

Naruto Yotsuki, Kumogakure

The road home from Yasai-Sanna had taken four days, and for the first two of them Naruto had been forced to listen to the song. The Lightning Daimyo's escort had learned all seven verses before the bridge was even out of sight, and they sang it at every rest stop, at every stream crossing, and once, at full volume, while relieving themselves against the same pine tree. Purple lightning had broken the bug-boy, apparently, and the bug-boy rhymed with nothing at all. That had not stopped them. Only when the Daimyo's road turned west towards his palace and Team Ten's turned north into the mountains had the singing finally faded, and even then Omoi had hummed the chorus for half a day without noticing he was doing it.

Kumogakure came into view on the morning of the fourth day, and Naruto felt something in his chest loosen at the sight of it.

The village clung to the mountains the way it always had, its pale towers growing straight out of the rock, linked by rope bridges and stone walkways that creaked in the wind. Clouds sat low over the highest peaks, so thick that the top of the Raikage Tower vanished into them. The cold stung his nose despite the scarf pulled up to his chin. The air smelled of wet stone, pine resin, and the smoke from the forges on the lower terraces.

Gods, he had missed stone.

After a week of silk sheets, painted ceilings, and servants who bowed every time he sneezed, the plain grey walls of home looked better than any palace. Nobody here would write a song about him. Nobody here would ask him to stand still and look dangerous for a man in robes.

The gate guards waved them through with barely a glance, and Darui stopped just past the arch, scratching the back of his neck.

"Right," he said, voice as flat as ever. "That's it. Mission's finished. Go home, eat something, and sleep for a day. I'll handle the report."

"Just like that?" Omoi's eyes darted to the nearest rooftop as if someone might be waiting there with a lute. "What if the song got here before us? Merchants travel faster than we do, sensei. What if half the village already knows the words, and they make us stand on a stage at the next festival? I can't sing. I mean that, I physically cannot hold a note, my mother made me promise never to try in public-"

"Omoi."

"Yes, sensei?"

"Dull," Darui muttered, and that was apparently the end of the conversation.

Yugito laughed under her breath and touched Naruto's good arm as she passed, fingers lingering for just a moment. She said nothing. The look she threw over her shoulder said plainly

enough that she would be knocking on his door before the night was out, and Naruto found himself smiling despite everything.

Then Darui started walking, and he did not turn towards his own home.

He took the long stone stair that climbed towards the Raikage Tower, hands in his pockets, shoulders slouched as though he were going to buy bread. Naruto knew exactly what Darui would be telling his grandfather within the hour. The seal had slipped on the bridge for one second, and a green-haired girl from Takigakure had watched him the whole fight without blinking once.

He did not ask to come along.

He had barely made it to the end of the gate square when a runner caught up with him, a skinny chūnin named Kenta Ishida with a nose red from the cold and a Tower armband half falling off his sleeve.

"Naruto-sama!" The boy skidded to a halt, panting. "The Third Raikage... he wants to see you. Right away, he said. Well, he said 'when the boy gets back', but I think he meant right away."

Naruto tapped the bandage under his jacket, wincing more than he needed to. "Can't, sorry. Medic's orders. I've got to have this shoulder looked at before anything else, or she'll skin me. Tell him I'll come later."

"Later when?" Kenta asked nervously.

"Later," Naruto repeated, and walked off before the runner could ask again.

There was no medic waiting for him, of course. The shoulder had been stitched on the bridge and checked twice on the road, and it ached no more than it had yesterday. He told himself he was just tired. He had nearly cooked himself from the inside a few days ago, after all, and anyone would want a bed and a closed door after that.

You don't want to know.

Even now, the old man's voice followed him everywhere.

What was he supposed to say to him now?

Thank you for raising me? What would you have done to her if your men had caught her?

He had no idea, and until he did, he would rather not stand in that office at all.

The quickest way home ran straight past the foot of the Raikage Tower, so Naruto took the long way instead. He went down through the market terraces, past the noodle stalls and the blacksmiths hammering out kunai, then back up the eastern stair, a detour that added at least

half an hour to his walk. It was stupid, and he knew that perfectly well. Kumo was not so big that he could avoid his own grandfather forever.

He had just reached the narrow street below his apartment when a voice boomed down from above.

"Yo! Little lightning walkin' slow, takin' the long road, where ya gonna go?"

Naruto groaned before he even looked up.

Killer Bee was crouched on the edge of a rooftop, sunglasses on despite the clouds, a battered notebook open on one knee and a pencil tucked behind his ear. He scribbled something down, crossed it out, and scribbled again, then dropped off the roof and landed in front of Naruto with barely a sound.

"Hey, Uncle Bee," Naruto sighed.

"You're three streets wrong for home, kono yaro," Bee pointed the pencil at him. "Tower's that way, you're walkin' this way. Ain't askin' why, 'cause I ain't that kinda guy, bakayaro!"

So he had noticed. Naruto was certain that Bee just liked to act stupid, but in secret, he noticed much more than people gave him credit for.

"I'm tired," Naruto said, which was at least half true. "I just want to sleep. That's all."

"Sleep is for the weak, and you got a whole week!" Bee snapped the notebook shut and tucked it into his belt. "Today's a day off. No wives, no lies, just you and your uncle under Kumo skies. Wheee!"

"You don't even have a wife."

"Exactly, fool ya. That's why it rhymes."

Before Naruto could argue, Bee had hooked an arm around his good shoulder and was steering him back down the street, away from his apartment, his bed, and the quiet he had been dreaming about since the bridge. Bee was humming something under his breath, and to Naruto's horror, it sounded a great deal like the Daimyo's song.

Gods, he was never going to get any sleep!

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"Not the left side, Bee! You know the rules!"

The shout came from inside a cloud of grease smoke before they had even reached the stall, and Naruto couldn't help but grin.

Gaku's grill sat on the second market terrace, squeezed between a rope maker and a stall selling cheap kunai by the bundle, and at one time or another it had fed half the chūnin in Kumo. Gaku Ishikawa himself was a bald, one-eyed former chūnin from the eastern valleys, with forearms as thick as hams and a voice that could carry across a training ground. He had banned Bee from the left half of his counter four years ago, after Bee climbed onto it to perform a new verse and put his foot straight through the plank. The ban had never been lifted, and Gaku had never stopped reminding him of it.

"Right side, left side, meat don't care, fool ya," Bee declared, dropping onto the very last stool on the right. "Same fire, same grill, same busted chair."

"Same bill, too," Gaku grunted, flipping a row of skewers without looking. "And you still owe me for that plank."

Bee ordered two dozen skewers, beef, chicken hearts, and grilled onions, along with two mugs of the cheapest ale in the stall. Naruto had meant to eat a few bites to be polite. Instead he ate eleven skewers in a row and only stopped because his stomach finally reminded him that it was there. After a week of tiny palace dishes arranged like flower beds, plain charred meat tasted better than anything the Daimyo's cooks had put in front of him.

Around them the market carried on as it always did. Two genin at the end of the counter were arguing about whose fault it was that a farmer's goat had escaped during a D-rank. A woman at the rope stall was haggling over the price of a coil as if her life depended on it. Somewhere down the terrace, a drunk was singing an old marching song, badly, and getting the words wrong.

"So," Bee said, licking sauce off his thumb. "Princess job. Were the princesses pretty?"

"There were five of them."

Bee choked on his ale. "Five?! Kono yaro, and you came back lookin' like somebody ran over your dog?"

"It was a long trip," Naruto muttered, rolling his left shoulder without thinking. The stitches pulled, and he winced before he could stop himself.

Bee's sunglasses tilted down a fraction. "And the shoulder?"

"Training accident."

"Lie, lie, I see it in your eye," Bee sang under his breath, but he did not push, and he went back to his skewers.

Naruto was more grateful for that than he would ever say out loud.

Only one skewer was left on the plate between them by the end, a fat piece of beef charred black at the edges. They both reached for it at the same moment. Bee slapped Naruto's hand away, picked it up, studied it, and then dropped it onto Naruto's side of the plate with a sniff.

"Last one's for the student. House rule."

"Whose house?"

"Bee's house." He jabbed a greasy thumb at his own chest. "Been the rule since you were knee-high and cryin' 'cause the old man made you run up the north stair twenty times."

"I didn't cry."

"You cried so hard Gaku gave you a free onion."

"He did," Gaku called from behind the smoke, without turning round. "Snot all over my counter. Left side, too."

Naruto ate the skewer in silence, which was the only dignified thing left for him to do.

The weapons smith on the third terrace was a narrow, sweltering shop, and Tetsuo Kanda, its owner, was a short, soot-stained man from the iron mines of the northern ridge who looked at Bee the way most people looked at an approaching storm.

"Don't touch anything," he said as soon as Bee ducked through the door.

Bee touched everything. He drew a straight blade from the rack, weighed it, made a face, and put it back. He tried a second and a third. By the seventh he had three of them spinning in the air above his head, catching each one by the hilt and tossing it up again, while Tetsuo stood behind the counter with both hands pressed over his eyes.

"Little bro! Catch!"

The fourth sword came at Naruto handle first. He reached for it with his left arm out of habit, and the stitches screamed. Bee's hand shot out and snatched the blade out of the air an inch from Naruto's fingers, and in the same smooth motion he flipped it and pressed the hilt into Naruto's right hand instead.

He didn't say anything about it. He simply kept juggling the other two as though nothing had happened.

"Grip's too tight," Bee said, nodding at Naruto's hand. "You hold it like it owes you money. Loose. Like you're shakin' hands with a pretty girl."

"I don't shake hands with pretty girls."

"Yeah, that's your whole problem, fool ya."

Naruto loosened his grip anyway. The sword felt better at once, lighter.

They bought nothing. Tetsuo watched them leave with the relief of a man whose shop had survived a siege.

The dango stall at the corner of the fourth terrace belonged to Granny Fumi, who was at least a hundred years old if she was a day and who had been selling the same three-coloured sweets for as long as anyone could remember. She took one look at Naruto, reached up, and pinched his cheek hard enough to bruise.

"Look at ye," she clucked. "All bones and bandages. Don't they feed ye in that army?"

"I'm a genin, Granny, not an army."

"Same thing. Sit." She pushed two sticks into his hands and a third into Bee's. "And you, ye big lump. Still singin' at people?"

"Every day, Granny, every day, Bee don't stop, Bee don't sway-"

"Mm. Sit down before ye knock my lanterns over."

They sat on the low bench outside the stall. Naruto had barely bitten into his dango when Bee leaned back against the wall, stretched out his long legs, and announced to the entire street, "This kid, when he was five, tried to eat a whole stick in one bite to beat my record. Choked so bad the old man had to hang him upside down by the ankles."

"You told me it was a dare!"

"It was a dare. I dared ya. Didn't say it was a smart dare."

Naruto chewed for a moment. "Remember when you tried to rap for the Raikage's council and forgot the words to your own song?"

Bee stopped chewing.

"You stood there for so long that Grandfather fell asleep," Naruto went on. "Darui still tells that story."

"That was strategy."

"You hid behind a pillar."

"Strategy!" Bee pointed his dango stick at him. "Ain't no shame in a tactical retreat, bakayaro."

Granny Fumi cackled behind them, and Bee shot her a wounded look over his sunglasses. Then, without a word, he slid his last ball of dango off the stick and onto Naruto's.

Naruto ate it. Neither of them said anything about that either.

The public baths below the east cistern were nearly empty at that hour, which was the only reason Bee was allowed in at all. Steam hung low over the water, and the stone was warm under Naruto's back. He sank down until the hot water reached his chin and kept his bandaged shoulder carefully above the surface.

Bee lowered himself into the pool beside him with a groan like an old door. Without his shirt, the scars across his chest and arms stood out pale against his dark skin, a long ridge down one side of his ribs, a puckered circle above his hip, the iron kanji inked on his shoulder half hidden under an old burn.

His eyes went to the fresh pink line on Naruto's neck. Then to the bandage. He was quiet for a while.

"That one's new," he said finally, nodding at the neck.

"Missing-nin," Naruto said. That was close enough to true.

Bee grunted. He turned and showed Naruto the ridge down his side. "Mist swordsman. Three on one. I won."

"You were one?"

"I was the one. That's how I won."

Naruto snorted. He tapped the scar on his own neck. "This one came from a guy who could've finished me and didn't."

"Mine came from a guy who tried real hard and couldn't." Bee sank back against the edge, looking pleased. "Bee wins. Scar contest goes to me."

"You can't win a scar contest."

"Already did."

Then, because he had apparently held it in as long as he could, Bee began to sing. It started low, a slow thing about steam and stone and old bones, and then it got louder and faster. He was halfway through the second verse, slapping the water for a beat, when two retired jōnin at the far end of the pool climbed out, filled the wooden buckets by the door with water from the cold barrel, and emptied both over his head.

Bee came up spluttering. "Haters! Kumo's full of haters!"

The last stop before dusk was the training fields above the north gate, where a squad of fresh genin were running taijutsu drills under a tired-looking chūnin instructor. Bee climbed onto the fence and began shouting encouragement at them in rhyme, which was about as helpful as it sounded.

"Knees up, chin down, fight like you own the town! Left hook, right hook, ain't nobody gonna take a look-"

"That doesn't even mean anything," Naruto muttered.

"It means motivation."

One of the genin, a tall girl with her hair tied back in a knot, had stopped mid-kata to stare at the fence. She nudged the boy beside her, and they both stared together. Naruto recognised the look on their faces and wanted to sink into the ground.

"That's him," the girl whispered, loud enough to carry. "The Raikage's grandson. Yotsuki. My cousin says he can do the purple lightning."

The whole squad turned to look.

"Show us!" a boy at the back shouted. "Just a little bit, Yotsuki-san!"

Naruto's hand moved towards his shoulder before he could stop it. Yoruichi's warning from weeks ago, about lightning tied to his life force, sat at the front of his mind, and he could still feel the burn of what he'd done to himself on the bridge. He opened his mouth to say no, and found he had no idea how to say it without sounding like he was scared.

Bee hopped down off the fence and landed between Naruto and the field.

"No, no, no, the kid's on rest, ya hear? Doctor's orders," he announced. "You want lightning? I'll show ya lightning."

He pointed dramatically at the sky.

Nothing happened.

He held the pose for a long moment, then lowered his arm, dusted off his hands, and turned to the squad as though he had done something enormous. "Lightning of the mind, fool ya. Most dangerous kind."

The genin looked at each other. Their instructor rubbed his face with both hands.

"Bee-sama," the instructor said wearily. "With respect. Please leave."

Bee went, grinning, and Naruto followed close behind him.

By the time the sun had sunk behind the western peaks, they were sitting on Bee's ledge.

It was a narrow shelf of rock on the north face of the mountain, a short climb above the waterfall that fed the village cisterns, and only Bee ever seemed to use it. The wind up here was strong enough to make Naruto's eyes water despite the scarf. Far below, the lamps of Kumo were coming on one by one, and the Raikage Tower stood above all of them, dark against the sky.

Naruto looked at the Tower for a moment too long, then looked away.

Bee said nothing about it. Instead he opened his battered notebook, licked the tip of his pencil, and pointed it at Naruto.

"Lesson time. I give the line, you finish the rhyme." He cleared his throat. "Cloud on the mountain, thunder in the sky..."

Naruto stared at him.

"Come on, come on, fool ya, the beat don't wait!"

"Cloud on the mountain, thunder in the sky," Naruto repeated slowly, "and... and I really want some pie?"

Bee lowered the notebook. For a long moment, the only sound was the waterfall below them.

"Pie?" Bee finally said, sounding personally wounded. "Pie?! You got purple lightning in your veins, the blood of the Yotsuki, and you give me pie?!"

"You told me to rhyme!"

"Rhyme with soul, bakayaro! Again!" Bee jabbed the pencil at him. "Wind through the valley, rain on the stone..."

Naruto thought hard. "Wind through the valley, rain on the stone, I'm sitting on a cliff and I want to go home."

"Stone and home don't rhyme!"

"They nearly rhyme!"

"Nearly don't count in a rap battle, and it don't count in a real one neither." Bee scribbled something in his notebook, then turned it around so Naruto could see. Under the day's date, in big, uneven letters, he had written: *NARUTO, ZERO.*

"You're the worst teacher in the village," Naruto complained.

"Best teacher, worst student," Bee corrected, tucking the notebook away with a satisfied grunt. "Now come on. Night's young, and you owe me a drink for that pie."

The Rattling Cask was the loudest sake hall on the fourth terrace, which in Kumo was saying something.

It was a long, low room with smoke-black beams, packed with off-duty shinobi, a few merchants, and anyone else who wanted to drink without being lectured. A pair of drummers were pounding away in the far corner, and a shamisen player was doing his best to keep up with them. At one table, three jōnin were arm wrestling for the bill. At another, a chūnin had fallen asleep face down in a bowl of noodles, and none of his friends had bothered to wake him.

Bee was greeted like a returning hero, which mostly meant people shouted his name and then went back to their drinks. They found a table near the wall, and within minutes there were two flasks of warm sake between them and a plate of fried tofu nobody had ordered.

Naruto had just poured himself a second cup when the door opened and half the room went quiet.

Yoruichi was leaning against the doorframe, one arm raised against the wood above her head, as if she had been standing there for an hour and they were all late. Her long purple hair was tied up in a high ponytail with a gold band, a few loose strands falling around her face, and small gold hoops caught the lamplight at her ears. She had traded her training clothes for a cream silk blouse with the sleeves rolled to her forearms, unbuttoned low enough that every man at the arm-wrestling table had forgotten his match. Charcoal trousers with a black belt hugged her hips and thighs as though they had been sewn onto her, and she was wearing black heels, of all things, on Kumo's stone streets. Purple lightning curled lazily around the fingers of her free hand, the way a cat might curl around someone's ankle.

She looked good enough to start a brawl, Naruto thought, and then he realised his mouth was hanging open and shut it quickly.

Her gold eyes found him across the room, and she grinned, all sharp white teeth.

Beside him, Bee had gone very still.

"Yo," Bee whispered, without taking his eyes off the door. "Little bro. Who is that?"

"That's Yoruichi," Naruto said. "My sensei. Grandfather brought her back to train me."

"That's Yoruichi?" Bee's voice cracked halfway through the name. "The one bro talks about? He says she's a storm with legs! He said she scared him, and nothin' scares bro!"

It seemed that A's description had not prepared his brother for the legs part.

Yoruichi crossed the room, the drummers somehow keeping time with her heels, and stopped at their table. "So this is where you've been hiding," she said to Naruto, then turned the grin on Bee. "And you must be the famous uncle. Killer Bee. I've heard a lot about you."

Bee shot to his feet so fast that his stool fell over behind him. He straightened his sunglasses, puffed out his chest, and raised one hand like a man about to perform for a stadium.

"Yo, lady lightning, purple and gold," he began, voice deep and smooth, "you're hotter than a... than a... a stove that's... cold?"

The word came out as a squeak. Bee's arm, still raised for the big finish, swept back to the table and knocked his full cup of sake straight into his own lap.

The whole hall seemed to wince at once.

Yoruichi did not laugh at him. She tilted her head, considered him for a moment, and then slid smoothly into the empty seat across the table, picking up the sake flask as she went.

"Hotter than a cold stove? Big man, that's sad," she said, pouring herself a cup from his flask. "You've got a voice like thunder and the worst line I ever had."

The arm-wrestling table howled. Someone banged a mug on the bar.

Bee's mouth opened and closed. "Wait, wait, wait, that was a warm-up, fool ya. Real Bee don't lose to a rookie, I'm the king of the-"

"The king of wet trousers, from the look of it," Yoruichi interrupted cheerfully. "Sit down before you drip on the floor, Your Majesty."

"Kono yaro," Bee muttered, but he picked up his stool and sat. Then he rallied, pointing at her with both hands. "Okay. Okay. Round two. Purple hair and a golden stare, you walk in here like you own the air-"

"I do own the air. I paid the rent this morning." Yoruichi drained her cup, then reached across the table, plucked the fresh cup Bee had just poured for himself out of his fingers, and drank that too. "And you rhyme like a man who's never been kissed."

"I been kissed!"

"By who, your notebook?"

That was the end of it. Naruto laughed so hard that ale nearly came out of his nose, and he had to cover his face with his sleeve while his shoulders shook and his stitches burned. It was the first time he had properly laughed since the bridge, he realised, and it felt so good that he didn't care how much the shoulder hurt.

Bee glared at him. "Traitor. My own nephew."

"You rhymed stove with cold," Naruto wheezed.

"Cold rhymes with gold, that was the plan, the plan just... fell apart in my hand." Bee slumped in his seat, wringing sake out of his trouser leg, then looked at Yoruichi with fresh determination. "Fine. Fine! One more. Bee don't quit. Lady, after this, what say you and me-"

"Sorry, big man," Yoruichi said, and slid off her chair. "I'm only here to collect my student."

She came around the table and sat down on the bench right next to Naruto, close enough that her hip pressed against his. Her hand settled on his thigh, lightning still crackling faintly around her fingers, and she leaned in until her chin was nearly on his good shoulder.

"He's late for his lessons," she purred. "Very late."

Bee looked at her hand. He looked at Naruto. He looked at her hand again, and his jaw slowly dropped.

"No," he said.

Naruto felt his face go hot.

"No, no, no." Bee pushed his sunglasses up onto his forehead and stared at them both with naked horror. "Little bro. Nephew. You and... her?! The storm with legs?!"

"Uncle Bee-"

"I'm out here rappin' my heart into the floor, and the kid's already got her walkin' through his door?!" Bee slammed his forehead down onto the table, making the tofu jump. "Kono yaro, bakayaro! Eight tails in my belly, and not one of 'em warned me!"

Yoruichi laughed so loudly that the drummers stopped playing to look.

She left them a little later to settle a bet at the arm-wrestling table, because one of the jōnin had been foolish enough to say a woman in heels couldn't beat him. Naruto watched her roll her sleeve another inch higher and decided the man deserved whatever happened next.

Across the table, Bee had gone quiet. He was turning his empty cup round and round in his fingers, his sunglasses back down over his eyes, and for once he wasn't humming.

"You been dodgin' the Tower all day," Bee said, without looking up.

Naruto did not answer. He picked at the edge of the table instead.

"Ain't gonna ask," Bee went on, his voice lower than Naruto had heard it all day. "Me and bro, we fought plenty, back when we were young and dumb. And the old man... the old man never said sorry once in his whole life. Not to me, not to bro, not to nobody." He set the cup down and finally looked at Naruto. "Old man's a mountain, cold and tall. He don't say sorry, but he don't let you fall."

It was not a very good rhyme. Bee seemed to know it, because he scratched his neck and looked away.

"And that thing up in your head," he added, tapping his own temple, "when it gets loud, you come find me. I got eight tails of my own makin' noise. Ain't nobody gets it like us two boys."

Naruto looked at his uncle for a long moment.

It didn't fix anything. His grandfather was still a mountain, and mountains did not answer questions. *You don't want to know* was still sitting in his chest exactly where it had sat for weeks, and no rhyme in the world was going to dig it out.

Yet Bee had tried, clumsy and red-faced and still smelling of spilled sake, and that counted for something.

"Thanks, Uncle Bee," Naruto said quietly.

"Yeah, yeah." Bee waved a hand at him and pretended to be very interested in the drummers. "Don't get soft on me, fool ya."

A roar went up from the arm-wrestling table. Naruto turned in time to see the jōnin slam into the tabletop face first, and Yoruichi rising from her seat with her winnings in one hand and a cup of somebody else’s sake in the other. She tossed the coins onto the bar for the next round, drained the cup, and walked back towards them as if nothing had happened.

She didn’t come back to her seat. She came up behind him instead.

Her arms slid over his good shoulder and around his chest, and she leaned her whole weight into his back, warm and soft and smelling of sake and something like crushed plum blossom. She rubbed her cheek against his, like a cat marking something it had decided was hers. Then, before he could do anything about it, she licked him, one long stripe from his jaw up to his whisker marks.

Naruto went rigid.

“Yoruichi,” he hissed out of the side of his mouth. “People are watching.”

“Mm.” She didn’t let go. Her lips brushed his ear, and her voice dropped to a whisper only he could hear. “Let them. They can stare at my ass all night if they want. Only one man in Kumo gets to spank it, and he’s sitting right here.”

The heat climbed up Naruto’s neck so fast he thought his scar might catch fire.

Across the table, Bee made a sound like a kettle left too long on the stove.

Yoruichi straightened, chuckling, and her hand slid from his chest up to his shoulder.

“Come on. I’ll walk you home. You’ve missed a whole month of lessons, and I’m not letting you sleep until we’ve caught up.”

Naruto stood up, ignoring the twinge in his shoulder.

Bee watched them go with the expression of a man watching his last ship sail without him.

"Walk him home, she says," he groaned, dropping his head back onto the table. "Walk him home... and Bee goes to bed alone, bakayaro!"