into her arms for the fifth time since they had entered the dense tree surrounded area, Sakura heard Kuzu hn'ing in what she guessed was more pride than annoyance.

"Did you? And who was the beautiful woman of green?"

"The only beautiful girl around, of course." Chouji answered immediately, making Sakura's cheeks redden suddenly.

She… She was beautiful?

"I see…" Kuzu murmured softly, then grunted out, "What was your final grade?"

Both Chouji and Sakura paled at the mention of the grade they'd received for the project.

Luckily enough, before they had to answer, Kiba returned to them with a sharp shout of, "Found the route! Come on!"

His eyes zeroed in on Sakura for a moment, and she tried her best to look as if she was able to carry the bags without any difficulty. And she thought that she had done a good job of it… Until Kiba walked towards her, plucked one out of her hands, and pointed forward with his free hand.

"Let's go!"

Sakura felt both offended and grateful that Kiba had taken some of the weight off of her. The fact of the matter was that the bags didn't weigh much. But they were really big and her small arms were only able to carry so much at a time!

Still, she followed after all of the males in front of her, more than happy to be part of their group.

Ever since she had befriended Kiba and Chouji, she'd begun to feel much happier. She had friends! She hadn't had friends before! And she'd thought that she wouldn't in all of her life because she was
so weird… They were nice to have around, though. Especially Chouji. She liked Chouji. He was really nice.

When they reached the main clearing of the forest Kiba had taken them to, it was to find the large trunk of the very beautiful tree they had lounged around the first time they had come here. And, just like last time, they all walked over to the huge roots by the floor and immediately got comfortable within.

The old man didn't. He just stood in front of them, looking down at them as if they were insane. But Sakura just smiled up at him and offered him the first thing she pulled out from the bag, a stick of fried fish.

"It's delicious!" She promised, prompting him to take it from her hand.

Slowly and with a soft huff, the man leaned down and grabbed the stick offered to him. But he soon turned away from all of them, showing them his back.

Sakura immediately guessed that it was because he was trying to hide his face from them all. And she didn't mind, she'd heard from Kiba that some ninja refused to show their masked faces because of horrifying injuries that marred them.

"Good food… Why don't we buy fried shit more often?" Kiba questioned as he tore into his own fish, which made Sakura look at him in slight disgust.

"Fried stuff is bad for you, Kiba…" Chouji muttered as he pulled out a stick of his own, "It's okay to eat every now and then, but not all the time."

The Inuzuka always ate like a savage. Seriously, he made it look as if he was always starving. Which Sakura found hard to believe, he came from a clan. Clans always had food. That's what her mother always told her, anyway.

Adopting a much more sedated pace, Sakura ate her own carefully. If she got an oil stain on her clothes, she knew her mother would grow annoyed. Especially with all of the grass and dirt stains that already covered her from head to toe.

After a while of them all eating in relative silence, Kuzu turned to look back at them.

"You never did tell me what grade you got on that project."

Looking away from him, Sakura began to nibble worriedly on her food.

"Cause we flunked and got our asses handed to us!"

Really… She wasn't sure if she was taken aback by Kiba's outburst or grateful for it… But, when she thought about it, Sakura really shouldn't have been surprised by it at all. Kiba was the one person she could always count on for blunt honesty.

"What do you mean?" Kuzu grunted, which made Kiba shrug slightly as he pulled out another fried delicacy to eat.

"Teacher thought we had made the story up. So he screamed at us. And because we also glorified the death of Konoha Shinobi… And because we pulled out someone's heart in the middle of the classroom and he thought that was too violent." He explained nonchalantly, somewhat annoyed with Iruka Sensei's stupidity, but not angry with him anymore.
Fact of the matter was that, even though their teacher didn't see the truth, he and Chouji and Sakura knew that the old man was real and everything he had done had happened. Besides, it was because of the old man that they had come together as friends. He was their best kept and most important secret. As long as they knew the truth, everything would be fine; at least in his mind.

"That's bullshit." Kuzu grunted immediately, sounding somewhat more annoyed than usual. "Those things actually happened."

"Iruka-Sensei said that no normal shinobi could do the things you did, Kuzu. I think he thinks we came up with it because what you did was pretty amazing." Sakura cut in quickly, even though she kept her eyes on the ground and away from Kuzu's own gaze.

Kiba wasn't surprised by this. She had a bit habit of keeping her eyes glued down to the floor whenever faced with terrifying adults.

He could let it slide for now… But if he continued to hang out with her, he would teach her how to look scary people right in the eyes. None of his friends would be submissive if he had anything to say about it!

"Normal shinobi can't do it…" Kuzu grunted softly. When Kiba looked up at him, it was to find him shaking his head.

He was still wearing that black cloak with the red clouds. And the same hat. And the mask looked the same. So he looked exactly like he had when they had first met him.

"Violence is a normal part of Shinobi life. You can't prepare the next generation of ninja without letting them see blood and guts. They need to know what they're getting into." He growled softly as he moved to sit down on the root beside Kiba, immediately making the boy scoot a bit away to not be in the way.

Chouji and Sakura sat side by side, eating from the same bag. So Kiba had been afforded the luxury of not having to share at all because no one was beside him…. Although… now that the old man was with him, he might lose that luxury.

"I know!" The Inuzuka nearly shouted out dramatically, the stick of his food sticking from his mouth. "They're raising us to be a bunch of babies that'll get killed in the field."

Kuzu's (freaking awesome!) eyes seemed troubled upon hearing this. But soon enough Chouji was speaking up, taking Kiba's attention away from the old man.

"We won't die, Kiba… I mean, yeah, we're not the toughest right now…" The Akimichi murmured softly with a slight shrug, "But we've got years to learn before we go out in the field… Besides, I won't let you die. As long as I'm around, you won't get hurt."

His words were strong; heavy with promise.

Kiba found himself actually believing them.

Beside Chouji, Kiba could see Sakura nodding quickly. "Mm-hmm. That's what friends are for, right? We'll protect each other. And we won't be like Kuzu's evil friend- we'll never betray one another… Right?"

Kiba looked at Chouji first and took in his determined stare and promising smile. Then he looked over at Sakura and found eyes wide with hope and a slight tremble of her lips.
"Yeah. Right." He nodded, then waved them both off, "We're a pack, idiots. And pack *never* turns against each other."

"Pack?" Both kids parroted quietly, all the while Kuzu looked down at him with a quirked eyebrow.

"Yeah: *Pack.*" The Inuzuka nodded sagely, pulling his food out from his mouth so it wouldn't disturb him as he talked. "A pack is tighter than family. And stronger than even a clan. There're a bunch'a different packs; small family ones, bigger clan ones, the like… But us four, we're a pack. And an awesome one at that."

"Four? Kid... I'm not looking for family."

"Didn't you hear Kuzu?" Sakura asked in genuine confusion. "He didn't say family."

"Yeah. You're not family. You're pack." Chouji agreed with a broad smile, making Kiba's own face break out into an accompanying one.

His very own pack… He liked the sound of that.

Sure, his Clan counted as a pack of sorts… But they weren't a *tight* pack.

With these four, though… he was *sure* they would be the *best* pack around.

..~..~..~

It's been so long since I last updated this story! But do not fret, I've got at least two more chapters prepare before I lose all hope with this story! So you'll get a few more chapters before I disappear off the face of this story again.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter! And please remember to review! I do so love reading your opinions.
Chapter 14

Kakuzu was not a man that allowed himself too many luxuries.

He did not believe in spending money; so he did not buy himself many things that some might consider 'items of leisure'. He only bought the bare necessities- and sometimes not even that.

He also did not take too much time pondering about the things that brought him great joy. The only thing he had ever allowed himself to take any sort of pleasure in was whenever he counted money after a well earned bounty had been cashed in. And this was simply because he loved money so much he could never truly detach himself from the pleasure he rejoiced in whenever he had some in his hands.

The only luxury he would never be able to admit to indulging in, though, was one that he had never even thought he'd ever find.

"So, Kuzu, where are you from? What's your village's symbol mean?"

It didn't even really count as a luxury, really. If anything what he refused to consider a luxury was actually a complication that he had no idea as to why he allowed in his life.

"It's none of your business, stop annoying me."

"But we want to know! And why do you wear that mask? Is it because your face is all messed up?"

"Kiba! You don't ask that kind of thing!"

The hyperactive brat that happened to be the biggest headache of the three Kakuzu had unwittingly allowed into his life had absolutely no tact. He was loud, obnoxious, seemed to be unable to read the most basic of social cues, and refused to behave like a proper child. In a way, the kid reminded Kakuzu a lot of Hidan. But, at the same time, he was a thousand times more stomachable than the Jashinist.

The pink haired brat, though, was more tolerable than the hyperactive brat. She had seemed to have taken his words to heart and he'd only seen her with tear filled eyes only once after he'd told her his piece of advice. She was usually the one that tried to calm the hyperactive brat down... Although it barely ever worked.

"But if I don't ask, I'll never find out. So why wouldn't I ask?"

"It's kind of rude, Kiba."

The fat brat was the least annoying of them all. But Kakuzu merely guessed that it was because he was the one that asked the least amount of questions about his life. And he was also the least likely to piss him off, seeing how he was the one that asked the least. Besides, the annoying, spineless attitude he seemed to have had the first time wasn't as clear to him anymore. The kid was a follower, there was no doubt about that. But he wasn't a spineless weasel either.

The brat with the too-big-for-his-face facial tattoos looked over at both his friends with confusion Kakuzu was sure wasn't feigned. And he was annoyed unbelievably by this.

What kind of kid couldn't understand just what things were and weren't considered rude?
He couldn't be bothered by this.

"Don't you three have anything better to do with your lives than just annoy me?"

They had been following him around for the better half of a day.

Admittedly, this may have been some of his fault. He could have never even allowed himself to be seen within the Village, so he never would have found himself having to deal with them. But they usually always offered to pay for his food whenever they saw him... So he had decided the risk was worth the reward. And he had managed to eat some rather delicious breakfast... The only problem was that now he was being followed by three annoying brats that asked too many questions.

"Not really. It's summer, we've got no school for a while. So we've got nothing to do." The pink haired brat shrugged slightly as she jumped onto a brick that had been laying in the middle of the road for some reason, "We spend our days running around."

"Sometimes we invite Shikamaru and Ino to play with us, but they're busy right now." The fat brat elaborated, all the while a bag of chips seemed to materialize out of thin air and appear in his hands.

He had heard about these two brats a handful of times before. But he wasn't all that eager to really learn anything about them- he didn't want to know about the brats that bothered him, why in the world would he want to know about brats he had never even seen?

"So, Kuzu, what're you doing here? Why haven't you popped up any sooner?"

Hidan and he were scouting out a couple possible recruits for the Akatsuki. His target was an Uchiha that was clearly too attached to his clan to ever possibly do anything against his Clan, much less his Village.

But it wasn't as if he could tell the brats about the real reasons as to why he was here.

Over the handful of unfortunate interactions he had been forced into by the mongrels, he had managed to concoct a cover story that they found completely believable and somewhat interesting.

In their eyes, he ran a sort of trading business. They did not know just what kinds of things he traded- they did not need to be aware of the unsavory side of his day-to-day life- and that was exactly the way Kakuzu needed it to stay. He couldn't really have a couple of snot nosed brats aware of his criminal endeavors, now could he?

Whenever he was in Konoha, they believed it was because he was finding people to sell wares to. Even though they had never seen any wares... Children in the Village Hidden in the Leaves were about as stupid as their shinobi... It was a true wonder just how this Village was the strongest of all of the Hidden Villages.

"Business. I've been busy." The man grunted as he crossed his arms over his chest, then looked forward at the path the hyperactive mongrel had been leading them down. "Just where are you taking me?"

"Our secret place of course." The brat answered as easily as if he were commenting on how blue the sky was on this particular day. "Pinkie and Pork Chop have snacks and I've got kunai. You're going to teach us how to throw them."

Kakuzu had never promised any of these brats anything. So he had no idea where they had gotten the idea of him helping them from.
"I'm no-"

"We'll pay for your lunch and dinner!"

Kakuzu leveled him with a completely disinterested glare, "Didn't you already waste enough money on my breakfast?"

"Maybe." The mongrel answered much too chirpily. "But Pinkie got her allowance yesterday and Pork Chop's got left over birthday money."

He was not a man that enjoyed the company of others; much less the company of children. He should tell these brats that he wanted nothing to do with them and that they should piss off before they really annoyed him.

Those annoyed words never even reached his mouth. His eyes caught sight of the necklaces he had not gotten for them and, for some reason, he felt his heart twitch just slightly.

Well… If he was here with the children… Far away from Hidan… It was something like a victory, really.

With a grunt, he motioned with his hand for the hyperactive brat to get a move on.

"No! Get up and fight back!"

From learning how to throw kunai a couple of weeks back, the mongrels had graduated to learning taijutsu. They were still very much beginners and very much insufferable in their lack of grace, but at least Kakuzu could say that they were much better than Hidan when it came to efficiency in the battlefield.

The pink haired brat was face down on the floor and had scraps and dirt marring her body.

If Kakuzu had been a kinder man, he would have told the hyperactive brat to back off and leave her alone as she took a breather. If he had been a nicer sort of person, he would have even gone up to the girl to try and soothe her worries so she could get back up, but at her own pace.

Kakuzu was not nice. Nor was he kind.

"Are you going to let him step all over you? Show him how he can't."

Kakuzu would never admit to this, but he felt a little bit of something when he saw the pink haired brat raise her head up to show off the fire that burned within her green eyes.

She was beaten. There was no way to avoid that. The Inuzuka was leagues beyond her when it came to his taijutsu skills. And the Akimichi was well above her as well, but nowhere near the Inuzuka. It was clear that she was a civilian child rather than a clan one.

Even though her defeat was clear, the brat struggled to force herself to at least stand up.

From the corner of his eyes, Kakuzu could see the Inuzuka brat grinning with pride clear on his face.

"Way to go, Sakura! Just like that! You can do it!"

The Akimichi cheering for her had his fair share of bruises and stains, seeing how he had already gone up against the Inuzuka before the pink brat had.
It was almost sickening to see how much these kids relied on each other to gain strength. But this wasn't Kakuzu's problem to solve. They would eventually learn that there was no such thing as trust in a world like theirs.

Panting with her face reddened, the pink haired brat raised her fists in a weak imitation of a fighting stance.

She struggled to keep her footing, but propelled herself forward so she could throw a sloppy and completely miscalculated punch at her friend. The hyperactive brat sidestepped it and allowed her to fall on her face once more, a harsh 'Oof!' falling from her lips.

Kakuzu decided that she had fought enough for one day.

"Alright. I'm hungry."

He couldn't tell the brats that he had decided the pink haired brat had done enough for the day. If he did, they might have gotten the incorrect idea that he actually cared for them. And he couldn't have them believing that.

As he stood up from the stump that had become his usual chair for observing their training, Kakuzu noted how the Inuzuka brat swooped down to help pick the pink haired brat up from the floor.

If there was something he had learned from the brat in the course of the past few weeks, it was that the Inuzuka were weird. They were rough and believed that a bit of harsh medicine was the best to helping their kids. But they also fuzzed over their 'pack', much like a mother hen at times. The hyperactive brat had shown these traits off, at least.

The Akimichi brat meandered towards his friends with bottles of water at the ready and offered one to each.

Once they had gulped down everything they were going to drink, the three turned to look up at him.

"Where are we going?"

Brats…

"Weren't you three so worried of keeping me a secret? I thought you didn't want me to be seen with you as we ate."

The simultaneous and perfectly synchronized way their faces dropped at the reminder was almost amusing.

"Right… Well… I guess Chouji and I can go and buy some food while you and Sakura stay here. She needs some rest, anyway."

He wasn't all that enthusiastic about having to stay with the pink haired brat. But he wasn't about to say no to free food. So Kakuzu merely grunted and sat himself back down on his preferred stump.

The pink haired brat smiled over at him, tentative and tired, and then allowed herself to slump on the trunk of the large tree behind Kakuzu.

The time spent waiting for the two male brats passed in silence. It was only really filled in by the brat's snores, seeing how she had managed to fall asleep.

… If he were a lesser man, he might say that the brat looked somewhat cute as she slept, arms
dangled over a particularly large root.

When the two brats arrived, it was with two bags filled with food carried by each. They made their way towards him, allowing him to grab the first bit of food before they moved on to sit with their fellow brat at the base of the tree.

"I'd say today was a good day." The Akimichi brat commented before he had begun to munch on his fried fish. "Target practice went about as well as it could have. And this time Kiba didn't almost rip my arm out."

The Inuzuka brat glared down at the floor of the memory of his loss of control, but the Akimichi patted his back and smiled comfortingly at him.

Truly, their reliance on each other was just **wrong**.

Kakuzu ate his first piece of the meal quickly, his body turned away from the children so he would not have to worry about them seeing his scarred face. And once he turned to look over at them, it was to find the boys trying to wake the pink haired brat up so she could eat something.

As they did that, Kakuzu looked over the place they had deemed perfect to be their base of operations. It was within a large forest- which didn't really surprise him, this was Konoha, after all.

There was something about the atmosphere in this place, though… Something that didn't feel quite **right**. And the fact that the Inuzuka brat insisted on them following him unless they wanted to die certainly did not make Kakuzu's suspicions die out.

"What do you think, old man? Are we getting better?"

Compared to the first time he had accompanied them on their training? By light years. They had started off completely inept and truly pitiful. Now, though, they were able to throw kunai with nearly **good** precision and their fighting styles were much more refined.

"There's still room for improvement."

"Tch, you always say that. But, secretly, you're amazed at how awesome we've gotten! We're just seven, after all."

"Kiba, you're still six."

"I turn seven in a month, Akimichi!"

"Still six… Pipsqueak…"

Kakuzu, stealing a sly glance at the children, was able to see Sakura grinning tiredly at her friend. And Kiba, in turn, was gawking at her with much too dramatic surprise clear on his features.

With a silent roll of his eyes, the large man stood up, made his way towards the brats, and took another piece of fish.

As long as he got food out of them, he didn't mind having to be around them.

The less money he spent, the better his life, after all.

"Just where the hell do you disappear to when we come here? It's like you've got something important to do other than just count your money."
Kakuzu grunted as he ignored Hidan's much too loud words.

After acquiring one final dinner from the brats, Kakuzu had waved them off (among shouts and pleas to return before the following school term started so they could spend some more time with him) and made his way towards the outskirts of Konoha so he could meet up with his insufferable partner.

It wasn't any of Hidan's business what he did or did not do while they were in Konoha. Just like Hidan's own exploits weren't any of Kakuzu's interest. As long as they stayed out of each other's hairs, this little partnership didn't have to necessarily be the most insufferable one Kakuzu had been forced to put up with.

"Come on! Why don't you tell me? Is it embarrassing? Is it violent?" The Jashinist didn't know how to keep his mouth shut.

The hyperactive brat was much like this… But he was much less annoying, seeing how he actually did shut up whenever Kakuzu glared at him in just the right way.

"Do you waste your money on whores?"

That was a question that didn't even need a response.

Kakuzu would never willingly waste money on anything- not even something some men might consider important.

"Fuck, you're boring."

"We've got a mission. Why don't you focus on that?"

"Because messing with your personal life is a thousand times more interesting, of course. What the fuck, Kuzu, why would you think I wouldn't want to know where you go off to?"

Hearing the name coming from Hidan's lips made Kakuzu want to smack him. He didn't need the Jashinist calling him that. Not when he already had three other brats that used that name to call for him.

"Bounty. Land of Wind. Suna's borders."

Hidan huffed over dramatically in a way that made Kakuzu want to beat the stupidity out of him.

Watching the brats running around wasn't really anything he did to gain any sort of pleasure. He didn't feel anything when he saw the three brats laughing and having fun, as if there were no problems in their lives they had to deal with. His heart didn't warm at the sight of the three helping one another to get better and learn. He felt absolutely nothing when they built each other up, rather than tore one another down.

He merely watched after them to make sure that the gifts he had not given them were not misused or mistreated. Those necklaces had most probably not been easy to find, they weren't stones that were easy to find. And those targets weren't all that cheap to find in the market.

... He was lying to himself even in his own mind... He was going insane... He blamed exposure to Hidan.

Still, it was because of following the brats that Kakuzu was able to find out some rather intimate details of their lives he was sure they had not wanted others to know.
The Inuzuka brat came from a broken home. His parents were never around; always left him to his own devices and to fend for himself. Which, in a way, might have been admirable... If not for the fact that this particular brat needed more guidance than he did independence.

The fat brat had the most stable family life. His parents clearly loved him and nurtured him; some might even say that they did this to an almost sickening degree. Still, they made sure he was always fed and never needed anything, which was admirable in its own right. The dirt Kakuzu had on him wasn't even all that bad; he didn't want to have to decide between two group of friends. He was the bridge between the pink and hyperactive brat and the other clan ones; he clearly had friendships with them both and didn't want to lose them. But it was clear from the way that he would worry over all of them that he believed one day he might be given an ultimatum: one or the other, but not both.

And the pink haired brat had a family that protected her too much and didn't want her anywhere near the shinobi life... Or her Inuzuka friend.

The brat wasn't around when her parents spoke of this, but Kakuzu had caught the conversations many times before.

"She might die; I don't think I could deal with that."

"He's such a bad influence- I mean, he's a good friend, but... I worry..."

"Maybe she'll figure out she's not caught out to be a kunoichi. Then we won't have to worry."

No family was perfect. No kid had a perfect life. Kakuzu was not surprised to find any of this out.

It bothered him, though, how badly the adults in the brats lives judged them. If even he could see their potential, then there was clearly something there to mold.

Konoha truly was filled with idiots.

He was not the kind that would care enough about other people to actively think about them and things that might have brought them joy. He did not believe in buying gifts just for the heck of it; nor did he believe that gifts should be given away recklessly.

For some reason, though, he could not stop himself from thinking about the three brats when he looked at the portable targets that had been left lying around by some clearly inexperienced Suna genin.

They needed to be able to practice their aim... If they didn't practice, they'd never get any better...

As he walked away from Suna, Kakuzu found himself carrying two things of very different importance.

One was the head of the bounty he and Hidan had been sent to cash in. The other was a bag filled with five small targets that had been much too easy to grab.

He refused to think about which one happened to be more important.

"Not everything is a race, Inuzuka! Winning isn't all that matters!"

"Yeah, it's just what's awesomest!"

Kakuzu grunted softly as he watched the Inuzuka make an ass himself as he rushed to set up the
practice targets the three brats had found in their homes that morning.

Two had been left in the Inuzuka's house, two in the Akimichi's, and one in the civilian's.

It had not taken more than an hour for the brats to get together and begin gushing over their newest gifts. And in a couple of minutes, they had grabbed the other two mongrels Kakuzu had heard about so they could try out their newest gifts.

"Where did you guys even get these from?" The brat with the pineapple shaped hair asked softly, looking over at the target that he had been tasked with setting up.

Because they had been taken from unsuspecting Suna brats, they had seen their fare share of use. There were nicks and holes already in them, along with a couple of scratches. So it was more than clear that these were not new targets.

Kakuzu found himself frowning at the Nara brat. He was already asking too many questions.

"They were gifts from a distant cousin of mine." The hyperactive brat answered without skipping a beat, lying rather smoothly.

That one. That brat was the most dangerous of them all. He knew how to lie. Kakuzu had seen him stealing a slab of meat in the market place a couple of weeks ago without getting caught. And he had a loud mouth on him. He had no idea just how a Clan kid had wound up so rugged, but he knew that it would be dangerous to allow the kid to continue down the track he was going.

Not that Kakuzu cared about that.

"Hand me downs, huh?" The blonde brat questioned with clear disdain in her tone of voice, "He could have given you something new, you know?"

"Or he could have given me nothing at all. Geez, a gift's a gift, Yamanaka."

The blonde snapped a glare and the Inuzuka bared his teeth at her. But soon the fat brat stepped forward and defused the situation by saying a simple, "Why don't we start on some target practice?"

"Yeah!"

The Inuzuka was easily distracted... That seemed to be the only thing that ever managed to save him from getting into petty squabbles that would amount into absolutely nothing of true importance.

"Let's all try to hit the center target! That way we can really see who's the best!" The pink haired brat chimed in as she walked over to the other brats, all the while the Nara continued to look over the target that had been given to him to set up.

Kakuzu knew that look. He had seen it plenty of times before on the faces of Nara he had come across that had tried to apprehend him. He did not like that look.

"Sounds good. Here you go." The Inuzuka grabbed safety kunai from the bag he had wrapped over his shoulder and handed two to each of the brats around him. "Oi, Nara, you going to play?"

"Yeah, yeah..."

Taking much too long, the Nara brat stood up, set up his target beside the rest, and walked over to the Inuzuka to grab a pair of kunai himself.

That one was one the brats would have to look out for. If they weren't careful, he would be able to
figure out their little 'shared secret' in no time.

..~..~..

Hope you all liked this chapter! I like Kakuzu's point of view, he's such a grumpy guy!

Anyway, in the next chapter, there'll be a time of skip of some two years just to get the ball a-rollin'.

Please review!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Special thanks to the user Yappano for having drawn up an adorable little doodle for this story that actually helped inspire this chapter. I’m real grateful for the drawing!

Chouji had never been the kind to sneak away from his house when his mother had asked him to complete a chore before he went out with his friends. But Kuzu was here. And Kiba was yelling at him to hurry up, because they still had to get Sakura and if they didn't, Kuzu would get away and they couldn't let him leave again without a proper goodbye!

(That name didn't sound awesome enough for the old man. Kiba said that it most probably was some kind of fake name to hide his true identity. But Kiba had also created a whole convoluted back story for the old man- one that involved allegiances to multiple Villages, a great showdown against various Kage, and multiple near death experiences-, so Chouji wasn't completely prepared to believe some of the things he said about the man.)

Instead of watering the plants and feeding the chickens like he usually did during the mornings, Chouji rushed through getting dressed so he could run out of his home and follow after Kiba and get Sakura. And even though he normally would stop to eat some food, all he had time to grab was one of those breakfast bars his father would take with him on missions before he was off.

He ran after his excited friend with sleep slowly leaving his eyes and his stomach growling in protest over not having been able to be fed anything before taking part in any kind of rigorous activity.

"Are you sure that this is a good idea?" He asked in a slight pant as he followed after Kiba, "I know it's the weekend, but we've still got chores to do!"

"Of course it's a good idea! Chores can get finished any time; the Old Man, though, isn't someone we see every day." Kiba promised, "But we have to hurry and get Sakura! Kuzu isn't big on patience and I'm not letting him leave again without saying bye to him!"

Chouji did his best to keep his pace with Kiba- which was much easier now than when they had first become friends almost two whole years ago- and when they got to Sakura's house, he was allowed a slight reprieve as the Inuzuka banged on Sakura's front door.

"Sakura! Sakura! Sakura!"

It took a couple of seconds to get any sort of answer. But when the door opened, it wasn't the pinked haired person they were expecting. Instead, it was the pink haired man that happened to be their friend's father.

Chouji liked the man. He was kind and always offered them foreign candy whenever he returned from his business trips.

But right now, he looked less than pleased to see them.

"What in the world are you two doing looking for my daughter at five in the morning?" He groaned in a sleep laden voice, immediately making Chouji regret having allowed Kiba to drag him with him.
He wasn't a big expert on adults, but he was sure that they weren't the kind that enjoyed being woken up at such an early hour by the friends of their only daughter.

"We need to finish homework quick! Sakura's my only saving grace, sir!" Kiba whined, sounding both honest and genuinely distraught.

How the Inuzuka was able to say such convincing lies, Chouji still couldn't understand…

"And why didn't you work on this ye-"

"Because I was helping mom around the house the whole day, daddy."

Chouji smiled as soon as Sakura's head popped in from beneath the splayed out arms that belonged to her father. Both of his hands were holding onto both sides of the doorframe, a stance that would have most probably stopped someone his height. But not Sakura, she was much too short to be affected by his position. And she managed to squeeze past his right leg, sending him a reassuring smile.

"Don't worry, I'll be safe. Chouji and Kiba are both good kids."

Her father's green eyes were wide and completely shocked. It must have been because Sakura was already completely dressed, and was even ready to leave, seeing how she also had a large bag slung over her right shoulder- resting on top of her left hip- and a healthy apple in her hand.

"Bye, daddy." She waved at her father before skipping down the stairs and smiling at both boys. "Let's go."

"Yeah! Let's go!"

Kiba had run off before he'd even finished screaming. And Chouji and Sakura quickly followed after him, both wearing smiles of pure joy and excitement.

As they ran behind their friend, Chouji decided to ask what he knew both he and Kiba were wondering, "Hey, Sakura, how'd you get dressed so quickly?"

Sakura looked at him for a couple of seconds with a confused look on her face, then giggled softly and turned back to look in front of her. "I could see you two running to come get me from a mile away. As soon as I saw two little kids running in my direction, I knew it was you two, so I started dressing." Then she patted at her bag, a large smile on her face, "And I packed breakfast for you two."

"You're awesome, Sakura!" Chouji cheered.

"Good job, Pinkie." Kiba nodded, offering a cool smirk over his shoulder before he focused in front of him to lead them towards the Old Man.

Kiba and Chouji running up to her home at an unusual hour was no longer strange. At first, it had been extremely weird and she'd been apprehensive about following them wherever it was that they wanted to go; especially so early in the morning. But after a couple of escapades in the middle of the night or the early hours of morning that had all ended in pure awesomeness, Sakura had begun to prepare for these very adventures.
Every night, she'd make sure to leave a bag filled with enough food for all three of them hanging off of her dining room table and that she had picked out the best kind of clothes for running. Most mornings- when she woke up normally without having to worry about adventures-, she took the food with her to give the boys during the day and she wore the clothes she'd picked out. Running was an everyday occurrence when one was friends with Kiba Inuzuka, after all, so she wasn't really misusing her wardrobe by doing such a thing.

Her planning ahead, though, always proved to serve her for the better whenever Kiba and Chouji sporadically showed up with excited looks on their faces.

Today, she'd woken up earlier than usual because her body had decided to wake up before either of her parents. It was odd to wake up so early, but she hadn't minded too much because she had managed to fall asleep rather early the past night. And she'd chanced a look out of her window just for the heck of it, only to find two silhouettes racing over to her home in the dim sunlight that barely shined over Konoha at this hour.

As soon as she'd seen them, Sakura had jumped away from her window, rushed to get dressed, brushed her hair and teeth, and ran down to the first floor of her home to grab her food bag.

She didn't know why they were running. But she had a hunch that it had to do with the Old Man. Especially after the little gift she'd found on her drawer last night.

With a small smile, the pinkette chanced a glance down at her left wrist. The bracelet was a simple leather one, but it was beautiful. And the bloodstone in its very center was a perfect match for the necklace she now proudly wore front and center at most times.

On Kiba's wrist, she could see a bracelet as well, although this one seemed more frayed than her own. And on Chouji's, she could see another, much thicker one.

Even though Kuzu had denied ever having been the one to gift them the necklaces with the green rocks, they had all known that it had been him. He may have said that he would never waste money on anything, but Sakura was more than sure that he loved them a bit more than he tried to let on.

The targets they had all mysteriously received a little more than a year ago were even harder to connect to the Old Man. But there was no doubt in the mind of any of them- Kuzu was too awesome to believe!

When Kiba began to slow down, Sakura slowed her own steps as well. And when they reached the edge of the forest they frequented whenever they ate with Kuzu, she was able to see a tall silhouette wrapped up in a dark cloak glaring at them all.

"Kuzu!" She gasped in surprised joy, "You're here!"

The man glared over at her, but Sakura didn't shirk away from him. She had gotten to know him rather well over the last few years. And if there was one thing she was certain of, it was that if he didn't love them to some degree, he would never put up with them. So, if he did put up with them, then he did love them… To some degree, yes, but it was still love!

"You were going to leave us again, weren't you?" Kiba questioned with a hiss as he walked over to the man and Sakura could just hear the frown in his voice. He didn't even sound winded!

All the while, Chouji and she were huffing softly to try and catch their breath.

"Dude! Why do you insist on staying away from us?"
"You kids are foolish and idiotic brats." The man sounded as if he were lamenting softly, but they just walked up to him with identical smiles on their faces. "It's too early for you to even be awake. How did you know where to look for me?"

"I've gotten better at tracking down your scent." Kiba declared proudly as he stopped in front of the man, hands planted on his hips. "And we figured out your pattern. Sometimes you appear to stay for days. Other times, you only stay a night. You only stayed the night."

Kuzu glared down at him with unamused eyes.

But Sakura knew she could see glint of pride within those green eyes.

"Breakfast time!" She announced, throwing her bag open. "It's the most important meal of the day and running after Kuzu is no excuse; we all need to eat breakfast."

Kiba groaned immediately, "What are you, my mother?" But Sakura wasn't deterred by the reaction, seeing how it was the same one that Kiba always used whenever she offered them food during their escapades.

Even with the reluctance, the Inuzuka accepted the sandwich offered to him, which was one that was wrapped up in napkins and had his name written neatly on it.

"Thank you, Sakura." Chouji smiled kindly as he took his own sandwich, which was much more stuffed than Kiba's own.

But when she looked down at her bag, Sakura noticed that she'd only packed three sandwiches. And there were four people right now… She'd never packed for Kuzu… She had never found herself needing to… Would she have to give up the apple she'd brought along to snack on later?

"I already ate."

She looked up at Kuzu's sudden growl and found him looking down at her with those intense green eyes. It was weird for him to look at her so intensely… But Sakura had a hunch as to why…

Nodding softly, she plucked out her own sandwich from her bag, smiled at the apple that was now nestled peacefully in the corner, closed the flap, and began to unwrap her food.

"So, where're you off to now?" Kiba asked over his only ham filled sandwich, making Kuzu look down at him.

"Don't eat with your mouth full." The man scolded, but then sighed as he crossed his arms. "If you must know, I'm going to Sunagakure. Money's good over there now."

"So business has been doing well?" Sakura questioned curiously, only to then furrow her eye brows, "Or has it been bad enough that you've had to travel a lot?"

"Good. And it's taking me there." He informed, but soon sighed and asked, "Did you kids seriously run out of your homes just to say goodbye to me? In the middle of the morning? Don't you have school today?"

"Yeah." Chouji answered as Sakura chewed on her first bite, "Yes. School's tomorrow, though. But you're important to us, Kuzu."

"Sides, we've got contingency plans." Kiba let the man know, "If we do too much today, we just don't go to school tomorrow. Fake sick and everything."
Sakura kept the fact that they had never actually tried faking a sickness before to herself. Instead, she just allowed the Old Man to think about whatever it was he was mulling on. Then, after he had chosen on what to say, he spoke up with an unimpressed scowl.

"You're supposed to go." Kuzu deadpanned, which received slight shrugs from all three of them.

"We learn more from you when you choose to appear." Sakura told him in complete honesty, "Your way of teaching is much cooler. And Kiba teaches us what his clan teaches him about taijutsu, so we're all pretty much ahead of the class right now."

"And because of Sakura's brain, we're all getting mostly straight A's." Chouji just about cheered, making Sakura's cheeks become dusted in pink, "School's more like a chore than something we need at this point."

Kuzu didn't look amused at all with their words. But he didn't argue with them. Instead, he simply asked, "So you're basically offering to do anything I want for the day? Just as long as I spend time with you? Did I get that right?"

"Yup!" They all chorused immediately.

Sakura's heart was pounding loudly in her chest but she couldn't wipe off the broad smile on her face.

Her friends were awesome. Kuzu was amazing. And, really, it's not like their adventure could leave them so tired that they wouldn't want to go back to school tomorrow.

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Kiba's home life had recently begun to sour even more. It had been shit before. But now it was mega shit. So whenever he found the chance to escape from his family to hang out with his pack, he took the chance.

Finding a pattern to Kuzu's movements had not been easy. It had taken all of their heads to even begin to understand how he moved. And after that, they'd been forced to remember every single time the old man had appeared in Konoha and they had known about it. It had been even more difficult when they took into account the times he had visited without them having found out.

He'd also gotten better at finding the old man's scent. It was a scent that differed greatly from many of the people inside of Konoha. So, once Kiba had managed to find the specific smells that separated it from the rest, it had become much easier to follow him.

Hunting the old man down was preparing him for a life in tracking! And his parents thought he was wasting his days by running around with Pork Chop and Pinkie!

Anyway, when he'd figured out the old man would most probably be showing up during these days, he'd kept his nose alert so he could sniff him out. And the moment he'd smelled the old man's scent inside of his room and a new trinket on his torn up desk, he'd begun to get dressed so he could chase after the quick man.

Grabbing Chouji and Sakura was second nature by this point. They were always more than eager to follow him whenever it dealt with the Old Man. And he valued their company enough to actively want to be around them.

Besides, the earlier he was hanging out with these two, the faster he could forget all about how
horribly his life at home had spun out of control.

"You truly are insane brats…" The old man sounded as if he was softly lamenting the fact, but Kiba didn't really care about it.

The new bracelet decorating his wrist weighed on him with pride and happiness. It was the third gift he’d received from the old man, even though Kuzu insisted on refusing the fact that he had been the one to give them the other two things. And because he insisted on denying the true origins of those gifts, Kiba knew that it would be futile to try and ask him where he had gotten this from. He knew the true scent that had brought him this gift, that's all that mattered in the end.

"Just a tiny bit." He shrugged happily, then asked, "What're we going to do today?"

The man took a moment to breathe in and think. During those few seconds, Kiba chanced a look at both his friends.

Sakura's hair was longer now, but so were his and Chouji's. It reached to her shoulders now and needed to be clipped back with some butterfly looking clips Chouji had given her on her eighth birthday (If they had been given to her by anyone else, Kiba would have told her to drop them; but seeing how he actually respected Chouji, he respected the rather girly gift). She'd gotten taller too, but was still shorter than both him and Chouji. And she had forgone her style of decorative and nice looking clothes from some time ago and now dressed mostly in shorts and t-shirts, seeing how she was always active now. But she always kept a jacket wrapped around her waist, just in case they wound up some place cold. Seeing how her arms and legs were always exposed and was rather skinny, she got colder faster than either him or Pork Chop.

That was a fact Kiba was proud of. Because of him, Sakura and Chouji were now the third and fourth best athletes in the class. They were only behind him and Sasuke because of extremely obvious reasons. Although, for equally obvious reasons, Sasuke had recently been lagging behind, and this had allowed both of his friends to pick up his slack.

Chouji, on the other hand, was taller than him now. Seeing how big his father was, Kiba wasn't surprised to find out that Chouji would grow up to be huge. Although it still chagrined him slightly whenever they stood side by side and Chouji was only a millimeter taller than him. His own style hadn't changed much, but that was because he'd always worn pants that ended at his shins and comfortable shirts. Unlike Sakura, who favored pinks, reds, purples, and blues in her clothes and tried her best to never look as she had the day before, Chouji preferred green in his clothes.

Right now Sakura wore a short sleeved red shirt, purple sandals, her necklace and brand new bracelet as accessories, and a pair of black shorts. Today's jacket was a beige color, kind of like Kiba's own favored jacket. Chouji's shirt was light green, the vest he always wore was dark green, and his pants were olive. That kid really liked his greens… He too wore the necklace and bracelet gifted to him, though.

Their clothes didn't have holes in them. Sure, they weren't new anymore, but they'd seen their wear and tear and still didn't look completely old. Kiba wasn't sure when they had been bought, but he knew it had been not too long ago.

He didn't want to look down at his clothes. They were handed down from his older cousin and sister, had holes and sewed on patches all around, and the only thing that brought him any kind of pride was the big jacket he wore that was able to cover up most of those imperfections.

"Have you three ever been taken out of the Village?"
"A couple of times." Chouji answered with a small shrug, "Nothing big."

"One time daddy took me with him during his job… We didn't get too far, though. And it was just that one time." Sakura informed in that quick tone of hers that always lost its speed the more she spoke.

At first, Kiba had been annoyed by that quirk of hers. Now he just considered it purely Sakura. So he didn't mind it- although he didn't love it too much either.

With a nonchalant shrug, Kiba crossed his arms over his chest and looked away from the old man and his friends.

He'd been out of the Village many times before. But those had been times that were extremely bittersweet to him. On one hand, he'd been able to explore the forests of the Land of Fire without anyone barking in his ears about proper forms or shit. But, on the other, they'd been times in which he'd been completely forgotten by his family, which had been the reason why he had been able to go so far without getting in trouble.

"Lot more times than Chouji." He supplied eventually, refusing to look over at any of his pack.

He knew Kuzu would be looking at him with those disappointed and annoyed eyes he always put on whenever Kiba said anything. He just knew it. And he didn't want to look at the man judging him. Not right now.

"Alright… Well, I need to start making my way to Suna. You brats won't leave me alone; the Inuzuka will just follow me with his nose," Kiba smiled proudly at this bit and nodded for it was completely true; even though the smile was not as broad as it could have been; "So let's strike a deal: We'll get out of Konoha and see some sights. But when I tell you to leave, you come back here."

Without even thinking about whatever might happen while they were outside, Kiba jumped forward with a broad smile and thrust his hand over at the old man, "You've got a deal, Kuzu!"

Getting out of Konoha had been much less exciting than Chouji had thought it would have been. And he was pretty sure that it shouldn't have been so easy. Well, it should not have been so easy if Konoha's security really was as good as he kept hearing his dad's friends talking about.

There was a tunnel by the edge of their favorite area of Konoha that Kiba and Kuzu led them towards. It was a tunnel Chouji was sure shouldn't have been there, but, well, at least they were going out of the village.

He knew he shouldn't go. He was aware of all of the trouble in which they might end up in if they actually left the Village and got into trouble outside. And he knew that his parents would be disappointed if they ever found out about him leaving the Village to hang out with a person they believed was fictitious and his friends.

If they ever found out.

The small voice in the back of his head sounded suspiciously like Kiba, but Chouji chose to ignore that fact. Instead, he chose to take the words at face value. If they found out- chances were that they wouldn't. So, if they wouldn't find out about what he had done, how much trouble could he possibly get into?
He must have been spending too much time around Kiba and Sakura… Those two were the ones that twisted words to make bad plans sound awesome. He was simply the one that chose to tag along because he loved his friends enough to do so.

Sure, Shikamaru might have to spend today with Ino. But those two needed to make friends already if they really were going to be the next Ino-Shika-Cho team up. Even though Shikamaru didn't hate Ino, he sure didn't try to make friends with her. So not having Chouji around to distract him may just be exactly what he needed!

Yeah! That was a good thought! Besides, they weren't doing anything important in class right now and they always got good grades now because Sakura always helped him and Kiba out with whatever confused them. And the old man's own recounting of history (although much more grandiose and amazing than what they were taught in school) sure helped them stay focused during most classes. So it wasn't like their adventure being too tiring would actually harm them in school.

The only class in which he and Kiba readily struggled was math. They both hated math. Even though Sakura actually really liked it. But that was okay, because she always helped them pick up their own slack.

As they walked behind Kuzu- Sakura's eyes wide in complete amazement, Chouji's own slightly widened as he took in his new surroundings, and Kiba with complete relaxation and no excitement whatsoever-, Chouji found himself smiling like a fool.

They weren't the kind of people that would normally be friends. But he, Kiba, and Sakura had all managed to become amazing friends. Amazing enough that Kiba actually called them a pack. And that must have been big if what his father had said was true. It was supposed to be an honor to be called a pack from an Inuzuka if one was an outsider.

Trees all around. That was all that Chouji could say to properly describe their surroundings. He'd been outside of Konoha before, but that had been using the main roads. And while those had also had trees surrounding them, he'd walked over dirt paths. This time around, they were walking over roots, ground that seemed to never have been stepped on before, and a couple of very unfortunate bugs.

"Hey, Kuzu…"

"Hn… What do you want, Pinkie?"

Chouji found himself smiling softly at the man's forced indifference. He still couldn't understand why Kuzu insisted on his hate for them. If he hated them, he wouldn't have left them gifts last night. And if he didn't like them, he certainly wouldn't be taking them out of Konoha.

"Why aren't we using the main exit?"

"Because I'm sneaking two clan kids and a civilian kid out of a Hidden Village where I do not live nor work in. This constitutes as a kidnapping."

"Seriously?" Kiba cut in with excitement, "Cool! I can say I was kidnapped!"

"Aw, Kuzu!" Sakura gushed immediately, skipping over all of the roots and rocks on the ground to dance around the tall man, "You're the nicest kidnapper ever! You even asked us if we wanted to go."

The man didn't answer her. Instead he grumbled softly. And Chouji swore that it sounded like 'Brats'. But he wasn't completely sure.
They walked quite a bit. Chouji wasn't sure of how long. But he knew that the sun had barely been seen when they'd met up with the old man. But by the time they reached his destination, a little town named Midori no Miro, the sun was already high in the sky and shining brightly.

"Where're we going, Kuzu?"

The old man grunted softly, but Kiba's question went otherwise unanswered.

The Inuzuka looked over at both Chouji and Sakura in curiosity, silently asking them if they had any idea. But if Kiba didn't know where they were going, Chouji was even more lost. Out of all of them, Kiba had been the one to leave the Village the most, after all. He'd seen more of the world outside of the giant walls that surrounded their Village. If he didn't know, how could anyone expect his less traveled friends would?

The town was full of all sorts of civilians walking around, either going to their jobs or just living their lives. Chouji was able to see some little kids running around with sticks in their hands, all the while the people he assumed to be their mothers were talking inside of a small eatery. Aside from that, he saw one big man that caught his eye. He was covered in muscles, with two large scars that ran over his chest in an interesting 'X', and a rather mean scowl on his face. But when he passed by the kids running around and one greeted him, he graced them with a warm smile that had them all giggling and muttering about how kind he was.

He'd always wondered, did Kuzu smile beneath that mask? He always seemed so serious… Kiba had once said that he thought that the old man didn't have the capacity to smile because he didn't have lips surrounding his mouth, which was the reason why he wore that mask. Sakura told him he was exaggerating and then said that Kuzu undoubtedly had lips, most probably did smile, but just not often.

"You already started your proper ninja training?" The man grunted, leaning his head down just slightly so he could look at Sakura.

It was an odd question. He had been around to give them the first pointers, after all… Maybe he was asking about them officially beginning their training?

"Yup." She nodded immediately, pointing a finger at Kiba, "We've got the best grades in the class now!" She beamed at him, which made him grunt softly.

"Only taijutsu? Have you not been taught anything in bukijutsu?"

"We can all throw stuff, if that's what you want to know." Kiba shrugged, "But we've learned most things from you."

Because of Kiba, he and Sakura were great close ranged fighters at this point. Whenever Iruka-Sensei threw his little tournaments where the winner would get to pick out a prize from the mystery box, they were usually always the finalists. And because they were such good friends, they would always give each other mostly fair chances of getting to the finals.

Last time, Kiba had 'lost' to Sasuke so the Uchiha could move to the semi-finals. But Sasuke had recently lost his touch in taijutsu, which Chouji couldn't truly judge when he took account what had happened to him, and he'd lost to Sakura. She and Chouji had then squared off in the Finals, much to Iruka-Sensei's dismay.

The man had wanted to scold them for months now for their supposed cheating. But he couldn't
really, not when he didn't have enough evidence against their deciding the victors of the tournaments. Because there really wasn't much to find, not really; they were good fighters and always wound up beating their other classmates. It wasn't their fault, though, that sometimes Chouji would get the leg up on Kiba during the final round or Kiba didn't feel too good to be fighting Sakura.

Sakura had won that particular bout and she'd gotten a set of practice kunai for that victory. The last time Kiba had won, he'd earned two blank notebooks, which he'd then given to Sakura because he would never use them. Conversely, Sakura gave him the kunai because she knew that he would use them more. The last time Chouji had won, he'd received a book about the First and Second Hokage's lives, which he and Sakura read out loud from time to time to get Kiba to learn about the men that had founded their Village.

Kiba was the best at throwing kunai; Sakura wasn't a big fan of it even though she was actually rather good at it, while Chouji was average.

"Got any money on you?"

This question was weird.

They all patted at their pockets. Chouji wasn't sure why the other two did; he only did so out of hopes that maybe he had some change inside of them. But he didn't.

"Mm-mm." He shook his head, only for Sakura and Kiba to follow suit.

On regular, non-school days, they would have money. They would always grow hungry by lunch time because of all the running they did, so they would usually buy something to eat. If they didn't, they would go to either Sakura or Chouji's houses to ask for food. But on school days, they would pack their own lunches. They wouldn't have need for any money. Especially because they would usually be able to run back home after school was over if they wanted to buy anything.

"Alright." Kuzu nodded to himself, then pointed over at a small shop that was only just being opened now by its shop keeper. "Today I will teach you a valuable shinobi skill that I assure you is not taught in your little Academy."

Chouji quirked an eyebrow at this, confused and beginning to grow worried.

The only skill he could think of that entailed shops, zero money, and anything remotely ninja-like was one that could get them all in trouble.

"Time for you to steal your weapons."

Chouji immediately paled.

Much to his dismay, Kiba cheered.

"What? Kuzu, you can't teach us that!" Sakura immediately began to argue, even though it earned her a sharp glare from her Inuzuka friend. "It's not ethical! It's not right! We're supposed to be honest-"

"Ninja are anything but honest, Pinkie." Kuzu cut her off with that sharp growl that let her know there was no room for arguing. "Ninja are devious and quiet. They do everything and anything they have to do to finish a mission. And one type of mission you will undoubtedly be sent on at one point
in your life will be one that requires you to steal some sort of item- a document or artifact- from your enemies. So, no, thievery is not something ninja don't take part in."

For a couple of seconds, Sakura only stared up at the large man with a slightly gaping mouth. Then she breathed out, "Wow… I think that's the most you've ever talked, Kuzu."

With a sharp glare down at her, Kuzu corralled them towards an alley between two large buildings so they couldn't be heard. Then he told them to sit down, which all of them quickly did. In turn, the man picked up a crate that had been lying against the wall and sat down on it, pulling out a paper from inside of his sleeve… Did he always carry paper in there?

"Stealing is a delicate, important skill all shinobi need. And because I know that your Academy will not teach you this, I've decided to be gracious enough to teach it to you."

Sakura wanted to ask him if he'd planned for this to happen. But before she could even wonder if she should raise her arm to ask- because Kuzu sounded a lot like Iruka-Sensei again and he hated to be interrupted whenever he sounded like this-, he was speaking again.

"The first step to stealing is to find something you want." Upon saying this, the man showed them the piece of paper he'd produced from his sleeve, "It can be anything- a piece of paper, a trinket, even food. But you cannot steal anything if there's nothing to steal." After saying this, he rolled up the paper, although he continued to speak, "The second step is to identify the danger surrounding the target."

The more the man talked, the more Sakura grew sure of stealing really being a ninja art. Like, it made sense. Ninja were supposed to be silent killers. And they had enemies that they would need to gather intelligence on. So it would only make sense that, sometimes, ninja would have to steal documents from their enemies to be able to protect themselves.

Yeah… Stealing did sound like something ninja could do…

With the paper rolled up, the old man placed it down on the floor beside him, "An object far from its owner is much easier to take," Now he leaned down and grabbed it again, only nestle it between the crate and his leg, "than one right beside said owner."

Sakura hung off of every word. She was so busy learning from Kuzu- she just loved learning from this man, he was such a good teacher- that she didn't even try and see if either of her friends were paying attention. Usually, in school, she would have to smack Kiba so he paid attention and quietly remind Chouji that drawing should be left to after school instead of in the middle of class. But she was so intrigued by the man's lesson that she didn't think of either of her friends.

"Identifying the danger also means figuring out if the owner is the right sort of person you would like to catch you stealing. Even though your ultimate object is to steal without getting caught, there is always the possibility of being spotted. And the things an old lady whose purse you're stealing would do to you are completely different to what a person like me would do." To emphasize this point, he growled as he pointed as his chest.

Sakura found herself swallowing softly, deciding that, in fact, she would never want to get caught stealing from someone like Kuzu. Not even from Kuzu himself. Even though he liked them, she was sure he wouldn't take too kindly to them trying to steal from him.

… Did he even have anything they could steal? She'd never actually seen him carrying anything… The scroll would be the first thing she'd ever seen him carrying around.
"The third step to stealing is to plot out your steps and make sure there is an escape route in case you get spotted. You can't go straight up to the item to steal it; that'll draw the owner's attention." Kuzu now crossed his arms over his chest, "You've got to be smart and use deception and timing to get what you want."

That made sense. Going right up to what you wanted might be the quickest route… But Sakura was sure that only dumb people tried to take the quick route when they were doing something like stealing.

"And, finally, the last step is to go through with that plan, take what you want without getting caught, and getting away before the owner even finds out that they've been the victim of a crime."

The last bit made Sakura feel somewhat queasy. Because she didn't want to be a criminal… Wasn't it part of the ninja life to steal? If it was, why did Kuzu still call it a crime?

"Inuzuka!"

"Yeah!"

"You've got experience stealing."

Sakura blinked at the bluntness of the expression, then turned to look at Kiba with curiosity. She'd never heard about him stealing anything. But from the sly smile on his lips, Sakura could tell that he had, in fact, earned some experience in the ninja skill.

"You could say that, yeah." Kiba nodded slightly, only to ask, "Why'd ya wanna know?"

"Stand up." Kuzu commanded, which Kiba immediately did.

The man grabbed the piece of paper he had rolled up, pulled Kiba towards him, and stuck the paper inside of his jacket pocket. Once he'd done that, he pushed Kiba back to where he had previously been standing. "Walk that way." He instructed, pointing to his left, which would make Kiba walk in front of him and his friends.

"Why?"

"Just do it."

Kiba frowned softly, but took a couple of steps in that direction. Sakura and Chouji both followed him as he walked. But when he stopped, they turned to look at the old man. Kiba managed to get as far as a few feet away from the people inside of the alley, then looked back at Kuzu with narrowed eyes. "What was that for?"

"You kids saw how I put the paper inside of his jacket?"

Both Chouji and Sakura nodded. Sakura was wondering where the old man could be going with this; they all seen him doing that.

"Where is it now?"

"In the jacket?" Chouji mumbled softly.

"Are you sure? Why don't you look?" The old man sounded proud, as if he'd managed to- no way!

Sakura looked over at Kiba's pocket, trying to find the paper she'd seen sticking out from his pocket. But she couldn't find it.
"What?" Kiba asked, eyes growing wide as he patted at his pockets, "I didn't feel nothing! How'd you take it?"

When Sakura looked back at the old man, it was to find him pulling out the paper from the same sleeve he'd taken it from the first time.

"When you want to steal something, it's intelligent to wear loose clothes that allow you to conceal it without it being obvious on your person." The man sounded as if he was smirking, which Sakura was sure he must have been doing at the moment.

She couldn't believe it. She hadn't even seen him move!

"Cool…" Both she and Chouji marveled, all the while Kiba ran up to him with wide eyes, "How'd you do that so fast?"

"Years of honing this specific skill." The man grunted, returning the paper to Kiba's pocket. "Pinkie, Pork Chop, it's your turn to practice."

Both of them froze up at suddenly being called, but the man stood up before they could say anything.

"If you feel anything, Inuzuka, hit them as hard as you can. Every single time you get caught, you risk losing your life. One smack is mere child's play when compared to that." He told them all before he turned around and away from the alley, "While you practice, I'm going to scout out the weapons store."

And he was gone before any of them could ask just how they were supposed to begin trying to steal.

They all remained there in the alley, surrounded by silence and the cold walls. But soon Kiba clapped his hands loudly, snapping them out of their stupor, "Time to start training, kiddos!"

The old man was so cool! He'd always known that he was awesome, but he'd literally had no idea that his awesomeness could go so far!

And, best yet, Kuzu knew that Kiba was a good thief.

Even though he knew his parents weren't too proud of this particular skill he'd already improved, Kiba couldn't help but glow in pride. Kuzu had decided he would be the one to gauge Sakura and Chouji's skills. That meant he was awesome!

Both of his friends' first tries were disheartening. When he passed by both of them, he felt their clumsy hands inside of his pockets. So he'd smacked them each with as much force as he could muster- per Kuzu's instructions, of course.

"That may have left your hand red, but getting caught in the field could mean losing your hand!"

Their next couple of tries were much better. But he still felt them, so he still smacked them harshly.

"Kiba!" Sakura yelped after one particularly harsh slap, which only made Kiba snicker at her.

She looked frustrated and pissed off. Which was a hilarious look on her, she was kind of like an angry bunny rabbit.

"Come on! I know you can do better than this!" He tried to rally them both, "Listen, you've got to
use much less strength. You can't just stick your hands into my pocket. The objective isn't to steal my pocket, it's to steal what's inside!"

"I'm trying!" Sakura huffed, all the while Chouji sighed softly, "This is hard."

They continued trying, though. And with each smack of warning, their hands became lighter and less perceivable.

When the old man arrived a couple of minutes later, they'd both managed to steal at least once without Kiba feeling it.

"Are they ready?" He asked Kiba, which had him smiling. "Good. I've got intel. C'mere."

..~..~..

Hope you all liked this! Please review and tell me what you thought!
Chapter 16

Chouji was proud that he had eventually managed to take the paper from Kiba. But he still wasn’t all that sure if stealing truly was a ninja art he should be learning. No matter how good the old man’s logic may have been, there was a little voice in the back of his mind telling him that this wasn’t the kind of skill his parents would want him focusing on. This time the little voice took the tone his mother’s would have whenever she would find him with his clothes dirtied and Kiba and Sakura right beside him with an even bigger mess on their clothes after one of their more savory adventures.

“The clerk is blind in her left eye. So that’s the side that’s favorable- it’ll be harder for her to see you if you’re on that side. There’s a kid that works the door, though, and his eyesight is as good as a civilian’s could get. He’s the one you have to watch out for.” Kuzu told them as he pointed at a teenager that stood at the front of the small weapons store.

He was much bigger than Chouji and his friends, but much smaller when compared to Kuzu’s large frame. His hair was a dark blue, his eyes black and pretty angry looking, and his lips were set in a deep frown. He was looking inside of the store at the moment, but he would look into the street every time someone passed by it within a rather small distance. Chouji guessed it was because he was supposed to be the bodyguard or something… Like his dad would sometimes be when he was out on missions.

“The small weapons are outside on the racks. So kunai, shuriken, daggers, smoke bombs, and the like are there. The more complex and bigger weapons, though, are either locked up on the walls or hidden in the back.”

After he’d said this, the man slipped one kunai, a pack of shuriken, and a pack of smoke bombs from his sleeve. “These are what’re the easiest to grab for you; the shelves are at about your heights. But if you find something more to your liking, grab that.”

Chouji couldn’t believe that they were actually about to go into a store and steal from a half blind woman. And he couldn’t believe Kiba looked so eager to do such a thing.

“Make a plan, find what you want, and take it. I’m not going to step in if you get caught, so you have to be prepared to pay for your mistakes.” The man told them gruffly, only to slide the objects he’d pulled out back into his sleeve.

Had he stolen those things from the store? In that small amount of time?!

Chouji gaped at the man with eyes wide in shock. But Kuzu merely grunted and glared down at him before he barked out a short, “Now go.”

Kiba jumped into action immediately. He ran out of the alley and entered the shop with way too much energy, immediately calling the teenager’s attention. Kuzu groaned and shook his head softly, then looked down at the two kids that were still there.

Chouji really didn’t want to steal anything. It didn’t feel right. And, even though he wasn’t sure, he could guess that Sakura felt the same way.

“What’re you two still doing here?”
“That lady’s blind…” Sakura muttered, “It doesn’t feel right to steal from her… What if she’s a kind old lady that’s just trying to make an honest living? Aren’t we taking away her business by stealing from her? Won’t she go bankrupt and lose her home if she loses her business?!”

Kuzu stared at her with an unimpressed look inside of his oddly cool eyes, “That doesn’t matter. You were given a mission. You have to complete it.”

“But stealing is wrong, Kuzu. Especially if you’re stealing from someone that’s good.”

“Kid, other people don’t matter.” Kuzu grunted at Chouji as he crossed his arms over his chest, “You know who’s supposed to matter to you? Those you deem important. Not some stranger on the street that doesn’t even live in your Village.”

Chouji frowned at the harsh words, “But-”

“Just go and steal something, kid.”

Kuzu moved so that Chouji and Sakura both had a clear view of the shop Kiba was already browsing. But Chouji didn’t want to go… It didn’t feel right.

Noticing that neither of them would move on their own, Kuzu groaned and pushed them both harshly in the direction of the shop. “If you come back empty handed or get caught, I’m never going to come back to Konoha.”

Now that was terrifying to Chouji. Even more so than stealing from someone he didn’t know.

Quickly, both he and Sakura scurried towards the weapons shop. And when they crossed the doorway, the Akimichi did everything possible to avoid having to meet the teenage watcher’s eyes, completely sure that he would be able to read his intentions if he looked into his eyes.

The shop was a normal one, although a little bit small. There were two large displays that created three halls through which they could pass. And there was a counter in the very back of the shop, where there was a cash register. The woman Chouji assumed must have been the owner sat behind the counter, her right eye a similar black to the teenager’s own, although the left one was milky and glossy.

She was frowning softly, right eye watching Kiba attentively.

When he saw his friend, Chouji could understand why it was that the woman was looking at him. He was staring up at a large sword that was locked up behind a large display case at the very back of the shop. And his eyes were wide and his smile mischievous.

If he was going to try and steal it, he’d get caught immediately.

“Come on, Chouji.” Sakura muttered softly, and Chouji felt a hand tugging at his shirt.

Without much thought, he followed after her. And once he saw where she was taking him, he couldn’t help but be grateful.

Stealing this wouldn’t hurt the old woman that much. So they’d be able to keep somewhat clean consciences.

“You’re awesome, Sakura.”

“I know.”
Her heart pounded harshly against her chest as she and Chouji both stared at the packs of smoke bombs and individual kunai that were displayed side by side.

She couldn’t believe they were actually about to steal something… She couldn’t believe that the old man had actually put them up to doing such a thing!

But it was part of their ninja training. It was necessary, really. Especially if the Academy would never teach them how they were supposed to steal important documents from their enemies.

Kuzu had yet to teach them anything they would not use in the future. They had to trust and believe in him. They were all a pack, after all.

“Okay, I’m going to put my jacket on. We should be able to hide some of this inside of my pockets without it being obvious.” Sakura whispered to Chouji, eyes on the weapons in front of her. “I want you to stand right there to make sure that the guy can’t see me putting these things inside. And keep watch; tell me when he’s not looking so I can put these things inside.”

It was straightforward and somewhat rushed, but it was the only plan she could come up with at the moment. She didn’t have Kiba around; he was much too busy gawking at that sword; so she couldn’t count on him as a distraction. So she would just have to hope that Chouji would keep a good look out.

“A-alright.” She heard Chouji mutter.

Then she heard the soft squeaking of his feet against the floor, alerting her as to the fact that he turned his back on her to look at the watcher.

Immediately, she wanted to scold him. But if she did that, then she’d really draw attention to them. She had to hope that the teenager at the door just considered Chouji to be a harmless weirdo and didn’t consider him being watched by the Akimichi a strange thing.

As she waited for the all-clear from Chouji, Sakura’s wide eyes skimmed over the objects set before her. While she did this, she put on her jacket seeing how it was rather big on her because of it having been bought by a far away cousin that didn’t truly know her size. Because of the size, it had large pockets- perfect for fitting countless items inside.

The smoke bombs would be useful in case they were caught… They might be able to cover their escape if it was really necessary. But she really shouldn’t be thinking that, she couldn’t think about that- they couldn’t get caught. Kuzu had sounded as if he had meant business when he’d said he’d never come back if they were caught. So she shouldn’t be thinking about that. Failure was not an option on this mission.

The kunai might be a good choice, too. She needed actual ninja weapons now; she was tired of having to ask Chouji and Kiba for theirs whenever they were practicing by themselves. But her parents refused to buy her any yet, saying she was still much too young for such dangerous items.

It was pretty stupid, especially after they had heard from Iruka Sensei just how well she was doing in school with various kinds of fighting styles. But they were so overprotective they didn’t want to risk her hurting herself…

With a small sigh, Sakura reminded herself that she had a very important task at hand.

Lucky for them, the kunai’s tips were all covered by a pouch that ensured they couldn’t hurt anyone. Which would mean that the kunai wouldn’t cut through her jacket’s pockets once placed inside.
Aside from that, the gloves that were kept inside bins on the floor looked pretty interesting…

Leaning down to grab three pairs, which were black and looked just a tiny bit too big for her hands, Sakura couldn’t help but feel extremely anxious.

What was taking Chouji so long?

“Hey!”

The spike of panic that ran right through her forced her to freeze. Her blood ran cold and her whole body seemed to become suspended in time as her heart froze along with it.

That didn’t sound like a woman’s shout… It must have been the teenager at the door! Why? Was she not supposed to touch anything? She hadn’t done anything yet, she’d just grabbed a pair of gloves!

A couple of seconds of pure, terrifying, silence passed. Sakura closed her eyes, prepared for the scolding she would receive.

It never came.

“Now, Sakura.”

As soon as she heard Chouji’s hurried whisper, the girl opened her eyes and glanced at him in shock. But that was when she saw the teenager rushing over to the other side of the shop; where Kiba was.

She didn’t know just what in the world was happening. But she quickly moved her hands, pocketed the gloves, and grabbed the most smoke bombs and kunai she could. Once that was done, she shoved them into the jacket, kept her hands inside to make sure that the things didn’t move too much while she ran, and rushed past Chouji.

“Let’s go!” She whisper-shouted, heart pounding in her ears as she forced her legs to move as quickly as they could.

It was when she crossed through the threshold of the shop that she noticed just why it was that the teenager had shouted. But, even though she wanted to stop, she couldn’t. She was much too scared of being caught to stop. She just scurried out of the shop and into the alley, seeking safety.

Chouji and Sakura needed a diversion. Kiba knew that. They would be much too nervous; call too much attention to themselves with all of their staring and shaking. So he’d decided to be as obvious as possible about his own intentions as he’d run into the shop.

By running so eagerly into the shop, the Inuzuka knew he would call attention to himself. Just like he knew this was a great tactic because it would allow Sakura and Chouji to take what they wanted if they were smart enough to act.

He knew that his friends were smart. And he knew that they would be smart enough to know that he was the perfect distraction for them to act. So he would allow himself to be the sacrificial lamb to make sure that those two could get a stash for them.

(Talking to them about his plan had never crossed his mind. Because why would he need to talk to them when they already were the best team up around? They would know what he was planning as soon as they saw him leave. He was sure of it! They were pack- of course they would know what he was doing!)

He had walked around the shop for a while, waiting for his friends to act. As he had walked, he had
found a small scent he knew extremely well coming from the bottom of one of the shelves. So he discreetly looked down at the floor and caught a glint of metal.

The devious smirk that fought its way onto his lips was hard to keep suppressed. But he managed to keep how happy he was over what Kuzu had left for him to find (most probably, it wasn’t like the man to leave his scent all over something- he was usually much more discreet about everything).

It was weird, though… How had he even managed to get that item out of its display? Furthermore, had he left it out for Kiba to find? Or had he merely left it out to see which one of them was able to find it?

Shaking his head, Kiba forced his eyes away from the concealed weapon to begin to look over the paper bombs in front of him and waited for the perfect time to bend down and take what Kuzu had left behind.

He found his opening when Chouji and Sakura finally meandered the way into the shop.

When the teenager’s eyes looked down at his friends, Kiba took his chance. As fast as lightning, he snatched the knuckle dusters that had been left out of their proper place and lowered his arm back to his side to not seem suspicious.

After that, he’d begun to gawk at the display case that held a pretty nice looking sword within it. It was nice craftsmanship, although a bit too flashy and big for his tastes. He liked smaller, much more inconspicuous weapons at the moment. Maybe in the future he’d want to use such a sword. But right now he was in love with speed rather than strength in his fighting style.

He was still pretty small, unfortunately. But eventually he’d hit a growth spurt and would be able to wield battle axes and long swords to crush the skulls of his enemies! Just like his cousin told him their grandfather had once done.

The shop owner was glaring at him. The teenager’s eyes were on him. Everything was set up perfectly for his friends to take what they wanted.

Waiting patiently, Kiba tried to smell surety coming from Sakura. Once she had decided on something to steal, he would smell it. And he’d be able to spring his trap. But, until then, he’d have to wait.

Minutes of silence passed. He stared at the sword like a complete idiot. He made sure to look as obvious as possible to capture the attention of both the shopkeeper and the teenager. The woman glared at him, distrust and anger wafting off of her.

Once the scent of surety hit his nose, he acted. Like a novice, he began to thumb at the padlock on the corner of the display case. And that immediately caught the shop keeper’s and teenager’s attention.

“Hey!” The teenager shouted, immediately running up to him.

Kiba allowed his hand to get grabbed by the kid, eyes going wide as his mouth opened with faked surprise.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“N-nothing!”

“He was trying to steal that sword!” The owner limped out of her little corner and hobbled over to
them, glaring down at Kiba, “You little thief!”

“Hey, I didn’t take nothing!” He argued, which made them both scoff.

“Just because we stopped you.” The teenager scowled, shook him harshly, and pointed outside, “Get the hell out of here before I call the authorities.”

From the corner of his eyes, Kiba saw a shock of pink hair running out of the shop. A blur of green followed quickly after. And, admittedly, he found himself having to suppress his smirk yet again.

He knew his friends would know what to do.

“Alright, alright!” He huffed as he yanked his wrist out of the kid’s grip, “I’m leaving. I didn’t want to buy nothin’ here anyways. It’s all cheap and fake.”

“Why you little-”

The kick to his ass was unnecessary. The beginnings of a growl bubbled their way up to his mouth but he managed to make himself ignore the need to beat the shit out of the teenage snot. He couldn’t get in a fight. Not when his plan had worked so well.

He stormed out with a heavy scowl on his face, all the while the two shop workers grumbled and judged.

Once he was in the middle of the street, he allowed the smirk that had wanted to come out since he’d seen his friends running away to finally make its way onto his lips. And once he reached the alley that his pack was waiting in, he gave them all thumbs up.

“Good job, guys!”

Sakura huffed, hands stuffed into her jacket pockets. Chouji just stared at him, eyes wide.

Both of their hearts were pounding as if there was no tomorrow, clearly shaken by their first act of thievery.

Kiba was just proud to know that he’d been able to get them to actually steal something.

Maybe now they would be able to take more stuff back in Konoha… Like that delicious steak ma never bought because it cost too much… Ooh, and they could even steal some of that delicious steak teriyaki that jerk of a kiosk-owner sold for way too much money!

“What’re you smiling about?” Kuzu growled from behind his friends, standing up from his crate to loom over them all. “You were caught, Inuzuka.”

Smirking at him, Kiba thrust his hand into the large pocket of his jacket and pulled out the knuckle duster Kuzu had left for him. “Yeah. But I still got my loot.”

The man’s eyes narrowed, devoid of any emotions. But he reached down and grabbed the metallic weapon. Then he brought it up to his eyes so he could inspect it. After a couple of seconds of looking at it intently, the man grunted and tightened his grip.

With an astonishing glow of blue, the faint line design that ran around the weapon’s length amazed them all.

“Huh… Not bad, kid.” He grunted, only to then slide the weapon inside of his sleeve.
Kiba was not able to suppress the squawk of surprise that left him. “Hey, what’s up?! You left that for-”

“You’ll hurt yourself with this.” Kuzu offered as his only explanation as he cut the Inuzuka off, making the kid snarl and glare. With a much too smug glint in his eyes, the old man then looked down at Sakura and Chouji. “What’d you get?”

Sakura squeaked softly as she began to pull things out of her jacket, handing some over to both Kuzu and Chouji.

It was actually a lot.

Kiba found himself surprised by the vast amount of beautiful smoke bombs that she produced, brain beginning to work on all of the beautiful pranking opportunities that had just opened up.

Kunai and smoke bombs had been her loot. But she’d managed to grab a lot of said items. And, as if the numerous quantity of that had not been enough, she finished by waving three pairs of gloves in front of him and Chouji.

“They looked cool.” She offered as her only explanation.

Kiba grabbed a pair as Kuzu sifted over her loot. The Inuzuka sniffed the garment, took in the dark color of it, and shrugged. They looked nice, yeah, and they smelled good enough. But his nails were long and would undoubtedly get caught on the cloth. If he was to wear gloves, he’d need to cut off their tips.

“Hn… Not bad.” Kuzu moved the crate he had been sitting on over to them to spread the winnings over it, although his voice was mostly emotionless.

Kiba sneered in slight frustration at the lack of praise from the man. Their loot had been amazing! Sakura and Chouji had gotten managed to grab a lot! Why couldn’t he say that out loud? And why couldn’t he just say that he had left those knuckle dusters out there for them to find? His scent was all over the weapon!

“There are nine kunai in all- three for each of you if you wish to split it. And there are twelve smoke bombs- four for each.” Kuzu informed them, which made them all smile tentatively.

Okay, the old man may not have praised them, but they’d done good-

“Or you could just keep it all, Pinkie.”

Kiba’s smile fell as soon as he heard the old man say this.

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Sakura blinked in unrestrained confusion at the old man. Kiba frowned, though, clearly dismayed by what had been said. Chouji just looked down at the gloves in his hands, wondering if he should put them on. They were nice, after all. And they felt soft. Had Sakura picked them out for them to wear immediately?

“But… Chouji and I worked to get this…” He heard Sakura mumble softly, which made Kuzu grunt and shrug.

“Then split it between you two. It’s your loot- you can do whatever you want with it.”
Quite frankly, Chouji wasn’t surprised to hear this from the old man. But he was kind of hurt. Why would he expect they would leave Kiba out of their little bounty sharing? They were a pack; they didn’t just abandon each other… Right?

Chouji decided to pull the gloves on. And when he did so, he swore his hands twinkled softly. They were good gloves.

Once he’d finished marveling at part of their stolen loot, he looked up at the old man and found him looking up at the sky. His eyes were narrowed and looked harsher than usual.

“I’m going to leave now. Go back home.”

He left without much flare. He just walked off; he didn’t even turn around once to make sure that none of them were following him.

Chouji stared after him, actually confused. Not by his words, no, Kuzu was a man of few words usually. He was confused as to why he’d suddenly sounded so distant, and if he were distracted.

Kuzu was _never_ distracted. He didn’t seem capable of ever being caught off guard.

As soon as he was gone, Kiba stomped his feet and huffed.

“Dumb old jerk!” He hissed, glaring at the old man’s back. “Our plan went off without a hitch!”

Chouji was surprised by this. What in the world was Kiba talking about?

“What plan, Kiba?”

The Inuzuka huffed as he grabbed one of the kunai and pulled it out of its pouch, inspecting it. “I distracted the store owner and the stupid guy so you two could grab things without getting into any trouble. _And_ I managed to grab those knuckle dusters _he_ left out for us before I got caught.”

Was that why he had gone in with so much energy and being so obvious?

Chouji blinked at his friend in astonishment. But then he shook his head and smiled softly. Of course Kiba would have thought things through. He wouldn’t have run in without any kind of plan in his mind- as minute and unorganized as it may have been. He was the ring leader, after all. He wasn’t as smart as Shikamaru, but he did know how to lead.

“How about you tell us your plan next time, Kiba?” Sakura asked softly, “Chouji and I just went along because we were afraid Kuzu wouldn’t come back if we didn’t bring something back.”

Kiba huffed but nodded, “Still’d be nice for the jerk to not be such a jerk…”

“Don’t worry, Kiba. We’ll share.” Chouji assured him, turning to Sakura. “Right, Sakura?”

As soon as their eyes met, Sakura’s right fist tightened and she nodded, green eyes hard with determination, “Right! We’re pack, Kiba!”

“Besides, you know Kuzu’s always a big jerk. He’s quiet and doesn’t like speaking much. Remember, he really loves us. He just taught us how to steal!” Chouji reminded him, smiling broadly while Sakura nodded sagely beside him.

For a second, Kiba didn’t react. He continued to frown, apparently struck by the old man.

Soon enough, though, that frown melted into a pleased smile and he jumped between them both,
hugging them over their shoulders, “That’s right, we’re a pack! And we just completed our first successful heist, kiddos! We’ll hit it big, you’ll see.”

“Uh…” Chouji stalled for a moment, then sighed and hung his head, “I’m not sure I want to go on any more heists, Kiba.”

“Nonsense!” Kiba jumped towards the winnings with a broad smile, “We’ll be the bestest thieves all of Konoha has ever seen! Now, let’s get going; I’m hungry and we ain’t got no money.”

He pocketed his three kunai and four smoke bombs, then handed the same amount over to Chouji. Once that was over, he gave the remaining items to Sakura, and finally looked over to the floor.

“Yo, you left your bag on the floor.”

Sakura squealed suddenly as she ran over to the spot where he was pointing towards. And when she picked up the bag she had brought with her from her house, she smacked her forehead.

“We could have used this!”

“But you dropped it, Pinkie. So you made shit harder for yourself.”

“Ah, I’m such an idiot!”

“Not arguin’ there!”

“Kiba, shut up!”

“Nah, this is fun.”

Chouji smiled at his friend’s banter as they began to walk out of the alley, completely amused.

Okay, yeah, they’d just done something bad. But it had been for a good reason. And now they all had weapons- he knew Sakura had needed some for a while. But they wouldn’t be making a habit out of this. Sure, stealing may be a Shinobi skill they would need at some point, but Chouji refused to take anything that wasn’t his if it wasn’t necessary. Now he knew he could do it if he needed to; that didn’t mean he needed to.

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After she had beaten herself up over having forgotten about her perfectly useful bag, Sakura wound up thinking about the old man’s cold words about Kiba.

Well, they hadn’t really been directed at him. But they had excluded him. Which meant that the old man had thought Kiba had not earned his share of what had been taken… No, that couldn’t have been it. Maybe he was just trying to teach them about selfishness and how the ninja life was a lonely one?

Kuzu was so infuriatingly confusing!

… … Maybe the old man was trying to make him see that going off on his own hadn’t been right?

Konoha was known for its teamwork. Shinobi camaraderie was important to their Village; it was actually one of the reasons they were so successful. At least, that’s what Iruka-Sensei said. That their teams were strong because they worked together for the same cause; they weren’t selfish and tried to one-up one another.
If Kuzu knew this, then he would know how important it would be for them to work together. And while Kiba’s plan had worked, they hadn’t communicated it. It could have easily failed because they hadn’t coordinated anything before Kiba had run off.

Pursing her lips softly, Sakura jumped over one particularly large root in their route. Then she glanced forward and noticed how happily Kiba was running over the roots. He was rushing around on his hands and feet, an amazing feat she could never wish to mimic.

He looked happy.

If she brought back the issue of the old man, his bad mood would come back… She didn’t want that to happen.

Sighing softly, Sakura promised herself that she would eventually talk to him about what Kuzu might have meant.

“It’s about lunch time, what should we do?” Chouji asked from a couple of paces behind Sakura, making her turn her head slightly to see him.

Luckily for him, the breakfast bar he’d brought with him, along with the apple she’d brought along, had helped quell his hunger until they reached Konoha. But he must have been starving- the Akimichi actually ate a lot. Even though Sakura still had no idea just where in the world all that food went once it had been consumed by them. It was as if the Akimichi were bottomless pits!

“I’m feeling something meaty,” Kiba panted slightly as he stopped in his ceaseless bouncing to talk to them both. “But we’ve got to buy something… We can’t go to any of your houses…”

Sakura frowned softly at this reminder, but soon shrugged. “We can go to my house really quickly. If we’re able to get there before one, we can sneak in, get money, and get out. My mom usually goes out to buy groceries during the lunch rush.”

Both of her friends stared at her in questioning at this. But she just shrugged again, “My mom’s weird.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Kiba grunted, “Adults are all weird, after all.”

Chouji looked over at him, a thoughtful look on his face. “And she’s an adult… So it would only be natural if she was weird.”

Both boys looked at each other for a second, nodded in synchronization, then looked over at Sakura. Their eyes clearly asked ‘do you agree?’.

“I can’t argue with that.” She agreed, then motioned for them to follow her. “Let’s go! I’m hungry!”

And they began to run, their destination clear in mind.

When they reached Sakura’s house, she told both him and Chouji to be quiet. Their neighbors were nosy and if they heard any noise inside of her house, they’d tell her mom. And then she’d get all suspicious and they couldn’t have that!

Kiba shifted from one foot onto another as they waited outside of Sakura’s kitchen window, fingers grazing the smoke bombs they’d acquired.

He still couldn’t believe the old man had actually offered the option of him not getting anything… If it hadn’t been for him, neither of his friends would have gotten a single thing! He didn’t deserve the
harsh judgment!

Growling softly, the Inuzuka pulled his hand away from his pocket and looked over at Chouji.

The boy was twiddling his thumbs- hey, he’d put the gloves on! Huh… They looked kind of out of place on him, though… Kiba wasn’t sure why… Eh, most probably because none of them had ever worn gloves before.

They remained in silence for a couple more minutes. Then Sakura jumped out of her window with an Inuzuka-like grace that filled Kiba with nothing but pride and smiled at them both.

“Alright! I’ve got the cash! Let’s go!”

Kiba whooped and quickly began to run, eager to finally get some food into him.

Yeah, the old man’s words had left a bad taste in his mouth. But at least his friends were honorable enough to see his awesomeness.

Chapter End Notes

This'll sound like a random question, but what do y'all think about a story about second chances in which Kakuzu is the one to get a second try at life? I wrote a story like this a while ago, in which Hidan gets 'adopted' by Inoichi Yamanaka and basically turns his life around because of goodness and stuff.

I asked this over on Fanfic, but I wanted my readers on the archive to give some input too.

Kakuzu gets sent to kill the first Hokage and fails. But unlike in canon, Hashirama takes pity on him and decides to 'adopt' him and help him turn his life around after he's been forsaken by his Village. What do y'all think? Is it worth the write?
"Run! We got our stash!"

Chouji could not believe this is what his life had recently become. But, at the same time, he could not say he was totally surprised with the turn of events that had led him to a point in his life that had him running away from Kiba's favorite meat stand with bags of stolen food tucked safely under his arms.

"Catch those kids!"

He did not stop running, even when he heard whistling behind him. Even though the authority figures around him might try and stop him, he knew that Kiba and Sakura had his back and would create all necessary diversions so he could get away with their newest loot.

Admittedly, this would be their boldest move ever since they had first learned how to steal from Kuzu. All of the prior times they had practiced the skill of thievery, they'd actually tried to be as quiet and inconspicuous as possible so they would not get in trouble with their parents after they were found out.

But Kiba had wanted to get this meat. And Sakura had been all on board because the meat stand had a dessert stand right beside it, so her eyes had been filled with sweets rather than imminent danger. And Chouji had just followed his friends' plans because… Well… It might be a good idea to learn how to get away in broad day light when a score went wrong?

They weren't stupid. Even though they had no idea how to use elaborate genjutsu to be able to disguise themselves, they had still covered up their faces and worn dark clothing so they would not be easily identifiable. So, hopefully, they would not be getting in trouble for pulling off such a risky trick in broad daylight.

As he rushed down the crowded Konoha streets with his stash, Chouji was able to hear the sounds of struggling, things crashing, his friends whooping, and the dismayed groans of adults.

When they had reached the outskirts of the market, Chouji made a beeline straight for their hideout. Because Kiba had taken them there so many times before, he and Sakura were good at staying on the path he always took them down, so now he didn't need his best friend around to guide him through the motions.

By the time Kiba and Sakura caught up to him, Chouji had already reached their favorite tree. He had busied himself by pulling off the dark scarf that had hidden most of his face, except for his eyes, the gloves Sakura had swiped for them during their first lesson in this skill, and the long jacket Kiba had given him to make him seem even bulkier than he actually was.

"That was great, Pork Chop!" Kiba's fangs glinted in the dim sunlight that barely broke through the dense foliage of the surrounding trees. "I don't think I've ever seen you running so fast before!"

"Well, we hadn't done anything this risky before." Sakura offered, pulling off the straw hat she had used to obscure her extremely conspicuous hair. "And now that we've managed to get away with it, I don't really think we should try and do something like this again."

Kiba undid the knot that had held the scarf he had used to cover the bottom of his face, then shrugged and nodded softly, "Yeah, guess you're right. Next time we'll strike at night."

Chouji allowed a breathless and kind of annoyed chuckle to leave him as he grabbed the bags that...
held their loot. Then he handed one over to Kiba, who immediately thrust his hand inside to grab at the food. Sakura loomed over his shoulder, patiently waiting to be able to get her hands on a proper lunch before she sank her teeth into the bag of sweets.

The three fell into an easy silence after this, munching happily on their stolen meals. They spread out around the tree, getting into their most comfortable places so they could fully enjoy their time together.

Chouji did not feel particularly good about the fact that the food was delicious and he was thoroughly enjoying it. He knew that this was because he had stolen this food, rather than paid for it. But it was also because he didn't feel all *that* bad for having stolen it… It's like he didn't feel too bad and that made him feel extremely guilty for not feeling any worse or having tried any harder to stop his friends from coming up with this plan.

"No, but, seriously, I think we're going to be the best team around if we get put together when we become genin." Kiba muttered as he munched on his rice ball, a proud smile on his lips.

The comment was sudden, but nothing new. They'd had a conversation like this plenty of times before.

A couple of weeks ago, Iruka Sensei had explained to them how genin teams worked once they graduated. And the fact that they were teams composed of three that would stay together until they at least passed the Chunin Exams had filled Kiba's eyes with stars and given them all hopes of being able to work together as actual shinobi.

"Right now, Kiba, we're all taijutsu specialists." Sakura sighed, "We can't all be on the same team."

"Then you've got to start training in genjutsu or something, Pinkie." Kiba rolled his eyes, as if his words were the only truth they needed to follow. "Ain't that hard."

"If it's not that hard, why don't *you* specialize in genjutsu?" Sakura huffed in indignation, only to receive a snort from their friend.

"'Cause I'm an Inuzuka. *Duh.*"

Chouji smiled softly at his words as he picked up a piece of beef teriyaki. Before he ate it, though, he offered, "There's more to ninja life than just genjutsu or taijutsu, guys."

Kiba was currently hanging upside down from a tree branch while Sakura and Chouji sat on a large root that allowed them to see him without too much difficulty.

It was because of the angle they were in that Chouji was able to see how Kiba suddenly tensed and his eyes narrowed, worry striking him.

Chouji was about to ask what was wrong with him when he heard a branch snapping beneath someone's foot.

Immediately, Kiba jumped down to stand in front of him and Sakura, all the while both of them stood up and moved to back the Inuzuka up.

Their defensive reactions were for nothing, though. The warmly smiling face of Kiba's father appeared from the dense foliage around them, his two dogs padding behind him softly.

"The Forest of Death… I should have known this was where you kids spent your days."
Sakura liked Kiba's father. He was a very nice man that would sometimes bring them sweets if his job at the hospital didn't have him too busy. Although, recently, Daichi Inuzuka had not been as kind as she had grown accustomed to him being in the past few years. He had not brought them any sweets in a while and he didn't seek them out too much.

Even though Kiba would never admit it, Sakura knew that this was something that really bothered him.

"Forest of Death?" She asked quietly, head cocking to the side, "Is that this place's name?"

Daichi's left eye was soft and kind, just like the smile on his lips.

"Did Kiba never tell you kids about how dangerous this place is?" He asked, voice slightly exasperated, but mostly fond.

It was weird to suddenly hear him sounding like this… The last times Sakura had seen him, the man had been frowning in clear frustration. Of course, that had been when she'd seen him having to go down to the Academy to answer for Kiba's behavior, but… it was still weird to see him happy.

"Wasn't necessary. I know all the safe places. As long as they don't veer off from where I tell 'em to go, they'll be safe." Sakura heard Kiba murmur as he shrugged his shoulders, then her friend asked, "Dad, what're you doing here?"

Sokudo and Chikara walked up to her to sniff her and allow her to pet them. Then, once they had finished receiving the pets they wanted, they moved on to Chouji to repeat the process. As the large dogs did this, Daichi sat himself over on a large root in front of the one they had been using as their seats.

"Finally got a break at the hospital. I decided to hunt you down and find out where it is that you always disappear to."

The Inuzuka continued talking together, but Sakura was much too caught up wondering over Daichi's words. The Forest of Death? That didn't really sound like a place she should be frequenting…

"I overheard your conversation, by the way." Daichi suddenly sounded more energetic than before, and when Sakura looked at him, it was to see his eye positively twinkling. "And Chouji's right, there is more to being a ninja than just taijutsu or genjutsu. Have you kids forgotten about the important role medics' play?"

"W-well, no, Sir." Chouji mumbled softly as he picked at his bit of teriyaki. "But we haven't really been taught anything about medical ninjutsu in the Academy… Yet."

"Seriously?" Daichi asked, sounding legitimately surprised. "I already knew lots of stuff by the time I was your age... Well, do you kids want to learn a bit about it? I've got time off from the hospital."

Kiba, for once, didn't make the decision for his friends. Instead he glanced back at each of them, silently asking them if they wanted to.

Sakura didn't know about Chouji, but learning medical ninjutsu from an actual medic sounded like one of the best opportunities she would ever be given in her life. Especially from a medic that had as good a reputation in the field and in the hospital as Kiba's father.

It seemed Chouji shared the sentiment, because Kiba breathed out softly and nodded, "Sure, dad."
"Good! Now, pack up. I've got books over at the house; I can teach you there."

A trip to Kiba's house?

Were they really about to go to Kiba's house?

Sakura turned to look at Chouji, only to find that his eyes were just as wide as her own.

They were going to finally get to see Kiba's house!

Wasting no time, she packed up all of the snacks they had not eaten and pulled the strap of her bag over her head so she could carry the food without difficulty. With that finished, she smiled at Daichi, excited over finally being able to see Kiba's house.

The fact that all of their food was clearly too much for them to properly eat without chancing stomach aches was never mentioned. Daichi merely smiled at all of them as he waited for them to pack up the loot Sakura seriously hoped he wouldn't question as to where they had gotten it from.

They had never seen his house before. He'd never invited them over and Sakura's mother had always told her that she couldn't invite herself over to other's people's houses, no matter how much she really wanted to go.

When they entered his house, Kiba did his best to hide the wince he really wanted to release.

His friends were immediately met by all of the dogs they kept inside of the house. With wagging tails, dogs from all corners of the house ran up to the door to greet the visitors they'd wanted to come visit them for two years now.

There was a reason why Kiba never invited his friends over. And it wasn't just the dogs.

The Inuzuka Clan Compound wasn't like the Akimichi or Nara ones. It was a large stretch of forest, like the Nara, but the buildings were rugged and built for sturdiness, not beauty. And, unlike Sakura's clean, really nice house, the houses here weren't taken care of to be nice looking. They were taken care of to last and to keep roofs above the heads of the members of the Clan.

In his eyes, his home was embarrassing when compared to the ones his friends lived in. It was broken down, ugly, and filled with people that were just as embarrassing and humiliating as the rest of his home.

Scratch and bite marks were the norm, dog fights and shouting matches their entertainment, and things being in their place by being out of place was the decorations. There was no beauty to be found here. Just disorder and chaos of the worst kind.

"Just follow me, kids." Daichi called out among the barking and loud panting as he formed a path through the excited dogs, "The study's on the second floor."

Kiba closed the door quietly behind him as his friends animatedly pet the dogs that sought the most attention. He shuffled his feet as he waited for them to follow his father, suddenly feeling much too small.

He knew his friends liked him. He knew they considered him pack. But he was terrified of them judging him for the conditions he and his Clan lived in.

He'd never cared about this kind of thing before he'd gone to their houses. If he had brought them
here before he'd gotten to know them, he was sure that he would feel no kind of embarrassment now. But he hadn't. And he knew how clean and quiet their homes were. So he knew that they most probably wouldn't be the biggest fans of his house.

After his father and friends had gone to the second floor, Kiba still remained by the front door. He was frowning softly, a heavy feeling of despair nestled deep in his stomach. He didn't know if it was right to call it despair... But he was terrified. His stomach felt heavy, and he knew that it wasn't because of the stolen food.

"Pup! You comin' along?"

"In a minute!" He called back, then took a shaky breath and pushed away the snouts of dogs that wanted him to pet them. "G'way." He hissed out, only to receive a growl for his troubles.

He loved his dogs. But sometimes, he just wished he was a normal kid without ties to an insane Clan like the one he did belong to.

With a heavy sigh, the young boy dropped the bags of loot, hissed at his dogs that whoever took them would find an unholy amount of fleas on their fur, and trudged his way up to a place he certainly did not want to go to.

When he arrived at his father's study, it was to find the incredibly messy area covered in dogs, books, and two chairs utilized by his friends as his father dug through his favorite chest so he could find whatever boring book it was that he wanted to find.

"Now, medical ninjutsu is a very delicate yet completely important brand of jutsu that can be the difference between life and death in the field. A team of shinobi out on a mission without a member that knows medical jutsu is a team destined to death. Have I been understood?"

Both he and Sakura nodded eagerly at Daichi's question, but Kiba merely rolled his eyes.

Chouji couldn't understand why it was that his friend was acting so oddly. It really was nothing like him to have such little interest and energy in anything he did. Especially considering how it was his father that was giving them the lessons... Wasn't he supposed to be really happy over them finally being able to see more about his life?

... Maybe he hadn't wanted them to come here in the first place? Clan Compounds weren't really places were non-Clan affiliated people would hang out. The Akimichi didn't mind Kiba and Sakura going in there all of the time because they were his great friends. But just because his Clan didn't mind it didn't mean that the Inuzuka were the same.

For all it was worth, though, Chouji liked the Inuzuka Compound. There was a sense of freedom and happiness around here... But that may have just been what he assumed because of how happy all of the dogs that had greeted them earlier had seemed.

"The most important requirement for a medical ninja is to have a steady hand. Shaky hands in the middle of a procedure make any kind of procedure a thousand times more difficult. So the most important thing to first learn when beginning training for medical ninjutsu is how to maintain a steady hand under all circumstances. That is what you will start on today."

Kiba's father's smile was kind and assuring. His eye was bright and eager. And Chouji had never seen him looking as happy before as he did now.

Maybe he liked teaching people about his profession?
Sakura raised her hand and made Daichi point to her and ask, "Yes, Pinkie?"

She pulled a face at the nickname that Kiba had given her, but quickly asked what it was that she had in her mind, "How are we supposed to learn how to keep a steady hand? And should we even begin to learn? We're already pretty advanced enough in the Academy..."

Daichi smiled broadly at this, "And it's great that you three have such great grades. Don't worry, though. The more you know, the better equipped you are to be an active ninja." Then he looked down at the books he had pulled out of the chest and picked one in specific, opened it, and showed them a page that showed a drawing of a person performing different exercises. "You train by acquiring strength. First, push ups."

"What? Physical labor? Dad!"

"Drop and give me twenty, pups."

Kiba growled while Daichi smiled. Sakura merely shrugged at Chouji and found a place to set up and begin to do her push ups.

Chouji followed after her in very little time. Even though he had no idea just how in the world doing push ups would help them gain steady hands, he was sure that Daichi wouldn't have them doing such a thing without a reason. So he'd do as he was asked.

Kiba growled and hissed at his father for a couple of seconds before he huffed and joined them on the floor.

By the time they had finished with all of the exercises Kiba's father set out for them, Sakura felt as if her arms could fall off. She wasn't completely certain just how in the world her grip was supposed to become steadier if she couldn't even properly feel her hands. But Daichi smiled at all of them with a glint of pure pride in his eyes that she could not ignore. He had never looked like this before, and, quite frankly, it felt as if she'd just gone through the greatest, most grueling training regime and ended up on top.

"What you kids have just done aids in building strength. A strong hand goes- and pardon the pun- hand in hand with a steady one. Strength gives you the best base to keep a good balance in your work." As he said this, the man began to flip through the pages of the very book he'd opened before to show them the exercises. Now he opened it on a page with the drawing of a person writing something. "Now, onto the steady bit of your workout."

Once again, Sakura raised her hand. Once again, Daichi smiled at her and nodded for her to speak up. "This is really fun, really... But shouldn't we learn at least a little bit about medical ninjutsu before we actually start working on it? We could maybe not like it and then all of the training would have been for nothing..."

"Not at all. Just like taijutsu and genjutsu, knowledge in medical ninjutsu should be enforced in every ninja." It was odd... The man's smile stayed in place... But it didn't look as happy as it had before. "Knowing how the body works and how to aid in healing it, even in the most rudimentary of ways, can be the difference between life and death in the field without a proper medical ninja on your team."

He closed the book he had opened now and looked over the large piles of books and scrolls scattered all around, keen eye running over the spines at a speed that Sakura found breathtaking.

Daichi Inuzuka was one fast man.
"Here it is." He smiled broadly as he pulled out a scroll from the dredges of a pile—a area that Sakura would never even have thought she would find anything of importance. "But I won't tell you you're wrong in telling me you should know something before you start up on practicing this skill. Here's the same scroll I used to begin training back in my pre-genin days. How about you all look it over? Then, if you're really interested, you can come back to me and I can properly teach you everything you need to know."

He offered her the scroll and Sakura blinked down at it, her brain working rather hard to make a connection between his words, his actions, and what he wanted her to do. It took Kiba nudging her with his elbow for her to finally move. And then it took a couple of seconds more to grab the offered scroll and hold it in both her hands.

Medical training... It had always sounded pretty cool to her. Being able to save her teammates out in the rush of battle? What better way to keep her friends safe, right?

Iruka Sensei had told them that they would be able to become specialized in their skills later on in their years, if they so wished—after they were genin. At the moment they just had to focus on understanding the basics.

Wouldn't having a great medic like Kiba's father helping them learn, though, be one of the greatest opportunities a medical ninja-in training could ever get?

"Now, would you kids like something to eat before you leave?"

"Nope. We got that covered." Kiba suddenly piped in, moving quickly to leave his father's study. "Come on, guys. Let's split."

Sakura stared after her friend's retreating form, completely caught off guard by his hurried movements. Why was he acting so oddly today? Hadn't it been a good day?

The pink haired girl made a checklist of the good things that had happened in the day:

1. They were able to meet up with each other at the break of dawn, which had meant they would spend a lot more than just a couple of hours together.
2. Taijutsu training with Kiba in Chouji's backyard had meant that they had gotten to practice this skill and not fall behind on it.
4. Came up with a plan to steal meat and sweets from the vendor's market and it had gone off without a hitch—miraculously enough.
5. Finally, they had been given this little training session from Daichi and had finally been able to see Kiba's house.

Blinking at the mental list she had made, Sakura could honestly not see just why Kiba was in such a foul mood.

The Inuzuka Compound was exactly what she had pictured in her mind. And, quite frankly, she loved it. There were dogs everywhere, there didn't seem to be any rules to impress guests with faked politeness and grace, and it was nice to be in a place where it didn't seem to matter that she was a civilian. Daichi and the dogs still had treated her rather nicely.

Daichi sighed heavily, immediately catching Sakura's attention.

Suddenly, the man didn't look as happy as he once had. If anything, when she turned to look at him, he seemed as if he had just finished a long work day that had drained him of all energy.
"Are... Are you okay?" She asked softly, which earned her a sad, lopsided smile.

"Of course. It's... I'm just worrying over my son, is all." He admitted, standing up. He looked over at Chouji and ushered him to stand up, then at Sakura. And once they were standing up, he led them outside of his study. "Kiba is a good kid. But I just have no idea how to reach him... But it's nothing for you kids to worry about."

He suddenly stopped walking, a glossy look in his eyes. Sakura looked at him with wide eyes, then over at Chouji in a slight panic.

Was this normal? Were people supposed to suddenly freeze like this? Was he in trouble?

Chouji looked just as confused as she did.

"Listen up, honorary pups."

Sakura didn't even try to suppress the relieved sigh that left her when Daichi began to move again.

The man knelt down so he was mostly at eye-level with them, offering them both a sad smile before he continued to speak. "You kids are Kiba's greatest friends. I value that. And I value the loyalty you three show each other. Promise me one thing?" He didn't even wait for them to properly respond. "Don't ever forget that you're Kiba's pack. Can you do that for me?"

There was a pained look in his only visible eye that made Sakura's heart squeeze uncomfortably.

"But..."

"What's the hold up?"

Daichi squeezed them both on one shoulder, smiled, and stood up to face his son. "Nothing, pup." Now he pushed them both towards Kiba and the stairs, "Now on your way you go. Don't get in any trouble, you hear? And Kiba?"

Kiba looked at him with a cross between a glare and a sneer and Sakura had only ever seen her friend looking like this when around people he didn't like. But there was no way he didn't like his father. No way. None. Nope. Not possible.

"I won't tell your mother how you spent this day. But don't make a bad habit."

Sakura's heart dropped.

He knew!

Kiba's eyes widened and he tried to keep an unimpressed look on his face. He nodded, though, and turned around, signaling for his friends to follow.

Of course his father would know that the food they had with them was stolen. He was a great tracker, after all. And to reach the Forest of Death from the hospital, the shortest route would be to go through the market. If he had taken that route, then he must have heard about the three unknown hellions that had managed to steal supplies.

But he wouldn't tell his mother. And that saved him from a beating.

When they were finally far away from his home, Kiba was able to breathe easier.
His home was embarrassing. It was broken down, his father was weird, and his dogs were overwhelming. He knew that Sakura and Chouji wouldn't call him out on any of this because they were too nice... But... Hopefully, they wouldn't stop being his friends. And if they didn't, then he would just never let them go back to his house to make sure they didn't have a reason to stop being his friends.

They walked in silence. Sakura had opened up the scroll his father had given to her after they had crossed the threshold between Inuzuka land and the rest of Konoha. She'd immediately lost herself in learning, which had left Chouji and Kiba with nothing much to say. Chouji had then busied himself with listening to Sakura whenever she blurted out anything she found important about learning the basics.

He didn't understand why anyone would want to be a medic. It wasn't an exciting life. And it could mean being cooped up all day in a hospital. Even though his father loved that life, Kiba could never see himself actually ever holding someone's life in his life. Especially if it meant having to work in the worst hell hole in the world- the hospital.

"This is all extremely fascinating!" Even though he'd never admit it out loud, Kiba loved it whenever Sakura got like this.

Passion was something he knew how to value. And Sakura's passion burned like no other when she found something that was actually worth her time. Whenever she got like this about their taijutsu lessons, Kiba felt something within himself screaming at him to push and become even better. Because if Sakura could be so impassioned, he could too.

"It does look pretty cool." Chouji admitted, "But I'm not sure an Akimichi would be the right person for this kind of thing..."

"Nonsense, Chouji! If Kiba's father can be great, you can too! We'll all be great!"

Kiba wanted to tell her to slow her roll; what is this we you're talking about? Because he certainly would not be wasting his time on medical ninjutsu.

But he didn't say it. Because he knew that, just as Sakura could be greatly impassioned over certain things, that passion didn't necessarily last the test of time. She'd once felt strongly over history and becoming a logistics ninja. Then she wanted to be the greatest taijutsu specialist in the world. Then a genjutsu specialist. Now a medical ninja.

This was just another phase she was to go through before she actually found something that stuck.

"How about we go back to our hideout for target practice?" He offered after a couple more minutes of wandering around aimlessly while listening to Sakura and Chouji whispering to themselves. "We have to be perfect for the Old Man."

They agreed without needing much more convincing.

..~..~..

Hope you all enjoyed this! Please review and tell me what you thought of this chapter!
Chapter 18

Chouji liked Daichi Inuzuka. He was a kind man that always managed to make time for him, even after the longest, most difficult day in the hospital. No matter how bad his day had been, Daichi would make sure that he had time for Chouji during the weekend so that he could teach him about medical ninjutsu. At first Sakura had been with them too, but she had decided that she wanted to focus some more on another concentration if Chouji really was good enough that Daichi felt he could be one of the best.

"Ah! You're early, Chouji."

There was something off with the brightness in the man's eyes. But there was a bright smile on his lips, so Chouji didn't question that too much. Adults tended to overcomplicate their lives- Daichi was most probably perfectly fine, albeit slightly tired.

"Mom asked me to bring you guys some food." He explained as he raised the large bag filled with all kinds of meats and delicacies. "And dad told me to tell you 'thank you for everything'."

Daichi's smile broadened at the sight of the paper bag and he swooped down to take it from Chouji's hands. "Ah, this is the good stuff! You parents sure know how to bribe a vulnerable Inuzuka!"

Chouji wasn't completely sure just what he meant by that but he certainly didn't question it. Daichi tended to be as weird as Kiba sometimes, so he knew better than to question a lot of the stuff he said. Instead of asking or wondering, the Akimichi began to make his way towards the man's office so they could continue on their lessons.

"I'll be up there in a moment, kay, kid?"

"Yes, sir!"

All of the dogs that had been laying in wait until Daichi disappeared chose to appear just as Chouji began to make his way up the home's stairs. They struck as a single unit, flying from their various hiding places to pounce on the young boy with their tails wagging in pure excitement.

Already completely accustomed to the dogs' behavior, Chouji allowed himself to be taken to the ground with chuckles of enjoyment bubbling from his lips. He did his best to pet as many dogs as he could, but he only had two hands and there were more than six eager dogs barking at him for his attention. Noses bumped at his body, tongues licked up his hands, arms, and face, and a couple of paws swiped at him in search of his attention.

Inuzuka dogs, in his eyes, were the cutest companions to have and made the best non-human friends, too. He could totally understand why it was that the Inuzuka took such good care of them and insisted on making them their lifelong partners. And, honestly, he couldn't wait for Kiba to finally get his own dog. That way, they would always have an Inuzuka dog with them, not just whenever they visited their friend's home.

"Stop you're shouting!"

The dogs stopped their constant whining, yipping, and barking as soon as they heard the young boy's growl. But they didn't stop squirming or looking to capture Chouji's affections.

Craning his neck, the Akimichi did his best to see his best friend through the sea of fur and slobber. Standing right side up, even though he looked upside down to the boy on the floor, Kiba Inuzuka
looked down at the floor with a small frown on his lips. He looked as if he had just woken up with his hair even wilder than usual and his eyes somewhat puffy.

"Hi, Kiba."

"Heya, Chouji." Kiba waved lazily, then cocked his head to the side slightly. "Is the floor comfortable?"

"A bit." The Akimichi shrugged, which managed to make Kiba chuckle softly before he headed over and offered his hand.

Chouji took it without any hesitation and jumped up when Kiba pulled him up. The dogs whined at losing their captive, but a quick sneer from Kiba managed to make them shut up soon enough.

"C'mon... I swear, we can't leave either of you alone unless we want ya gettin' jumped..." Kiba huffed in slight exasperation, but Chouji didn't try and argue against him. It was the truth. Whenever he or Sakura were left alone in their friend's house, they would get ambushed by the dogs so they could be pet. Neither of them minded it, but the Inuzuka were never happy to see them on the bottom of a dog pile.

Kiba led him into the study where they had learned their first bits of medical ninjutsu. It was just as unkempt and rowdy as the first time Chouji had stepped inside, but he was used to the mess and could navigate it almost as well as Daichi could by now.

Both boys made themselves comfortable in whatever perches they could find and Chouji opened up the book Daichi had last left him with while Kiba yawned sleepily and began to allow sleep to take him yet again.

Daichi walked in to find Chouji reading and Kiba snoring softly about ten minutes after they entered. Chouji was able to see the man halt and look at his son, a fond smile appearing on his lips as his eye softened at the sight.

Daichi Inuzuka loved his son. Chouji knew this because it was so easy to see. Sometimes, though, it felt like Kiba wasn't aware of just how much his father actually cared about him.

"Alright. Are you ready for today, Chouji?"

"Yes sir!"

He loved learning from this man. It was a shame Sakura had stopped coming to their lessons, but he could understand that she didn't really need to learn medical ninjutsu if he was busying himself with it.

Daichi smiled back at him with as much energy as Chouji felt. He was ready to learn as much as Daichi was willing to teach him!

"Rainy days suck."

Sakura hummed in agreement, even though her eyes never left the window she was staring out of.

Lunch was supposed to be the time of the school day in which they were allowed to run around like the true children they were. It was the only time of day in which they were allowed to stretch their legs outside of the classroom and they didn't really have to worry too much about pissing off a teacher because of how loudly they were laughing.
Unfortunately, today's lunch would be spent stuck inside the classroom: the worst place to spend their lunch inside.

"Kiba, Sakura, Naruto, please. Pay attention. This will be coming on the test."

Sakura looked back at Iruka Sensei and took note of the kind of sad look on his face. She smiled softly back at him, which made him nod before he continued with his explanation of Konoha's great victory in the Second Shinobi World War.

She already knew most of this, though, so she looked back outside of the window and continued to curse the dark gray sky that torture them with rain. Kiba continued to glare at the sky and Sakura was pretty sure that he hadn't bothered with looking at their teacher when they had been called. Naruto was looking at the board with a completely annoyed look on his face.

Today had started off so well! But then the rain had come and sucked all the life outside of their class and Sakura couldn't help but hate the rain.

Not only would she be missing out on a fun lunch, but they had already missed out on sparring matches during their physical education period because of all the rain. Instead of doing anything fun, Iruka Sensei had sat them down to teach them about chakra and how it coursed through your body and you were able to manipulate it with enough concentration... Again.

Normally, she didn't mind learning. Usually, she was all up for learning from their teacher. But the Old Man had already beat knowledge about chakra into them a couple of weeks ago and had promised to teach them how to start manipulating it next time he came back. It was with the condition that they have food and drinks prepared for him for the whole time he would stay in Konoha, but the three of them already had a set allowance to spend on Kuzu put to the side, so that really wasn't anything they had to actually worry about.

"If I could, I'd punch the sky to make it stop raining." Sakura whispered to her best friend, which made Kiba huff and nod in agreement, even as his eyes continued concentrated on the sky.

"The sky deserves to get it's ass kicked."

Sakura breathed out and looked back at the board, jotted down a couple of dates she knew were important, and began to wonder just what in the world they would do if they weren't able to leave the academy for their lunch.

If she hated being locked up inside a classroom during this hour, Kiba loathed it. He was kind of like a caged animal whenever he was inside of a closed space during a normal day. But when he was stuck inside a classroom during lunch... Well, last time this had happened, he'd gotten into a fight with Naruto over who would end up being the Hokage one day.

She'd have to come up with something to save Iruka Sensei the headache of having to deal with an irritated and hyperactive Kiba Inuzuka...

Well... She guessed that it couldn't hurt to run through some taijutsu poses taught to them by the Old Man in the corner of the classroom... That might keep Kiba busy...

Kiba frowned in concentration as tried to keep his shoulders relaxed, even as he tried to repeat Kuzu's motions for the awkward attack.

Inuzuka were taught to fight on all fours. But Kuzu said that it would be for the best for him to know more than just one fighting stance if he wanted to survive out in the real world, so he had been
teaching all three of them how to properly fight.

The poses were awkward for him, but Kiba knew that they were powerful from just having seen the sheer strength Kuzu carried in his stance when he was teaching them the steps.

"Okay..." Sakura breathed out as she tried to keep her voice from quivering, just as concentrated on proper stance as he was. "Now... Punch!"

All three children struck out in a synchronized tempo, punching at the air before them. Then, repeating Kuzu's steps, they threw their left arm out, only to follow with a vicious front kick at the air before them.

Just like all the other times before, when it was time for them to follow the front kick with a roundhouse with their left leg, they all fell short.

Kiba growled in frustration as he threw himself at the floor, all the while Sakura and Chouji huffed and remained a bit more composed.

"This is impossible!"

"We just have to keep training, Kiba. Don't worry, we'll get it eventually." Chouji tried to encourage him, but Kiba frowned and stuck his tongue out at him.

Inuzuka fought on all fours. They didn't do this two-legged stuff. It was awkward and weird. It didn't matter how powerful their strikes could be in this stance; it wasn't a worthwhile trade off in his eyes.

"Children?"

Kiba looked away from Chouji to find their teacher looking at them with an unreadable expression on his face. Even though he was pretty good at keeping his face devoid of emotions, Kiba could smell the worry and confusion wafting off of him.

"Whadya want, dude?"

Iruka Sensei frowned at him for a second before clearing his throat. "Where did you three learn that technique?"

Kiba frowned at the question and shrugged, "Saw it in a book."

Distrust now tainted the man's scent but Kiba didn't care. Even though Iruka Sensei didn't trust them, they weren't about to tell him anything that dealt with the Old Man. They had learned their lesson years ago and they had sworn on a promise. And once you made a promise, you couldn't just break it. That's not how the world worked.

"Kiba..." He warned, making the Inuzuka scoff and roll his eyes.

"Really, Iruka Sensei." Sakura insisted and Kiba just let her convince their teacher.

He didn't really trust Kiba. And, really, the Inuzuka couldn't blame the guy for it. He was a trouble maker and a bit of a loose cannon. Sakura, though, was mostly straight laced and barely ever lied... Or, at least, that's what most people thought. She had become a rather proficient liar in the past years they had been friends and her enjoyment of breaking some rules had only grown.

Apparently, Sakura had always been like Kiba in her blatant disregard for rules. She had just acted like a goody two-shoes most of her life because she hadn't had anybody around her to teach her
another way. With Kiba in her corner, though, she had shown off some pretty wicked true colors that made him truly appreciate her.

If anything, Chouji was the only straight laced one among them. But, even then, he was learning how to lie as well.

Man... Was he a bad influence?

... *Nah. He was a great influence!*

"Chouji and I can't really copy the Inuzuka fighting style. It's really hard. So we found this book in the library and learned some of the basic attacks." Sakura insisted, sounding so honest that Iruka's scent began to lose its distrusting edge. "We can't get out of the classroom today, so we thought it'd be a good time to practice... We aren't bothering anyone, are we?"

Iruka Sensei shook his head, "Not really. I was just wondering where you three learned that style from... Its a bit... *Harsher* than I would think appropriate for kids."

"Harsher?" Chouji questioned, "What do you mean, Sensei?"

The man scratched the back of his head, then pulled up a chair and sat down in front of them.

Kiba sat up as his own friends moved closer so they could listen to their teacher.

"Well, the steps you're following ask for a lot of strength to be thrown into your attacks. It's the kind of technique I'd expect to see in a ninja that was raised outside of Konoha, honestly... Most of our books teach speed rather than strength."

*Oh...* Well, the Old Man *did* seem much more inclined to strength rather than speed. He was strong and powerful; there was no need for him to be completely fast if he could defend himself.

"Oh... Well..." Sakura faltered and Kiba shrugged and spoke up for her.

"It looked cool, dude. Are you going to scold us for learning?"

"Not at all." Iruka Sensei sighed, "I just want to ask you to look at some other stances. Clearly this one's giving you some trouble. How about you take a look at some other sequences?"

They all blinked at him.

Kiba had honestly expected a scolding.

Huh... Unexpected.

"Where should we start, Iruka Sensei?"

The man smiled and Kiba felt his stomach drop.

They were all sent home with extra homework in the form of an attack sequence that focused more on speed rather than strength.

Kiba blamed the Old Man.

"Hmmm... These are rather... *Interesting* reports, Iruka."
The man nodded slowly at the Hokage's observation. "But you aren't surprised."

It wasn't a question and they both knew it.

"Not at all. With the way these three have been progressing, I am not surprised at all to find out that they are already learning such advanced fighting styles. They are the resident taijutsu specialists in the Academy, aren't they?"

Once again, the Chunin nodded. "They've beaten almost everybody their own age. Ever since the Uchiha scandal, Sasuke hasn't been himself. So Kiba's only real competition now are his friends."

The Hokage leaned back as he muttered, "And how goes Sasuke's own progress?"

"It's slow... But at least he's talking to Hinata again."

"That's good... I cannot imagine how hard it must be for him to have lost his father in the Uchiha uprising. But the clan is rebuilding and, even though it will be a slow going process, I am sure that he will eventually recover from his father's actions."

Iruka frowned but couldn't help but agree with the older man. The Uchiha scandal had hit Konoha hard, but at least they had the right tools to try and rebuild and regain Konoha's trust. It was a long road ahead of them, but with Mikoto's strong leadership, Iruka strongly believed that they would eventually recover.

"Well... There is no way to get around it- these three will have to be a genin team." "Are you sure, Lord Third? Isn't it too early to be deciding such a thing?" Iruka questioned, then frowned, "And wouldn't it be for the best for them to be spread around rather than to be grouped up on the same team? With their current knowledge, they are almost a whole year ahead of the rest of their classmates. It would only make sense for them to be placed in different teams."

"On a normal occasion, it would." The Hokage relented, but explained, "But young Kiba has already chosen his pack. Normally, Inuzuka are put on a genin team that become their pack. But Kiba has chosen to go against tradition and has already created a pack. If we were to separate them once they graduate, it would just cause headaches all around. No, even though it would be good to separate them because of how much they know, it would just cause trouble. Kiba wouldn't interact well with others if he was separated from his pack."

"I see..." Iruka nodded, then asked, "Well... At least we've got a genin team already decided with a couple of years to spare."

The Hokage nodded but the pensive frown remained on his lips.

"These children... They are not being taught by their parents. Neither the Akimichi nor the Inuzuka teach such skills to children so young. And the Haruno family is civilian and completely unknowledgeable of this kind of topic. Where are these kids getting so much instruction?"

"They told me that they are learning from books they find."

"I am sure that you did not believe them?"

"Of course not. No child can learn that well from a book. These kids have raw talent, of course, but this is almost unnatural..." Iruka breathed out. "They are learning from someone and they don't want anyone to know who that is."
"Truly, a rather intriguing mystery...

Iruka agreed wholeheartedly.

Just who was teaching these three so much that they were leagues beyond their classmates?

After weeks of practice, they were able to actually finish Kuzu's fighting sequence without messing up. And, from the way that the Old Man nodded without barking at them to start from the beginning, Chouji could tell that they had finally done it right.

"It is suffice to say that you three did not trip over your own feet this time around."

That was a compliment and they all knew it. So Sakura didn't waste a single second in beginning to cheer, which Chouji followed up almost naturally. Kiba smirked over at the Old Man and nodded with pride.

They had finally done it!

"Now, why don't you show me that sequence the weak teacher wanted you to learn?"

"But we already know it's stupid!" Kiba immediately argued, which made Kuzu roll his eyes and glare at him without saying a single thing.

With a loud groan, Kiba moved his body so he stood in the beginning stance of the sequence Iruka Sensei had asked them to learn. Sakura and he followed shortly after, and they went through the motions without a single hiccup.

This sequence was easier to learn and repeat. But it was much faster and focused on agility rather than raw strength. Chouji felt weird doing it, but he didn't mind it too much. Although he did prefer Kuzu's much more.

Once they were finished, Kuzu scoffed in disdain and shook his head. "If you were to continue this teacher's train of thought, you'd never get anywhere in your training. No, I'll teach you something important today so that you don't fall too far behind on the schedule you're supposed to be on." He clicked his tongue for a moment, then called, "Pork Chop, what have you learn about medical ninjutsu?"

"The basics." Chouji smiled proudly as he recounted what he had learned from Daichi. "I can now heal small scrapes and cuts! And I'm supposed to be learning how to mend obstructed chakra pathways in a month or so."

"Hnn... Fine."

Kuzu always seemed annoyed whenever he was teaching them stuff. Chouji wasn't completely sure why, but he was following a schedule that they had never even seen. He hated whenever they weren't able to follow it and he was annoyed whenever someone else tried to teach them something he considered futile or outright useless.

"We'll be going on a small expedition today. It's nowhere too fascinating, just a clearing I found with soft ground for you three to start learning chakra natures."

Chouji wasn't completely sure why they needed to travel to learn even more about something the Old Man had told them about countless times, but he didn't argue. He just followed Kuzu and his friends outside of the Village yet again.
After a brief break for lunch, Kuzu took them to a rather rocky area just outside of the Village's walls. There he showed them how he was able to make a giant wall sprout up from the ground without even breaking a sweat.

She would have been lying if she tried to say she wasn't amazed by seeing such a thing.

After he explained to them just how it was that he was able to complete such a feat- "Force your chakra into the ground and make it do what you want it to do. This soil is soft so it should be easier to manipulate."- he stood off to the side and watched them struggle to create even the tiniest of mounds.

Sakura managed to make the biggest mound, even though it wasn't any taller than her ankle's height, but it collapsed on her in only a handful of seconds. Chouji's inch high mound actually remained standing sturdy, though, so that was something... Kiba's mound was a bit taller than Chouji's, but shorter than her's, and it collapsed on him before his hand had even left the ground.

They were all left frustrated and annoyed that they couldn't make anything even nearly as impressive as Kuzu's own huge wall.

"Concentration. You three aren't concentrating enough. Kiba, more patience. Sakura, more chakra control. Chouji, more chakra." Kuzu barked at them, "Try again!"

So they continued training throughout the day, simply practicing in making a solid mound of raised ground with Kuzu shouting corrections and critiques at them every time they failed to astonish him.

By the time they had finished, Sakura's unimpressive mound was stable, but Chouji's was solid and was able to stay standing even after Kuzu kicked at it. Her's was not able to stand up to the challenge. And Kiba's own mound fell beneath the man's weight; he hadn't even needed to kick it to make it fall.

"Tomorrow you'll be starting on tree walking." Kuzu grunted as he crossed his arms over his chest.

Sakura was panting softly as sweat trickled down her face. Her whole body felt as if it weighed a ton and, from the way Chouji's shoulders were drooping and Kiba wasn't arguing with Kuzu, she could tell that both her friends were just as exhausted.

"Chakra control is necessary to utilizing elemental ninjutsu. So tomorrow you're going to learn how to walk on trees with chakra and then you'll come back here and show me if you've improved at all."

Kuzu's teaching style was harsh and he barely ever allowed them time to rest.

Sakura felt like she was being treated like an actual ninja, rather than just a child.

"Now, come on. You kids promised me dinner."

She was too tired to smile at that.

Eating was nearly impossible with the way his limbs wanted to collapse on him. So, instead of eating, Kiba just closed his eyes and rested against the old man's side as he ate.

"Get off of me."

The man was ignored.
"Not you too, Pinkie."

Kiba cracked one eye open to see Sakura leaning on the other man's side, her own eyes closed as well. And, finally, when the Old Man was about to huff at both of them to leave, Chouji rested his back against Kuzu's own.

"Let us sleep, old man..." Kiba grumbled at him, only to earn a heated glare.

He didn't care though. He was too tired to grouch at the Old Man about how much of a slave driver he was. So he closed his eyes, yawned, and made him a bit more comfortable against the old man's side.

He actually managed to fall asleep.

With three annoying pests sleeping against him, Kakuzu couldn't help but wonder just how this had become his life and why he had not killed them on the very day they had asked him for a war story.

The only good thing about them all having fallen asleep on him was that he could eat without having to worry about them looking at his face and screaming about monsters and ugly creatures. And he couldn't complain over the silence that appeared when they were actually sleeping. On a normal day, they would be asking him for more stories while he ate.

... Maybe then having fallen asleep wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to him.

Still, once he had finished eating and he put his mask back in place, he was left with a rather large dilemma: he had three sleeping children resting on him and he couldn't leave them out in the middle of the Forest of Death.

For a couple of seconds, he wondered if it truly would be a bad idea to leave them here. And he received his answer in different scenarios conjured by his imagination where they were eaten, stung, poisoned, or faced a combination of all three by the dangerous animals that lived within this death trap.

No, he could not leave them here. But he also couldn't take them back to his current quarters- they would never meet Hidan.

The only options he was left with were two: either he stayed with them until they woke up or he risked dropping them all off in their homes.

He wasn't keen on staying in this death trap for too long, so it wasn't hard to choose between those two.

With a heavy sigh, Kakuzu gathered up all three children, packed up the food they hadn't touched, and began to travel under the cover of night into Konoha.

On his way there, he decided that his safest bet was to leave them all in one house. He wasn't about to make three different trips, so he would save time by just leaving them in the same place. And he chose to leave them in the girl's home, seeing how the boys both lived inside of Clan Compounds and that would be too much hard work.

Sneaking into the Haruno home wasn't too difficult. They didn't have any traps set up in the upper level of the house, so he was able to sneak into the girl's room without any difficulty.

Once inside, he placed the girl on the bed.
After he did that, he frowned.

He couldn't leave the boys on the floor... Right? No, it was too cold.

What was he thinking, of course he could do that. They were just brats!

Frowning at his own thoughts, Kakuzu grabbed the covers on the girl's bed and threw them on the floor. Then he put both boys on top of the covers and snuck into the lower levels of the house to leave the food inside of the refrigerator.

Neither of her parents were home.

Konoha idiots... Did they not even worry where their daughter was at this hour? It wasn't too late-just seven pm- but she wasn't even a genin yet! Konoha seriously had a parenting problem.

When he returned to the girl's bedroom, he found the three children still slumbering peacefully where he had left them. The Inuzuka had managed to throw all of his limbs out and taken up most of the sheets' space, all the while the Akimichi had curled into a small ball on his right side. The civilian had somehow found one of her plush toys and hugged it in her sleep, a small smile now on her face.

(If he was a weaker man, Kakuzu would dare call these mongrels cute. But seeing how he wasn't a weaker man, he merely scoffed at them and looked for a pen and paper to leave them a reminder of their schedule for the following day.)

..~..~..

Hope you all liked this chapter! Please review and tell me what you thought!
Chapter 19

Hana opened her front door, only to find the father of one of her dumb brother's lame friends standing on their porch.

"Hello, Hana." Chouza Akimichi smiled at her in that weird Akimichi way, even as she quirked an eyebrow in unamused disinterest at him. "Is Chouji in here by any chance?"

She had to stop herself from laughing at that.

"Dad's working a double shift. Kiba never brings anyone home if he's not here."

Her brother was stupid and insufferable. His friends had adopted those unfortunate characteristics and she was more than happy that they were not here... Even though, she could admit, it was odd that Chouji hadn't returned to his house yet. It was already pretty late.

Chouza's face lost the dumb smile and adopted a worried frown.

"It's nine thirty... Aren't you worried that your little brother hasn't returned?"

Hana sighed heavily, rolled her eyes, shifted so that she was resting her weight on her right leg, and shook her head. "Of course not. The little idiot never gets back here early if ma doesn't tell him he has to."

One of her dogs barked at her about how the other two were ganging up on him and she promptly ignored the three idiots and gave Chouza an annoyed look. Either he left or she did; but she wasn't standing at her door for any longer if he didn't have anything important to say.

"Would you by any chance know where-"

"Check the Haruno kid's house. Or the taverns. And don't come back here looking for any of them; Kiba doesn't like bringing people here."

She hated that too. That's why she chose to instead go to her friends' house rather than have them over. Her house was embarrassing, her family was insufferable, and her Clan was insane.

"Alright, well, thank-"

She had slammed the door before the Akimichi could finish saying anything.

With a heavy sigh, Hana returned to her room to continue reading the book on medical theory and dreaming about the day she could finally move out of this stupid house and make a life for herself without her family dragging her down.

Chouza wound up standing in front of Tsume's door for a couple of seconds, blinking in shock.

Hana was supposed to be Kiba's sister. But she hadn't seemed even marginally concerned with his well being... Or his friends' well being.

It wasn't too late at night, but Chouji, Sakura, and Kiba were still very much children that needed to be looked after. And even though tomorrow was Saturday, that certainly did not mean that they should have been running around Konoha without any kind of supervision so late in the day.
He had always known that the Inuzuka were rougher around the edges than most clans, but he had also believed that they valued family- or, as Chouji insisted on calling it, 'pack'.

"Well... She is a teenager..."

The man was more than aware that this particular age Hana was in was difficult and confusing, so he wasn't too taken aback by her nonchalance. But he was still bothered by it.

Still, the man had done as instructed and made his way towards the civilian area of Konoha to hunt down the Haruno home. Once he had found it, he had knocked softly on the door and patiently waited for someone to answer him.

His son's rather developed chakra signature was emanating from the top floor of the house, so he knew that he had found the kids' refuge. But he didn't feel any activity going on inside... As if the kids were sleeping, actually.

The rather undeveloped chakra signature of one of Sakura's parents stirred at hearing him knock and, after a minute or so of waiting, Chouza found the drowsy face of who he assumed to be Sakura's father looking at him.

"Yes?" The man sounded groggy and slightly lethargic, undoubtedly after having been awoken.

"Sorry to be a bother, Mebuki-san, but I'm Chouza Akimichi- Chouji's father. It seems that my son is inside your house and I was wondering if I could go up to fetch him?"

Upon hearing his name, all of the grogginess on the man's face vanished. His eyes widened and he took a step back, seemingly frightened.

Chouza smiled softly, rather accustomed to this reaction from civilians that were not accustomed to being around Clan Heads.

"Chouji? I know that Sakura's here, asleep, but I highly... Well, you are the shinobi here." The man murmured softly to himself, then shrugged. "Alright, just this way, Lord Akimichi."

This was the first time they met, Chouza mused as he followed after the pink haired man. Even though he had seen Sakura's parents during different school functions, he had never actually spoken to them. He usually always spent those functions around his own friends, Inoichi and Shikaku, even though Chouji's best friends were Kiba and Sakura... Hmm... Maybe it was about time he made an effort and reached out to other parents...

When they reached Sakura's room, the civilian opened the door a crack and pointed at his daughter's sleeping form on her bed. "See, it's just her."

Chouza smiled softly and pushed the door open even further. Because of this, the light in the hallway illuminated more of the girl's bedroom, and two lumps on the floor became visible.

"It seems the children decided on an impromptu sleepover."

Chouji would be getting punished for not having warned his parents about such an activity and they would be speaking seriously about asking for permission rather than forgiveness, but for now, Chouza would not wake the child up.

"I'll take the Inuzuka and my own kid off your hands."

Sakura's father was much too stunned by finding two clan kids in his daughter's room to properly
answer.

 Civilians were really rather amusing sometimes.

Mebuki's worst fears had finally come to life: her daughter's friendship with two Clan kids was much too developed to break.

Now she found herself a quiet and fearful witness to those two Clan born children invading her home for sleepovers almost every week... And she was much too terrified of possible repercussions from either the Inuzuka or Akimichi Clan to try and tell them that she would not allow it...

Kami help her... Her daughter was ignorant to all the danger she was in because she trusted too much...

She should have put a stop to the friendship years ago, before it had become an actual friendship. But now it was too late.

Today was going to be a big day. They all knew it.

Winter break came with a cold vengeance, leaving the children of Konoha downtrodden with the onslaught of constant rain they were not able to fight off. Most of their winter break was spent indoors while valiantly combating against the dark forces that were boredom and further learning from educational games that weren't nearly as fun as some parents tried to say they were.

"Are you ready for this, Kiba?"

Sakura jumped from one fun-ducational book on the floor over to another, highly invested in their game of 'the floor is a highly hungry beast that'll eat you if you touch it'. Kiba, in the mean time, was fussing over the special clothes his mother had given him for the very occasion.

"Of course I am! I just hate these stupid clothes!" He growled as he pulled at the high collar, then proceeded to scratch at his left side with a huge frown on his lips.

Chouji frowned softly at his distress, "Just why are you supposed to wear them? If they're so uncomfortable, maybe you should go change..."

Just as Kiba began to play with the hem of his shirt to pull it off- he still wasn't too receptive to the fact that boys shouldn't be changing in front of girls, and Sakura didn't seem to mind much anymore-, Hana appeared and smacked her brother on the back of his head and received a heated growl from him.

"Those are specially designed clothes that block scents, Chouji." She sighed as she ignored her brother's own theatrics, a roll of her eyes following before she elaborated a bit more. "We try to stamp down our scents as much as possible when we go meet the puppies- their noses are extremely sensitive and can get easily overpowered with our scents."

She was wearing a set of gray colored clothes that were much like Kiba's, albeit a tiny bit longer. She was even wearing clothes on her feet, something Chouji had never seen.

"I hate these things!" Kiba commented- precisely talking about the odd garments.

"They're called socks and it's only for a day, you big baby. Stop whining."
Sakura stopped in her bouncing around over the books when Hana sent her an unamused glare and Chouji began to feel extremely self conscious as she continued to shake her head at them.

He looked down at his own hands and played with the gloves Sakura had stolen for them... What had they done wrong this time?

"Alright! Let's go get Kiba's partner!" Daichi Inuzuka brought back the warmth that Hana had managed to suck away from the three children, immediately making them jump and begin to cheer in excited anticipation.

Hana rolled her eyes for the second time since she had appeared in the Inuzuka Clan Head's living room.

"Remember, pups, you two can't come into the shrine. But, once Kiba's finally gotten his partner, we'll go out to celebrate by buying lunch." The man promised them after he’d bent down to look them both in the eyes, his only visible one shining with clear pride and happiness.

Finally, Kiba's terrifying mother, Tsume Inuzuka, appeared from the second floor of the house. The four members of the household were clad in the specialty Inuzuka garments that covered their whole bodies- except faces- and looked rather bland. But Chouji didn't comment on it. He merely followed them all out of the Inuzuka Clan Head's home, happy to pet the dogs that chose to walk up to him to receive his affections.

Sakura's parents had not really wanted her to go with Kiba and his family on the day he was supposed to finally meet his canine partner. They would have liked it much more if she had spent her day indoors, reading up on trading routes and trade relationships between Konoha and smaller towns nearby, seeing how they insisted that she should have knowledge for a possible back-up plan in case being a ninja didn't work out... But, luckily enough, Daichi had managed to convince them that she should have gone along.

"It's important for the dogs to meet their partner's friends, too. And, considering how these three are just about inseparable, the sooner the better. That way the dog can start to connect all of them as its human, not just one. That'll ensure that this canine partner will do everything in its power to protect them all!"

There was no doubt in her mind that Daichi had made all of that up on the spot just so she could go with them because he didn't want her to be left out. Chouji's parents had absolutely no problem with him going on the important day, so she would have been the only one to have missed the occasion if Daichi hadn't argued in her favor.

It was supposed to be a big day for their Inuzuka friend. Sakura knew this because he hadn't stopped talking about it for the past month. Every single day they had hung out together, he had made sure to remind them of the big day that was his 'partner finding' day.

In all honesty, she was just happy that she was able to spend yet another day out of her house and with her friends. Her family wasn't all that approving of much of what she did so it was nice to be able to avoid them whenever possible. They would much rather have her safe and sound at home than having fun running around with their friends. They still couldn't understand that she wanted to be ninja and she loved getting dirty when she was with her friends... But she was sure that they would eventually understand what she loved and would stop putting a damper on her mood!

The walk to the Inuzuka shrine didn't take too long, although they did wind up having to stop a couple of times because of all if the dogs that flocked to them so they would get pet by Sakura and
Chouji. Kiba frowned at all the dogs because he wanted to get a move on, but Daichi simply allowed the two outsiders to have some fun before they got to the boring part of their trip.

Once they reached the large shrine that was nestled into the very back of the Inuzuka Compound, Sakura and Chouji were left outside with Kuromaru, the Haimaru brothers, and Daichi's own dogs. In part they were there to make sure they didn't stray or get in trouble. But they also weren't allowed inside of the shrine because they weren't wearing any of the scent dampening clothes that was imperative to wear before someone was allowed to go inside.

Sakura and Chouji busied themselves by running around with a few of the dogs that ran up to them, although Kuromaru scared them off when they started to get a bit rougher than necessary.

That left both children bored for a couple of seconds. Then Sakura got a rather bright idea.

"Hey, Chouji, let's race up that tree!"

It was not too big of a tree, just small enough that if they fell from the top in the right way, they wouldn't break any bones. But it was big enough to challenge them, so Sakura believed it was the perfect tree to try the newest skill Kuzu had taught them on.

Chouji immediately agreed and they took off running before any of the dogs around them interrupt their run and stop them. Although Sakura did hear Kuromaru barking after them, asking just what in the world they thought they were trying to do.

"We're going to climb a tree, of course!" She called back as she ran forward, only to finally reach the tree and begin to head upwards.

Chouji was only a couple of inches ahead of her because of the head start he had gotten. But she had quickly closed that distance and had managed to stay on par with him until they reached the tree. When she took the first step to run up the tree, it took her a fraction of a second longer to stabilize her chakra than it did Chouji. So her friend was able to reach the top faster than her by just a tiny bit.

"I win!"

"Yeah, well... You ran off before I could say go!"

Chouji smiled at her from the branch he had chosen to sit on, all the while she huffed and crossed her arms, all the while perched on her own branch. They were on either sides of the tree, but could still see each other.

"You sound a lot like Kiba right now, Sakura." Chouji smiled broadly and Sakura had never felt so insulted before in her life.

To make sure the Akimichi understood he had crossed the line, Sakura stuck her tongue out at him and turned away from him to look over at Kuromaru. The large dog was now at the base of the tree, looking up at them both with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Is everything alright?" She asked him, suddenly worried over what could have been worrying him.

This tree wasn't all that big... So it wasn't too dangerous to climb. And they had done exactly as Kuzu had instructed them to do whenever they were going to climb up trees- they had not missed a single step.

What had they done wrong?
"Yeah... No, everything's fine, kid."

*Then why do you sound like you're ready to tell me someone's died?*, Sakura found herself wondering, even though she didn't give her thoughts a voice.

Looking over at Chouji, she found her own worry mimicked in her friend's face.

What had they done?

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The day an Inuzuka met their canine partner was one of the most important, if not *the* most important, day in an Inuzuka's life. This was the day the human and canine halves became wholes and finally began their lives. It was such an important day that it was tradition for the whole family unit to take the day and spend it together- it was almost like a holy day for them.

Kiba had been waiting for this day for what felt like forever. Well, of course it had felt like long- he'd wanted to get ahold of a partner as soon as he had been old enough to know that Inuzuka were able to use animals in battle.

When they had entered the large space utilized to breed and take care of the Inuzuka's finest dogs, Kiba had felt like someone had died. The space was large, but quiet. There wasn't the usual rumbling and growling that could always be heard within the Inuzuka Compound. Everything was quiet, and the silence was only broken every now and again by the soft whines of puppies.

His parents directed him towards the viewing area of the shrine, where the puppies that were old enough to be adopted were exhibited. It was a room that was separated from the rest of the space by a large window, ensuring that the creatures inside were safe from the outside.

As soon as he walked up to the glass, Kiba fell in love.

Some of the puppies were currently eating from bowls placed on the ground- none of those interested him. There were a few that were playing together, biting and pawing at each other with a lot of energy. None of those called out to him either. But there was one that was currently trying to chew through the door that led to the outside world, energetically biting at the door and lifting his paw every now and again to try and escape.

After Kiba had looked at the puppy, it was as if the connection was created in mere seconds.

The puppy stopped in his escape endeavors and looked over at the window where he stood... And he yipped excitedly, running up to the glass to jump over at Kiba.

"I found my partner in crime!"

He heard his father chuckling whole heartedly behind him, then felt a large hand pat down on his head. "There are other options, kid." His mother murmured from behind him, "Other, less... worrying options."

Kiba had no idea what that meant.

He looked down at the puppy, who looked back at him with wide eyes and a tail that wagged so fast he could barely keep track of it. The pup barked at him, panted, and barked once more.

Kiba smiled down at him and nodded, "This is going to be my best friend, ma."
After they had grown bored of talking in the tree, Chouji and Sakura had jumped down from their perch in the sky and began to go through some of the motions Kakuzu had taught them. And once they had finished up running both the old man's sequence and the less strenuous one Iruka-sensei had taught them, they decided to take part in a light spar.

It wasn't all that amazing, seeing how neither of them were as competitive as Kiba strove for them to be. So it was mostly throwing random punches and kicks, rather than actually trying to defeat one another.

Kuromaru may have scolded them for not taking such a thing seriously at one point. But before he could tell them that all fights were to be taken seriously, no matter how familiar the opponent, they heard a shout of joy that could only belong to their Inuzuka best friend.

"Guys! Meet Akamaru!"

Chouji turned away from Kuromaru just in time to find Kiba running down from the steps of the shrine the Inuzuka family had gone into, a small white ball of what Chouji could only describe as fluff captured in his hands.

"That seems more white than red..." Chouji heard Sakura mutter softly, but, from the lack of reaction from their canine-like friend, the Akimichi guessed that he had not heard her say such a thing.

When Kiba was right in front of them, he proudly displayed the small puppy he had acquired while he had been separated from them. The small animal looked at Chouji and Sakura, sniffed softly, and then yipped at them.

Chouji decided that Akamaru was an absolutely adorable creature immediately. Sakura cooed over how small he was, walking up to Kiba to look him over from closer up.

"This little guy is going to be our newest partner in crime, got it? He'll learn how to pick locks and create distractions and do all sorts of stuff that'll help us enhance our skills! Just you wait until we show him to the old man- I'm sure he'll be able to see how much potential this guy's got for infiltration and stealing!"

As their friend said this, his family walked up to the children. Chouji looked over at them and noticed just how weird Daichi Inuzuka's smile became for a split second, leaving him confused.

There was something about Daichi Inuzuka that just didn't sit right in Chouji... Not anymore. Actually, now that he thought about it, it seemed that Daichi was hiding some kind of secret. Because his parents had looked pretty similar a couple of months ago, when they had tried to hide the fact that his cousin's cat- whom had been one of Chouji's favorite pets in his whole life because she had been big, lazy, and very loving towards cuddles- had died.

He was curious enough to want to know just what it was that was bothering Daichi Inuzuka so much. But he was respectful enough to know that he shouldn't be prying into the life of an adult if said adult was clearly against saying much about what it was that was bothering him.

"I thought you had grown out of the 'old man' phase after you got your ass handed to your for lying on a school project, pup." Hana rolled her eyes, walking up to them with her arms crossed over her chest.

All three of them froze upon noticing Kiba's grave mistake, but the Inuzuka made a point of huffing and telling his sister to shut it, she knew nothing, to try and divert attention away from the topic. Which was a good thing- they didn't need to have Kiba's parents focusing on them and their stories
about the old man once again.

"Weren't we goin' for food?" Kiba quickly turned to his mother after having shouted at his sister, who growled down at him and told him to apologize to his sister.

The next few minutes were spent walking outside of the Inuzuka Compound while Kiba refused to apologize and Hana incited his anger by telling him that he had to if he didn't want his mother's wrath on him.

While this happened, Akamaru passed from Kiba's hands to Chouji's. And Chouji was incredibly delighted when the puppy decided to burrow into the large pocket of his right pant leg to take a nap.

It was a rather odd name... But he was sure that this little pup would make a fine addition to their small pack.

Kiba had been right. Akamaru quickly became their perfect partner in crime.

They had started off small, of course, because they were more than aware that Akamaru was a small puppy that had not been born with the skills to commit a heist. First they had just had him as look-out; barking at them whenever anyone got close to them so they could scatter before they were caught doing something that would have landed them in trouble. But, quickly enough, the dog proved to be smart enough to acquire important roles in their mischief.

"Alright, boy, just as I taught you."

Sakura wasn't sure just why it was that Kiba liked stealing from this particular butcher so much, but she knew that the meat they got from here was delicious, so she didn't mind it as much as she would have if the meat wasn't all that great.

The old man was supposed to come over today and it would be the first time he'd meet Akamaru. So they were going to cook up a delicious meal, seeing how Chouji was already rather skillful at making a couple of simple yet delicious meals. Steak was Kiba's favorite- it didn't matter which kind of steak- and, because of this, preparing simple steak meals had been the first thing their Akimichi friend had learned.

Akamaru yipped in excitement, made his way towards the pack of dogs that had congregated around the outskirts of the merchant area of Konoha, and began to bark out orders. This specific brand of interaction was always interesting to witness, seeing how Akamaru was about the size of her palm and the other dogs were huge. But they were Kiba's helpers in most of his misadventures and so knew who to listen to.

As his partner dealt with relating the plan to the rest of the dogs, Kiba turned to his friends with a wicked smirk. "Alright, you two, let's go to the rendezvous point. If we get spotted with the dogs we'll be the first to be fingered for this."

Kiba had taught a pack of wild dogs how to steal. Just when Sakura thought she had learned all she could about her best friend, he came up with brand new ways to shock her that were only logical, but still somehow surprised her.

"Alright." Sakura nodded, followed by Chouji.

Soon enough, they were hiding by the tavern area and waiting for the rest of the dogs to pull off the heist. Seeing how Chouji and her had already done their job- which had been setting up specific explosive tags that were to go off when Akamaru pressed on them-, they felt rather sure of how
successful their plan would be.

"I think the next thing we should ask Kuzu to teach us should be some more about Earth Style ninjutsu." Chouji commented conversationally, which made Sakura nod.

She was a fan of this particular style because it made her feel powerful. Wind and water both sounded like they required grace and wit, which was cool... But it just didn't call to her. And fire style was explosive, but not her particular cup of tea. Earth Style, though... She had seen only a handful of moves that Kuzu had shown them so they could see what they could rely on if they trained well enough... And she was mesmerized by it.

When she had been younger, she had been too weak to do much for herself. But now that she had some idea as to what friendship and pack were... Well, she wanted to be strong enough to protect her pack. And Earth Style just called to her.

"We should get him to set up some sort of test or somethin' for us." Kiba murmured as he ran up a fence and balanced himself at the top, "See how far we've come, y'know."

"That'd be cool."

They continued to speak a bit more about the old man and what they wanted to do with him next. After a couple of minutes of waiting, though, they were able to hear the excited and animated barks of the group of animals that Kiba had recruited for this mission. And after a few seconds of waiting, the rather large herd of dogs appeared in front of them, Akamaru perched on the head of the large, scarred dog at the very front.

The little pup yipped and Kiba congratulated him.

"Alright, guys, a deal's a deal. Come on, Chouji'll cook for you too."

A pack of dog was aiding them in stealing steak from a merchant... Life was truly an interesting thing when Kiba Inuzuka was around.

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Kuzu found them in the Forest of Death with their food prepared and packed. The group of stray dogs they had contracted for aid was already off in Konoha, after having eaten their share of the loot, of course.

Part of being a ninja, Kiba was sure, dealt with having the right connections and keeping them. Even though a group of stray dogs wasn't the kind of contact many people may have thought about, it only made sense. Stray dogs could go just about anywhere and hear just about everything that was said. And if ever they did anything odd, they would just be passed over as stupid dogs.

… He'd never say it, but Chouji had given him the idea to contract these dogs for help. The Akimichi had once made a comment on how it seemed that dogs were everywhere. And from that small observation, Kiba had gotten the idea. Now he had a group of loyal strays that helped them commit a couple of small heists in exchange for food.

"Old man! Meet Akamaru!"

The man hadn't even crossed through the threshold of thick trees before Kiba was bounding up to him with his partner jutted out in display.

Kuzu stared down at the pup for a couple of seconds... Grumbled something unintelligible, and then said, "He's a puppy. Useless in a fight."
Kiba growled, but the man sighed and spoke up once again, "But I'm sure he'll be useful once he's bigger."

Damn straight.

"Come on, Kuzu. We made you food!" Sakura called from their favorite tree, where she had the food and drinks packed in a neat lunch box.

Kuzu grumbled some more as he moved towards Sakura, which made Kiba quirk an eyebrow at him.

"Everything alright, old man?"

As Kiba followed after him, Kuzu waved his hand noncommittally at him. Then he sat down on a thick room and placed his forehead in his right hand, looking much more human and tired than Kiba thought was possible.

"It's nothing, kid." He grumbled softly, then looked up.

First his eyes looked over Sakura, then he looked at Chouji, who was picking up stray kunai and shuriken so that they could take part in some target practice while the old man ate. And, finally, his unique eyes fell on Kiba... and hardened.

"Today you'll be learning the basics of water walking. It's much tougher than walking on trees, but I want you all to know a specific set of skills before you graduate."

There was something about the old man that didn't feel right... He looked... Sad.

Kiba found that he was dumbfounded because of this realization. The old man had shown a whole array of rather negative emotions- like anger, annoyance, irritation, and some more anger. But never before had he seemed to have the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Your Academy's curriculum is more than lacking, so you'll be learning a lot more on practical skills, rather than useless theories. Pressure points and vulnerable spots in the human body will be what we'll be dealing with the next time I come to Konoha. Once you've shown me that you're worthy of moving on, we'll go on an excursion that will double as a mock-mission. Have I been understood?"

All three of them nodded quickly, all the while Akamaru yipped in agreement.

"Good. Now get to practicing your aim. I want to see only bull's eyes. Every miss will receive a penalty of fifty push-ups."

"Alright! Let's do this!"

The best part about Kuzu was that he didn't treat them like children. He didn't use kid gloves when he spoke to them. He treated them as if they were training to become ninja. And, dammit, Kiba couldn't believe how stupid his Village's teachers could be now that he knew what a true education was.

"Come on, Akamaru, let's try and see if you can throw kunai!"

"He doesn't have thumbs, Kiba." Sakura called after him as he ran towards the practice dummies they had set up eons ago.
"Then senbon!"

Akamaru would become the strongest and most important nin-ken to ever exist!

The girl he had been told to tail for the month was the same age as the three idiots he had agreed to teach. She was just as impulsive and loud mouthed as the Inuzuka idiot... But she didn't have any friends like him.

Kakuzu knew that he was not a good man. He knew that he wasn't even an *okay* person. He was a monster, through and through. Murder and violence ran through his veins and he had never faltered to complete a contract, no matter how pitiful his target had been.

But there was something about the girl from Takigakure that had been cursed to carry a chakra monster within her... There was something about her that made Kakuzu *feel*. Just like these three Konoha idiots that he would make sure would be able to stand a chance in the real world.

Ninja were supposed to be ruthless killing machines. Their job was unpleasant and dangerous. Konoha was weak and was falling into a dangerous cycle of creating weak ninja. If he allowed these three kids to go out into a battlefield with only the knowledge given in the Academy, they would be slaughtered in no time. It was almost laughable that such a powerful Village was allowing such mediocrity to prosper.

But Kakuzu would make sure that these kids were prepared for the real world.

"Focus, you idiots!" He barked out as the Akimichi fell through the water's surface yet again, all the while the Inuzuka and his pup swam around. The civilian was the only one that was still dry, but it was because she had not tried to step onto the river's surface yet.

"Pinkie, if you don't get in there, it'll be a hundred push-ups!"

The girl squeaked in fear and promptly fell into the water, right beside the Akimichi.

*Stupid kids.*

~..~..~

I haven't forgotten about this story! It just takes some time to write for it...

Anyway, I'm thinking that I'll write one more chapter about them as kids, then have another time skip to their final days in the Academy so that we can finally get to the genin stuff. What do y'all think about that?

Please review!
He was supposed to have left Konoha by now. Hidan and he had been assigned a new mission that was supposed to take them to a small town, a civilian one, in the outskirts of Iwagakure to help them fend off a group of bandits. Hidan had already set off for their rendezvous point, more than eager to have been given permission to exterminate all life— as long as he made sure that said life was devoted to crime.

Kakuzu was currently in the tree canopy, perching on a branch, while the idiotic children ran around and made good use of the last hours of sunlight of the day. He had already bid his farewell and told them that he would be long gone in a couple of minutes... But he was still there. Watching.

It was astonishing to see the children acting their true age. He had grown up in a time where children had been forced to grow up well before their time... A time when he had been forced to make decisions that no child should ever have had to make before they had reached their tenth year of life. But these kids had been given a blessing they were ignorant to— they were given the blessing of being children.

Sighing softly, he forced himself to turn around and look away from the scene.

(The Inuzuka, his tiny mongrel, and the civilian were all ganging up on the Akimichi. The game was a cross between actual sparring and capture the flag and the poor boy was getting annihilated by the other two brats. They were all smiling, though. They were all happy. Disgusting.)

A twig snapping had him throwing an instinctive kunai in the direction of the noise, where he heard a muffled hiss as the weapon was dodged.

"I didn't know anyone was up here. Sorry for- you're not from the Village."

Daichi Inuzuka, the rowdy boy's father and an excellent tracker in his own right. Some considered him to be the bane of Missing-Nin on the Hokage's shit-list. Kakuzu himself had never had to face off against the man until now, so he had no previous meeting to draw information from. It was hard to take him seriously, though, even with the small reputation he had managed to build- somehow, this supposedly great tracker had not been able to smell him and had been caught off guard by finding him there.

"... You're smaller than I thought you would be."

The picture of Daichi Inuzuka in the Bingo Book had him snarling with clear ferocity in his eyes. It was clearly an old picture, seeing how he had lost one of those eyes at some point. But, still, that picture couldn't have been too old. And it had showed the image of a strong, muscular man with nothing more than passion and viciousness.

The man before him was a sunken in shell of flesh and bones. His large jacket and pants hung off of him, clearly too big for his body. And his own face was beginning to look much more skeletal than alive.

The scarred lips curled into an annoyed smirk as the man hauled himself onto the tree branch opposite Kakuzu. Once he was stable, the long haired Inuzuka crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the tree trunks, as if trying to relax.

Kakuzu knew better than that, though. He could see the barest movement of a chest heaving; the widening of nostrils as they tried to capture more oxygen; the slight tremble in weakened limbs.
There was undoubtedly something off with Daichi Inuzuka.

"We've never formally met, have we, Mr. Old Man?"

Kakuzu quirked an eyebrow at the question, but remained silent. Instead of saying anything, the Missing-Nin took in the rather large pack on the Inuzuka's back, along with the lack of dogs. The pack showed that he was prepared for a mission; but not having any sort of dog with him spoke otherwise.

After noticing that Kakuzu wouldn't speak, the Inuzuka sighed and clicked his tongue. Then he shook his head and looked over in the direction Kakuzu had previously been facing, towards the children. His scarred and hardened face softened, much to Kakuzu's disgust (and unfortunate understanding) when he noticed whatever new stupidity the children were committing.

"Tsume and I had always known you were real. We had just assumed you were some kind of hermit with extravagant fabrications, so we never let my son know what we knew. Tsume had hoped that he would eventually grow out of you; leave you behind and take life seriously." The man's voice was deep, a regular tone of voice for a man as tall as him, but it was unbearably saddened...

Tired.

Kakuzu knew that tone of voice very well. He knew that fogged haze in the man's eyes.

Without having had an actual conversation, Kakuzu knew everything he needed to know about the broken man known as Daichi Inuzuka.

Seconds of tense silence passed them by in a slow crawl. Kakuzu knew that he should have been leaving, but he also knew that this man had a reason for having come to meet him... For having struggled to get to him.

Daichi closed his eyes and looked away from the children, towards the horizon, where the sky was quickly darkening because of the winter weather. "I am going to die, sir. And I am too much of a coward to let my family see me waste away. So I am going to go on a mission where I will die. And no one other than you and the Hokage will know the truth."

The final words of a sick man.

Kakuzu would be moved if it wasn't for the fact that he'd seen many of these countless of times before. Although, he was touched upon hearing Daichi admit how much of a coward he was; not many people were honest enough to admit to being such a thing. People were always much too proud to ever admit to being imperfect.

"I want you to give those three kids these gifts when you deem it right... I know you're a good man, even though you're a criminal. And I know you care about those three."

Daichi was avoiding using the children's actual names. It must have hurt too much.

From the bag on his back, the man pulled out two different kinds of objects. The first was a standard pouch, although it had a fishing rod with some sort of fish on its hook- the symbols of Ebisu, the laughing god, if Kakuzu was remembering his small amount of knowledge on religion correctly. On top of that pouch, there was a simple looking key, mottled with age and its edges dulled just slightly.

"I'm not good with gifts. But I know that this should be a good one for Ch-Chouji." The Inuzuka motioned to the pouch, which now made sense to Kakuzu. It was a first-aid kit. It took him a second to recover his composure, but soon the man was speaking again. "For the other two, I leave the key to my weapon's closet. They can take whatever they want; my family managed to acquire a large quantity of weapons before my mother married into the Clan and everyone else died off."
Ah... So this man was merely a half-Inuzuka... Interesting indeed, seeing how those were barely ever allowed to become ninja.

With his head bowed, Daichi looked like the shell of a strong man. Kakuzu had never met him in the battlefield before, but he had heard some small anecdotes of how dangerous this man had once been... And now he was reduced to this nothing.

"Here you go. I'll-uh... I'll be going now."

Kakuzu accepted the gifts and watched as Daichi turned away, struggling to even move his body.

"Get back here."

He wasn't the impulsive kind... But this was just downright pitiful.

"Go back to your family. Say goodbye to them. Do not leave them like this."

Daichi's whole frame was frozen and rigid as Kakuzu spoke, turned away from him still. "If you are going to die, then your son at least deserves to say goodbye to you. If not for your own sake, then his. You don't have to tell him about your Hokage-sanctioned suicide mission. But at least say goodbye to the little shit."

Kakuzu had seen the effects of this kind of selfish abandonment in shinobi before. And it never brought anything but problems and self-doubt to the kids that were abandoned by their parents.

"Go back to your home and make your final days worth something."

Kakuzu left Daichi Inuzuka there, frozen in that very same spot on a tree branch, not saying anything else.

It was when he had crossed through the Village Gates and was well on his way to his mission's destination that he noticed he had not returned the gifts Daichi had asked him to give the kids.

"Thank you very much, sir!"

Chouji couldn't believe all of the books that were now his!

Daichi Inuzuka smiled at him, a small thing that barely reached his eyes, and ruffled his hair. "Those things would just keeping mounting dust in this house. Hana doesn't like them and Kiba'll never want to be a medic. They'll be more useful in your house."

His heart was beating fast and his brain was working in overdrive with all of the access to information he now had at his fingertips. He couldn't wait to get back home, organize these books, and then begin to read through them!

Huh... He kind of sounded a bit like Sakura back when she had loved reading...

As the Akimichi began to walk away from the Inuzuka home, he heard a round of rather violent coughing coming from behind him. But when he turned around to look back at Kiba's father, it was to find the man with a soft smirk on his lips and an eyebrow lifted in humored curiosity.

"Goodbye. I'll make sure all these books are treated like royalty!" Chouji gave him one final promise, which made Daichi smile, showing even his teeth.

"I know you'll treat them right, kid."
As quickly as he could without allowing his new books to fall, Chouji made his way back home. He would have to return to the Inuzuka home later on with his father to gather the rest of the books and scroll on medical ninjutsu that Daichi had decided to give him. For now, though, he had been able to carry a small stack of some ten books and he couldn't wait to find a place for them in his room!

Sakura had been busy looking over some of the scrolls Kuzu had left for them because of their usefulness in learning some more about pressure points when Kiba threw himself on the ground beside her.

"Whatcha readin', Pinkie?"

"How to knock people out." She answered with a hum, then lifted her gaze from the scroll to scan her surroundings. "Hey, where's Chouji?"

Kiba huffed in a loud and dramatic fashion, rolled on the ground so he was looking up at the sky, and pulled Akamaru out of his favored hiding place- Kiba's hood- so the pup could run around.

"With the Harpy and Deer Boy. They invited us to join them for their little get together or whatever... But I don't want to go."

Sakura quirked an eyebrow at her best friend and returned her gaze to her reading. She wasn't paying attention to the printed words, though. Instead, she was pondering on the best course of action after finding out about where Chouji was.

Kiba didn't hate Shikamaru. He only disliked Ino a bit more than he disliked the Nara himself. But he wasn't the biggest fan of them when they were together. And he certainly got close to hating them when they took Chouji away from them. Normally, he would be elated to go and bother Ino and Shikamaru while they were with Chouji. But his best friend didn't really like it when he messed with Deer boy and Harpy girl and it didn't seem as if he really felt like bothering the final member of their pack too much.

With a small frown, Sakura chanced a look at Kiba from the corners of her eyes. He was laying on the floor with a heavy frown marring his features and his eyes seemed as if they were unfocused...

Could Kiba be thinking about something that was bothering him? Could him being in a bad mood be the reason why he had decided to not bother Chouji and his old friends?

If so... Just what was bothering her friend? He was always so sure of himself- so egotistical- that he refused to allow anything to actually bring him down. Seeing him bothered by something really worried Sakura.

But she couldn't flat out ask him what was wrong because he was so prideful he'd just yell at her about being too awesome to need to talk about something as girly as feelings...

With a small frown, Sakura rolled up the scroll she had been reading and closed her eyes. She breathed in the sweet scent of the Forest of Death, ordered her thoughts, and finally opened her eyes once again and looked down at her best friend with a smile.

"Hey, Kiba, how would you feel about a spar with me? I want to try and see if these pressure points work and you're the perfect victi- I mean, helper." She made a point of offering the most innocent, bright eyed smile she could muster, earning a look of confusion from Kiba.

First he stared at her with nothing short of doubt shining in his eyes. Then that confusion morphed into insult upon noticing the 'slip' of her tongue. And finally a large smirk broke out on his lips when
he noticed precisely what kind of challenge Sakura was offering to go through with.

Normally, she would prefer to consult with Kuzu about any kind of technique she was interested in before she actually tried to use it. So Kiba knew that she wasn't offering to practice on him lightly. Which meant that he understood rather well just what she was offering and was excited to take part in something that could either be dangerous and/or completely thrilling.

"Let's do this thing, Pinkie!"

So that's how she and Kiba spent the rest of their day, sparring with Kiba avoiding most of Sakura's jabs and Sakura trying her best to stun her friend and finally hit him in one of his many pressure points. By the time night had fallen, they were both sweaty and panting as they lay on the large roots of their tree, hunger and the need to sleep screaming at them.

"Hey... Sakura..."

Swallowing to catch her breath, the pink haired girl turned to look at her best friend and found him with a pinched look to his face. This made her post-spar high drop immediately and she began to worry over just what was eating at Kiba now.

"Think... D'ya think I can stay at your house tonight?" He asked softly, voice barely above a whisper. "I... I really don't want ta go home t'night."

It wasn't new to hear Kiba talking about not wanting to return to his home. There were issues in his family that neither she nor Chouji knew about- and neither of them dared ask Kiba about those issues to not get on his bad side. But it was odd to hear Kiba actually asking for permission to stay at her home rather than just force his way inside.

Her mom wasn't Kiba's greatest fan... But Kiba sounded as if he really needed the break.

"Sure, Kiba."

"Kids, I need to be honest with you. I'm sick and it's incurable and fatal. I've only got a couple of years left of life- but I only have months left of quality life. So I'm going to go on a dangerous mission where I will die. But I need you to know: No matter what you might hear, I'm doing what's right. I can't die on a hospital bed. I'd rather give my life in the field."

His father had sat him and Hana down that morning to speak to them about his sickness... His impending death.

Kiba... He had always known his father wasn't the same warrior he had once been. He could remember a time when he would go out of the Village almost every single week- a time when his father was the prime example of a hard working shinobi. But that had changed when he had taken on a job in the Village's Hospital- a change he had explained by saying that his talents were better used in Village... But that had been a lie. He had started to work in the Hospital, yes... But he had taken the job to have an easier access to the treatment that helped keep him alive without having to tell anyone about his truth.

There had been something off about his father for so long... But Kiba hadn't questioned it and had simply accepted all of the explanations his parents had given him when they had been given.

Now his father was going to die. He was going to go off on a mission to receive a proper warrior's death rather than waste away in a hospital bed. And there was nothing Kiba could do about it.
He had never had the best relationship with his parents... But he had never wished anything bad to happen to them. *Never.*

As soon as their father had finished talking to them about everything that was happening and everything that *would* happen, he had asked them to stay strong and live their lives to the fullest. Then he had hugged them both, kissed them on their foreheads, hugged them one last time, and had walked out of their house to never return again.

After he was gone, a deathly silence hung over him and his sister. Neither said a single thing. They just... stayed there... Quiet and pensive.

Then his sister, as she had done with every other problem their family ever gave her, had left Kiba alone to go and search for any of her friends. She abandoned Kiba and left him alone in a cold house with the fact that his father was going to die threatening to choke him.

His father didn't even look like himself... The only reason he had been able to make people believe he still looked like himself was because he had taken to using a henge *every day* to seem as if he was healthy...

The person Kiba had listened to and seen talking about a fatal disease and going to die the warrior's way had *not* been his father... This person had been an emaciated corpse... And this would be the last memory he would have of his father.

Like Hana, Kiba decided to seek some comfort within his friends. But when he had noticed that Chouji was with the Harpy and Deer boy, he had felt disgusted. He didn't want to be around people he didn't like, like his family. He didn't want to be around acquaintances or friends. He wanted to be around his pack. And one member of his pack was off with people he didn't want to even *think* about.

So he had sought Sakura out. And she had managed to make him forget about every horrible thing he had learned today for a couple of hours. She had managed to remind him just why it was that he had decided to make her pack.

Now he was in her home, sipping at a mug of hot coffee her father had prepared for him, all the while Sakura finished preparing a meal for them both. Her parents had not denied him entrance into their home, nor had they been against the idea of allowing him to sleep over. But they had needed to leave if they wanted to be able to get to some stupid show they had tickets for, so now both kids were alone in Sakura's house.

And all Kiba could think about was the fact that his father was going to die and he would never be able to do anything with him ever again.

"If you're feeling up for it, we can always try out that earth jutsu the Old Man taught us after dinner. I've been trying to make my mounds bigger, even though they're not very strong. I haven't found the correct amount of chakra I need to make the perfect mound."

Sakura chattered mindlessly over different things they could do after dinner, as if trying to find something that he was interested in actually going through. She didn't have to offer anything... Yet she tried to keep him distracted.

Sakura knew there was something off with him. Yet she didn't ask him about it. Instead, she tried to distract him.

He didn't deserve such a good friend...
"Or maybe we can go through that sequence of power he said would be good for us to learn. Or maybe-"

"Didn't you have a book or something on poisons and their uses?" Kiba interrupted, only to find Sakura turning back to him with widened and shocked eyes.

He hated reading. But she enjoyed it. And she loved learning.

She had helped him out enough. It was about time he tried to return the favor.

"Let's take it easy tonight. We worked hard enough today."

Sakura stared at him as if he had grown a second head... But after a couple of seconds, she smiled softly and nodded. Then she turned around and turned off the stove to serve up the simple dinner of instant ramen.

He would tell her about everything that was going on with his father. But not yet; he wanted Chouji to be there with them.

A month after he had met the Inuzuka idiot's father, Kakuzu found himself inside of a mercenary den that doubled as a tavern as he looked for possible contracts to complete.

Hidan had thrown himself into a shouting match with the bouncer over being able to enter with his scythe or not- Kakuzu didn't care about that dumbass as long as he didn't try to kill the guy that was just doing his job.

As he made his way towards the target's board by the back of the establishment, he could hear whispers of rumors and facts mixed in with boastful shouts of ninja killed. There was no music in this establishment, but it certainly was not needed. Most of this sort didn't care about the arts or proper music. It wasn't necessary.

"I killed him! That damn Kage won't be able to set that dog on us ever again!"

Normally, Kakuzu ignored such claims. They were usually inconsequential and shouted out by drunkards that wanted to seem more useful than they actually were. But this one... This one stood out to him. This person used the precise words to make him think on the man on a Hokage-sanctioned suicide mission he had come across not too long ago.

Kakuzu halted in his search for the target's board and instead remained standing so he could better listen to the drunken ramblings.

"Yeah, but it ain't like ya got someone important, like that Tsume bitch. Ya just got her yella-bellied husband."

Tsume Inuzuka... The known Clan Head of the Inuzuka Clan. The wife of one Daichi Inuzuka. The mother of one idiotic mongrel.

Daichi was dead.

"But I got 'er husband! An' he was an easy kill! 'E practically begged to get killed! Lookin' like a weak coward, it was easy! Hell, I actually felt kind of-"

A thick black tendril piercing straight through his annoying mouth cut off the bastard's ramblings in no time.
All sound ceased in the tavern as every single mercenary within turned to look at Kakuzu with widened eyes. Violence amongst them was not out of the ordinary- a quick and seemingly senseless murder was not customary, though.

Slowly, with sickening squelches as the tendril pulled away from the disgusting man's skull, Kakuzu pulled away from the deceased and returned his arm to his side. Then he made his way towards his initial destination and found the bulletin board with the pictures of wanted people in the near vicinity without offering a single explanation.

He was dressed in all black. His parents had said that this was the appropriate form of dress when going to a funeral.

Daichi Inuzuka's funeral.

Kiba's father was dead.

The procession was a small one. Only a handful of people from outside of the Inuzuka Clan had been invited. And only a small number of Inuzuka had turned up to say their final goodbyes to Daichi's ashes.

Chouji had thought that all of the Inuzuka Clan would turn up to say their goodbyes to the husband of the Clan Head. But his father had explained to him that all Clans had different traditions- and it seemed that the Inuzuka were not the kind of Clan to have every single member come out to the funeral of one member.

Chouji recognized Tsume Inuzuka, with her harsh glare and dry eyes. He also knew Hana, Kiba's sister, and understood why she had tear filled eyes, even though there were no tear tracks on her cheeks. All of their dogs were standing faithfully by their side... And Daichi's own pair of dogs were standing beside Kuromaru with the most forlorn look on their faces Chouji had ever seen on any dog born into the Inuzuka Clan.

The rest of the Inuzuka there, which were a small handful, he did not know.

He stood beside Kiba as one of the Inuzuka Elder's spoke about Daichi's well lived life and well earned death. His best friend was glaring, much like his mother, but had tears in his eyes, much like his sister.

Sakura stood to Kiba's other side with tears falling freely down her face.

Chouji himself felt like crying... But did not dare. He did not know Daichi Inuzuka well enough to feel that he deserved to cry over his death. Even though the sadness around him weighed on him-ordered him to allow his tears to fall.

Behind them stood his parents and Sakura's own. They were the only outsiders that had been invited to come.

Once the elder had finished speaking, Tsume made her way towards the edge of the cliff they were standing before, which faced an endless forest. She had an urn filled with her husband's ashes tucked tightly into her side.

"He died like a warrior. Now he will rest as an Inuzuka that lived so well deserves- free to roam wherever his soul wishes."

He swore he heard her choke up on the final words. But Tsume squared her shoulders and opened
up the urn to allow her husband's ashes to be swirled away by the wind.

Ten seconds later, the whole of the Inuzuka Clan that had come began to howl.

It was such a sad sound that Chouji was not able to stop himself from crying then.

Daichi Inuzuka was gone.

Death was real.

Somehow, she had never thought about death. Even though death was a natural part of a ninja's life, she had never felt the need to ponder about it before. She had remained mostly ignorant to what it was... Remained ignorant to how it came about.

A ninja could die on a mission, like Daichi had. That sort of thing happened all the time. Yet, somehow, she had never thought it did.

After Daichi's ashes had been scattered, Tsume thanked the people there for having come to say their goodbyes to her husband. Then she had informed them that there was a small lunch waiting for them in the Inuzuka shrine, per tradition, if they wished to come along.

Without asking for permission from her parents, Sakura followed Kiba away from the rest of the crowd. Chouji came along as well, even though he did ask his parents if it was alright for him to leave before they did.

She did not know where Kiba was taking them, but she knew that he didn't want to be a part of the lunch that was being offered by his clan. So she just followed her best friend through different scenery until they eventually reached their spot in the Forest of Death.

Once they were there, Kiba slumped to the ground and breathed out heavily.

Sakura closed her eyes and held onto his shoulders as she sat down beside him. Then she moved her hands so she was hugging him by the waist and leaned into his side.

When Chouji wrapped his arms around both of them, it was only right for them both to lean into their final best friend.

After a couple of seconds, Sakura heard Kiba sniffle into her shoulder. Then she felt something wet drip onto her clothes an her grip on her best friend tightened.

No words were exchanged among them after that. They only held each other as Kiba cried.

His father was dead.

He had been a horrible son.

His father was dead.

His father was dead and Kiba had been nothing short of a terrible child.

His father was dead.

Kiba breathed in, a shaky thing that burned his throat, and tightened his hold around his friends.
His father was dead... But at least he still had his pack with him.

He had not been a good son. He had been rambunctious and defiant and rude. He had not appreciated his father when he was around... And now all he wanted was for one of his father's shitty smiles or horrible jokes or exasperated reprimands. But he would not be able to get any of that anymore because his father was dead and gone.

He had not been a good son... But that did not mean he would be a horrible friend. His pack was great even though his family wasn't. And he would do *everything* in his power to be the person they deserved to have around them.

His father was dead and he had done a horrible job of making the man proud of him. But his pack was still here and alive and he'd be damned if he ever let *anyone* harm them.

~...~...

And that is the chapter! Sorry for the sudden angst, but it was kind of necessary. Hope you all liked it! Please review!
"Hey, guys, you're seeing what I'm seeing, right?"

Sakura was very sure of what she was seeing. But she wanted to make sure that her pack could see this too- just in case she was going insane at the tender age of ten years old.

She was staring intently at the history book on her desk, all the while she felt Chouji and Kiba begin to crowd her on either side. Akamaru craned his neck from his spot sitting on her lap to get a better view of the book, then yipped in surprise.

"Yeah, you're right boy. That's Kuzu's village symbol." Kiba murmured softly as he moved his hand so his fingers ran over the black-and-white picture of Takigakure's prized Tree of Life.

"So... Does that mean that Kuzu's from Takigakure?" Chouji asked in awe, "Did... Did we finally figure it out?"

Four years of their lives, they had been kept in the dark about the Old Man's true origins. For four whole years, the three of them- Akamaru had entered the picture only two years ago, and, so, had only been able to mull over the mystery for that span of time- had tried to figure this mystery out by asking the man himself. But never had they received a straight-forward answer.

Takigakure's village symbol was certainly unique- which wasn't a surprise. Every symbol had to be easily distinguishable, after all. Still, to Sakura, the symbol looked like two upside-down lightning bolts that were positioned to be perfectly parallel to each other.

"There's no gash running through the symbol, though." Kiba murmured through pursed lips, leaning onto Sakura's shoulder as he crossed his arms over her head. "I thought the gash was part of it, Pinkie."

So accustomed to Kiba, the pink haired girl did not mind being used as a stand. She merely shrugged softly and scratched Akamaru's chin. "It was a long-shot for the gash to be part of the design, Kiba. Our theory wasn't correct, then. Bummer."

"Why would Kuzu scratch out his village's symbol?" Chouji huffed, sounding as perplexed as Sakura felt. "There must be a reason. He never does anything without having a reason to."

The four of them fell into a heavy silence as they began to think up of possible reasons for Kuzu to have done such a thing. But before they could truly voice out any of their thoughts, Shikamaru and Ino walked into the Nara's library and immediately made the three of them unwilling to speak any further about the old man.

For four years now, the three of them had kept the old man they had met in a bar to themselves. Undoubtedly, their friends and families knew they were hiding something. But whenever they were asked anything, they deflected the questions and sometimes even resorted to flashy distractions to change the topic of conversation.

Sakura's parents hated it, but they had already accepted that she would never speak about her pack's biggest secret. So they didn't ask her about it anymore and instead focused most of their attention into trying to convince her to give up on wanting to become a kunoichi.

Stupid, she knew. But her parents were civilians. They just didn't understand her as much as they thought they did.
"What're you three so focused on?" Ino questioned with a clearly unimpressed glint in her eyes.

Sakura still didn't understand why she didn't like her or Kiba. Just like she didn't understand how hard it was to understand that their pack was not one of three members, but four. But Ino was one of Chouji's oldest friends, so she and Kiba still put up with her to keep their best friend happy.

Akamaru growled at being left out, but soon jumped out of Sakura's lap and onto the desk. He then walked over to the right edge of the book and nosed the pages, beckoning Sakura to turn the page. The girl did so and then the pup settled onto the right page, intently reading the left page.

"It's kind of obvious, Yamanaka." Kiba rolled his eyes as he stretched back and stepped out of Sakura's personal space. "We're working on teaching Akamaru how to read and write."

The blonde scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest, rolling her own eyes. Shikamaru, who stood only a couple of feet behind her, at least seemed intrigued enough at the seemingly preposterous idea to quirk an eyebrow at the Inuzuka.

"Read, I believe. But write?" He questioned, which earned a broad smile from Sakura.

"Yup! Inuzuka dogs are the most intelligent of Konoha's canines! Teaching him this wouldn't be a stretch- and would totally come in handy in the future."

"Well, at least he looks cute enough- even though it's stupid to think a dog can read, much less write." Ino commented offhandedly, then made her way deeper into the vast collection of books and scrolls sheltered in the Nara Compound's most prized possession- their exclusive library. "It's a perfectly fine day and you guys are wasting it inside of a stuffy and boring library. Aren't you supposed to be the first ones excited to run around the Village? Shouldn't you be out causing mayhem or something?"

Sakura chanced a glance to her left at Chouji. The Akimichi was smiling awkwardly at Ino, fiddling nervously with his fingers.

She couldn't stop herself from sighing and softly shaking her head as she stood up from the desk.

"You're right, Ino. Wanna help us with a score?"

Their thieving ways were an open secret at this point. Everyone knew they did it- but nobody had ever caught them in the act. And because they were now smart enough to get away from the scene of the crime without leaving any evidence, no one could scold them or even call them out on their mischievous ways.

Kuzu really was a great teacher.

"I'm not helping you steal meat again." The girl's face pinched inwards in disgust, "I had to throw away a whole outfit cause I couldn't get rid of the smell of wet-dog and putrid blood."

Sakura didn't hear Kiba audibly groan, but she may as well have. She didn't need to hear her best friend to know how unamused he was with Ino anymore- she just knew.

"Well, in our defense, Kiba did tell you to steer clear of Enenra. He's feisty." Her best friend shrugged, then offered a cool smile. "Would you rather spar? It's been a while since we've practiced together."

Now Shikamaru groaned audibly, "Because you three have a monopoly over spars. Why do you think Iruka-sensei only has you guys fighting against Sasuke and each other at this point?"
"Talking about Sasuke," Ino crooned, immediately receiving simultaneous eye-rolls from Sakura, Shikamaru, and Kiba. "What?! You can't tell me he hasn't gotten cooler! And so much more dreamy~."

With a shake of her head, Sakura made her way towards the Miscellaneous History section of the library and began to look for more books on Takigakure- now that they had a lead, they needed to chase it down to its very end.

Ino babbled nonsensically over Sasuke this and Sasuke that, all the while she forced herself to ignore the annoying blonde. Kiba and Akamaru were undoubtedly biting their tongues to now howl out in despair, all the while Shikamaru was regretting having been born into his life. Chouji, like the sweetheart he was, would most probably be the only person actually listening to Ino.

"And he likes girls with long hair! I'm a shoo-in! I've got the longest hair from all the girls in the class!"

This caught Sakura by surprise.

_Long hair, huh?_

Maybe she should cut it- she had always liked the way Kiba's mother's hair looked.

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"You'll have an assignment this week. You're to create your own mythological story- taking into account what we have learned on this chapter on the Hidden Village's unique myths. You will be working in teams and you will be able to make your own group- yes, Sakura, I am aware that you will be with Chouji and Kiba."

Kiba growled at Iruka-sensei's words, even as Sakura lowered her hand and sighed in relief, as he made a show of grabbing Akamaru from the top of his head to lift him up in the air, "You're forgetting a student, sensei!"

The scarred chunin smiled awkwardly as the pup barked at him, calling attention to his equal importance in the three students' pack. "Of course. Akamaru is also a part of your group, I'm sorry for forgetting."

Akamaru barked with a quick jolt of his head, nodding with relief at being considered the student he was. And now that Kiba was also relieved to hear this, he lowered his pup down and placed him back on his head.

"I'm going to give you this weekend to able to write your stories. And, excluding Akamaru's group, everyone will be in a group composed of three students." Iruka-sensei continued to address the rest of the class, even though some students began to whisper to each other about possible partnerships. "The only real rules to this assignment are that the work you are to hand cannot be taken from any of the existing myths. And, believe me, I'm a teacher for a reason. I will know if you have taken a past story and changed a couple of names around."

"As if that'll be difficult." Kiba whispered to Akamaru, who barked in agreement.

_"The Old Man will definitely have something cool!"

Kiba nodded at his best friend, very much sure of the fact that, yes, Kuzu was the man to go for whenever in need of a kickass story... Just, this time, they'd tweak the story a bit to not get into too much trouble with their teacher.
"Now, you'll have the rest of this period to discuss over your project. Once lunch has finished, I expect you all to have a clear idea as to what you will be doing."

After offering a couple more guidelines Kiba didn't bother paying any attention to, Iruka-sensei set them loose. Without sparing a single second, Kiba jumped over his schoolmates' desks to reach Chouji, all the while Sakura walked towards them like *a normal person*.

As they waited for Sakura to get to them, Kiba took a moment to get a good look at his friends. They were still the same pack members he'd been with for the past four years, just older and with slightly different wardrobes.

Chouji still preferred knee-length shorts with a predisposition towards green, although now he had added a set of goggles on the top of his head, leaving his hair to jut outwards in sharp spikes. Sakura now tended to wear either the baggy shinobi-style pants (that Kuzu had gotten for all their birthdays but refused to admit to having done so) or shorts, along with plain colored, sleeveless shirt and a dark jacket wrapped around her waist.

Her hair was long now and always kept in a neat ponytail, kind of like Hana's, but she had recently begun to contemplate cutting it as short as her friends. The only reason she hadn't done so yet was because her parents didn't want her to lose her 'beautiful locks', even though she had tried to explain to them that long hair was a liability on the field most of the time.

His own style of dress hadn't changed much. He still wore ratty hand-me downs with parchment covering holes and a large jacket that helped cover up most of the clear fixes. But he now had a prized set of pants and shirts (that Kuzu had undoubtedly left him!) that he kept hidden in his closet for the days the Old Man came around.

Once Sakura was with them, Kiba smiled wickedly at both his friends. "Old Man."

Sakura shook her head and crossed her arms, "We don't even know if he'll be coming during this weekend, Kiba."

"Old Man." He answered simply, which earned an exasperated sigh from her.

"Fine. Chouji and I'll come up with a backup plan- just in case he doesn't appear, like he has for the past three months."

Kiba frowned at her now and crossed his own arms. "You need to learn faith, pup."

"I'm older than you." Sakura grouched, prompting Kiba to lean towards her with a cocky smirk.

"Yet you're still a puppy."

She glared and seemed prepared to answer, but Chouji interrupted them both sighing and grabbing Akamaru from Kiba's head. "Yeah, boy, we're the only sane people here. Kiba and Sakura are far gone in their joint insanity."

Akamaru barked, telling Kiba that he didn't actually agree with Chouji, he knew he was very much sane, but the Akimichi gave him snacks and he wanted to stay on his good side. Kiba, immediately, growled back that he was a weak traitor, but soon straightened up and motioned at Chouji's notebook.

"We may as well look like we're actually thinking up of something..." He murmured, then pointed at the Akimichi, "So sit down and write the list of weapons and supplies we'll need to spend a weekend camping in our headquarters."
Chouji sighed at the idea, but still sat down and began to write. Sakura rolled her eyes at Kiba's orders, but soon began to tell Chouji things they would be needing if they were serious about surviving out the whole weekend.

That Friday afternoon was much like any other. Once they were let out of the Academy, the four of them ran to their headquarters within the Forest of Death to begin to prepare for a weekend of training and studying. This time around, Sakura led the way, seeing how she was most excited to get back to work on creating the poison Kuzu had left a formula for them to use on weapons. But, after years of following the same path, they all knew what steps to take and what routes to avoid- so it was only normal they took turns with this too.

When they were a couple of feet away from their make-shift wooden treehouse- which they had built with the help of his and Sakura's fathers-, Chouji noticed that there was something that felt off about the Forest. It was as if everything was... Well... Quiet. No animals could be heard. The wind barely blew. It was all rather... Still.

When they reached their headquarters, Chouji was immediately able to see just what was so off about the day.

"About time you brats got here. You've kept me waiting."

"Kuzu!" Sakura gasped at the front of their procession, immediately breaking into a sprint to try and jump onto the old man.

Without turning around to face them, Kuzu took one step to the side and effectively allowed Sakura to fall to the ground below.

Kiba howled with laughter as Akamaru yipped in harmony, all the while Sakura groaned from her spot splayed out among dirt. Chouji winced at the fall, but knew that Sakura was too tough to allow one trip to actually hurt her.

"Y'see, Pinkie! I told you the old man'd be here ta help us with our homework!"

Kuzu continued to face the large tree they had utilized to build their treehouse, at eye level with the rope they sometimes climbed when they were too tired to walk up the trunk of the tree. A couple of seconds later, he turned around and looked down at Sakura, then prodded her with his foot. He didn't say anything, just poked.

Sakura groaned momentarily, then rolled onto her back and threw her arms to either side of her.

"I am now one with nature. Sakura Haruno is no more. This is my home."

Chouji smiled at his friend's theatrics, but Kuzu merely grunted and shook his head.

"What do you need now? And are you willing to pay?"

In between both questions, Chouji swore he heard Kuzu inhale sharply- as if in pain. But the man was standing up so straight and looked so normal, that he couldn't help but think that he may have imagined the sound.

"We need to come up with a myth." Kiba offered as he walked up to the Sakura, bending down to grab her bag and begin to rummage through it for her wallet. "So just give us any story you got, dude. Anything you say'll sound like a myth to Iruka-jerk."
Once he had found Sakura's wallet, Kiba opened it and began to count her money, all the while the old man continued to look at the interaction with a mostly unreadable expression on his masked face.

"We can buy you dinner- Kiba, what have I told you about taking my wallet?" Sakura scolded, only to receive a shrug from the Inuzuka.

"I always pay you back... Eventually."

Chouji finally walked up to the small group and sighed at his friends, then smiled up at Kuzu. "It's great to see you again, Kuzu."

The man grunted for a moment, then jutted his chin in the direction of their treehouse. "Yours?"

Chouji nodded, more than aware that Sakura and Kiba would be too enthralled in yet another of their arguments to gave the man any proper answers.

"Not bad." He commented offhandedly, then began to walk onto the large trunk of the tree. "Go find me some food. I'll tell you the story once I've eaten."

The Akimichi nodded, even though Kuzu wasn't looking at him, then turned around to relay the information to his bickering best friends.

"Fine, you mongrels want a story, I'll give you one."

Out of his full repertoire of experiences, Kakuzu knew that there were at least a dozen different stories he could tell that would amaze the children. But there was one specific tale that kept popping up in his mind- and it wouldn't leave him alone.

It hurt to remember the story.

But these children didn't know who he was. So they would never know that this was a true story that had happened to him. They would be too amazed by the happenings to ever actually question them- they would believe that he had heard this story in passing and he wasn't the protagonist in it.

After they had brought him food, Kakuzu had eaten in solitude as the children ran kata on the ground below. He had taken this time alone to mull over possible stories... And try to ignore the pain emanating from his whole body.

The last bounty he and Hidan had accomplished had not been an easy one to complete. It had left them both terribly wounded... And for the first time in a decade, Kakuzu had been forced to replace one of his hearts.

Maybe that was the reason why this specific tale kept replaying within his mind.

Now the children and furred mongrel were sitting crossed legged in front of him, all the while Kakuzu stood with his back propped up against a wall. Even though the treehouse had undoubtedly been built by children, it seemed that they had received help from knowledgeable builders- it was sturdy and safe. The architecture was odd, for the entrance was a hole in the very middle of the wooden floor, but Kakuzu didn't question it, seeing how the rope that led up here was tied on the ceiling just above the hole.

The treehouse was on the comfortable side, small enough to not have needed too thought before constructing, but large enough to fit a man of his stature comfortably while he sat. When he was standing, he had to hunch his shoulders and lower his head to not graze the top of his head with the
ceiling. And it was decorated with a couple of trinkets and pictures- and these all had some kind of emotional significance to the children.

Kakuzu did *not* take note of the fact that there were some rather beat up targets laying on the far left corner of the makeshift building. Just like he didn't notice the way the three mongrels were wearing matching necklaces and bracelets.

No. He did not note that at all.

"There once was a seasoned ninja that was sent on a mission by his Village's elders." He took a pause to create a severe ambiance for the story, all the while thinking of the best vocabulary to use to make this sound more like a myth than an actual occurrence, "He was told this would be a most noble mission- it would bolster their Village's standing among the shinobi nations and it was the most important mission to complete. He was *not* told that it would be a suicide mission. He was *not* told he was meant to have died."

"No way! Stupid Village elders!" Kiba interrupted with a growl, "They're always bad guys!"

Kakuzu knew there was a story behind the thought. But he didn't prod. Instead, he breathed in and forced the anger bubbling within him to subside- these kids were not the elders. They did not earn his wrath.

"The Ignorant Ninja went on the mission, unaware of the betrayal. He traveled across the lands until he reached the Village Hidden in the Leaves. Once at the border of the newly created Village, he came face to face with the God of Shinobi himself- Hashirama Senju: the target of his mission."

There was a collective gasp from the children. Kakuzu closed his eyes and allowed himself to remember the kind smile and, paradoxically enough, harsh words told to him by the First Hokage- *I don't want to fight you. But I will if I have to. Please, turn around. There's no need for a battle tonight.*

"The fight was over before it had even began; but the Betrayed Ninja still attempted to defeat the Shinobi God, even though he knew his fate. Hashirama Senju decimated the Betrayed Ninja within the first seconds of their bout- but this is not where this story ends. Hashirama was as generous as he was powerful, so he allowed the Ninja to escape. And, so, the Betrayed Ninja returned to the Village: a failure."

A heavy silence fell over the five of them after he had said this, voice grave. Now he opened his eyes and looked over the children, taking note of the truly flabbergasted faces of the children.

"The plan the elders had hatched to kill this ninja had failed, but the Betrayed Ninja was not spared from any further pain- this is not a story with a happy ending. He became a pariah within his Village; a loser with no shot at redemption."

"What?" The pink haired girl gasped, eyes wide. "That's not fair! He was set up for failure from the beginning! That's-"

"If you want to stop me from telling this story, it's your money you've just wasted." Kakuzu cut in bluntly, leveling her with an unamused glare.

Immediately, she squeaked and covered her mouth with both her hands, and made a show of keeping quiet.

Kakuzu shook his head at her theatrics, then sighed as he remembered where he had left off in his story.
Once he had recalled his last words, he continued with his story, "He was insulted and ostracized- and a seed of unimaginable hate was planted within his heart. This seed was fertilized and nurtured by the passage of time and the scorn of the ninja that refused to work with him. But it bloomed into a poisonous climax when the Betrayed Ninja overhead a blind member of the Council of Elders talking about his failed assassination. So full of rage- blind and thoughtless and scornful- the Betrayed Ninja broke into the Village's most secured vault and stole their most prized forbidden jutsu. Under the cover of night, he escaped from the Village and performed Enma's Absolution. One of the most dangerous forbidden jutsu they had documented."

The brattiest of the boys gasped in awe, his eyes twinkling brightly as he leaned forward in excited curiosity. "What does that jutsu do?"

*It shatters your body and pollutes it with the air of the dead themselves. Then, a Shinigami, after your soul has journeyed through all of the planes of hell and fought with the fifty Warlords and you have defeated them all, will pull your soul out and stitch your shattered body back together. You then become a demonic rag-doll, bound to eternity to create a collection of hearts and souls for Lord Enma and the Shinigami.*

Kakuzu didn't say any of this. Instead, he offered a much tamer explanation.

"It grants a limited-form of immortality. But you must pay a high price to achieve this end." He answered gravely, feeling the burning of the four masks on his back. "He spent the following three years of his life training his body and mind, preparing himself to take revenge on the Elders that had used him as little more than a disposable tool."

His throat seized as flashes of the mangled bodies of those despicable elders began to appear in his mind. And he closed his eyes once again, allowing the images to permeate his whole consciousness, even as he tried to regain some modicum of control over himself.

After a couple of seconds of tense silence had passed, Kakuzu crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head to the side. "Tell me, what do you think the Betrayed Ninja did?"

All three of the children contemplated their answers. Then the Akimichi slowly raised his hand, and asked, "K-killed the elders?"

"Yeah! Bloody revenge!" The Inuzuka cheered, pumping his fists before turning to look at Kakuzu, "Is he right? Did the Betrayed Ninja murder them all?"

Kakuzu couldn't help but frown at the enthusiasm.

This was a game to the Inuzuka, wasn't it? This was all exciting and a game- far away from reality and incapable of occurring to him. This wasn't real for him. This was just a story.

Softly, Kakuzu nodded. Then he closed his eyes and spoke in a grave whisper, "The Betrayed Ninja slaughtered all of the Elders within the Village. Shinobi and civilian alike, they all tasted the lethality of his wrath. They all fell- one by one- until the rivers within the Village ran red with their blood."

Stunned silence.

Then Kakuzu heard a sniffle from the pink haired girl. "I... I understand they were mean... And that they deserved it... But... But slaughtering them like cattle... That... That's horrible."

Opening his eyes, the man found her actually crying for the despicable parasites that had sent him to his own demise. Even with the sudden spike of anger he felt, he was somehow... Oddly enough... *Comforted* by this.
The Inuzuka was crass and seemed incapable of understanding the need for sympathy. But this young girl had plenty empathy to make up for his failing. It made sense that these two somehow balanced each other out.

"The Betrayed Ninja's heart was corrupted by the alienation and hate he felt over having failed to complete a mission." Kakuzu explained with a shrug, trying to seem disinterested even when his hearts- all five- clenched unbearably. "He decided that destroying them as they had tried to do with him was justice."

Once again, a heavy silence fell over them.

Then the tattooed boy smiled broadly and stood up from his seat. "This is the perfect story, Kuzu! We'll have the best myth out of the whole class!" After he finished cheering, he pointed at the girl, "Take out all your notebooks and pencils! We gotta get to work on getting this all down! We've got the source, this is the best time to write everything!"

The girl sniffled and wiped at the tears in her eyes, but nodded and pulled out her supplies from the bag the Inuzuka had poked around to find her wallet. After a couple of seconds, she opened one notebook and grabbed a pencil, preparing herself to write everything down.

"Okay, we've got to do some editing." The Inuzuka murmured to himself, beginning to pace from one end of the treehouse to another.

Kakuzu watched quietly as the kids fell into the groove of their usual actions, just allowing them to be free without intruding on them.

"Wait, Kuzu, do we have your permission to change things?" The Akimichi boy questioned respectfully, looking so unbelievably innocent that Kakuzu felt sick.

These children were nothing like the children he had grown up around. They were innocent and blissfully unaware of the horrors that would await them in the career of a ninja.

For the first time since he had met them, Kakuzu allowed himself to admit to himself that he didn't want any of these children facing any of those horrors. He wanted them to steer clear of the way of the ninja. He wanted them to grow old and senile and be happy without ever having to know the feel of another person's blood on their hands.

But they were bred for the shinobi life. Even the civilian had the makings of a great warrior. Their progress in ninjutsu was stellar for their age- even when Kakuzu pushed them to be better.

He wanted the world for these kids. But he knew that hell would be what they received.

With a noncommittal grunt, the man allowed himself to turn his head to the side, against the wall, and closed his eyes. "Do whatever you want. Just don't bother me unless it's important."

They left him alone then and didn't actually bother him at any point. When they formulated a question, they found an answer for themselves. And, quite frankly, from what he heard as he faked dozing off, these kids were doing a well enough job of touching up on the story by themselves that they didn't need him at all.

They were ten years old.

Only two years of this innocent bliss left.
Kakuzu is an angsty man. And this is totally my headcanon for how he ended up being the demonic ragdoll we saw in the anime! Don't steal! I came up with it all on my own.

I'm sorry for taking so long to update this, but I have a newfound muse for this! So I'm thinking at least one more chapter before I fall into my old procrastinating way!

Please review!
"Nothing, Lord Third. Whoever it is that has been teaching these three kids has not returned in the past three months." Kakashi Hatake informed the Hokage from his spot beside Tsume Inuzuka, arms crossed as he slouched into himself.

"That or my brat taught him how to dilute and mask his scent." Tsume growled immediately after the younger male had spoken, "I swear, I can't control that runt. Ten years old and already he's chunin-level at avoiding detection."

Hiruzen bit his tongue- he couldn't tell Tsume that the Inuzuka had created the problem child that Kiba Inuzuka now was. That would just anger Tsume even further. And that wouldn't be in the best of his interests.

"This is most troubling." The aged Kage hummed, eyes closed with his arms folded over his desk. "This person has managed to elude detection for at least four years now. Clearly, he isn't a villager- how does he manage to sneak in without ever triggering any of our alarms or traps?"

Kuromaru, who had sat quietly to Tsume's left this whole time, now cleared his throat and called attention to himself. "If I may, sir, the pup's recognized as a tracking prodigy for a reason. He's had the ability to sniff out oddities since he was in diapers. He's undoubtedly honed that and focused it on traps- we should remember that his pack's headquarters lie in the most dangerous area of the Forest of Death."

Tsume grunted in agreement, "With the kid's help, there's no doubt that someone can get in and out of the Village without detection." Now she sighed and raised her face to the sky with exasperation, "Anyone wanna adopt 'im?"

"I'm not one for kids." Kakashi answered cynically, then turned back to the Hokage. "Listen, I understand that we should be worried about someone getting so easily into the Village for security reasons. But this guy's only ever actually come here to teach those brats. He hasn't broken any laws- we're sure that all those misdemeanors committed by the pack are of their own machination. Why're we so focused on catching him?"

Now Tsume growled audibly, but she said nothing.

Hiruzen didn't have to be a mind reader to know that she undoubtedly thought that this mysterious teacher had something to do with her husband's death. He would have to speak privately with her later on- she knew that the mission Daichi had gone on would be one that got him killed. It was erroneous to think that this unknown intruder had anything to do with what had happened.

After thinking this, Hiruzen turned to the Hatake that had spoken up. "There are too many unknown variables to allow him to continue running loose. The fact of the matter is that he is a shinobi from another Hidden Village that is able to sneak through our defenses. He may keep this information to himself- or he could sell it. This man is a danger to our way of life and he will remain this way until we catch him."

This person's intentions could be as innocent as they could be sinister. He may be sneaking into Konoha to aid children he had taken a shine to. Or he could be infiltrating their village to systematically weaken their defenses and grooming those children to use them in an attack against their home.
Until now, they had found no evidence of any structural weaknesses caused by anything other than natural processes. But as the Hokage, he had to contemplate all possible attacks on his home. And this man was a danger until he was caught and properly interrogated.

"So he's an enemy until he tells us why he's doing what he's doing." Kakashi summarized with a sigh. "I'd say only an Inuzuka could create a problem like this, but an Akimichi and civilian are involved, so there's clearly something wrong with all three of them."

Tsume barked out a harsh laugh as she shook her head. "Says the boy that-"

"Up, up, up!" Kakashi interrupted with a harsh glare, "We don't talk about that anymore."

Hiruzen shook his head at both his best trackers and their familiarity with each other. But he soon sighed and sobered up.

In his heart, he wanted to believe that this man was a good influence on the children and had only the best intentions. But in his mind, he knew that he couldn't rely on the hoped kindness of others. He needed to ensure it.

She woke up in her bedroom.

This wouldn't have been surprising or odd... If not for the fact that she was pretty sure she had fallen asleep on the wooden floor of their headquarters within the Forest of Death.

As soon as her mind had caught up with the fact that she had not been in her house last night, the young girl propelled her upper body forward. The sheets on top of her fell so they pooled on her lap but she didn't pay them any attention. Instead she glanced around her room in alarm, immediately feeling a wave of relief wash over her when she spotted Kiba, Akamaru, and Chouji sleeping on a heavy comforter on the ground.

It seemed that Kuzu had brought them to her house to sleep after they had fallen asleep in their headquarters. Even though it didn't happen often, it seemed that Kuzu had created this specific routine perfectly because he had never woken any of them in the small handful of times this had happened.

Because this had happened before, Sakura knew that the next thing she should have checked was her nightstand to look for a note from the old man. And when she turned her gaze to the piece of furniture, it was to find there was a rolled up piece of paper resting innocently beside her lamp.

With a small smile, the girl reached for the paper and opened it up.

'Remember to practice your earth release techniques. Don't mess up with this homework- I'm expecting good grades in all your subjects in the Academy at the end of this term.

Make sure the Inuzuka keeps proper hygienic techniques. He stinks. And I'm sure he's got cavities.

The Akimichi needs less sugar in his diet. He most probably also has cavities.

You should get checked out too. Don't your parents take you to the dentist?

Cut those bangs if you can't keep the damn things out of your eyes- you'll get killed in the field if you keep messing around with them.

Next time I come back, I'll be needing your aid. So practice and learn as much as you can.'
The first few orders didn't really strike Sakura as odd. The old man had been leaving her direct orders for a while now, mostly on the days that he left them in her house after they had fallen asleep on him. At first, they had been directed generally at all of them. But by the third time this had happened, he had left direct messages to her that she was supposed to then inform her friends about.

It was pretty interesting, though, to see that the old man had caught on to her growing discomfort with her long hair, even though she hadn't said anything about it. Although the whole cavity thing wasn't all that surprising- Kiba had been grouching about tooth pain whenever he ate sweet or cold things recently.

The last line, though... It was odd. Different. Kuzu didn't really tell them he would be back. It was kind of unnecessary, in her eyes. He always came back, no matter how much time he spent away. But asking for their help... Actually telling them he would need their aid... It was kind of scary.

With her eyebrows furrowed, Sakura chanced a look at the two boys sleeping on her floor. Kiba was splayed out on his back, with an arm thrown over Chouji's face. Chouji, in turn, was sleeping on his left side as he snored softly. Akamaru, so similar to Kiba in some things that it was kind of scary sometimes, was laying on top of Kiba's forehead, curled up and content.

It would be a while before either of them woke up, it seemed. If they were about to wake up, Chouji would be on his back and Kiba would be face down.

With a small sigh, Sakura decided to leave the note where she had found it and stood up from her bed. Once one her feet, the young girl made her way towards her dresser to get some clothes so she could begin to prepare for the day.

"Well, Kuzu said you should get it checked out, Kiba."

Akamaru yipped at him about how important it was for him to be able to use his teeth in battle in case of a worst case scenario.

And Chouji, bless his soul, didn't really offer any other reason as to why he shouldn't be fighting against going to the dentist. The Akimichi merely cooked their breakfast in silence.

Delicious aromas filled up the Haruno kitchen because of Chouji's expertise in the culinary arts, but Kiba couldn't bring himself to get excited over the fact that they had, essentially, been allowed complete freedom within Sakura's house. Her father was off on a business trip and her mother had run off to the market for some reason and neither had checked up on Sakura before leaving her home alone- which meant that all four of them were now in Sakura's house without any adult supervision.

It wasn't the first time this had happened and Kiba was sure that it wouldn't be the last. Even though Sakura's parents were neurotic over her well being, they seemed to be kind of ignorant over just how dangerous their daughter could be. He guessed it was because they thought she was too good to sneak boys into her house in the middle of the night. In his eyes, they were kind of stupid.

"I don't like hospitals. " He crossed his arms over his chest with what was most definitely not a pout pulling at his lips. "And I've been good for two years without going to no stupid dentist! I don't gotta change that."

Sakura shook her head beside him, then placed a paper on the island where they sat. Kiba glanced down at it, noticed the old man's simple yet sturdy handwriting, and frowned when he noticed the hygiene part about him.

"I'm fine!"
"I think we've gone nose-blind around you." Sakura offered with a shrug, "Because we're pack, we're always together. But the old man isn't around you so often. And the girls in class are always whining about you smelling like wet dog."

Akamaru jumped onto the island's tabletop and growled at Sakura, "Well they smell like over-processed perfume and stupid manufactured stuff, but you don't see me barking about it!"

"Yeah, Akamaru's got a point!" Kiba turned a glare on his best friend, "How come they can complain about my smell but I can't say nothing about the fact that their stupid perfume constantly clogs up my nose?"

Sakura offered him a sympathetic frown. "Because society sucks." The shrug was as annoying as the fact that Kiba couldn't be angry with her over this. He knew she was right.

With a defeated huff, the Inuzuka placed his arms on the countertop and threw his chin onto his forearms.

"I don't wanna."

There was a soft click as Chouji turned off the stovetop. When Kiba lifted his gaze, it was to find that his best friend had prepared a large serving of oyakodon, filled with way too much chicken and beef for any normal person. He had used the Haruno's largest ceramic bowl as the vehicle for eating and Kiba found it kind of interesting how the four of them were able to eat from the same plate and none thought about that being possibly weird.

Chouji placed the giant bowl on the countertop, in between Sakura and Kiba, and then sat down in the chair that had been left open for him in the very middle.

Akamaru barked as he jumped towards the plate, sat down, and eagerly waited to be given permission to be able to eat from the humans.

Kiba sighed as he picked himself up, silently accepting the chopsticks that were offered to him by Sakura.

"I can ask my parents to see if they can take us together, Kiba." Chouji offered kindly, his words striking Kiba straight through the heart.

He didn't understand people.

But at least his pack was there to help him slowly come to terms with how odd everyone else was.

After they had eaten their breakfast, they worked on editing Kuzu's story so it read like an appropriate myth rather than another war story.

"We gotta cut out Hashirama and Konoha." Sakura mumbled as she lay on the floor with a pencil in her hand, poised over their first draft.

Kiba hummed in thought for a moment, "Maybe we could call Konoha a magical forest? Like, add magic into the story and make it seem like Hashirama is a legendary monster or something."

Sakura glanced at the Inuzuka for a second, then looked to her right and at Chouji, who lay beside her. Her lips were pressed into a tight line, her eyebrows were knitted, and her eyes were squinted so narrowly that they were almost closed.
With a small smile, Chouji looked down at the paper they had begun to write their first draft and contemplated on a possible name for their home and First Hokage.

He wasn't the smartest person around. But apparently he was very good when it came to coming up with names. Kiba was great at nicknames, but, apparently, he was good at thinking up names for their schoolwork.

The name of the protagonist of their story had been one he had thought up when he had noticed that Kuzu had never given the ninja a name. Nanashi. Nameless. Sakura and Kiba had both loved it- Kiba had thought it was cool and badass, but Sakura had said that it was a great name because it alluded to how small and helpless the Betrayed Ninja had been for all of his life.

Chouji had just thought the name was fitting because Kuzu had never given the man a name.

Hashirama Senju was their First Hokage. He was a man that gave his life for a dream and deserved the admiration and respect of the whole population of Konohagakure. He was also an amazing shinobi that had been so unbelievably skilled that he was known as the God of Shinobi. This wasn't a man he could besmirch for the sake of hiding his identity.

"How about... Kandaina omo, the Generous Lord? And Konoha can just be known as the Generous Lord's kingdom."

With twin shouts of approval, Kiba and Sakura let him know that they approved of the changes. The pink haired girl set to writing the rest of the story they would be handing in, all the while Kiba commended Chouji on having such a great talent for accurately naming things.

Chouji didn't understand why his friends thought it was a talent or why they liked it so much. What he had offered until now was simple and pretty easy to understand. There really was no reason to think it was more than it was.

But as long as they were happy, Chouji was too.

Chouza knew that the relationship between Kiba and his family was strained and difficult. He had known this for years now, much like he had known for quite some time that Sakura's own parents were simple civilians that were at a complete loss as to how to deal with having a shinobi daughter.

While the Haruno parents hovered over their daughter at times and refused to give her much space, Tsume gave Kiba too much freedom. And it seemed that this freedom was now impacting his health, if the children's assumption of him having cavities was reality.

"Tsume, may I have a moment?"

It had been two years since Tsume Inuzuka had become a widow and Kiba and Hana had lost a father. It had been two whole years since the Inuzuka Clan had lost a pillar in their family. It had been two years since Kiba's friendship with Sakura and Chouji had become completely inextricable. And it had been two years since Chouji had confided in him that he was worried about the Inuzuka family.

The children were not stupid. They were not ignorant. They were just children. The Haruno family didn't seem to understand this. Tsume didn't seem to care. But Chouza was very much aware of the fact that these kids were smart enough to notice when things were off, even though they were not able to understand why.

"I smell you've been with the runt."
Kuromaru had been the one to speak up. Tsume remained hunched over the mission report she was filling out, all the while the large dog to her side looked Chouza directly in the eyes.

It was still somewhat unnerving to speak to the animal as if he were yet another person. But he had learned from seeing his own son interacting with all sorts of different animals, Akamaru and Kuromaru included. Even though to him, a human, they were mere animals, they were still conscious and knowledgeable. He may not have been able to understand or communicate well with them- but he knew that they deserved his respect like any other person.

Having a child was one of the most terrifying yet enlightening occurrences that could happen to a man.

"The children came over to the house an hour or so ago. They had been finishing homework in Sakura's home when they fell asleep. Chouji made them all breakfast."

Tsume grunted with a stiff nod of her chin, but didn't take her eyes away from the report. Chouza, after years of having dealt with the likes of Inoichi and Shikaku, was disappointed but not surprised... Yet again.

Finding the woman hadn't been difficult. Unlike her son, who could be just about impossible to track down without an Inuzuka nose, Tsume had recently become a creature of habit. If she wasn't at the Mission's Desk getting assigned onto a mission, she was in the Inuzuka compound relaxing. If not in either of these places, she could be found in the Hidden Drink tavern.

Right now she was seated on one of the smaller tables on the balcony of the tavern, Kuromaru standing beside her as the ninja around them indulged themselves in alcohol.

"The kit's house is a favorite for their sleepovers." Kuromaru offered as he sat down in front of Chouza, gazing up at the man with comfortability clear in his eye. "But the pup staying out at night isn't anything new or worrying. You're not here to tell us where he's been."

Kiba was a ten year old child. Smart as he was and as skilled in taijutsu as he may have been, he was still only ten years old. Chouza had never been the kind to ignore age when it came to a ninja's viability in the field- he was one of the main backers to ending the practice of graduating Academy children younger than twelve so they could become fully fledged genin. Kids were supposed to be kids. They could begin to completely take life seriously when they were old enough to truly comprehend it.

Because of this way of thinking, he couldn't understand how someone as smart as Tsume could allow her second son to run loose. Chouza was not blind- he knew very well how dangerous Kiba could be if he wished to be. He sometimes despaired in thinking what could have been of this innocent child if he had never befriended Sakura and Chouji.

But this was not a fight he would be able to win. He had no say in telling a widow how to raise her children.

"The children wish to go to the dentist together, they think it might be fun to be with friends when they go." They had tried to make it sound like they had wanted to go because they were all interested in their own health, rather than trying to go with Kiba to be there for him. But Chouza could see right through them.

Something shifted in Kuromaru upon hearing this. His mouth tightened as his amber eye seemed to harden.
Tsume finally spoke up, making Chouza turn to her and lose sight of the seemingly irritated ninken. "Kuromaru'll bring you some money later." Tsume finally placed her pen down and brought her hands together to stretch them over her head. "While you're at it, see if you can take the runt to get vaccinated. Last time I tried, the little shit decided to be a hellsprite and bit the doc, so he didn't get some of the less important vaccines."

Runt.

He still couldn't understand why this was a descriptor of Kiba. Wasn't the runt of the litter supposed to be the weakest link? That certainly wasn't Kiba.

Tsume finally looked at him and gave him an amused smirk, "Inuzuka can be pretty hard to tame, y'know."

No. He didn't. Because Kiba could be just as decent as Chouji or Sakura if he put his mind to it. Just like Sakura and Chouji could be as devious and 'dangerous' as Kiba if they wished to.

These were children. They were not supposed to be boxed into such rigid assumptions just because their parents couldn't understand the fact that they were ever-changing because they were children.

"Of course." He eventually answered, "I'll tell you the date once I've made the proper arrangements."

"Sure thing, Chouza. Thanks." Then she turned back to her work.

Chouza left with a heavy heart.

Their weekend was spent finishing up their writing project and taking Kuzu's plea for more training seriously. When they weren't working on editing Kuzu's story, they were trying their best to perfect the few earth release jutsu the man had taught them. Sure, they would sometimes take a break, eat a delicious steak, and continue planning for their great sleepover in the Forest of Death, but they took their work very seriously.

When Monday finally rolled around, they had completed their big story and were all incredibly proud of what they had come up with. Sakura had utilized her most perfect penmanship to make the story look as grown-up as possible. And Chouji's drawings had really cemented the mythological feel of their big story.

"Alright, kids. Would any of you like to read your stories aloud?" Iruka-sensei asked them once they had finally hit the Literature period, starting off the class with a broad smile.

Even though this period was usually the most tedious, everyone was actually excited for it. Lunch and recess were usually the most looked after periods in their class. But, today, Literature took the cake.

Kiba and Naruto's arms shot up into the air almost as soon as Iruka-sensei began to speak.

"Us first! Our team is the best and our story's the greatest!"

"That's not a real word, Fox Breath!" Kiba shouted at the blonde before he turned back to Iruka-sensei. "Our story'll blow theirs out of the water!"

Akamaru barked from his perch on top of Kiba's head, undoubtedly adding his two-cents to how great their story was.
Sakura smiled softly at her pack's eagerness and raised her own hand. Iruka-sensei quirked an eyebrow at him and, while Kiba and Naruto began to exchange insults and shouts, the pink haired girl asked, "Could we get into our groups for the first five or so minutes? That way we can practice how we'll want to read our stories."

Both fiery boys were doing their best to get closer to each other, almost standing on top of their desks, even though they were supposed to be on opposite sides of the room. Uzumaki was at the very edge of the classroom, while Inuzuka was in the middle. But that sure didn't stop them.

Iruka-sensei smiled at Sakura, "Well, if a group doesn't want to read their story to the rest of the class, they don't have to. But if you wish-"

"Yes! Now let us go first!"

"Naruto and Kiba, I will leave both your teams without reading your stories out loud if you continue interrupting."

That shut them both up.

Sakura smiled and looked over the classroom. Even Shikamaru, who was mostly always asleep by this time of the day, was eagerly looking at Iruka-sensei... Well, as eagerly as he could muster up. His eyes were ever so slightly widened, rather than completely narrowed. Even Sasuke and Hinata seemed like they actually wanted to read their myths. And Hinata hated speaking!

"Alright. Get into your groups quickly so you can decide how you'd like to tell your stories to the rest of the class." Iruka-sensei relented and in less than a second, Kiba was jumping over his desk to jump over the rest that were in the way so he could reach Chouji's desk.

Sakura shook her head as she stood up and jogged towards the desk, trying her best to dodge all of her other classmates as she did so.

"I still don't understand why we don't meet at your desks, guys." Was the first thing Chouji told him, Sakura, and Akamaru as soon as they reached his desk.

Sakura and he were seated pretty close by. There was only a kid with the surname of Hitomi in between them and he always moved to his friends when group projects were announced. In essence, they could stay in place and Chouji could take his desk and they were perfect.

"Where's the fun in staying put?"

"I agree with Kiba on this."

Chouji sighed softly as he pulled out their master manuscript. "Any thoughts?"

Sakura was usually the one to keep their important papers. But they had decided to let Chouji keep this specific story because they felt that he had worked twice as hard as either of them in making the story. He had come up with a lot of the names and descriptions and even made the drawings for their big work.

"I think you should read the narration parts, Chouji." Sakura offered with a small smile, "You did come up with a lot of the story, after all. I could read for the elders and Kandaina omo. Kiba could read for Nanashi."

He liked that plan!
"I'm the hero!"

"You get stabbed in the back by your village and mercilessly slaughter your elders." Sakura told him with an unamused deadpan, leaving him to smile broadly back at her.

"Exactly. I'm the hero!"

He was very much aware of the fact that they might get in trouble for this story. It was dark. It spoke of betrayal and a huge massacre. In its original state, it was even almost kind of treasonous. But they had changed it enough that Kiba believed that Iruka-sensei wouldn't have too much of a reason to not like their story.

Beside, they were all ten now. Only two years away from graduating. Their teacher shouldn't get so angry over them talking about betrayal and murder. Especially considering how they had been themes in another myth they had read during the class.

"O-okay. I... I don't mind reading so much."

Kiba smirked at the quiver in Chouji's voice and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come on, Porky. You'll be amazing. Just like Pinkie and I. We're all great."

Akamaru yipped at being forgotten, but Kiba growled back at him that he wasn't part of this story so he could shut it.

His dog bit him in the nose before jumping onto Chouji's head.

"Brat."

"Runt."

Kiba rolled his eyes and ignored Akamaru's insult... even if it stung for some reason.

The first group allowed to go was Hinata, Sasuke, and Shino's group. Their story was one about a samurai that loved a ninja of a warring clan and lost her in battle. The samurai then went into the underworld to recapture her soul, only to die and reunite with her in the other world. Sasuke read the whole story while Shino and Hinata stood to either of his sides, quiet and unmoving.

Chouji guessed that Hinata didn't want to read because she was still so painfully shy. But Shino had most probably read nothing because he just hadn't felt like it.

After their team, the group of Ami, Haru, and Aoi had told their own story. All three of them had tried to act, but Ami had tried to outshine Haru. Haru had tried to outshine her. And they had ended up shouting over each other, all the while the blue haired Aoi had shrunk into the backboard as he tried to tell the end of their story. It was an interesting enough story, with a talking phoenix and a musical rock, but Chouji had not been able to hear it all because of Haru and Ami shouting over each other.

Finally, their group had been called up. Kiba had, once again, jumped over desks to get to the front of the room. They had only been two, Chouji's and Iruka-sensei's own... But... Still...

He and Sakura followed after him.

Once they stood in front of the chalkboard, facing the classroom, Chouji looked down at the papers in his hand. He looked up one final time to look at Iruka-sensei standing at the back of the classroom,
Once upon a time, there was a brave warrior simply known as Nanashi. He was a spectacular shinobi that never questioned his superiors and had always completed his missions, no matter how difficult. One day, he was sent by his kingdom's Elders on a mission he was told was extremely important he complete. But he did not worry- he had never failed before. The target may have been powerful, but so was he. So he left his home in the search of his target, now Chouji took a break, looking over at Shikamaru- noticing that his eyes were actually alert in intrigue- before he breathed out, "not knowing of the trap his Elders had set up for him."

"He travelled far and wide until reaching a large chain of mountains that held a stone staircase that led him to the heavens, into the kingdom of Kandaina omo, a forest spirit that was believed to be immortal."

Now Sakura stepped forward as she pointed a finger at Kiba- she had most probably already read over Chouji's shoulder to know the man's lines. "Betrayed shinobi, turn back. These are my lands and I will protect them if I have to, but there is no need to fight. Go back to your home. Forget having come to my territory."

Kiba, surprisingly enough, didn't shout out his lines. Instead he took on a rather serious approach, kind of reminding Chouji of the old man's own mood as he told them this story.

"I was given a mission, Kandaina omo. As difficult as it may be, I have to see it through. For that is my ninja way."

Kiba lunged at Sakura, who blocked his first punch and stepped behind him in a graceful twirl. After she had finished the motion, she wrapped her left arm around his neck and raised her right arm so her hand was grasping the top of his head- effectively placing him in a chokehold.

They hadn't talked about doing this. But Sakura and Kiba were great at improvising these kinds of things.

"The battle was over before it had even begun. Nanashi was no match to the Lord of the Heavens. But Kandaina omo was known by this name for a reason- he was as generous as he was powerful. So he allowed Nanashi to escape and return to his kingdom- a failure."

Sakura released Kiba and pushed him away, then rushed to stand beside Chouji once again. Kiba feigned a sad and long trek before looking Sakura directly in the eyes once more. When Chouji turned to look at her, it was to find her with her arms crossed over her chest and a heavy glare on her face.

"You return a failure! You may as well have not returned at all!"

"But, Elders-"

"You are a weakling and a disgrace! You are now to be known as the pariah of this kingdom!"

Kiba glared harshly at Sakura as he slunk away from her to stand on Chouji's other side once again.

Chouji continued with a heavy tone, "The Elders plans to kill Nanashi had failed, but this is not where the story ends. He became ostracized for having returned with his life a failure, rather than having died trying to complete his mission. His kingdom turned on him and belittled him, running him to the edges of his home until he was living in horrible conditions without any money to sustain himself."

When Chouji chanced a glance at Iruka-sensei, it was to find that his teacher had a small frown on his face. This scared him, but he continued reading as best he could.

"The scorn he received from his home made him begin to hate his kingdom. And one day, when he overheard a blind Elder speaking about his failed assassination, this anger erupted in a frenzy."

"Nanashi should have gotten killed fighting Kandaina omo. Why couldn't he have died as he was supposed to? That way, we would have been able to rally our kingdom with him as a martyr." Sakura loudly whispered with both of her eyes closed, then shrugged to herself, "Oh well. At least we have now rallied with him as a disgrace. A fate well earned in my book."

"Nanashi's rage knew no bounds. He broke into the Great Shinobi Temple, where the kingdom kept their strongest jutsu hidden from the world, and stole them all. Under the cover of night, he escaped with all these powerful jutsu and, once he was far away, performed one that granted him limited immortality, for a rather heavy price. For three years he trained his body and strengthened himself until he deemed he was powerful enough to avenge his memory. After these three years, he returned to his kingdom," Now Chouji took a dramatic pause as Kiba rushed to Sakura and held her by the throat, "And slaughtered all of the Elders that had dared try and kill him."

Kiba and Sakura didn't depict the death of the Elder. Instead, after Chouji had finished speaking, Kiba stepped back and returned to his spot beside Chouji.

Okay, at least Iruka-sensei couldn't get angry with them over depicting the deaths of Elders. That was good.

"The end." They all chorused.

Chouji's heart beat loudly in his chest as he stared at Iruka-sensei. And from the way neither Sakura nor Kiba moved, it seemed that they too were eager to see how their teacher would react.

Some of their classmates began to cheer over the great story they had told, but Chouji was much too focused on Iruka-sensei to pay them any mind.

The man was frowning softly.

Oh no.

He closed his eyes and brought his hand up to his chin. He looked extremely deep in thought.

Oh no.

~*~

I don't always leave a chapter on a cliffhanger. But, when I do, I make sure to make it as evil as possible.

I hope you all liked this chapter! Please review and tell me your thoughts!

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!