Sakura Haruno is lead doctor at the hospital of her home village, but when a deadly plague breaks out across the Sand village, Tsunade sends her to their aid. She is the head researcher and must find a cure before the plague wipes out the population of the Sand, or travels between villages. She is making little progress before she receives help from an unknown source. Things begin to look up for Sakura before the unknown source decides to more intimately control her progress.
“Sakura-chan,” Ino hummed, “The Hokage is looking for you.” She peaked up from her ledger and set her pen down. “Sounded pretty serious.” She smiled to her pink haired friend.

“Right, let me just get these to the hospital, then I’ll be on my way.” Sakura decided and gave an exhausted smile. “The locksmith’s wife just gave birth to triplets, and almost lost her life, so I thought to brighten her stay at the hospital.” She sat the flowers on the counter as well as a couple of notes.

“You’re always buying flowers for patients!” Ino huffed. “When are you going to buy flowers for a man?” She whined. “They’re not going to come to you!”

Sakura had to smile. Her friend was always getting on her to try and get her to move on from Sasuke. At first, Sakura thought it was Ino’s odd way of eventually getting Sasuke all to herself, but she later realized Ino just wanted her to move past that incredibly painful chapter of her life. It was impossible to tell when it would end, but Sakura knew she wouldn’t be satisfied until Sasuke was home safe, it didn’t matter if he never wanted to see her again, so long as their team, along with Kakashi would be united once again.

Ino, however, had a slightly different outlook. Even though she would tell Sakura she wanted Sasuke back just as much, Sakura had overheard her one day, when she was speaking with Tenten, that she believed he was truly lost and that even if he came back, irreparable damage was already done; there was a rift in the team and in the young nin that would never be fixed. Sakura’s smile wavered just slightly and she gave a heartfelt huff.

“Now, you’re one to talk! There’s been a set of roses by your door every week for the past three months, and you haven’t found out who they’re from?” Sakura grinned and leaned on the counter, head propped up daintily on her two gloved fists. “My money’s still on Lee. Or Neji.”

“Hah!” Ino snorted. “Lee?! I would never date a hot head like Lee! Besides, he’s too in love with you, ‘Oh, Cherry Blossom of my Heart!’” She laughed.

“Oh, come on, Ino! Lee’s a great guy.”

“I’m not looking for a great guy! I’m looking for mister tall, dark, and handsome.” Ino said with a slight flick as she tore the printed receipt from the register and handed it to Sakura.

“Yeah, it’s why you’re still single!” Sakura shouted as she hastily grabbed the flowers and receipt and bolted through the door, quick enough so that the launched notepad wouldn’t pelt her in the head as Ino intended.

With a giggle, she let the glass door of the shop swing gently shut, a bell ringing to signify its movement to the shop keep. One sandal stepped out in front of the other as she padded through the slightly crowded marketplace. She stopped to admire the Ramen shop.

Faintly, she could hear Naruto’s voice chattering to her and Kakashi’s ever-mocking laughter. Her eyes grew dim as she heard Sasuke, no doubt putting down Naruto for his boisterous ways. Half of her yearned dearly for the sweet aroma of nostalgia that presented itself, but the kunoichi knew better. Her bangs fell just slightly in front of her face as she looked down to her clenched fist. Tsunade taught her better than to give in to nostalgia. Her mentor knew a thing or two
about broken teams, as she had once expressed to Sakura while they braked from a particular intense training session.

Her mind continued to wander, reviewing the incidence that was the past couple of years. Naruto still away for training, she had a lot of time to herself to simply think. Too much in fact. She smiled haphazardly at the noodle shop, puzzling the chef inside as he waved awkwardly to her. Sakura’s cheeks grew pink as she realized how odd it must seem for her to stand there staring at him for so long. “Time to go, Sakura.” She murmured to herself and ducked into the crowd, shuffling her feet until she arrived to the hospital.

She made her way up to the maternity ward, where the mother of the triplets nursed two of hers while her husband diligently held the third, waiting until it was the last baby’s turn to feed. The mother smiled gently at Sakura and waved her in.

“Ahh, look at that. They’ve all got a full head of hair almost.” Sakura fawned and brushed her bangs away from her face to get a better look. She had recently begun to have intrusive thoughts of motherhood. Her own mother would later tell her it was maternal instinct, and that instead of going on dangerous missions she should settle down with a handsome man and partake in the labors of raising a family. Sakura would scoff and wave her hand dismissively, often citing that she was too busy for infants, or too picky to become someone’s bride.

“Luckily, it looks like these three girls will be taking after their mother.” The bald father laughed, rubbing his scalp awkwardly. “Let’s hope at least.”

“They have their father’s eyes. Each of them.” The mother whispered soothingly, a love stricken look on her face.

“I am glad they are doing well. You had us scared for a moment.” Sakura confessed.

“It was a difficult birth,” The mother said quietly, as to not disturb her children. “Though, thanks to you, Haruno-san, these three and myself are happy and healthy.”

“Oh,” Sakura laughed gratefully. “I couldn’t let any of you miss this upcoming festival! The cherry blossoms are said to bloom extra bright this year.” She teased, trying to diffuse the situation from thanking her to another topic. She sometimes had a bit of trouble accepting other’s gratitude for things that she would have done anyway.

“Really, Haruno-san.” The father said more sternly. “I owe you my life. I would be lost without this one. She’s my rationality and sensibility.” He joked, leaning over and kissing his wife’s auburn locks.

“I will be back tomorrow to check on you four, then maybe you should be cleared to go home by then.” Sakura said with a slight bow as the mother finished nursing the two in her arms and welcomed the third. “Sleep well.” She bid and turned to set the flowers on the counter, next to a couple of other bouquets and wreaths of well wishes. She turned on heel and exited.

With a deep breath, she steeled herself to confront Lady Tsunade. She had admittedly stalled and the Hokage would most certainly take notice of her tardiness. She sprinted from one building to the other and entered the room, bowing quickly, ducking fast enough to dodge her second head-aimed missile. Those dear to her had a funny way of showing their intentions. *Always with the throwing.*

“Forgive me, Lady Tsunade! I apologize for my lateness.” Sakura bit out quickly, in as pleasant a tone as she could while still panting from her sprint.
“Not accepted!” Tsunade slammed her hand on her desk, invoking a tingle in her palm. She gritted her teeth. “This is urgent Sakura—stand up straight!” She breathed, frustrated less at Sakura, and more at the situation. As Sakura stood, she took a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose and mentally adjusting. Fingers splayed across the oak of her desk, she arranged her thoughts. “Are you familiar with Tozlu?”

It took Sakura a beat to comprehend her words. “Toz.. lu.” She reflected, earning her an angry grunt from Tsunade, telling her to finish her thought quickly. “Oh—yes—an ancient plague, from Suna… also known as Dust Lung. What of it?” She asked.

“It’s resurfaced in the Sand Village, for unknown reasons… though we have reason to believe it was weaponized, due to how quickly and intensely. They have no known cure.” She reiterated what Sakura already knew about the disease. “No known cure, no treatment that truly helps, and the last time it struck, if left 43 people alive, out of 780.”

Sakura was pale now, much paler than the first blossom of spring. Her breath caught in her throat. She knew exactly what her teacher was sending her to.

“Sakura…” Tsunade began, much more gently. She didn’t want to put her best student, her most prized medical nin, and truthfully, a wonderful young kunoichi into an area with such dangerous disease. “I need you to go there in my place. Had… had I not been Hokage, I would be there, but I cannot leave this village. You’re the only one I fully trust with this mission, as a lead. Though, because of the ambiguous origin, I’m sending two Anbu with you as well… and Kakashi.” She said carefully. Kakashi was a prized nin, one she couldn’t afford losing, but it was vital that Sakura remained safe, and not to mention, should Kakashi be with her, she was more likely to feel comfortable, rather than three Anbu she’d never met. “You need to leave immediately. I’ve packed a bag of things for you to take... you probably shouldn’t take you own things. I also included a set of clothes in there that is only to be worn upon your return. I’ll have you burn everything else. We can’t risk the plague travelling. We’ve already shut down inter-village travel in the area.”

How had word not gotten to her already? The corner of Sakura’s mouth twisted into a worried smile and she bowed. “I will travel to Suna and assist however I can in finding a cure.” She promised proudly, though doubt and anxiety filled her bosom.

“Sakura.” Tsunade said sternly, breaking her gentle demeanor. “Return to the village, no matter what. Even if you cannot find a cure, you must return to the Hidden Leaf. While we are allies, we cannot risk some of our greatest assets to aid a fellow village.”

_That_ left a bitter taste in Sakura’s mouth, but she nodded tersely and Shizune handed her a pack that was to be hers.

“Kakashi and the Anbu are no doubt waiting for you at the gate. You should hurry there…” She trailed off, switching the paperwork on her desk as a team of young chunins came in behind Sakura. “Should’ve already been on the road by now.” She added, with a little smirk. Sakura smiled back. That was Tsunade. Even if it would be her last words to her, they would be matter of fact-ly or terse.

Sakura’s smile faded the second she left the room. In its place was a deep frown, and terrified gleam. She padded from the tall building and made her way to the main gate. She wished she had a moment to say a proper goodbye to her parents, but she knew that every second counted. She would send them a letter after arriving at Suna, and she was confident Tsunade had already informed them of her departure.

“Ah. There she is.” A masked woman stated to Kakashi, who still didn’t look up from his
“Sakura-chan.” Kakashi hummed as Sakura jogged up to them. “It’s my place to be the late one, or did you forget?”

“Nobody could forget, Kakashi-sensei.” She gritted out with a pout. “You are late to nearly everything.”

“Shall we depart?” The second masked nin stated rather than questioned.

“Yes!” Sakura said, mentally trying to imitate Naruto’s determination and ready-to-go-attitude. She was queasy, even as they walked through the tall, well painted entrance. Kakashi smiled sympathetically beneath his mask. He took the first step out. At all given times, according to Tsunade’s instruction, he would be in front, Pakkun would be much further ahead to scout for any possible threats, the Anbu in the crow’s mask would be behind her, and the Anbu in the ant’s mask would be far behind the formation, seeking out any who might follow the bunch.

The threat of a terrorist who may have weaponized the previously extinct plague was much more believable than the plague simply returning, as they had instated immense sanitation since the first outbreak of it. Hygiene steadily improved until the threat of it was little to none. However, this strand seems to have overcome that as no matter how many times somebody washed their hands, and sanitized their domicile, people were catching it quicker and quicker. The population had already suffered a loss. A previous 12,902 some people shrunk to an 11,874.

They darted from the path, Kakashi as their guide, and Pakkun guiding him. They nearly flew through the trees, anxiety eating away at each of them, though almost entirely at Sakura. She reviewed what Tsunade had said. Mostly about her returning if she saw it as hopeless. That could only mean that she was frightened it may spread amongst the land, despite its nature of needing sand, dust, or dry dirt to travel.

Time had passed mercifully quick and soon it became too dark to see. Kakshi stopped abruptly, causing Sakura to ungracefully crash into him, deep in thought. Kakashi whipped his head around and caught her just in time. She hung over his arms like a wet towel. The sudden impact to her midsection knocked the wind out of her, but she was grateful, for a couple of seconds more and she’d be splayed onto the flaky bark of the tree ahead of her.

“Sakura-chan, you need to watch your step.” He said mirthfully.

“Thank you, Kakashi-sensei.” She croaked out, much more nauseous now. She stood and straightened her tunic with a huff. He patted her on the back.

“You need to get your mind off of it.” He chastised lightly, hand now on her shoulder, to get her waning attention. “Worrying about it on the way won’t cure it.”

“You’re right.” Sakura huffed.

The Anbu that had been following them finally caught up. “We’re clear,” She whispered to her masked colleague, who nodded then looked at Kakashi, for instruction.

“We won’t be making a fire tonight.” He stated, mostly for Sakura. They respectively jumped from the branches and wandered to a small clearing. Sakura immediately chose a spot of clovers to lay her bedroll out on. “I’ll take first watch, then Ostu-san,” He gestured towards the ant-masked woman, “Then Sakura-chan, then Ostaka-san” His hand drifted towards the man in the crow mask. The three nodded and Sakura settled into her cot. She brushed out her hair and tied it back, giving
her hands something to do for a moment while she decided to eat or not.

Despite her exhaustion and queasiness she settled on eating as the best option. She took a pack of dried meat and fruit from her bag and made a face at it.

“Something the matter, o’ regal Sakura?” Kakashi mocked and made an exaggerated bow. “Is the food not to your standard?”

“Stop it with that.” She hissed and rolled her eyes, pushing her pink bangs away again. “It’s just been so long since I’ve eaten like this.” She admitted with puffed out cheeks. “I’m not used to it is all.

Kakashi gave her a smile, eyes crinkling lightly in the corners before speaking again. “It’s good to be on a team with you again, though this time almost as equals. It won’t be long before you surpass me, Sakura-chan.” He admitted. Sakura waved this away.

“No way, Kakashi-sensei! I couldn’t best you in sparring when I was younger, and I still can’t now.”

“That, my dear, sounds like a proposition!” He laughed.

“You know what…” Sakura pointed a strip of fruit at him. “I will take you up on that after we find some sort of cure to Tozlu!” She exclaimed, taking a large bite out of it.

“Right.” Kakashi said and laughed a bit before taking his post.

It was silent for a moment as Sakura was left with these… Ostu.. and… she tried hard to memorize their names—“Ostaka!” She shouted as she remembered.

“Yes?” He looked up from a scroll he had been writing in.

“O-Oh, nothing.” She waved her hands in a dismissive gesture. “I was just remembering your n-name.” She managed, cheeks red with embarrassment at breaking the silence.

His sister gave a snort and lifted her mask just slightly to eat.

“Right. Ostaka. And Ostu.” He jabbed the ant-mask, jarring it slightly from the woman’s tanned face. She grunted in displeasure, mouth full of food. Her spare hand went to slap the side of his head rather than fix her mask. Both of them could’ve stopped the taunting jabs but their quarrels were better avoided with such.

“I’ll remember.” Sakura promised with a smile and nod. The dynamic between the two was humorous and endearing. She couldn’t help but giggle a bit at their antics. They had to be related, she mused. “I’m Sakura Haruno, but you can call me Sakura, of course.” She affirmed what they had been briefed on.

“It’s nice to meet you, Sakura-san.” Ostu said, crumbs falling from her lips, as she ate like she hadn’t in a week.

“Oi, slow down, Ostu.”

“Shut up.”

“You’re going to make yourself sick.”

“Not as sick as you make me.”
Ostaka’s hand darted to snatch the loaf of bread from his sister, though he was met with a muddied boot in the face. Ostu chuckled until her brother kicked the food from her hand. They both scrambled to catch it, but Ostaka was the one that managed to grab it from the air and shove it whole into his mouth, causing his sister to whine and sit back down.

Sakura laughed quietly, a gloved palm over her mouth to try and muffle the sound. “I must admit, it’s odd to see two Anbu behave so…”

“Regularly?” Ostu finished her thought, as her brother was still feasting himself full.

“W-Well,” Sakura belatedly realized she could have offended them.

“We are not as seasoned as the others.” Ostu chimed in. “And though we are always on duty, with Kakashi as look out we have this rare chance to unwind a bit.” She smiled, mask still obscuring the upper half of her face. Sakura wondered how she could see at all, but she seemed to know exactly where to turn her head. “No, your words didn’t offend us.” Somehow she had noted exactly what Sakura's intents had been.

“Thank you.” Sakura breathed quietly then offered and awkward smile.

“Tell us about this … ‘Tonulu’,” Ostaka requested.

“Tonzulu.” Ostu corrected with a snort.

“Tozlu.” Sakura said finally with a grin, causing the siblings to deflate a bit. Her smile wavered as her mind drifted back to the deadly plague. “It originated long before the organization of the villages, in the desert, as a virus carried in either fecal matter, or blood, though historians aren’t sure which may be the case.” She began, paling a bit. “It’s reknown for its brutality, and swift results. Back then, it was a matter of days after contracting it, sometimes hours. Though now, with improved medicine, it can take a month… maybe two.”

The two Anbu siblings fell silent. They knew it was a grave situation, but Sakura’s hesitation and careful phrasing gave them a sense she was only speaking gently of it.

“Though I’m not sure how it’s spread now, I have reason to believe it could be a product of the air… if these masks Tsunade-sama included are any indication. She didn’t fully brief me on what’s known about this version.” She coughed a bit, from the psychosomatic itch in her throat as she trailed onto the next subject. “It’s a bit like Rot… It tricks the body into thinking that the lungs are dead, and they begin to decay prematurely, until all that’s left of them is a gritty, bloody paste.”

She could hear one of the siblings swallow grimly and her own chest felt tight just at mentioning it.

“Previously, there’s been no cure or treatment, and luckily only one or two people have gotten it in the last century, from unhygienic practices in the desert.” Sakura said, rubbing a bit of warmth into her upper arms. “It’s said to be one of the most painful ways to go.”

“We are here to assist however you need.” Ostu spoke up, adjusting her mask back into place.

“Yes, we are at your disposal, Sakura-san.” Ostaka said with determination thick in his tone. For a moment, he sounded just like Naruto. Her heart skipped a beat. Wherever he was, with that white haired Sage, she hoped he was far from sand, and farther from the plague.

“You should get some sleep, Sakura-san. I will cover your watch.” Ostu decided, not giving
the girl a choice in the matter.

“The thank you, Ostu-san.” Sakura smiled, eager to get more sleep than promised. She laid back and stared at the starry sky, glimmering shyly through the canopy of leaves. Her mind wandered to her two teammates, far from her. She felt tears just behind her eyes but willed them away. Surely, Sasuke and Naruto were safe. Surely.

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’Sakura-chan,’ She heard Sasuke’s voice in the back of her mind and her eyes shot open. She was not in the clearing. In fact, she seemed to be in some sort of market place, though she couldn’t tell what the vendors were selling. ‘Sakura-chan,’ She heard him again.

“Sasuke-kun?”

She heard a thick cough then a groan of pain. Her heart picked up.

‘I don’t feel well, Sakura-chan. I’ve been coughing up blood and sand. What’s wrong with me?’ She saw his figure in the distance and ran through the crowded street, but he was facing away from her. ‘I’m not getting any better.’

“Coughing up blood? Th-That can’t be a sign of anything good. What about a fever? Night terrors or hallucinations? Paranoia?’”

‘Heal me, Sakura-chan.’ He instructed, but then walked further away, until she began to follow him. Then he ran. She ran after him as fast as should could until eventually something snagged her foot and she landed face first into dirt and grass.

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The fall caused her to wake up abruptly and as she stood up, she swore she could see Sasuke’s sharingan. The two pools of crimson stared intensely at her before slowly drifting close.

“Sasuke…” She muttered, feeling the tears she thought she had done away with resurface and spill over. She shivered and looked around, clearly parted from their camp. Kakashi would yell at her for this. A murder of crows that had been standing near where she thought she saw Sasuke flew away in a loud ambush towards the night sky, as Kakashi ran through them. He saw Sakura standing there, disoriented and sobbing.

“Sakura-chan… why are you out here? Is there someone nearby?” He asked her quietly, putting an arm around her to comfort her. She covered her face to try and forge some of her dignity.

“N-No, I-I must have been seeing things… I th-thought I saw him.” She whispered. She wasn't sure why she had cried so easily, but tears flowed almost freely down her dirt covered cheeks.

Kakashi grimaced but nodded. The poor thing must have been sleep walking. He’d have a word with Ostaka for getting lazy on his guarding duties and not noticing Sakura walking from their camp while clearly asleep.

“Are you okay?” He asked.

“Yes, thank you, Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura forced a smile and then smiled genuinely when Kakashi put a hand on her head, just like he did to the team when they were younger. She couldn't help but seeing two red glints of light in the shadow. She surmised it was a figment of her imagination and stared sadly into the eyes of her lost teammate.
Squawk!

A stray crow sat by the hallucinated Sharingan until Kakashi looked over his shoulder to see whatever Sakura was staring at. The crow flew away.
“Sakura-chan!” She heard a loud alto voice call and then a gust of wind, as the gorgeous Temari flew from the station she had been waiting on, far up on the highest point of their wall. She smiled brightly at the pink haired girl and landed triumphantly, standing a bit taller than Sakura in all of her fatal glory. She had all the sex appeal the Sakura and Ino longed for, yet Temari strived on her combat skills and tactical thinking rather than her evenly proportioned body. Sakura greatly respected and looked up to her.

“Temari-san! It’s nice to see you again.” She said happily. “Though, I wish we could one day meet under circumstances not involving strife.”

“I agree.” The blonde said firmly and waved meekly at the two Anbu. The silence of the Leaf Anbu made her a tad uncomfortable, as once their forces were not so kindly. Many deaths revolved around the special forces; some of theirs and some of their own. She got past it and smiled, even despite the rough history of assassination attempts to her brother that she would often halt before he even noticed. “Let me show you to our medical research lab.”

“A lab? That’s new!” Sakura chimed eagerly. Previously, she knew the village to have a very small medical center with minimal equipment. Since the alliance, however, the villages shared medical knowledge and discoveries, advancing together very well. It was part of an act set in motion by Tsunade to make sure that all villages were equipped with the material and knowledge to heal most any injury, disease, and epidemic. Which made it all the more ironic that the village most eager to partake was the first to fall ill to Tozlu.

“Yes! Don’t you count us out just yet in the medical field. Though we don’t have someone like your Hokage, we’ve trained some excellent medical nins!” She established, walking through the canals of the village with the unit behind her. “So, Sakura-chan.” She quieted, leaning in close, so that Kakashi and the others couldn’t hear her. “How is Nara-san?” She asked, trying to seem inconspicuous though the blush on her cheeks told a different story.

Sakura grinned a bit, smirking at the sand kuiniochi. “He’s still single.”

“I-I meant—how is he doing!” She huffed, inwardly adding that she knew he was single, as they had been writing each other quite often, though nobody knew besides the two of them. After her last visit they decided that they would keep their budding romance simple and clean. After all, it would be hard to manage while they’re both so busy with their separate duties to their villages.

“He’s doing well. He’s going to be monitoring the chunin exams! No doubt, he’s looking forward to your ‘ambassadorial’ visit as well.” Sakura said, cunning lining her voice. She knew very well they both had feelings for each other. Those feelings had begun in the preliminary rounds as she watched his scheming mind at work, then as he observed her well-honed skills.

“Don’t say it like that.” Temari whined and gave Sakura a light smack on the shoulder. Sakura giggled, Temari joining in as well. As they approached a tall medical facility a stench hit Sakura that made her recoil and look around for the source. Before them stood a large, newly erected building, standing exactly seven stories. Her eyes widened.

“Gaara wanted to call it the Naruto Center. We settled on Medical Research and Special Cases Center.” Temari said, looking to Sakura. “He said that naming after your teammate was only fair for the great service Naruto-san did for our Gaara.”
“The Naruto Center.” Sakura repeated, briefly remembering the interaction between Gaara and Naruto. She smiled a bit. Even out here in the desert, Naruto still had such great influence, especially now that Gaara was Kazekage. How far he came, from the loner her once was. She had seen the difference as they were leaving the village after the assault. Gaara thanked his brother and sister, and changed the way they got along ever since. Temari and Kankuro no longer feared for their lives, and Gaara was happy, spending time with his siblings, watching after his people.

“Can you imagine?” Temari asked and scrunched her nose. “What a terrible name for a research lab.”

“What is that stench, Temari-chan?” Sakura finally asked, pulling the mask from her bag. The odor became too much for her. The mask covered the lower half of her face. It was solid, likely some sort of clay, and held purifying herbs in it for her to breathe in. In theory, they would act as a filter. Temari shot her a glance, curious about the reasoning behind it, then looked back at the building.

“Tozlu.” She said firmly and opened the door. Temari put a sleeve to her nose, and even Kakashi did the same, though the two Anbu likely had the same herbs in their masks. “This is where we have been treating those infected, and likewise conducting research, though we don’t have much. Come, there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” She guided the unit towards the elevator and brought them to the very top of the building. It was beyond sterile with the strong scent of Sage and Peppermint. It was a vile combination, but the air must be clean. “This is Hiroshi Tin.” Temari said, directing Sakura’s attention to a lanky man, in a mask. He bowed slightly.

“It’s lovely to meet the fabled student of Tsunade-sama.” He said simply and stepped aside.

“I trust you to show her around, and brief her.” Temari stated. “I have matters that I must tend to.” She said almost forlornly to Sakura. “I’ll catch up with you tomorrow! Tin-san will show you to your quarters and get you adjusted.

“Of course, Temari-san.” Hiroshi said dryly. Sakura’s eyes lingered on his mask. It was sand brown with black eyes, pointed lightly. It didn’t look like any particular creature, and instead looked more functional than ornamental. He spoke to the point and nothing else. She was a bit used to the kindly medical nin of the Leaf.

“It’s nice to meet you!” Sakura chirped, smiling widely and hoping to make a good impression. Kakashi had taught her that first impressions were one of the most important thing about any sort of relationship, be it professional, romantic, or platonic. “I’m Sakura Haruno.”

“Yes. Haruno-san. Please follow me.” He said and gestured towards where he in just a moment turned to walk. “We have the latest equipment to my knowledge, though our best work is done over scroll. It seems even with technological advancements; this plague has been… sealed in some form.” He continued. “I believe it was indeed weaponized. It is airborne and incredibly contagious. All of our citizens are wearing masks, but it has helped very little.”

“Has there been any tested and proven treatment?” Sakura asked.

“The most we’ve been able to do is ease the pain of the patients and place those unable to breathe on ventilators. The longest survival case has been three months, and the shortest has been about 17 hours.”

“What cures have you tried?” She asked, rolling up her sleeves.
“We’ve attempted transplants, removal using chakra, flushing it out with fluids, and antibiotics, but nothing has proven worth its time.”

“Right.” Sakura took a deep breath and tied her hair back, looking at everything he just said as it was written out, though in greater detail, on the table in front of them as they approached the main research station. Her mind raced as it often did as she begun a new project. This one would surely challenge her more than any other before. After all, she just had to cure an ancient plague brought on by an unknown assailant without the help of her mentor. No problem, right?

“If you are ready to begin work,” Hiroshi began. “I will show the others to your place of temporary residence.” With a gesture he guided the others from the room.

Sakura waited for them to be out of ear shot.

“Damn.” She began, talking to herself to organize her thoughts. “This will be more of a challenge then I expected... though perhaps I should have expected it.” A shiver ran down her spine. Was someone watching her? She quirked her lips in confused amusement and looked around before returning to the task at hand.

Distantly, Hiroshi led the three from the medical research building to a high rise of apartments. “A local landlord has donated a two-bedroom apartment to house you. Though the Kazekage initially wanted to reserve part of the palace residency to serve as guest rooms, the council decided that the least exposure to outside forces, the better. We cannot risk his health, after all.”

“I agree.” Kakashi chimed in, filling the void of silence. “It was kindly of the landlord.”

Ostu gave Kakashi a look beneath her mask, but said nothing, maintaining the stoic imagery that had been taught so thoroughly to her.

“This way.” He lead them up a flight of stairs to the third floor, then handed Kakashi two sets of keys. “The pantry had been fully stocked in preparation, though if you wish to dine out, simply put it on the Kazekage’s tab. He has offered to cover your expenses.”

“Understood. Thank you for your assistance, Tin-san.” Kakashi smiled amicably, though he knew it was not returned. Hiroshi walked away, and Kakashi gave an expressive glance at his two Anbu colleagues, before opening the door. It was quaintly furnished and just as promised, food had been awaiting them, their first meal there even prepared and sitting out with plates covering the bowls.

“I’ll go ahead and put away Sakura-chan’s food. I know she won’t be back until late. Ostaka-san, eat and then join her at the lab, as quickly as possible. Tomorrow, Ostu-san, you will guard her, and then I the day after, and we will use those rotations. Ostu-san, when you are not on duty with Sakura-chan, you will follow any leads on who might have possibly weaponized this plague, Ostaka-san, when you are not on duty with Sakura-chan, you will scout the village, constantly insuring the security and investigating all ways in and out, and it would be best to keep in contact with Temari-san. I will be the one reporting to the Hokage and speaking with the Kazekage and council.” He determined, listing out each task carefully, to best suit each nin’s specialization.

“How are we going to room?” Ostaka asked, a slight tint hidden beneath his mask.

“You won’t be rooming with Sakura-chan,” Ostu teased, jamming her thumb into his ribcage. “You’re a closet pervert.”

“I will room with Sakura-chan.” Kakashi stated plainly, amused by Ostaka’s interested. It
was not unexpected though. Sakura was a brilliant young kuinoichi, and as he had recently noticed, blossoming into a gorgeous woman.

Though he chastised himself for it, he had occasionally caught his eyes wandering over her when her back was turned, noticing how well she had grown since he first knew her. “I am better suit to guard her.” Ostu opened her mouth and held up a finger, about to debate that she would be best to room with her, but she knew Kakashi was beyond the ways most men would be. He had more self-control than any man she knew. Still, she had an odd feeling in her gut, as though it were not the only reason he wanted to spend his nights alone with Sakura. Her mouth twisted close and she lowered her hand. “Good, then, I will unpack her, and my own things. I suggest one of us be alert and awake at all times. You two can work out your shifts, and I will likely sleep during the day to make sure Sakura-chan has enough sleep to work at full capacity.”

With that, the siblings settled in and Kakashi as well made it so that all Sakura had to do upon arrival would be shower, eat and sleep. The circumstances were morbidly dire, he thought as he laid out his sleeping cot on the ground next to the bed where Sakura would sleep. The plague had created a drastic notch in the population in a matter of months, and even through the best efforts of the sand village, word of the plague was beginning to creep out of the desert and reach neighboring villages, cities, and lands. The village was ripe for attacking. He had to stay alert for scouts of neighboring land. Any foreigners not already established in the land would have to be investigated, as drastic as that sounded. He tugged his mask down and rubbed his face, staring at the dusty mirror that sat upon the dresser. He heard the door shut and assumed Ostaka had left to monitor and protect their medical nin. Seeing a blur among the rooftops confirmed that. He laid down on the cot and decided to take a quick nap, long enough to keep him going through the night.

It was dark when he woke from his slumber. His eyes fell to a pair of legs.

A rather shapely pair of legs.

He cleared his throat, and saw the toned calves jolt as Sakura turned around and brushed her hair out of her face, expression tired, but smiling. She was obviously extremely sleepy but worked hard not to show it. Her hair clung lightly to her face. She had evidently just gotten out of the shower.

How he would’ve enjoyed guarding her while she was vulnerable.

Kakashi pushed away thoughts he should not have been having and sat up. Sakura sat on the edge of the bed, not sure how to make conversation. She had poured so much of herself into her work that she was exhausted beyond words. Eventually, she just laid down and stared at the ceiling. “I’m a bit tired. I think I’ll go to bed without supper.”

“Sleep soundly, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi smiled and patted her head after standing. It was an amicable gesture, but at the moment it caused him to pause. Even that simple contact had him yearning like a teenager for her.

“Goodnight, Kakashi-sensei.” She muttered, burrowing under the cotton sheets. They were soft against her wet skin. She heard slight rustling then noticed him exit through the window, sitting on the balcony. With one Anbu inside, he would stand sentinel outside, completely securing the area. Sakura watched him while his back was turned, a faint blush rising to her cheeks. Had he always looked at her like that? Half of her hoped he didn’t, given that she was so young when they met, but the other half very much wanted to see that hunger in his eyes again.

He looked dangerous, when his eyes darkened like they had just a second ago, and it stirred her. Sakura licked her lips and turned her back towards the window to try and get her steamed mind
to settle down.

She wondered what went through his own mind, and if she might have a place there. ‘Don’t be silly’ she told herself. He was strictly professional. The curious side got the better of her. ‘It would be fun to see what’s under that mask though, see if the rest of his face is just as handsome.’ Her subconscious purred. ‘Looks might not matter, if the face is comfortable enough of a seat.’

A bit shocked she would think that, she buried her face into the down pillow and drifted off to sleep. Her dreams were haunted with the aches of her tired muscles and her confused thoughts about her previous sensei.

She felt her body drift as if on water. When her vision came to, she was in a deep lake of green water. She took a deep breath, miraculously not taking in any water. She curiously uncurled her body, stretching for a moment and then swimming further into the depths. She heard the faint ringing of a bell. It was so soft and so light, the image of starlight came to mind. She followed the ringing until she was pelted with a sandy wind. She shielded her eyes until it passed and the next thing she knew she was knee deep in golden sand, shimmering brightly. She drifted through it, until she managed to stand fully, though sand had already gotten in her wrappings. She hissed as a sharp pain hit her hand. She jerked it back from the sandy banks to find a sting on the palm of her hand. She looked down to see a slightly-too-large scorpion poised to strike again.

She backed up with a grimace and accessed a bit of her chakra to take the pain away. Suddenly she was back in the lake. She swam to the surface this time and found herself back in the Hidden Leaf village. She smiled and climbed out of the warm water, getting hit with a slight breeze that smelled faintly of the various dining spots in the village. She walked through the empty village, almost perplexed. No one was there.

Sunlight bore down on Sakura’s face and she sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She heard shuffling as Kakashi crawled back through the window-door.

“Sleep well?” He asked, making small talk.

“Yeah.” Sakura murmured, far too sleepy for small talk. She walked to the basin and splashed water in her face; an attempt to make herself more socialable. She pushed the mass of hair, now damp from her face and looked at the ninja standing by the spotlight of sun. He was half dressed, down to a loose pair of pants that hung lowly on his hips, showing alabaster skin beneath. She could see the heavy definition of his muscles, as if perfectly carved. He also wore a rather form fitting shirt, meant to go under his clothes.

He fished out a new tunic, better suited for the weather of the village and pulled it over his head. Sakura traced her eyes down his torso to a rather obvious bulge in the front of his pants. Usually this was covered by the thick, and stiff material of his slacks, but in the loose bottoms he chose, his girth translated very well. As he pulled the shirt down, it fell in front of his groin.

“Staring is rude, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi remarked, a smirk playing at his lips beneath his mask. He had caught her staring twice now. He didn’t particularly mind. It was flattering, that someone young still found him attractive. Though he wasn’t old by any means, he discovered he was of the age where younger women no longer pined after him as they did in his youth. And it wasn’t like he hadn’t been sizing her up the night before.

“Staring—Oh! N-No, I’m just—zoned out.” Sakura lied, heat coming quickly to her face. She turned around and gathered up her clothes, waiting for him to leave so she could change. Taking the hint, he left with a little chuckle, shutting the door behind him. “Wasn’t staring.” She muttered, undressing from her night clothes, and putting on her medical scrubs. She tied her hair back and
pinched some color into her cheeks.

She looked sickly pale, mostly from terror. The plague was horrifying on paper, but seen in person was unfathomable. The plague became a constant thought for her.

“Good morning, Sakura-san.” Ostaka greeted her at the table, having already made breakfast for the unit. “Did you sleep well?”

“Yes. Thank you.” She managed, a polite smile. Did they all want small talk? She mentally sighed. Sexual tension, worry, and exhaustion wreaked havoc on her brain.

“Good.” Ostu said, placing something in front of her. “I have gathered some information, names, particularly. I have passed them by anybody with some sort of knowledge, but, I thought perhaps you may recognize the names.” She motioned for Kakashi to read as well.

The two looked over the list of names. With a grimace, she read respectively: Kabuto Yakushi. Orochimaru. Sasuke Uchiha.

“It… still… I haven’t…” Sakura stammered. “Seeing his name…”

“It is still hard to imagine, I know, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi said, trying to comfort her. He placed his arm around her shoulder and she slumped. Sasuke was a missing nin, a rogue, a danger to the lands. It was all hard to process. She still saw him as the handsome young boy she fell so deeply in love with, and as the cruel boy who broke her heart, and hurt Naruto.

“Among missing nin, among the names of Akatsuki and rogues.” She sighed, putting her finger next to Sasuke’s name. She bit the inside of her cheek and traced her finger down the list of names. Kakashi thumbed through his Bingo Book, reminding himself of the entries, when he came across one name.

Sasori of the Red Sand. Kakashi briefly remembered the name. His father had slain the boy’s parents in battle. He had remembered almost every of his father’s fabled kills, as he no doubt ran into the repercussions later on. The families of the dead would often hunt him down or try to exact revenge in some manner.

This page stuck out for another reason. Sasori was said to be a master of poisons and puppets. If any of the names knew about illness and plagues, it would be him or Orochimaru. Kakashi pointed to the name on Ostu’s list, among three other names.

“Investigate these, when given the opportunity. Especially Orochimaru.” He followed up with, looking into Ostu’s mask. Her white eyes showed her understanding and she nodded.

“Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura said, swallowing a bite of food, well prepared by the Anbu. “Do you think… do you really think Orochimaru would take this indirect route?” She asked genuinely. It seemed beneath him in an odd sense.

“I think he would do anything to disrupt the balance of the land.” He answered honestly then paused. “Though, you raise a fair point.”

“I’m ready to leave when you are, Sakura-chan.” Ostu said, a smile in her voice. “We should leave soon, it’s nearly mid-morning.”

“Right. Thank you, Ostu-san. Thank you for breakfast, Ostaka-san.” She said and made her way to the door where she slipped on her sandals and picked up the satchel she had dropped carelessly on the floor the previous night. “I’m ready to go.”
“Excellent. Go ahead and I will be behind you.” Ostu confirmed, adjusting her mask and pulling her hood over her black hair.

Sakura nodded and stepped out of the door after bidding goodbyes to her temporary teammates. She took a moment then put her half mask on. After the idea had reached the council, the Kazekage ordered masks be worn by all in order to prevent further spread of disease. She spotted a familiar figure up ahead, making his way to the medical center as she herself was.

“Kankuro-kun!” She called eagerly. “Nice to see you again!”

“Ah, if it isn’t ---” Kankuro paused for a moment.

“You don’t remember my name.” Sakura pouted, hand placed on her hip to show her displeasure. She scoffed, half-jokingly.

“Sorry, it has been so long.”

“Not that long!”

“Haha! Sakura Haruno-san! I remember you by your temper!” He chortled, placing a hand over his face feigning surprise.

“Snarky!” She huffed, stomping a foot.

“Come, let me get the door.” He offered, waiting for her to step through the entrance.

“Ah, a gentleman at heart? Or are you trying to make me forget your terrible memory?” She taunted, sauntering past him. “I don’t forget as easily as you, Kankuro-kun.”

“Right.” He sighed and then laughed a bit. “Headed up to the lab?” He asked, walking with her to the elevator.

“Yes. Are you?”

"Hn. I have some… poisons I wanted to test on the ghost-lungs.”

“Ah, those…” Sakura shivered, evoking a laugh from Kankuro as the elevator ascended. “We don’t have anything like that in the Hidden Leaf village. I suppose I’m just not used to… cadaver lungs being operational outside of the body.”

“Yes, it’s a delicate justu, very hard to keep up, but our Hiroshi is a genius! We were kind of creeped out when he requested 15 sets of dead people lungs, but it’s been irreplaceable in the research progress.”

“I agree! An excellent advancement, but eerie nonetheless… to see them breathing… to see them rotting.” Her voice grew dim. “Poison?” She asked, glancing at the wooden held under his left arm.

“I found them in, well… Have you heard of Sasori of the Red Sand?”

“I have only heard vaguely of him.” Sakura mentioned, finding it odd to hear a previously unimportant name twice so close together.

“Yes,” Kankuro began, taking a deep breath and waiting for her to follow as he exited the elevator. They approached the stations of ghost lungs. “Sasori was a puppet master here in this village, before he… defected, I suppose. He’s said to now roam between villages, and in particular,
outside of this one at some hard-to-find tavern full of criminals and the like.”

“Defected?”

“A story for another time… anyway, as a missing nin, he ended up leaving behind a great amount of work, including a few of the puppets in my collection. He was truly a master craftsman. Shame he grew evil and whatnot.” He said almost dismissively as he unpacked the vials of pungent poison. “These were left in his workshop. I have recreated a few of them, so I was thinking, since he’s said to have once contracted the disease—“

“There’s a living vessel of the plague?!” Sakura interrupted.

“Yes, supposedly he’s still alive, living with sandy lungs and all. I was thinking maybe he had the cure somewhere in his possession. I would’ve tried these much sooner, but I needed to recreate them, so that we have these, and copies of them to make antidotes for. I imagine he’s far moved passed these by now, but by knowing the antidotes to these, maybe one day we could know the antidotes to his newer ones.” He determined, feeding a couple drops of the liquid into the detached Trachea until it filled the lungs.

He did the same with four other ghost lungs until he was out of the samples. One of the ghost lungs had immediately deflated, while the others kept working. Sakura gave a shiver.

“What terrible poisons.” She noted as one of the sets began to flake and shrivel.

“He was a terrible person.” Kankuro remarked, recording each reaction as it happened. “I’m going to stay here and watch these. Feel free to work around me.”

“I was going to anyway.” Sakura said stoically then giggled. “Don’t mind me asking, but is there any hint of how Sasori could’ve survived the plague?”

“It was only fabled he had it.” Kankuro confessed. “But… we’re operating on fables now.” His voice grew dark and his painted eyes narrowed harshly. “We’re that desperate, Sakura-chan.”

“It’ll be okay.” She said uncertainly. Even with all her medical training, she never knew how to fully comfort someone who was clearly mourning. It was something she never got used to working in the hospital.

“Sakura-san.” Ostu spoke up, causing a start in Sakura.

“Yes?” She sighed as Kankuro chuckled at her jumpy nature.

“You have a letter, and package.” Ostu handed her both, eyeing her. “They’re from your parents. I didn’t fully read the letter, I just needed to make sure there wasn’t any sort of paper bomb. I apologize for opening both.” She nodded.

“I-It’s fine. Thank you.” Sakura smiled and set both on the table. She opened the letter. Both her parents were incredibly worried for her safety, as anticipated. They must’ve gotten a particularly quick feather to deliver these. She smiled at the package. There was her favorite set of gloves, extra wrappings, a flower from Ino, and a picture, still in the frame. Team Seven. She frowned but set up the picture at the station where she worked. “Naruto-kun, Sasuke-kun.” She whispered to the photograph. “Help me figure this out.” She muttered to herself. She sat the letter and package under her desk and unrolled another scroll with the plague sealed firmly in it. She took a deep breath before analyzing it further.

Ostu sat at in a chair far out of the way. She perked up minutely as footsteps approached,
though the other two didn’t take notice. Hiroshi slid the door open and silently went to work, ignoring acknowledgements from the other two. She narrowed her eyes at him, straining to hear any hitch in breath or voice, any sort of reaction. He simply began to gather supplies, some sort of specialized anesthetic, and left to treat current patients in the building.

Sakura hadn’t met all of the patients, but she met quite a few, analyzing their physical condition and all their symptoms. They were medicated to the point of almost-comfort, and most of them were on oxygen, clinging to life. Since yesterday, she had lost 68. Today’s death toll was already at 17, and day hadn’t crept around the corner yet.

Hours passed, and eventually Kankuro watched as the last set of ghost lungs died and he grimaced. One of the poisons held out and actually ate away at the infected tissue, but left enormous holes in the linings of the lungs.

“Sakura-chan, what if we used poison 5 to eat away at the plague, then just repair the holes from the lungs?”

“Painful and hopeless.” She retorted, too absorbed in her work to give further explanation on to the detrimental effects that would have on the patient. Kankuro gave her a look. She looked up, having not realized her own rudeness. “Should we cure people like that, it would give them limited life spans, if we could just find a cure, we wouldn’t have to give people an expiration date at all.”

Kankuro tilted his head then frowned deeply. “Let’s take a break, Sakura-chan. We should go get lunch.” He looked at the sunlight outside. It was well past afternoon, nearly time for dinner, but the two of them hadn’t eaten a bite.

“Not hungry.” Sakura lied, only to be immediately exposed by her grumbling tummy. She blushed and looked up to see if he had heard it. A full row of white teeth showed as he grinned at her. “Okay, but then it’s back to work.” She smiled humbly, and set down the scroll she had been metaphorically dissecting.

Ostu stood, causing Kankuro to nearly jump. She looked to him with mirth, realizing he had well forgotten her presence.

“Come on, it’s Gaara’s treat.” Kankuro laughed and opened the door for her once again.

“The chivalry continues!” Sakura declared as she left the lab, passing Hiroshi on the way out.

“Going somewhere, Leaf girl?” He asked, obviously irritated to see her taking a break.

“Just going to get lunch.” She said, a pout tugging at her lips.

“Right, well, while you relax, I’ll be working on a cure.” He hissed, slamming the door behind himself.

“Ignore him. He’s got a stick up his ass.” Kankuro rolled his eyes. Sakura grimaced, rubbing the back of her neck guiltily. “Come on, we’ve got a ramen stand. Naruto-san seemed to like it when he and that old guy passed through here. Maybe we’ll catch Temari on the way there. Judging by the time, we should be walking there around her regular route.”

“Route?” Sakura asked, “What sort of route does she walk?”

“Temari walks the entire village twice a day, securing entrances and exits and all sorts of detailed bullshit.” He snorted. “When Gaara became Kazekage, she took it upon herself to protect
not only him, but the entire village.” He stood up a little straighter and smiled. “It makes her happy. She… feels fulfilled protecting others.” He stated.

“What about you? What do you do?” Sakura asked curiously. The infamous sand siblings had been quite a topic after the incident involving Orochimaru and a certain sand demon.

“Oh, that’s boring nonsense—let’s talk about something else.” Kankuro decided as he got close to getting emotional.

“You said Naruto had been through here?”

“Ah yes! But barely. He dropped in to try to see Gaara, but we didn’t tell him Gaara became Kazekage. We didn’t know how he’d take the news, and all that. We just said he was off on a mission.” said Kankuro. “He and that old guy stopped by here to eat.” He gestured when they reached the small stand. Sakura let out a laugh of disbelief.

“It looks almost exactly like ours! Like Ramen Ichiraku!” She laughed out of joy.

“It resembles it greatly.” Ostu finally spoke up, though she went unheard by the two. Kankuro and Sakura chattered on as they sat and ate. Ostu herself had a bowl, though she ate quickly and returned to her post outside the small shop.

Just in time, Temari walked by and recognized the ant-mask of Ostu. She peeked into the ramen shop she was guarding and saw her brother and Sakura enjoying their meal. She attempted to sneak up behind Kankuro but her sudden would-be slap on the back was countered with a jab to her ticklish side by Crow, operated by the chakra thread at the tip of Kankuro’s thumb and forefinger. Temari let out a yelp and landed a punch instead after laughing.

Sakura noticed similar behavior in the sand siblings to the mysterious Ostu and Ostaka. She laughed with the two.

“So Kankuro convinced you to slack off, huh?” Temari questioned, feigning a haughty attitude. “You should be careful around this one. He’s recently run into a bit of trouble involving ladies.”

“Trouble?” Sakura questioned, raising an eyebrow then looking at Kankuro as his cheeks grew red.

“C’mon, sis.” Kankuro groaned and covered his face with a hand. “How long are you going to bring that up?”

“Oh, he has his own little fan club amongst our young chunin girls.” Temari said in a sing song voice. “One even snuck into our home and managed to get pictures of him while he was bathing.”

Kankuro groaned loudly and slurped at his half empty bowl to try and drown out Temari’s recollection of what happened.

“Then one of the little girls tried to black mail him with the pictures—to which he responded with…” Temari cleared her throat and summoned her best mocking voice. “‘You can’t scare me with empty threats like that! I wouldn’t go on a date with you, even if you were as pretty as you seem to think you are’.”

“Harsh, Kankuro.” Sakura chided with a grin.
“She photographed me naked, without my permission! That wasn’t harsh, that was nice compared to what I could have done.” He scoffed.

“Yes, well,” Temari interrupted. “Then she posted the photos almost everywhere in the village.” Temari shivered in disgust. “I hope to never seen images like that again... The content alone... That rubber duck...” She stuck out her tongue to show how vile she thought it was.

“Ha. Ha. Yes, make fun of me.” Kankuro whined. “Like I’m not even here, go on.”

“Like... like a stack of misshapen dangos.” Temari laughed.

“That’s mean, sis.” Kankuro chastised. “I don’t make fun of your school girl crush on that creep who complains about literally everything!”

“Back off!” She hissed, blushing at even the mention of him.

Sakura smiled and stood, getting both of their attention. “Thank you for lunch, Kankuro-san. It was good to see you again, Temari-chan.”

“Yeah, good to see you too.” Temari mumbled, wondering if their behavior had scared her off. She settled next to her brother to eat.

Ostu followed Sakura back to the compound.

“Ostu-san.” Sakura spoke up after a bit. “What do you know about Sasori of the Red Sand?”

“I only know what the others do... He is a missing nin, associated with the Akatsuki, often seen skulking about between villages.

“Do you know anything about him allegedly surviving this plague?” She asked, brow furrowed deeply.

“I have just recently learned about this, Sakura-san. I didn’t know he had it. Shouldn’t it have killed him by now?” Ostu questioned.

“Yes... according to Kankuro, it is said he had it a long time ago, so he should be long gone... I need to find him.” Sakura determined. If someone were to have lived with it, they would either have a cure, or an effective treatment. She needed either one to save the village. “I need to find Sasori of the Red Sand, and inquire about this plague.”

Ostu snorted with laughter, an unbecoming noise escaping her. “Okay. Yeah, we’ll just go find Sasori. ‘Hey, mister-Akatsuki-puppet-man, care to share your knowledge with us?’” She laughed to herself.

“Oh—don’t make fun of me! If he truly had it, then he knows the cure! There’s no way he’d be alive at all if not for it.” She decided. “It was just a thought.” She murmured forlornly. “You’re right, though. We certainly can’t just ask him.”

“Please don’t make a plan to meet him, Sakura-chan.” Ostu hummed. “I don’t believe that would end well for you. After all, he could be the one who released this plague on us.”

“You’re right again, Ostu-san.” Sakura sighed once again.

“That’s my job.” Ostu joked, lightly tapping Sakura’s shoulder to get her attention. Sakura turned and looked at her inquisitively. “Don’t get so down. It’s only day two. You can do this,
Sakura-chan. You’re the Hokage’s favorite student, and her teachings will guide you. You have to do it. You’re the hope of the Sand Village.” Ostu said.

Sakura took a deep breath and stood up straight. “Thank you, Ostu-san!” She smiled brightly, filled with new determination. Tsunade hadn’t just taught her fighting. She had extensive knowledge of diseases and how they came about, how they worked, and most importantly, how to cure them. She would put that knowledge to good use. Sakura practically bolted into the medical center, nearly leaving Ostu out of the elevator.

Still, there was a chill up her spine. She knew someone had been watching her.
Day 9.

Dear Ino,

Thank you so much for the flower! I’m sorry I haven’t written you sooner. I’m so busy with work that I haven’t had the time before now. The only reason I have time now is because the medical lab is being sterilized. I accidentally let loose a pathogen from a study scroll and contaminated the lab. Whoops! That’s 2 hours of sleep working hard.

Anyway, things have been coming along. We’re making progress on the outbreak. I can’t give you too many details, but we have determined it was indeed an intentionally created strand of plague, resistant to (and suspiciously) most everything Lady Tsunade had propositioned. We have a list of suspects, but one really weird lead, that Kakashi, Gaara, and the council are super insistent about. Have you heard of Sasori? I’ve asked around and gotten some weird responses, but let me know if it rings a bell!

How’s Shikamaru doing? Asking for Temari. She’s head over heels and it’s obvious from a klick away! I’m sending you a package with this letter. It’s a neat sculpture I found of a piglet. (Haha, it’s you) It’s actually super cute and made out of hardened sand. It had to be sterilized so it will smell funny, but don’t worry about that.

So much love!

Sakura

Sakura sealed the scroll with a pink ribbon, while Ino would seal her own with blue ones. Sakura took the blue ribbon and tied it into her hair. She wasn’t very superstitious, but she hoped somehow the article from her dearest friend would grant her more strength than she currently had. She had spent a little over a week there and she was absolutely drained.

The little reprieve she did receive was between the jovial antics of the Anbu siblings, Kakashi’s humor, and letters from her friends. She received so many, even from Neji, Shino, and Hinata! Those were names she never thought would worry about her enough to write her. She knew word had gotten around, but receiving so many well wishes was refreshing and energizing. She kept all the letters on her nightstand and read them before going to sleep each night.

Another day awaited her tomorrow. She went to change into her night wear—a large t shirt Naruto had gifted her a couple of years ago (that she would outright deny to wearing, but could never part with), and a pair of loose pants with a draw string to keep them on her slender form.

“Please, dress in the restroom.”

Shirt already pulled up past her elbows, she gasped and forced it back down when she realized Kakashi was in the room.

“Damn you! You quiet bastard!” She squeaked, tossing her slipper at him. He did not try to avoid it. In fact, he was completely rigid, she noticed. She ran for the restroom to finish changing, hearing the chuckles of Ostu and Ostaka from the parlor. “You should’ve said something sooner!” She shouted, red as a beet root. There came no reply, so she hoped the situation was behind her.

Treading lightly, she returned to the room and narrowed her ivy eyes at the copycat nin who sat, almost perched in the corner of the room.
“I didn’t know you were in here when I changed.” She ground out.

“I should hope not.” Kakashi chuckled. He was a bit frightened by her ire, if he were honest with
himself. It looks like Tsunade taught Sakura more than medical practices. He saw the sage's anger in
the girl.

“Don’t get the wrong idea.” Sakura groaned. After Ino had teased her relentlessly about a
‘romantic getaway with the one and only Kakashi’ after learning of their rooming status somehow,
Sakura had grown wary of her own attraction to the man. Many women would do most anything for
that sort of closeness to the mysterious ninja, but knowing him made her a bit jaded to his charms.
Though, recently she saw herself falling for them. Those little grins he would give her, and slight
innuendoes hidden in innocent comments.

“Never,” Kakashi said, half-genuinely. It grew increasingly alarming how much he caught his
mind drifting to places he wouldn’t admit even if he were tortured for the information.

“I’m going to sleep now.” Sakura declared, burrowing under the blankets. It was dreadfully cold
during the nights, so she had gone out and bought two extra blankets for the bed. She was used to
the temperate weather of her home village, and did not want to suffer the cold if she didn’t have to,
despite Kakashi’s unrelenting comments about her growing to accustomed to such comforts and
forgoing her ability to thrive in environments that caused her to struggle.

“Goodnight, Sakura-chan.” He hummed.

“Goodnight, Kakashi-sensei.” She said awkwardly, thankful that he then left the room to patrol.
She had wondered about his sleeping pattern until she caught him dead snoring with a book over his
face at the kitchen table one morning. She smiled remembering it and let out a little snort of laughter.

Her and Ostu had managed to stack four of his books, a couple of wooden bowls, and a kunai on
top of his book before he woke with a start as all of the stacked items clambered on the floor and
table.

Kakashi had not yet retaliated, which worried the two kuinoichi but it kept Ostu a bit more alert,
so he would wait further, no doubt.

The next morning, Sakura awoke to the sound of a loud explosion at a trade entrance into the
village. She darted out of bed and immediately grabbed her gloves and kunai. Her Anbu guardians
and sensei were nowhere to be seen. A note was scribed quickly and left on the table. It told her to
stay inside. She scoffed and dressed rapidly, headed out of the door after discarding the note. ‘What
note’ she asked herself, and immediately headed to the source of commotion. Her heart lurched into
her throat.

There was a light knell she heard faintly to her right. It sounded so deathly familiar that it froze
her very being. She swallowed thickly and looked around. She saw nobody nearby. In fact, Temari
had made sure citizens were evacuated into the safety of the main building that the Kazekage had
ordered construction to make a shelter in case of external strife. Her stomach churned at the thought
of the crowd spreading more of the disease in their close quarters. This was a highly calculated strike.

Another explosion hit, this time much closer to where she stood. She was blown back by the
force, but in bracing herself to collide with one of the surrounding buildings, she found two large
arms wrapped around her torso. She panicked for a moment before recognizing the bird like features
of Ostaka’s mask.

“You’re supposed to be in the apartment!” He yelled over the sound of another explosion as he
carried her to a safer spot before setting her down.

“I can’t help in the apartment!” She returned, putting her foot down, metaphorically and literally. “I’m not some fragile thing—“

“You are our greatest asset, now please return to the domicile.” He enforced.

“What’s going on?” Ostu found the two and immediately landed behind Sakura, who turned. “Sakura-chan…?”

“I can help!” Sakura huffed.

“Not by being a stubborn child! Go!” Ostaka yelled.

“I’m not being stubborn!” She fought.

“Go!”

“Not while you fight!”

“Ostaka, she won’t leave.” Ostu affirmed. “This one truly takes after Tsunade-sama.”

Sakura was about to retort when she mentally rescinded her cutting statement as she realized the truth behind Ostu’s words.

“She is useful to us here as well.” Ostu continued. “Sakura, please do not rush into explosions as they happen, though. You are our greatest asset, as he said.”

“Kakashi will have our heads.” Ostaka groaned.

“That is later. We must quickly find the source of these attacks and put an end—“

Ostu’s words were cut off by the building they were standing on suddenly collapsing as another ballistic ignited a chain reaction. Seven more buildings fell as the three found new ground to stand on. Ostu looked to Sakura. It seemed the explosions were targeting her. A kunai whirred past Sakura’s ear, slicing a bit of cartilage just as the thought occurred. Then as she turned her head, a kunai was caught just before striking. Ostaka stammered in disbelief as one of Kankuro’s puppets had skillfully blocked the attack.

Before they knew it, Ostaka and Sakura were jammed inside of a large barrel-like puppet, and pulled from the action. Ostu made eye contact with Kankuro, who simply gave her a thumbs up, having secured the stubborn Sakura to bring her to a safer location. He likely didn’t realize he had also put a most irritable Anbu in captivity as well.

“Fuck! There has to be a way out—a joint or something that—“ The puppet tumbled ungracefully about, causing Sakura and Ostaka to collide as he yelled and cursed. “Some sort of weak spot or—Ow!” Sakura landed with her back across his upper body. “You know what—I’ll just. Here. Don’t—Ow! Don’t hit me!”

“Why are you holding me! Let go!” Sakura huffed, in as much of a blind panic as him.

“If I hold you like this we won’t tumble into each other!” He determined. “Stay still, damnit!”

“No! Let go! Just hold on to the walls!” She shouted

“I can’t!”
“Well—stop holding onto my—“

“Oh—I’m so sorry.”

Kankuro paused as he finally reached the medical center and landed his puppet with a bit more finesse than should be for such a heavy item. He heard some… odd things from the puppet, and belatedly realized he trapped two people in there instead of just Sakura. He commanded it open and Sakura bolted from the barrel, leaving Ostaka to crawl out last. She was disheveled and he looked more concerned and embarrassed than anything, mask cracked and broken by Sakura’s fist. There was a noticeable mar on his cheek as well.

“Um.” Kankuro cleared his throat. “Sorry. I only meant to grab the pretty one.” He said, trying to diffuse the sudden angry tension with some sort of humor.

“Right, well, I won’t blame you for accidentally grabbing her too.” Ostaka grinned.

“Oh—please. You-” Sakura huffed.

“Yes, please. Please stop fighting and listen.” Kankuro rolled his eyes. “We have an unknown attacker, only a day after we discovered Orochimaru as our prime suspect. We need to get a handle on this situation. I brought you here, Sakura, because the explosions seemed to follow you. I confirmed it after I sent four clones in separate directions, and they followed the one they most likely believed was me, carrying you and your friend here.”

“Why would they be after me?” She asked, stumped. What had she done?

“You’re making advancements that has slowed the progression and spread of the plague, it’s likely that there is someone inside our walls that is sending information to whoever made this thing in the first place.” He explained to the best of his knowledge.

“What should we do?” Ostaka spoke up, finally brushing himself off and recovering from the tumble.

“Secure this location. I’m glad I brought you. I’m going to lead them away from this building, so Sakura, I need you to make three shadow clones.” He said while doing the same. “Those three sets will leave and go to locations very far from here and attempt to draw out the perpetrator.” She nodded and signing her ninjustu. Three more Sakuras appeared next to her.

“Go.” Kankuro instructed the sets and then he took a deep breath as he looked at the two. Desperation showed in his tired eyes. “Anbu, protect her with your life, if you have to. She is the only hope left for the Sand Village. I’m afraid Tin-san has a terrible cough. We fear for him.”

Sakura swallowed a bit of lingering paranoia and settled at her station. The windows were locked and shades were drawn. Kankuro left without another word. Ostaka sat across from her.

“Sorry.” He apologized. “I shouldn’t have treated you like a genin.” He admitted, fiddling with a bit of his sheared hair.

“You are correct, and I will forgive you when we sort this thing out.” She gestured towards the previous source of explosions.

“Right.” He sighed and looked over her notes before stopping abruptly and apparently hearing something she couldn’t. She looked towards the door when he did and he vanished right before her eyes. Sakura looked around quickly for him before arming herself.
There was a faint rustling at the door then a heavy blast sent Ostaka flying past Sakura and sent most of the lab equipment scattering. There was the faint knell again. Her heart raced and she looked over to the unconscious Ostaka, before the Anbu vanished once again, appearing behind the perpetrator. Her heart froze and she became paralyzed by fear.

The figure in the door had blackened robes with crimson clouds. He had blonde hair, pulled up into a high pony tail. Ostaka had a kunai to his throat and held on tightly.

“Very rude of you, hm.” The man stated simply, craning his neck in a challenge. “I only wanted to talk to her.” He laughed at his own joke then turned his frightening gaze back to Sakura.

He looked absolutely crazy. He had a gleam of madness in his eyes and she clearly saw no mercy there. Just as Ostaka dug his kunai into the man’s throat, the clone made a terrible explosion, one Ostaka was not prepared for this time. Sakura let out a scream and ran over to the Anbu, immediately trying to perform her medical ninjutsu.

“So, you’re the prodigy I hear about.” The man hummed, looking over her work before putting a couple scrolls in his bag. Sakura should have defended her work, but she focused more on healing Ostaka. Large portion of his skin had been blown off, exposing bone, tissue, organs. She poured her chakra into his wounds until they sealed. He was far from healed but he was out of immediate danger. Sweat dripped from her brow and she turned to look at the man who now stood at Ostaka’s upturned feet. She had just depleted her own chakra almost entirely, and it showed.

“What do you want?” Sakura managed to fake bravery.

“Oh, I was going to just take a few things and leave, but now…” He looked over the girl. “I can make you into a masterpiece. He was right about you...” He said with a deadly smile. He went to reach for her, but she was already gone. She ran down the corridors of the building, knowing he wasn’t far behind. She was operating on minimal chakra, and loathed to leave Ostaka alone there, but had no choice. Besides, the madman was on her tail. She opened a window and jumped from it, immediately regretting it, as she missed her leap to the next building.

Scrambling, she managed to grab onto a window seal and shove her way up to her feet. She jumped to the roof and began to flee, not much ahead of the blonde Akatsuki member. “Kakashi!” She yelled as she spotted the familiar figure. He turned his head and his eyes widened in complete shock when he spotted who managed to grab her just in time. The madman put on arm across Sakura’s shoulders, and held in his hand a small cherry blossom made out of clay.

“Your name is Sakura Haruno...” The man whispered against the shell of her ear, causing her to flinch. “How fitting you would die by a blossom,” He chuckled.

She looked to his hand, then to Kakashi who stood a distance away. She squirmed helplessly, but it was no use, even with her strength, she had no leverage and he held an actual bomb in his hand.

“Stay back, copycat ninja.” The man yelled.

“Deidara.” Kakashi finally identified him. Kakashi’s mask had been pulled down ever so slightly to reveal his sharingan.

“Oh, you know my name.” Deidara hummed and then laughed. “It won’t do you much good. I hadn’t planned on having this much fun today. But this one? Lots of potential, huh?” He gestured at Sakura with the hand holding a small bomb.

“I have to ask that you don’t kill her.” Kakashi started, stepping forward. Shrinking the distance
didn’t phase Deidara at all. Sakura on the other hand, was shaking like a leaf.

“Don’t worry, dear, I won’t let the bad man hurt you.” He chuckled and squeezed a bit harder across her shoulders. He paid no mind as she took deep breaths, calming herself and focusing her chakra. Kakashi caught onto her movements however, and quickly improvised a plan.

One of his hands was busy holding the struggling kunoichi in place, the other held a dangerous bomb that could easily kill her. If Kakashi removed the bomb from the equation, he knew Sakura could handle the rest. Spotting Ostu behind Deidara, he decided to instead, just keep the narcissistic man distracted. It wouldn’t be too hard to do. Ostu was smart enough to recognize the situation and assist how she could.

“Please, just let her go. What is it you are looking for?” Kakashi meant to appease him.

“What is it I’m looking for?” Deidara reflected, a slight incline in tone. “I shouldn’t even tell you, but I was sent to investigate this plague of yours. Yeah, but I got stopped from doing that, so now this has to happen. This one knows more than I do about it, so she needs to come with me. The alternate is for her to end up on three different buildings in a bloody paste.”

Hearing his regard, Ostu paused only briefly before snatching the clay creation from Deidara’s hand and flinging it high into the air, as he belatedly detonated it, seeking to damage at least one person with it. As soon as he detonated it, Sakura slammed her head into his face and brought her elbow to his ribcage, the combination sending him flying into Ostu, who grabbed him by the throat and slammed him into the ground.

“You will do no such thing.” Sakura growled and attacked him once again. Her better judgement said to run, but he had humiliated her by taking her as hostage. She had promised herself she wouldn’t be a liability anymore. She wouldn’t let that promise get broken before she even got to show Naruto how much she had grown. She drew her fist back behind her head, rage burning in her eyes as Deidara oriented himself with reality again. He managed to move just in time, but fell into the crater created in the building and tumbled through the cracks. Sakura attempted to chase him through, but he managed to get past her and stepped off the edge of the crumbling roof, stepping right onto a waiting bird, who swept him away.

He let out a small chuckle as he watched her frustrated features grow less noticeable the further away he got. He even gave a mocking wave as he made his escape.

“Are you okay, Sakura-chan?” Ostu asked, approaching her slowly.

“Yeah.” Sakura said curtly. “I just… he got away.”

“Oh, he didn’t get away unscathed.” Kakashi remarked, holding up an empty injection vial.

“What is that? Why are you giving me that look?” Sakura asked, too angry for his shenanigans.

“This? This was Tozlu, and if his body operates like ours, he should be feeling the effects of it, very, very soon.” Kakashi determined, waving it triumphantly. Sakura stared in disbelief.

“So, when did you take that from my lab—and were you just carrying it around?”

“Yes.” He confirmed, jumping down from the building to alert the Kazekage the threat was gone.

Sakura followed him, bewildered. “That didn’t answer my first question!” She told him as he walked away.
She sighed and looked to Ostu.

“Where is my brother, Sakura?” She asked, more fear in her voice than she cared to show.

“He’s at the medical center.” Sakura managed. “He’ll be alright once we get him medical attention. I suggest we keep him at the apartment to reduce the risk of contamination.”

“Yes.” Ostu affirmed before immediately going to find him. The threat gone, she was comfortable with leaving Sakura to Kakashi’s care. She fled to the medical center where she indeed found her brother, lying prone on the floor. “Ostaka!” She screamed, Anbu training temporarily forgotten. She knelt next to him.

“Ostu…” He muttered, slowly waking up. “Ostu, I’m okay. Where’s Sakura—there’s a—Akatsuki—“

“I know. She’s safe. What the hell happened?”

“He blew me up.” He said plainly, feeling no pain over the rush of adrenaline. He raised his head and looked to his torso. “Oh.. that’s not good.”

“No, it isn’t. Come on, I have to get you back to the apartment so Sakura-chan can heal you.” She sighed and scooped her much-larger-than-her sibling from the debris of the ground. He rested his head, resigning to be carried, but just this once. He’d never let her do it after this.

“That man… he expressed more interest in Sakura-chan, than any regular enemy should.” Ostaka grunted in pain and brushed his fingers against a large dent in his flesh. A layer of skin had healed over the wound, no doubt Sakura’s doing.

“I noticed… it seemed like he was either going to kill her or take her with him. I couldn’t tell. Either way… I’m sending for reinforcements.” She murmured solemnly. “We can’t risk what happened again.”

“Don’t get your hopes up. The Leaf must defend itself as well. Tsunade can’t send many more people. Either risk of infection or taking away our fighting forces, should the village be attacked in this time of crisis.” Ostaka sighed, as his sister opened the door of the apartment.

She set him gently down on the bed of their own room. He winced in pain and realized one of his wounds had opened. Sakura was at the door almost the moment it did.

“Ostaka-san. Don’t touch it. You have dust on your hands.” She warned and sterilized her own hands in the basin, then by pouring alcohol over them. She returned to him and grimaced. “We’re going to need donated tissue and organ pieces. Do you know your blood type? I’ll send an order for them immediately.”

“O.”

“Oh,” Sakura hummed, stricken with momentary worry. It was such a rare blood type.

“Yes,” Ostaka grinned mirthfully, though the pain was finally catching up to him as he settled down.

“Now is hardly the time for jokes!” Ostu chided, teeth gritting in annoyance. He couldn’t take his own grave injuries seriously.

“Finding a donor won’t be easy. For now you are out of commission, Ostaka-san.” Sakura said.
With a deep, but trembling sigh, Ostaka removed the remnants of his shirt, causing Sakura to wince a bit. It looked terrible.

“You need to go back to the Hidden Leaf village.” Sakura decided. “Lady Tsunade is likely the only one with the capability to repair you.”

“She’s far too busy.” Ostaka frowned.

“Not for someone so important.” Sakura decided.

“How will he get back?” Ostu asked, a disbelieving look hidden behind her own mask. She looked at her brother’s brown eyes. “Should we risk sending him alone or with a group of possibly-infected-ninja-or-civilians?”

Sakura cringed, weighing her options. “ Safest bet would be to disguise him in with a group of merchants. He could ride with the merchandise as they make their way to our home village.”

Kakashi stepped through the door, carrying a couple of papers in his hand. He spoke up, startling Sakura and causing a slight incline of Ostu’s head. “That would be more suspicious than anything. A group of merchants travelling between villages during the current embargo? Unlikely. It’s safe to assume the Akatsuki are still in the area, or worse, preparing for another strike. It’s too risky to send him.”

“If we don’t, then he will die!” Sakura hissed at Kakashi, who seemed far too indifferent. Kakashi took a deep breath and steeled his expression.

“Sakura-san.” Ostu spoke up, now in immense pain.

“I’m not the priority here.” He confirmed and put his hand on hers. “You need to get back to work. Time is running out.”

Sakura stared at him for a moment. She felt like a helpless little girl. Ostu sat next to her brother.

“Fine…” Sakura resigned. He was right after all. Despite her pride, there was a greater risk. If they didn’t act quickly, the sand village would experience a great loss, then possibly the rest of the lands as well. “I’ll send medicine to you though. I just ask that in your compromised state, you sterilize every hour. This place needs to be sterile.” She reiterated and stood up.

For a second, she could swear she saw tears in Ostu’s eyes. Even Kakashi looked as if he were struggling with lamentations all his own.

“Ostu-san, stay here with your brother. I will watch after Sakura-chan.” Kakashi decided. He would also request guards for the apartment from Temari, so that Ostu could look after her brother rather than do her assigned duty.

Sakura was headed out of the door without another word. She had a lot of work ahead of her.
Night Terrors and Amnesia

Day 23

Hiroshi stood at the open window of the lab. He wore a fuller mask now, and bright white gloves. Sakura stared at him for just a moment.

“It is indeed Tozlu.” Hiroshi spoke up, voice neutral.

“You should not be here. You should be with your loved ones.” Sakura said. “I will work twice as hard—I’ll—“

“They are healthy. I prefer to keep it that way.” He interrupted her. “Besides, now we have a live subject… we will perform a vivisection on me, and therefore have access to an active sample of the virus, as opposed to the cadaver samples and synthesized samples.”

“You can’t be serious… You’ll never recover—what if we find a cure?”

“I’m deadly serious, Haruno-san.” He said firmly and gestured towards a surgical table. “I want you to perform it, and sample an active culture. Even though we have active cultures from the ghost lung, this one will be purer, more active, as it has the full functionality of my blood flow.”

“That is true… the virus feeds off the other organs as well but…”

“It is a gruesome thing to ask, I know.” He broke face, and his voice crackled ever so slightly. “But it must happen, and I am likely the only one who would agree to such things.”

“But, goriness aside, it’s illegal! Highly illegal—I could be exiled, or imprisoned, and no doubt stripped of my status.” She listed. “Is it really worth it, Tin-san?” She asked.

“Should you be able to harvest a culture, you would gain greater insight to the nature of this plague. Please, Haruno-san. It’s one life, to benefit many thousands of lives. The families that are being torn apart by this plague would want you to do this.”

“B-But… I pledged to do no harm outside of battle.” She rebuffed, sweating a bit as she was being morally cornered. She shut her eyes and contorted her face with concern and disgust. “Fine. I will do it, I just… need an hour to prepare.”

“Steel yourself, Leaf girl.” He croaked, trying his best not to cough. “I have quick matters to attend to, then I will be ready.”

Sakura nodded as he exited the room. Her eyes widened when she fully realized what she just agreed to, and she began preparing anesthetics and her tools. She set them out neatly on a tray next to a surgical table where it would be executed. It was morbid. An outlawed practice, actually. In all lands, vivisection was strictly forbidden. She put up shades on all of the windows and doors. She drifted, light headed to her work station, attention drawn to a note.

That hadn’t been there when she came in the morning.

‘Sakura,

It looks like we will be working together. Bring your findings to a drop spot, behind the tavern near the hidden entrance to the village. I will share mine as well. Do not alert your caretakers. I
will be there tonight to pick up anything you find.’

She swallowed thickly and jolted in shock as the note burned out of thin air as soon as she was done reading it. She brushed the ashes onto her scrubs and looked around. Somebody had snuck in, but… she was there the entire time. It couldn’t have been Tin-san, could it?

Suddenly she became very wary of her surroundings and even went so far as to check around the room for signs of foreign entry. Nothing was out of place, but in the back of her mind, a noise alerted her of a possibility. Her stomach churned and she paled. She heard a slight tinkling knell.

“Sakura Haruno-san.” Hiroshi interrupted her thought process. He still had his mask but now wore patient garbs: a pair of shorts and a gown that tied in the back. “I have taken this.” He held up a flask. It was a familiar poison. It would not affect his body, only his brain. They had 3 days before it would shut down his mind.

“You really want to do this…” Sakura whispered.

“I am ready.” Hiroshi said and hopped up onto the table, only to lay himself down, staring up at the ceiling. He had a photograph of what Sakura assumed to be his daughter clasped tightly in his hand. Sakura approached him and pulled a full faced mask over herself, to shield herself from any splatter of contaminated blood. She pulled over a lab coat that’s collar reached and tucked into the mask and a hood to cover her hair. She couldn’t risk exposure. “Thank you, Haruno-san.” He said to the painted mask.

“You can call me Sakura, if it pleases you.” She murmured, opening his shirt and dotting where the incisions would be made in surgical ink. She pressed a needle into the vein of his elbow, wrist, and neck. It was a fast acting chemical that shut down the external nervous systems. He would feel no pain through the procedure, and had he not planned to die, he would have never felt pain again. The substance was only for use in the most dire cases, but she counted this as such. He smiled.

“You look like my Hiruta.” He mused, mind drifting off as the drugs entered his blood stream. “She’s got those same emerald eyes…” He said, each word coming out slower than the last. His eyes shut and as she checked his pulse, she noticed he had drifted off into a deep sleep. He would wake later.

“Good night, Hiroshi-san.” Sakura said formally and made the first incision. She held her breath as she continued the morbid surgery.

It took three hours of safely moving his organs about and collecting samples. She had made a discovering upon pulling a nodule from his lungs. The plague was a substance. It was not airborne like they thought. There was a foreign substance that had attached itself to his lungs, meaning that the ghost lungs weren’t infected with the same thing that the people were contracting. She could almost smile at the discovery, but she had to act quickly. She sewed everything back into place and healed his wounds shut. There were large scars where his skin had been peeled out of the way, but his sacrifice gave them the step ahead that they needed.

“Thank you, Hiroshi-san.” She managed through her disgust at the viscera left on her gloved hands. She cleaned up her station and put a blanket over him to shield him from the cold of the lab. She managed to get everything sparkling just in time. There was a heavy knock at the door. Kakashi entered without waiting for a reply.

“I brought lunch. Ostu-san made these.” He opened his palm to reveal a small sack of what were likely food pills.
“Thank you, Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura hummed, steadying her voice and trying to appear calm. It wasn’t convincing and the copycat ninja tilted his head to get a slightly different view of her face.

“Sakura-chan…” He began, spotting a phial in her hands. “What is that, if I may ask?”

“The plague, still attached to lung tissue. It’s in its earliest form, I suppose.” She said, holding it up. It looked more like a piece of raw meat covered in black sand and dust. “It is not airborne, as we once thought. It is a substance. That would better explain how everybody has been getting it, despite best precautions.”

“Could it be in the water?” Kakashi asked nervously. He was excellent at controlling his tone in most situation, but this frightened him. The light terror on his face reminded her of the mysterious note, as the word ‘caretaker’ came to mind. She put a hand on his shoulder and smiled.

“I am uncertain, but I will need samples from all 47 water sources in the village, and I would suggest we purify our water until we know.” She instructed kindly and he nodded, knowing that he was the only one to do it.

If word got out that it was in the water, the citizens would panic. That was the last thing they needed. She took a deep breath as he left. Hiroshi still laid on the table, fast asleep as though nothing had happened. Sakura took one of her samples to a scroll and sealed it into midair above the scribed sigil on the parchment. She took a deep breath and slowly rotated it, analyzing each speck of it. She wrote down every observation and eventually made a copy of all of her current notes.

She packed all of her personal belongings back into her bag as well as her notes and locked up the lab. Hiroshi would awaken later, but she had to leave him there. She couldn’t let the patients know he was sick by placing him in a bed. He would wake and leave, and it would be done. She felt an odd calm.

One step at a time, she very slowly made her way to the tavern the note had mentioned. She wondered if she was right to share her findings. What if the mystery writer was the one who released the plague? What if he simply wanted to make it immune to her findings. She nervously slowed down. She could be walking directly into a trap. Still, she went on.

The tavern was full of people, some with higher chakra signals than others, but she was able to pick out a rather hefty one that seemed to be waiting behind a block. At first she thought it may have been Kakashi, but it seemed too powerful. She nervously looked about. Nobody was near her. She decided to place her work in a small crate where she noticed a stack of papers already there. She took those and left her own. She immediately began to look through them before realizing they were notes on the plague, written in a very neat, pristine fashion, much more organized than her own.

Filing them into her bag, she left quickly and looped around to a tea shop where she sat at a table to read over the notes, knowing Kakashi was still busy with the water samples, and wouldn’t find her until much later. It was well past dark, and the small restaurant was barely staffed. Two or three people kept it open for those late night drunks, and of course her now as well. The notes began with a preface for her to read.

‘Sakura,

Thank you for complying with my orders.’

She scoffed and continued reading.

‘It pleases me greatly, your willingness to participate. This plague is a threat to both of us, and
our very different walks of life. The plague was designed to spread through chakra rather than physical closeness. The aura one gives off contains the contaminate and it is passed to another purely by proximity, though the substance actually takes the form of a bug, or serpent. It is a piece of the infector’s own chakra in the form of a pest that infects the victim. With that, we know who is behind this. You know him as the man who stole away your teammate, Sasuke.’

Sakura nearly choked on the tea that was brought to her, and paled.

“Are you okay, miss?” A waitress asked, getting her attention.

“Ah, yes, thank you. Something—something caught in my throat, that’s all.”

“You should see a doctor. Coughs are not ending well lately.” She said before leaving her table.

‘We have reason to believe Orochimaru has released a plague in order to kill the vessels of those who have the tailed beasts within them, such as your friend, Naruto Uzumaki.’

Now she was certain that the author of these notes was trying to make her feel uncomfortable.

‘Please take great care. I have placed a package in your room. There are a pair of gloves inside for you, that will simply conceal your chakra signature. Stay healthy. Continue research.’

She held her breath and steeled her mind to look at the signature—to find out who was sending her these odd letters.

In place of a signature, she saw only a small image of a scorpion. She frowned and her brow furrowed in frustration. Who could have possibly written her? And who had managed to sneak past not only the sand guards that had been appointed to her apartment, but the well trained Anbu and Kakashi even? She needed to find the person who would signature with a scorpion.

“Who are you…” She murmured as she stood, and made her way back to the apartment, new notes in her tight grasp. They would no doubt come in handy, but could she trust them? And how did they know Orochimaru was behind it?

“Ostu-san.” She said when she walked through the door. Ostu was in the kitchen, readying a bowl of soup for Ostaka. “How is he doing?”

“I-I think he’s recovering.” She offered. “I-If you’re not too tired, Sakura-san, could you take a look at him?”

“Of course.” Sakura smiled. “You should nap. It looks like you haven’t slept in ages.”

“I haven’t. I’ve been researching who could have done this—and of course watching after Ostaka.”

“I have an anonymous tip…” Sakura began. “Orochimaru.”

“Orochimaru… but… why would he want to do this?”

“Perhaps it’s a power trip.” Sakura shrugged, biting her tongue. She was a terrible liar. “Or maybe he’s targeting the Kazekage, for whatever reason.” There. A half-truth.

“That makes sense… the Kazekage is the most powerful in the village. Perhaps it means Orochimaru is currently weak!” She exclaimed. “I’ll nap later—please watch Ostaka!” She said and bolted from the room. Sakura smiled a bit at her sudden burst of energy and entered the room where
Ostaka laid prone.

“How are you feeling?” Sakura asked, immediately looking over his wounds and delivering the sister’s homemade soup. Though it held no medicinal quality, food made with love and positive intentions always helped heal a patient. She set the soup on the night stand and began unwrapping the bandages. There were not signs of rot or infection, which was incredible.

“Good! Actually… you know, I have some pain, but… I think I’m healing.” Ostaka managed.

“Yes… it would appear so… who has been healing you?”

“No one. Every time I sleep, I wake up feeling even better than when I laid down.” He chirped. “You, doc’, are a quack. Your fancy medicine is nothing in the face of my pure determination!” He exclaimed, pumping a fist in the air to exaggerate his excitement. Sakura chuckled. He reminded her much of Lee.

“Well, determination doesn’t mean much in the face of a partially missing liver. That’ll heal on its own, but the others… it—” Sakura cut herself off and forced his arms away from his torso, climbing on the bed with him.

“Sakura-san…” Ostaka stammered, flustered by the sudden closeness of her. She shushed him and he gave her a look. “Sakura-san, what are you—OW!!” He yelped as she clipped a sample of flesh from him and darted from the bed. “You could’ve warned me!”

“You’re healing—b-but these aren’t your organs! Well, this part isn’t!” She was utterly exasperated. He would certainly have noticed an organ transplant, partial or otherwise. There was a line of demarcation between part of his original tissue and the donor tissue. “This isn’t yours.”

“Well, it’s certainly not now.” He pouted. “What’s wrong?”

“And you’re sure nobody had come in here to heal you? You’re not messing with me?”

“No… nobody is allowed in here. We’re sterile, remember? That whole thing you insisted we do?” He gritted, now annoyed with her vague nonsense.

“Somebody has grafted donor tissue onto your own to accelerate the healing process. Look closely.” She held it up to the still exposed original. “This isn’t yours.”

“It is colored a bit differently…” He noticed, now pale. “So someone snuck in here and healed me? Should I feel good or bad about that?”

“I don’t know… it’s clear that… that somebody has plans.” Sakura murmured, suspecting the author of the notes. “I will… be back. Just relax… there’s nothing you can do other than that.”

“Yeah. ‘Sleep tight, Ostaka-san! Someone is coming in while you’re unconscious and performing surgery on you’!” He mocked, gesturing flamboyantly.

“Hush, we’ll get to the bottom of this.” Sakura decided and shut his door to cut off any more whining. She went to her bedroom and her stomach lurched when she saw a neatly wrapped present on the bed. “Is this some sort of sick joke?” She asked herself in a whisper, opening the box. Surely, inside sat a pair of gloves, identical to the ones she used for battle, but with two sigils on the palms of them. As she slipped them on, she felt queasy once again and sat down as her chakra adjusted to the presence. She took a deep breath then noticed a black ribbon with crimson edges sitting in the box as well. It was the same length as the ribbons Ino tied her letters with. She made a face and picked it up. It was silk, a finer material than she was used to.
Whatever creep had been stalking her left her a ribbon to tie her hair with? This had to be some sort of pervert. Still, she curiously kept it in her pocket. She heard a slight ring and looked around quickly. The last time she heard ‘that fucking bell’ she was nearly killed… or kidnapped.

Still, nobody was there. It must have been some sort of psychosomatic ringing that got under her skin. She took a moment just to look outside. Guards stood outside the building, watching in all directions for any sign of danger. She felt like a princess in a tower. The thought almost made her laugh. She certainly didn’t look like one, or smell like one for that matter. She wreaked of cleansing alcohol and peppermint. She took three showers a day previously, in fear of contamination, though now that she knew the true source of the disease, she could avoid it more accurately.

She would unfortunately have to stay quiet about her findings until she thought of a way to express them as her own discoveries. A mysterious author would raise too many suspicions, and fear of deceit was the last thing the village needed, still, she had to be vigilant. She settled into her bed and fell asleep, only to be woken by Kakashi later.

“Sakura-chan.” His voice seemed headier than normal and she sat up, belatedly realizing she had, out of a force of habit, simply stripped to her underthings and crawled in bed before falling asleep. She pulled the sheet up with her as she sat. “Sakura, are you alright? I couldn’t feel your presence… your chakra… did you exhaust yourself?”

“Oh…” Sakura managed. “No, no, nothing like that… I… got new gloves… I thought that…” She stalled, yawning while she thought of an excuse. “Since the attack, maybe it was best to be completely hidden.” She suggested and Kakashi nodded slightly, though she couldn’t completely fool him. He knew something was off.

“Right. Perhaps that is wise. I contacted Tsunade-sama, and she replied. You are to remain under my complete supervision at all times. She is sending out a unit of Anbu to investigate the Akatsuki’s movements.” Kakashi sighed.

“Good!” Sakura chirped, now a bit more alert. She looked outside of her window, a white bird flew past it. Paranoia struck. Did it look like clay or was she mistaken? She swallowed thickly then looked at the sky. Nearly morning. No use in going back to sleep. She yawned once more and stretched only to scramble and grasp at the sheets. “Um… Kakashi-sensei, do you mind turning around?”

Kakashi chuckled at her antics, though his eyes did not wander. He had an iron fist on his own libido… thanks to some libido suppressants he had purchased the night before after catching himself observe her as she showered. He was lucky she didn’t catch him. Despite being a well-trained warrior, he was frightened by her zeal and anger when combined. He saw the damage she had inflicted on an older man when she caught him peeping on her at the hot springs outside of the village. He couldn’t help but grin a little. She was certainly taking after Tsunade.

Sakura waited until his back was turned for her to dress. She put on a clean set of surgical scrubs and tied her hair back with Ino’s baby blue ribbon. “Alright. Thank you, Kakashi-sensei.”

“You don’t have to thank me for not being a creep.” He laughed.

“Well…” Sakura began, trying desperately to formulate a retort. “You’re making breakfast.”

“What? I made breakfast yesterday.” He pretended to lament.

“As captain of this unit!” Sakura puffed up her chest and opened the door for him to leave. “I command you to fix breakfast! Something with rice!” She mustered her best ‘Kakashi’ voice she
could, dropping an octave and covering the lower half of her face.

“That’s plainly offensive.” He murmured, but complied with her ‘orders’.

As breakfast was prepared, Sakura performed another check up on Ostaka, and lied to him when she said that nobody had done recent work on him, by the looks of it. However, it was clear that just hours before, new tissue had been added.

“Your determination to heal is working.” Sakura fibbed, and cast a healing justu over him. “But this will help.” She smiled.

“Thank you, Sakura-san. I feel like we are growing very close.” He blurted out, a slight pink to his cheeks.

“Careful, Ostaka.” Ostu laughed. “Don’t fall in love with the doctor. She has a billion patients just like you back in the Leaf.”

“A billion?” He asked, exasperated, feigning shock.

“No, a trillion handsome young Anbu.” Sakura said matter of factly before blushing vividly at her admission of admiring his looks.

“Handsome, eh?” He jested, poking her reddening cheek. “None more handsome than I, I hope.”

“Come on, Ostaka, stop messing with the girl.” Ostu suggested. “Any redder and someone will mistake her for a tomato.”

“You two are too much,” Sakura murmured and covered her cheeks.

“Oh, Sakura-chan!” Ostu practically fawned and leaned over to hug the pink girl. “You’re so cute when you’re flustered.”

“Mm’not cute.” Sakura protested, pushing at the tightly latched on woman.

“So cute.” Ostu insisted, squeezing a little more before letting go.

“I’m going to go help with breakfast.” Sakura declared before standing up and marching out.

“You scared her away, Ostu.” Ostaka pouted.

“Shut up.” Ostu rolled her eyes. “You were the one flirting with her.”

Ignoring their loud conversation, Sakura padded into the kitchen, socks muffling her footsteps. “Kakashi, time to prove your worth! You’re currently my most sane teammate.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” Kakashi hummed sarcastically.

“Or whoever.” Sakura added and began washing dishes. “Kakashi-sensei, I have a lead.” She jumped right to the chase, heart picking up a bit. She had to tread lightly. “From the sample I pulled the other day, I have been able to determine that whatever this plague originated from, it must be transferred through chakra.” As she was saying it, something clicked in her brain. It explained why it was completely resistant to treatments. “Which... is why... none of our medicines have worked.” She tried to make it sound like she hadn’t just figured it out. She threw on her shoes and darted from the room, grabbing her bag. “I’ll be back later, Kakashi-sensei!”

“Wait—I have to go with you—damnit! Sakura-chan!” Kakashi yelled, stumbling behind her to
grab his own weapons and shoes. He followed her, mumbling about her being too trigger happy with the sprinting.

Due to her chakra suppression she had reached her limit on sprinting and decided to walk the rest of the way.

“If we can find a way to somehow do a complete… chakra dialysis.” Sakura murmured to herself. “We could extend the lives of the patients while we work on a cure—get me Kankuro!”

“I’m not your aid.” Kakashi muttered angrily, beginning to become irritated with this younger, pinker version of Tsunade.

Still, he acquiesced. Disappearing from her view, Sakura took this time to look at the ribbon she had brought with her. The silk felt good on her finger tips and she could have sworn it had the faintest shimmer to it. She put it closer to her face. There was a slight perfume to it, that smelled like sandalwood, lacquer and wicker. It smelled like Kankuro, almost. She made a disgusted face at the brief thought of him trying to court her in such a way. No, he wasn’t that creepy. Or at least, he wasn’t creepy in that manner. He was a whole different type of weird; an endearing type of weird.

“You sent for me?”

Speak of the Devil.

“Yes! I’ve made an advancement, and I think I’ve found a treatment that could prolong our patient’s life spans while we find a cure. Are you familiar with dialysis?” She asked.

“I am, but how could that possibly help?”

“Well, read this, quickly, then I will further explain, once I have my thoughts together.” She confessed then handed him a copy of her notes she had strewn together, intended to update the Kazekage and Hokage on her progress. She went to her station as he read over them. He was no less than impressed.

“Chakra… infected chakra… Which would explain why the patients were too sick to perform even simple jutsu. And the reason that not many children were becoming ill.” He was baffled by her progress. “How did you come to this conclusion?”

“Here,” She said, picking up the sample she had pulled from Hiroshi’s lungs. “This is an active culture.” She explained. “Look hard at it. Can’t you feel it? Perhaps see it? It has its very own chakra signature. On top of the original disease, whoever weaponized this added a very damning side effect. It blocks the users own chakra—not through exhaustion—but through infection. With this sample I think we can trace it back to its owner, it has a light tinge of violet, which I think I know who it can belong to.” She grinned from ear to ear.

“That’s… impressive. Wild, if it’s true… but… have you been sleeping well? Sakura-chan, your eyes look… different.” Kankuro tried to say lightly. Her eyes were not their normal shade. They had dulled, and the dark circles under her eyes grew heavy. She shook her head.

“It doesn’t matter. I am this much closer to a cure.” She whispered. “I want to see those poisons again.” She requested.

“Right away…” Kankuro trailed off, worried and bewildered. He exited, leaving only her and Kakashi in the silent room. Kakashi watched as she worked, infecting a healthy set of ghost lungs with the virus and using the jutsu Hiroshi had taught her in order to bring them to life. She had a new
found vigor for her work.
When Kankuro returned, he had the original phials that the poisons were made in. Sakura’s eyes widened in disbelief when she recognized the scorpion logo on the phials. It was something she hadn't expected. Her skin crawled with possibility and her mouth became decidedly dry. Kankuro stared at her for a moment before finally questioning her.

“What is it?” He asked, narrowing his eyes to try and read why she looked so started at the sight of a couple of poisons. She dealt in poisons all the time.

“Oh, nothing, just... w-who did you say those poisons belonged to? Aha... just curious” She stammered helplessly, throat tightening at the thought of what she already knew. Could it be him? Why? There were more questions around every corner.

“Sasori… He left many of his personal belongings and creations behind when he defected.” Kankuro muttered, thumbing the label. "I'm grateful in a way, but it's a bit disturbing... thinking of what Crow did before Crow was mine."

“And he was the one fabled to have survived this plague.” Sakura continued. Her brow furrowed.

“Yes, we’ve been over this.” Kankuro said, quirking a brow. The violet markings on his face moved with his expression, exaggerating each one.

“I-I need some time alone, please see yourself out, Kankuro-san.” She requested, pacing nervously as the finality set in that Sasori was clearly the author. She tried to be polite, but she shook relentlessly. So a member of the Akatsuki was after her work... okay. That confirmed it wasn't Orochimaru. Which was good, right?

Hearing the door shut behind Kankuro, Sakura paled intensely and sat down, unable to stand much longer.

“What is it, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi asked, concerned over her behavior. This was one of Konoha's best medical nin, and he hadn't seen her this fidgety before. It was beyond disconcerting.

“This Sasori… He has apparently lived far past the expiration date of the virus.” Sakura said carefully, not wanting to give anything away that could incriminate herself. “I think… I think I need to contact this man.”

“That’s crazy, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi hummed. “He’d likely kill you on sight.”

“Well, even with our advancements… this is looking bleak. We’ve found a treatment but the knowledge that it’s a chakra targeting plague only makes it worse… harder to cure.” She shivered a bit and rubbed warmth into her arms. She was in a cold sweat. She couldn't help but occasionally glancing around, as if talking about him would summon him somehow. Running on only a couple of hours of sleep and barely any food, she was truly pushing her limit. Just as the thought occurred to sit down and take a break, she found her vision blurring. With her suppressed chakra she was weaker than before.

“Sakura-chan?” Kakashi called out a bit above his normal speaking volume. He darted up from his seat and caught her in his arms as she tipped over. Her eyes were hooded but moving rapidly and her
He cursed and looked around for some sort of help. He sat on the ground and laid her down, holding her shoulders firmly against his lap with her face towards the ceiling. He watched closely, unprepared for such a situation. The mild seizure took a couple of moments to pass, and when it did it left her dazed and nauseous. Blood dripped from the corner of her lips and he wiped it away nervously.

Compassion overtook him and he held her still, hugging her close.

“Kakashi…” She muttered with her bitten tongue; barely seeing his face but somehow recognizing him, more by feeling than sight. She groaned in pain as a migraine overtook her senses. The lights were blinding and each word was a stab of pain.

“Come on.” He encouraged her to stand. When he found she could not he instead picked her up very carefully, holding her just slightly too intimately to be decent. She blinked and covered her eyes.

“Issobright.” She slurried, tongue feeling like sand paper, heavy in her mouth.

“Just close your eyes. I’m going to take you back to the apartment and you’re going to sleep this off.” He informed her.

“Ginger… lemon… Enturo root.” She muttered a list of ingredients. “Migraine cure. Gotta work.”

“We likely don’t have those here. Either way you need sleep more than anything.” Kakashi chastised. “You’ve been working too hard.”

He continued to speak to her but she could no longer discern what he was trying to say. It felt like she was floating. She put her cheek against his shoulder for some sort of comfort. It was bright.. and hot. And loud. She could barely think. She closed her eyes completely and when she opened them, she was in her dream lake once again.

“Odd…” She shivered. The water was much colder than before. She swam downwards, only to cast her bleary gaze upon the bloated and rotting corpse of her temporary colleagues, Ostu, Ostaka, and Hiroshi. She gasped and started flailing her limbs in a desperate attempt to get to the surface. The wooden hand of a life-sized puppet dipped into the water and she eagerly grabbed it. The puppet pulled her to the air and she crawled out of the lake.

“Thank you, Kankur—“ Sakura abruptly shut her mouth when instead of the friendly figure she had grown close to, stood two feet, painted nails on toes peeking out of dusty sandals. The robes that draped over the figure were pitch black. Red clouds floated lazily, ever changing in shape. There was an unearthly iridescence to the man. Almost like he was only a projection of his true self. She saw him step closer, until he was just an arm’s length from her as she laid on the ground, half of her body still emerged in the freezing water. She scrambled to her feet and swallowed fearfully, beginning to say something.

“Sakura,”

The voice was even and calm.

“Discontinue your medical procedures on Ostaka. He has been infected with the virus for study. If you heal him again, I will have to revoke your ability to heal. We cannot risk you getting sick.”

She furrowed her brow.

“Sasori.” She said quickly. It did not bother the figure and he continued.
“Since Kakashi has insisted on following you like a lost pup, I will have to contact you in this manner. No need to scribe your notes, they’re all up here.”

His hand reached out and brushed some hair from her face before patting her head lightly.

“Orochimaru is near. Take precaution, but should you find yourself in a dangerous situation with that man, simply ring this bell.”

“What bell?” She asked, face contorting with confusion.

“He is a sneaky man, but prideful. I imagine he would prefer to kill you directly, but not before taunting you about your missing team mate. This will give you time.”

“Answer me!”

“Be safe, Sakura. You are safest when you are in the lab, rather than investigating matters above your station.”

With that, the projection was gone and she was left alone on the warm sand. There was a scorpion next to her and she stared at it with the intent to move away, but when it did not move, she thought it gentle and simply sat there for a moment. She needed to further investigate Sasori, despite his warning.

Sakura’s eyes fluttered open to a familiar scent. Like the air’s energy before a storm, an unknown scent that carried a particularly masculine feeling.

“You’re awake, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi sighed with relief. “We thought we’d have to send you back to the Leaf village.”

“How long have I been—“ She made eye contact with a crow on her window. She stared for a moment until it flapped its wings and flew away. It had red eyes.

“Ah, don’t read into omens too much.” Kakashi laughed nervously. He never liked crows. Not after his run ins with Itachi Uchiha. The thought made him concerned and he looked to where the bird was. It couldn’t be, right? The first Akatsuki member alerted them, so Itachi wouldn’t be so reckless as to send some sort of vessel right to the window.

“Omen? Oh, yes, I don’t pay attention to those.” She lied, pretending she didn’t read the tea leaves at the bottom of her cup, when she would drink it. She rubbed her eyes and sat up. Someone had washed and dressed her.

“Five days.” Kakashi finally said. “You had a seizure and then fell into a coma. We’re not letting you operate on such little sleep again.”

“I’ll be okay. Five days, really? That would explain why I’m devastatingly hungry.” Sakura laughed slightly. It was a funny thought, but worrying. Did Sasori somehow do that to her? Her paranoia was beginning to eat away at her rational thought.

“I’ll go see how dinner is coming along.” Kakashi decided and left her alone in the room.

She managed herself out of bed, legs weak and slightly tingly from the long rest. She stood up and walked around the room to get her bearings before spotting the ribbon that Sasori had given her for her hair. It now had a small, golden bell sewn into it. She picked it up, shocked it wasn’t a more practical material, like brass or iron or some sort of industrial metal. It was real gold. She smiled a bit. It certainly was pretty. With a bit of hesitation she used it to tie her hair back, against her better
judgement. There was a slight jingle when she walked, that she could just barely hear. It sounded like a baby bird’s first chirps, or the sound of rain pattering gently upon a tin roof. She closed her eyes for a moment to enjoy the sound before reflecting on what Sasori had told her.

She frowned deeply, remember he had said something about not healing Ostaka anymore. That he might take away her chakra. Was that possible? She didn’t doubt he knew how. The thought made her shiver. Without it, she was a moderately strong woman, with extensive medical knowledge, but very little power against someone from the Akatsuki. She decided to not pursue the Akatsuki member as she once thought, and settle for working with him at a distance. The information he provided was already helping the citizens of the village. They had prolonged the lifespans by nearly triple, though it still wasn’t very long, and the process of the chakra cleansing was arduous and painful for most.

She walked into the kitchen, to see Ostu and Ostaka side by side, cooking with gleeful intent. Her stomach churned at the knowledge of him being infected. Ostu would not take it well. She hesitated to tell anyone of her knowledge without evidence, but Ostaka displayed no immediate sign. No physical manifestation of the virus was present. What was Sasori using him for? How could she stop him from doing it?

She took a deep breath and sat at the table. She had to find a way to stop Sasori from using her friend to experiment on. She noticed the lack of tissue placement around his lungs, and could only surmise that Sasori left it free to perform observations on the stewing virus.

“Sakura-chan!” Ostu hummed and sat in front of her. “Everything alright?”

“Yes, thank you.” She smiled. “Just deep in thought.”

“Don’t be too down. Being sad won’t cure the plague.”

“You’re right.” Sakura laughed a bit and rubbed her scalp, a slight itch of guilt appearing. “I can’t believe I missed five days of research. It feels like an eternity.”

“You’ve been asleep for an eternity.” Ostaka whined and placed her meal in front of her: grilled salmon with assorted vegetables and rice.

“It looks delicious, Ostaka-san.” She said, quickly attacking the food in front of her with her chopsticks. “You’re a better cook than Kakashi-sensei.”

“Sakura-chan, you are becoming as mean as a scorpion.” Kakashi teased, though the mention of the insect made Sakura’s skin crawl.

“I am not.” She decided and ignored the rest of his sentence as he tried to convince her otherwise.

“Sakura-chan isn’t mean, she’s just feisty.” Ostu corrected. “Like a Pomeranian pup.”

Kakashi chuckled at the comparison.

“I am not like a Pomeranian—certainly not a pup.” Sakura asserted, “If I were any dog, I would be a Grey Hound, elegant and graceful.”

“Those are ugly.” Ostaka stated blatantly.

“Are not!” Sakura hissed.

“She really is like a Pomeranian!” Ostu laughed loudly, voice elated by the similarity.
“Kakashi-san… would be a mastiff.” Ostaka decided with a nod.

“Or a Basset Hound.” Ostu chuckled, imagining the dog’s long ears and droopy nose. “With all of those wrinkles of old age.”


“Ostu-chan…” Sakura paused, looking at the woman. “You specialize in torture?” The thought shocked her and made her slightly uncomfortable.

“Well, yes.” Ostu hesitated and pushed up her mask to eat. “But I don’t enjoy it, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Oh please, she gets off on it.” Ostaka said, taking a large bite of fish. “Brags about it sometimes.” He said, mouth full.

“Only about that one time! And I had bragging rights! I broke one of Orochimaru’s henchmen into giving us his location, and we led a nearly successful full frontal assault on his lair.”

“Then forced him into hiding so deep, we currently have no possible leads.” Ostaka finished for her. Ostu slumped.

“Don’t remind me.” Ostu returned.

“You once found Orochimaru?” Sakura asked.

“Don’t sound so surprised—I was top of my class in all marks.” Ostu boasted. “Same as you, Sakura-chan.” She smiled at the girl fondly.

“We have a lot in common.” Ostu pointed out.

“Yes, like you’re both dreadfully annoying.” Ostaka chuckled.

“Annoying?” Sakura repeated for a moment. His voice infliction took her back for a moment, thinking of Sasuke. She bit her tongue.

“I-I didn’t mean to hurt your feels—I was just joking!” Ostaka exclaimed, jumping up and running to her side of the table to embrace her.

“N-No! You didn’t hurt my feelings—just déjà vu is all!” She laughed. Kakashi watched her facial expression. He knew better. Even the single word Sasuke had once called her remained so thoroughly engrained in her memory that dredging it up caused emotional pain. He felt badly for the girl. She was so lovelorn for such a cruel boy. He wished he could reach her, emotionally, and take that pain for her. He caught her staring for just a second too long and glanced down at his meal.

“Ah, good. I wouldn’t want to hurt your feelings.” Ostaka said honestly. “You are dear to me. To both Ostu and me.”

“You are dear to me as well.” Sakura smiled brightly, a bit giddy. She couldn’t wait to introduce these two to Naruto. The three of them would get along very well.

“Sakura-chan, you should head back to bed to get a full night’s sleep.” Kakashi determined with a small smile. “You still have to wake up in the morning to work.”

“You’re right. Thank you for dinner.” Sakura bowed slightly and went to her room once more. She sat on the bed and read through her friends’ letters. The bunch of nin were diligent with their
writings. It made her feel appreciated. Even Tsunade had written her a couple of letters, mostly praising her, but then offering advice, and always telling her to stay healthy, and keep her unit healthy. She had already failed that.

With thoughts of home in her head, Sakura drifted off to sleep.

Kakashi entered not long after he recognized the soft snoring from the bedroom. He sat at the foot of the bed, one calloused hand touching the thick quilts where her foot would be. He yearned for her, he realized with a frown. she looked so serene lying there. For a moment, he could believe nothing was wrong with her at all. But there were changes. Something was hurting her, and she was deathly reluctant to share her pain. Someone. He thought bitterly. Someone is doing this to her. Sakura isn’t this vulnerable to the environment, but people sway her.

As the morning light washed over her fair face, the scent of sandalwood and lacquer drifted past her and she breathed deeply, a light blush coming to her cheeks. She smiled. It was a pleasant scent, like that of a small shop that made toys or furniture. For a moment she had a vision of a young man, red hair like a sunset, tinkering with some sort of puppet. He looked up from his work to see her standing in the morning rays. He didn’t offer a smile, instead, he looked quite dreary. His eyes were hooded and solemn and his frown deepened slightly. She tilted her head but didn’t approach him. He sat in what looked like a vendor stall, decorated with combat puppets.

He was beautiful. His face was perfectly symmetrical and his eyes were such a deep shade of amber she thought that if she looked closely enough, she would see fossilized flora. His cheek bones were equidistant from his eyes to his nose, but were wide enough to cast a slight shadow over his face. He looked to be just a few years her junior, if she had to guess. She took a deep breath, summoning the courage to speak up.

“Hello, there!” She smiled and finally stepped forward. She noticed his eyes meet hers, and his own widened ever so slightly and a light blush came to his own face. That made her smile genuinely and grow shy. “My name is Sakura… may I see what you’re making?”

“Yes.” He replied curtly. He turned over his palm revealing a small cylinder, engraved with sigils and what looked like roots. Wasn’t he just holding a puppet?

“A… piece? Perhaps to one of your puppets?” She asked politely before gesturing to the ones hanging around the room. She paused as her eyes fell on one of Kankuro’s favored puppets; Crow. “Did… you make that?” She wondered, feeling slightly panicked as she looked back to the red head. He looked different now. His eyes were darker, less lively, and his skin looked far too perfect for comfort. He smirked at her and stood up. He wasn’t as young as when she first saw him. In fact, he looked to be in his early 20’s. The man was still as handsome as could be, but now it seemed fabricated. His complexion was eerie and he didn’t breathe as she did. He was still.

“It’s for my latest creation.” He confessed, but gave no further explanation. “Sakura…” He began. His voice was like thick honey dripping down sand, like the steady flow of a deadly river. “You should be more careful with who you give information to.” He stepped to her, almost a head taller than her. “We wouldn’t want our communication becoming common knowledge, now would we?” He asked, reaching out and gently touching her cheek. His hand was frigid, but to her surprise it felt as though his skin were just like hers.

“You’re so warm.” He purred. “How do you like your gloves?” He asked as he gestured for her to walk with him. To her amazement, a path opened in front of them and she began to walk with him.

“They’re… just like my regular ones.”
“Yes, I had them made after your regular combat ones. You’ll find the knuckles contain a reactive metal. Though they stifle your chakra, it’s still possible that it may be concentrated to it.” He explained. “I do enjoy your gifts as well.”

“My gifts? What have I given you?” She asked, hairs raising on her neck as his arm slinked around her. He knew he was making her dreadfully uncomfortable. He was practically reveling in it.

“Knowledge, my dear, and a test subject. The work on Ostaka is coming along very well.” He hummed.

“Please, stop using my friend.”

“It’s too late, Sakura.” He said more sternly. “He’s infected. The only use he has now is to be the new patient zero. You’ve noticed the lack of symptoms, I’m sure? I created a new strand of the plague, that may just counteract Orochimaru’s dreadful version. It’s still Tozlu, so it will still kill him. I’m using it to see if I can somehow get past the chakra-properties of Orochimari’s plague.”

“I don’t want him to die.” She frowned. The grip on her tightened.

“Don’t be selfish, Sakura.” Sasori hissed. “His death will benefit many… just like Hiroshi Tin’s live dissection.”

“How did you know about that?” Sakura whispered, practically holding her breath.

“There is nothing you do, that I don’t see, Sakura.” Sasori smirked, loosening his hold on her until his arm comfortably, but possessively rested around her. “You’re my new puppet.”

“I’m nobody’s puppet!” Sakura glared at him and shoved his arm away. His mirthful gaze turned cold, sending shivers up her spine.

“You were a puppet of the Leaf, before I claimed you. Take off your gloves when you wake up. You became my puppet the moment you obeyed my first commands, and it’s far too late to decide not to be. I hold the life of your friend, and the future of the Sand Village in my hands.” He said evenly, no hint of remorse or pleasure in his steady voice.

“N-No.” She decided again. This time, he only stepped back.

She awoke to the loud call of a crow sitting in her window once again. Angrily, she threw one of Kakashi’s books, that had been placed on the nightstand, at the crow which caused it to squawk again before flying away. She was drenched in sweat and trembling like a leaf in the wind.

“Everything okay, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi asked, retrieving his book from the floor.

“Just had a nightmare, that’s all.” Sakura coughed a bit, eyes widening. Was she bleeding? She looked down at her gloved palm and for a moment she thought she saw blood. She shivered and walked to the restroom, disrobing to take a long, scalding shower. She turned on the water and meekly stepped in. It started warm and gradually grew hot, reddening her skin on contact and causing her to relax. She looked at her palms again, attention drawn to her wrists, just beneath her palms. There were two scorpions, one on each wrist. They were small, but noticeable. She stared in horror at them and began rubbing, trying to get them off.

Eventually her wrists were only red and sore from her incessant scrubbing. She whimpered before breaking down and crying. She knelt against the tile of the shower, dizzy with fright. She should have never shared her notes.
“Sakura-chan, I’m coming in.” She heard Ostu’s voice. “Sakura, why are you crying? Is everything alright?”

Sakura cleared her throat, thankfully hidden by the bamboo divider.

“O-Oh, yeah, just a bit, uh… distressed.” Sakura said, trying to avoid the truth.

“About what? Are you okay?” Ostu asked, voice heavy with concern.

“I-I’m fine!” Sakura lied, adding a little laugh. “I’m sorry for worrying you all, I just am a little homesick.”

“Sakura-chan…” Ostu sighed, taking a moment. “I’m a trained interrogator. I can hear a lie a klick away. Especially from you.”

“It’s fine.” Sakura said, now nervous.

“No, I want you to tell me what’s wrong.” Ostu established. “Sakura, you need to be okay.”

“I know! I promise, I’ll pull myself together, I just… need a moment.”

“Alright…” She retired her onslaught of questioning and stared at the pile of gloves before noticing blood on Sakura’s gloves. She picked them up and analyzed them with wide eyes. “Sakura, why were your wrists bleeding?”

“Bleeding?” Sakura asked indignantly and looked at the now evident tattoos. She grew pale. “Oh, I just was carrying some equipment the other day and it had blood on it—“

Ostu shoved the divider and grabbed both her hands, looking them over. She looked at Sakura again, confused. Sakura held her breath and waited for her to ask about the obvious marks of Sasori. She overlooked them, searching for a wound.

“I see. No wounds… you really shouldn’t lie to me, Sakura-chan. You’re so bad at it.” She said and looked at her eyes. She must not have paid any mind to the tattoos. Sakura belatedly realized Ostu had removed her mask. She had dark tan skin, but stark white eyes that had long been blinded.

“Ostu-chan… can you see?” She asked, then immediately regretted her borderline rude tone. What had gotten into her? Sakura turned off the water and began to dry off and dress.

“Oh, you caught me off guard, I thought I had food on my face from breakfast.” Ostu laughed and unconsciously touched her scars, just under her eye. “No, not in the sense that you know. I have very little sight. In fact, what little I do see is a combination of chakra, aura, and figure, with some hues.”

“Interesting… does Ostaka-kun have the same eyes?”

“No… no, these were put in me when my real eyes were taken from me.” Ostu admitted.

“Taken?!” Sakura muttered, shivering at the thought.

“Yes. When I was about 14, I was approached by Orochimaru. He at first gave me the choice to come with him or not. When I refused, his henchmen attacked my clan’s land. Many were killed, and my brother and I were abducted, because at the time, you couldn’t tell us apart.” She laughed. “We’re both flat chested and then we were not particularly muscular. Dressed the same even. We came from a family of woodcraftsmen, and decided at a young age that we wanted to be ninja.”
“He attacked your family?” Sakura asked. Ostu seemed to be sporadically avoiding telling the truth.

“Yes, and after he... took us back to the compound, he poisoned my brother, thinking that would be enough to kill him. He underestimated how stubborn Ostaka was when he dumped him in the wild. Ostaka came back to rescue me with a squad of Anbu, including the, at the time, 12-year-old Itachi Uchiha.” She laughed nervously. “After the… operation, or transplant of these eyes into me, I swore I’d marry that Uchiha. I woke up on the operation table, red sharingan staring down at me before he carried me off.”

Sakura stared for a moment, then smiled. “Looks like we both used to have our hearts set on that clan, huh?” She asked.

“Ah, yes… your attachment to Sasuke. They really are a cursed clan.” Ostu said sadly and rubbed her arm. “It’s a shame. Such talent and power…”

“So… what’s special about your eyes? Do you have a kekkei genkai? Why would Orochimaru do that?”

“Not in the traditional sense, but these eyes grant me the ability to see someone’s intentions, to understand them more deeply, at their base. Then…” She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. When she exhaled and opened her eyes, they were golden, with onyx slits down the center. Sakura recoiled and bumped into the bathroom sink.

Orochimaru's signature snake eyes. “I don't have any sort of power like the Uchiha, or Hyuga clans, but these eyes grant me the ability to... well, tap into a very volatile source of chakra. I don't often use it, as it has painful effects on my person afterwards, but when it’s needed, it’s there. I suppose Orochimaru wanted to see if it was a safe procedure. It was... so I imagine he has these eyes now.”

“Why did he pick you?” Sakura asked, completely enthralled. Ostu’s stare returned to a gentle, snow white hue and she frowned.

“My family shares a certain resilience. We are renown less for our powerful justu, and more for our simple ability to endure.” Ostu admitted with a small laugh. “We can withstand most poisons, fatal wounds, and so on. I believe he was targeting me because I could better withstand his experimentations.”

“It’s how Ostaka is still alive?” Sakura asked with a small smile.

“Yes. Without our inherited stubbornness, we would have had to bury him weeks ago. Years ago, actually. Tsunade-sama is always picking us for the most difficult missions, because she knows we’ll live. The question is whether we could survive Tozlu.” She laughed nervously. Sakura averted her gaze.

“If one of you were to contract it…” Sakura began, carefully. She stared down at the scorpion on her wrist then grimaced. “I would do everything in my power to cure it.”

“I’m touched.” Ostu said genuinely then looked away. “It will be unfortunate, not having contact with you after this mission.”

“Yes,” Sakura sighed. “But, your duties always come first and all that other nonsense.” Sakura smiled brightly, trying to cheer her up. The scars around Ostu’s eyes crinkled as she smiled.

“You’re a wonderful healer, Sakura-chan.” Ostu beamed and gave her a quick hug before exiting the rest room. Kakashi gave the two woman a suspicious look as they both exited.

“Anything interesting to tell me, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi quirked a brow. It took Sakura a moment to
comprehend what he was implying.

“We were just *talking*!” Sakura managed, red in the face. “I wouldn’t—not with a teammate I mean.” She laughed awkwardly, rubbing her neck and making a dismissive gesture.

“Of course.” Kakashi smiled. He knew they weren’t fooling around, but seeing her squirm like this was too good to pass up.

“We weren’t!” Sakura asserted. “Ostu-chan—tell him!”

“Tell him what?” Ostu smirked and put her mask in place, then held her forefinger up to Sakura as she fumed. She gave a long pause. “I never kiss and tell.”

“B-But we didn’t!!” Sakura barked at Kakashi as he began to snicker.

“Sakura, you…” Ostaka had just rounded the corner and gave a disappointed look to his sister.

“I did nothing!”


“I am not!” Sakura somehow managed to blush even more.

“Care to prove it?” Ostu offered, voice feigning a pout.

“No!” Sakura hissed and stormed off, though when she was out of eyesight, there was a slight grin. She tugged her gloves in place and began to tie up her hair in one of Ino’s ribbons, only to find it missing from her bag. The silly smirk lost its place on her lips and she frowned deeply. She could only feel the black ribbon with the bell. Settling to leave her hair down, she tugged her sandals on. “I’m going out!” She announced.

“I’m coming with you.” Kakashi added, already dressed for the day.

“You don’t have to follow me everywhere, Kakashi-sensei. What if I were going on a date? That wouldn’t look good; showing up with an older man by my side.” Sakura muttered.

“Oh please, you don’t have time to date.” Kakashi rolled his eyes, dismissing her attitude towards him. “Besides, I have to follow you. It’s only a matter of time before someone attacks the village. I need to be ready to evacuate you, and your work.”

“Evacuate? Why would I not stay and fight? I’m not completely helpless.” Sakura growled as she exited the apartment, heading down the dusty street.

“You are too important to be fighting off enemies. Right now at least. Once you cure this thing, you can fight and scrap until your heart’s desire. I might even be the first in line to pick a fight with you.” Kakashi said flatly. “Until then, you’re working on a cure.”

“Whatever,” Sakura groaned, reviewing her notes from before her short coma. She needed to refresh her memory. Without realizing, she bumped into a stranger in the path. “S-Sorry.” She managed, catching her notes before they even hit the ground. She stood up straight and managed to put on a smile at the stranger before her eyes widened and her breath caught. Red hair. Golden eyes. A deadly smile.

“No worries.”
Sakura stared in disbelief.

…

“Miss?”

…

“Miss, are you alright? It looks like you’ve seen a ghost?”

“Sakura-chan.” Kakashi spoke up, getting her attention. She looked back at her old teacher, as if asking for help, then back to the stranger. She relaxed a bit.

“Alright… have a good day.” The stranger said after a long moment. She watched him walk away. He didn’t have red hair, or a set of golden eyes, or a fatal smirk. He had brown eyes and hair and a look of concern on his face.

She was losing her grip of reality.

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to leave feedback! It helps with showing me what you want to see, what you do and don't like, and sometimes just gives me that little extra bit of encouragement to write the next chapter in a timely manner. Graítãs tibi ago.
“Kakashi!” Sakura suddenly exclaimed. “Please fetch Gaara!—Or Temari—or Kankuro—just someone!! I’ve made a discovery!” She yelled, scrambling around her station. Her hands shook with excitement and she flew about, trying to rearrange her mess to be presentable. Her heart pounded like war drums in her chest and her smile couldn’t leave her lips. “A treatment!!”

“Very good.” Kakashi smiled and stood to leave. He hesitated, not wanting to leave her side at any given moment. Still, he followed her request and went to find one of the sand siblings. She had come so far. He had a sense of nostalgia as he walked through the village. He would never have imagined one of his pupils would grow into such a talented researcher. She was fit to be on Tsunade’s level of not only combat, but medical prowess and strength. Kakashi sighed, almost lamentingly. He admittedly missed the runts that ran around, half witted. When the three of them were together.

‘Yes, very good.’ She heard someone say. She froze and began looking around, not seeing anyone.

“Hello?” She called, suddenly grabbing a kunai closely and checking the lock on the windows. She had heard the voice as clear as day, just slightly to her left, as if someone had been standing over her shoulder.

No one answered. She felt a burning in her throat from nervousness. There was a note on her desk. She opened it and her eyes scanned over the lines of perfect hand writing.

‘Leave a sample behind on your station, before you go out for lunch.’

Anger swept over her and she whipped her head around again, searching for any sign of somebody entering her lab. She tore the note to shreds, before dumping it in the trash can. She wouldn't listen to that arrogant asshole—if he thought he could just take her work with no retribution?!

“Sakura-san.” She heard Gaara’s steady voice at the door and smiled widely, whipping around and pretending she wasn't on the verge of a mental breakdown, though it crept just under her skin.

“Gaara-sama.” She said, changing her honorific to better suit his role as Kazekage. He wore his robes, but had taken off his hat, and stepped into the lab. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“Likewise.” He said politely. He was still adjusting to small talk and pleasantries, but he seemed to have good manners. He’d already come so far from that angry little boy she met at the chunin exams.

“Kakashi tells me you’ve found a treatment.”

“Yes.” Sakura smiled again, giddy with excitement once more. She held in her palm a small, black pill. “This is very hard to make; very taxing, but essentially, it contains purified, unbelonging chakra. I used some of my own and poured it into this medium, then used a clarifying justu to remove all traces of my personal essence from it. In place of my essence, I channeled a solvent: a combination of spring water and Kakun plant.”

“Kakun?” Gaara questioned. He had never heard of it before. Then again, when his researchers tried to explain what they were doing in hope of receiving grants, he often had no idea what they were talking about.
“It doesn’t grow here, but I had some brought to me. It’s a leafy plant that interrupts the flow of one’s chakra. It is used to break chakra suppressants and barriers.” She decided to neglect mentioning she had actually ordered the plant in case her stalker lived up to his promise and decided to cut off her chakra altogether.

“I see… so how does it treat Tozlu?” He asked, holding the pill. He could feel some sort of radiated energy from it.

“It blocks out the patient’s own chakra and works to cleanse it. While this strand of Tozlu is concentrated at the lungs, a large portion of the viral symptoms, such as exhaustion and inability to perform justu—stem from infected chakra.”

“I… didn’t know chakra could become infected.”

“Neither did I, until S—“ Sakura cut herself off with a loud cough. “Sorry, I-I uh…, have a tickle in my throat.” She lied, then continued, thankful she caught herself before the truth came out. “Until I ran some tests on a few of the younger patients. Their chakra was more raw, more energetic.” It was true, she was wise enough to not just believe whatever Sasori had written down. She confirmed it by running her own, more gentle experiments.

“Interesting.” Gaara quipped. It wasn’t, but he knew it was something he was supposed to say.

“So… this treatment… will it lead to a cure?”

“Unfortunately… this only stops the patient from transferring the virus, and it will allow them to cast justu and may help with the exhaustion, but…”

“Why did you call me here, Sakura-san?” Gaara continued, beginning to irritate. “If you did not find a cure, why am I here?”

At his harsh tone, Sakura shrunk a bit. “I cannot produce these on my own. I need someone with immense amounts of chakra, and many people like that, in order to make enough. Everyone should have a supply of these. It may help lessen the number of new patients.”

“Very well. I will have that arranged. Thank you, Sakura-san.” Gaara hesitated, realizing he had somehow caused her girlish excitement to deflate. “Very good work… You are truly an asset.” He amended, causing her a shy smile. The corner of his mouth quirked slightly, in a forced, but heartfelt smile. “Thank you for updating me. I look forward to seeing what else you come up with.”

Kakashi let out a breath of relief and escorted Gaara back to his office. Sakura paced nervously when Kakashi left. She had a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach. Still, she packed up her supplies to go to lunch. She tidied her work area and hesitantly set one of the pills on her desk before snatching it back. Thoughts raced through her mind and she set it down once more.

‘Sakura,’ She heard Sasori’s voice hum, almost playfully. ‘You should wait on your escort, Sakura. The streets are dangerous. Full of criminals who may just have an interest in you, little marionette.’

“Shut up!” She screamed and threw a potted herb in the direction of the voice, breathing heavily as she tried to quell her panic. She had reacted without thinking and drew her arms to her chest in worry.

‘How unsightly, Sakura. That temper of yours must be why no man wants you. I think it’s amusing. Maybe even charming.’

“Shut up!!” She screamed again. She stormed from the compound, electing to exit through the
window and jump down from her high tower. She landed in a busy street and looked around. Maybe she should have waited for Kakashi. Maybe Sasori was threatening her... 'little marionette'? She felt sick at the thought of him calling her what was supposed to be a sweet nick name.

Now that he had a treatment, was she still any use? He obviously had a cure, if he survived Tozlu. She felt herself begin to shake and she hurried her pace. Would he kill her?

Needing some sort of comfort, she walked quickly to the ramen stand that resembled the one back home. It reminded her of the time spent with her team, so it provided a small amount of solace. She seated herself and ordered, beginning to calm down. She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned around to see no one there.

“Everything alright, miss?” The elderly woman on the other side of the counter asked as she prepared Sakura’s order.

“Oh, yes. Thank you for asking.” Sakura lied, a smile on her face. She folded her hands and stared down at them. She could see the bottom of the scorpion tattoos beneath the hem of her glove. The sight made her pale, but she ignored it when the bowl of ramen was put in front of her. “Thank you.”

She ate a bit slowly. Sakura took this time to unwind. She deserved a little bit of rest after working so hard and finding a treatment. When she finished her meal, she paid and left, deciding to take the scenic route back to the medical building. Kakashi would not be able to find her, but she could use a moment alone. Kakashi brought up... confusing feelings in the pit of her stomach. Not to mention, his snarkiness that morning had been stronger than normal, and she needed a break from it. Even if it was only a 10 or so minute break.

“My, my… look at what we have here.” She heard a loud holler, coming from a man who had obviously began drinking far too early in the morning for her tastes. She pointedly ignored him and sped her pace. “Hey! Girl! Don’t pretend you don’t hear me!” He growled and skulked over. He was large in stature, and surprisingly fast for a drunk. “You bitch, look at me—”

A tightened fist landed firmly between his eyes and crushed his nose. He yelped in pain and stumbled back into one of his buddies. The three men glowered at her.

“Ugly whore!” One yelled.

“Stupid bitch, I’ll kill you!” The other screamed and pulled a sword from the sheath on his back. He charged at her, but she easily dodged his attack and tripped him.

“Wise up and fuck off.” Sakura hissed. She landed a painful kick to the one who fell, but was grabbed by the other. He put an arm around her neck and pulled her back.

“We oughta kill you, but I want to have some fun first.” He slurred, trying to whisper in her ear, but instead spitting on her. His breath wafted in front of her. It smelled like rotten meat and sake.

“Let go!” She screamed feeling nothing but disgust and contempt, before ripping herself free by jarring his shoulder with her own. She moved quickly and brought his offending arm behind his back. She planted her sandal firmly over his spine and yanked his arm until she heard a loud click. Something she had seen Sasuke do all those years ago, but she was a bit more merciful and simply dislocated his shoulder. Though her first reaction was to break both scapula bones and clavicles.

The man screamed in pain. The first man, holding his bloody and broken nose stood up and opened his mouth to yell something at her. She braced herself and paused as he was silent. His eyes rolled back in his head and she gasped as she realized the tip of a kunai peaked at her from his throat. A
robed figure stood behind him and slowly removed his kunai.

“Sakura-chan,” The figure hummed. There was a glint. She recognized him after a long moment.

“Kabuto.” She hissed, slowly removing her chakra suppressing gloves. She felt a surge of energy and smirked, ready for battle. “What are you doing here? Did Orochimaru send you to see how his plague was doing?” She asked, cocking her head.

“Yes, though I’m here for another reason too, you see. This pesky rat has apparently been working on a cure, and made some unfortunate progress.” He said in a dangerously low tone. "Don't you know its dangerous to walk alone as such a pretty little girl?"

“So you decided to try and take care of it yourself? Wouldn’t you rather send someone else to do it? Someone more capable?” She asked, causing him to sneer.

“You'll find I’m Orochimaru’s aid for a reason, little girl.” Kabuto hissed.

“I never understood why. You’re a capable medical nin. Why would you want to serve someone like that?”

“Interrogating me?” Kabuto laughed. “No use. The information won’t go anywhere. You’re stalling.” He accused and took a defensive stance. Sakura felt her breath catch in her throat. He knew well that he could easily kill her, and she knew it too. Shoving her hand in her pocket for her kunai, she was alarmed to only find the ribbon with the bell.

Remembering what Sasori had told her, she yanked it out and gave it a small ring, causing a loud laugh from Kabuto.

“Is that how you summon your guard dogs? Are they some sort of servants?” He asked mirthfully.

Sakura didn’t reply. Instead, she gathered her chakra in her fists and lunged at him. As she did, she felt her movements practically take over, in an almost eerie way as she expertly landed a blow to Kabuto’s sternum. He had tried to move, only to be stricken with her other fist. He flew back into a building, creating a large crater behind him. She looked at her fists in shock, before seeing thin, cobalt threads attached to her. She was alarmed to only find the ribbon with the bell.

Her stomach lurched as she was moved about, expertly handled. Before she could process the situation, an explosion went off behind Kabuto, sending him flying towards her. Her arm extended and he became impaled on her fist. She bit back a scream as she felt his blood trickle down her arms, and warm viscera clench around her fist. She pulled her fist down and looked at him in horror.

“How did you--…” Kabuto began, voice thin and labored. He spotted the chakra strings then looked around, cursing under his breath. “Of course. You are no more than a puppet...

In a matter of seconds, the man in front of her disappeared in a puff of blue flame. She recoiled back and yanked herself free from the strings. She looked around in terror, before she saw Kakashi running towards her.

“Kakashi-sensei!” She yelled, falling to her knees as she realized an injury. It was a sizable gash in her chest, stemming from her right shoulder to just above her left breast. She hadn’t even realized it was there, but the pain kicked in and brought her down. “Kabuto! It was Kabuto—we have to stop
“Sakura-chan.” Kakashi managed and knelt next to her, hugging her tightly. She looked at him with confusion. “The entire medical building was blown up. I thought you were in it.” He confessed. Suddenly, Sakura was very happy she decided to take the scenic route. He let go and looked at her gash. “Did he do this?”

“Yes.” She said.

“I’m impressed you held him off.” He admitted. It bugged Sakura that he was shocked, but she knew her own strength as well. "I’m so glad you're safe..." He said awkwardly and leaned down hugging her gently. "I thought I had lost you."

“Yes…” She muttered shyly, not entirely sure how to respond. She touched her wound slightly and began to try to heal it, but her chakra was exhausted. “I’d like to go to the apartment. I’ll heal this after recuperating.” She said and stood up, though the pain made her sight waver. Kakashi shook his head at her stubbornness and used his shin to push her legs out from underneath her, and caught her before she could fall. She huffed in distaste but blushed stubbornly. It was when he kissed her forehead that she stopped protesting.

“It wouldn’t kill you to ask for help.” He chastised. He had almost lost her. He hadn't realized how deeply that truly would've affected him. Kakashi looked down at her, an image of Rin flashing behind his eyes. He swallowed thickly. "Let's get you to safety."

“I think it might actually kill me, Kakashi-sensei.” She pouted and tried to pretend being this close to him didn’t make her shy. She relaxed a bit, but held her chest. The searing feeling was becoming overwhelming and she surmised he had a poisoned blade. She paled at the thought. “Actually, can you take me to the hospital? I may have been poisoned.”

“I was headed there anyway.”

When they arrived there, they came upon a similar pile of rock, blood, sand, and fire. The hospital had as well been decimated. Kakashi stood there for a moment before turning around and taking her towards the apartment. Sakura couldn't imagine the death toll from Orochimaru's attack.

“Orochimaru is the one behind the plague. I just don’t know why.” Sakura sighed, hanging her head a bit.

“I figured it was him. All evidence points towards him.” Kakashi admitted. “I have sent another request for reinforcements, or at least a disaster relief group.”

“I hope that Tsunade-sama doesn’t pull us, in fear of the danger… I’m so close. I know it. Why else would Orochimaru attack?” Sakura mused, finding her feet when Kakashi set her down at the door of their unit. He opened the door for her and stepped in after her. She walked carefully to her bed and laid down, using a hand mirror on her night stand to examine her cut. It was healed just enough to be safe while she rested, but it had to be cleaned. She was certain whatever poison he used wouldn't kill her. In her extensive training with Tsunade, she was exposed to so many different poisons she had built quite the resilience to them. Anything short of hemlock wouldn't kill her.

Ostu brought her a basin and rag, after seeing her walk in injured. She got to work cleaning the wound for Sakura.

“Kabuto did this, I can tell.” Ostu spoke up. Her voice was grief stricken. “The incision is precise, but you are lucky it was not deeper. I see one of his poisons at work. We need to find an antidote
quickly. I will get to work on that immediately.” Ostu said, taking a nearby wash rag to sample her blood, to find out which poison he used.

“Good.” Kakashi nodded and sat down on the bed beside Sakura. He set the basin of cleansed water on the nightstand and lightly touched the wound, a green aura of healing chakra at his fingertips. He was terrible at medical ninjustu, but he would try his best to do what he could. Sakura smiled blissfully. It felt warm and friendly. Soon enough, the day caught up with her and she was passed out. Kakashi was so nice to heal her. It was an unspoken truth, that when a friend healed you, it was different, more potent and softer. This was the softest healing she ever received. It made her blush.

Sakura awoke to the feeling of cold hands on her shoulders, holding her down. She panicked and tried to scream, but her voice had been bound with some sort of gag holding a seal on it. She screamed into it, but there was only silence. She tried to see who was holding her down so tightly, but the darkness was too enveloping.

After a moment she felt why she was being held down. A curved needle entered her delicate flesh that had been slightly inflamed from the poison. A string was carefully brought through and connected on the other side of the wound as it was slowly stitched up. Tears came to her eyes and she trembled relentlessly, though she tried to stay still. The hands left her shoulders, confident she knew the pain that would result from her jerking away now. A similar cold hand stroked the side of her tearful cheek.

‘Shhh,’ Sakura heard against her ear. She began sobbing in a mixture of agony and fear. Whatever poison Kabuto had used made her flesh tender and more susceptible to pain. She had no way to tell how long it took, but it felt as though the stitches took hours before her healer snipped the cord and cast a healing justu over the wound. She relaxed a little bit, but continued to weep silently. The healing was decidedly cold and unfriendly. ‘Good. Stay still, just like that.’

She felt her arm be lifted before a needle bit her flesh. She was immediately flushed of pain as the antidote entered her system. It was very fast acting and soothed her. The seal was removed from her mouth, but all she could manage was a faint whimper. She heard her healer chuckle and pat her head before she passed out once more.

“You stitched yourself up?” Kakashi asked, seeing the bloody needle lying next to her hand on the bed. “That’s impressive, Sakura-chan.”

“Hn?” Sakura groaned as she woke up. She felt as though a weight had been lifted from her chest. “K-Kakashi-sensei…” She managed, sitting up slowly and looking down at her chest. She felt along her stitches. “O-Oh. Yes.”

“I brought your breakfast to you. It’s a little early. Likely 4 or 5 am.” He guessed with a shrug. “Never too early to start the day.” He said.

“But you’re always late.” Sakura grinned weakly.

“I have… no response.” He told her and set a tray down in her lap. “Eat up. You need to really push… we have ten days left here and then we must return. There’s been a singular case of something similar to Tozlu in the Leaf.”

Sakura stared in disbelief and nodded. “Who is it?” She asked, looking like a child up at him.

Kakashi grimaced. He didn't want to tell her. He didn't want to see that smile disappear.

“Ino.”
“Ino-chan is sick?!” Sakura practically screamed. Her heart pounded in her ears and she felt tears prick at her eyes.

“It’s okay—Sakura-chan, calm down! She’s under Tsunade-sama’s direct care. She’ll be okay.” Kakashi grabbed her shoulders to stop her from moving around too much and reopening her wound. “And soon you’ll be there, likely glued to her side taking care of her. I sent my fastest dog with a packet of those treatment pills in hopes it is a similar plague.”

“Okay.” Sakura managed. Her throat was tight and her heart raced. She had to find a way to contact Sasori immediately. She needed to work with him directly. The leads he was giving her were all genius and helpful, but she needed him by her side in order to complete the cure. The distance was slowing her down. “Thank you for breakfast, but I will eat later.”

Sakura got out of bed in a hurry.

“I have so much work to do.”
Sakura paced about in the building of the Kazekage, where an impromptu medical lab had been placed. They lost a lot of the research, which set progress back indefinitely. However, with knowledge that Sakura was making progress, it was no longer safe for them to remain in the village. That must’ve been another reason to call back the medical nin to her home village. Orochimaru would send more forces, though now with greater precautions. Minutes passed into hours and she had half-heartedly wondered why Kakashi hadn’t joined her already. He was likely contacting the Leaf village, or arranging their leave.

Her hand drifted to her pocket almost on its own, and she pulled out the ribbon with the bell. She rolled the bell around in her fingertips, admiring the beauty of it. There was a well cut ruby at the bottom of it she had not noticed before. She held her breath and her eyes grew concerned for her own actions as instinctively, she held the bell up to her ear and rang it. It was the same knell from the attack Deidara had made on the village, but lighter and an airier sound. Moments passed and the next time she rung it, was out of desperation. She shook the bell and looked around. She needed help… why wasn’t he coming to help her? Had he abandoned her?

Sakura resigned to be seated and perched herself on her new desk, still fidgeting with the bell. She needed Sasori’s direct help. Most of his notes were vague and when she would ask questions he would ignore her. Setting the bell lightly back in her pocket, she paced once more before going to the window and looking for any sign of him. There was nothing but eerie silence. Since the attack, less people came out of their homes.

She tried reviewing the notes once more but came to no sort of conclusion. She needed to focus, but whenever she did, thoughts of Ino prostrated on a funeral pyre haunted her. Sakura lamented her distance from her friend but resigned to her fate, only briefly however. The more she thought of Ino, and of her exposure to a plague similar to the deadly Tozlu, her stomach churned and her throat grew tight. Her arms felt like lead and her hearing buzzed.

It felt like lightning had struck her spine when a chilling idea emerged. She had heard of Sasori skulking about between towns, and over one particular tavern. She would have to go there, to convince him to work with her in person. She packed her things and stepped out of her doctor’s scrubs. She took a spare set of clothes from the barracks of the building; a pair of slacks, a long tunic with a heavy leather belt, a hood and gloves made of muslin. She dressed quickly and ground up peppermint and sage into a large basin of water before dumping it over her head. That would block her original scent, making it harder for Kakashi’s legion of hounds to find her.

Without thinking it through, she headed out the door, only taking a pack of her research, the few samples she still had, and a couple of letters from Ino. She paced through the village, occasionally stopping strangers to ask about a pub outside of the limits of the village. There was one, nobody liked to visit: ‘The Floorboards’ was the title of the establishment. She supposed it had some sort of humorous remark about drunkards and the floor, but she didn’t ponder on it. Her mind stayed on subject and she headed in the direction someone pointed her. She often checked behind her, but saw no signs of being followed, until one masculine voice spoke up above her loud thoughts.

“Sakura-chan.” She turned to see a man she didn’t know. He had an unfamiliar face. Blonde hair and green eyes smiled at her softly. “It’s me. Hiroshi.” He said. She hadn’t even recognized his voice. The smile he wore confused her. Hiroshi had never smiled at her—and if he had it had been hidden
deeply under his mask. He came up and hugged her. “I know you’re leaving, Sakura-chan, but I wanted to thank you. I know you’ll find a cure with his help.”

“With… his help?”

“Sasori’s help, yes.” Hiroshi said then his smile faded. “I am not as obtuse as you think, Leaf girl.”

“How did you know, though?”

“Oh, I have been sending him your notes.” He confessed. His speech was cheerful but slurred. The poison he had ingested was having its effect on him. “I only have hours to live, so listen to me. I’m only going to say it once, then I’m going to go spend my last few moments with my daughter and son-in-law.” He pressed a scroll into her hands. “Sasori will kill you, Sakura-chan. He wishes to preserve your beauty.”

Sakura’s skin crawled and she stared at him with disbelief.

“Do not go to him.” He warned, grabbing her wrist now. “Run to your Leaf village. Stay with your Hokage and highest trained ninja. Otherwise, he will have you before the fortnight has ended and you won’t escape him after that.”

Sakura’s breath hitched audibly and she yanked her hand away. Her pride was somehow wounded by his words and she gave him an offended look.

“I’m only telling you this, because now he holds no domain over me, anymore. I’m already going to die.” He chuckled.

“I have to find a cure… my best friend is ill.”

“She would not want you to sacrifice yourself.” He reasoned with her. He had a point, but Sakura cared more for her life than her wishes.

“I will… not let him capture me.” She promised and smiled a little. “You should go be with your family. Your skin is getting paler.”

Hours passed, each slower than the last as her thoughts of Ino grew darker and dimmer as each fleeting image of her coughing flashed behind Sakura’s eyes. The sand went on endlessly, but she knew she was making progress as the ground beneath her changed in hue, and occasionally she would pass some sort of flora that would provide her the solace of knowing she was getting closer to the edge of the land as the flora changed in breed and density. She longed to be by her friend’s side. The thought of the blonde beauty lying ill in the hospital brought her to despair. As it became dark, Sakura found a small dent in the side of a cliff that would help her escape the onslaught of the wind. She unrolled her cot and curled up in the blanket. She idly munched on dried fruit she still had in her pack.

Sleep came easily to her as she was physically and mentally exhausted. Her sleep was peaceful and without visit from her vermillion tormentor. The moon watched over her restful reprieve until the sun crept over the landscape, sunlight gently draping across her. She stretched her tired limbs and slowly rose up, giving a hearty yawn.

Sakura smiled. She hadn’t been contacted by Sasori with his horrible images and commanding tone.
Nor did she awake to Kakashi standing over her with a pack of hounds who had no doubt sniffed her out while she slumbered. She cracked her knuckles and gathered up her small amount of belongings before continuing on her journey. She should reach the tavern by midday.

Sure enough, as the sun rose to the zenith of the sky, Sakura managed to find a small tavern. They were in a thin forest, clearly on the climate lines of the desert and dense forests. It was sparsely attended, but the few day drinkers who were there were exactly as Kankuro described: criminals. She recognized a few faces from the bingo book, or wanted posters, or files that Tsunade would leave lying haphazardly open on her desk. She didn’t look anyone in the eye. Instead, she pulled her hood up to cover her damningly brightly colored hair and pushed past the curtain. The bartender acknowledged her with a skeptical look, then went about his business of refilling a keg.

Sakura sat at a table near the corner of the room and laid out her notes to work on while she waited for any sign of Sasori. She was close enough to hear the conversations of others, so she would have to listen for any indication of Akatsuki activity as well. Something told her he was there. He had to be. With her disappearance, he would at least look for her, right? She knew too much now. She surmised he would want her dead, as Hiroshi hinted.

“Order something or leave.” The bartender now stood at her table, looming over her with his large arms crossed.

Sakura hesitated. The few times in her life that she did drink, she clearly remembered not being very good at it. “Amazake, please.” She nodded slightly and the bartender walked away after muttering something she didn’t catch. She went back to surveying the room.

As her drink clattered onto the table, the familiar knell of a bell against wood sounded in her ears and she belatedly realized she wasn’t at all prepared to face Sasori. She hadn’t thought of anything to say—or how to fight him—or how to bargain with him. She held her breath and looked around. He was here, somewhere. She just couldn’t see him. She felt a possessive hand land on her shoulder.

By chance, her eyes fell upon the floor next to her feet. The ribbon and bell had fallen from her pocket. She let out the breath she had been holding and picked it up. She chuckled nervously under her breath, realizing how paranoid she was. Sasori made her uncomfortable in ways she hadn’t yet discovered yet. He both made her skin crawl, and made a small portion of her brain relax all at once. Having contact with him felt like she was accepting her own death, and she hadn’t even seen him in person. ‘But that’s about to change, isn’t it?’ She could practically hear the lull of his voice. She bit her lip.

A shudder wracked her form. She had lost weight since being in the Sand village, as she had been skipping meals simply so she could stay at work. Her clothes were too big and she felt more cold than usual. Sakura took a hesitant sip of the amazake, and forced herself not to scrunch up her nose. Even though it was sweet, it still had a strong after taste. Yet her face remained a cold mask of silence. There was a sour taste on her tongue regardless, but she curiously took another sip to test whether or not she liked it. She decided she didn’t and set it back down.

It was at that moment she experienced a sudden dizziness and looked down at her drink with accusing skepticism. She held it under her nose and paled when she smelled a familiar toxin. She immediately began coughing, and quickly escorted herself out sight. She forced herself to cough hard, running to get away from whoever it was that drugged her drink. She recognized the toxin from an incident a year ago at a bar in the Leaf village. Men had been drugging women with an extremely volatile substance that slowed blood circulation, causing extreme lethargy and exhaustion. It would occasionally lead to heart failure in extreme cases. By coughing she was forcing her blood to circulate and heart to pump. Eventually she was coughing for real and she braced herself on a nearby
tree before steeling herself and ramming her kunai into her freshly stitched wound. She screamed in pain as she ripped the stitches.

She would have taken a more direct approach to force herself to regurgitate the toxin, but taking a breath to shove fingers down her throat could be fatal. Instead, she hurt herself to the point of vomiting. As she expelled the contents of her stomach, she continued coughing, until the numbness of her limbs receded, and she could feel her heart pounding. She heard rancorous laughter from the tavern and wiped her mouth before turning to see what the commotion was. She realized the bartender and a group of men were laughing at her.

“Pinky can handle her Drop!” One exclaimed, waving a phial of the blue liquid someone had snuck into her drink.

“Which of you poisoned me?!” She shouted, voice hoarse from the painful croaking. They laughed again at the image she displayed. Fists clenched, eyes wild. She took a few deep breaths to try and calm herself down before lunging at the man who seemed to smirk the most. She didn’t wait for him to admit he did it. She recognized him as a well-known rapist and killer, and therefore did not value his life one way or another.

He caught her fist, but could do nothing to stop the knee that rammed into his ribcage, resulting in a loud, sickening crunch. The man howled and crumpled.

“You bitch!” He yelled and began to sign. Her eyes widened and she jumped back. The men around him seemed to stay out of it, rather enjoying the show. Without announcement, Phoenix Flower was aimed at her. She flinched and managed to dodge before focusing once more. She harvested a large portion of chakra into her fists and took a defensive stance, just in time for another fire style assault.

She cleared her mind and soon the world became silent as she and her opponent were the only forces of nature that mattered.

Angered by her quiet, he continued in offense.

“Fire Style!” He roared. “Twin Dragon Flame!” From his throat came a wave of blue flame, twice the size of Sakura in height, and many times that in width.

She held up her hand to the dragon flame and used her chakra to block it; something she had seen Tsunade practice multiple times in both training and combat. Much of the flame was blocked, but a small amount licked her gloved hand. A small giddiness overcame her. She had never been able to do it in training, but this had felt different. Faintly she felt responsible for it, but part of her knew better. She whipped her head around to see blue lines attached to her limbs. She moved freely, but the cords were there. She turned her attention back to her attacker just in time for him to pounce on her. He held a tantō to her throat and pressed as hard as he could, but she had wedged her forearm against his and pushed back with all of her might.

Things were starting to look bad for her.

She looked around for Sasori once more before looking into the eyes of the man above her. For a flash he had Sasuke’s face and that caused her to waver enough for the blade to slice into her flesh. Why would she think of him at a moment like this? Did this man’s assault really remind her of her former teammate that much? Was she weakening?

“I’m going to have fun with your corpse, pinky.” The man wheezed, putting all of his weight against her. She made a face at him before focusing more of her chakra into her arms and managing to gain ground even though she had very little leverage. She slowly pushed him back.
“I’m going to give you a swift death.” She hissed, eyes darkening. She swore she could taste blood. In the back of her mind, she heard herself protest against the violence. That she should render him unconscious and turn him in instead. “Who will miss you?” She asked, left arm darting out and knocking him in the ear with her hand cupped. It was enough to stun him and she shoved him off her before catching his head between her hands and snapping his neck. She watched the chakra threads detach from her hands and she looked up to the other men who were still laughing and now making jokes. She stood up and dusted off her clothing. At least now they were laughing at him.

“Come on in, I’ll give you something fresh.” The bartender exclaimed, patting her on the back amicably. “Don’t worry about him. I’ll be taking him in for reward money. It’s how I keep this place going half the time. Your drinks are on the house.”

Sakura allowed herself a small smile. “I appreciate it.” She lied and followed the group back into the tavern. There was someone new sitting at the bar, sipping some sort of rye malt. He had dark tan skin and brown hair and when he moved, she swore she could hear his joints clicking. Keeping an eye on him for a moment, she returned to her table to see her notes slightly ajar. Whether she did that in her frenzy or whether someone had tampered with them remained to be seen, but she focused on healing the recently opened stitches and the even cut on her neck. The cut closed as if it had never been there and she mended her stitches with what little medical supplies she had with her. It stung, but the adrenaline still coursing through her made her forget it.

As the bartender brought her a new drink, she reviewed the instance of what just happened, mentally. She watched a couple of men drag the body out of sight from her peripheral vision. Sakura grimaced and swirled the drink in her cup, sniffing it this time before taking a sip. She was a killer already, but his had been... thoughtless.

“It’s a wine.” The bartender said gruffly. “You might like it better. ‘Comes from fruit instead of rice.’”

“It’s good, thank you.” She said absentmindedly. She could feel the snap of the man’s neck and the look in his eyes as life drifted from him. It was haunting. She looked down at her palms and adjusted her gloves, peering at the Scorpion tattoos. Had she really taken that man’s life without at least offering him the chance of mercy? Surely she didn’t do it. It was Sasori, without a doubt. He had attached to her limbs and controlled her movements, just like she knew he did with Kabuto.

The bartender had watched her before looking down at her wrists. He gave a grin.

“Scorpions, huh? Odd place to put ‘em. I can think of a few better places for a tattoo like that.”

“That is… completely none of your business.” Sakura sighed and sipped the wine again. “They were put there against my will anyway.”

“You some sort of runaway slave?” He joked. Sakura paused and the corner of her mouth quirked in a confused frown. That’s exactly what she was. The puppet had ran from its master, only in order to find him however.

“I suppose.” She said and finished off the wine. Her eyes drifted up to his, then scanned the room once again. “Something like that.”

“I’d buy a pretty thing like you, if you’re wanting to get away from your owner. I need some help around here.” He offered, dead serious.

“I’m not for sale! I’m a medical nin, not a play thing!” She hissed. “You’ve seen what I can do.” Her expression soured.
“Right,” The bartender laughed. “So, you’re a killer. I haven’t seen you in the bingo book though. Either of them. Why the hell are you here? Not trying to take away any of my clients, are you?”

“I don’t care about your clientele.” Sakura said honestly. “I’m looking for someone. I need his help.”

“What is it? Maybe I can keep an eye out for you.”

Sakura hesitated. The name felt heavy on her tongue, as if saying it aloud would make him appear. “Sasori,” She said quietly.

The bartender froze for a moment, then leaned in to whisper. He smelled like sweat and malt. “You mean you’re looking for that Akatsuki member? Are you suicidal? He’ll kill you in the blink of an eye and turn you into one of his weapons.”

“I don’t care for my life.” She said evenly. “I need his help and I’m willing to do whatever is necessary, to save the life of my friend.”

“He’s not in the business of saving lives, you stupid girl. You know he kills people, right? Look, I see you can hold your own against some lowly raper, but Sasori’s on a whole different level.” The bartender sat across from her now.

Sakura schooled her expression and sat back, looking at him. “I can hold my own against him.” She said, mostly to herself. She was confident she would at least put up a fight. “I’m out of options. There’s no one else to turn to.”

“I don’t know what you did to prevent you from going to anyone else, but you’re headed down a dangerous path.” The bartender said and grabbed her glass to refill it.

She said nothing in return and looked back down to her notes. Her hands tingled with checked rage, but not regret. She grimaced and thought of Kakashi, Ostu, and Ostaka. She knew Ostaka would pass soon, and she wished to be there for his sister, and she longed for Kakashi, but her focus was saving her home village. The ends would surely justify the means. Sakura shrunk a bit and stared down at a letter from Ino, she had received just before fleeing the sand village.

’Sakura-chan!

You will absolutely never in a hundred years believe who was leaving me roses!! It was Neji!! I’m sure that someone told you I’m sick in the hospital, and that’s great and all but can you believe the stern, cool, loner Neji Hyuga was in love with me?! He came to the hospital with roses. I can hardly believe it! After a little thought, we’re going out for barbeque on a double date with Choji and some girl his mom set him up with! Hopefully Neji isn’t going to offer to pay for those. Choji can do some damage there!

He’s still kind of pretentious but I see right past it. I’m going to get to know him!

Anyway, Tsunade-sama gave me a weird diagnosis. She says I have Tozlu, but I soooo know that’s not the case. We have zero sand. Zero! Whatever it is, it’s making me cough a lot. I can’t wait for you to get back. Neither can anyone here. We’re gonna throw a HUGE party for you when you get back! We’re having it here in my room, since me and Tenten are already assigned to this room. She’s got the same gunk I do. Oh man, Sakura-chan. I’m so excited for my date. Tsunade-sama is releasing me from the hospital and assigning a nurse to me so that I can go. What do you think I should do with my hair? I think I should leave it down, maybe curl it? Hope you write me soon!

Your favorite person in the whole wide world,
Sakura sadly folded the paper up again and placed it in her pack. She propped her head on her hands and stared at the entrance to the tavern. A couple of men left, leaving her and that man at the bar who still hadn’t risen from his seat at all. He occasionally ordered another drink and made light conversation. Something she couldn’t name was incredibly off about him. Still, she began working on her notes, drawing few conclusions, but able to focus more intently now that she was away from the Sand village.

There was some missing part of the plague that she couldn’t put her finger on. It travelled through chakra, and she assumed took from the environment and person’s biome once infected, rather than entering the body through the excretory system as any sort of physical substance. The issue now was the presence of sand. Certainly, being surrounded by loose sand, people were bound to inhale a certain amount of it over their lifetimes, but there was so much in the cadavers that she received for study. The largest amount was about a pint of sand and the smallest amount was a tablespoon, which was quite a bit nonetheless.

Then there was the matter of the speed of decay being accelerated by what she assumes is a deadly psychosomatism, triggered by the infection tricking the brain into thinking its dead. She even observed that in a few patients, they thought that they were dead, as in truly believing they had passed. It was rare, but it had gone that far in about 14 patients out of the thousands that died, proving that the infection had a direct effect on the brain rather than just the body.

Her heart nearly stopped.

“Drinking alone?” She heard a male’s voice. That was the voice that made her itch to leave, the person was the source of her unease.

“Yes, and I wish to remain that way.” She said curtly without looking up from her notes. She heard a chuckle and finally gave in to curiosity by glancing up.

“I was warned about your temper, hm.” Deidara smiled and sat next to her, scooting uncomfortably close. Sakura said nothing in return, shocked. She simply stared at him, wide eyed with her mouth pressed into a tight line. “I knew you’d be here.”

“Where’s Sasori?” She said quickly, not taking the bait.

“Ugh.” Deidara sighed. “Ugly? He’s out looking for you.” He said and pressed his forefinger into her arm. “You bailed on the village, without permission.”

Sakura looked around now, seeing the bartender nowhere in sight. Nor any person. She was alone with a member of the Akatsuki. Trying to devise an escape path she paused. “That can’t be… he’s near. You’re lying.”

“I’m a liar, but I’m not lying to you.” Deidara leaned in and caught her direct eye contact. He took a moment to admire the hue of fear in those deep pools of green. “What reason would I have to lie to you?”

“Maybe lying is just fun to you.” Sakura quipped and gathered her notes. She needed to leave. As soon as she began to rise, Deidara grabbed her arm and pulled her back down. Her side crashed
against him and the contact made her queasy. He gripped her arm so tightly she feared there would be violet bruises.

“You shouldn’t have run away, Sakura-chan.” He said, a small distance from her face. She looked up at him, believing him now. “So far away from your attack dogs.” He smiled. “What are you doing out here anyway? Avoiding your duties?”

“I-I’m trying to find Sasori.” She stuttered but tried to sound brave. “I need to speak with him.”

“For a medical nin, you’re not very smart. Why did you really run away?” Deidara chuckled lowly, enjoying watching her struggle to keep up her act.

“He wasn’t answering my questions. I need to work alongside of him. We need to hurry with this cure,” She said honestly. “My friend is ill.”

Deidara laughed. “So you pissed him off to try and find him? You’re not very wise at all, hm.”

“I don’t care about your opinions of me.” Sakura glowered. “Where is he?”

“Don’t worry about that, dear.” He said and kissed her cheek, knowing it would make her shudder and try to squirm away. He laughed when she did exactly as he thought and tugged her closer. “You should watch your back, Sakura-chan.”

“You should watch yours. You have no idea what I’m capable of.” Sakura defended her wounded dignity.

“You’re lucky I’m in a playful mood. I want to see how this plays out. You never saw me, Sakura-chan, and if you tell him you did, I’ll deny it… or maybe kill one of your friends, we’ll see.” He hummed and stood up, bringing her to her feet with him then letting her go. She fell back into her chair, looking disheveled.

“I never saw you.” Sakura gave in, eager for him to leave. Deidara walked out but not before waving to her.

“See you later, Sakura-chan.” He laughed and took his leave.

Sakura shivered and looked at the bartender, who finally came out of his supply room.

“Had he been here the entire time?” He asked.

“Yes.” She hissed, angry he didn’t come out sooner. Maybe it was for the best, though. Deidara was crazy. He might’ve killed him. “But… pretend you never saw him.”

“I do, every time he’s in here.” The bartender smirked. “Or do you not know how this discretion thing works?”

Sakura rolled her eyes and gathered her things.

“Is there some place I can stay? I really don’t want to sleep in the woods again, and I’m afraid it’s getting late. I want to scout for him, but I can’t do it half asleep.”

“There’s a hot springs inn up the road, but that place’s expensive. You could stay with me if you like.” He grinned. “I won’t try anything.”

Sakura stared at him incredulously for a moment. Hot springs or creepy bartender? It was no competition.
“Right… I’ll be back tomorrow.” She promised and walked out of the tavern, looking around for any signs of Sasori or Deidara. Seeing no one around, she continued down the road in the direction he pointed her. Eventually, she came upon a modest, but well decorated building. She could smell the scents they must use on the water. She entered and was greeted by a friendly worker.

“Good evening, miss.” She bowed lightly. “How long would you like to stay?”

“Just tonight… full service, please.” She requested and fished around in her bag for money. She laid out the correct amount and followed the worker to a small room. It had a cot, dresser, television, radio and table. “Thank you.” She smiled lightly. It would feel good to relax a bit. Maybe it would even help her focus on her notes.

She set up everything she needed, this time including scrolls and samples of Tozlu. Deciding to bathe first, she disrobed and stretched. Her body had long been neglected. Her fingernails were in all sorts of disarray and her hair was dry and brittle. She noticed the complimentary product tray on the dresser and smiled. Perfect.

She pulled a plush white robe over her figure and followed the signs to the hot spring. There were a few other women in there, chatting to themselves. Removing her robe and hanging it on a branch of bamboo, she stepped into the scented water and felt her body instinctually relax in the grasp of the warm water. She sunk down until only her nose remained above it. Her eyes shut and she listened intently to the woman’s conversations. It was low but above the sounds of the water flowing from a manmade fountain and the crickets’ orchestra just outside of the high fence.

“Did you pass that creepy man on the way here too?”

“Yeah, all hunched over, he looked more like an animal than a man.” One giggled.

“He looked like a total scum bag, a scowl on his face and all that drab black.”

“He walked weird, too. Like it hurt to walk, but he was moving so quickly, muttering about a hunting or something.”

“Goodness, we need to travel in a group next time so we don’t run into creeps like that alone.”

Sakura grew tired of their chatter and tuned them out. She sat up and looked up at the night sky, leaning her back against the smooth stone of the pool’s edge.

“Hey, are you alright?” She heard someone wading near her. She turned her head towards the voice and smiled. “That cut looks bad. I’m somewhat of a healer, would you like for me to have a go at it?”

“Oh, I-I, uh...” Sakura stammered. “I’m a medical nin as well, but my chakra is a bit drained. Sure, you can if you’d like—but I’ll be fine.”

“It’s no problem at all.” The woman settled next to her. She was a bit shorter than her, with long black hair and blue eyes. She had a couple of scars on her shoulder, but other than that she had moderately fair skin, similar to Sakura. “Where are you from?”

“Me? I’m from the Hidden Leaf Village, how about you?”

“I’m from a small town just outside of the Sound.” She smiled and held her hands up to Sakura’s chest, calling her chakra to her palms and changing the nature of it to a soft, healing one rather than pure energy. Sakura’s tension melted a bit.
“Thank you. That feels better already.” Sakura said honestly. She hadn’t bothered healing it herself.

“It’ll scar.” The woman frowned. “I’m Shidra, by the way. You can call me Shi.”

“Sakura.”

“Oh, what a pretty name! It matches your hair.” She laughed a bit.

“Thank you.” She nodded a little. “What brings you out here?”

Shidra finished up her healing and sat next to her. “My former teammates and I come here every five months to catch up and relax. That’s Nan-chan and Lan-chan.” She pointed to two identical women who were half asleep by the looks of it. “And that’s Dotana-sensei. We call her Dot.” She pointed to the woman, clearly older than the three. While she was older, her short blonde hair held much color and she didn’t show many signs of age on her face. “She was our teacher. Now we go on missions together.”

“Ahhh. I miss my team.” Sakura frowned a bit. “It must be lovely being so close.”

“You aren’t close with your team? I mean, I know not everyone gets alone, but it’s a shame.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m very close with Naruto-kun and Kakashi-sensei, but one of our teammates… Sasuke-kun… he ran away when we were younger. We’ve been searching for him ever since.” She confessed. It had been so long since she last told someone.

“That’s so sad.” Shi leaned in and hugged her tightly. “I can’t imagine losing anyone from my team!” She looked at her teammates and then back at Sakura. “So what brings you here, Sakura-san?”

“I’m hiding from someone… and well, searching for him… it’s a bit complicated?” She mused, rubbing her neck consciously.

“Oh my. I hope you find him, maybe!” She smiled and let go, wading back over to her friends.

Sakura had a feeling in the pit of her stomach, like she had already found him and he was watching her. He had to be. He had helped her fight off that rapist, then he killed him using her. She wasn’t sure she could just take someone’s life like that, so quickly and carelessly. She shook her head, trying to physically clear her mind.

Sakura hopped out of the warm water to the steamy night air. She sat by a bar that was full of all sorts of beauty products and soaps. She selected a shampoo and lathered her hair with it. It smelled like citrus, and burnt her scalp a bit, no doubt being some sort of clarifying shampoo. Sakura lavished her body in soaps and attention, cleaning the sand from her skin and managing to uncoil a bit as she did. Her shoulders relaxed and she massaged the tension from them, hands gliding evenly over her skin with the aid of the bubbly soap. She took a bucket from beneath the bar and leaned over, scooping water from the springs into it before leaning her head back and dumping it over her hair. She repeated the procedure a few more times before she determined the soap was gone.

Picking up a pumice stone, she began to scrub the layers of grime from her, now softened by the warm water and cleanser.

‘Preparing yourself for him, hm?’ The thought was intrusive and she made a face. ‘We can’t go to him looking bad.’ Sakura blushed a bit. She certainly didn’t think of him that way. Quite the opposite in fact. She despised him, and if she could kill him, she would. Still, he was undeniably handsome, and possessed an air of dominance that disgusted her and thrilled her all at once.
Clearing her mind of thoughts of him, she stepped into the warm water once more and watched as the stars glistened in the inky black sky. It was delightfully clear and she could see each one in all of its glory.

“Sakura-san.” Dot approached her, getting her attention. Sakura sat up. “You mentioned you were from the Hidden Leaf Village. Do you know the Yamanaka family?”

Sakura smiled brightly. “Yes! My best friend is a Yamanaka!!”

“Ah! Excellent! I have something for the head of household. You see, my nephew recently married into the clan. We have a little one coming in the winter. I’ll drop it off by your room, but would you mind running it to them?”

“I… I wish I could,” Sakura’s smile faltered. “I’m likely not going to be returning, you see.” She managed. “The man I’m looking for… I expect he will kill me.”

“Then why are you looking for him?” Dot could’ve laughed. “Silly girl.”

“I need his help.” Sakura sighed. “I am doing something that I can’t do alone, and I was hoping he would finish my work… even if he kills me.”

“That’s noble. I think.” Dot gave a sympathetic smile. “I hope you have luck.”

Sakura stood to leave. “Thank you. Enjoy your reunion.”

She smiled politely before stepping out and slipping her robe back on. Sakura treaded to her room and sat at her table. A tray of delicious looking food waited for her next to her makeshift works station. She sat it on top of her notes and looked over the food. Miso soup, lobster tail, various stewed vegetables and two rice cakes.

“A real dinner.” Sakura laughed a bit and began to eat, savoring the cooked food. Her thoughts returned to the Anbu siblings and she sighed. Ostaka’s impending demise saddened her more than she first thought. Maybe she could convince Sasori to cure him.

Thoughts of the redhead lingered on her mind as she finished her meal and prepared to sleep. She wondered when he would emerge from the shadows and speak with her. She hoped it would be soon. Ino’s life depended heavily on her progress. She yawned and decided to work on her cure in the morning. Sakura unrolled the provided bed mat and neatly folded the robe.

Deciding she didn’t want to smell like sweat and peppermint in the morning, she took her dirty clothes to the sink and began washing them by hand. Once done with that, she hung them by the open window and settled in to sleep. She needed to hurry and find Sasori, before it was too late. She needed to cure Tozlu. She wanted to return home. Thoughts of the Leaf Village hung brightly in her dreams. She dreamt of Naruto’s impending return. She dreamt of being by Ito’s side. She dreamt of Sasuke.

Chapter End Notes

Two chapters in one day?! Arte et Marte hahaha.
The next morning, she returned to the tavern as quickly as possible. She knew she was being followed by somebody, but she knew it was not Sasori. She only hoped it wasn’t one of Orochimaru’s. She was quite sick of him. Whoever it was, she was sloppy. She heard her, she felt her chakra signature, and at one point, she saw her face. She was stout and grungy.

“Why are you following me?” Sakura asked once she stood outside of the tavern. There was no response. Sakura took a deep breath, attempted to calm down, then turned on heel and repeated herself. “Why. Are. You. Following me?” She asked again.

Silence, still, until she heard a slight rustling. A woman jumped down from the tree. Her face was covered by a mask and her hair was covered by a hood. The woman quietly pulled a sword from a sheath that rested horizontally on her lower back. Sakura took a defensive stance and looked down at her hands immediately. There was no chakra cord attached.

The woman was behind her in a flash and stabbed her sword through Sakura’s thigh. She hadn’t been paying close enough attention. Sakura gasped and whipped her head around, turning lightly and worsening the wound. She swung her fist and connected it to the side of the woman’s head. Her mask flew off and revealed a stern face. She let go of her sword and stumbled back, moving her mask back into place and yanking the blade from Sakura’s leg.

“What do you want!?” Sakura yelled, drawing the attention of a couple of patrons and gripping her wound now.

“You need to come with me.” The woman said evenly.

“No! I won’t! Who are you?” Sakura hissed, doing her best to quickly heal her thigh while the woman oriented herself.

“I am a mercenary. Come with me.”

“Not in your life.” Sakura growled and tugged her gloves tightly into place before summoning her chakra. She took a deep breath before striking the ground and causing a crater that opened up beneath the woman. Alarmed, the mercenary could do nothing to stop herself from falling as the ground that was just underneath of her was suddenly gone. Sakura was on her in a moment, ignoring the searing pain in her leg.

She was quick to strike, and as she did, she felt wood splintering around her fist. The woman’s face collapsed into itself, creating the sound of snapping rather than what it should have sounded like. Sakura’s eyes widened as she pulled the mask off once more. It was a puppet.

Horrified, she looked around for its master, then looked at the bartender, who was in awe. Her eyes returned to the puppet, only to see a large amount of blood on her hand. She stared at the corpse on the ground. There was blood, broken skull and brain matter scattered in a halo of gore around the woman’s head. Sakura swallowed thickly.

“My apologies.” She said to the bartender and went inside. She sat at her usual table and trembled uncontrollably. The bartender offered her a cigarette. Looking between him and the offering, she eventually took it with shaky hands. He lit it for her and she saw her victim in the gentle glow of the
cigarette, trying her best to hold it together.

“I’m going to guess you aren’t really a killer.” The bartender said slowly. "Was this your second kill?"

“I’ve killed… I’m a kuinoichi… we all kill eventually.” She said evenly, taking a long drag before slowly exhaling. She knew how terrible cigarettes were, but it was the few moments of bliss that made them attractive to people. She calmed down a small bit and rubbed her eyes with her non-bloody hand. Absently she healed her thigh, but only enough to stop the bleeding. The smell of the cigarette wafted past her, vaguely reminding her of Asuma-sensei. “I just… never killed so…”

“Thoughtlessly?”

“Mercilessly.” She winced. “I didn’t even give her a chance to yield—it was barely a fight! I just… don’t know what got into me.” She looked down at her hands again, holding the cigarette between two fingers. The ashes sloughed off and fell on her red skin. She could see blue attachments to them; puppet strings.

“Here.” The bartender brought her yet another offering of liquor. “This is will make you forget it.”

“I don’t want to forget… I have to stay alert.” She asserted, finally managing to calm herself down. “I need to get my thoughts organized, that’s all.”

The bartender looked around. The man at the bar was the only other one there. He sat across from her.

“Be honest with me, girl. Where are you from? Who are you? You aren’t my usual type of customer.”

“Sakura Haruno,” She whispered. “I’m from the Hidden Leaf Village. I’m Tsunade’s apprentice and… I defected from duty while in the Sand Village, in search for Sasori. I need him to help me directly in finding the cure for Tozlu. My best friend will die from it if I can’t make a cure, and swiftly.”

“Sakura Haruno-chan.” The bartender smiled a bit. “I know about you. Someone in here was talking about you just the other day. I thought I recognized the pink hair, but… I thought maybe it was common wherever you two were from.”

“Someone was talking to you about me?” She said incredulously. Her mind raced a bit and she looked at him in utter confusion.

“Yeah, he got completely black out drunk and just spilled his life story. Never got his name though. Real pretty boy. Talked about killing his brother a lot. He came in all collected, and he was quiet. Didn’t talk to anyone else. Shouldered a whole lot of guilt. Tried to drown it.”

Sakura pressed her lips together tightly and her brow knit in grief. She hung her head a little and forced back tears. Sasuke was taking about her? “His name was Sasuke Uchiha.”

“Uchiha?! That explains those red eyes of his!” The bartender laughed. “So what, was that guy a friend of yours?”

“Yes. I find myself thinking about him a lot lately. He was a teammate of mine a couple of years ago. He defected as well. I guess... I guess that makes me like him, huh?” Sakura admitted, feeling a bit more relaxed around the man than yesterday. She smiled morosely. "If only we had a little more in common back then... maybe he would have stayed."
“He thinks about you, too. Talks about not knowing about his life after his revenge. That he’d come to you, or some Naruto kid and work it out. Then he starts getting real angry, talking about how it’d never work out. Confusing kid.” The bartender hummed, smoking a cigarette for himself.

Sakura put out her own when it became too short and set it in an empty glass. “I wish I could say I don’t care about him anymore. He doesn’t truly care for me. Still, I want him back, and wish for his safety.”

“He was with Orochimaru, so I can promise you, he’s as far from safe as one could be.” The man said honestly. Sakura frowned and sighed. She knew. She knew too well.

“What’s your name, by the way?” She finally asked.

“Jerim Hao.” He smiled a yellow, toothy smile at the girl. “Pleasure to get to know you.”

Sakura smiled a little bit and finally wiped the blood off her hand with a set of dirty clothes. She shook his hand meekly.

“My wife left some of her things when she left me. Why don’t you take a look at those clothes and see if any of ‘em will fit you? You stink in those.” He admitted, pointing to her current ones.

“I’d appreciate it.” She nodded a bit and followed him as he stood from the table.

“I’ll be right back, don’t take anything.” He hollered to the man at the bar. Sakura briefly noted it was the same man as before but ignored it. She followed Jerim up a flight of stairs. “Here’s her room. Second on the left. Go on in.”

“Thank you, Hao-san.” Sakura bowed her head a bit and went where he instructed. She grasped the cold brass door knob and opened to the room. It was pretty empty, but there was a small wardrobe next to the window. She opened it up. The clothes were a bit large for her, and for a woman much taller than her. It smelled faintly of mildew and she could tell rainwater had seeped into the upper level of the house, but it didn’t really bother her.

She looked through them to find the simplest, least expensive thing she could take. The bartender was awfully generous. She smiled halfheartedly and picked out a tunic and pair of slacks. They were as thick as canvas, but had no sleeves for her arms and the slacks stopped mid-calf. She belted it off and attached her weapons pouch and kunai sheath to her waist. She absentmindedly looked through a couple of drawers, just to get an idea about the missing woman. She saw minimally expensive jewelry and a couple of photographs, but nothing too personal.

Finished up, she left the room and trodded back downstairs.

She set a couple of notes on the counter for the bartender without saying anything when her eyes caught a string of blue chakra. Scratch that. Several strings. Attached to the man sitting at the bar. She looked around in a panic but saw no sign of Sasori. It had to be all in her head.

Something told her it wasn’t. When he moved, she heard the telltale sounds of a puppet’s movements. She stared for a long while before returning to her papers, still watching the puppet at the bar. He was wooden. He hadn’t spoken, had he? And he wasn’t drinking. His glass was still full and he had put it to his mouth several times. She watched him intensely as she packed her things.

Where was Sasori?

She flinched as she heard a crow squawking, perched in the window. Without thinking she through her kunai, nailing it in the chest and causing it to flap its wings. However, instead of falling over dead, it disintegrated. It disintegrated. It disintegrated. Her hands felt numb with fear. He was
watching.

“It was lovely meeting you Hoa-san but I must be on my way.” She rushed the sentence out so quickly it took him a moment to comprehend it. “Thank you for your generosity!” She shouted as she exited, looking around wildly. Who was it? Who was there? Her heart pounded ruthlessly and she recognized she was having an anxiety attack, in the back of her mind. Where was Sasori?

As she turned her head to behind the tavern she saw a dark figure. And a pair of red eyes. No. Not red eyes. Red Sharingans. She ran to the figure, wide eyed. A little laugh escaped her. Her emerald eyes had turned dull and pale. Sasuke. It meant Orochimaru wasn’t far--but she saw him. She saw her Sasuke.

“Sakura Haruno,” The figure spoke, reaching out and grabbing her arm. “You’ll come with me.”

“Sasuke-kun…” She managed, eyes dewy and lifeless all at once. That caused the figure to pause and look at her with more scrutiny. She took a deep breath and hugged him so tightly it would’ve broken at least a rib or two. “Sasuke-kun, you’re okay… I’m so happy. You're okay."

The figure was silent, before it disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Had it been a shadow clone? That meant he was around here, somewhere. She ran behind the tavern, looking around wildly before running back and checking both directions of the road, trying to figure out where he was, or where he could have come from.

“Sasuke-kun!” She screamed. “Sasuke-kun, where are you?!”

“Sakura-chan.” She whipped her head around. It was the bartender. Next to him was the puppet. She saw red.

“Sasori, you bastard, come out!” She shouted, looking to the tree line. “I'll just have to make you come out then.” She growled. Where did Sasuke-kun go?

“Sakura!” Jerim yelled. “Stop!” He was frightened to approach her. She proved to be a bit of a menace. He stumbled back out of her way, nearly tripping over himself in the process.

“Sasori!” She yelled, charging at the puppet. This time she was certain he was a puppet, but just to make sure, she grabbed his throat. It was hard and felt smooth under her hand. Wood. She ripped the hood from his head. Dead eyes, a slotted mouth that opened and—

She moved just in time to avoid the needles that shot out of his mouth. Without a second thought, she collected chakra in her fists and punched him so hard in the torso that wood practically exploded from his back, leaving a gaping hole in his chest. Her ears rang so loudly she couldn't hear what Jerim was yelling at her. She stormed around, searching for Sasori when she noticed a trail of blood. Her eyes followed it to a corpse. She ran over and examined it. He had a hole in his chest and his eyes had rolled back into his head.

“Sasori’s been here.” Sakura announced, standing up and looking at Jerim. “You should get inside.”

She was concerned for her new friend. "Sasori may target you!"

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” The bartender breathed and practically ran for cover. He wondered what was wrong with her.

“How did he…” She ran her fingers over the wound. The organs in his torso had collapsed, ruptured, or got pushed out through his back and minced against his spine, which was broken almost cleanly. “He’s near. I need to find him.” She growled again. She'd be the one to find Sasori first.
“Sakura.” The voice was stern. She turned around to see a man she didn’t recognize. He had long black hair that had been tied back, and red eyes. She paused, horrified as she noticed his Akatsuki robes. She scrambled to her feet and backed up. “You need to come with me.” He warned.

“I-I know who you are… you’re Itachi Uchiha.” Sakura managed, stammering every other word in pure terror. “Why? Why are you here?”

“For you, Sakura.” Itachi said calmly and gestured. “Come with me, or we will have to make you.” Sakura looked around for the other half of ‘we’ and stood in shock as she saw a… shark looking man emerge from the tavern with a bottle of some sort in his hand. “Make this easier on yourself, Sakura.”

“Damn!” Kisame laughed, pointing at the corpse. “Did she do that?! Oh, she’s fun.” He decided.

“I-I didn’t! I couldn’t—Sasori did it!” She argued, backing up a bit. Her heart raced. She needed to run. She couldn’t believe Sasori would send those two to kill her. He wouldn’t even kill her himself. She looked at Itachi then the path. His eyes narrowed.

“Sakura. Do not run away.” He said, those his words were lost as she sprinted as fast as she could, using as much chakra as needed to propel herself forward.

“Oh yes, I was hoping she would do that.” Kisame smirked. “Can I go after her, or?”

“Let me.” Itachi decided, before taking off after her. So this was the little girl that had distracted Sasuke from his hatred? He failed to see the reason why. She had clearly snapped, so she must have been weak.

It wasn’t but a moment before he caught up and was at her side. When she turned to look, he caught her with a genjustu and picked her up off the ground, holding her over his shoulder.

“Sasuke.” Sasuke hummed at the door as he removed his shoes.

“Ah! Just in time.” Sakura smiled and went up to him, embracing him then kissing him on the cheek. “Naruto-kun is coming over for dinner tonight, him and Hinata.”

Sasuke acknowledged her with a nod.

“How was your day?”

“My day was just as the others.” He said and stepped into the kitchen to help her prepare dinner. It was one of their favorite things to do together, as it gave them a common goal and something to do with their hands and they didn’t have to talk. Sasuke still wasn’t much of a talker. He had come back damaged.

“I’ll get the vegetables.” Sakura announced and went outside to a small garden, littered with fully grown plants. It was near harvest season, and she kept watch carefully over each and every growing life that she had planted. She returned inside with a basket full of produce and stood next to him as he skinned and gutted the fish. His hair had grown out long, and he kept telling her to cut it for him, because he was no good with shears, but she never had the heart to. She’d grown so attached to it, even if he complained about brushing it. He kept it back in a pony tail, just like his father had in his youth.

She set her head gently against his shoulder and in response, he turned and kissed it, before returning
to the task at hand. He sliced the fish into four even parts and dumped the guts and scales into the trash can.

“Sakura.” Sasuke began. “I think that I would like to continue the Uchiha lineage.” He said, completely out of the blue. It gave her pause before her hands started working again, returning to chopping the vegetables.

“I would like children. Two… maybe three.” Sakura said, musing.

“Two sounds like a wonderful number. I do hope it’s a boy.” Sasuke hadn’t spoken this much all week and now he decides to have this conversation when their dinner guests were supposed to arrive in a half hour.

“I would prefer a girl.” Sakura giggled, causing Sasuke to let out an amused huff.

“And when she marries, she will take someone else’s name. What then?” Sasuke rose a brow, smirking down at her.

“So? What if whoever she marries takes hers? That’s what Ino’s husband did. What if she marries a woman who decides to take the Uchiha name? Just because I took your name doesn’t mean every woman does. You’re sounding like your Great Uncle Madara, dear.” She grinned and poked at him.

“Then… I suppose the lineage would continue.” Sasuke huffed in amusement once more.

“And what if our boy takes his wife or husband’s name, ah?” Sakura mused.

“You’re right. Let’s have enough kids to make sure that it continues either way.” Sasuke's smirk only grew.

“Yes! I agree—hey, put me down—what are you doing?!?”

“Let’s start now, Sakura-chan.” Sasuke decided and hoisted her up in his arms. Her cheeks turned a bright red and she lightly hit his shoulders in a faux protest.

“We have to finish dinner, Sasuke, stop it!” She laughed, pretending to try and escape his grasp.

“No, we need to start immediately.” He grinned and tossed her on the bed. “Those two can wait just an hour or two longer for dinner.”

“An hour or two?! That sounds like a challenge.” Sakura giggled and started shimmying out of her clothing. Sasuke grabbed her shirt and pulled it off quickly before landing a trail of kisses from her belly to her neck.

***

Sakura sat anxiously in the stands at the very front of the colosseum. It was so different than when she was last there. The last time that she sat in those creaky stadium seats, she watched anxiously as Naruto and Neji fought, then as the previously emotionless Gaara decimated the village.

She watched as her only son, barely 9 years old walked onto the spacious field with his opponent, a much taller, much more experienced Konohamaru. She folded her hands tightly in her lap. Sasuke was late… she was full of anxiety.

Konohamaru was about 13, with many more missions behind him and battle experience, not to
mention Naruto’s *direct training*. She of course had faith in her son’s abilities, but he was her first child, and she had a new mother’s worry still.

Sasuke sat next to her without a word. She smiled lightly and gripped his hand, mostly needing the support for herself. Sasuke had trained Shisuke since he was able to talk. He specialized in taijutsu, having many lessons from a friend of the family, Lee. However, with his activated Mangekyō Sharingan, Sakura was concerned adversely that he may lose control and harm Konohamaru greatly. He shouldn’t have even had the Mangekyō. It was inherently wrong for him to possess such despair at such a young age.

Though Shisuke had a fairly normal childhood until age 5, at age 5 he suffered at the hands of his own uncle. Since Sasuke had given up his vengeance for Itachi in favor of returning home, Itachi lived. On a trip to visit the coast, Shisuke had wandered off, only to be tricked by Itachi into coming with him.

The scars around the boy’s young left eye had been hard to heal. Itachi had implanted his own eye into the boy, causing him great difficulty with his eye sight. The eye rejected, though still gave him the ability to use the powerful Tsukuyomi. He was only blind in that one eye, but adjusted well.

After a heated quarrel over status during a mission with Ino’s son, he ended up causing the much older teenager to fall into a coma that lasted a month. When Ino’s son awoke, he had suffered irreparable brain damage. She had never felt worse when Shisuke treated the subject with a deadly indifference.

Since then, the village with Kakashi as Hokage has taken great lengths to protect and hone the boy towards a good path, rather than the path Itachi pushed him to with the Uchiha’s curse. Shisuke expressed little remorse after his transplant and Sakura suspects he was not forthcoming with everything that happened when his uncle kidnapped him.

It was odd, though. It seemed that when Shisuke somehow absorbed memories of the massacre through Itachi’s eye, Sasuke and Shisuke had grown much closer. They didn’t often talk as Sakura thought a father and son should, but she would find them sitting silently on the roof top overlooking the much-too-large Uchiha compound.

Shikamaru stood in the field, observing the opponents for a moment. Shisuke was one he had to keep an eye on.

“You may begin.” Shikamaru announced, voice as bored as ever. He looked up to see Sasuke watching him intently, and of course, his fiancé Temari waving frantically from her seat behind the happy couple. He grinned a little bit and returned his vision to the two genin.

Konohamaru immediately created several shadow clones and took a good distance from Shisuke. Shisuke stood in place, dark hair covering his facial features and hiding hid expression from the audience. What they didn’t see was a smile that cause Konohamaru to waver as a shadow clone shaped the rough, newly learned Rasgengan in his palm.

Sakura watched at the edge of the seat as the two fought. The match was almost called when Shisuke was plastered on the ground, a failed Chidori having blasted him back. However, when he stood, and activated Tsukuyomi, almost entirely out of anger, the match ended quickly. Shisuke overpowered Konohamaru, but thankfully displayed a great amount of mercy in defeating him. He simply used his Sharingan to actively distort Konohamaru’s perceptions, rather than to trap him in genjutsu.

Sakura stood up cheering as her son’s name was loudly announced as winner, and she saw Sasuke
smile proudly from the corner of her eye, though he did not say anything. Shisuke looked up to the stands, and though he was just barely able to make out which blurs were his parents, he smiled.

***

In the delivery room, Sakura laid spread on the hospital’s sheets. They were already full of blood. Around her stood her best friends and god parents to her children, Hinata and Naruto. Ino stood at her feet, medical mask covering up most of her face as she instructed the nurses around her. Ino hadn’t originally been trained to deliver babies, but after she had helped Sakura with Shisuke when they were nowhere near a hospital, Sakura decided she wanted her best friend to deliver all of her children. The blonde had been honored and excited.

For the first time in years, Sakura saw Sasuke’s face turn from his normal aloofness to a living picture of concern and fright. He gripped tightly onto her hand and looked at her so intensely, as though he were scared it would be the last time he saw her face.

“Just one more push, Sakura-chan!” Ino urged. Sakura was sweating and shaking and in so much pain she was beginning to numb. Sasuke’s clear show of emotions had startled her from her objective. She braced herself and began to push. “Nurse, please prepare for wound care immediately—she’s bleeding too much—we have no time to lose!”

“Sakura,” Sasuke breathed, stomach in knots from the look of pain that tainted her beautiful features.

“Stay strong, Sakura-chan.” Naruto whispered, gripping onto his own wife’s hand for some sort of support. He felt faint.

“Nurse—begin healing now!” Ino yelled, pale in the face. For whatever reason, and despite a 17 hour labor, there was an unusual amount of birthing complications.

Sakura began to see spots of white, and then all black as her head fell back against the pillow, she could hear Sasuke screaming her name, trying to grasp her hand and pull her back from the void of slumber she was drifting into.

When Sakura awoke, there was a sleeping infant in her arms, held in place by her husband. She groaned in pain but smiled down at her baby, a blush rising to her cheeks. “Ah… he’s already got quite a bit of hair.” She giggled lightly, alarming Sasuke of her awakening. He quickly kissed her head.

“You had us all worried, Sakura.” Sasuke confessed and held her close.

"Hey... Sasuke... How about Oachi? It sounds like... such a nice name..." She managed, drifting in and out of consciousness.

***

Sakura woke slowly to the noise of a baby crying.

“Sakura, dear.” Sasuke muttered tiredly. “It’s your turn. I’ve done it three nights in a row now.”

“Let Kimi get it.”

“Love… Kimira is too young to take care of the baby.”

“Let Shisuke get it.”
“Shisuke is away on a mission, dear.”

“Let Hakkun get it.”

Sasuke chuckled lightly before pulling the covers from Sakura. “Hakkun’s paws are too big to pick up the baby gently.”

Sakura groaned and rolled out of bed. She pulled on Sasuke’s shirt and padded through the house.

“Mommy! The baby is crying!” A small girl ran up to her.

“Yes, I know. Go back to sleep, Kimi, I’ll take care of it.”

“Yes mommy.” Kimi hummed and hugged her leg. Sakura bent over and kissed her forehead.

“Goodnight, honey.”

“Goodnight, mommy.”

Sakura continued through the Uchiha family home and opened the door to the nursery. The crying stopped. Sakura narrowed her eyes, attempting to see in the dark. The baby laid silent in its crib. Sakura chuckled a little at the tired infant’s sudden quiet and approached the crib. She leaned over and kissed the baby’s head before standing up straight with a look of confusion. She wiped her lips as they were wet. She looked down at her hand and audibly gasped.

“Sasuke!!” She screamed at the top of her lungs. “Sasuke, come quick!!” She cried, looking down at the silenced infant. She tried a healing justu, checked the pulse, and repeated this four or five times. Tears streamed down her eyes. “Sasuke!!” She screamed again when he didn’t come. “Please!”

Nobody still came, so she picked up the infant and held him against her breast lovingly, whispering affirmations of care and love to him, but still nobody came and the baby did not respond. She wept and knelt on the floor, holding her child close. Her ears rang with grief and her blood coursed through her rapidly. She stood up and walked to the bedroom. Her chest was soaked in her son’s blood.

“Sasuke… Oachi is—“ Silence fell once more as she took a few quick breaths before screaming and running over to her bloodied husband. She gently set down Oachi and tried to bring back Sasuke from his state of permanent slumber. She held Oachi once more and sobbed helplessly. Panic over took her and she ran to Kimi’s room, not able to find her at all. She ran through the compound of the Uchiha family home before she stood before a man she hoped to never see.

“You’ve done well, Sakura, beginning to return the clan to its former glory. An Anbu captain as a son, a talented young genin at the age of 8, and a baby that accidentally activated Sharingan while still nursing…” Itachi began. “Unfortunately, that is why I had to exterminate them. Sasuke failed me, you see… I will have to use Kimira, this time.” He said and pulled the young girl by her night shirt from behind him. He held her in place as he removed a kunai from his sleeve and pointed it at Sakura.

“It’s a shame, Sakura. That you had to do all of this.”

Sakura froze before falling to her knees. She still held Oachi to her chest. She hung her head and winced as she felt the kunai enter her chest, piercing both her and her infant. She fell to her side, holding Oachi close.

“Kimi…” She managed, looking to her daughter. “Kimi, mommy and daddy love you. Never forget
that—“

Itachi shoved the girl forward and the girl came to her mother in a flash, holding onto her and crying.

“Don’t hold hatred in your heart.” Sakura whispered, then held her finger up to her head, gently poking the weeping girl, the same way Tsunade would. “Go to Kakashi-san… move on from this.” She managed, telling her desperately not to seek vengeance. “Go to your Uncle Naruto… be safe, my little rose.” Sakura could feel her lungs filling with blood. She gave her a tiny push. “Go, Kimi. Mommy loves you.”

Kimi ran from both Sakura and Itachi, screaming for help. She ran from the compound and would no doubt try to get medical help and ninja to fight off Itachi. Sakura took a deep breath, though it pained her. Itachi had left. She rolled onto her back, still hugging her child close.

She kept her eyes open. She would not die with her eyes closed. She wanted her last sight to be of her husband’s or children’s’ faces, but the stars and full moon would have to do. She held her hand up to them, as if charting their location in her head. She wanted to hold Kimira and Shisuke again. They would be deeply affected by this and the thought hurt her heart.

“Sasuke…” She whispered towards the sky. She coughed as she began drowning in her own blood. It trickled down from the corners of her lips and she trembled shamelessly. Tears continued to flow down her face and with what little strength she had left, rolled onto her side, cradling her baby and slowly she felt a pleasant but horrifying numbness. The call of the unknown lied before her and she could do nothing but plummet into that great green lake.

Chapter End Notes

Woo! Haha, this chapter was supposed to be MUCH longer, but it didn't have good flow that way, so I split it.
Lost Letters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dear Sakura,

So, I hear that you're missing. It's hard to imagine you got kidnapped, but you would never defect from duty, right? There's a rumor saying that you went crazy and left. There's a lot of rumors lately about you... it makes me sad. Naruto is supposed to come back to the village any day now, because we're at risk of an enemy attack. It's been confirmed that Orochimaru is behind the attack. I don't guess you knew?

Come back,

Ino.

Dear Sakura,

Kakashi's hounds, Akamaru, nobody can find you. I'm really worried now. Stay healthy.

Please come home,

Ino.

Dear Sakura,

I thought it was pretty sad, when I saw Ino-san writing you letters and sending them off into the river outside the village. Thought I'd give it a try. I really miss you, Sakura-chan. I wish I knew what happened. I wish I were there for you, to protect you. Kakashi-san misses you too, I can tell. He hasn't reacted this since... well, it was just a little before my time, but he had a teammate he lost in a horrific way. He was in love with her and when she passed, he buried himself in despair, like he is now. Please come home soon. Ostaka is healing! I think. Tsunade says he has Tozlu, but I have faith that wherever you are, you're coming up with a cure.

Much Hope,

Ostu Kuren

Dear Sakura,

This is pointless, isn't it? Writing letters like this. I wanted to ask your blessing. See, Ino's parents fell ill and passed due to weak constitutions. Many of the villagers have passed. It's not traditional, and of course you won't be able to reply, because I'm going to put this letter in a bottle and send it into the river, but... I wanted to ask your blessing as I ask Ino to marry me. I have as well fallen ill. We don't have much longer, but I plan to make every moment of the rest of Ino's life as lively and happy as possible.

If for no other reason, come back for her,

Neji Hyuga

Dear Sakura,
I thought it was a sick joke when Temari told me you had disappeared. Her village had been attacked by Orochimaru. Gaara is missing, on the run from the Akatsuki. Kankuro was severely injured then not seen again. She's coughing. There's so much blood and sand when she coughs. Come heal her.

Sincerely,

Shikamaru Nara

Dear Sakura,

You're my prized pupil. I know that wherever you are, you're safe. I know it. I've sent scouts after you. We know who took you. Sasori of the Red Sand. I'm not sure what he wants with you, but I know that the Akatsuki and us as well have something to gain at seeing this cured, so I can only hope it's to find a cure. Be safe. Be wise. We will be waiting with open arms when you return. You will return. You have to.

Your Teacher,

Tsunade

Letter after letter floated down the river in little glass bottles, all eventually gathering in a bunch against the side of the same rock as it caught them in passing. They piled up quickly, one after the other, day after day. There were twenty seven total, most from Ino.

Chapter End Notes

What?! This isn't a filler chapter--no.
Healing

Sakura woke up in a cold sweat and flailed her limbs against the rope that restrained them. She was hyperventilating and trembling. Tears immediately fell from her eyes. She had everything and he ripped it from her. The haunting image of Sasuke’s mutilated corpse hung just behind her eyelids, and the weight of the illusioned infant clung to her chest still.

“By thankful… I was told not to harm you.” Itachi said evenly after spotting her awakening. He was going to simply physically torture her through Sharingan, but he could tell she had too strong of a will to be brought into submission by that. He needed to take what she loved and turn it foul. If he was honest with himself, he was curiously fascinated by this girl’s infatuation with his little brother. He had seen the fantasies of a domestic life with the younger Uchiha, and utilized those against her, tainting them. Still, he longed to know how someone could want Sasuke, after how much Itachi had broken him. “I can do much worse than that, Sakura. Will you comply, now?”

“Y-Yes.” She managed, heart pounding so loudly she could hear it. Itachi nodded and Kisame set her down on her legs, though one failed her from the untended wound. She kept herself standing and followed as they beckoned her. It was dark. Some early morning hour, she had to guess.

She limped just behind the two members, trembling wholly. How could he be that cruel? How had he known to use her dreams against her like that? She swallowed back an oncoming sob. Kisame occasionally glanced at her, so she kept her gaze on the ground.

Strangely, Kisame didn’t feel any joy in seeing her suffering as he normally would with their victims. Maybe it was because he knew there was nothing more he could do to her, but a very small part of him pitied her. Sasori would destroy her. He could already see the beginnings of it. The psychosis that she had entered at the tavern was entertaining, but Sasori would make it no doubt almost painful to watch. Kisame preferred to physically harm his victims. Seeing the psychological warfare between some members of the Akatsuki and their targets was often disturbing to some degree.

Sakura flinched when Kisame turned around and walked purposely towards her. Her hands flew in front of her face and she braced herself for some sort of pain. Instead, he bent down a bit and scooped her up, holding her like one would a child.

“You’re annoyingly slow.” He growled to cover the temporary lapse in cruelty. He’d have to do something violent to the girl later to show he wasn’t getting soft, but it seemed pointless. Itachi was too wise to his ways. He had already seen Kisame’s soft side.

Sakura didn’t apologize. She bit back a hurtful comment and hung her head a bit. The sunlight was warm on her skin and eventually she reached out to heal her thigh. It stung badly, and the pain was a deep one, rooted in her spine it felt like. She could tell there was no poison, but it had hurt tremendously nonetheless. Luck was on her side, however. Since it hadn’t hit anything, including completely missing the main artery and the femur, it healed relatively quickly.

Kisame watched her as he walked, slightly fascinated by her healing. He watched as she cut away at the pants so she could open them up to see the wound. The sinew and muscles reached out and mended themselves together, skin slowly emerging from the dark red hue and building itself up until all five layers were present.
“That’s an impressive skill. No wonder Sasori wants you.” Kisame remarked, causing Sakura to look up at him with terrified eyes before slowly trying to put up a façade of bravery, or at least tried to. He could still see her bottom lip quivering both in pain and confusion, and likely whatever mental hell Itachi put her through.

“What does he want with me?” Sakura asked.

“Well, I’m assuming he’ll use you to help find a cure, then kill you.” Kisame said bluntly, causing Sakura to recoil a bit, though she had nowhere to go. “Deidara is sick.”

“Ah… Tozlu?” Sakura feigned innocence on the matter. She knew very well Deidara was probably in a very bad state by now, from where Kakashi had poisoned him. Kisame only nodded in response.

“Set her down. We’re entering an inn.” Itachi commanded and signed. A cloud of smoke overtook him and when it cleared, he looked very similar to himself, but he was a bit shorter, with shorter hair and the face of a stranger.

Kisame gently set her down and did the same, resigning his shark-like appearance for something less recognizable and intimidating.

“Sakura… pull up your hood. Your hair is too characteristic of your family.” Itachi told her and she did such. She moped a bit, still limping as she hadn’t gotten the chance to completely heal her wound due to her lack of chakra. Kisame gave her a small push forward.

She saw the inn as they continued. Like the tavern, it was on the side of the road, fairly underwhelming and a bit shabby. The man at the desk was unimpressed with the trio and only pointed to a sign giving the prices.

“One room.” Itachi said and handed him the money.

The man quirked a brow and hid a smirk, clearly getting the very wrong idea about Sakura and the two men standing on either side of her. Kisame held tightly onto her wrist to discourage any attempt to flee. The man handed Itachi a key and instructed them to go up the stairs and follow the hallway to the tenth door on the left.

A strong hand guided her as they moved but she simply kept her head down and followed rather than fought like they thought she would. She was much weaker than the two of them, especially combined. She needed to carefully plan her attack, and only use her strength at a moment where escape was a guarantee. Then she would flee to the Leaf village and abandon her mission to find Sasori.

Kisame pushed her into the room. “You need to heal that wound, girl.” He gruffed, guiding her by the shoulders to sit in a chair in the corner. Both of the men let their summoned disguises rest.

“I can’t, I’m out of chakra.” She lied. She had about a third left, but she was saving it in case she needed to defend herself from them.

Kisame narrowed his eyes at her and knelt down in front of her, grabbing the waistline of her pants. She jolted and grabbed his hands.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” She bit out, then drew her fist back and struck him in the head. It was clear he didn’t expect it, but he stayed in place and looked up at her again. “I can’t see the wound.” He growled and yanked at her pants. “I knew you were too stubborn to comply, so this is happening.” He grabbed her throat with one hand, causing her to panic and scratch at his wrist. He
tugged down her slacks and lessened his hold, but kept her in place.

Itachi eyed the pair for a moment before letting his robe slip from his shoulders. He folded it almost too neatly and placed it on the table.

“Kisame.” He said. “She was frightened you were trying to rape her.”

“Rape her?” Kisame almost laughed, then looked up at Sakura mirthfully. “What would I gain from that?”

Sakura’s cheeks tinged red and she looked at Kisame pointedly.

“I wouldn’t.” Kisame rose a brow and grimaced. “So stop panicking.”

“Easier said than done, fish man.” She hissed, bitterly scorned somehow by his insensitivity.

Kisame snorted in amusement but gave her a warning squeeze. “If it weren’t for Sasori’s orders I would’ve painted the tree line with you, girl. All of you Leaf Ninja are so odd.” He said and glanced at Itachi, who only returned him with a neutral look as he sat down to polish his weapons. “But we can’t turn you over to him like this.” He said, and jabbed the ‘healed over’ wound. Sakura flinched and let out a yelp.

“Kisame, keep her quiet.” Itachi warned.

“I knew it wasn’t healed at its core. Who did you think you were fooling?” Kisame asked, continuing to dig his thumb against the hollow skin until it was rending. Sakura kept her mouth shut, not wanting to know what would happen if she screamed.

“Kisame,” Itachi said more firmly, this time looking over at him. Kisame couldn’t help but flinch, but he showed no shame of it towards Sakura.

“Right.” Kisame said and pulled out a kunai. “Sakura, stay silent. I need to cut away the new flesh to get to what’s underneath if I can heal it. I’m not as skilled as you, medical nin.”

“W-Wait, I’ll heal it!” Sakura managed, then took a deep gasp of air as Kisame let go.

“That’s what I thought.” He laughed. “I can’t really heal. I don’t know a single justu for healing.”

“You’re sadistic!” Sakura hissed.

“Yes, I know.” Kisame hummed then stood up, leaving her in the chair.

Sakura glared at him for a moment before pulling her pants back up and tearing the hole in them a bit larger to gain more access to the wound. She would save her bit of dignity if it killed her. She bit back a whimper of pain and closed her eyes, visualizing the damage beneath her skin. Her hands began to glow a dark green, as opposed to the regular soft hue they did when she healed.

Itachi glanced up from his work to watch her. That, he hadn’t seen before, though if he had to guess, he surmised her compromised psyche was the reason behind her altered state of chakra flow. He could see it in her eyes, as he often saw before in Sasori’s victims. He liked to toy with his prey more than he would openly admit to his colleagues.

“Kisame. We’re out of food.” He said evenly.

“Why do I always have to get it?” He hummed in displeasure and grimaced. He waited for Itachi to answer and groaned when he didn’t. “Fine, I’ll go find something.” Kisame said, reimagining himself
to appear like any other traveler. He opened the door and left, with a final glare of warning to the pink haired girl. He chuckled when she flinched.

“Sakura,” Itachi said quietly, rearranging his weapons in his belt. It had gnawed at his mind since he saw it. “Why do you pursue my brother? He has abandoned you, nearly killed your friends, and committed more atrocious crimes than he is now known for.”

Sakura was shocked by the question. Why would he care? Itachi didn’t strike her as the type to worry about what little girls from the Leaf village thought about his family. She pressed her lips together in a thin line, trying to think of how to word it.

“I don’t think you would understand it, clan killer.” She said before quickly covering her mouth. She wasn’t sure how that slipped out without her permission. He eyed her for a moment before walking over to her. Her healing faltered and flickered off as she braced herself. This time she avoided his eyes. He sat on the end of the bed, nearly an arm’s length away from her. She was surprised how the proximity terrified her. “He… he’s only confused. This isn’t him.”

“This is who he is.” Itachi examined her features, curiously. He was almost amused by her avoidance of his eyes. “I won’t put you under the Sharingan’s influence again, so look at me.”

Seeing no other choice, her eyes drifted to his, and she was relieved to see that signature Uchiha black. He looked so much like Sasuke, it made her heart pick up in beat. Other than the stress lines so engrained in his portrait, he looked so youthful. “You didn’t break him completely… he’s still in there. I saw it.”

“Regardless, why would you pursue such a domesticated setting with him?” Itachi leaned in. Nobody envisioned a future like that with an Uchiha. This girl was either devoted or mental. “Even in your fantasy he was cold and distant.”

“You—“ Sakura bristled. “My thoughts are none of your business. Don’t think you have the right to play the ‘protective older brother’ role, now! If you cared about him, you wouldn’t have let him fall into Orochimaru’s hands!! What if he lets that creep have his body?!”

Itachi’s eyes widened only the smallest amount, but Sakura didn’t miss it, and she wished in that moment she could rescind her statement.

“The Akatsuki’s secondary priority is to kill Orochimaru, he is a traitor to the—“ Itachi’s words were cut off by a harsh, painful cough. As he covered his mouth to cough, his hand became coated in a sandy blood. Sakura sat back in shock.

“Itachi-san…” She whispered. His eyes cut up at hers, full of hatred. “Do you…”

“Yes,” He said evenly, wiping the blood from his mouth. “If you tell anybody besides Sasori, I will make your death slow, and painful.” He warned. She believed him fully. His face contorted in pain as he coughed again, now not restraining himself like he had around Kisame. He doubled over and paid no mind when Sakura stood. Even in his vulnerable positioning, he could kill her should she try anything. A weight pressed into the bed next to him, and she pulled his hair out of the way, gently rubbing his back. “Why are you touching me?” He said harshly. “You have no right.”

Sakura didn’t rise to the bait. Instead, she felt around his back until she located where his lungs should be. She sent a calming wave of chakra through him, causing him to relax a bit.

“You can’t die of Tozlu.” She said simply. “Sasuke won’t come home to me until he’s killed you.”

Itachi examined her face jadedly and grabbed a folded towel from the foot of the bed to wipe his
“Sasori doesn’t have this to give you.” Sakura said and fished around in her pocket. There was a packet of pills. “He had the prototype, but this was made with the Kazekage’s chakra instead of mine. It’s much more effective, as it utilizes the sand’s spirit’s own supply of chakra.”

Itachi took it from her outstretched palm and looked over it, suspiciously. “You think ill of me enough to believe I would trust this?”

“You have less than a few days, Itachi.” Sakura said sternly. “Even if it was poison, it would be merciful, because the death that awaits you is ten times more painful than anything you can imagine.”

“You have no way of knowing that.” He tried.

“Remove your shirt, and I’ll prove it.” Sakura said. She had a certain tone she used with especially stubborn patients and she was using it now. Itachi eyed her before deciding to believe her words. He tugged his shirt off, to reveal his pale torso. It was lean and tone in the way only a warrior’s could be. There were lesions all over his upper chest and immense bruising. Her fingers splayed over a particularly colorful spot where his lungs were leaking the infected fluid. She pressed which caused him to go rigid with pain he wouldn’t otherwise voice. “This contaminated blood is flowing through your body at an accelerated rate, thanks to your chakra. Take the pill. It’ll slow you down, but save you until Sasori and I find a cure.”

“So you’re resigned to your fate.” Itachi said, changing the subject. He looked down at a couple of spots where his skin had opened. The sight reminded him vaguely of leprosy.

“I have my own reasons for needing to cure Tozlu.” Sakura said sadly.

“Yes, Ino Yamanaka.” Itachi told her. She almost gasped and looked at him with an expression of surprise. “I know a lot about you, Sakura.”

“Yes, it’s creepy.” She rebuffed and handed him a salve. “This will draw out the pus and contaminated blood, through those wounds. It’ll hurt but that too will slow your death.”

“Why are you doing this, Sakura?” Itachi insisted. “Are you that broken?”

“Perhaps I am.” She muttered. “I’m doing this as a probably futile effort to gain your favor.” Sakura paused and now urged him to return his shirt to his body, as though she wouldn’t admit it, the grotesque sight on him was distracting. He reminded her far too much of Sasuke. “I want you to smuggle the cure to Tsunade. Ino-chan needs to live…” She said sadly. “She needs to live no matter what. Even if I die, or never get to see her again, I just want her to survive.” Tears came to her eyes. Tears she had previously repressed. With her damaged willpower they overcame her barriers.

Itachi watched the tears drip down her face, almost sympathetically.

“I will place a sample of the cure on her desk at the village, and nothing else.” He said steadily and pulled his shirt over his head. He watched her again. No wonder Sasori wanted her. She was intelligent. Or, she would’ve been had her mind not been so badly fractured by his indirect torture. Not only that, but she held a very peculiar type of beauty. While he wasn’t necessarily attracted to her like he was some women, he saw what Sasori wanted from her. He had no doubt she would be a beautiful puppet. Her chakra control was unparalleled and rumored to surpass Tsunade’s. She would be a powerful weapon, as she complemented his other long-range puppets.

“Thank you, Itachi-san.” She forced a smile and handed him the pouch of treatment pills. “These will serve you well. One a day should do it.”
He felt the effects immediately, but was loathe to show it. Sakura stood up, craving distance from the intensely quiet man. She wandered to the window and opened it, looking over her shoulder to see if Itachi would stop her. She watched the tops of trees rustle gently against the wind and shivered with cold.

“Sleep, Sakura. You need to sleep.” He told her.

“I just spent who knows how long asleep under your Tsukuyomi.”

“Two days,” Itachi corrected, causing her eyes to go wide. No wonder she was so hungry and thirsty. Still, she asked for nothing. She returned her gaze to the trees and caught sight of the first stars of the night piercing through the lavender and orange painted sky, cobbled with darkening clouds. “Sasuke will never love you like that.”

“I know,” She said, too quickly. “But… dreaming like that…” She began, not sure where to go with it. “I’m going crazy. I have to hold onto something.” She said, wiping tears away from her eyes. “If I die, I want to be sane. I want to think of my friends in my last moments, and I want to believe Sasuke’s safe.”

Itachi didn’t voice it, but he wanted the same. Despite popular opinion, he loved his brother greatly, and feared for his future every second that he spent with Orochimaru.

“Orochimaru won’t take his body.” Itachi said, though he wished he hadn’t. He didn’t want to reveal too much.

“Part of me knows.” Sakura said quietly. It felt odd holding a conversation with Itachi like this. She wondered if he talked like this to his colleagues.

Itachi didn’t say anything in return. Instead, he dug around in his bag and pulled out a photograph he had hidden. “Sakura.” He spoke up, and beckoned her over when she looked. She narrowed her eyes and approached him suspiciously. He pressed the folded photograph of her team into her hand.

She didn’t look at first, observing the pain she saw in his eyes. Why was he showing so much emotion to her?

Sakura looked down, turning pale when she saw the copy of the picture she held so close to her heart.

“I can see the happiness he is reluctant to show. He gets that from me.”

“He gets a lot of his problems from you.” She said pointedly.

“I am aware. You’d be foolish to believe I have remorse over it.” He pushed her hand back towards her when she tried to return it. “Sasori is going to hurt you. You will go insane if you don’t hold onto something. Hold onto that.” He suggested.

“Why are you helping me?” Sakura asked bluntly.

“I’m interested to see what happens when his new project doesn’t break.” Itachi answered honestly.

It was Sakura’s turn to be silent. She sat on the second bed and crawled under the sheets, favoring what Itachi had told her about needing to sleep. At least if she was asleep, she could pretend she was anywhere else.

“Goodnight, Itachi-san.” She said in parody of what she would tell Kakashi if were there. She
frowned deeply and got no response as she expected. She wondered if Kakashi was worried about her, and if he were searching for her. Now she was certain she hoped Pakkun could pick up on her scent. Though, she didn’t want him to find her for his own safety.

She was woken by a large, heavy body settling next to her and then large hands pushing her onto a further side of the bed. When her body was rolled away her eyes shot open and stared at the wall as someone laid down next to her. Disoriented by a hyper realistic dream she was having about her former teacher and the Anbu siblings, she blinked a couple of times.

“Kakashi-sensei?” She whispered before hearing a deep laugh, most definitely not coming from Kakashi. She turned her head and flinched, seeing Kisame.

“You’ve slept with your sensei?” He laughed quietly, not trying to wake Itachi. She hadn’t expected either of them to lie down to rest. Most certainly not both. Though, she supposed they had to sleep as well, even if… well, were they still even human?

“N-No!! It’s not like that!” She hissed under her breath. “I forgot where I was. I forgot you brutes kidnapped me.”

“How do you forget something like that? Idiot girl.” Kisame grunted and laid on his back, taking up most of the bed and not allowing her nearly enough space to comfortably put between them. She could feel the heat radiating off of his chest and she belatedly noticed he wasn’t wearing any sort of shirt. Her cheeks instinctively grew red and she returned to facing the wall praying that he was wearing some sort of pants.

Her fears were realized later that night as she laid awake with an awkward sense of terror, that she realized she felt bare skin against her foot when he shifted—which had to be his calf or shin or something as he stretched out in his sleep, effectively closing the gap between him. Sakura shut her eyes tightly and dared not to move—especially when she felt her pull her closer, no doubt mistaking her for a pillow in his sleepy state. He laid his head on her side, disregarding his pillow’s attempt to free herself. She felt disgusted in a way, at the proximity. This was entirely improper.

Morning crept slowly, so dreadfully slowly closer. She was greatly relieved at the sound of the birds chirping and the sound of shifting.

“Kisame,” She heard Itachi’s voice say. “You’re going to crush the girl.”

“What?” Kisame muttered groggily and pushed himself up onto his elbows having not realized Sakura was beside him at all. The great log of a sleeper blinked awake and looked down at the coiled up Sakura. “Oh.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes at the wall and glowered. He patted her shoulder.

“Wake up and get ready, we’re leaving after breakfast.” He said and stood up, pulling pants on over his boxers. She was relieved he had at least been wearing that, but did he have any sense of shame or dignity or at least self-preservation? She pulled the sheets and stretched lightly.

“How do I know you didn’t poison my food?” She asked, almost entirely as a conversation starter.

“Kid…” Kisame started, face blank. “You’re sitting in a small room with two of the most wanted nins of all time. And you think we would poison your food? I’d much rather tear you apart. Itachi would likely stab you.”

“I have…” Sakura managed. “No response.” She decided, becoming a bit friendly with the two. They hadn’t killed her, and barely hurt her. It was evident they weren’t lying when they told her they
were simply escorts.

“Mm.” Kisame acknowledged and fished through the bag of groceries. It was mostly packaged soldier pills, fruits and jerky, but Sakura couldn’t help but give a goofy grin when Kisame handed Itachi a popular brand of candy bar. So the great and evil Itachi Uchiha has a sweet tooth? Kisame handed her the rations she was meant to eat and picked out his own, as a much greater amount.

With the chair occupied, Sakura hopped up on the table, knowing that if she sat back on the bed she would immediately lay back and fall asleep. She munched on the apple and took bites out of the jerky, saving the food pills for later. She watched the two of them eat and hold their conversation that they kept pointedly low. Perhaps it was about her. Or her village. She frowned a bit and stared out the window, wondering how Ino was feeling. She couldn’t receive letters anymore. Maybe she’d be able to send them once she got to wherever Sasori would have her. Maybe he would be that kind.

Her mind drifted to Ino again. She wondered how her and Neji’s date went, how Neji was handling the situation…

“Let’s go.” Itachi commanded, already dressed and heading out the door. He was standing noticeably taller, probably in result of the treatment. Sakura followed behind the two, not caring to be picked up again. They treaded quietly through the hall and she watched them disguise themselves. She pulled her hood up and sighed. She hoped it wasn’t much longer, or adversely, that at some point they would stop paying attention, or run into trouble, so that she could escape. Itachi handed her bag to her.

“Wait… when did you pick this up?” Sakura asked, brow knitting in confusion. “And where were you hiding it?” He didn’t respond, but she rifled through it to make sure her notes were still there. As they left the hotel far behind, she removed her hood. As the day grew warmer, her hair became a heavy burden on the back of her neck. To alleviate it, she pulled her hair back in the red and black ribbon with the bell. Kisame gave her a look as she did so.

“That’s Sasori’s way of marking you, Sakura.” Kisame mentioned, gesturing at the bell.

“He’s already branded me.” Sakura whined. “The ribbon is pretty. Besides, I’m going to die soon, so what does it matter.” Sakura felt the fabric of her headband. “He can brand me as much as he wants, it doesn’t make me his.”

“You say that now, but he’s a master at all sorts of fucked up ninjustu.” Kisame warned. “What do you mean, already branded?”

“My wrists.” She held one out for him to see and tugged her glove up to her palm. “He’s put his signature there.”

“That’s… new.” Kisame picked his words carefully. “He normally doesn’t sign his art until he’s finished it.”

“What do you mean ‘art’?” Sakura asked, grabbing his sleeve when he wouldn’t answer.

“Sasori’s most powerful weapons are his human puppets.” Kisame began. “He’s unmatchable in puppetry, because of his craftsmanship.” His words were hesitant and careful. “He makes his puppets out of talented ninja he deems worthy.”

Sakura’s throat became suddenly dry. Kisame turned to see her face, but made no reaction other than drinking in her horror. “D-Does… does it hurt?”
“It could. He usually kills them before he starts the process though, so maybe not?” Kisame shrugged.

“I hope I’m not used against my friends.” She said idly. Kisame observed her with a snort.

“You’re broken already? How disappointing. I was hoping for a bit of a show.” He confessed. Sakura scoffed openly.

“I’m not here for your entertainment.” Sakura said matter of factly.

“Right, you’ll be for Sasori’s ‘entertainment’.” Kisame laughed causing Sakura to glare up at him, eyes brimming with disdain. Itachi glanced at the pair curiously. It seemed Sakura was recovering from her psychotic break and paranoia. Who knew it would only take two dangerous criminals kidnapping her?

“Your innuendo disgusts me.” Sakura huffed.

“Your giving up so quickly disgusts me.” Kisame returned, smirking at their little charade. She rolled her eyes. How quickly the killer and the medical nin had become friends, as far as friends could go for Kisame.

“Kisame, the seal.” Itachi interrupted their banter. Kisame stammered before realized what Itachi was saying and went ahead of them, signing some sort of release and walking forward. Sakura watched in awe as the forest before them dissolved into a rather gloomy looking sight.

“Quickly now, before the gate closes.” Kisame prompted. Sakura picked up her steps and followed behind the Akatsuki members. She fell in step with Kisame, favoring to be close to him, rather than the unknown. She didn’t feel fear, as much as she felt an inkling of discomfort and awkwardness.

As they stepped through the gate, the sky darkened, and it was likely the early hours of the morning, if she had to judge. Itachi opened one of the large, foreboding steel doors. Sakura looked around. The halls were barren.

“Ugh… for artists, Sasori and Deidara pick the blandest places to stay.” Kisame noted.

“You’ll get used to it. We’re staying here, as well as Kakuzu.” Itachi said, shutting the doors.

Kisame eyed him oddly.

“You’re sick, Itachi.”

Itachi narrowed his eyes.

“I noticed. Your fingernails were brown when you changed your coat.” He pointed to Itachi’s hand. “You’re sick with something.”

Itachi’s silence confirmed it.

“Sakura… will you give me an examination as well? I don’t want to catch whatever Itachi has.” Kisame chortled. "It's two years ago all over again."

“I can’t believe… Sasori didn’t protect you? He gave me these gloves to make sure I didn’t catch it.” Sakura commented, opening her palm to show the sigil embroidered on the fabric.

“What an asshole.” Kisame murmured. “Typical Sasori. He probably wanted us to get sick so he could run tests. He takes these pissing contests with Orochimaru way too far.”
Itachi seethed a bit. “He had preventative measures?”

“Yes… it wasn’t long when we were communicating that he gave me these gloves.” Sakura grimaced. She would’ve thought that his colleagues would be the first people he would protect. “They’re chakra suppressants. You caught the disease through contamination via your chakra flow. While it is more likely to happen in battle, and healing, it can even happen in simple proximity.”

“Which explains why we had so much trouble finding you.” Kisame laughed and patted Sakura gently on the head. “Make me something like that, won’t you?”

“Maybe.” Sakura said carefully. “We’ll see if there’s a deal we can make.” She grinned at the shark-like man toothily.

“Oh? Ha!!” Kisame snorted and guffawed. “Kakuzu is going to like you!”

“Kisame, why do you assume such things?” A voice cracked from the further end of the hallway as they approached a figure in similar dressings to Kisame and Itachi, though this man covered his face like Kakashi. She didn’t make eye contact. “Like her?” Kakuzu drawled. “What? Is she worth a lot of money? Heiress? In the Bingo Book?”

“No, she’s just scheming, like you.” Kisame smirked and patted her head, rustling the pink hair, a bit amicably but not without condescension. Sakura huffed in dismay. “So, you’re staying here while Sasori works, huh? Means you’re sick too?”

“Yeah, the idiot’s fucking sick.” Another voice came. “Got me fuckin’ sick, gonna infect the whole fuckin’ lot of us.” It growled, walking towards the others. “Itachi, did you get it for me?”

“Here,” Itachi said, offering in his hand a silver pendant with a triangle encircled there. The man emerged and snatched it from him eagerly before glaring at him in contempt. Sakura observed the man as he looked between Itachi and the pendant. He had an odd shade of eye color, and he was pale as though he had been living under ground for more than a lifetime. The most poignant thing of his appearance, however, was the glint in his eyes. This man was so far from sanity, that he easily disguised himself. He wore a convincing skin. Though he looked human, she could tell he was far from it.

“Who’s this? Why did you bring some girl here?” He said in annoyance. “And why is there a damn scratch on it?”

“Hidan, you left it in that brothel with all those corpses, and couldn’t even go back to get it yourself.” Itachi hummed, giving a small cough. Sakura eyed him in worry and handed Itachi a handkerchief, earning her a suspicious glance from the madman that caused her to recoil a bit and back into Kisame.

Hidan snorted in amusement and stepped forward. Kisame set a hand on Sakura’s shoulder, though it felt like he was holding Sakura out in danger, he was more signaling that Hidan didn’t have permission to harm her.

“What’s a thing like this doing in here, huh?” He grinned. His teeth were a slight off white, as if he had just had blood in them. He leaned in, far too close to her face for her comfort.

Sakura stopped her trembling with sheer willpower and narrowed her eyes, appearing to not be frightened by his assertion of dominance at all. She looked down at him with her held tilted back.

“I’m here for Sasori.” She said sternly, making it sound more like she came to him, rather than she was taken into ‘custody’ by two of the nation’s most wanted criminals.
“Sasori, huh?” Hidan frowned suddenly, sneering at her lack of either fear or submission. Then he laughed. “Maybe I’ll get to mess with you after you’ve been turned into a puppet then, assuming you’re worth anything.” Suddenly he felt a pocket of air in his lungs and he doubled over at her feet, gripping his bare chest and coughing.

“Hidan, you look pathetic.” Kakuzu chastised. “Appearing so weak in front of the enemy.”

Kisame couldn’t help but laugh, causing Hidan to yell yet more obscenities at him. Sakura flinched at the sudden outburst, stepping back again until her back was pressed into Kisame’s front. Her eyes twitched lightly in embarrassment and she righted herself.

“Come, Sakura.” Itachi ordered, somehow having slipped past her line of vision. He was walking past Kakuzu. She looked at him like he was crazier than Hidan before side stepping the yelling match between Kisame and Hidan. Her hands quaked lightly and she made eye contact with Kakuzu as she passed him. His stare was not as intense as the others’, but it clearly held no mercy or compassion. She put her head down again and shuffled quickly behind Itachi.

Chapter End Notes

3/3 for the day
“You’ll be meeting him now.” It was odd she found even a sliver of comfort in the clan killer’s presence. It might’ve been their conversation, but she noticed a glimmer of humanity in his deadpanned face and inky eyes. With each step she eventually noticed her heart rate increased. They neared an underwhelming door and Itachi opened the door, standing to the side.

She thanked him under her breath and stepped through, fully trembling now. She observed the room from left to right. There was all the medical equipment she had in the research lab at home, even positioned and set up the same way she had her own set up. To her discomfort, she found the painting of the Cliffside of Hokages hung on the farthest wall, just the way Tsunade preferred it. She swallowed thickly and looked to the corner where a hunched over figure was still fidgeting with phials.

“Thank you for finding her, Itachi.” A rough voice came from the hunch. Her breath hitched. That couldn’t be Sasori, right?

The image of the slightly taller man with red hair flashed behind her eyes. She gave Itachi a look as he left and turned her vision back to Sasori. As he turned around, the first thing she noticed was that he was frighteningly ugly. His face was harsh and half of it was covered in cloth. His eyes were beady and dark.

“Sakura, bring me your newest notes.” The voice matched the face, but he seemed patient. Sakura’s hands shook as she dug through her bag, pulled out a file, then carefully approached, feet feeling faint. “Do not make me wait.”

She sped up just a hair and held out the notes. An arm, attached to his body in a seemingly wrong way reached out and grasped the file. Another moved from the cloak and he flicked through them. Sakura felt a foreign rage building in her fists, though she maintained her face of aloofness and emptiness. Sasori turned a bit and that’s when she struck.

A rage sparked in her.

Everything he had done to her—those loved ones he harmed—how he used her as a pawn in a game between him and Orochimaru. She couldn’t stop herself from attacking.

"You hurt me!" Was all she could say. The three words barely described the fragility of her mind after his attack.

Wood splintered around her fist, but she waited for the moment it turned to blood. To her surprise, it didn’t. Instead, a hand from the splintered wood shot out and grabbed her throat.

“You foolish girl.” Sasori hissed, face shrouded still, though he gripped her throat tightly. There would be bruises, should she not die. "Did you expect to assassinate me?"

“You bastard.” She returned through a strained voice. She had managed to grab her kunai and stab it into the side of his head, trying to end it quickly. The grip on her throat lightened, but Sasori grinned, further crawling out of his puppet.

“Deidara was right about you, you’re a fighter.” Sasori said evenly, drooped eyes never wavering
from hers. She looked at her hand for any sign of blood. Surely, now she was crazy. She scrambled back, falling on her rear and running into a surgical table. He was at her in a blink, but when she tried to move, she found herself bound in chakra threading. She struggled against his hold until she felt her skin tear slightly on her arms.

“Let me go!” She growled. “You hurt my friend—you stalked me—you toyed with me!” Her voice was shrill and broken.

“Of course, my little marionette.” Sasori hummed, another grin pulling at his lips, she noticed. As her eyes began to see other than red, she noticed he was the same man who visited her dreams. He looked no older than she did, which disturbed her. She had read up on Sasori and he should have been around Kakashi’s age, at thirty-five or so. Instead, he looked to be no older than 20, with a friendly, rounded face, soft amber eyes staring out from long red lashes. His skin was a perfect surface. It disturbed her, along with his term of endearment. “Now, if you’re done… it’s time to get to work. We need to find that cure, don’t we? That is why you left the village, to find me. You found me… good work, Sakura.”

“Don’t talk down to me.” She threatened, though she was in no position to. “Yes, I did come here to find a cure. I need the cure.”

“You’re not sick. Until your disappearing act, I was performing routine checkups on you. You do need to take better care of yourself. You aren’t eating like you should be.” Sasori said, gently touching her stomach. Her skin crawled in disgust and she turned her head.

Gripping her hair, he forcibly made her look him in the eye. Her hair was surprisingly soft to the touch, and was a feeling he would grow to appreciate.

“Though I never got to examine you like this.” He hummed. “Your eyes are an intense shade…”

“Let’s get to work, then.” She spat, desperate to escape his scrutiny. Sasori seemed to frown, though he still wore that mirthful expression. What she saw in his eyes frightened her. No one looked at her like that—like they were admiring art in some sort of museum with a painter’s keen eye, looking for flaws but finding none.

“I’m going to continue research, and you’re going to perform examination and treatment if necessary on Itachi, Kisame, Kakuzu, and Hidan.”

Sakura stared at him as he stood and took a calculated step back.

“Begin work immediately. You may leave this lab to fetch them, but I will know if you leave the compound.” He said, picking up some sort of metal ring and opening it with his chakra signature. He looked her in the eye before stepping towards her once more.

He had an oppressive air about him and she wouldn’t let him know how much he frightened her to her core. She stood tall and glared at him, waiting for him to say something else. His hand rose to her hair but she batted it away. The second she did, his other hand caught her wrist and he clicked the metallic ring around her neck. She noticed with a feeling of dread that it fit her perfectly, as if premeasured.

“If, you were to leave, without this…” He held up his hand, showing a small silver ring. “I will know where you go, and the punishment you receive for defying my orders will be severe. Is that understood?”

It was entirely possible he was only trying to intimidate her, but it was working. She nodded slightly
and glowered. He petted her hair, this time without Sakura stopping him. She shuddered at the
unwelcome touch.

“Go.” He ordered. “Kakuzu first. He’s the one with his face covered.”

“Fine.” She bit out, wanting to have the last word. She opened the door and stepped into the empty
hallway. She poked her head back in to ask a question but was waved away.

She groaned. This mysterious author turned out to be a huge prick. No surprise there. What was a
surprise, however, was his creepy way of regarding her. Marionette? She shuddered a bit. Sakura
wanted nothing to do with him, but he was a necessary evil. At least until she could find a cure. Then
Itachi would deliver it to the Leaf Village, and Ino would be saved. All she had to do for now was
comply.

Pressing her lips into a tight line, she began walking down the hallway, checking inside rooms. Some
were empty bedrooms, others were storage. She came upon one empty, but stocked kitchen, and a
couple of offices.

“What’s the princess doing out of her castle, huh?” She heard Hidan’s voice and turned slightly.

“I’m looking for Kakuzu.” She said flatly. She wouldn’t let him see any of her reactions. It was
obvious that was what he wanted.

“Oh? Doesn’t Sasori know he shouldn’t let a pretty thing like you wander around all helpless?” He
smirked, walking over to her and cornering her against the wall. She tried to duck to the side but he
stopped her with an arm, the other poised on his hip.

“You seem to think you’re more alluring than you actually are.” She narrowed her eyes. “Don’t stop
me from doing my job, and don’t assume I’m helpless, freak.”

“By Jashin-sama…” Hidan hummed, licking his lips eagerly. “Are you challenging me?”

“No, I’m stating the facts.” Sakura said, weighing her options. An idea struck her and she whipped
her head to the side, as if to check to see if someone was there. Effectively, the bell on her ribbon
rang, and a door opened further down the hall.

“Hidan…” Sasori’s voice was far away, but the immortal heard it.

“Lucky break, girl. Maybe next time I’ll have some fun with you before I sacrifice you.” He said and
leaned in, giving her cheek a lick. She scoffed in disgust, sleeve darting up to wipe the offending
saliva from her skin. Hidan chuckled and pushed off the wall. “I’ll see you later.”

Sakura murmured some nondescript threat of castration and continued on. Sasori watched her for
only a moment, before returning to the lab. Sakura eventually came upon an office with a small
window peering inside. She saw Kakuzu sitting at a desk, going through a large pile of papers and
scribbling things as he went. She didn’t have to knock before the door was opened and a black
tendril retreated to its owner.

The surprise of the sight showed plainly on Sakura’s face and she drew her hand up to her chest a
bit.

“What do you want? Be quick.” He said in a sigh. He didn’t seem as hostile as his counterparts, but
she kept her guard up. She couldn't trust any of these people.

“Please come with me, Kakuzu-san.” She said politely. If she was going to be around a bunch of
criminals, she wants to stay on their nice sides, with the exception of Hidan who seemed too difficult to communicate with.

“Polite.” He grunted, standing up. “I’m assuming this is worth my time. Do not disappoint me, nurse ninja.”

“Medical nin.” She said under her breath. She couldn’t have manners about all things. He seemed to be severely outdated, calling her something like that.

Kakuzu narrowed his eyes but said nothing in return as he followed her back to the lab. He watched the back of her head. Sasori had picked her out among a whole lot of possibly better qualified medical nin. There was Tsunade, but he knew the Hokage of the Leaf Village may be too much for even their combined forces. There were many medical nin in the sand, sound, mist villages as well as the many outlying towns. Why this one? Perhaps it was her other capabilities. Or her beauty. While it didn’t mean anything to him, he knew of Sasori’s fondness for art and beauty.

She opened the door for him and gestured for him to sit on a table. He stood at the end of it, arms crossed. Ignoring his streak of defiance, she gathered the necessary components. She handed him a white patient’s robe.

“Disrobe to your underthings and sit on the table, please.” She emphasized. Sasori watched through the reflection of the window. She hooked a stethoscope around her neck. Latex gloves snapped over her wrist and she pursed her lips when he did not comply. “What?”

Kakuzu didn’t answer, instead he did as he was told initially, having only waited to see what she would do. He pulled his shirt off and stepped out of his pants. Her reactions no longer interested him.

“As I thought.” Sakura hummed to herself. She examined the slight discoloration at his legs. At that, Sasori did not turn, but began to listen intently. “I could tell by your gait. How long as it been?”

“Only three days.” Kakuzu answered, looking down to the mass of lesions all over his body.

“Odd, though… your blood must pump quicker than normal.” Sakura said idly and held the end of her stethoscope to his chest after he hopped onto the table, legs uncomfortably in the way. His choice of seating caused Sakura to lean just a bit. He seemed to take silent amusement in her discomfort. As she pressed it to his chest in various locations, listening intently, she was taken aback and put her hand up to his chest this time, summoning a bit of chakra and shutting her eyes in concentration.

Sasori readied himself to restrain her at what appeared to be an attack. Instead, she quirked a brow and walked around to the side of the table.

The stitches had seemed odd, and of course Sasori would supply her with no medical record. He had a total five heartbeats. His blood flowed disconcertingly fast, and where muscles should have been, there were only some sort of tendril that slithered beneath the shell of his flesh. She would have been disgusted, but her mind was focused sharply on her patient.

“Ah. That would explain the acceleration in symptoms. How long have you had a cough?” Sakura narrowed her eyes. She had never dealt with patients like these, yet she still assumed the cold apathy of a doctor dealing with an insubordinate invalid.

“One day.” He said, eyeing her suspiciously. He didn’t trust this girl. Even if she was Sasori’s little project.

“You need to shut down chakra flow, remove four hearts, and stay out of combat until we find a cure, or you will rot.” Sakura said briefly, taking notes.
“What?” He hissed, grabbing her clipboard to get her attention.

“I recognize by your chakra signature that you’re… at least 90, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And the hearts… these masks… trophies of some sort. Existing on your body and I imagine not just ornamental. Do they grant you their chakras as well?”

“Yes.”

“Right, well, all five of the chakra signatures are severely infected. You need a complete dialysis with a healthy, uninfected human. You need to slow your blood flow. We can either put you on a hefty amount of thickeners, or you can remove four problems and make this simpler for yourself. When we find the cure, it will be safe to return them to your person, until then, you’re only speeding up your impending rot by… four times.”

“I can’t die,” Kakuzu hissed. “I just want aid for this insistent cough.”

“You can’t die, but your body can decay. You are not immortal. There is no such thing. Without any living vessel, you cease to exist as we know the word. You can take my advice, Kakuzu-san, or you can rot.” Her words came out shockingly evenly.

Kakuzu reached out to grab her throat, but instead clenched his fist. That insufferable look she was giving him sent both a chill up his spine and a sliver of fear to his mind. He was aware he could rot. It’s why he had to replace patches of skin… eyes… most of his skeletal system.

Sasori stood up straight, staring at Sakura now.

“Explain how you know that.” Sasori ordered. The first thought to her mind was a snarky ‘years of medical training’, but she decided against it for now.

“I’ve seen this before. In theory, at least. I knew a ninja who once had two hearts, purely by biological accident, but two nonetheless. His blood pumped so quickly that when he was poisoned with a simply night shade concoction, it killed him almost that very second. The virus is in Kakuzu’s blood, and it’s travelling to every piece of sinew he has that way, eating away at them with its sandy substance it produces in the lungs.” She turned her back to Kakuzu, a brave move. She gestured to the lesion of his legs that caused him pain as he walked. “They shouldn’t be here until at least another 10 days.” Sasori watched her for a moment before nodding.

“Shall we start immediately?” Kakuzu prompted, a grumpy undertone in his voice.

“Oh, no. I need more information on your hearts and those masks and everything else you might think is relevant—on paper. I have three more people to look at, and then we can begin the procedure.”

“You’re becoming awfully commanding, my marionette.” Sasori drawled. “Is that wise?”

“I’m likely one of your few options, and your only option if you want Kakuzu-san to live.” Sakura said fiercely, trying to hide the trembling in her hands and the numbness in her feet. “He doesn’t have long enough for you to find a new medical nin capable of what I am.”

“You are correct… but your attitude now reflects how much I put you through when your worth becomes useless.” Sasori smirked, enjoying the bite in her tone. It sent a shiver down his spine, though not of fear. Only excitement. “Hurry with the others now.” He instructed, reminding her who
was in charge. “The quicker you get done with them, the quicker you can come over here and help me with the cure.”

Sakura said nothing in response, but bowed politely at Kakuzu who scowled and pulled his robe on, walking out to go scribe his medical history and any complications she may find.

Trying not to show any more fear (though she failed at that), Sakura exited shortly after he did.

“What next?” Sasori hummed.

She barely heard him, but she did unfortunately understand her order. With another sigh of mental anguish, she walked about until she stumbled upon a court yard. It was still dark, she noticed. The grass was oddly soft, and there were fireflies drifting about as if they were not in the presence of a grade-A psychopath. Hidan sat on a bench, staring at the starry sky. So perhaps the unfeeling madman had a soft side? Likely not.

“Hidan-san—“

“It’s Hidan-sama, to you.”

“I’m not here to stroke your ego, Hidan-san. I’m here to fetch you for your exam.” Sakura droned, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. She feared if she gave into the brimming show of annoyance, she may turn blind from the intensity of her disdain.

“Oh, nurse, certainly.” He chuckled with that shit-eating grin of his. He turned to her and stood up. He was too tall for comfort, she noted. She began walking. “Oh, you were serious.” He frowned, not masking his disappointment. “How boring.” He whined as he followed her. “Hey, does your boyfriend know you walk around dressing like such a slut in front of five men?” He mocked, clearly not happy about her modest choice of clothing.

Sakura did her best not to reply, but an unamused hum came out anyway. She opened the door and let it half-close on Hidan as she walked over to the same table and handed him a fresh garb. “Change into this and sit on the table.”

“I’m not wearing that.” Hidan said, already stripping.

Sakura mentally hissed at his crass attitude. He walked, ass naked to the table and hopped on. She was suddenly very glad for the paper protecting the leather of it. She averted her eyes, a slight tinge to her cheeks.

“See something you like, nurse?”

“No, in fact—“ Sakura cut herself off. “Cover. Up.” She asserted, handing him a blanket. His skin was oddly free of any sign of disease. Hidan begrudgingly complied, glaring at her the entire time.

“One day I’m going to sacrifice you to Jashin-sama.” Hidan hissed at her. “Then I’m gonna find all your little fucking friends and sacrifice them as well.”

“Right…” Sakura rolled her eyes and began listening to his breathing. “A good, deep breath.” She ordered. As he did, she noticed she could most definitely hear the rattling of sand. Sakura looked at him suspiciously. She picked up a rather large needle that was hollow inside, similar to a straw. “This is going to hurt.”

“I’m into that.” Hidan chuckled, then yelped in pain when it hurt a bit more than he was expecting. “Bitch.” He growled.
“It’s just a needle.” She huffed, though she knew damn well it had to hurt. She had pressed it into his chest, just beside his sternum, with deadly accuracy. “I hope you’re resilient. Oh, I’m not even supposed to do things like this, but… desperate times?” She shrugged.

“What do you mean?!”

“It’s unethical to pull a live tissue sample of vital organs because of the pain it causes the patient.” Sakura hummed, almost happily and left the hollow needle in his skin. “Now stay very still or I might puncture a lung.”

“You’re sadistic.” Sasori noted, eyeing her from head to toe. It was unexpected. He had assumed she would be gentle, even with the criminal clients.

“I’m thorough,” Sakura corrected, a bit amused by his choice of words. Her previous exposure to the vivisection with Hiroshi, to the horrors of Tozlu and corruption of the mind had faded her docile facade. She picked up a wire-thin set of what looked like tongs. She slid it into the straw-like needle, ignoring the blood that poured through. “You have an amazing healing factor.” She managed, clipping the very delicate tissue from his lungs, but not puncturing.

“That fucking hurts!” He hissed. “Stop that immediately!”

“Stop squirming.” She said simply and removed the needle after she collected her sample. She set the bloody tissue in a dish and examined it. “I find it odd that you have Tozlu, yet show no external signs. You must heal tremendously fast…”

“Duh, haven’t you heard of me?” Hidan muttered, a bit offended.

“No. Not once in my life.” She said honestly, earning her another growl.

“I’m the prophet of Jashin-sama. I go through this world doing his work.”

“How lovely.” She hummed absentmindedly. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“I can never fucking die because of it. I’ve had my body burned up, my head cut off, and I’ve been disemboweled more times than I can remember.”

“Aa… this changes things.” Sakura said. “Sasori-san.” She got his attention.

“We can heal Hidan right away and use him for dialysis with the others.” Sasori nearly completed her thought, before adding. “Sasori-sama, to you.”

Sakura looked down at her feet but nodded a little.

“How do we go about healing him?” Sasori asked, now approaching. He set a possessive hand on Sakura’s shoulder. She didn’t understand it, and that gave him all the more reason to do it.

“I’m thinking… simply cut out the sick parts. Look, healthy tissue right here. Chakra dialysis, then cut out the disease. Then his purified chakra could be used for dialysis with the others. It will be a painful process, but in Kakuzu’s case it may save lives.”

“Right.” Sasori hummed, examining the clipped tissue. “What if we just poison him and make his lungs shrivel?”

“I… yes, that would be simpler.” Sakura said, deep in thought. “I know just the poison. The ones you left behind in the sand village… there was one that turned the lungs to a liquid, and assuming he
has both kidneys still, that would just be filtered out and leave room for new lungs to grow. It took about five hours.”

“The new version of that takes two, but that won’t be an issue. Hidan is a masochist, anyway.” Sasori said, deadpanned expression still.

“I am not!” Hidan hissed.

“I’ll gather what we need for the treatment. We can use my Kazekage puppet for the dialysis, rather than risk anybody with proximity infection.” Sasori decided, exiting the room.

“I, uh, need to gather something as well.” Sakura lied and exited, not wanting to be left anywhere alone with the religious freak. She sighed deeply when she was outside of the room, and stood just out of view of the door. She was getting tired. And hungry. It was hard to tell time though, because it seemed like it was always night. She knew many hours had passed, though, so it most certainly should have been getting light outside.

When Sakura reentered, having seen Sasori come down the hall, she found Hidan laid out on the table, groaning melodramatically.

“Hurry up.” Hidan whined. Sasori followed behind Sakura, gently guiding her by the shoulder to the surgical table.

“Over here, Hidan. I don’t want blood over there, it’s not close enough to the drain.” Sasori asserted.

“Too much clean up, with as easily as you bleed.”

“I don’t bleed any easier than you!”

“I don’t bleed at all.” Sasori reminded him.

“Let’s see how she bleeds then—I’ll bet it’s the same.”

“You won’t touch her.” Sasori said, voice darkening just a bit. Hidan smirked.

“Oh?” Hidan challenged. "Puppet boy doesn't want to share his toys?"

“If I didn’t have orders to keep you contaminated bunch alive, I would kill you myself.” Sasori drawled, slowly becoming agitated that Hidan was messing with his doll. Sakura narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms over her chest. “Don’t be insubordinate, Sakura. I have no orders regarding you and there are infinite ways for me to hurt you.” He said, seeing her pout.

Sakura straightened up a bit and dropped her arms to the side as a chill ran through her. She was so jaded from her previous psychotic break that she seemed to have forgotten her position. All the same, he thought.

Hidan laid out on the surgical table and tossed the blanket she had given him over his groin, not wanting to hear her nag again. Sasori approached and summoned his puppet through a scroll. Sakura watched, enthralled by Sasori’s sharp movements as he directed the puppet. It hung suspended in the air and a black, iron tube that seemed to formulate from sand extended from the chest of the puppet. It moved slowly towards Hidan who watched Sasori suspiciously. It came to Hidan’s heart before forming a sharp point and jamming into his chest, breaking his sternum.

Hidan roared in pain and thrashed his arm towards Sasori, who simply moved and pulled Sakura behind him, getting her out of the way. “You bitches! You didn’t warn me!”
“You shouldn’t need a warning to know getting stabbed would hurt.” Sasori rolled his eyes and began pulling Hidan’s chakra with a jutsu. Sakura watched in half a state of terror. That wasn’t how it was done in the sand village, but it seemed just as effective, if Hidan’s painful yelling was any indication.

It took three hours to filter the immense amount of chakra from his system until it was sterilized. Immediately, Sasori motioned for Sakura to hand him a syringe.

“This will hurt more.” Sasori warned, a slight grin on his face as he felt for ribs. He wasn’t as accurate as Sakura with placement and ended up scraping a rib as he forced the needle into Hidan. Hidan growled in pain as Sasori poisoned him. “Go. You may want to lie down.” Sasori yawned, stretching a bit.

With Hidan exiting, a string of obscenities behind him, that left Sakura and Sasori alone to clean up. She helped silently then washed her hands.

“You’re probably hungry.” Sasori noted. “Come.” He ordered, heading towards the door. Sakura made a face at him as his back was turned but followed, not wanting to receive any sort of punishment. “You’ll fix food for yourself.” He told her as they entered a kitchen.

Sakura looked around, entirely out of her element. She wasn’t good at cooking. She never had been.

“I’m not hungry.” She lied, deciding to test her leeway with Sasori.

“You will make food, and then you will eat it.” Sasori told her, stepping towards her now. She stood her ground, straightening to try and equal out the slight difference in height. His expression remained neutral. “You will do this now.” He said one more time. She could tell it was her last warning. “You shouldn’t have tested me.” He growled now, and unbuttoned his robe.

Sakura shot back as some sort of spear headed weapon shot from his midsection. Before she could run from the room, it wrapped around her, dragging her back to his feet now on her knees. She screamed in fright when the spear pierced her, clearly dripping with some sort of poison. She immediately felt the effects and went limp, looking up at him angrily.

“You’ve seemed to have lost your fear for me. Let’s amend that.” He decided, dragging her along the floor as he walked through the hall. “I worked so hard to get you here, Sakura. Don’t make me regret my decision to not harm your friends.”

“No—please! I’m sorry!” Sakura hissed as her body was overtaken with an immense pain. She screamed, but the sound that came from her was foreign. She’d never experienced such intense agony before. She wasn’t sure how to process it so she simply wailed in pain. “Please—make it stop!”

“Perhaps.” Sasori hummed. “But not yet, no.” He reached down and ran his fingers through her hair. “I’m glad I decided to attach a nervous system to myself. I forgot how lovely it was to have a tactile sense.”

Sakura cringed in horror and tried to get out of his grip, but it did not waver. He dragged her and laid her on a rather large bed.

“Here.” He hummed, almost kindly and sat next to her. The thing constricting her retracted, but now he held her down with a firm hand over her chest. “There, there, little marionette. You’ll learn. It’s my fault you’re hurting. I didn’t teach you well enough the first time.” He said sadly and gently kissed her head. “Let’s make sure it doesn’t happen again.”
Sakura sobbed and tried to move away. “S-Stop! Don’t touch me so affectionately!” She managed, but her voice was shrill and shook helplessly.

“Oh, but Sakura, you’re mine now. I can do what I please.” Sasori chuckled a bit, running his fingers down her arm. The next thing she felt was total paralysis, and external agony instead of internal. Every contact hurt like nothing before. Realizing the state, Sasori picked her up, this time in his arms. It was a mockery of intimacy and it made her nauseous. “Let’s get you cleaned up.” He decided and carried her to an adjacent room. It held a large bath tub, almost ornate, but decidedly bland. He sat her down on the tile flooring with her back propped against the cold wall. Each contact sent a new wave of pain through her.

Tears streamed down her cheeks. Why did she have to test him? She should have listened, she chided herself. She trembled and watched him with a sense of dread as he filled the bath tub with lightly steaming water. Any other time, the sight would look inviting. Instead, it looked menacing. The hot water would scald her sensitive skin now that every touch seemed to feel like a stab wound.

She flinched when Sasori was in front of her again. “Please, d-don’t touch me—it hurts so much.” She begged, looking up at him desperately.

“Oh, my dear. That’s a wonderful look for you.” He said, eyes washed in some sort of unnamable emotion. He knelt in front of her, brushing the hair from her face and simply admiring. There was always a beauty to watching someone writhe in pain, but this was especially potent. He was totally transfixed with the need to touch, to feel, to see her pain so daintily scribed across her youthful features. “I will have to give you the ability to feel pain when I remake you.”

Sakura cried out when he hugged her.

“Don’t cry, my dear. It’ll be better soon.” He said gently and began undressing her.

Each piece of clothing that slid off from her skin was agony. It burnt and stung all at once, yet it was a deep pain that rooted itself in her bones. It only continued to get worse as now she was bare before him. She tried to cover herself, but touching her own skin hurt as well. Sakura sobbed in her helplessness. “Please, make it stop.”

“It’ll wear off soon.” Sasori promised, kissing her cheek. It felt like a brand to her and she turned her head. Sasori frowned, but still gently sat her in the water.

“It’s too hot!!” Sakura screeched, flailing in the scalding water. Sasori shook his head, cackling a bit.

“It’s fine. Barely hot enough to produce steam.” Sasori chuckled and pet her hair before his hands twitched with an urge took over him. He wasn’t one to often give into urges, but he couldn’t help himself this time. Perhaps it was her influence that made him more volatile, more open and more honest. He smiled gently.

His grandmother had told him as a child, that when he found the person that made him want to be honest and live freely, that the person was his soul mate. It was a romantic notion that he previously scoffed out, but he saw it now.

In his blind emotion, he grabbed her by her face and shoved her underwater, holding her there as she struggled for air and to be free of his grasp.

She felt pain overwhelm her and she almost immediately fainted. Sasori yanked her from the water before she could drown and sat her against the wall of the tub.
“There now... see? The pain is gone.” He hummed and leaned in, cupping her face gently. Her eyes were shut so serenely. His lips gently met hers and he felt a fluttering in his chest. He moved back only a hair’s breadth. That had been his first kiss. Despite his age, he had never once been interested in even casual encounters, so he never bothered with romance. It seemed like a waste of time.

“Mm...” Sakura groaned in her sleep, still lightly in pain. He knew the poison was in its last stage, the weakest and least potent. Now she would just ache. “Kakashi-sensei...” She muttered, obviously having some sort of delirious hallucination. Sasori narrowed his eyes as a twinge of jealousy overtook him. Still, he didn’t retaliate. He knew jealousy was ugly. Instead, he sighed. One day, somehow, he would make her lustfully utter his name in such a tone.

He used one of the perfumed soaps he had collected in preparation for her arrival. He gently wetted a sponge and poured the aromatic wash into it before slowly washing his newest puppet. Each moment of her skin was a masterpiece, but he would improve it one day. Sakura stirred slightly. The touch still hurt, but it no longer sent her spiraling.

“S-Sasori.” She whispered in fright as she opened her eyes, slowly becoming aware of the situation. She smacked his hand away as it had laid upon her arm. “I’m sorry!” She immediately managed.

“It’s okay, Sakura.” He purred, holding his arms out. She hesitantly curled into him. It made her skin crawl in disgust. She was mostly disgusted with herself, at how much she relaxed to his touch. It wasn’t natural. “I forgive your insolence.” He said with a tender kiss to her pink hair. “Let’s finish getting you washed, though. You haven’t taken good care of yourself.” Sasori noted with a grimace. “That’ll change though, won’t it?”

Sakura didn’t say anything, and it took her a moment to snap out of her submission. The ache in every muscle of her body warned her to be more careful. She would abide, but she was careful not to fall into the psychological trap he had laid out. She parted from his embrace, averting her eyes. Sasori didn’t chastise her for it, instead he continued to bathe her, much to her embarrassment. Sakura’s skin burnt at his touch, though for newer reasons.

Nobody had seen her like this before. Of course, she fantasized about being this bare in front of Sasuke, but not in this way. It disappointed her greatly and she shut out what Sasori was doing. She felt herself become distant, and she didn’t mind. She could focus on other things if she shut him out.

As Sasori rinsed her off by gently dumping water over her, he lifted her from the water and set her on both feet, careful not to let her slip. He painstakingly dried her off with a soft towel. She had never felt this low. Not even when Sasuke ran away. She stared blankly at the wall.

“Come now, Sakura. You’re going to make food and then you’ll check on the other two. Wear this.” He decided, handing her a set of clothing he had gotten for her before she arrived. It was a simply ensemble. Black pants and a shirt that resembled one the rest of the Akatsuki had, but from the midsection down it was mesh instead of cotton fabric.

Sakura slowly dressed herself, trying not to make a face at the choice of clothing. It was fitting for the temperate climate the compound had, but she disliked showing her naval so openly. Sasori brushed out her hair lovingly, before pulling it back and tying it with a new ribbon. Sakura belatedly noticed it was one of Ino’s and her eyes softened.

“Does having this make you happier?” He asked, placing her fringe in front of her as she normally had it with great care.

“Yes... Ino is my best friend. Having something from her makes me happy.” Sakura admitted, taken back that he didn’t just throw it away like she thought he did.
“Then you may keep it.” He decided, kissing her cheek gently. He could never let the others see him treating her like this. “Let’s go. You have others to look over. Itachi, and Kisame still. Then Deidara when he returns.”

“I don’t like Deidara.” Sakura said absentmindedly as she followed him. She noted that the sandals he had given her were thinner than her normal ones. They were only meant for the indoors, truly.

Sasori chuckled a bit. His voice had almost sounded like Kakashi’s. “It would be more surprising if you did.”

Sakura gave him a look of something like surprise, but said nothing. She averted her gaze. This man was crazy. She eyed him from her peripheral. As Sasori walked, she fell in obedient step behind him. When they got back to the lab, she cleaned up and readied herself for the next patient.

“Itachi, next.” Sasori told her and shuffled some papers about. “He’s at greatest risk of dying from this, so you’ll need to be more vigilant with him. He’s one of the others I truly don’t hate.”

Sakura stared at him for a moment before nodding and heading out of the door. She gathered that Sasori held some manner of distaste for the others. She could tell he outright hated Hidan (and there she couldn’t blame him), she observed that he didn’t particularly care for Kakuzu or Deidara, but why would he go on to say that he, in his own way, liked Itachi? Maybe they understood each other better. Sakura knew Itachi had some humanity left in him, and she can only imagine the pressure he endured as the great clan’s prodigy. Sakura knew from stories that Sasori had a rough childhood as well, but she didn’t see the connection. Maybe that meant Sasori had a bit of humanity left in him as well. Maybe she could exploit it and escape.

“Sakura, you shouldn’t daydream like that around here. You need to be alert.” She heard Itachi scold her. She blinked and looked up at him curiously.

“What does it matter to you, Itachi-san?” Sakura hummed, tilting her head a bit. “My wellbeing is a passing instance, I imagine. I’ll be dead soon anyway.” She said, gripping her arm.

Itachi only made a noise of disapproval.

“Oh, I’m meant to fetch you for an exam.” Sakura noted. “I have a question, though I don’t expect an answer.” She waited, then decided to continue when he was silent. “Why does Sasori need me to examine the lot of you? I had assumed he was simply no good at the medial aspect involving the plague, but I see he’s plenty capable—and even listed as a medical nin in some sources. He knows just as much as I do.”

“At first I thought it was his own amusement.” Itachi gave her that, then trailed off, opening the door for her once again.

Sakura gave him a lonely look. He looked so much like Sasuke… it made her hurt so badly. She stepped in with a small ‘thank you’ and patted the table. Her tongue was heavy because of the similarities, but luckily he knew the drill. However, with Itachi, she had to force herself back into ‘doctor-mode’ after she noticed the sight of him disrobing caused her to blush deeply. She wasn’t over Sasuke, despite what she liked to think, and having his older brother, bane of his existence, and reason for his hatred right there should’ve made her seething with rage, not blushing like a little academy girl.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a bad cough from him. She grimaced and patted his back a bit. Why did she empathize with this clan killer so much? He had tried to take Naruto, hurt Sasuke, tortured Kakashi…
Sighing, she pressed the stethoscope to his chest, then his back, listening to his breath at all levels and angles. She focused her chakra into her hands and pressed them against his chest. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. It was a technique Tsunade had developed. She was able to visualize his internal organs and search for any abnormalities. She grimaced deeply, causing Sasori to approach. He and Itachi exchanged looks. Sakura began looking around once more.

“Four… five… six… seven.” Sakura sighed, eyes still closed as she withdrew. “Seven sights of infection… Seven different instances of infection…” Sakura’s grimace grew deeper as she contemplated. “Itachi-san… I can only wonder how many instances have you engaged in combat in the past, say four months?”

“Seven.”

“And who were you battling?”

“Orochimaru has sent people after me… seven times.”

“He’s targeted you seven times.” Sakura corrected. “He must have sent some sort of specialized henchmen after you simply to infect you. This isn’t good at all. Even if we cure the Tozlu, it has eaten your lungs so deeply...”

“Lung transplant.” Sasori decided. “To avoid a fallout, we will transplant Itachi’s lungs with Ostaka Kuren’s lungs.” He hummed, flicking through a file of possible donors. “I expected to have to do something like this.”

“W-Wait!” Sakura said, snapping out of her lull. “You can’t use Ostaka-kun’s!”

“The Kuren family carries the gift of endurance and Ostaka's lungs have proven their resilience to the plague. In order for Itachi to stay alive, he needs those lungs.” Sasori corrected and grabbed Sakura’s shoulder. “It must be done.”

“B-But… Ostaka’s chance of survival will plummet, to possibly nothing.”

Sasori glared at her, tightening the hold on her. He took a deep breath, deciding the best course of action.

“If you do this, you will be rewarded greatly. Perhaps I will let you return to the side of your friend even.” Sasori suggested. “Ino, wasn’t it? I’m sure she would like to see her best friend once more.”

Itachi couldn’t help the frown that pulled his lips. He wouldn’t admit it, but he grew close to the girl who loved his little brother so deeply. It was that shared love that connected them. He narrowed his eyes, wondering if it was his place to interject.

Sakura leaned against a piece of equipment and held her head. She began shaking.

“Fine. But… must I be the one to do it?” Sakura squeaked. She would do anything for Ino. Anything to ensure her life and happiness.

“I don’t have a fine enough touch to transplant such delicate organs.” Sasori admitted. So that was why he chose her. She was renowned for her ability to perform such intricate surgeries.

“You’d give this girl her freedom?” Itachi said, incredulity hidden by a hateful tone.

“After, the cure is made.” Sasori nodded.
“You’ve grown soft, Sasori. It disgusts me.” Itachi muttered.

“Yes, me as well.” Sasori shrugged and traced his finger along Sakura’s exposed clavicle, causing her to jump and manage to hide her fear.

“Very well. What must I do?” He asked.

“Bring the Anbu Ostaka Kuren.” Sasori said, pulling the file. “Mind his sister. She’ll be able to tell everything you’re planning if you aren’t careful.”

“Ah… Ostu.” Itachi said after a moment. Sakura swore she could see a spark of regret.

“Yes. Orochimaru implanted her with those low blood Hyuga eyes. I’m surprised she didn’t gain the regular kekkei genkai.” Sasori hummed. “She may know that we have taken Sakura if you aren’t careful.”

Itachi hummed in acknowledgement and put his clothes back on.

“O-Oh, don’t forget to keep the salve on those lesions. You haven’t been.” Sakura nodded, causing Itachi to huff in amusement and wave dismissively for a moment. He had an air of majesty, just like his younger brother.

“Thank you, Sakura.” Itachi stood up, poking her forehead lightly. Her eyes widened a moment. Sasuke had once done that to her. Did he get it from his older brother?

Itachi nodded a farewell to Sasori and left, leaving Sakura alone with her confusion and captor. She rubbed her head nervously. “D-Did you mean what you said? You’d let me go?”

“I meant it. You’re too weak to turn into a puppet.” He lied.

“I promise to be useful until then.” Sakura told him, turning to look at him.

“You will be. I will use you until nothing is left.” Sasori said through gritted teeth. “You’re still going to perish, don’t get me wrong, but you will be there for the rest of her short, sickened life.”

Sakura flinched a bit. She was wrong. He had no humanity in him. She scowled a bit, but sighed. “I’ll go fetch Kisame-san.”

“Very well.” Sasori murmured and stretched a bit. The only thing wrong with a functioning nervous system is that he could ache again.

Sakura left quickly, shaking. What had she just done? She had traded the life of one friend for another. Then again, she was certain she would be forced to perform the surgery anyway. She rubbed her neck and stared up at the ceiling before she began walking, in search of Kisame.

“Oi, girl.” Hidan called.

Ah. One thing after another.

“What?” She asked.

“Do me a favor—“

“No.”

“What?!”—“
“I understand that I’m at Sasori’s disposal. That doesn’t mean I have to do what you say.” Sakura hissed and pulled a kunai out. “If you don’t stop bothering me, I’ll harm you.”

“Feisty bitch, huh?” Hidan smirked, approaching. It wasn’t until the kunai was in his stomach that he realized she was serious.

“I’ll gladly take your place as the one used for dialysis. I don’t need you.” She growled, drawing her fist back before she felt restraint.

“As much as I’d love to see him in a crumpled mess on the ground.” Kisame said, gripping her wrist. “Boss would kill us if we lose one more member.” He groaned, pulling Sakura back swiftly as Hidan reached out to grab her.

Sakura stubbornly yanked her hand away, glaring at Hidan.

“One day, I’ll find a way to kill you.” Sakura promised, causing Kisame to snort as Hidan cursed at her. Kisame dragged her away with a warning glance at Hidan.

“I don’t doubt you could kill him, kiddo, but we need him around.” Kisame patted her head, ruffling her hair. She swatted at him, too reminded of Kakashi’s affinity of hair ruffling.

“I need to examine you, so we should be going towards the clinic—where are you taking me?”

“Oh, Sasori can wait just a moment, I wanted to talk to you.” Kisame groaned, pulling her a little harder when she tried to escape his grasp. She huffed in disdain and yanked herself away only to fall in step behind him. “Stubborn woman.”

Kisame guided her to the door leading outside.

“Sasori will hurt me if I stray too far…” Sakura warned him.

“He won’t do shit if you aren’t running away.” Kisame rolled his eyes and brought her out to a creek. He sat on a rock and pulled his sandals off. He stuck his feet in the water and she was inclined to do the same.

“So what is this? Some sort of criminal-victim bonding time?” Sakura smirked up at him. She had gotten used to his appearance. He no longer really intimidated her.

“Exactly!” He laughed, patting her back a bit too roughly. She made a face at him and he stopped. “Ah, sorry. You’re smaller than the people around here.”

“Oh? Haven’t noticed.” She grinned as he cackled again. He was so easy to make laugh, it was a bit enjoyable. “Really though, what did you want to talk about?”

“That preventative measure. I can’t let the others know, but I have got someone I need to look out for. Don’t want him catching the plague.” Kisame admitted, twiddling his thumbs nervously.

“Ah, so the dangerous fish rogue has a lover?!” Sakura snorted.

“Hey, don’t call me that—and no!!... yes. Close, at least. He’s... ugh, he’s an elite warrior. We don’t have lovers.” Kisame muttered angrily, jabbing her in the side and causing her to squeak and rub her ribcage in pain. “I need you to embroider that symbol onto this.” He handed her a head band and she was taken aback by the symbol on it.

“Why is it, it’s always my village involved in dangerous affiliations?” Sakura reflected, taking the
headband daintily.

“Dangerous affiliations?! I’m no danger… to him.” He amended, rubbing his jaw nervously. “And look, you can’t tell anyone about this, alright?”

“Yes fine, but… who is it?!” Sakura grabbed his arm, eager to find out who would betray his village so readily to love someone like Kisame. It was admittedly a romantic notion, but curiosity was a strong drug and she was desperate.

“I won’t tell you that.” Kisame rose a brow.

“Fine, fine, I’ll do it. But it will cost you.” Sakura decided. “I need you to deliver letters.”

“I knew you would ask something, but… you are just going around Sasori’s back like that?”

“I have no attachment to Sasori… other than the one a dog has to its owner.” Sakura spat almost hatefully. Her chest still hurt from the poison and she gripped it meaningfully. “I do not really know what he wants from me.”

“You know,” Kisame sighed, sitting back a bit. “We may the some of the worst criminals out there, but we have hearts.” He shrugged. “Kakuzu has four.” He chuckled.

“Kisame-san.” Sakura looked at him, brows knit and frown deepened to one side. “I am having trouble holding onto my sanity and it… I’m still not… I’m not myself. I can’t tell if I’m jaded—o-or what. I haven’t been myself in a sense… well, since I left my village. Everything’s been…”

“Controlled.” Kisame nodded. “Since the moment you left your village. Itachi’s Tsukuyomi is more powerful than you may think.”

Sakura narrowed her eyes, watching a fish float by, undisturbed by their presence. “Ah, then…” Sakura cleared her throat and leaned forward, putting her hands on her knees. “Then all of that I went through…”

“Torture by the Uchiha, at Sasori’s behest. It’ll be over soon.”

Sakura nodded a bit and stood up. She put the headband in her pocket.

“I’ll make this protective charm for your boyfriend if you’ll deliver my letters.”

“That’s a deal I’m fine with.”

“Then, let’s get started with your examination.”

Chapter End Notes

4 in one day?! Who’s the best Papa around?
Dear Ino,

Hey, so… don’t hate me. I am in a bit of trouble, and if I’m discovered, I can be killed, or worse. I’ve been captured by the Akatsuki, and since I’m not even supposed to be telling you any of this—I’m going to tell you everything!

So, I made some real progress in Suna on a treatment and Orochimaru, who is responsible for releasing Tozlu on the world sent Kabuto after me. I thought I had fought him off—but it was a member of the Akatsuki who did it by controlling my movements. Sasori. Well, later on he decided to take me captive.

We’ve almost found a cure, but I regret working alongside the Akatsuki greatly. I think that Orochimaru was trying to wipe them out and part of me wants to go ahead and run away, or kill myself and let them die out, I thought that would be a noble thing to do in order to possibly save many lives, but then I started thinking, if anybody can kill Orochimaru, it’s these guys, so now I’m working with poison master, Sasori of the Red Sand, and we’re so close to a cure.

I can’t wait to come home. He’s promised me my freedom, if I help him. I hope it’s true, if not, I want you to know that I love you very, very much. I miss you so much. I love everyone there, and I hope you’re all doing well. I know you’ll give this to Tsunade-sama, so I wanted to thank her, too. Anyway… feel better. I’m sending this with a whole bunch of notes that he and I have come up with on all of our discoveries.

I’ll be by your side soon,

Sakura

Sakura's heart hurt dearly as she rolled the letter and tied it with a bit of medical threading. It wasn't her normal pink ribbon, but it would do. She briefly wondered about some sort of metaphor for the change in her, having the stitching material tie it instead of ribbon. She disregarded the thought and gripped the letter sadly before handing it to Kisame, who had watched her writing with a bit of interest.

"Just don't hurt anyone, right?" She laughed a little, handing him the embroidered headband. "I'm not the best seamstress, but it will prevent infection. Also give him these." He looked down at the sack of pills. It was about 30, if he had to guess. "One a day, in the morning before he leaves his house."

"Thank you." Kisame smiled with a pat to her head.

"And hey..." Sakura muttered, a bit more quietly. "If you get the chance," her cheeks grew red and she covered one with her palm. "Can you see how Kakashi Hatake-sensei is doing?"

"Is that the sensei you slept with?" Kisame snorted. "Or rather, dreamt about sleeping with?"

"I don't--I didn't--you're insufferable!" She hissed, completely red now.

"I'll check on him if he's close by." Kisame chuckled, ruffling her pink locks. Sasori had forced her to take better care of herself, and now her hair was shinier, softer, and smelled like a combination of blood, sterilizing alcohol, and perfume.
Delusion

Kakashi paced the room restlessly, gripping the letter so tightly he almost feared it would tear. His Sakura had been kidnapped by the Akatsuki and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t find her. The Leaf had sent four different teams out in hopes of finding her, but wherever they were keeping her was impossibly far away and this—this letter just appeared one day!

He felt tears pricking his eyes and he sat down at the foot of Ino’s bed. She was wired in to a large piece of equipment, eyes dark, skin pale and littered with lesions. The letter had given her hope, and it had shown in her eyes. To her left sat her teammate Shikamaru and her sensei. She was drifting in and out of sleep as the drugs kept her in a delirious state.

“Are you ready?” A nurse spoke up, asking Shikamaru a question. Shikamaru nodded and sat in a chair beside her bed. “Ino-chan,” The nurse said gently, barely touching Ino’s shoulder through her masked hand. The girl stirred.

“Sakura?” Ino asked, eyes glazed. She had just woken from a pleasant dream.

“No, dear, it’s time for medicine and dialysis.” The nurse hummed sadly.

“Oh… okay.” Ino grimaced and looked at Shikamaru. Ino was a bit surprised at how avidly the village mourned Sakura's absence. It almost made her happy that they were more concerned for her friend than when Sasuke had ran away. There was even a very light movement, started by Rock Lee to find Sakura, fliers, word of mouth, it travelled around the Land of Fire in its entirety that the young pink haired girl was missing. It was only a matter of time before someone found her, then. “Thank you,”

“It’s no problem.” Shikamaru mumbled, moving the neckline of his shirt and placing the needle in his chest, taping it off himself. He never let the nurses do that type of thing. It creeped him out. The nurse took the connected end of a wire from one needle to the one she placed in Ino’s chest. She signed and slowly, Ino’s chakra flowed to a small bead in the center of the wire where a justu had been cast to purify the chakra. On the other end, Shikamaru’s chakra flowed to it. He closed his eyes and sat his head back. It was always exhausting.

Kakashi watched the sight and grimaced. He left the room without a word and headed straight to Tsunade. He had to speak with her. Ostaka and Sakura were missing in action, Ostu went rogue in order to find her brother, Naruto had yet to return, and wherever the hell Sasuke was, he wasn't helping.

“Send me after her.” Kakashi demanded. “Send me, Shino, Kiba, and Hinata after her. I’ve already put together a list of reasons why we’d be the best team to go out—with Akamaru and Pakkun working together we’d find her before daybreak—just send me—please.” He stammered.

Tsunade looked up from her paper angrily. “I need you here.” She said for what felt like the hundredth time to the insistent copy cat.. “We’ve been attacked twice now. Our forces are weak. We have to keep you here. You were practically our last straw on the last attack.”

“I’m no use here!! If we find Sakura, we can bolster our forces—she’ll find the cure here—“

“It sounds like she’s doing better work there.” Tsunade finally said.
“So that’s it?!” He rose his voice and grabbed the edge of her desk, leaning forward. “Tsunade-sama, I cannot lose another! If I lose her—I’ll be gone to despair—she just—“

“She’s nothing like Rin.” Tsunade snapped. “I’m doing what’s best for our village.”

Kakashi visibly recoiled, stepping back even as the image of Rin’s face flashed before him at the mention. Tsunade's harsh tone caused him to glower a bit. She had no right to speak if his first love in such a manner.

“I’m going after her.” Kakashi decided.

“You’ll be a deserter if you do.” Tsunade warned. "A traitor."

“I don’t care.” Kakashi said evenly, removing his head band and slamming it on Tsunade’s desk. “I won’t lose another loved one. I’ve lost too many, now.” She noticed his Sharingan was already activated, though not out of malice.

Tsunade stared in disbelief. “You insolent—“

Kakashi was gone before she could continue her thought. She glared at the door and gripped his headband. Of course, she would forgive him when he returned, especially if Sakura was with him. But to have her authority disregarded like that. The village was beginning to disbelieve in her power to protect them. Many left in fear of the illness, others in fear of attack. Their numbers were dwindling between death and abandonment.

It was exactly what happened to the Sand Village. With a couple thousand left, they were overtaken by enemy forces, Kazekage and family forced to flee. Temari remained in the village here, hiding from head hunters while Gaara and Kankuro were missing in action.

Tsunade stared down at the notes Sakura had sent in secrecy. It was undeniably obvious she was making better advancements when with Sasori than she did on her own. That didn’t mean she wasn’t trying to find her. Sasori was too dangerous not to worry about it. Sakura was like a daughter to her. She had shed tears when she first found out. She never did that.

"Hokage-sama." An unnamed guard ran into her office. "Kakashi-san has been spotted running from the village... he's the third one today, should we send somebody after him?"

After a moment of consideration, she sighed. "Two search and retrieve Anbu, Hinata Hyuga, Kiba Inuzuka, and Shino Aburame." She said carefully. "Hinata Hyuga will be the team captain, and all of the others are to obey her, no matter what she decides to do once she find him." Tsunade stood with her last word and the guard nodded, existing to fetch the listed people.

She walked to the far window. She would have to take a break from her desk and fight, should another attack take place. Eyes dark with fear, she coughed into her fist, wiping the blood from her lips when it came.
Sakura stared across the room at Sasori. She had not liked him one bit. He was manipulative and vague and condescending and evil. Yet she felt close to him. Did he remind her of Sasuke? She grimaced at the thought.

“Why do you make such faces at me, dear marionette?” He asked, not backing down from her challenging stare. “Do I disgust you that much?” He asked, rising from his seat and approaching her. He didn’t like how tall she was in comparison to him. “Don’t grow much more, my love. I’ll have to remove portions of your leg bones and shrink you.” He jested, tapping her nose gently and leaning to look her dead in the eye.

The threat was lost on her. Her eyes were dull and lifeless like they almost always were. The only times he saw them light up were the times she was elbow deep in someone’s torso, performing some sort of vivisection or autopsy. He had grown to admire her fascination with anatomy as it was similar to his. Distantly, he wondered if it was the control she felt over her patients that gave her the rush. It didn’t truly matter though.

“‘My love’?” She mocked harshly. When had she become so hateful? “You made our relationship very clear, Sasori-sama. You are my puppet-master. I am your puppet. You cannot love for a puppet.”

“Oh? Who are you to tell me what I can love for and what I can not?” Sasori glowered and gripped her hair lightly. “Who are you to speak to me in such a harsh tone? You will learn to love me. It’ll soon be your only choice.”

“Why would I ever love you? You’re hateful and evil.” Sakura spat, but winced as his hold grew tighter. She felt an uncomfortable stirring in her stomach that made her eyes open a bit wider to look at him. Fear was just underneath her skin, though she was desperately loathe to show it. It was only a matter of time before he hurt her again.

She began not to mind her torment, as much as the thought disgusted her. Maybe it was her way of coping with it, to find pleasure in it.

He pulled her up to her tip toes by her hair before dragging her over to a clean surgical table and slamming her down. He cast chakra strings over her, tying her in place as she finally began to break free. She shouted in protest, summoning as much chakra as she could to break his hold on her, but ultimately failing.

“You’re pushing my patience.” Sasori sighed and went to a cabinet, out of her eyesight. He gathered a large amount of needles, typically used for combat rather than any medicinal purpose. “You’re going to regret that.”

He approached her and set the bundle of needles next to her head so she could see them, then he pulled a kunai from a pouch around his waist. She said nothing, but spat in his direction. He did nothing and instead began to cut her clothes away. Should he have loosened his ties to disrobe her, she surely would’ve gotten free and done unfortunate damage to his vessel.
“I noticed that you didn’t have your ears pierced… and read in your medical record that you didn’t like to receive shots. Are you afraid of needles?” Sasori hummed, pulling her scraps of clothing away and exposing her. “Because that would be unfortunate.”

“I—I’m—wait… wait—I’ll behave!” Sakura hissed, struggling once again as she realized what he was planning to do. He drew a needle from the bundle and traced it lightly from Sakura’s throat to her naval.

“Far too late.” He huffed, shaking his head a little. He pressed it into her stomach just above her belly button, not but a couple of centimeter’s deep. She gasped, trying not to show her pain, though he could see it in her eyes. He gently brushed her hair away from her face. “Let’s start with ten, then I’ll see how I feel about it.” He decided, flicking the needle that was in place. He lined up each one perfectly and pressed them into her slowly as she tried not to move in fear of making it worse.

“P-P-Please,” She breathed, though she went between holding her breath and gasping for air. Tears fell from the corner of her eyes.

He smiled, pressing each one in just a bit deeper as thin lines of blood dripped from each needle. He ran his finger over them, just barely moving them. “No, I think let’s say… stop here?” He wondered, pressing his fire finger to just between her breasts. He nodded to himself and continued to prick her.

The door opened behind him and he turned briefly to look. Itachi watched with a quirked brow.


“Deidara is back and he needs medical attention soon. I was sent to inform you. He is lying in bed. It seems that he isn’t in a dire state, but… needs to be tended within the day.”

“Right. We’ll be done, eventually.” Sasori nodded lightly, pressing another needle into Sakura. This caused her to cry out. “If you’re going to watch, Itachi, you need to hand me another bundle. I’m nearly done with this.”

“I can’t—I don’t—“ She stammered helplessly, sobbing now. “Sasori-sama, please!”

“Do better.” He huffed, flicking a needle.

Itachi stood there for another moment, face as coded as ever despite Sakura looking to him for some sort of help. Of course he wouldn’t help. He probably loved that sort of thing. Instead, he turned and left, causing Sakura to cry out in despair now.

She had felt betrayal at his leaving. She wasn’t sure exactly what she expected, but she had hoped that maybe he would helped, or at least stayed there or…

“He wouldn’t have helped you.” Sasori noted with a bit of anger in his voice. “I’m ultimately in charge of your life and wellbeing. It doesn’t matter what he wants.” His eyes lingered on hers as he got a rotten idea. He began to press each needle deeper and deeper until it was almost completely sunken into her. She screamed now.

“P-Please—wait—that’ll puncture something!!” She screeched in horror, flailing once more and trying to break free. In her blind panic and pain, her vision grew hazy and soon she found herself underwater.

It was her dream lake again, she noted. She looked down to her stomach to find herself back in her usual garb—red shirt, black shorts. She’d missed it. She felt on her head to find her headband securely in place. Looking around, she decided to swim up to the surface, and crawled onto the shore
there.

It was a bit disorienting, but she was thankful to be away from Sasori’s cruelty, if only for a moment. Sakura hummed in dismay and looked around. The forest that presented itself to her was unfamiliar, but she felt compelled to walk it, nonetheless.

She didn’t feel pain, she noticed. In fact, she felt wonderful, walking along a dusty path. Her mind had a moment to drift, so she let it.

“I wonder if Kakashi-sensei is searching for me,” She sighed and rubbed her cheek worriedly. Would he be able to rescue her? She knew damn well she didn’t stand a chance to that many Akatsuki members, and if she were truthful, neither did he.

“Sakura.” She heard. Her brow furrowed and she frowned. It was cruel how her mind was making her hear Sasuke. “Sakura.” He said more firmly.

She looked up and physically recoiled when she saw him. He was just—just standing there—in clothes she’d never seen before with a sword horizontally positioned on his back.

“…What?” Was all she could manage. Not ‘are you okay’, ‘it’s been so long’, ‘are you safe’, ‘are you healthy’. Just a simple ‘what’. One word, underscored by a devastating amount of confusion and anguish.

“I’ve heard a rumor you were kidnapped. You picked a very odd place to hide, amongst my brother.” He said evenly, approaching her.

She wasn’t prepared for this, but she found herself taking another step forward, then another, then another quicker than the last. She took a deep breath and wrapped her arms around him tightly, shocked he didn’t disappear the second she did.

Instead, he pulled himself free, a commanding hand on her shoulder.

“Sasuke-kun…” She muttered in disbelief, staring at him.

“You need to escape from them.” He said finally after watching her for a good moment.

His eyes were that deep black. His expression harvested no emotion and his casual stance told her he felt none either.

“This is a cruel dream.” She managed, idly touching his arm. He felt so real.

“This is not a dream, Sakura.” Sasuke said evenly, staring at her as she tried to discern what in her mind made her conjure this image. He sighed and pulled away from her.

“How are you here?” She asked, beginning to believe him.

Sasuke said nothing, simply watching her. “My eyes are more powerful than they were the last time we met.” He stated.

“I… see.” Sakura drawled, afraid to look away from him. “Are you… safe?”

“You worry about me when you have been taken hostage by Sasori.” Sasuke smirked a little, amusement playing at his face.

“You look sad, Sasuke-kun.” Sakura said, testing the waters by taking another step towards him.
“Your eyes… they’re…” She was reminded of their time on missions as children. “So lonely.” It was fitting. The sole survivor of the Uchiha Clan Massacre. He closed his eyes for a moment before looking down at the ground. “Why did you come to me, Sasuke-kun?” She asked curiously.

“I heard that you had been kidnapped.” He said. “I wanted to know if it was true.”

“I… yes. Technically, it was your brother who kidnapped me. He’s… sick, Sasuke. If you were to strike now, you would surely be able to kill him—he’s weakened by Tozlu and—“

Despite his best attempts, Sasuke’s fist came to his mouth as he coughed. Sakura simply watched, tears coming to her eyes.

“How could Orochimaru let you get sick?” She gasped.

“He lost control of it. All of us are sick. Kabuto is working on a cure, and is not making any headway. He stole work from the Leaf Village, but even they have nothing.” Sasuke’s voice stung her in an odd way.

“Give me… a week… we should have the cure in a week.” Sakura decided. “Sasuke-kun,” She said as he started to fade from her vision. As she began to wake. “I miss you!”

“You’re still annoying.” He said, a slight smile on his face.

She began to cry, but smiled as well. It hurt her more than she would say. He only came to her because now he needed her. Still, she wanted desperately to help him—now that he finally needed her. It was all she wanted, all of her life.

When she woke, she was still sobbing. There was residual pain in her abdomen, but no blood. She had been cleaned and healed, and Sasori stood over her, watching her with confusion and worry.

“It changed. Tears of agony to tears of anguish.” He whispered, stooping to level out with her. He brushed hair from her face and kissed her cheek gently. “Was it a dream?”

“Y-Yes, a dream.” She managed, confused but comforted by his actions. She didn’t understand why he hurt her, but then took pity on her when she was hurting. He was such an odd man, and it frightened her. He was so volatile and unpredictable that there was no way to truly please him. It would always end with her in pain.

“What of?” He asked, rising her from the table and carrying her over to a chair where he sat, then cradled her on his lap. He stroked her hair lightly and wiped her tears away even as they came continuously. She didn’t want to tell him. Telling him she was sad over another man could be dangerous. Still, she knew she was a terrible liar and he would surely punish her for lying, if she did.

“I dreamt my childhood friend was sick. He has Tozlu, but, it was more than just a dream.” She tried to explain. “Itachi’s younger brother…” She said quietly. “He came to me asking for help…”

“He doesn’t deserve your help.” Sasori said flatly. “I know about what happened.”

“I-I don’t care… I’m saddened by his impending death!” She cried, tucking her chin and curling up against Sasori. Admittedly, his comforting was working and she held onto him. He sighed deeply and pulled her just a hair closer.

“I don’t want to see you in pain if I didn’t put you there.” He decided. “But I truly think that Sasuke deserves whatever happened to him. Had someone crossed me like that, I would have hunted them down and executed them for their treachery.” He told her. “You shouldn’t love him like you do.”
“I—I—” Sakura stammered, stunned by his words. “And you’re much better?!” She asked, shoving herself away from him in a moment of clarity. “You tortured me!”

“I did. I will do it often, sometimes just for fun.” He whispered, pulling her closer against him. His arms were like iron bands around her that she could not escape. “And the difference is that I own you. Nobody else is allowed to harm you.”

“You’re twisted.” Sakura hissed under her breath, then braced herself for retaliation. None came and instead, Sasori only kissed her head gently.

Her word had stung him for some odd reason. He would think on it later, but they had work to do for now.

“Gather yourself.” He ordered, pointing to the fresh set of clothing. “Dress and sterilize to begin work.”

Sakura didn’t respond, she only glowered at him and slid out of his lap. She righted herself, glaring furiously at the floor. She dressed to gather her dignity before turning around, stance wide and brows knit in anger.

“I find you insufferable—beyond insufferable—you’re the very bane of my existence!” She screamed, flinging a nearby specimen jar at him. His eyes widened a bit and he dodged with a growl as he stood up. She flung her gloves off, flexing her hands carefully as she focused her chakra. “I’ll end you.” She whispered. He only took an offensive stance, deciding to utilize his taijustu instead of wasting chakra on her.

In the blink of an eye she was on him, up in the air before him and leaving her abdomen completely open. He rose to struck but despite what she showed she was going to do, her knee came up, connecting with his chin and sending him back into the wall. She jumped to the place he was, attempting to land a punch to his head, though he managed to move just in time. He grabbed her arm and landed a blow just below her ribcage.

Seemingly, she doubled over in pain, but that only lowered her center of gravity, so she used it to take solid hold of his arm before making eye contact and bending to plant one sandal on his chest. He grabbed a kunai from his pouch and stabbed it into her leg but she didn’t flinch. Adrenaline coursed through her. She gritted her teeth as he twisted it, watching her with those curious owl eyes of his.

Suddenly she yanked, causing him surprise as his arm disconnected from his elbow. She shouted in fright and backed up when he swiped at her with a hidden blade.

“Ha! Foolish girl,” He growled through a smirk, heart pounding pleasurably in his chest. He even let out a little chuckle. “Oh, I hoped you would do this, but I didn’t think it would take you this long.”

Sakura’s cheeks reddened with something, either anger or embarrassment or arousal, though she didn’t want to acknowledge that last possibility. She spat at his feet. “I will kill you!” She declared, charging him again. He rolled his eyes and easily blocked her advance by thrusting his blade at her. Though he grunted in alarm when he actually ended stabbing her. He fully expected her to parry or dodge, though she just held up her fore arm, letting the blade run cleanly through it until it was moments away from her eye. She held him in place with his own shock and shot her hand out to grab his throat.

It was her turn to be surprised when she smashed it. Sasori went limp that instance, head dropping and rolling at her feet. She stared into the space where it had been in absolute horror, then screamed
when his body continued to move. It withdrew the blade from her arm. She felt a paralysis, as she should have expected. Poison.

“Wh-What…” Sakura managed, falling to the floor at his feet, but staring at his face as it was lifeless and dead. Even the eyes held no color anymore. “I don’t understand.” She breathed, chest rising and falling rapidly in pain. The door opened.

“You two are loud, hn.” Deidara called, then stammered out a few ‘uh’s before laughing. “Sasori, you let your guard down! Oh, Sakura-chan. You’ve done me a huge favor. Now he can’t talk! Ah, that poison. You don’t have long.” He chuckled and walked over to her crumpled up form, pinching her cheek lightly. She belatedly noticed he was missing an arm and seemed to have a sizable gash on his cheek. “This? A run in with some white haired ninja from your village. I think it was… hm… I want to say Kakashi?”

“Y-You—” Sakura’s mind raced but she only managed to cry out as her arm began to pulse in pain. She gripped it and cast a healing justu over it, closing the wound. She did the same for her shin and managed to stand. “Get out of my way.” She hissed and shoved the clearly weakened artist to the side. “I need the antidote.” She limped towards a medicine cabinet, hastily looking through them for labels.

What she felt had to be a hemlock-based poison, given how much it pained her and the exact type of pain she was feeling.

“Pushy.” Deidara grunted, stumbling a bit but leaning over to pick up Sasori’s head. He laughed again. “You completely crushed his throat. Good job, hn!”

“Don’t talk to me, you hurt Ostaka-kun.” She hissed quickly, finding something to nullify the effects of the hemlock. It was no antidote, but it would work to flush the deadly plant extract from her by making her literally sweat it out. Then her system could metabolize whatever other toxins were in it by her practiced resistance.

“Ostaka? That must be that guy I blew up.” Deidara said carelessly with a little shrug as he pulled something from Sasori’s chest. “Hey, you wanted your freedom, right?” He asked with a little grin as he planned something devious. “Go.” He said. “The barrier is a genjustu, so just, go, why don’t you?”

“I don’t trust you…”

“Trust me? You don’t need to. I’m not in any condition to stop you. Go on. Before Kakuzu or Hidan catches you!” He laughed loudly now as she began running, gathering a pouch of weapons from Sasori and fleeing immediately. “Oh, this will be entertaining.” He hummed holding the pulsing cylinder and walking back to Sasori’s workshop. “He’ll owe me one.” Deidara pulled a black curtain, revealing different versions of Sasori’s body. He shoved the cylinder into one and made a face as the skin adjusted over the joints. “Gross.”

“It’s not gross.” Sasori corrected, stretching into his joints. “This one is more human. Organs, skin, real teeth. It’s one of my best.”

“I think you owe me a thank you.” He grinned, flicking a stand of blonde hair from his face, triumphantly.

“No. I heard what you told my Sakura. I won’t thank you for encouraging bad behavior.” He said lowly, pushing his teammate out of the way.
“The two of them are made for each other. Pushy.” He murmured as Sasori stormed away, clearly ignoring Deidara’s remark with a scowl.

Chapter End Notes

Hello hello! No beta reader so excuse any errors! I’ll fix them as I spot them.
Transplant

Sakura had managed to get herself out of the horrible realm they held her captive in. She was now sprinting at full speed through the forest. She didn’t want to take the road as it would be far too convenient to track her on. She was about four hours of running away when the pain in her shin grew to be too much and she had to slow down.

Her lungs burnt with the quick intake of air and her eyes were dry. Sakura, after listening intently to make sure nobody was following her, sat perched on a tree branch while she took a breath. She signed and conjured up a disguise for herself. With no knowledge of camouflage justu, she wasn’t able to disguise her scent or chakra signature, but she could at least look differently.

Perhaps out of sentimentality, or a lack of creativity, she gave herself Ino’s eyes and many aspects of her face as she pictured her best friend. She traded her short pink locks for long and curly ones, reflecting her parents’ signature dirty blonde hair. Sakura rubbed her face and looked around. At least she would be able to tell if Sasori was coming. She noticed there was always a clicking sound when he walked, whether or not he noticed it.

Itachi was less of a problem as well, since he was weakened. Kakuzu’s chakra and therefore power was significantly decreased as well. Kisame, Hidan, and Deidara were the only ones she had to worry about it from the Akatsuki. Other factors that she’d need to be wary of were Orochimaru, scouts from other villages, and the usual roadside dangers.

Sakura rose and began her flight once more, images of home implanting themselves in her mind. She couldn’t help but smile a little. She was one step closer to being by Ino’s side. Not paying attention, she slipped on a mossy branch and plummeted to the ground. She groaned a little and sat up, glaring at a flock of black birds.

“What’re you looking at?” She glowered, righting herself and continuing on her journey. Though it was still dark, Sakura noted that sunlight would soon begin to peak over the mountainside.

That’s when she heard the barking. It frightened her at first, but the second sound caused her to almost crash into a tree trunk.

“Sakura!!” She heard Pakkun’s little voice yell. Her eyes grew brighter than they had been in years and a huge smile overtook her as the tiny pug jumped at her.

“Pakkun!! You found me!” She breathed in disbelief, hugging the dog as he excitedly wiggled in her arms. “I can’t believe it. Does that mean Kakashi is near?”

“Yes. This is wonderful!” He congratulated himself, though she could clearly hear the relief in his voice.

“Yes, you’re the best good boy.” Sakura cooed, scratching his head.

Pakkun let out a small growl, but leaned against Sakura’s petting. He pretended not to love it, but Sakura knew the weak spots behind his ears made him yip like a little puppy.

“We need to hurry. We’re in bad territory.” Pakkun whined, jumping out of her arms and beginning to leap from branch to branch, Sakura behind him. “Kakashi isn’t far.”

“I’m so relieved.” She breathed, tears pricking at her eyes, but she did her best to make sure they didn’t come through.
It took them about an hour to reach the spot where Kakashi had been waiting anxiously. She stopped a bit far away and watched him pace nervously before noticing her. She jumped down and grinned from ear to ear running up to him. She stopped just a step away from him. The proximity brought a blush to her cheeks.

“Good morning, Kakashi-sensei.” She hummed happily, looking up at him. Sunlight illuminated the tree line behind him. She searched his face for his response. He looked rough, but he also looked like he was thoroughly relieved.

“Good morning, Sakura-chan.” He breathed, carefully grasping her shoulders, doing his best to keep a respectful distance, but longing to physically reassure himself she was actually standing in front of him. “Did you sleep well?”

“Not terribly. I had a bit of a bad dream was all.” She whispered, hesitating for a moment as she moved just a second closer. She saw Kakashi’s hesitation as well, but he pulled her against him and wrapped his arms around her tightly. It was one of the most comfortable feelings in the world. He was so warm and so tender. It felt as though he was encasing her and protecting her from everything that happened.

“I’m glad to see you in one piece. You had me scared.” He admitted, breathing in the scent of her hair and closing his eyes tightly. “I’m glad you’re safe.” She could have sworn she heard his voice waver for a moment. One of his hands cradled the back of her head and the other stayed on her back, trying to take away all the pain she had experienced while away from him.

Carefully, her arms gripped onto the back of his vest and she clung to him. This was as close as she had ever felt to someone and it made every nerve ending in her body sing happily. She smiled against his shirt and nudged him lightly.

“You need to have more faith in me, Kakashi-sensei.” She chuckled.

“It’s clear that I must. I’m just… I’m so sorry… I should have never left your side.” He stammered for a moment. She backed up for a moment, but maintained physical contact. He looked so boyish just then, hair unkempt, skin dirty, face honest. It seemed a bit odd to her, but she noticed tears dripping only from his left eye.

She had so many cursed feelings about him just then. She wanted to kiss him, the urge was almost overwhelming, but she kept her safe distance.

“Thank you for coming after me.” She smiled.

“Not just me—“

“Sakura-chan!!” She heard Hinata’s normally shy voice yell as the girl bolted straight at her seemingly out of nowhere. Hinata grabbed Sakura and hugged her tightly, chest heaving. “Sakura-chan, thank goodness you’re alright, but you’re hurt. Your chakra is flowing oddly.”

“A couple of escape wounds.” She shrugged them off, lightly patting Hinata’s back to signal for her to stop squeezing her so tightly. “You should see the other guy.”

“Ah—sorry.” She blushed, bowing her head an increment. Shino and Kiba dropped down into the small clearing at nearly the same moment and smiled at her greatly. Two members of the Anbu followed shortly.

Sakura looked at them before frowning, then looking at Kakashi. Though they didn’t say a word, they had an entire conversation and he nodded sadly.
“Ostaka-san is missing, and Ostu-san has become classified as a rogue nin. She went crazy and ran from the village.” Kakashi said after a moment. Sakura’s eyes grew dark again and she looked down at her feet.

“I see.”

It was her fault.

“Let’s go back to the village. I’m sure Tsunade is eager to see you.” Kakashi spoke up after a moment.

“I would love that.” Sakura hummed, then frowned as time slowed to a stop around her. Dread settled into her stomach and she looked at a flock of black birds behind Kakashi. He was still. The colors seemed to fade and tears dripped down her cheeks. “No… no, don’t take this away—Itachi, please don’t take this away!! Leave me here--please!”

“Sakura.” She heard Itachi’s commanding voice and her eyes opened to a bright light bearing down on her. She could have cried if she still had it in her.

“You shouldn’t have run away, my love.” Sasori sighed, standing over her. She blinked in confusion. That delusion Itachi set in her mind had been so realistic. She was mortified. Sasori was doing something just out of her sight and when she tried to move she found herself to be totally immobilized. “I didn’t want to begin the procedure this early, but… it’s clear you need to be tied to this place to stay here. You didn’t run well either.” He reminded her, showing her his hand with the silver ring. “Tracking device.”

“H-How are you alive—is-is that b-blood?” She stammered, seeing his hand absolutely soaked in it.

“Yes, yours even.” He said blankly, giving her cheek a little pat and effectively smudging blood over her. She tried to look to see what he was doing but it failed. He hummed in displeasure. “Don’t fight the paralysis. You may begin to lose the numbing agent if you move around.” He warned and she stilled, not wanting to feel whatever he was doing. “Good girl.” He said after a moment. She felt a horrible cold wash over her midsection and was horrified as she spotted what looked like her skin being peeled from her. She groaned in anxiety and looked up at him. His eyes were beautiful and much more lifelike than she remembered.

It was an even and complete patch of skin from just below her breasts to just above her naval. Sakura gaped, heart picking up in pace. He would make her ugly if he skinned her.

“I need this as a base to begin growing skin from for your new vessel. I wanted it as close to the original as possible. Anything else won’t do.” Sasori said, smiling down at her. “Itachi, could you please bandage our lovely puppet?”

Itachi only hummed in response and used a light healing justu over the bare area, to stop the bleeding and create a film of regrowth over it so that when he bandaged it, it would be less painful. She wanted to scream, but it was not in her. She simply shut her eyes, letting tears drip from the corner of her eyes. She stared up at the Uchiha’s inky eyes after a moment, letting her mouth open just a hair to say something, though no words came out. Yet again, his visage reminded her of Sasuuke as he looked down at her with some sort of internal tumult cleverly concealed in a façade of emotionless indifference.

She became delirious, briefly wondering if she would spend the rest of her life in that state as it felt so regular. Sasori hummed a thin tune to himself as he worked and she maintained her eye contact with Itachi. He was trying to understand her, but was obviously failing in doing that as he
continuously looked her over. He glanced over his shoulder to look at the ruby-haired puppet master. Affirming that he was not paying attention, he shot his eyes back to Sakura’s activating his sharingan and taking her under a genjustu.

She sat in the courtyard of the academy back in the Hidden Leaf. There was a warm breeze, warm enough that it quelled the chill she had been feeling.

“You Uchihas…” She muttered, leaning her back against a tree and gazing at the sky. “You’re much more merciful than you let on, Itachi-san.”

The only response she got was the doors of the academy opening. Much to her surprise, it wasn’t her memories that she was seeing. Instead, she saw someone she immediately recognized. A huge grin crossed her face as a much smaller, much meaner-looking Kakashi walked out behind the crowd of soon-to-be-ninjas that eagerly left the school, ready to be done with education for the day. She chuckled to herself. He had an almost angry look in his eye and he shot her a glare when he saw her laughing. She couldn’t help but smile. He was a cute child.

“It’s weird to think of Kakashi-sensei as anything but an adult. Honestly, when Naruto-kun mentioned Kakashi-sensei’s younger years, I just pictured a shorter Kakashi. This is precious.” She hummed before waking.

Her frown returned, as did the cold.

Itachi backed away as Sasori approached her and looked down at her sadly. Something looked terribly different about him. She noticed his body was a tad different.

“How did you survive?” She murmured, tongue heavy from the effects of the toxins in her system.

“One day, I’ll tell you. For now, however, you have work to do.” Sasori hummed and put a bowl of something up to her lips. “Drink.”

Not wishing to find out what would happen should she choose to disobey, she drank slowly, feeling the numbness leave her system and a steady pain settle into her stomach. She winced, but sat up as he allowed it. He began to dress her and moved her from the table.

She drifted to her work station, dizzy with the pain.

Sakura stared dryly down at the samples of Tozlu, at the numerous enzymes, the numerous ‘treatments’. She zoned out for a moment before looking down to her bandaged stomach. Sasori would kill her. The thought only made her numb. She sighed and wiped the anguish from her face, replacing it with a mask of aloofness, that when she caught reflection of in the mirror, reminded her awfully of Sasuke and Itachi. It made her want to grin but she didn’t have the energy. Instead, she began working.

Sasori looked at her with a small smile. She was broken, now. He sighed dreamily and returned to his own station to continue work.

After a couple of hours of individual work, he brought his minimal advancements over to him and frowned a bit. He didn’t like being surpassed, but this girl surpassed him in many ways that he wouldn’t say aloud. He narrowed his eyes at her. “Itachi, are you ready for your procedure?” He asked, causing her to look at him with knowing, sorrowful eyes.

“Does that mean Ostaka-kun is here?” She whispered slightly.

“Yes,” Itachi nodded slightly.
“He’s already drugged, Sakura, but we must hurry. Itachi’s lungs are decaying quicker than the Kuren’s.” Sasori warned, manually pumping air into the knocked out Uchiha on his table. Sakura’s hands were steady and her eyes were focused but she was truly terrified of this procedure.

Sakura made the incisions and pulled the skin back, pinning it to his arms to hold it in place. Sasori watched curiously as she summoned chakra to her hands and stopped his bleeding, holding the blood in place before cleanly breaking his ribs and removing them. Her chakra pumped his heart and moved his blood, and now Sasori walked over to Ostaka, who had been drugged as well.

So this boy had watched over Sakura? He didn’t look nearly strong enough. He placed Ostaka beside Itachi on the other side of where Sakura stood, painstakingly doing her work. She concentrated so deeply she probably didn’t realize she looked angry, furious even. Cutting it free with an artist’s precision, she removed his infected lungs and put them on a slate of sterilized paper. She focused chakra into them as well to keep them in a breathing motion, the same way Hiroshi had once done to keep the ghost lungs alive.

She turned to do the same to Ostaka and paled deeply. Tears came to her eyes, but she didn’t let them blur her vision as she performed the same procedure to her friend. Her look of anger turned to that of desperation and in her mind she could see Ostu’s grieving face.

Total, it took three hours to successfully switch the lungs, and when she was done, her arms were wrapped around Ostaka’s shoulders and she cried helplessly. She didn’t care if she was in front of her master and the older brother of the boy she loved. Ostaka was her friend, and she had done that horrible thing to him.

“Let him go, Sakura, we have to put him back.” Kisame said gently, touching her shoulder. When she backed up, wiping her face stubbornly and glaring down at her feet. Kisame gave her a look as he lifted the large man. There were no signs of surgery as his chest was in the same state it had been when he arrived. Sakura turned away, light headed with grief and anger.

Itachi sat up, touching his chest at the light scars. She had left him with scars on purpose, but he hadn’t known why. He took a deep breath, now able to.

“It feels much better.” He said lightly. Sasori nodded and started cleaning up. There wasn’t much blood, but there was enough to bother him. Sakura began cleaning as well, silently with a dead look on her face. She looked better that way, he idly noted. Without another word he left. He was just like his brother.

“Sakura, go eat lunch.” Sasori ordered. “I will leave you alone.” Sakura nodded, silently thankful for the time apart. He hadn’t allowed her much of that. He even watched her as she slept, only sleeping one or two hours of the day to rest his mind, since his body didn’t crave slumber the way it once did when he was fully human.

She stepped out of her surgical scrubs and sat them in a hamper.

It wasn’t until she returned, that she felt better. She was still in a state of depression over what she had done, but she tried to look on the bright side of things. With Itachi’s life saved, Sasuke could kill him one day. She sat by a window and stared at the night sky. If Sasuke killed Itachi, surely he would then go back to the village, and even if she never saw him again, Naruto would have him and that was important to her.

“Melancholy is dangerous, Sakura.” Sasori said, sitting on the other side of the window and
watching the sky with her.

“Will daybreak ever come?” She asked quietly, fogging the window with her breath before tracing the image of a sun into it as it faded. “I would love to see dawn.” She was briefly reminded of her image of Kakashi and frowned again, staring down at her hands. No matter how she scrubbed them, she visualized blood all over them.

Sasori stared out of the glass for a long time before answering. “After we cure Tozlu, I will take you with me, and you will be my weapon when I attack Orochimaru. Then you will see the daylight.”

“I would love that, Sasori-sama.” She whispered, looking at him. He scanned her face for any signs of treachery, but only saw honesty. “That would be lovely…”

“What a twisted mind you have, my love.” Sasori muttered, returning his gaze to the moon. “If I’m not mistaken you tried often to be merciful?”

Sakura didn’t reply. She would not say it aloud in case of being discovered, but she enjoyed these moments. She watched Sasori after a moment as he examined the dark world outside as well.

“I would love nothing more than to kill Orochimaru.” Sakura sighed, a slight smile hiding behind her mask of neutrality. "He has caused me so much pain, hurt the ones I love, hurt my village. Kabuto, too. He deserves to die as well.”

“Orochimaru is a primary target.” Sasori hummed and stood up, offering her a hand. “Let’s spar, Sakura. I believe you need to train.”

Sakura made a noise of surprise and took his hand hesitantly. “Is this some sort of trick? Are you going to punish me for fighting you? What about harming you like I did before?”

“No, if you hope to kill Orochimaru, you need to train. I think it will be good for you, too.” Sasori nodded and traced his thumbs over her knuckles, still holding onto her hand. “I am not well-versed at taijutsu as I once was, but I know two who are.” He said after a moment of consideration. “Besides, a puppet should never try to harm their master.”

Sakura didn’t have a response to this, instead she awkwardly pulled her hand to her chest. “Is it wise for me to fight? If I get harmed I—“

“Don’t underestimate my skills as a medical nin just because I can’t perform surgeries like you can.” Sasori asserted, stepping closer. She cowered back a bit, causing him to smirk. He loved when she would try to evade him. “What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing!” Sakura hissed, trying to stand her ground a bit too late. He gripped her neck and walked her back into the wall where he slowly drug her up it. She glared at him. He was so tender one moment, then hostile the next.

“My… look at that disdain.” He breathed, enraptured by her eyes once more. “This is why I could never turn you into a lifeless puppet like the Kazekage… no, I will make you something so much worse. You will suffer so greatly.” He promised, leaning in to kiss her cheek tenderly. Her tears dripped down to where his lips met her flesh and he grinned against her cheek, kissing her again before letting her go.

She gasped for air, holding her neck.

She wouldn’t look him in the eye.
He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head. Was there a bit of confusion in her face? He could also spot the slightest amount of reddening. How odd.

“Go, ask Itachi if he’d like to spar. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind. His recovery is nearly over.” Sasori shrugged and turned his back, walking back to his work station.

Without another word she shuffled off. She held her hand where his had been. She grimaced, face contorting lightly with displeasure and complication. She shook her head a little bit and rubbed her face. Surely she didn’t begin to enjoy his harmful ways?

Sakura sighed loudly and groaned. “Sakura, you should have slit your own throat when you had the chance.” She said bitterly. She felt cast in jade. Still, she padded along in search of the Uchiha. She’d gotten better at sensing when someone was nearby. She came to his room and knocked lightly before hearing affirmation to enter.

She immediately averted her eyes, blushing even to the tip of her nose, but giving no sign otherwise that she had just walked in on him bathing himself. She cleared her throat a bit and looked anywhere else.

“Something the matter?” He asked evenly, clearly unaffected by the situation.

“She has told me to request a spar with you.” She managed. Was it hot in there? It felt hot in there.

“Ah. Training?”

“Yes, he wants me to fight—fight with you!” She coughed a bit, unsure why the intrusive thought had permeated her brain. She heard an odd noise. Itachi had chuckled. That was a sound she thought she'd never hear.

For a second, he could see the face of Izumi Uchiha standing quietly in the door way, requesting to train with him. He smiled lightly.

“Stop doing that.” Sakura muttered, briefly glancing up to look at his eyes—oh god it was so hard to keep eye contact. Why couldn't he just dress like a normal person?

“Smiling? Does it frighten you?” Itachi asked, climbing out of the open tub and using a towel to dry his hair. His disregard for his own nudity bothered her greatly.

“A bit. You’re supposed to be the villain in this story. Seeing you with humanity makes me question my morality.” Sakura said plainly. With all the time she spent with Sasori, hiding herself in the confines of her mind she had come to many conclusions about her own reservations.

“How insightful. Morality is fleeting, Sakura. Don’t hold onto it.” Itachi responded blandly and dressed himself comfortably before pulling on the typical Akatsuki's robe she was so used to seeing him without. “Here, change into this. Those scrubs will limit your movement and if you aren’t careful, I may end up killing you.”

“Ah, thank you.” Sakura said idly, catching the clothes he tossed her. She stared at him emotionlessly before he got the hint and turned around. She awkwardly slid out of her clothes, quickly throwing on the much-too large shirt and pants on.

“Hm…” Itachi observed when he heard her huff in completion. He grabbed a rope from his bedside table and tied it around her waist to hold the shirt in place, snipping it at the desired length and repeating this over the sleeves and cuffs of the pants.
Sakura stared at him with incredulity. She opened her mouth to question why he kept such a thing on the bedside table, but decided against it and pressed her lips together tightly. She didn’t want to know. She was trying to distance herself, after all.

“Let us go.” Itachi decided after making sure the clothes wouldn’t restrict any movements, get in the way, or fly off of her when she was dodge him. She truly would need to be at her best in order to properly defend herself from him. He had been inside her mind and saw there the intensive training Tsunade put her through. If she could survive that, there was very little reason to go easy on her. She followed behind him, watching his back as moved.

"I know so little about you." Sakura informed him. "This will be difficult training for me."

"You'll find I'm more knowledgable than you seem to give me credit for. I won't kill you, if that's what you're worried about." Itachi's voice was a bit lower. "We'll stick to taijustu then."

"Prepare to get your ass kicked." Sakura hummed, grinning at him as he glanced back at her.

"I didn't take you for the taunting type." Itachi replied, opening the door to the courtyard and stepping to the opposite side. Sakura took a good survey of their environment, looking for ways she could possibly get a head start against him with. "No justu or chakra focussing techniques on your part, and I shall not use my sharingan. Break this, and I will harm you greatly." He warned.

"Got it. Go easy on you." She nodded, pretending to be in deep thought when she smirked at him mirthfully.

Itachi huffed in amusement, shutting his eyes for a moment. He pulled the robe off and took a defensive stance. Sakura understood this to mean she got the first attack, so she charged at him, fist drawn back and ready to strike. He ducked as she punched, using his fore arm to deflect her as he aimed his own at her midsection. Tsunade had always taught her to leave a fake opening. She twisted midair, grabbing onto his deflecting arm as leverage and pushing herself back just as she thrust her leg out from underneath her, landing a kick in his chest. He let out a cough and glared at her, grabbing her foot and slamming her into the ground.

She hissed in pain and backed up just in time to dodge his next attack as he advanced on her. She needed to get to her feet, but with his constant movement, he made it difficult for her to have even a second of reprieve to right herself. Suddenly her back hit a large brick wall and he grabbed at her. She used the wall to push herself forward and she darted between his legs, crawling quickly away and jumping to her feet. He turned around, only to be met with a fist pounding into his cheek. He hit the wall and ducked as a second throw came.

She was breathing heavy from exertion. He had hardly broken a sweat. He wiped a bit of blood from his lips, originating from his cheek gnashing into his teeth when she punched him. She narrowed her eyes, trying to read his next movement. It was impossible.

He kicked back from the wall and jumped to the air above her. She ran from underneath him and evaded his next charge as well. He and Sasuke shared very similar fighting styles, she noticed. That was when her smirk returned. This time, she let him land a blow to her cheek that caused her to stumble and turn to shield herself from the next. His arm came in front of her neck and she quickly brought her own arms up, folded between her throat and his forearm as he tried to put her in a hold. She pressed her back against him tightly and broke the hold, causing him to stagger. She took this opportunity to do something Lee taught her, and she dropped her center of gravity, gripping him around his abdomen and using all her strength to lift him backwards. He flailed in her hold but she continued to use the momentum to bring him back. His head crashed into the ground behind her and she flipped from where she left him, taking a good distance.
It took him a moment to snap out of his disoriented state and he couldn't help but be amused. He hadn't seen it coming.

"You fight like Sasuke-kun." Sakura told him.

"He fights like me and our mother." Itachi corrected, standing up and rolling his shoulders a bit, feeling a slight amount of damage. "No more words." He warned, approaching her at a steady rate. Instinctively, she took a step back, but used her foot behind her to propel herself forward with a direct punch. She readied her right leg as well to strike when he would no doubt block her punch.

They went on like that for about half an hour before both of them were bloodied, bruised, and panting, a good distance apart.

"Without your sharingan, we're almost on the same level." Sakura said through her swollen cheek. She was still weaker than him, and her damages proved it, but she had held a good amount against him.

"Yes." Itachi said, nodding a bit and wiping blood from his eye. "You are very skilled in this, Sakura." He admitted, sitting down and patting the ground next to him. She approached him and sat in front of him instead, legs crossed.

"Thank you. It means a lot coming from one of the most dangerous criminals in all of the lands." Sakura grinned at him. He was unaffected by her labelling.

"I didn't see it in your memories, but your fighting style. It imitates Tsunade's as well as Kakashi's." Itachi informed her.

"And Lee's." She amended, nodding a bit. "Kakashi didn't directly train me, and I feel a bit left out from it, but I picked up on a lot of things while we went on missions together. Sometimes we would go as a duo on missions that required a bit more finesse."

Itachi nodded, listening to things he already knew. "You harbor feelings for your sensei."

Sakura's cheeks lit up with red warmth and she leaned back a bit in surprise. "Yes... I always had a very distant crush on him, but as we began going on missions alone, I found myself falling for him. When we were in Suna... I think I finally realized it."

"He's alive and looking for you." Itachi noted. Sakura's eyes darkened and she pulled her knees to her chest to comfort herself.

"You're cruel, Itachi."

"It's in my nature."

Sakura looked at him sadly. He was suffering as well.
“Hand me the new extraction.” Sasori ordered. Sakura wiped her hands free of blood, gently carrying the sample to him. She was soaked in Hidan’s blood as the immortal laid open on the table. He was being used more or less as a class of students would use a cadaver in a lab as Sakura constantly cut open, removed, chipped pieces from and injected things into his lungs.

“Are you two almost done?” Hidan asked, irritably. "This really hurts."

“Nearly.” Sasori lied. He had no quarrels putting Hidan in a bit of pain. He had after all, implied harm to his puppet. Harm among other things he would never allow this man to do to her. Sasori eyed Sakura as she worked diligently. She was an intrepid. She slept only when she was forced to, ran on little more than rice, fish, and recently coffee as Itachi had introduced it to her. She would stop working in ten minute increments occasionally, and at first her sneaking out had alarmed him.

He had grown so relaxed around his puppet that he didn’t notice when she slipped from the building. The first time however, he had a puppet in tow, something old he had made that resembled an iron maiden but was not fatal in the slightest. It only made the time spent inside of it very uncomfortable.

To his surprise, she had been perched on a tree branch, watching the never waning moon and eating something she had put together, or reading the letters she thought he didn’t know about. She had gone through so much to try and hide them. He wouldn’t punish her for it, but he knew she tore up floor boards to hide them under. Of course, he read them all. He didn’t mind her sending occasional reports to her sick friend that she was alive. She was never going back, and eventually he would sever that bond, but until the time where they found a cure, it was best to let her hope.

His thoughts snapped back to reality as she gasped in surprise, beating on his arm to get his attention. He quirked a brow. Every time she made some sort of discovery she became girlish and excited. It was simultaneously absolutely disgusting and deeply, undeniably adorable and he wanted to foster those feelings she had and let them grow. She was such an enigma to him. He wanted nothing more than to break her, and hold the pieces of her as close as possible.

“Look, this enzyme is eating away at the sand and turning it into sludge.” She muttered. “Which can be pushed out of the lungs using this justu.” She indicated something she had scribed on a scroll. He nodded lightly. She was good.

“Excellent. Let’s test it.” Sasori turned to Hidan. He was always quick to test things on the silver haired zealrous. Partially out of spite, partially because it was a better way than keeping his theories as that, but almost entirely because when Sakura began spouting on about her theories he understood not a single word of what she was trying to say. Either she would lose herself to medical jargon that had fallen from his vocabulary over the years, or, in her excitement she would stammer and mix up the order of her sentences.

“Fuck you.” Hidan groaned, already dreading what came next. He almost leaned away when Sakura looked at him. Her eyes had changed. It would have turned him on had he not been lying prone on a slab of metal, skin peeled back, lungs elevated so she could see their entirety, and blood held in his body just barely with some insanely fucked up justu Sakura had created for performing surgeries. He was beginning to suspect Sakura enjoyed hurting him. There was a glint of pleasure in her verdant eyes.

“Orders.” Sasori reminded him with a bit of a smirk. “Sakura, why don’t you do it?”
“I… would rather not…” Sakura lied meekly, eyeing the madman on the slab. She nonetheless clenched the syringe. Her hands tingled. The gore brought something about in her that she wouldn't want to explore even in the privacy of her subconscious.

“What part of that sounded like a suggestion, my love?” Sasori warned.

Sakura averted her gaze and approached, not caring to warn Hidan when she punctured his bared lungs with the needle. He glared at her, then Sasori, then Sakura again. He coughed viciously when the enzyme began to spread in each lung and devour the sand.

“D-Drowning!!--You bitch! I'm--can't breathe!” He choked, becoming red with anger at the two’s experiments. He only endured it because Leader threatened to seal him away if he didn’t comply. Suddenly, being immortal wasn’t all that great.

“Interesting, do you think…” Sakura muttered to herself, slicing the bottom of Hidan’s lung and sitting him up. She held a bowl under the incision as a sludge poured out, containing no sand. She smiled widely, having become used to the warm, fluid, visceral parts of Hidan’s insides. “Yes, now…” She healed the incision briefly before dropping the justu she had to hold Hidan’s blood in place. He paled significantly and it splashed onto her once again. It was a damning sight. Part of him was entirely too turned on by it for his own good (which explained why Sasori insisted on sitting something over his groin), and caused him a minuscule amount of fear. Sakura seemed to be developing a god complex, as he heard about most surgeons gaining while hovering over their patients. Kakuzu had described it well. While they laid beneath her hands, she was their god. What an evil bitch of a god she was.

“He’s like a fountain.” Deidara snorted from his stool in the corner Sasori had given him after his presence became troublesome. He had first pouted like a child, but wanted to stay nonetheless to watch Sakura work. He found her to be quite artistic. Deidara had wondered if she would be interested in doing a collaborative piece one day. He had always wanted to do art with the insides of his victims, but too often, nothing was left of his victims.

Sakura whispered something and a pink chakra flow lifted from her finger tips, almost identical to puppet strings. It gathered the sludge and safely pulled it from the membrane of the lungs. Hidan took a deep breath now, eyes wide as he looked at Sasori. It seemed his torment was over.

“That’s it… that heals it.” Sakura muttered, staring down at Hidan’s exposed innards. She still thumbed around for evidence of it. She used her chakra visualization to see inside his lungs. Clean. His chakra felt pure. He no longer had it. She smiled and laughed a little, sitting against an adjacent table. “That’s it…” She muttered. “Now if we could just make it safe for people who can’t be opened up like this one.”

“Deidara. You’re next. Lie on the table.” Sasori pointed to the one Sakura was leaning against, so she moved. Sasori went to work stitching up Hidan. “How will we do it on Deidara? Tube in the enzyme then use the same straw to cast the justu directly? That would minimalize risk of the sludge getting into the blood stream and stopping the heart.”

“Normally, yes, but the tube gauge required to do that would have him bleeding out.” Sakura grimaced and wiped a splatter of blood off her face. Her eyes had never looked greener. As much as it disgusted her, she was in her element. She hadn’t felt this alive in so long. She hadn’t realized how dormant she was until now. The smell of blood brought an unfamiliar tingling from her fingertips to her toes and she shivered at the thought.

Sasori saw it too. Every time she looked at him, heat rose to his cheeks. She was falling into madness
in such a poetic way he wished to capture it on canvas, and every night as she lie sleeping he tried so desperately to paint the portrait that showed it, but came up with nothing that could even hint at the phenomenal beauty of her own degeneration into the unknown. Sakura glanced at him and he smiled a little. Chiyo would be proud to see him this in love.

“If we could stop the heart, and blood flow, we could safely extract it before it reaches the bloodstream.” Sakura said then looked at Deidara, who portrayed an accurate fear of her. It made her heart flutter to see such a thing in his eyes, though she’d never admit it to herself. Even if it was less a fear of her, more a fear of what she would do to him and he would have to let her do. “I say we bring in someone to test in on, and not risk his life. There were some people in the Sand Village… scum. Rapists, Murderers. May we try it on them?” Her voice wasn’t as even as his own, but he recognized the calm of a familiar distance.

“Yes, if that is what you wish.” Sasori sighed, smiling a little. “I’ll send Kisame out at once.” His arm wrapped around her shoulders and he buried his face into her blood splattered hair. Hidan’s squirming and incessant moving had effectively caused her to be covered with it, as it would occasionally break the surface tension of Sakura’s justu that held it firmly in place. She looked even more beautiful like that. He kissed her neck lightly, causing her to shudder against him. “For the rest of the day, why don’t you relax? I had Kisame bring books from your home in the Hidden Leaf.” He informed her.

“Thank you, Sasori-sama.” She smiled a bit. “But I think I’d rather train for now.” She hummed, eyes sparkling lightly at the idea of being used against Orochimaru, still. What he said had given her hope.

“That will be fine.” He warned and waved her off. She exited promptly, going back to Sasori’s bedroom to change into something easier to train in. She spotted a package on the bed addressed to her.

Her brow quirked in confusion and she carefully unwrapped it. A huge grin crossed her face. Her headband, a set of her casual clothes, and a set of her usual clothes. She quickly put on the usals, finding them best to train in. She tugged her elbow coverings up her arm and secured her kneesocks just over the top of her calf. She practically purred. Nothing fit better than those. She grabbed her headband, but frowned deeply when she saw the symbol had been marked through. No doubt Sasori’s doing. Still, she used it to hold the majority of her hair back, only letting her bangs, though neatly trimmed as they were fall in front of her face. At the bottom, she found a hair beret she recognized to belong to Ino.

Her eyes widened a bit as she held it in her hand, thinking over the possibilities of what it might mean for her to receive it. Had Kisame stolen it to cheer her up? She’d preferred to think of it as that, so she clipped it onto the high collar of her top. She smiled in the mirror and wiped a bit of blood from the ends of her hair.

Back in the lab, Sasori had just about cleaned everything up.

“What’re you going to do about her thinking she gets to go back once it’s cured, Sasori?” Deidara hummed. Hidan looked at Sasori expectantly. “It’s kinda nice having her around here. She smells nice, and she does the dishes.”

“She shouldn’t have to clean up your messes, Deidara, that isn’t why she’s here.” Sasori growled at the thought of Deidara forcing Sakura to do chores. That’s not why his puppet was here. “For fuck’s sake. You’re a grown man, you shouldn’t need a woman to wash the dishes.”

“But it’s so dull, yeah?” He whined. “Just standing there cleaning things?! Boring!”
“You’re avoiding the question, when are you going to tell her she can’t go back? Can I tell her?” Hidan cackled, a wicked grin across his face. “I’d love to make her cry.”

Sasori shot him a warning glare. “I’m the only one allowed to make her cry. She’s mine.”

“When?”

“I’ll tell her when I feel like it! It’ll affect her work ethic if she finds out now so you’ll do well to keep your mouth shut, no matter how hard it may be for the likes of you.” He ground out each word with more venom at the last, directed at the two men in front of him. “Why don’t you go find some whore house, Hidan? The sexual tension emanating off of you is disgusting. You dick was hard through the entire procedure.”

“Off of me?!” Hidan nearly choked on his laughter. “Here I thought you couldn’t even fuck someone—do you have a cock on that puppet body of yours?!”

“He does now.” Deidara murmured to Hidan, mouth hidden behind a hand. Both of them chuckled when Sasori’s cheeks grew red.

“You shouldn’t talk of me with such disrespect.” Sasori warned. He said nothing more to the two as he shoved open the door of the lab and left. He didn’t have to take that.

The hallway was silent as it normally was, other than the occasional creak in infrastructure. Since Sakura had been there, Sasori made Deidara install more lights. She had made the off handed comment one day, simply to fill the silence that it was too dark. Sasori found himself doing lots of pointless things for that woman. Like including body parts onto his body that he hadn’t bothered with before. He never had use of it before. He didn’t eat or hydrate so it wasn’t a necessary part for urination. He had never bothered with sexual intercourse. It never appealed to him before, but now it had.

Sasori sighed, hand pressed against the cold door of his workshop. He didn’t realize it before, but he was incredibly lonely. Pushing the thought to the back of his mind, he opened the door and stepped in, admiring the scent of quebracho wood and lacquer. Sasori stepped up to a curtain and gently pulled it aside. There was a wooden frame of a puppet, standing 154 centimeters high. It was skeletal, but had the base for Sakura’s measurements, though a bit shorter due to his own want to tower over her.

His fingertips grazed the jaw bone and he picked it from its hook and carried it lovingly over to his work bench, laying it down across the table. He turned on the overhead lamp and looked over his shoulder at a cabinet of parts. None of the glass eyes he had made for him were nearly beautiful enough. He’d have to use her own eyes, or find a way to capture their beauty. The easier route would be to use hers.

Sasori sighed, pulling a blanket over his soon-to-be-Sakura, as if she was cold. He walked over to a tank where he was growing skin. He had taken a small portion of the graft he had collected from her and gave it a frame to grow over. Surely enough, just as his had done, it began to ‘heal’ over its new frame of muscles and sinew.

Those were artificial as well. Much stronger, denser than what could be human. He had made them specifically for Sakura. They would never deteriorate like hers would if not in use. She was lightly muscled and toned all over and he didn’t want her to lose that upon coming to her new body. He smiled. He’d have to do the same for his body.

The creation of his new puppet was inspiring him to change so much about himself, mainly of the
He went back to the table and looked over a list. There was still the matter of hair, eye lashes, supercilia, and fingernails. He had already decided to use her original teeth. They were slightly crooked and he adored the little gap she had between her front teeth. When he had switched bodies he had made himself the definition of perfection in lines with evolutionary and beauty standards. He wanted to keep her as she was. Her imperfections made her a masterpiece, something only a great artist could truly appreciate.

He felt his own eye lashes. He had used silk for all of his puppets as it was easy to procure and minimally realistic against the clear grain of wood, but she deserved something better and more realistic. He would admit, despite his best efforts, his puppets lacked a certain lively quality. Sasori sighed, rubbing his neck. It would be a pain to acquire, but he had heard of beauticians using mink or sable fur to make eyelash extensions for socialites and such. Of course then he would have to take great care to somehow make them curl like hers did naturally.

A knock at the door startled him from his thoughts.

“Yes?” He called, semi-annoyed at this interruption. It showed in his voice.

“E-Excuse me.” Sakura started, cracking the door. Sasori narrowed his eyes at her curiously. Normally if she had the chance to get away from him, she would hide from him until he retrieved her with the information that she needed to sleep. “I-I was j-just… can I stay in here?” She whispered.

He knew immediately that something was wrong, and his first thought was that Hidan had done something. After a moment of thought on the matter, his brow knit and he nodded.

“What is it, love?” He asked, gesturing for her to approach him. She did, slinking carefully over to him a bit closer than she normally did. She was twitching. Her eyes were wide.

“It’s j-just,” She stammered. “Never mind.” She finished, shaking her head. She sat at his feet and stared at the wall in front of her, just on the other side of the work bench. He cocked his head, but ultimately decided not to pry. Had Hidan done something, he was confident Sakura would’ve beaten him out of his immortality. She was that type of woman, after all.

He gently stroked her hair, comforting her. She seemed to cease her trembling, but she kept staring down at her hands. It became clear to him that she was hallucinating when she tried to wipe something from them that he was not able to see.

As wonderful as it was to have her broken in for him, it seemed to produce some unfortunate side effects.

“Do you ever think about the people you’ve killed?” She asked, beginning to shake a bit once more. He stared for just a moment more before returning to his work.

“Occasionally. Likely not in the sense that you are, that would be a waste of time. Why?” He asked now.

“I… when I was looking for you, I killed… I killed three people. Two of them, because I thought you had sent them after me.” She confessed. He paused his work and looked down at the top of her head. He hadn’t sent anybody for her except his colleagues. “The first one drugged me, so I feel justified in that, but the other two? Now I’m not even sure they were hostile towards me… I slaughtered them without giving them a chance for mercy.”
“That isn’t something to be ashamed of. Who cares if you kill someone? The human life is short, and sad. There’s no denying it.” He dismissed her guilt and began tinkering with a joint again, realigning it.

“What if someone killed me?” She asked, now looking up at him, though his eyes stayed trained on the task at hand.

“I would kill them, and likely their family and friends. You are my possession and nobody can harm my possessions.” Sasori only made a quick glance at her. She was crying again. He popped the shoulder into the ball joint and rotated it to make sure it did so correctly. He placed a limit on the rotation so that when the muscle and skin would be attached, they would not tear due to over rotation.

Sakura sighed in response, leaning against his leg and blushing down at the floor. Being this close made her uncomfortable. Sitting on the floor at his feet made her uncomfortable. For whatever reason, she wanted to do those things regardless. She yawned. It had been a long day. A productive day, but a long one nonetheless.

“Let’s rest, shall we?” Sasori asked, but didn’t truly give her an option as he leaned down to scoop her up. “We have a busy day tomorrow. We will be testing methods on the new subjects, and we will be purifying one of Kakuzu’s hearts to put back in him.”

Sakura settled into his arms and wrapped her own around his neck. If she was to be his captive, she would at least let herself experience some form of intimacy. It was foreign, but it made her flutter lightly, and she craved that closeness with him. Even if he was going to hurt her at any given moment. He was completely unpredictable, but she began to grow accustomed to it, and it didn’t bother her as much as it first had.

He walked her through the compound.

“I see you got the package Kisame had delivered. I felt you would be more comfortable in your own clothes. Your incessant whining about what I picked out was beginning to grate my nerves.” He informed her. She shrunk a little in his arms.

“I’m sorry.” She whispered. She felt weak. She felt little.

“No worries. You’ll make it up to me through effort towards the cure.” He said with a kiss to her temple as he laid her on the bed. He pulled the clothes from her body, a process that still made her blush just as much as when he first did it, though now she didn’t try to shield herself from his gaze. He was silently grateful. She was such a beauty. She didn’t have the proportions of other women approaching her age, but there was an undeniable charm to her.

Sakura curled up under the sheets and after a moment’s hesitation, Sasori moved underneath of them with her, something he hadn’t done before. For whatever reason he had begun to crave proximity in his very bones. Perhaps it was a side effect of his clear addiction to her. Sakura backed up immediately, getting as far from him as possible. He grinned a little bit at her annoyance for her personal space being invaded.

“Shy, dear?”

“You say dear with too much force.” Sakura narrowed her eyes in the dark at him and now did shield herself from him, but he grabbed her and pulled her up against him, one arm encasing her shoulders, the other just at her pelvis to hold her still. He smiled against her fragrant hair. “Why are you doing this?” She practically whined, squirming to get out of this hold.
“Sakura, you pretend not to know.” He chuckled and acting upon a urge that was foreign to him, he hit her neck tightly, causing her to cry out mostly in shock though no doubt in some amount of pain from it. He hummed in pleasure as her struggling died down and he released her neck from his bite. “Had I been more like my colleagues I would have taken you by now.” He whispered against the shell of her ear. She shivered in his arms, but chose not to reply.

“Please…” She whispered so softly, he barely heard it. “Please don’t do that.” She implored, feeling sick to her stomach at the idea. She had always planned to give herself to Sasuke. Sasori quirked a brow, almost offended.

“Saving yourself or some other nonsense like that?” Sasori asked.

“Y-Yes, I am.” She confessed, truthfully though she was not wanting to tell him in fear of retaliation.

Sasori considered her for a moment. So she feared the loss of her virginity? He could use it against her, no doubt. It would be tame compared to the torment she would endure during the switch from human to puppet. He even laughed a little bit.

“You realize, not only is your body mine, but it won’t matter anyway? I’m going to destroy this body in order to bring you new life.” Sasori drawled darkly, nipping at her neck again as she began to tremble against him. “I could take you right now and there would be nothing you could do to stop me.”

There was nothing Sakura could say to diffuse the conversation from that topic. She considered bolting from the room, but that would likely encourage him to torture her once again. She could attack him, but it would only end in punishment. She didn’t want to lose any more skin, or worse, this time a body party. She sighed and resigned to her fate by just lying there. Maybe if she didn’t give him the fear he craved from her, he would not find it entertaining. That was obviously what he wanted. He was a sadistic bastard, after all.

“Your silence angers me, my little puppet.” He shifted until he was on top of her, slowly grabbing her hands and intertwining their fingers but pinning them against the mattress. His eyes were dark, but she could clearly see the malice there. She shivered and looked away. The thought that she might enjoy it was too much for her and her cheeks began to redden. “I realize, that you think you’re going to get out of this untouched, as you are now.” He considered, looking over her face for any sign of deception. “That isn’t the case. I suppose I’ll have to be more clear on the matter.”

As he pressed his body into hers, she now began to struggle against his hold, eyes widening and mouth becoming suddenly dry as her heart picked up its pace.

“W-Wait, Sasori-sama, please don’t do this—I don’t consent.” She whispered.

“Your consent doesn’t matter to me. I own you.” He reminded her and shifted again, though much more quickly, pulling her wrists together and binding them with a chakra thread. “I wish to use what I own.”

Panic set in and she began kicking at him.

“I won’t let you.” She hissed. She had managed to buck him off and he toppled to the side, but now he was furious with her. He was upon her once again, though this time, his hand came to her throat and she was displeased to find him squeezing tightly, though not the front of her neck. She could have cried when she realized he was only subduing her. Not wanting to risk losing consciousness is such a way, she relented and he was on her once again, pressing her heavily into the mattress.
“There’s my good girl.” He chuckled when she began crying.

“You’re disgusting.” She whispered, trying to hide her face from him.

“I’m fine with you believing that. I don’t value your opinion.” He grinned and flipped her over causing her to yelp in surprise when he held her face into the pillow but raised her hips up with his other hand. She screamed for help, but nobody came to her aid. She had sensed a chakra signature just outside of the door, but despaired as it began to walk away. She screamed again, though this time in pain as he shoved two fingers into her, completely dry. “My… we might have a slight difference in opinion, but I believe… you’re about to have a very bad experience. I hope nobody told you, but you’re always going to remember your first time.”

“Please, Sasori-sama, please don’t do this to me.” She begged, balling her fists up in the sheets and burying her face. Her words were muffled but he understood her perfectly. “Please.”

“Groveling now won’t work. You should have tried that earlier.” He said casually, molding his body to hers and biting the back of her neck lovingly as he began to move his fingers in and out of her, almost curiously as if discovering her. She whined in pain and squirmed underneath him. She was almost relieved when she felt him retreat, but she let out another harsh cry when something much thicker than his fingers pressed into her.

Her breath hitched uncontrollably before she let out a shriek of pain. Sasori let out a groan of pleasure as he held her tightly in place, savoring every moment of her agony. The combination of how tight she was, and how she screamed nearly did him in. He moved slowly at first, and much to her dismay, she felt he was moving easier due to her natural lubrications.

“What’s this, little doll?” He growled against her ear. “You’re so broken that you enjoy when I torment you.” His face was taut as he tried to control his expression. He began moving more quickly as it became easier, thrusting into her fully before withdrawing to do it again, each time a bit rougher than the last. Sasori relented to his previously unfelt urges and began to pound into her, barely giving her any reprieve to take a breath as she screamed between sobs and begged uselessly. It only excited him further.

Sakura stopped struggling now and just sobbed into the sheets, wishing he would just be done with it. He seemed to be dragging it out and it became clear that he wasn’t doing it for his own pleasure, but rather to torture her. It was working. She became so lost in her despair that her cries grew quiet and she wept much more quietly into the mattress. She was in so much of a fit that she just now noticed he had been holding her in place with his teeth on her neck. She groaned in pain, whispering small pleas to him. Much to her surprise, he slowed down and pulled out only to reenter her once he flipped her onto her back.

The manhandling was beginning to bother her, but she didn’t want to let him know in fear of it increasing.

“My little puppet… you’ve grown quiet.” He said and leaned down. She immediately felt the need to press further into the bed until she was lost in the mattress. He kissed her tenderly. So gently that it made her all at once need to vomit and melt against him. She was mad, surely. Sakura looked up at him hesitantly when he withdrew.

Her eyes were puffy from tears, but her cheeks were extremely heated. She looked him in the eye now. He had such cold eyes, but beyond that she could see affection. Very slowly, as if walking on ice, she raised up to her elbows and kissed him of her own accord. He didn’t deserve it. He deserved death for all he put her through, the logical part of her knew that. The logical part of her had a voice that grew dimmer and less important with every second. Survival was key, and survival came by
giving into him.

Sasori was no less than shocked when she kissed him, but he allowed a lovelorn smile to grace him. It was a beautiful sight, and Sakura would do her best to engrain it in her memory. She blinked her tears away and frowned.

“I didn’t like it.” She whispered.

“It wasn’t for you to like.” He reassured and kissed her forehead this time as he elected to lay next to her, done with harming her.

“W-Wait, aren’t you supposed to… you know…” Sakura trailed off, not sure how to word it. “Is that all there is to sex?”

“That wasn’t sex,” Sasori led with. “And I didn’t give myself the sexual organs for completion. This was an experiment on my part.”

“Oh…” Sakura had lost her virginity to one of his experiments? That was perhaps more painful than if she lost it to his cruelty. She wanted to cry, but she was certain there were no more tears left. He cuddled against her, pulling her close and trapping her there. She stared up at him blankly. He drained her completely.

“Get some sleep, Sakura.” He ordered and she shut her eyes, though her mind was reeling and it became difficult for her to focus on anything other than the painful ache in her pelvis. She wanted so badly to go home. She hated this. She was losing herself. After a while of not finding sleep at all, she opened her eyes again and turned her head slightly so that she could see Sasori.

Without her consciously noting it, he had rolled onto his back, giving her space. She laid on her back as well, lightly gripping his hand in her own. A mockery of hand holding. She stared up at the dark ceiling, just as he did with his golden eyes. The ceiling provided her no answers, no comfort, no peace, only a void. In that void, she found a comfortable state of simply not thinking.

Sasori mentally acknowledged she grabbed his hand, but he made no move to reciprocate her intimacy, or push her away. He simply laid there, staring at the dark ceiling. The ceiling provided him a blank canvas for his mind to wander upon. In that canvas, he painted a picture with his minds eye of Sakura's mutilated corpse as he would remove the most beautiful parts of her to put on the new Sakura.
Suppression

Her restful form lied under the thin sheets of his bed. He sat by her side, idly tracing patterns on her alabaster skin. He had gotten in the habit of bathing her, dressing her, trimming her hair instead of letting it be the choppy mess it was previously. With his other puppets, they required very little upkeep. Admittedly, he was having fun taking care of his doll. He had bought her several outfits she was forced to wear when not working on the cure. It was more for his amusement at seeing her constantly trip over the hem of her skirts, or messing with the ornate filigree, or even being entirely too shy to leave the room in some of the outfits he had chosen for her. Of course it was nothing to ostentatious, but it was obviously things that made her uncomfortable, and that thrilled him.

He saw a new side of her blossom. She was well taken care of. They only worked about 7 hours a day, as opposed to her previous 14-20. He smiled as she turned over in her sleep. There was a pink hue to her cheeks and her lips were parted slightly. He ran a fingertip from her forehead to the tip of her nose, admiring the gentle slope.

Even with all his years of crafting beautiful dolls for the sake of creating art, he himself was the prettiest thing he had managed, and now he was faced with something beyond his own portrait. She had an unusual quality to her features. They didn’t reflect what he was taught was beautiful. As he researched her when first trying to find a partner to work with on Tozlu, he learned she was teased for being ugly. He supposed those who were antagonizing her were right. She was not the definition of beautiful, but she possessed a type of beauty that had yet to be written. No poet had told of her yet. He would be the one to show the world how lovely she was.

He leaned in to kiss her again. He shut his eyes, enjoying the feeling of her lips for a moment before drawing back and brushing the bangs from her eyes. He let himself smile as one hand wrapped delicately around her neck and imagined drawing the life from those deep emeralds of eyes.

There were so many conflicting desires surrounding the girl. He wanted to kill her, to set her free, to take her, to run away with her, but he wanted desperately for her to love him. Something she would likely never do. Would he have to kill those in her dreams? Sasuke Uchiha? Kakashi Hatake? He knew their names, could likely find them fairly easily. It would be a matter of ease for him to off the two men who stood in his way.

He sighed and propped his head up on his fists. He would not pursue them. He would simply have to show her that she couldn’t live without her master. He was all she had. Perhaps killing that Ino-girl would do it? He doubted it would have the desired effect. It’d likely only send her into despair.

Sasori grimaced, gently tracing the sun spots on Sakura’s shoulders from years of not covering properly from the sun’s damaging warmth. He hated and loved to sit there as she slept. It was torture. Every part of him wanted to claim her, but he had to do it carefully. She needed to love him, and to be loyal to him.

He couldn’t tell if it was good or bad, but he saw her creating bonds with Itachi and Kisame. Itachi, he didn’t mind. In fact, he thought it healthy for Sakura to be exposed to the Uchiha. He could teach her quite a bit about madness but loyalty as well. Kisame was the problem. He made her too happy. If not for Kisame’s disposition towards men, Sasori would have felt jealous. Sakura enjoyed spending her ‘free’ time with him by the creek.

Sasori stood up as the clock struck seven and gently rustled his sleeping puppet. She slowly opened her eyes and frowned deeply as she was roused from what must have been a peaceful dream. Since she was now by his side, he asked Itachi to implant some sort of happiness into her dreams, or at
least serenity. He carefully toyed with her sanity, often physically harming her and mentally comforting her, or the other way around. She became glass-like. It was beautiful.

“Good morning, Sasori-sama.” She hummed slightly. It was this odd thing she did, where she greeted him, despite the hatred that burned. “Did you sleep well?” She asked, sitting up and smoothing her hair into place with the hair brush on the night stand. Though she was first reluctant, she took much better care for herself. Sasori was caring in that way, and it pissed her off to no great length. She first yelled at him when he came at her with a brush. He had only smirked and held her down.

“I did. Did you, my puppet?” He played along, taking the hair brush from her and turning her around. He smiled, gently running his fingers through her hair before brushing it out a bit more before diving it into sections and lovingly plaiting it. He tied it off with a light blue ribbon and trailed his fingers along her exposed shoulders.

He had her sleep in a thinly strapped night gowns, often to admire what he considered one of her most docile features. She had sun spots, light scars here and there, and little freckles on her shoulders and neck, ones she hadn’t even noticed until she caught him tracing constellations on them. She would grimace and shrug it off, as she always did when he told her she was beautiful.

She was damaged in a lighthearted way. She refused to believe in any worth that didn’t come from dedicated education or training. He didn’t care too much to convince her, but it still occasionally irked him that she would just brush off compliments of her appearance.

Sasori retrieved her clothes for the day. A long, black dress with a slit on the side. It was a typical garb found in Suna, and in the back of her mind, she drew a connection between it and what Temari liked to wear. He stood her and dressed her, hands lingering on her waist as he tied a waist band of fabric around it in a deep crimson hue. He pulled a sleeveless maemigoro over her as well, same hue as the obi, as it barely reached her ankles.

It fit perfectly, as the clothes always did, Sakura noted bitterly. Each piece she began to catch on, also complimented the silver tracking device around her neck. Despite having given her the clothes she would have wanted to wear, he insisted on dressing her like some sort of doll. To make it worse, the fabric around her waist dug into the still-healing wound he had given her after running away.

“These are not practical,” Sakura whispered. “I can’t work in these.”

“You can change while we work.” Sasori said, pinching her hip tightly until she broke her mask of aloofness to wince and double over against him, trying to dull the sharp pain. “Be grateful.”

“Thank you, Sasori-sama.” She muttered angrily, staring down at her toes. Those too, had been painted and taken care of. Sasori took such good care of her, she was beginning to feel comfortable with him. Her skin was soft and her cheeks had a vibrant hue. She was well hydrated, even if she still ate very little partially out of silent protest.

“Come, little marionette.” He hummed, opening the door for her.

She nodded and walked as he directed her. Even the pet names were growing on her, as much as they made her want to weep.

“You will sit here while I work.” Sasori ordered, pulling a stool to the end of his workbench. Sakura sat on it carefully and watched him with a bit of suspicion. He bit his thumb, summoning a rather large puppet.
“Sasori-sama… how do you make those?” Sakura asked, half bored, half curious.

“My little marionette is curious about the process?” Sasori hummed, not looking away from his work as he lay the puppet down and began dismantling the former Kazekage. “I begin with the corpse of a powerful warrior.” He said lazily, holding the Kazekage’s head by the hair and handing it to her.

If nothing else had been creepy so far, that got under her skin. With shaking hands, she took it and examined it.

“I often don’t use their original skin, I usually keep it all wood; the only things I really need are their hearts, maybe a couple of bones to make the process easier. In his case, I took his hair as it was so characteristic of him. The eyes are his as well, though cast in resin to preserve them.” Sasori drawled on as Sakura fidgeted with the eyelids, pulling it back to gaze into the eyes, or moving the jaw to see how it worked.

“What about me? Will…”

“I’m going to use all of you. Nerves, blood vessels, bones, teeth, even down to your fingernails. I want it to look exactly like you. Though your process will be excruciatingly painful.” His words didn’t make her flinch. Much to her dismay, she blushed a bit. This was some sort of compliment.

“Will I look like this?” She asked, handing the head back to Sasori as he oiled the joints of that as well.

“Will I be dead?”

“No…” Sasori paused from his work and approached her. She didn’t move, just looked up at him as he stood in front of her. With one hand caressing her hair, the other undid his cloak until his chest was exposed. He brought one of her hands to the cylinder that contained his heart, chakra, and life force. “You will be like me.”

Sakura now blushed intensely, but looked at the circular thing on his chest with a bit of scrutiny. She wondered the process, but decided not to ask any more questions for the day. Instead, she very slowly, very hesitantly let her hand drift along his torso until she came to the alcove of his midsection that was cut out to reveal, instead of intestines, a long coil with a spearhead at the end, she noticed it still contained poison on it.

“I’ll be changing my own body as well,” Sasori said, thankful that no betraying shade of blush could rise to his cheeks. “I’m going to change it to better suit what you’re used to, Sakura.” Sasori said after a heavy moment of consideration.

Sakura simply stared for a moment, before looking down at her hand. “Sasori, do you love me?” She asked curiously. Now it was Sasori’s turn to stay in silence for a moment.

“I love all of my puppets.” He said dismissively, stepping away from her.

Sakura glared at him when his back was turned. Now she knew that the cylinder in his chest was the part of him that was living. All she had to do was destroy it. She wouldn’t make a move at the moment, but soon… once he let that guard of his down. She would kill him and flee the compound and run faster than she had before, then she would go straight to Tsunade and be safe in her home village.
“Let’s go for a walk.” Sasori decided. He didn’t need to do such things, but keeping her physically active was important to her health, and she would remain healthy one way or another. He had her taking vitamins, medicines to bolster her immune system, and many other sorts of supplements. He was genuinely concerned she would fall ill with the disease, being at such close proximity to it. He got no response, but heard her soft foot falls as she followed behind him. He was deep in thought when he was startled.

Turning lightly, he saw her face plastered against the concrete floor, clothes flattened. Unresponsive. His eyes went wide with shock and he whirled around, immediately picking her up. Her cheeks hadn’t been red with a blush this whole time, she was ill, just as he feared. He pressed a cold hand to her forehead and grimaced.

“Maybe not.” He muttered, referring to the walk. He gathered her in his arms and walked to the bathroom. “A cold bath may dispel this fever.” He told her, though he wasn’t sure she understood him.

Her eyes were open but lidded and it looked like she was trying to say something but it failed her. Her voice never came out. He turned the water on, bringing it to a luke warm as to not shock her. Delicately, he set her in the filling tub after stripping her. She was still too light to be healthy. He frowned deeply when she looked at him. She was in pain, but he didn’t cause it, so he didn’t like it.

“My mother told me…” She muttered quietly, not hearing her own voice. “When you have a fever this bad… it was because something happened to you in another life, at that exact moment. Something big.” She murmured, looking down at her hands. “Why am I covered in blood?”

Sasori narrowed his eyes, looking her over. She wasn’t, other the occasional leak of blood into her bandages that would now have to be changed.

“You don’t have to control me with these strings.” She nearly hissed now, face contorting in anger. “I’ll do what you want.”

Sasori didn’t respond. Had he gone too far? Had he broken her at her core? He heard her laughing as she set her head back. Her skin was warm, but she was shivering. He wanted to grip her hand but he did not.

“Maybe I killed you… in another life… that’s what this is.” Sakura grinned through her chuckles, watching him for a reaction. He simply narrowed his eyes sadly. “I bet th-that I set you on fire. Or stabbed you. I feel… I saw… you hanging, suspended on swords from two puppets… one woman, one man. You whispered something, and had that same bored look in your eye.”

“Would that truly please you?” He asked, almost curiously.

“No.” She answered simply, sinking into the water. It hurt. It felt so cold. He watched her carefully as she slid beneath the surface, staying there for a moment before opening her eyes and looking up at him. Her hair floated gently against her soft skin. He reached into the water and moved it away from her eyes, staring at her.

She stayed there too long. Was she looking for a way out? She slowly let the air from her lungs, looking up at him still. He looked so handsome, she noted. His eyes were sad and honest. His hair framed his face like a bloody halo. Eventually she came up, controlling herself and only breathing in slowly. He moved the hair from her face once again. She found him doing it often.

“You’re beautiful.” Sasori told her, using the back of his hand to feel her cheek. “I want to keep you like this.”
Sakura looked away now, idly tracing circles on her thighs. She grew comfortable being nude around her master, because his eyes didn’t look at her that way now that he had raped her—or at least she didn’t notice if they had—he looked at her more like a puzzle, and that she didn’t mind. Her eyes drifted up to him once more, belatedly looking at him. His eyes were more of a honey than the yellow she initially thought, and his hair was choppy but well kept. It was his portrait that caused her heart to flutter a bit.

Perhaps it was the careful conditioning he put her through with those mind games of his, but seeing his face comforted her as well as disturbed her. It made her skin crawl, but all she wanted to do was take it between her palms and stare the way one looked at the moon.

She shivered a little bit and he checked her temperature. “Come, let’s get you fed and rested. We will work on Kakuzu a bit today, but other than that it is clear you need to rest.” He decided, picking her up from the water and setting her on her feet.

At first she hated being picked up, but now she was growing accustomed to it. She stayed still as he went on to dry and dress her. He knew she was perfectly capable, but he took some sort of pleasure in taking care of her, that she didn’t care to question one way or another. It was one less thing she had to do. He could do it all he wanted.

She began staring off into space again, so he guided her to kitchen and watched as she prepared a simple meal. She hopped up on the tall counter, eating at a slower than usual pace. Sasori stood there for a moment before moving and pulling her knees apart so he could stand between them. She set her bowl down and looked at him curiously. With the height of the counter, the top of his head came just under her chin.

It didn’t take her long to realize his intentions as he wrapped his arms tightly around her waist, settling his ear against her chest and listening to her heart beat. She was so warm, still, though not dangerously so. He shut his eyes and stayed there.

A grimace tugged her lips and she looked for a way out, but seeing no such thing, she resigned to her fate and hesitantly put her arms around his head, holding him in place. It felt good to hold someone like that, even if the situation made it entirely wrong. She idly played with his hair, feeling how soft it was between her thumb and forefinger. She felt sleepy. Her eyelids drooped and her posture dimmed.

He whispered something to her but she didn’t quite hear it as she drifted asleep, propped up on her captor. He smiled a little and pulled her from the counter, holding her bridal style and quite closely. She stirred only to set her head against his shoulder and fall back asleep.

“I suppose a nap would be good.” Sasori decided, carrying her back to his bedroom. He laid her gently on the bed and crawled on it with her this time, lying beside her and watching her eyes move languidly beneath their hoods. He treasured this time where he could look at her so tenderly. He was careless though. He had showed too much affection. He needed to hurt her. She needed to fear him. It was obvious she didn’t when, after waking for a brief moment, she snuggled up against his chest and put her arm around him, just as a lover would. This project was going decidedly awry.

“Hey, Sasori…” She muttered, waking up a bit. “Do you think… we’ve met before?”

“I would remember hair like yours… or a temper like yours.” Sasori said quietly, placing his hand behind her head and running his fingers through her locks.

“I mean, in another existence. Maybe we were friends before.” She whispered, no doubt delirious. “I
bet if we were both kids, still young and not tainted by the way of the shinobi... we would’ve been good friends.”

Sasori said nothing and she fell back asleep. He had visions of this girl before he even sought her out. Of her blood on his hands, on her fists more accurately, as her and his grandmother attacked him. It was an odd vision that ended with his demise as he impaled himself on Chiyo’s attack. He narrowed his eyes.

Before, he thought his suicide in this vision was silly, but he understood it now. He had been shown how lonely he was, how far he was from humanity and how he admittedly missed it. Even now, there was a distance that could not possibly be met. He felt like there was some sort of void, and he began to try to fill it with the sweet scent of cherry blossoms in summer.

Sasori could practically hear his ears ring. This woman had dredged up the discomfort of emotions. He felt his heart rate increase as he began to think about it, and though he tried his best, those repressed emotions surfaced in the form a silent sob. He wasn’t sure why he felt so terribly, but his heart felt like it could collapse at any given time.
Sakura stood over the dead body, staring down at her fourth failure to successfully remove the dead Tozlu cells from the lungs. This one’s bloodstream had been infected with the sludge as it moved through the membranes of the lungs and in a matter of minutes he was screeching in pain as he perished, skin rotting quicker than anything Sakura had seen. She cursed under her breath and slammed her fist onto the table, resulting in a spider-web of cracks under it. Sakura was used to the failure in trial-and-error, but this was unlike the other times. She was so close. She was so close, but she couldn't quite grasp it. Her unchecked anger seethed just beneath the surface.

“Damnit!!” She screamed again, trembling with rage. She had gotten the cure but now she found herself utterly helpless to the new problem. “Next!!” She hissed and turned her eyes to Kisame as he brought forth the next prisoner. This man was found in the prison as a serial killer, though he insisted he was being framed. Sakura paid no mind and shoved the corpse from her table. The man’s dead body disgracefully landed upon the three others and Sakura nearly broke the new victim’s wrists as she strapped him onto the table.

“P-Please! Please don’t!! I’m not like them, I promise I didn’t kill those people!! Please--I have a family!” He sobbed, looking up at Sakura for some sort of forgiveness.

“I don’t care for your pleas. I don't care whether you did it or not. You should be honored to be lying on this table. Lying here means that with your life, you will be saving thousands.” She said, readying the cure once again and turning to him. He gasped when he made eye contact with her. "Do not be selfish.”

“Y-You’re that missing girl! There are fliers up everywhere. Sakura Haruno! Your village is looking for you—you don’t have to do these people’s bidding! Just run—someone will find you—please don’t kill me!” He begged.

“Your words are futile. She isn’t that girl anymore. She's my puppet.” Sasori hummed, watching Sakura with a high amount of appreciation. She moved like a swan, but had a killer’s intent in her eyes. Over the course of the week that it took to gather up the prisoners, he had tormented her, raped her, beat her, made her watch as he assembled the new Sakura, and of course played mind games with her. It was truly his best work of art. She was beautiful in her state of agony and madness.

Kisame watched Sakura as well, almost with a bit of pride. It was like watching her grow up. She had gone from a merciful crybaby to a ruthless intrepid with one goal in mind.

Sakura stared down at the man as he blabbered on and on about her home, about her friends who were looking for her, about he was wrongly accused, about his children. She felt her eyes narrow of their own accord, as if her body was moving on its own. She felt no remorse as she grabbed the man’s face, focusing her chakra and squeezing until a scream of immense pain emanated from him. He sobbed and tried to move out of her iron grasp but it was no use. There were indentions in his skin where her fingertips dug in painfully.

“This will pump adrenaline into his system. That should keep him from passing out like the others.” She said calmly as she cracked the lacrimal and nasal bones. She felt a small rush of pleasure and tried her best to ignore it. “Right now, your blood is pumping faster, your blood is rushing, so we must be wary of that as well as the general dangers of this procedure.” With one hand, radiating pink tendrils dripped like water from melting ice off of her finger tips. She moved slowly. The other hand grasped a very small syringe with a very long needle. The needle was long enough to reach the center of a lung. She analyzed his chest carefully before pinpointing a spot between his ribs. She
pressed the needle through his flesh with quite a bit of force, neglecting to warn him of the pain he would feel.

He let out another pained scream and sobbed hopelessly before coughing up bile and blood. Sakura pressed the pink light into his body firmly and as he coughed, sludge began to pour from his mouth, mixed with blood as it damaged his esophagus. As it happened, teeth came up as well. The dying Tozlu cells ate away at all of the flesh they encountered and he choked on the mixture of blood, disembodied tissue, and sludge. Sakura forced the chakra through his trachea, followed by a sturdy healing justu. He stared up at her, tears pouring from his collapsed eyes. He slowly stopped breathing, each breath coming more shakey, to his very last. It was hard to discern, but he was speaking.

Intent to gain any type of knowledge, Sakura leaned in. Sasori observed the man as his tearful face contorted into a painting of mirth.

“Orochimaru… s-sends… his,” A snake shot from his throat and Sakura dodged just in time so that rather than go through her heart as it was intended, the metallic snake shot through her shoulder, rupturing the bones there and coming out through the other side. “…warmest regards, Sasori.”

Sasori was quick to move and the man was decapitated via chakra threads. Sakura grunted in pain as the snake shivered, having it’s host die. Sakura was determined not to scream like she would have before. She was stronger than that. Kisame severed the snake and pulled it from Sakura’s shoulder as she cursed and did her best to heal herself, though her vision was fading. Just as she was about to lose consciousness, she made eye contact with Sasori.

No, she wouldn’t give in to that gentle void. Sakura had things to do. She glared down at the blood dripping down her arm, pushing herself hard to stay awake as she forced her chakra into the healing justu, despite how it burnt her skin. She pulled her shirt off, throwing modesty to the wind and she put her hand directly at the wound. Sasori simply watched her. He was intrigued, but hid it well. How bold she had grown in the face of insanity.

“How bold she had grown in the face of insanity.

“Next.” She ground out. She had stopped the bleeding. The pain was searing enough to motivate her fight against slumber. “I said, next. Please.” She glowered at Kisame as he stood there, not sure what to do. He took a moment before hauling the next one towards Sakura. This one was horrified and shaking relentlessly. “Do you plan to attack as well?”

“No, nooo,” She managed, trying to glare at her, like an injured dog would growl at a boar.

Sakura paid her no mind as she shoved the previous corpse from the table and pinned the engaged-to-be-dead on the slab.

She went through the same routine, with just slightly more success as the last.

It began as only ten to fifteen minutes between her orders of ‘next’, but as she progressed mostly in silence, the pile of corpses grew and so did the time between deaths, until at the third to last, the older man on her table lived through her procedure. She stared down at him, using her visualization justu to look within his lungs. She forced a smile and looked to her master.

“If we would run his chakra through dialysis to prevent him from being infected again, he would live.” Sakura said, staring down at the man as he thanked her, thanked his gods, prayed. She was silent as Sasori and Kisame spoke to each other. She ignored their conversation in favor of numbing herself. She grasped the man’s face between her hands. His life was there. His life was hers.

She did not see chakra strings that attached to her hands. There were none. She began to press until
she heard several sickening crunches. What was she doing? Why was she doing it?

Sakura’s eyes were dim and lifeless, there was no expression on her face. She could easily be mistaken for one of Sasori’s puppets. Blood sprayed her emotionless portrait as she took the elder’s life without thought. She stared down at it. Why had she done it?

She didn’t feel it. She couldn’t feel her hands. Sasori watched her with a little grin and slinked up behind her, hands gripping her hips possessively. Something in her snapped and she began to snivel like a child.

“She’s dead… may I please go home?” She whispered, tears washing away the homicidal contempt in her eyes. She broke down and turned in his grasp, hugging him tightly and sobbing into his shoulder. He wrapped his arms around her and stroked her hair lightly, whispering affirmations into her ear. She had been falling victim to these vivid mood swings more often since he had started to mess with her mind.

“Sakura, my love, you are home.” He purred, playing her like a stringed instrument.

Kisame watched in half-shock, half-disgust when Sasori looked up and caught his eyes. The smirk on the puppet’s face was deplorable and he felt sick. He loved to tear apart opponents, but doing it in such a painful way was a horrifying concept to him. Sakura was intelligent and wise, but putty to Sasori.

“P-Please, I want—I want to see m-my parents… and I-Ino-chan and Naruto-kun.” She wept, trembling against him. As he hushed her and pulled her tighter against him, she began to relax. Sasori’s grin never faltered. She had heard something akin to amusement in his voice, but elected to ignore it in favor of being close against him. The intimacy she once feared soothed her.

“Yes, you may go back,” He began, causing Kisame to somehow manage a look of even more surprise. So he really was going to give her freedom? It wouldn’t do her any justice. She was his. Tied eternally to him as he was the only one who had a place in her broken psyche. Even in those moments when she was strong and independent and Sakura, she would eventually lose herself again. It sometimes only took a moment for her to snap. “Since you upheld your end of the deal, I will allow you to go back to Konoha and cure your friends, the few of them that are alive. Then you must come back and take your own life.” He whispered against the shell of her ear. Her trembling stopped and she looked at him with the brightest look of glee. She smiled through her sobs, making a quiet gasp of disbelief.

“Y-You’re going to let m-me cure Ino-chan?” She said, careful to not be disappointed if he would suddenly rescind his statement.

“Yes, I need you to teach the cure to the medical nin there, so that the jinchuriki is cured as well. Leader's orders.” He hummed in her ear gently and took a distance between them. He looked her in the eye, wiping her tears away from her reddened face. “My beautiful puppet. How wonderful you will look to me, lifeless.”

That seemed to irk her glee but she did not frown. She didn’t care for her life. He had made sure of that.

“I’ll have Itachi escort you back.” Sasori said. “Go, puppet, gather your things. You’ll be leaving immediately.”

Sakura’s brow furrowed as he ushered her out. “Y-You won’t be taking me back?”
“I have work here to do.” He said plainly. He had much work between curing his colleagues, and creating the vessel in which Sakura would inhabit for eternity as his puppet. His lover’s disappointment was not lost on him. It warmed him greatly that she would want for him to perform such a task as to take her home. Still, there was too much to be done. “We will see each other soon, Sakura.” He promised and leaned in, invading her personal space and gently bringing her face to his by her chin. She was absolutely beautiful, covered in blood as she was.

She blushed deeply and closed the space between them. Every nerve in her body felt like it was alive, ringing like a soft bell, like the kiss lit up her very essence. She melted to his touch. When his lips parted from hers, she carefully opened her eyes, looking up at him through her lashes.

It was a wonderful sight to behold. He possessed her body, her mind, her soul and gave so little in return. She smiled nervously, shyness returning to her. Shy had never appealed to him, but in this instance, it did not annoy him. She could hear a slight twinkling of a bell. Her eyelids drooped of their own accord as he backed away, retreating to the lab and closing the door on her. She reached out, pressing her gloved palm to the door gently before she gripped her chest. It hurt. It hurt so much. His kiss burned. His eyes stung her. Her heart was aching. She bit back a whimper and wiped the tears from her face like a petulant child.

Her feet padded lightly against the concrete, only separated by her thin sandals. She opened the door to Sasori’s bedroom and turned on the water of the small shower-stall. She peeled the bloodied scrubs from her body. She was waifish, now that she looked. Much thinner than she liked. She frowned a bit and poked at her protruding hip bones. It wouldn’t matter soon. Soon, she would have a new body. The idea sickened her and pleased her greatly. How lovely he would make her.

She stepped into the warm water and rinsed the blood from her. She wondered how long she had been gone. She hoped it was only a week at most. It felt like years. Sasori had a way of making time drag and each second feel like an hour. It was torture just thinking about it. Sakura touched her lips lightly and frowned. What would her teammates think? Her friends? Her sensei?

Itachi knocked on the door, but opened it immediately after anyway and sat on the bed as he waited. The thin curtain separated his view from her, but he wasn’t particularly looking one way or another. He had picked up her head band and examined it. He was still sick, but he would only be gone for a week at the most, despite deciding he would use a teleportation justu. Itachi would need to still keep the distance from the village and simply observe her as she walked back on her own. He gripped a scroll tightly in his hand, sealed with a justu Sasuke would know how to diffuse, but Orochimaru would not. It contained explicit cure instructions. He would not let his kid brother die. He had sworn to always protect him.

“Thank you for waiting, Itachi-san.” She said idly and reached out of the curtain, feeling about for the towel. He got up and handed it to her, as it was just out of reach. As she dried off, he placed her clothes in reach and sat back down, deep in thought as he normally was.

“You will tell your Hokage that I abducted you from your station in Suna.” Itachi told her. “I’m going to teleport you not far from the village, and you will go alone. Tell them that you escaped.”

Sakura dressed herself quickly and opened the curtain, slipping back into her sandals. He approached her now and used a releasing justu to remove the collar from her neck. Her hand instinctually went to rub where it was. Itachi placed his hand on her shoulder to get her attention. She looked up at him and they stood in silence for a moment.

“I have reason to believe my younger brother returned to the village. He needs to be cured.” Itachi said slowly. “I will be going to where I know Orochimaru is, but if he is not there, he will likely be back at his home. I want you to cure him.”
“I will. I had already planned to.” Sakura smiled lightly, though her heart wasn’t in it.

“Kisame will miss your spending time with him. He enjoys your company. It’s not easy for him to connect to people. Sometimes—” Itachi was cut off.

“I’ll miss you too, Itachi-san. Though I wonder…. Do you think I will be sentient as a puppet?” Sakura asked. “If I am not, it will sadden me to have to lose the new friends I made.”

“I do not know.” Itachi said, almost sadly. “Let’s go.”

Sakura was barely prepared as Itachi grasped her arm tightly and activated his sharingan at the same moment he cast his justu. Reality faded from her eyes and for a moment she felt like she was asleep. She gasped when daylight pierced her eyes. She recoiled and Itachi put a hand up to shield her gaze as her eyes adjusted from the obnoxious sunlight. She heard the light noise of a bell as Itachi placed the hat that all Akatsuki donned over his head, shielding his eyes.

“This is where we part. Your home is that way. Simply follow this path.” Itachi said, handing her the weapons he had confiscated from her after a scuff she had gotten in with Hidan. She had truly castrated him like promised and therefore could no longer be trusted with sharp objects during her recreational down time.

Sakura tried to think of something she could say, some sort of reassuring words of comfort. She saw Itachi’s pain, though he tried his best to hide it. He may have been good at lying to Sasuke, but when his guard was down, she saw his tears trying to hide away. She smiled sadly up at him and placed a gentle hand on his cheek. She had grown close to him, she felt as though they could have been siblings. The irony was not lost on her.

“Goodnight, Itachi-san.” She said after a long pause for thought. He let her touch him, but his heart hurt. He thought he had been lost to familial bonds. She proved him wrong. His eyes dimmed a bit, but he nodded slightly and watched as she turned and left, walking towards her safe haven. He could hear dogs barking. Kakashi had already caught her scent and was bounding that way.

“Friends, hn?” Itachi caught himself giving a small, lonesome smile. That look in her eyes. Her eyes glimmered sadly, just like Sasuke’s had every time he had disappointed him. “Goodnight, Sakura.” He said, though her form had grown to a speck as distance separated them. His body began to morph and as he disappeared from sight, crows flew from where he should have been standing.

Not far off, Pakkun rode on Kakashi’s shoulder as he sprinted at full speed.

“That second smell is gone—it’s just Sakura ahead now. It must have been an animal.” He grunted as Kakashi nodded, eyes wide. He thought of nothing except for her. He had just now caught her scent and he wouldn’t let it go. He was lucky, she was so close. It was suspicious that she was so close to the village, but perhaps she was being kept nearby. He scolded himself for not finding her sooner.

There. She was right there. She was gazing up at the sky, one hand gripping her shirt over her chest. She looked thinner. She looked sick. She had a bit of blood in her hair. Her eyes were far away. She turned and began walking towards the village, before sensing him behind her.

“Sakura!” He yelled.

She turned around, eyes large, mouth slightly agape. Her breath caught. It was like she was being pulled from water. She smiled widely.

Kakashi was panting as he approached her. She could barely believe her eyes. She didn’t say
anything, she simply came forward and embraced her former sensei. He held her tightly, the same way Sasori did. The thought made her pause and she pushed it to the back of her mind. Sasori became an ominous shadow that coaxed her mind into a false sense of safety. She smiled into Kakashi’s shoulder.

“I smell blood on you… did he hurt you?” Kakashi asked.

“I’ll tell you all about it later.” She hummed, hugging him tightly. She didn’t want to let go, but it felt wrong to be this close to a man that wasn’t Sasori. HE had tainted her vision. “I know how to cure Tozlu, Kakashi-sensei. I escaped with some samples of the cure.”

“Let’s head back immediately, then.” Kakashi said, pride filling his tone. He knew she was alive. He knew she would persevere. He grabbed her gently with her face tenderly between his palms. He looked over her face. She looked so different, she could have been a completely different person…

There was nothing else said between the two. She was different. He knew she had undergone something traumatic. She didn’t have that pep she once did. She was sullen and she didn’t talk as brightly as she had before they had went to Suna. Kakashi cursed that mission. Kakashi cursed the Akatsuki. They had ruined Sakura.

They walked back in silence, but at some point, Sakura had reached out and grabbed Kakashi’s hand. He was thankful for the mask as it hid the deep blush. Though, judging by her expression, it was merely for emotional support rather than a romantic gesture. Her eyes were tainted.

“Sakura… I want you to tell me everything, when you’re able to.” Kakashi said, squeezing her hand lightly. She smiled to assuage his fears, but it didn’t work.

“I will invite you to hear my full report to Tsunade-sama.” She said carefully. “It’s just… I know that I won’t be holding it together much longer, Kakashi-sensei.”

“What do you mean?” He asked, concern painting his features.

“I-I am distraught, and traumatized… I only have it in me to tell about everything once. Anything more and I-I’ll break down, I predict.” She managed, though tears were already tearing at her throat. He nodded and tried to think of what to say.

“Be strong, Sakura-chan. The whole village has been waiting for you. Ostu-san, too. You’re… just in time, actually. Ostaka-san is on the brink of death. I knew you’d be home in time to cure him.” He said proudly. “You always pull through for your village. I’m thankful you endured what you did.”

“Y-Yes.” She forced her voice to be even. “Ah, what a view.” She breathed, heart fluttering as the gate to Konoha came into view. It was the most beautiful thing she’d seen. She took a step closer. “Ino-chan.” She whispered under her breath, eyes trained on the open gate. “I’m home, Ino-chan.” She said, breaking into a run. As she ran through the gate, the guards were alerted, but Kakashi followed her and reassured them everything was alright. She didn’t stop running through the familiar streets until she came to the hospital. She ran to the front desk. “Ino Yamanaka!!” She yelled, startling the half-asleep receptionist.

“R-R-Room 435!! B-But wait—the entire wing is sealed, you can’t---“ Her words were pointless, Sakura was already bounding up the stair case. “You’ll catch it!!”

411, 413, 415, 417… Her heart pounded so heavily she heard it in her ears. 419, 421, 423, 425… Her eyesight had blurred a bit with excitement, terror, adrenaline. She continued down the hallway. Each room was full, packed with four people each. Tozlu had truly done damage to the village. It
would be over soon.

“Sakura-chan!!” She heard Tenten’s voice first. Then her eyes settled on Ino. She laid on her bed, eyes foggy with the massive amounts of numbing agents in her system. She was wired from the chest to an iron lung. Sakura broke down in tears and practically flung herself across Ino’s lap. She hugged onto her best friend’s midsection, sobbing. She had been gone so long, Ino’s condition got the best of her. She was barely alive, and all Sakura could manage was to weep like a child—like that genin she cursed being when she was younger. She gasped as a gentle, shaky hand landed on her cheek. She put her own palm over Ino’s and looked up at her.

“Sakura-chan… I knew you would come home.” Ino laughed quietly. The spunk that the girl had seemingly trademarked was sapped from her. Sakura’s eyes hardened and she wiped her tears away.

“Hold on, Ino-chan. You’ll be alright. I’m going to cure you now.” Sakura promised and dug through a pouch, pulling out that short syringe with the long needle. Her hands shook lightly, remembering all of her failed attempts. But this was it. Ino had hours, at the most, based on the state of her lesions and eyes. Sakura began detaching the numerous IV’s, the many tubes and filters. Shikamaru’s eyes widened as he felt their chakras sever. He had been acting as a filter to Ino for weeks. It was an odd feeling to be detached now.

“You have a cure?!” Temari’s voice sounded. Sakura didn’t look at her. She simply nodded, eyes brimming with determination. Sakura withdrew a kunai, cutting the bandages over Ino’s chest and making a gesture for the others to turn their gaze and preserve her modesty. She felt just beside her sternum and prepared the light pink chakra in her left hand. She took a deep breath.

This was it. Sakura felt Sasori’s stabilizing hand on her shoulder, but she knew he wasn’t there. The scent of blood permeated her senses.

“Sakura-chan…” Shikamaru tried. She didn’t look right. “Sakura-chan—“ He cut himself off as she looked up at him. The look in her eye was terrifying. She wasn’t right, but he was too knowledgeable to stop her as she slowly lowered the needle. Angering her right now would not be wise.

“This will pinch, Ino-chan.” Sakura warned and pressed the needle in, as slow as possible. She visualized it. It was just passing the subcutaneous layer when she hesitated. It was so dark as her blood was tainted to almost black. She focused even harder and watched. It passed between ribs, pressing through the internal and external costal muscles… the small space between the pleurases… and finally the lung. Ino winced and held onto Sakura’s shirt. Sakura breathed very carefully as she slowly released the enzyme into her lung, immediately chasing it with the pink tendrils of chakra until a hue of cerise escaped her gaping mouth when she coughed. It carried bubbles of sludge and blood.

“My god…” Shikamaru breathed, horrified and in awe all at once.

Minutes passed slower and slower as she pulled the massive amount of Tozlu from Ino’s lungs.

“Shikamaru-kun, grab a bowl, collect the bubbles, careful not to get any on yourself, or her.” She ordered and he scrambled to obey her. She watched him as he did as told, then closed her eyes. She didn’t have to sign to summon her visualization technique. Her lungs were half-empty and a healthy red was returning to them. Ino coughed violently, but each one sounded better than the last. Her heart raced as the last dead cells of Tozlu flowed through her trachea, then through the river of pink chakra that Sakura commanded. As the last threat of Tozlu perished, Sakura withdrew, out of breath and sweating profusely from pressure and focus.
“Sakura-chan…” Ino muttered, more awake as the massive weight in her lungs had been lifted and the IV’s effects wore off. She sat up, feeling her throat, then looked at Sakura again. “You did it.” She whispered then tightly hugged the pinkette. “I knew you could—Sakura, I’m so proud of you! I’m so very proud of you! I knew you’d come home—I knew you’d be healthy—I knew everything would work out alright!” She began crying with joy.

Shikamaru seemed to relax as well as that sinister look Sakura had minutes ago left and Sakura sat on the bed, hugging her best friend.

“I had to do it. I heard you were sick.” Sakura said, kissing Ino’s cheek amicably. “I’d do anything to save you, Ino-chan. After all, you always need saving.” Sakura jested, causing Ino to huff and roll her eyes, but ultimately grin.

“You’re never leaving this village again.” Ino told her. Sakura’s smile faltered, knowingly, but she nodded.

“Never leaving your side.” Sakura amended.

The door slammed open so hard it cracked the wall behind it. Tsunade stood in the door way. She was pale, and coughed but her eyes were painted in disbelief. Slowly, she began laughing, before hysterically leaning over from it.

“A fucking miracle!” She shouted, rushing to the bedside. “Kakashi just informed me you have a cure—and damn!! You have a cure!” The woman had been drinking, but immediately sobered up with pure shock.

“I’m ready to get to work, Tsunade-sama.” Sakura informed her. “I have six more samples, and plenty of chakra. Here,” Sakura handed her a scroll. “Instructions and recipe for the cure.”

“I’m amazed.” Tsunade breathed and placed a hand on Sakura’s shoulder. “But I expected no less from you, my prized pupil!!” She affirmed with a huge grin.

Sakura’s cheeks reddened a bit. That was the highest praise. She bowed lightly. “Thank you, Tsunade-sama.”

“Now, you have a lot of work to do! And… Sakura-chan. You may start by curing Team Seven!” She said.

Sakura stared at her in disbelief. Team Seven meant that Sasuke had indeed returned. Her eyes remained wide.

“Then I’ll need a full report. By that time, the others should have mastered the cure as well.” Tsunade hummed, rolling the scroll around in her hand.

Sakura nodded happily, giving Ino one last hug. Ino was already shuffling to put her shirt back on and stand; something she hadn’t done in a month. She had bed sores and her body was stiff. She stood on shaky legs with Neji’s help. Sakura hadn’t him noticed him in the room. She hadn’t noticed most of the people in the room when she came in.

“I’ll see you later, Forehead.” Ino giggled. “Hurry up with those three. They’re over in room 440.”

“See you!” Sakura hummed, reluctantly leaving Ino’s side. She was everything she had worked for. She didn’t want to leave her for a moment, but she had to heal Naruto, for whatever reason it was important to the Akatsuki, and Sasuke as she had made a promise to Itachi. And of course Kakashi. The thought crossed her mind that she’d be seeing him without his mask as he would have to remove
his shirt and leave room for the sludge to come out of his mouth. She smirked mirthfully. After all of their hard work, they would finally know what he was hiding under there.

She chuckled to herself quietly as she walked down the hall.

“Knock knock!” She chimed, entering with a huge smile on her face.

“SAKURA-CHAN!!” She heard Naruto yell and in a flash, he was on her, literally. His arms wrapped so tightly around her shoulders that she almost stumbled. She giggled and hugged him back before putting distance between them.

“Ease off, Naruto-kun.” She laughed, looking at him. She was glad to see his cheerful visage again. He didn’t even look sick. “Alright, boys!” She practically shouted, grinning toothily at Sasuke. He laid in bed, glaring at the two of them. They were too loud for his tastes. “Shirts off.” She hummed.

“I bet you’ve been waiting to see Kakashi-sensei with his shirt off for quite a while, huh?” Naruto laughed. Sakura’s fist acted before her brain did and Naruto held his cheek, pouting. “Sorry, sorry.”

Kakashi couldn’t stop his own chuckle as he watched them exchange words. It was heaven, having his team back together.

“Sakura.” Sasuke said lowly, getting her attention. Ever since Sasori had been occupying her waking thought, she found herself not thinking as fondly of Sasuke as she used to. “Hurry. We are in pain, if you’ve forgotten.” He ground out.

“You’re so annoying.” Sasuke sighed, removing his scrutiny from her and putting it on Naruto. “Get out of her way, idiot.”

“Shut up, you bastard!” Naruto growled. Sakura giggled once again.

“Alright, Naruto-kun.” Sakura placated, slowly walking him back to the hospital bed. “You heard me, shirt off.” She asserted, pointing her finger at him. “And stop your nonsense!”

“He couldn’t if he tried.” Sasuke remarked, no lack of snark in the comment.

“Kakashi-sensei!!” Naruto whined. “See?! He’s the one antagonizing me, y’know!”

“Boys. Settle down, if you hadn’t thought about it, this is a delicate procedure.” Sakura said, beginning to anger. Naruto flinched.

“You look so scary, Sakura-chan.” Naruto whimpered but pulled off his jacket and shirt. Sakura huffed a bit and took a deep breath, summoning the pink chakra to her fingertips again. Kakashi eyed it warily. It looked so much like Sasori’s puppet strings.

“Hush. Lay back. Good, now take shallow, even breaths. We don’t want your lungs moving too much for this.” Sakura warned, tsk-ing him. Still, as she grasped the cure, her eyes seemed to darken.

Sasuke and Kakashi took notice, but Naruto just assumed that was how she looked when she was that focused. She placed her hand on his chest, causing a light blush to come to his face. He watched her as she slowly pressed the needle into him, warning him of the pain. He had never liked needles. Sakura ended up always being the one to give him shots, because she was the only one he trusted so
fully with it. The other nurses made a joke of it, but Sakura had thought it was kind of sweet (even though she’d never tell him that.)

“Hey, Sakura-chan.” He said, voice tinged with a bit of pain. “Welcome home.”
“So how much damage is being done as the dead viral cells floats up through the windpipe?” Kakashi asked, watching with quite a bit of interest. Sakura did her best to keep her eyes focused on curing Naruto. He thought, had she not repressed his stomach from doing so, he may vomit. She hadn’t warned him of the utterly foul taste her chakra had. “Why does it have that pink color?”

“It won’t damage anything, my chakra is encasing the alkaline sand and infection. I do not quite know why it’s pink, but when I first focussed my chakra externally, it lost its green hue that it has for healing, and just kind of took this color. I suppose it’s what it looks like when it’s neither helping nor harming.” She shrugged, carefully controlling Naruto’s breath intake as well. She knew him too well, he would be hyperventilating and otherwise panicking if he could. The last time someone had a panic attack through the procedure, it killed them by severing the river of chakra and causing them to swallow the sand that then ate away at everything it touched.

Even Sasuke had gotten out of bed to watch. Sakura felt the last bit leave him and carefully peered into his lungs with her justu, trying to discern if anything was askew. She frowned deeply.

“You’ll be out of commission for a while, Naruto-kun.” She said. “It’ll take at least a month to heal these lesions on the lungs. Naruto-kun, you really over did it. Have you been training?”

“What?! What else am I supposed to do?! I can’t lay around all day like Sasuke-kun can!” He snorted.

“I don’t lay around all day. I train my mind while I heal. Something you should do.” He said lowly. “I train my mind plenty!” Naruto whined.

“It doesn’t show.” Sasuke retorted bitterly.

“Enough, you two!” Sakura demanded, barely restraining her urge to slap both of them. “Naruto-kun, you need dialysis immediately, so while I cure Kakashi-sensei, you can hook up to the Third Kaze—…” Sakura stood there for a long moment, dead silent as she stared off into space.

“Sakura, hand me my scroll, we will wire Deidara to the Third Kazekage for dialysis.” She heard Sasori say. Her eyes were empty as she obeyed.

“Sakura, hand me my scroll, we will wire Deidara to the Third Kazekage for dialysis.” She heard Sasori say. Her eyes were empty as she obeyed.

“T-To me, and use a filter. That should purify the chakra…” Sakura continued after a moment, trying to shake off whatever had just happened.

“Everything alright, Sakura-chan?” Kakashi narrowed his eyes at her. He knew what had just happened. It happened to him all the time. It had just happened to him earlier when he saw Sakura standing out on the road. He had seen Rin standing there, Obito following behind her with that love struck look in his eyes.

“Everything is fine, Kakashi-sensei.” She smiled. “Please, lie down while I hook Naruto and I together.” She said, bringing a chair to Kakashi’s bedside. She gestured for Naruto to sit down and when he did, she pressed yet another needle into his chest and taped it off. She hooked a long chain of chakra-bidding metal to the end of the needle in him. She opened her shirt just enough to place her own needle to her chakra's core. She winced a bit as she did it in a hurry and took a deep breath.
“Send your chakra through it to me.”

“Wait, but won’t you get infected?” Naruto worried, but did as told, having to close his eyes to focus. He was not nearly as adept as she was at it.

“No, it goes through this filter before it gets to me.” She rebuffed.

“Then why bother hooking yourself to it if it just filters on its own?” Naruto continued to bug her with these questions, but she tried her best to answer them calmly.

“Well, because no filter is advanced enough to put chakra back when it’s done. It simply purifies it. I push my chakra into it and the two become one energy, for you. None comes through to me. As one energy, it pushes your own chakra back. Eventually mine won’t be in your system and you’ll be back to full Naruto.”

“So you’re saying… I’ll have part of your chakra, Sakura-chan?” Naruto murmured, blushing lightly.

“Yes.” Sakura said, deep in thought. “Then I suppose, in a way, it means I’ll always be with you to protect you and heal you.” She smiled light heartedly. It was something she always wanted to do. She wanted to always be able to heal and protect her teammates.

“Hah! Take that, Sasuke-kun! I will have Sakura-chan with me always!” Naruto laughed, pointing at Sasuke triumphantly. Sakura couldn’t help her small laugh.

Kakashi smiled warmly. Sasuke simply rolled his eyes.

“You’re turn, sensei.” Sakura chided as she taped the needle in place to her chest and prepared. “Shirt off!” She ordered, a smirk barely hidden behind professionalism. The three teammates immediately turned their gazes to Kakashi. Even Sasuke looked at him sharply. He chuckled when he realized they were waiting to see under his mask.

“Well, I suppose the gig is up.” Kakashi said lazily and shrugged, sitting up and very, very slowly. The three leaned forward intently as Kakashi peeled his shirt off. This was it. This was the moment they’d been waiting for since kids. They’d finally know what sort of sickening feature he hid under there!

Naruto and Sasuke immediately deflated, deep frowns on their faces.

“What’s the deal? You just look normal under there...” Naruto muttered, clearly angry about it.

“Sorry to disappoint you with my lack of grotesque deformation.” Kakashi chuckled.

“What the hell were you wearing it for, anyway?” Sasuke growled. One of the biggest mysteries of his childhood ended up being an anticlimactic disappointment.

“My mother wore one, and so I took after her.” Kakashi shrugged. He hadn’t heard Sakura’s reaction yet.

Sakura sat there, red as a beet, mouth slightly agape. 

*Oh no. He was pretty. No, handsome, No, unbelievably sexy, no boyishly charming!*  
Kakashi stared at her in disbelief, blinking lightly.
“You okay, Sakura-chan? You’re zoning out again.” Kakashi drawled, knowingly. He smirked openly at her, hint of white teeth showing. Even that was sexy. She thought.

Oh no. He was much more muscled that she thought—much more toned and oh for fuck’s sake she was burning alive where she sat. His face was gentle but chiseled sharply. Completely unlined as well, minus the slight bags under his eyes. He didn’t show any signs of being over mid-twenties. His lips were a bit thin, but begged to be kissed.

“Y-Y-Yup!! All good, haha!” Sakura stammered, waving her hands dismissively.

Sasuke eyed her for a moment, before catching on. He made an amused huff at Kakashi who gave him a short glare, daring him to say something. He pulled the mask portion of his shirt back on and left the rest of his shirt bunched up at his shoulders.

“If it’s that disappointing, I’ll just leave it on.” He said, grinning behind it as he has successfully flustered Sakura. She sure was cute when she blushed.

“Maybe that’s best. We wouldn’t want Sakura passing out.” Sasuke jested, waving his finger in the air. “That could end badly.”

“I-I’m fine! Ass!” She shouted.

“Woah, Sasuke-kun, you made Sakura-chan curse. Do it again!” He said, starry eyed.

“Shut it, idiot!” Sakura hissed, punching Naruto’s cheek much lighter than she would have liked to.

“Ow ow ow! Scary.” Naruto muttered, pouting again.

Sakura took a deep breath, jumping into a professional attitude immediately and smiling in neutrality at her sensei. “Are you ready for the procedure?”

“So quick to change the subject.” Naruto whispered begrudgingly.

“Yes,” Kakashi decided, lying back. Sakura fought to keep her mind focused on the task, instead of the body that laid before her that she desperately wanted to crawl on top of. A voice in the back of her mind wondered if Kakashi would bottom for her.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the thought from her mind. She focused her chakra and began pushing the needle into him. Thankfully, he had the least amount of Tozlu she had seen. Possibly because of the lack of contact with other shinobi. She had been informed he and a team had been out looking for her. Perhaps that isolation saved him the trouble of becoming more ill.

She felt Naruto’s chakra become fully purified. Kakashi must have sensed it as well, because his hand brushed her thigh ever so lightly, unnoticied by the other two, as he reached up and gently dislodged the needle from her chest to allow her to focus better. She swallowed thickly. Had he done it on purpose or was she just far too sensitive? She pushed it to the back of her mind and decided to think on it later.

It only took ten minutes to fully cleanse him.

“Alright, now Kakashi-sensei, you will be hooked up to Naruto-kun to purify your chakra.” Sakura said too quickly.

“What?! No way! Kakashi-sensei’s probably got evil chakra! I don’t want that!” Naruto protested, but earned a much scarier glare from Sakura, who then relented after a moment.
“You three will be my doom.” Sakura muttered and got two new needles. They moved to where Sasuke sat on his bed. His shirt left his torso wide open. Bold, as if inviting enemies to stab him there. He simply removed his arms from the sleeves and sat back, having already put a chair at his.

“We do our best, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi hummed as he took a seat and pressed the needle into his torso, where he felt his chakra’s core was.

“Sakura-chan, what’s that?” Naruto asked, pointing to where the zipper on her shirt had drifted to her naval while she wasn’t paying attention. Her breast band defended her modesty, but now her teammates’ and sensei’s eyesights were drawn to the thick scarring and heavy bruising of her midsection. They only got a slight peak, but it was more than enough to worry them. She stood there helplessly for a moment before Kakashi gently grabbed her hand, reassuring her. Her eyes were empty, caught in a different, far off moment.

Sasori stood over her as she sobbed. He had strapped her down.

“P-Please! It hasn’t healed yet—” Sakura screamed as he singed the thin skin healing over what he had removed. “It hurts!”

“You’ll think before crawling in someone else’s bed, next time you get the urge.” He growled, watching intently as the flames licked at her squirming midsection. She was sweating and crying and screaming so loudly, Kakuzu had come to stand in the door way, uncertain whether or not it was something he should interfere with or not. Losing Sakura could be a death sentence, after all. And those screams belonged to a woman who was on death’s doorstep.

“I-It’s not like that!” Sakura pushed. “I swear! I w-would never! I just wanted to be held!” She wept, shivering all over. “There was nothing romantic about it!”

“I’m the only one permitted to touch you in any way, outside of when I allow someone to train with you.” Sasori asserted.

“You denied me! You pushed me away! You bastard!” She screeched, pulling several muscles as she strained so hard she broke her bonds. Sasori hadn’t expected that, so when she broke yet another one of his replacable faces, he broke both of her wrists with the chakra strings and punched her hard in her stomach, shattering several ribs as well and causing a massive amount of internal bleeding.

It took an hour for him to forgive her and decide to put off transferring her into a puppet. He barely healed her, and forbade her from healing herself, other than her wrists. He wanted her to feel and see the bruising and burn marks.

Kakashi squeezed her hand and she snapped out of her daze.

“Ah, this? Oh, haha…” Sakura faked a laughter, trying to play it off. “I, uh…” Well, she wouldn’t say, in front of Sasuke at least, that she ran to Itachi as he was the only one who offered her comfort, but she would tell them a censored version. “I was… speaking with, um…” Should she even mention his name? “A member… Sasori did not like that.”

“By speaking with, do you mean sleeping with?” Sasuke asked bluntly.

"Sasuke-kun, what the fuck?!” Naruto practically screeched, about to lunge at his friend, but Kakashi stopped him. "Why the hell would you say that?!

Sakura narrowed her eyes. “I mean I was speaking with him. I wouldn’t lay with any of them,” by choice, she silently added, tears brimming at her eyes.
“Sasuke-kun, don’t be heartless. She likely endured a lot.” Naruto chastised.

Sakura held eye contact with Sasuke for the longest time. A flash of something sinister took over as she placed her hand against his chest.

“The scars were… a necessary trade. I came back with the cure and vital information about the Akatsuki, their weaknesses and an idea at what they could be planning, and that’s all that matters.” Sakura said firmly, voice even. Sasuke was taken aback by it but didn’t show it. They had a silent conversation that ended with Sakura scoffing. “Besides, I wasn’t the one who chose to be there.” She said cuttingly, before pressing the needle into Sasuke’s chest. He forced himself to remain calm. "If you don't believe me, look." She said, viciously grabbing the zipper and forcing it down. She pulled the flaps of her shirt aside, revealing a gruesome sight. Sasuke swallowed thickly. She took a bit of pleasure in making him upset.

"Now, now..." Kakashi slowly zipped Sakura’s shirt back up, but connected himself to her to purify his chakra with the chain. She looked down at Sasuke before injecting the cure into him and pulling out the dead cells as they came. She focused intently, but her mind happened to be somewhere darker. She didn’t see him. Her eyes widened as she stared down at him with a certain hatred that was lost on Kakashi and Naruto, but that Sasuke recognized entirely too well. Something in her eyes…

“Itachi,” He whispered under his breath to her. The others wouldn’t hear it, but she knew clearly what he was saying. She had that same disdain he held in his eyes. He didn’t make a move. It could be his last if he did. She had spent time with him.

Sakura nodded minutely.

Sasuke’s eyes left hers, looking back at her midsection, though now covered. He decided that it was none of his business, if she had met his brother or not.

In that way, he was a traitor and the small sliver of love she had left for him shriveled like an autumn leaf and detached from that dying tree.

She finished his treatment and withdrew from him. “You and Naruto can be connected. No exception, no arguments. I need to go report to Tsunade-sama on my situation. I require Kakashi-sensei to come with me.”

Kakashi looked at her curiously, but removed the needle from her chest first, tapping her skin lightly with a healing justu and closing up the identical entries where the needles were. He then did the same to himself and dressed.

“Thank you, Sakura.” Sasuke said evenly. She shrugged a bit.

“Not a problem.” Sakura said evenly. Her voice sounded dead as she cleaned up, emptying the dead Tozlu cells into a biohazard containment bowl. She tossed it in the correct bin and sanitized her hands. Kakashi followed her as she left without a word.

“Sasuke-kun, what did you do?!” Naruto hissed, jamming the needle into Sasuke’s chest. Sasuke smacked him.

“I didn’t do anything.” He waved dismissively, glaring at Naruto.

Kakashi walked her to the office.
“Those moments when you zone out… I get them, too, Sakura-chan.” Kakashi confessed, staring down at his arm.

Sakura looked frightened, as if he could read something she didn’t want him to know. She was shamefully weak.

“It’s alright. It’s… it’s not something to be worried about. You’re still here, you’re still Sakura.” He reassured her and turned her slightly, just before they reached the door. He scanned Sakura’s face. Something was broken in her. That cheerful medical nin was nowhere to be seen. Sakura was still missing.

“I can still smell blood,” She whispered, looking down at their feet. He hesitantly pulled her in for a gentle hug.

“It’s alright. If you need me, I’m here. I’ll hold your hand through this.” He said quietly. She smiled a bit and managed to conceal her blush. “Let’s go in, now.”

Tsunade smiled up at her from her desk, almost apprehensively. Sakura smiled back until it faltered as she made eye contact with someone she really didn’t want to see. Kakashi’s grip on her shoulder grew tighter as he looked at Ibiki.

“Ibiki, what is the meaning of this?” Kakashi asked quickly, pulling Sakura towards him. He would defend his former student, even from them. Now that she was back, he didn’t want to let her go again. Tsunade’s smile faltered and she looked down at her hands. They were shaking with rage—or fear. Kakashi couldn’t determine which.

Ibiki stood silently for a moment before stepping forward.

“The Council made a decision based on intel we received, that I would interrogate Haruno-san.” He said sternly. “She has nothing to fear from me, so long as she is not hiding anything that could cause harm to our village.”

Sakura looked at him, schooling her expression greatly with that same puppet-like look of absence that she had learned. “It’s okay, Kakashi-sensei.”

Kakashi wavered minutely before loosening his hold. Sakura stepped forward. Tsunade watched her with immense pride. She looked bravely at Ibiki. Tsunade had lost it when the council ordered the interrogation. The gall that they had in order to question her dear student.

“Thank you for cooperating, Sakura-chan.” Tsunade said with no small amount of relief. “After this, you may go home, or to Ino-chan, or wherever. You are free of duty until called upon. You’ve done your village, and me, a great service.”

Sakura bowed lightly, but looked up at Tsunade.

“But,” Sakura began, taking a deep breath. “This information, you need immediately. It’s about Orochimaru.”

Tsunade’s eyes went wide and she sat up. She had very much known of his involvement, since her first letter written in captivity.

“Orochimaru, according to what I managed to find out while in captivity, was attempting to kill the jinchurikis with this plague. For whatever reason, the Akatsuki are targeting the jinchurikis and plan to take them alive. Orochimaru is trying to prevent that, as well as bring destruction to the villages.” She said quickly. Tsunade sat there, agape and unable to control her reaction.
“Come, Haruno-san. Hatake-san, I’m afraid you can’t follow.” Ibiki warned and nodded towards Sakura. He led the way and Sakura fell in step behind him, though she was horrified by what waited for her.

She hadn’t been to the location where he guided her before. Just behind the Hokage’s main building was an inconspicuous door that led into a building inevitably hidden inside the mountain. She watched him suspiciously, heart thumping worriedly in her chest.

“Sit here.” Ibiki ordered and Sakura sat down in the chair he gestured to. She was in the middle of a room, surrounded by a massive amount of Anbu. It seemed like overkill, but she kept a face of calm. Many of the Anbu looked visibly uncomfortable, which brought her some amount of amusement. The Elder Council were there as well, watching from behind a thick sheet of glass to keep them safe. Ibiki stood in front of her. She kept her eyes trained on a spot on the wall, slowly distancing herself as she had learned to do when Sasori would make sexual advances on her. It was a technique she developed to make it hurt less.

“Where should I begin?” Sakura asked, left brow quirking lightly. She eyed him warily as he clinically grabbed her hand, removing her glove. There were healing wounds in her palms from where she had been nailed down to some sort of surface. Ah, she had forgotten about that. Repressed memory perhaps?

“This tattoo…” Ibiki said, ignoring her question and thumbing over it. She wanted to withdraw her hand but she stayed still. Any wrong move could be read as hostile and punished swiftly. Just like with Sasori. The comparison amused the bitter part of her.

“Sasori decided that I held too much pride in my village. So he marked me, and scarred my headband.” She said evenly, still staring off into space. She hadn’t realized it, but she made eye contact with Ostu. Ostu internally trembled under her dead gaze. That wasn’t Sakura. It couldn’t be.

“I see. We can give you a new one, assuming you are not a traitor.” Ibiki said. Sakura flinched when he reached for her face and untied it. The movement didn’t seem to bother him as it would have Sasori.

“What is this?” She bit out. “Undressing me? It makes me uncomfortable; you’ve succeeded.” She growled. “I implore you to stop.”

“I’m afraid I’ve been given instructions to take inventory of your personal items as well as any marks on your body. You are evidence, being processed.” He said carefully and stood her up.

Sakura’s eyes darkened and she glared at him now. That lively verdant green turned to an angered shade of the spruce tree’s flora. Ibiki looked at her questioningly before backing up.

“Please, remove your clothing and place it in the chair.” He ordered.

Sakura flinched as she heard Sasori’s voice there. She felt herself begin to sweat as she saw chakra strings attached to her hands, forcing her to do horrible things. She swallowed and blinked the vision away.

Ibiki watched her curiously. Her eyes twitched and moved in such a way that told him she was having some sort of visual hallucination. Her muscles said the same. He could hear her rapid heart rate before it slowed down again. That puzzled him. He looked up to her eyes as she kept them on the floor. They were empty. He would need to exercise great caution.

Sakura’s movements were slow, but precise. She unzipped her shirt and carefully shouldered it off.
Her movements were careful as well and she placed it gently on the chair. She undid the fasteners of the medical nin apron around her waist and followed the same procedure for her shorts and sandals, until she stood in her underthings in front of the crowd’s careful scrutiny. She felt more naked than she had in front of Sasori as they watched for any possibility that she would attack or become otherwise aggressive.

“I’m sorry to put you through this,” He expressed dryly, though it seemed sincere to her. “But I will need to be able to take note of everything.” He left it open.

Bedgrudgingly, Sakura unwound her breast band, clenching her jaw as she stepped out of her panties. She wanted to cover herself, but another part of her screamed for them to look at the scars, the wounds, the burns, the bruises. She saw a couple of people shrink a bit. Her midsection wound was clearly infected. Her once alabaster skin was marred permanently with ugly, twisting burn marks, deep wounds that exposed tissues, signs of contusions, and other manor of unpleasantries. It was by far the ugliest part. She saw Ibiki’s eyes widen a bit and then she looked up to the Council. They were repulsed and showed it clearly.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” He said lightly. He felt queasy. She had clearly been skinned, then when that began to heal, it was tormented. He began writing something down on a clipboard, occasionally looking back at her, trying to find the words to describe such horrors.

“This, as well as my back.” She said, turning a bit. There were deep lacerations. “He attached sharp pieces of metal to the end of his chakra string. This was the result of my refusing to eat.”

“The scarring on your thighs?”

“His battle-puppet, the Third Kazekage, has his iron sand. It compressed my thighs until the femurs broke, expertly avoiding any damage beyond that. Now it is iron sand that holds my bones together.” She confessed. It was coming back to her now. She can't believe she forgot that.

“You ran away, again, my love.” Sasori said sadly, circling her as she knelt on the ground weighed down by the iron sand on her shoulders and bent knees.

“I-I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” She whimpered, looking up at him fearfully.

“No... but you will be.” He sighed, gesturing lightly. A ripple of movement flowed through his chakra strings and the iron sand molded in cuffs around her thighs. She gasped in fright and tried to peel them off. They began tightening. “Who owns you, Sakura? Who do you call master?”

Anger overcame her, ire returning at the worst possible time. She glowered at him as he hurt her. Surely he wouldn’t do anything too bad to her. He needed her after all. “Nobody owns me, Sasori. I am a shinobi of the Hidden Leaf. I am bound to that village by honor an—“

“I don’t care about your village, and you won’t care either, soon enough.” He told her, gesturing again. The squeeze grew tighter. “You know what can happen to your legs, Sakura. It is of no concern to me, whether or not you can walk.”

“W-Wait—please—“ Sakura’s words were cut off by a sudden cracking noise. Her world stopped, and narrowed. The only things that registered were pain, and Sasori. She stared up at him as her brain tried to process the immense agony, but ultimately failed for quite a while. She began hyperventilating, then screamed, clawing at the iron traps. “You own me, Sasori-sama! I am your puppet—who will not run away again! Please punish me for my misbehavior!”

“Oh, good.” He hummed, fingers twitching. The sand pierced her skin, but lightened its strangle.
Some of it remained inside her legs, holding the two bones together. “Here, now you will be able to walk again. Painfully, but I suppose you’ll heal that.” He chuckled and withdrew the excess sand, banishing his puppet summon. “How many lashes should you receive? Hmmm… well, you were about twenty klicks away so… twenty?” He pondered, helping her stand. She shook and gripped onto him, barely able to keep herself up.

“Sakura Haruno,” Ibiki said more firmly. She jumped lightly and looked up at him again, eyes far off. He pitied her now. He had seen everything. He withdrew his hand from her head. It made him uncomfortable, how silent and brought together she was. “You may sit.” He allowed and she did, happy to not stand on shaky legs anymore. Somebody left the room.

She seated herself on top of her clothing, staring off again, but trying to stay focused in the moment.

“Sakura Haruno, my name is Ibiki Morino.” He said formally. “I need you to give a full account of what transpired and exactly how. I will know if you lie, skip details, or otherwise try to deceive me.”

Sakura waited a moment to see if he had anything else to say. When she determined that he didn’t, she looked around once more. The Council were watching once again and she held eye contact with them. They seemed to recoil a bit, but before it could be noted, she looked to Ibiki.

Yes, Kakashi was right. Something was terribly wrong with her.

“The morning began like the others. I worked in the Kazekage’s own building, as it was better defended than the rest. The reason I was there, was that the research facility and hospital had both been decimated in an attack by Orochimaru.” She said evenly, trying hard to remember how it happened. She controlled the pace of her heart rate. She felt a slight disturbance from one of the Anbu. He or she was watching Sakura with a Byakugan. No doubt monitoring her chakra movement to make sure she wasn’t using some sort of calming technique. She grew wary.

“I went out for a stroll. The room I was in was stifling, and I couldn’t think, so I went out for a moment to gather my thoughts… that was when a colleague of mine, Hiroshi Tin…” Sakura trialed off, graphic images of the vivisection flashing behind her eyes and causing her to stammer. She covered it with the false pain of betrayal. “It turns out he had been working with Sasori, giving him information on me and my work.”

If he had sensed a lie, he didn’t show it.

“Hiroshi Tin. He wound up dead of the virus.”

“Yes, he kept it from the public, but he was suffering from it as well. I am confident, given his state, that he died not long after I was kidnapped.” She confirmed.

“Tell me about that, is it true that you were abducted from the main gate of the village?” He asked, backing her into a metaphorical corner with a leading question. She narrowed her eyes.

“What are you playing at, Ibiki?” She asked, disregarding the honorific and hoping it would offend him in some manner.

“Ah, sorry.” He put his hand up, but she didn’t let her guard down. “Go on.”

“I wonder for the integrity of information you gather, if you interrogate in this way.” She said before continuing. “Itachi Uchiha—“

At the name, the room’s atmosphere tightened.
“Grabbed me and used a teleportation justu of some type to remove me from the village. I am not sure at which location I was. Forgive me, my panic had jeopardized my memories of the exact moment.”

Another lie, but Ibiki seemed not to notice. Of course, she was well aware that it could be an act.

“He brought me to a tavern, where he had some business to attend.”

There, that would cover her ass in case someone had blabbed they’d spotted her in that location.

“I made an unsuccessful attempt at escape, but ultimately was captured again.”

“After killing three shinobi.” Ibiki butted in, causing her to panic for a moment. She bit down the urge to swallow her fear.

“The three shinobi that I had to fight were sent by Sasori, just in case Itachi failed.” She said evenly. “He later revealed to me that he had done it to test my strength and develop methods to keep me captive.”

“Did they work?” Ibiki asked.

“Not as intended.” She said idly, rubbing her stomach subconsciously. “I made three attempts total. Two failed due to his preventative measures.” She looked down at the still-healing wounds on her palms.

“And he tortured you.” Ibiki finished the story of the escapes. She nodded lightly.

“Before that, when I first got there, he was inside of one of his puppets. I attacked him. My attempt to kill him was unsuccessful. Thought, he didn’t retaliate fully just then. His malice slowly grew. We had simply worked on the cure, at first. And… I have medical information about many of the Akatsuki.”

The room buzzed lightly, though stayed silent.

“First; Kakuzu.” She said. The name rang a bell to Ibiki so she didn’t bother explaining how she looked. “The Akatsuki seem to operate in teams of two, so he has a partner, named Hidan. Rogue nin Kisame Hoshigaki told me that they are referred to as the Zombie Combination, as they are seemingly impossible to kill.”

After another pause, she continued. “Kakuzu has five hearts, though he had four removed. I was forced to treat him, and suggested he removed four of his hearts to decrease blood flow. It truly didn’t have anything to do with it, but now he is vulnerable, until each one is cured. Each heart he collected from a powerful ninja he fought. They have immense amounts of chakra. Them being removed makes him weaker. You’re welcome.”

“Hidan is his partner. A zealot of Jashin. He is also considered immortal. Sasori had be run experiments on him. During these I would open his chest cavity, remove organs to examine, snip holes in his lungs, and overall test his immortality. I could find no flaws in it, and he healed without a single scar. Even when decapitated, he remained conscious, aware, and obnoxious.”

“You decapitated Hidan of the Akatsuki?” Ibiki asked, a sliver of disbelief in his voice. She eyed him before frowning.

“Regretfully, only once.” She muttered. “I attacked him in all manner of ways. Castrated him once even, looking for a possible weakness. There are none, but I believe if he were separated in pieces,
buried, burned, and placed horizon apart from himself, he would no longer be an issue. I thought on this a lot.”

“Next is Kisame Hoshigaki…” Sakura trailed off for a moment. “I could… also not find a weakness. Even when infected, he retained his vigor.”

“His partner is Itachi Uchiha. Those two were the more sane members, as far as bloodthirsty criminals go.” She said carefully. She knew Itachi’s weakness, but she would never tell them. “He was horribly sick. Orochimaru had personally attacked him.”

“Was?” Ibiki interrupted.

“Sasori forced me to perform treatment on him. He is at full health.” She lied. He didn’t seem to notice. Then again, she knew she wasn’t showing any sign of it, and he hadn’t used his mind transfer technique on her. He had no way of knowing. “The next is Deidara.”

She grimaced, remembering the one who first attacked her. “He’s the youngest member and charges into situations head first. He’s Sasori’s partner, and without him, Deidara’d likely be dead. That’s his weakness.”

“Thank you. This is valuable information. What of Sasori?”

Sakura broke now. She went pale. Her eyes seemed hollow.

“He’s a puppet.” She whispered, causing Ibiki to narrow his eyes. “He turned himself into a puppet. He can go between bodies… I don’t know how he does it.” The last part was a lie, but for whatever reason, she couldn’t betray his trust so thoroughly. “H-He is quite ruthless.”

“I see that.” Ibiki quipped, writing it down. “How did he ‘force’ you to heal the Akatsuki members?”

Sakura snarled at the accusation of betrayal, no matter how true it ended up being in the end. Tears came to her eyes.

“He took things from me that I can never get back.” She hissed. The implication was not lost on Ibiki and he averted his eyes. Rape was such a violent and personal assault. Sakura took that as a victory and stood up, fists shaking in anger. “I find the thought that I, Sakura Haruno, kunioichi trained directly under Tsunade-sama, would betray my village, betray Tsunade-sama, my friends, my family utterly unforgivable.” She growled now and he put a hand on her shoulder but she slapped it away, a bit too hard. He had a cracked finger, he was certain, but he showed no sign of pain.

An Anbu was on her in an instant and she froze up as she felt someone grab her across her shoulders like Sasori had. She screamed instinctually. She trembled and shook her head, thrashing about.

Sasori held onto her, nose buried against her neck, whispering sweetly to her. She sobbed.

“P-Please don’t hurt me, please don’t hurt me,” She begged as he chuckled lowly, slowly pressing into her. She screamed in pain, trying to squirm away. She made eye contact with Deidara as he sat perched in the corner, looking at the scene distastefully. He never had understood the appeal of taking her against her will. He preferred to seduce his partners and have them give themselves to him.

“Silence, puppet.”

“Please.” Her voice grew so small, so weak. She felt such an intense pain in her core as he took her.
“Do you know why I am doing this?” Sasori asked, pressing her face into the cold, blood filled table.

“N-No! I don’t un-understand!” She cried, trying to ignore the pain in the lower half of her body. He whispered something to her. She faintly recognized it as a justu. She began breathing heavily now, eyes darting around the room as horrifying figures surrounded her, promising her a slow death. She began shaking with fury and terror.

“Because I love you, and I want you to learn.” He whispered. Her building rage died out and she melted once again, letting him do as he pleased. “Good girl.” He whispered, running his fingertips down her cheek as he pulled out of her and backed away, adjusting his clothing and looking down at her as she cowered from the imaginary figures. One emerged. “Itachi isn’t the only one with a prowess for Genjustu. I picked a few things up.” He hummed. “Though I have no idea what she’s seeing.” He jested with Deidara.

“That’s pretty fucked up, my man.” Deidara tried to sound casual about it. “I don’t think she deserved that much. Hell, you already made her remove some of her own ribs to put in the puppet for, what did you call it, ‘authenticity’?” Deidara chuckled. “You are one fucked up man.”

Ibiki shot back from Sakura as her vision turned to the figures. His eyes were wide and he was sweating profusely. The Anbu holding her in place were alarmed, but held steady. He swallowed for a couple of minutes before managing to look at Sakura again. She was staring blankly at the floor, still clearly lost to her visions. He approached her again and signed the justu one more time after working up the bravery.

“Sakura-chan.” Whatever it was had Sasuke’s voice. It was something neither Ibiki nor Sakura were able to describe with a clinical accuracy, a creature so vile and unimaginably haunting visage of an amorphous, pulpy malignancy. It was something unnatural yet altogether appearing as old as nature. It piped smoke from one of its many mouths, ever morphing. It began to crawl towards her. No, rolling was a more objective statement. It’s various body parts tumbled before it as it moved ungracefully towards her. As it progressed it took a decidedly bipedal stance.

It shook and made a most disturbing noise, similar to that of organs falling from a disemboweled carcass and sloshing in a pile on a dirty concrete floor. As Sakura watched it, dismayed deeply by the abomination of nature in front of her, Ibiki did his best to watch, wanting badly to withdraw again and simply have her describe it. But as she was in a weak state, he had the best chance of getting the truth instead of gaining a fabricated vision. Sakura was too smart to let him in when she wasn’t vulnerable.

“Sasuke…” She breathed, then screeched again, backing into the floor as she tumbled from the table. She tried to find Sasori, but he was nowhere in sight. She was in a void of dark violets and reds and though she looked for an exit, all that seemed to be real were her and this thing. “Y-You’re not Sasuke.” She tried.

“No?” It had a thousand voices, but the most prominent one sounded androgynous, likely an amalgamate of the various voices. It was high pitched but she couldn’t discern whether or not it was human. “Oh, but don’t I look like him?”

“Who are you?!” She screamed, trying to seem threatening, though even Ibiki was shaking. Then it looked at him. He froze as Sakura turned to see him, too. This wasn’t part of her memories, no. This was a gate. Sasori had likely placed it in her mind without her knowledge.

“My, my. I guess you saw through my guise.” It chattered in an ear-bleeding whine. “What would you like to call me? How about you?”
“I won’t play your games!” Ibiki growled, placing a hand on Sakura’s shoulder to try and somehow reassure her.

“A visitor of the mind.” It careened. The shrillness was beginning to cause physical pain for the intruder. “How… interesting.”

“Who are you?!” He yelled.

“Oh… I remember you, now.” It crooned. “Ibiki, was it? And what did you call me all those years ago? Oh, right… Kijo. I shall take that name, then. Kijo, yes.”

Sakura didn’t seem to truly notice Ibiki. Perhaps it was still a memory. Either way, he needed to withdraw. He pulled, but the thing kept tugging him in.

Ibiki shot back, stumbling until he fell into an Anbu member who righted him on his feet.

“Sir?” One questioned.

“Send her to Jiraiya-sama… Sasori has placed something in her mind.” He breathed, pale as a sheet. “I must… report to Hokage-sama.” He managed, fixing his collar.

“She still hasn’t snapped out of it—“

“I’ll take care of it. I have no doubt Kakashi Hatake-san is standing right outside of that door. Let him and a couple of you take her to the Sage.” He determined. As stated, Kakashi was indeed just outside the door. He practically burst in when one of the Anbu opened the door to speak to him.

“Why is she naked?!” He growled, almost possessively. Ostu flinched and came between him and another Anbu. Kakashi hesitated, but remained in an offensive stance, just in case.

“We cataloged her injuries.” She said calmly. “Please, Kakashi-san. We need to get her to the Sage.”

“Why? What’s wrong? What’s wrong with her now?” He blabbered and pushed through the barricade of Anbu, who didn’t entirely try to stop him. He came forward and gripped her face between his hands gently. “Sakura-chan, what’s wrong? What did they do to you?” He asked, trying to wake her. He noticed light eye movement and picked up the contact.

She stared at him in disbelief.

“What’s wrong, Kakashi-sensei?” She acted as though nothing had happened. Ibiki watched uncomfortably before looking up to the Elder Council who glowered down at him for stopping the interrogation.

“Y-You were zoned out again, Sakura-chan.” He told her calmly.

“I’m… still naked.” She noted. He kept one hand on her face as he reached and grabbed her clothes, putting them in her arms.

“Once you dress, we’re going to see Jiraiya-sama.” Kakashi informed her.

“Oh… okay.” Sakura said slowly, pulling her clothes on. She tugged her sandals on lastly and cleared her throat, unaffected by her flashback. Kakashi couldn’t help the worried look on his face.

Kakashi held a hand out to her and she took it gladly, following beside him as he supported her with that small touch. “Sakura-chan… Now that we’re out of earshot… Are you alright? You can be honest with me.”
“No,” Sakura said after a moment of consideration. “I’ve been damaged.”

“I saw… I saw what he did to you. You shouldn’t feel ashamed. You couldn’t have stopped him.” Kakashi mended, squeezing her hand lightly. She smiled at him. It seemed like a genuine smile, but she had just gotten away with lying to Ibiki, and he knew it. He stopped her and turned to her. She looked up at him with a single question in her eyes. He tugged down his mask and leaned forward, pressing his lips to her forehead. “I’m glad you’re home.”

Chapter End Notes

Woo! This one took a little bit to write up and edit and I still feel like it's either rushed or OOC, so forgive me! Papa is just trying her bests here.
“How’s Sasuke?” Itachi asked, picking up the cup of tea and slowly bringing it to his lips. He was seated politely, dark blue yukata draped casually over his form. The smoke of calming incense wafted lazily through the small room. It was silent in the world outside the room, save for the chorus of crickets and light rustling of bamboo.

“He’s healthy again. I forgot how sassy he was.” Sakura smiled up at Itachi, hands folded in her lap, seated just on the other side of the table. She was a bit surprised to say the least, when she awoke in her dreams, wearing traditional garb, in what she assumed was a tea house. He’d even taken to the detail of putting her in a kimono she remembered wearing as a child, going to a family function. It held pleasant connotation for her. “What’s with all this?”

Itachi’s eyes wandered along the walls, tracing the painted patterns and then lazily falling back to Sakura. The two of them fit right in with the environment.

“My mother used to take me to places like these when I would do exceptionally well at the academy. My father obviously never found out. He would not approve of frivolous expenditures.” He said and waved his hand, conjuring up a dango. Sakura couldn’t help the chuckle at his semi-dramatic antics as he offered it to her. She plucked it daintily from his hand and took a bite, amazed that it tasted so real. Itachi offered a small smile, biting into one of his own. “These moments when I can be truthful are what I live for, I realize. I’ve lived the majority of my life as a criminal, manipulating people’s perceptions of me.”

“Ah, yes.” Sakura hummed ruffling her hair and trying to get it a bit more out of her face. “With me, you can, Itachi-san. Because I’ve lost my mind, right?”

“Correct. Nobody would ever believe you.” He affirmed. “They would say that the things you would say about me were no more than the delusions of a girl, suffering from unrequited love and torment at the hands of the Akatsuki.”

“Clever man.” She was not a bit bothered by the harsh reality of words, because inside her own head like this, when Itachi isolated her from her slow descent, she was not as flawed. He had given her a place where she could gain reprieve from her psychosis and flashbacks. She sipped the tea as well. “So, when am I scheduled to go back and gut myself?” She asked bluntly. Without realizing it, she had picked up on a bit of Kisame’s crass attitude with the time they had been spending together, either sparring or sharing dinner.

Kakashi was correct in that something had changed in her. She resembled Tsunade more and more each day. Now she held her brash attitude. Itachi rubbed the back of his head, giving a half-hearted smile still. It felt good to smile. Something he hadn’t done in a while.

“Well, tonight, but… I put it off. I’ll just tell Sasori I ran into some trouble. He’s so busy with the others, he won’t know I let you stay longer. I have been watching. I think it would be wise for Jiraiya to remove that gate in your mind. That justu Sasori used was volatile. I don’t think he fully knew what he was doing.” He hummed, relaxing a bit. “That gate holds immense power in it, but… you will fall to insanity if you use it. I believe it may be something Orochimaru used to gain his heavy amount of chakra.”

“Oh, gross.” Sakura stuck her tongue out. “So I have something in common with Orochimaru?” She made a face down at her hands as she examined them. They were so covered in blood.
“Yes.” Itachi admitted and reached across the table, grabbing her hand. “Sakura, please. I hate to ask you to do any more for me. I’ve observed your distance with my brother, and I acknowledge… it is his own hateful attitude, but please. I want you to pretend to love him again. It’s very important that he thinks he has somewhere to go.”

“Why is that? After he kills you, I always assumed he would come home.” Sakura shrugged, but listened carefully.

“I fear someone may try to reach him and expose me. I want Sasuke to think of me as the villain.”

“I know, Itachi, we’ve been over this.” She said, briefly gesturing in the air. “But I don’t understand why I must fake a crush on him.”

“If that person reaches him, I have set up a trap, but I know that it would not be enough.” He sighed. “There’s nothing I can do to protect him once I’m gone, so I’ll need you and the Leaf Village to do it.”

Sakura stared, parting her lips slightly to say something, but she let her gaze fall back to her hands. They were clean.

“I will do it.” She said. “Though acting like that in front of Kakashi-sensei.” She grimaced.

“I know, and I am sorry.” Itachi frowned, giving her hand a small squeeze before letting go. “How are things going?”

“They’re going very well. The Leaf has developed a cure. They’ve already transported it to the Sand Village. We’ve found Gaara-san, and Kankuro-san has showed up at the village’s gate. Gaara-san is in some small town on our very outskirts. Hiding in plain sight I suppose—and Ino-chan is well. Her and Neji-kun are headed to the coast for their wedding next year. Shikamaru and Temari have finally decided to accept their feelings for each other.” She giggled lightly, telling him the things that made her happiest. “Oh, I saw Kakashi-sensei’s face. He was so handsome that I forgot how to talk for a little bit. It’s burned in my memory.”

“I saw.” Itachi chuckled with her. “He is handsome, for someone that old.” Itachi teased, waving his hand dismissively. “Are you that into older men, Sakura?”

“Of course!” She laughed, clapping her hands together. “I mean, how can I not. You saw his torso.”

Itachi and her laughed for a bit, before the air became stale. Sakura’s eyes looked down at her hands. “My parents… Tsunade-sama told me they left the village to search for me. I know better.”

“Yes, I’m afraid you are correct. I apologize for not telling you sooner.”

“You know… I don’t know why I can’t cry about it. I mean, you cried, Sasuke cried, Naruto still cries for his parents, but…” Sakura put her hand up to her throat, as if checking for a pulse. “I’m so far gone I can’t even properly mourn them. Ino-chan became my sole focus for so long, I suppose I forgot about them. Weird, huh?”

“Not weird at all.” Itachi decided, then looked at her meaningfully. “Sometimes our families are not always blood.”

Sakura smiled widely, blushing a little.

“That means a lot to me.” She said truthfully. She finished off her tea. “Say… how’s Sasori doing? Do you know?”
Itachi stared, expressionless for a long moment. He looked away. “You shouldn’t want for the man who hurt you like that.”

Sakura deflated a bit, tears pricking at her eyes. “I know, that’s what makes it so terrible.” She put her palm up to her eyes, wiping away her tears that way before shaking her head. “I’ll try not to feel that way!” She decided. He huffed in amusement then sighed.

“I’m afraid I’ve been spotted. Well, my vessel has. I’ll have to be going now, Sakura. Hang in there.” He said with finality. “You have a couple more days.”

Sakura watched as Itachi’s form burst into a swarm of black birds. They flew around the room before the room deteriorated. She slumped sadly as the table rotted in front of her, then the floors were over taken with mold. She gazed at the opening door. Her eyes were empty. She saw Orochimaru staring back at her.

Outside her bedroom window, Kakashi watched her sleeping form. As the crow he suspiciously swatted away flew, her docile smile had turned into a look of fright and worry. She began thrashing in her sleep. She gripped her chest, back arching painfully before she became deathly still, eyes shooting open. She trembled. Kakashi slid her unlocked window open and knocked on the siding. She looked at him, but it didn’t look like she saw him quite yet.

Before he could process what was happening, he was flying into the adjacent apartment building. He winced and dropped a bit, managing to catch himself on a window seal. Sakura gasped and ran to her window.

“Kakashi-sensei!!” She shouted nervously. “I’m so sorry! I thought you were someone else!”

“That’s fair.” He admitted, moving his jaw to make sure it worked. “I was being kind of creepy. Just wanted to check on you.”

“Come in.” She laughed a bit and he jumped to the roof ledge that sat just in front of her window again. She held her hand out, and though he didn’t need the help, he took her hand and stepped into her bedroom. He looked around curiously, as if to get a better understanding of her from the things found in her room. “So, maybe you can answer me. Exactly how long was I gone?”

“One month and 13 days.” He said. “Well, one month, 13 days, and 9 hours.” He laughed a little bit. She smiled at him. “Did you have a bad dream? You looked unhappy”

Sakura stared at him for a moment, smile remaining on her face, but all traces of joy gone in an instant.

“Kakashi.” She said, dropping the honorific. She still gripped his hand. “We need to talk about things.” Her voice was low and saddened. “I’ll put on some tea.” She decided before he could reguse.

“Trying to get me out of my mask again, I see.” He jested, making her giggle a little. He followed her to the downstairs. There was a rather small dining room. He took a seat and soon she emerged from the kitchen with the promised tea. “It worked.” He said, tugging it around his neck and taking the offered tea. “I could get used to this.”

Sakura’s smile widened a bit, a blush on her cheeks. “Me too. Minus the… almost breaking your jaw.”

“Yes, minus that.” He chuckled. “What did you want to talk about, Sakura-chan?”
“Sakura.” Sakura held the warm cup between her palms, thumbing the smooth surface of the ceramic. Tears dripped down her cheeks as she calmly sipped the tea. It felt like human affection. No wonder Itachi liked tea so much.

“Sakura,” He said quietly, adjusting to not including some sort of follow up. The name tasted sweet on his tongue.

“I can trust you to keep this information between us, correct?” She asked barely above a whisper.

“Of course,” He nodded, freezing up. He wasn’t prepared to hear whatever she had to say, but he would not betray her trust. Especially if it was something important. A couple of months ago, he would have had an entirely different answer, but now with Danzo trying desperately to prove Tsunade was too sick to govern, and the Elder Council insisting that they must shut down the village completely, the political tension was truly to rife to trust anyone. And though he knew Tsunade could be trusted, he doubted that she had much power at this point anyway. On top of all that, he would keep his mouth shut because he desperately did not want to see Sakura have to go before Ibiki again.

“I’m slipping, Kakashi.” She said sternly and set down her empty tea cup, taking in how his face looked in the moon light. The open windows of her dining room allowed it to billow in. The energy company had shut down her power when her parents died, and she didn’t exactly have time to warn them of her return, so she made due. Luckily, the water and gas still worked.

“What do you mean?” He asked, pushing up his headband to look at her more closely. Her chakra seemed off, of course, but there was something much worse at play. He had noted the flash backs, the hallucinations, the sparks of dissociation. He didn’t want to believe it, though.

“I’m going crazy and I fear I don’t have much longer for this world as I know it.” She whispered, shoulders drawing themselves up. “Kakashi, would you stay with me? Would you stay with me while we have the chance?” She asked in a rush. “It’ll only be for a couple of days.”

Kakashi stared for a few moments as minutely she broke down in front of him. He held his arms out, offering physical contact if she wanted to initiate it, but he didn’t want to force it on her. It was clear what had happened to her, and even a hug could cause something in her to snap. She crawled around the table and smiled up at him as she let his arms wrap around her. She set her ear against his chest, listening to his fast heartbeat. Her expression was still even, but he could feel the tremors of her body.

“Is it odd for you, since I was once your student?” She whispered, arms finding their way around him. One of her hands tangled in his hair. “I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable.”

“It is odd for me, because I never thought someone would want me to stay with them.” Kakashi admitted, also whispering for the sake of preserving the quiet. “Surely you know I’m not the most… emotionally available person. It’s just an unexpected request, is all.”

“You’re not as broken as you think, Kakashi.” Sakura promised. He chuckled a little bit. She was worrying for him? She did always put others before herself. To the point where it became self-destructive.

“Likewise.” He said, gathering her up closer until she was cradled in his lap. “I’ll take care of you, if you would like.” He offered quietly, skirting around those three words as much as possible. She looked up at him, fingers lightly tracing on his scalp. She felt brave, only because she knew she was going to die in a couple of days anyway. She smiled. It was time to realize something she had been carefully avoiding. Her stray thoughts came to fruition on her tongue.
“I love you, Kakashi.” She managed. He felt her heart racing. He saw the traces of a blush, and the
genuine truth in her eyes. He held his breath for a moment, not sure how to respond. Sure, people
had confessed before, but he had never shared the sentiment after Rin had passed. In that way, he
was unable to move on.

Of course, he couldn’t respond with ‘are you sure you want that,’ or ‘please don’t mess with me like
that.’ Worse yet would be ‘how could you?’

“I believe that I may return your feelings.” He chose his words with great caution, kissing her hair
gently. She flinched, but held onto him. He tried his best not to take it personally. He stroked her hair
after a moment, enjoying the soft feeling. She really was like a cherry blossom. Fragrant, and
beautiful.

“So, will you stay with me? I don’t have long.” Sakura said.

“Yes, I will.” Kakashi promised and stared out of the window. “What aren’t you telling me? Why do
you not have long?” He looked down at her, puzzled. He knew why, but he didn’t want to accept it.

“I never escaped.” Sakura confessed. “Sasori let me go. We had made an agreement that if I cured
Tozlu and provided medical treatment for the infected Akatsuki, I would get the opportunity to return
to Konoha and heal those whom I love.”

Kakashi’s eyes grew dim with confusion, but he continued to hold her. He didn’t want to let go
anyway. He felt his own heart race uncomfortably and silently cursed it for not being stronger.

“The understanding is that I will return. I was supposed to already return, but… by one of the
member’s mercy, I’m being allowed a bit more time.” She whispered, burying her face against his
throat. He had a distinct scent. He smelled like the atmosphere before a storm. It was an energizing
sort of aroma. “When I do, I will never be able to leave.”

“I-I won’t let that happen a second time.” Kakashi swore now. “Sasori can’t have you.”

“You have to let it happen.” She implored. “I’m losing it anyway, and I was thinking… if I let this
thing Sasori implanted in my mind have my sanity… well, Sasori promised to use me to kill
Orochimaru, so I would be doing justice that way. Plus, from the inside, I think I could prevent
whatever they were planning with the jinchurikis.”

The more logical part of Kakashi had to admit she was right. If she was in with them, she had better
access to their plans, but that would risk her safety, which was unacceptable. Instead, he would
protect her. He couldn’t lose any more teammates.

“We can run.” He offered, being sincere. “I can take you far away from here. You can be safe.” He
said, pushing back the tears that threatened to surface. She really had gone crazy if she just accepted
this fate. “Or we can protect you. The entire village. We can all protect you.”

“The village’s security is greatly compromised by me remaining here—“

Kakashi’s ears began to ring and his throat tightened up.

“What’s inside of me… I won’t have control. I could end up bringing harm to the village. I killed
three people in cold blood under some sort of justu from Sasori. Something that made me snap.”

He shook his head a little, as if he could hear Chidori’s sparks. He closed his eyes and he could see
Rin’s face. Why now? Was it because of Sakura’s words? He held her a bit tighter.
“Sakura… you’re too cruel. I just got you back.” He whispered, allowing himself to tremble ever slightly. He was weakened by his visions of Rin.

“I know, but it’s not just for your safety.” Sakura reasoned. “Besides… look at my body. I don’t want this. If I can die fighting Orochimaru, then I will die happy. Besides, isn’t that some sort of saying among you front-line shinobi? It’s not how you live, but how you die.” She hesitated. “I’ve returned some of the world’s most dangerous criminals back to help. I need to somehow make up for that. I could do some real good. For whatever reason, a couple of the members let their guards down around me, likely not perceiving me as a threat.”

Kakashi shook his head. He couldn’t. He wouldn’t let her be taken away from him a second time.

“We’ll find a different way.” He told her. “Together, we will find retribution. For the both of us.” He whispered.

She wanted to argue, but she couldn’t. She knew her fate. Her fate was cold, unfeeling, encased in the body of a puppet and completely at Sasori’s whims.

When she let out a yawn of exhaustion, Kakashi rose with her still in his arms. Early morning light trickled onto the dusty hardwood all around them.

“Let’s cease talking on the matter for tonight.” He smiled down at her. They were both messes, but together they had a moment of peace. “You’re tired. I can tell.”

“I can’t sleep alone.” She said, eyeing him carefully.

“I saw.” He hummed.

“I’m not asking for… you know, it’s just…” Sakura trailed off and looked up at him almost pathetically when he set her down on her bed. She grabbed onto his sleeve and tugged him towards her. “You promised to stay.”

“If this is what you wish.” He smiled gently. She crawled under the covers but then hesitated.

“Don’t bring dirty clothes to bed.” She chastised with a jest in her tone. He shook his head and chuckled.

“You’re a real pervert, Sakura-chan.” He decided, stripping down to his boxers. She gleefully giggled and held the sheets open. “How’s this fair? You’re in a full length nightgown and I’m vulnerable.” He whined dramatically.

“Oh, please.” She laughed, slapping him lightly on the shoulder before ever so slowly, and with a massive amount of hesitation and anxiety, crept towards him and pressed him down onto his back. She laid at his side, listening to his heart and draping one arm across him. She could feel a scar on his side and idly traced patterns on it.

He relaxed almost immediately at the feeling of being held in such a way. He ran his fingers through her hair, gently massaging her scalp and staring up at her ceiling. She had painted clouds on her ceiling. He smiled a little and kissed the top of her head, but he could sense she was already asleep as her tracing movement died down until her hand rested on his ribs.

“Please, don’t let this end.” He whispered, shutting his eyes. He had such mixed feelings, but he was finally given an opportunity to be close to Sakura, and the imminent danger that would separate them once more lingered just outside her window. He knew that crow had been observing her. He just didn’t know why Itachi was allowing her more time.
Sunlight bore down on the intertwined two, but Kakashi ignored it in favor of watching Sakura’s restful sleep. He committed every detail of her face to memory and lightly played with her hair, careful not to wake her. She’d turned into a fine woman, but she was so fractured in so many ways. He sighed lightly, looking at the crow that sat in her open window.

“Please,” His voice broke a bit when he looked at it. The crow said nothing, only lowered its head. “Don’t take her again.” He whispered, still holding onto her. The crow flew away and he let out a sigh of relief once the presence was gone. What did Itachi have to gain now that Tozlu was cured? Why couldn’t they just leave her?

After a long while of thinking, time passed until it was midday. There was a knock at the door. Sakura stirred and blinked awake, hair stuck to her cheek still. She jumped when she heard Kakashi chuckle and blushed vividly, moving it from her cheek sheepishly. “I believe someone is here—"

“SAKURA-CHAAAAAN!!”

“That’s Naruto-kun.” She muttered, laying back down on him and clinging tightly as he began to rise from bed. She whined, trying to tug him back. “Wait, you shouldn’t get the door. You should let me do it. I have an idea.”

“Oh?” Kakashi hummed.

“Hey, Forehead!! You overslept! We’re going for lunch and you’re coming with us!” Ino yelled, knocking on the door. “I know where the key is!”

“Oh, even better,” Sakura cackled then cleared her throat, poking her head out of the window, looking at the two blondes. “Give me a minute! I’ll be down to let you in while I get ready.” She told them and shut her window, turning to Kakashi.

“Ino, Naruto, and Shikamaru made a bet three years ago on who I would hook up with,” Sakura informed him and picked his shirt up from the floor. Kakashi laughed quietly.

“They must be very invested in your love life, then?” He asked, blushing a bit and rubbing his jaw, still a bit sore from Sakura’s sudden defense.

“Yes! Naruto made a bet that I would be his, Ino bet that I would go on a date with Lee, and Shikamaru… well, I’m sure Shikamaru will be glad to receive that total of 300 ryō. Tsunade won’t be happy. Her money was on me hooking up with Ino.”

Kakashi could only stand and grin at her as Sakura hesitantly pulled her nightgown off. Of course, she still wore her underthings and a tank top, but she got so bitterly cold so easily. She shivered and pulled his shirt over her head. It was loose on her and fell to mid-thigh with the height difference.

“You should wear it more often. It’s a good look for you.” Kakashi remarked, causing Sakura’s face to light up completely red.

“You should leave your mask off more often.” She murmured, trying to gain some upperhand but only able to blush intensely. She felt her cheeks with her palms and smiled shyly.

He approached her carefully and kissed her forehead, before finding his pants from the night before and pulling them on.

“Oh, but then where would the mystery be?” He asked and pulled a spare that he had hidden in his vest. It wasn’t a full shirt, in fact it would only cover the lower half of his face. Sakura was hardly complaining.
She laughed quietly and padded down the stairs, unlocking the deadbolt and slowly opening the door.

“About—t-t-t-t-t” Naruto stammered, obviously having expected her to be wearing more than a shirt and some socks. She immediately regretted her decision.

“Don’t be weird, Naruto!” She yelled, clobbering him over the head when he refused to move his eyes from her legs.

“Ow! Sorry!” He whined, holding the soon-to-be-bump.

Ino simply stared in disbelief.

“Sakura-chan…” She started, looking around, though she still stood in the entry way. “Who’s shirt is that?—Ohmigod! that—” Ino squealed, pointing at Kakashi as he walked down the staircase. “Damn it!”

Sakura couldn’t hold back the laugh at their reactions. If Naruto hadn’t been shocked before, he was certainly shocked then.


“Yes. Last night, I snuck through her window.” Kakashi said evenly but ducked as various objects—shoes, pillows from the closet, a rain coat, and an empty bottle were all thrown at break-neck speeds by Ino.

“You dirty pervert!” Ino hissed, grabbing her Sakura and holding her tightly. “How could you do that to my sweet, innocent baby Sakura?!"

Kakashi laughed a bit harder now.

“He even laughs like a villain.” Naruto accused.

Sakura giggled, placing her arms over Ino’s. “He’s not a pervert. Well, he is, but not about this. I invited him to spend the night.”

“Ugh!” Ino groaned. “Now I’ll have to deal with Shikamaru’s smirking for the rest of the evening.

Naruto looked at his wallet in despair, then looked back at Sakura as she stood in front of Kakashi after draping his muscled arm on her shoulder. Once again, he was thankful he wore a scarf as it concealed one of the brightest blushes.

“I’ll be coming with you guys, when I get my shirt back.” Kakashi said, smiling lightly.
“I don’t mind.” Ino shrugged. “Any friend of Sakura’s is a friend of mine.” She giggled knowingly.

Kakashi decided not to tell Ino that nothing had truly happened. Instead, he pulled his sandals on that he had carried down with him. Just on time, Sakura hopped down the stairs, wearing civilian garb. She handed Kakashi’s shirt to him begrudgingly. It had smelled so nice.

The four headed out, lazily making their way to the ramen stand. The sun was high and bright in the sky, but a couple of clouds promised there would soon be rain. Birds flew overhead as if nothing had happened. There was a bit more foot traffic than yesterday. Cured patients, people no longer afraid of falling ill, and civilians took to the streets to enjoy their days once again, confident that their village could protect them now.

“Hey! The old man’s back!” Naruto declared when he saw that the small restaurant was indeed open and staffed. He practically jumped and sprinted over. The other three followed.

“Old man?! I’m in my prime!” He declared. “What’ll it be? The usuals?”

“The usuals.” Sakura decided happily. She took a seat, but winced as the stool pressed a sore spot on her thighs. She frowned a bit, but ignored it when Kakashi briefly set his hand on her shoulder before withdrawing it.

“Oh, Ino-chan. You haven’t seen Kakashi-sensei’s face yet.” Naruto said and Ino’s eyes went wide. She immediately shot him a look, waiting to see. When he did nothing and claimed he wasn’t hungry, she narrowed them suspiciously.

“I’m sure you’ve eaten quite a bit, huh?” Ino teased, a smirk playing at her full lips.

Sakura nearly choked on her food.

“Yes, I’ve already had breakfast.” Kakashi said, pretending not to catch the innuendo, but he looked at Sakura from the corner of his eye. She cursed his smug, handsome face.

“Is there an open seat?” Sasuke’s voice chimed in.

“Yes! Right next to me!” Naruto grinned, patting the stool. Sasuke was about to retort with something cutting, but he decided not to and instead simply sat down.

“There’s an unusual amount of crows flying about.” He said quietly, causing Sakura to flinch. “Reminds me of someone.”

Sakura shot him the most hateful glare she could muster, but then schooled her expression and returned to her food as he ordered his own.

“They’re likely looking for something to eat. With all the sickness around here, I wouldn’t be surprised if we started getting some vultures.” She said lightly, completely disregarding what he meant, as though she weren’t close with his brother. She sipped her tea and looked him dead in the eye, daring him to say something out of line. She looked back to Kakashi when he didn’t. “How are Ostu-chan and Ostaka-kun?”

“Pulling through, I believe.” Kakashi smiled. “Tsunade-sama said that Ostaka-san has been cured and they put in an order for lung transplants. You’ll be the one to do it. Ostaka-san said he doesn’t know why, but he only wants you to do it.”

Sakura grew pale, eyes widening a bit. It caught up with her. She rubbed her neck, thinking of a reason to excuse her reaction. She couldn’t just outright say, ‘Oh right, let me fix what I did.’
“Oh right, but… I don’t think I could do such a delicate procedure.” She lied, brows furrowing. “The lungs are so… volatile in nature.”

“It’s scheduled for tomorrow. You’ve already been booked.” Kakashi informed her. “You’ll do amazing, I know you will.” He smiled and leaned over, ruffling her hair affectionately. She laughed a little bit and swatted at his hand.

“Disgusting.” Naruto whined. “Horrible, nasty, disgusting.” He deflated, nibbling on a slice of pork while maintaining his pout.

“Wrong!” Ino yelled at him, slamming her empty bowl on his head. He yelped and shielded himself. “It’s beautiful because she’s happy. Don’t be jealous! Jealousy is a major turn off!”

“What’s with you two and hitting?” He muttered. “How are you getting married?”

“Oh, I completely forgot!” Sakura said, exasperated. “Ino, tell me everything!!”

“I’m out.” Naruto decided. “Sasuke-kun, Kakashi-sensei, let’s go train!” He decided, already headed for the training ground.

“What part of take it easy didn’t he understand?” Sakura sighed but smiled up at Kakashi. She grabbed his hand. “I’ll be here still if you take a little trip to go training. I’ll still be here, I promise.” She whispered so that the others couldn’t hear it. He resigned a bit and kissed her forehead.

“I’ll see you later, Sakura.” He hummed and stood up, falling behind Sasuke and Naruto.

“Let’s go shopping, we can talk then!” Ino decided.

“Ah yes, gossip and shopping.” Sakura laughed. Well, she did have money to spend. Her inheritance, to be exact. She knew she would no longer need it, so she had money to burn. “I’d love to!” She decided, paying for her own and Ino’s food.

“Thank you, Sakura-chan.” Ino chirped, pleasantly surprised as she put away her own wallet. “Hey, you can help me pick out a kimono to wear! The Hyuga family is all traditional and stuff, so I want to dress appropriately.”

The girls began walking down the busy road, comfortably close to each other.

“What about that one you’ve had your eyes on since we were 10?!” Sakura chided. “I think Neji-kun would be happier if you wore what you want rather than try to impress his family.”

“I…” Ino stopped for a moment before smiling widely. “You’re right, I hadn’t thought about that. Then let’s head to that woman’s shop! My mother got a wedding gown from there! My grandmother, too—and it’s the same woman, so I want to carry on the tradition while she’s still alive.” She laughed.

“A wedding gown?”

“Absolutely! I’ll look like a foreign beauty. I saw the idea in a magazine from a distant village. I really like the idea rather than a kimono. It looks fun!”

“Hmmmm, I suppose if it makes you happy.” Sakura smiled and leaned over to kiss her best friend on the cheek.

The rest of the day went fairly well. Sakura walked Ino back to her house and gave her a very long
good bye hug. She felt like it may be her last. She had a tightening in her chest that told her she was correct.

Her feet barely made any sound as she walked through the town, taking in the sights. She heard the crow squawk at her. She turned to see what the problem was when she made eye contact with a dark figure. The last time this happened, it didn’t end well. Sakura pulled her gloves on, ready for combat.

“You’ve been following my friend and I,” She said steadily, voice dropping lower than her normal speaking tone. That was why she felt the need to walk Ino home. Part of her knew she was being followed, though she initially wrote it off as paranoia. She was proven wrong as a man she did not recognize stepped into the street lamp’s spot light. He wore the mask of an Anbu, but something was terribly off.

Sakura narrowed her eyes.

“Name yourself and your reason for following me. Did the Elder Council assign you to me?” She scoffed, eyes burning with rage. Fingers itching with... something. Something foreign to her. She was getting excited rather than scared, and she began to hope for this person to step forward and attack her.

There was no Anbu tattoo on either of the man’s shoulders, but he slowly withdrew a sword. Sakura’s breathing picked up and she made a small noise similar to a laugh when he came at her.

“You should cease your assault.” Sakura breathed, voice coming out a little bit more chipper than she would have been comfortable with. “Please, tell me your name and why you’re following me.”

“Orders.” He said simply. “You need to come with me, Sakura Haruno.”

Sakura licked her lips eagerly. The last two times someone had said that it had ended up in an interesting way.

“I’m afraid I have somewhere to be right now. Could we postpone this little confrontation until tomorrow?” She asked, focusing her chakra until it became visible around her fists. “I’d advise that anyway, because while I am not cocky…” She trailed off, before her words became venomous and meaningful. “It’s going to take more than one of you to subdue me. I suggest three at the very least.”

“Do you intend to fight?” He asked evenly, obviously not moved by her bravado.

“Yes. I do not intend to be kidnapped a second time.” She retorted. The false-Anbu seemed to melt into the ground and she looked around for a long while. Minutes passed, but nothing happened. She slowly let her chakra drift from her hands but she kept her guard up. Perhaps he had actually heeded her warning?

She wondered if Sasori sent them. She hoped not. She’d surely be punished for such disobedience. Though, that wouldn’t make sense because he supposedly sent Itachi, and Itachi was… right there. She looked at a hoard of crows perched on a line.

“Hm. They seem to follow you.” Sasuke remarked, managing to scare Sakura out of her attitude. She squeaked but calmed down when she realized who it was. Itachi’s words swirled in her mind like dark clouds.

*I want you to pretend to love him again. It’s very important that he thinks he has somewhere to go.*

“So it seems, do you.” Sakura smiled. “Sasuke-kun, would you take a walk with me?” She asked carefully. He analyzed her with such scrutiny it nearly burned her skin. He made a small inclination
of his head. She waited for a moment for a verbal response but simply decided to begin walking. He
watched her for a bit before catching up to her and walking just behind her.

Sakura repressed a sigh. “How are you feeling?” His words surprised her and she halted, looking at
him to see if he was joking. “Do not feel the need to lie to me, to save my feelings.”

“I’m in pain.” She allowed the words to fall from her tongue and put a hand over her stomach. His
eyes fell to it. “I’m distraught. The Elder Council seems to believe I have somehow turned into a
traitor… the sentiment is shared among those I hold very dear as well.” She said meaningfully.

“I don’t think you’re a traitor.” Sasuke bit out, not caring to talk in code.

“Then what’s the problem?” Sakura asked, eyeing the sky as the last sliver of heavenly sunlight
disappeared behind the horizon. She couldn’t see the moon.

“It’s hard to believe you got away, is all.” Sasuke admitted.

“I had to…” Sakura grimaced at him. He faltered, watching her carefully. He looked heartbroken for
whatever reason. “I had to make sure you lived.”

“You didn’t just do it for me.” He told her.

“I know, but can’t a girl be romantic?” She whined a bit, but smiled widely as her antics got a quiet
huff of amusement. That was flattering.

“You’re still annoying.” He laughed a small bit.

“I still would rather you stayed.” Sakura said, feeling very, very small, just like she did all those years
ago. “Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Sasuke paused, having walked ahead of her without realizing it.

“There’s an exit up ahead. You weren’t walking anywhere with me. We were simply here at the
same time.” Sakura said. It stung her, even still. Maybe she still had feelings for him.

“I have to go.” Sasuke said, preparing to simply jump away, but he hesitated for whatever reason.

Sakura approached him from behind and wrapped her arms around his chest.

“Sasuke…” She whispered against his back. How tall he’d gotten. “Come home, after you kill Itachi.
Come straight home.”

Sasuke said nothing, just tilted his head back to look at the moonless sky.

“Thank you, Sakura.”
Sasori stared down at his hands. He had grown a layer of skin for himself, wanting to be more attractive for Sakura when she returned. Over his separation from her (which he found shockingly difficult to come to accept), he had determined that he wanted a bit more than her fear and obedience. He wanted her mind and heart as well. He found himself incredibly lonely. Hidan and Kakuzu left shortly after their cures, though weakened as Kakuzu was with only two hearts. Kisame and Deidara remained, but he did not enjoy their company.

His thoughts were tainted by the light flash of pink and the scent of cherry blossom. It had been years since he could last smell, but the scent was engrained in his brain and just the portrait of her brought it to the forefront of his mind. He put a hand to the bandages over his nose. That would change soon. Soon, he would taste, smell, feel. All for Sakura. She would surely appreciate it. If not, he would make her. He leaned down and kissed the puppet in front of him. She was beautiful, though incomplete. Just like the original.

He ran his fingertips along the complete skin. He had crafted every moment of her body to be exactly like the original, from soft undertones of red, to the freckles and sun spot on her shoulders, to each scar that she had prior to him granting her many new ones, even to the light stretchmarks she had gotten on her hips from losing weight, then gradually gaining it back with proper diet. She was equally muscled to her original, and would have the same, if not greater strength. He had slaved over every detail.

He ghosted his palm over her eyelids. He had placed glass eyes in her until he could use her original ones. He picked up a very thin, curved needle and lighter. He had decided mink fur would better suit his puppet. He used the lighter to burn the end of the mink fur and break the bonds in it. The flame was treated with his own chakra. It was a procedure he used to curl his hair as a puppet. He gently sewed the eyelashes into the soft flesh. There was a bit of blood that seeped from the membrane of the underside of her eye lids, but he merely wiped it away.

He spent two hours carefully placing each individual eyelash, long and dark and curled lightly as to enhance her mesmerizing eyes. It would look especially nice when she wept in fear or despair. He had given her tear ducts. She would be able to cry for him, just as he loved so much.

Done for the day, he picked up the puppet, weighing roughly the same as Sakura, perhaps a bit more with the density of the wood, and laid her down in a bed he had gotten for his workshop. Gently, his hands glided over her once more before tucking her in. He sighed, sitting on the edge of the bed. He was lonely again. It wasn’t like before. It wasn’t as easy as the last time he cut himself off from human contact.

He stared down at the floor, deep in contemplation. His eyes were ever as full of scrutiny. He bore down at the floor, as if damning it for his anguish. Part of him hated Sakura. It was why he harmed her so much. She had forced him to feel things that he didn’t want, and it was infuriating. He’d need to punish her one last time before she killed herself. She needed to know she was nothing, that she was the scum of the Earth for trying to…

*Trying to what?*

He heard her voice hiss.

*Help? I don’t understand why you’re so insistent on pushing people away and bottling up!*
How had she gotten in his head like this? He growled and put his head in his hands, grabbing his own hair in anger and seething with rage. It wasn’t her place to invade his mind the same way he did hers. Yes, she would suffer for it. She would experience pain as he did. She would never recover from what he would do to her.

But he couldn’t hurt her in the way he wanted. If he killed Tsunade or Kakashi like he planned to while she was in the village, she would never love him like he wanted her too. No, he would have to… what? There was nothing he could do other than isolate her and show her he was the only thing worthy of her love. After all, she was a goddess. A goddess of beauty and soon, eternally his. They would live well past the trifling life spans of her friends, and his colleagues. Together, King and Queen.

He smiled a little, shaking. How beautiful this all was. How proud his grandmother would be of him. Often when he was little, in an effort to show him empathy in the face of Suna’s teachings, she would tell him stories about true love and the importance of it. He thought at first, he was just being cruel to himself, mentioning ‘love’ and ‘Sakura’ in the same sentence. But when he held her, felt her tiny heart beat against his chest, felt the way she trembled like a wounded bird, he understood fully well. He loved her, so it didn’t matter if she returned those feelings. She was his.

He gathered himself together and headed out the door.

“Sasori, my man.” Deidara called, spotting him. “Where’s that little project of yours? Shouldn’t she be back by now?”

Sasori focused his seemingly never ending glare on Deidara. “Yes.” He said simply.

“I wonder if Itachi got attached and decided to take her for his own!” He laughed, barely dodging the kunai in time as it flew towards his head. “Watch it. Leader just explained he didn’t want any more of us dead. That would be more work for the rest of us, hm!”

“He would not. Itachi would not betray me in such a way as to steal my property.” Sasori said evenly then began walking again.

“Of course not.” Deidara laughed.
It took Sakura a long, tense moment before her hand could open the door. She looked at Ostu who sat next to Ostaka. Ostaka was laid out on the bed, hooked up to a several machines that prolonged his life. She knew, however, exactly how useless it was. Tsunade entered behind her with a file, also wearing scrubs, which had surprised Sakura.

“We have a set of lungs, but...” Tsunade began, trying to find a gentle way to word it. She wasn’t the best at wording things in a nice manner. “Ostaka-san, I will only be honest with you. Anything less would be an insult!” She declared, covering up her own fear with steadfast determination. “This does not look good. We’ve acquired a donor, but there is a great amount of danger involved in this procedure.”

“I suppose so, considering the Hokage herself is here to do it alongside one of the best medical nins we have here in this village.” Ostaka said quietly. His voice had gone. Ostu would joke that it was a blessing, but it worried her greatly. Ostu had already received a cure and was at full health other than the healing lesions on her chest. Ostaka had worsened after the cure.

Sakura looked between them worriedly. Her eyes flashed to what would be the donor lungs and she couldn’t help the feeling of dread that settled in her stomach. Tsunade put a hand on her shoulder, sensing her pupil’s distress.

“We will proceed then, if you have no protest.” Tsunade decided and looked at Ostu for a moment. “Are you sure you would like to be present for this procedure? It is very gory.”

“I will stay by my brother’s side. Always.” She said.

Tsunade knew it. That was their one condition to entering the Anbu, that they would only ever go on missions together. Growing up they were extremely close, and they never quite grew out of it, especially after the incident involving Orochimaru. Stripped of their masks, Ostu struggled greatly to school her expression.

“We will work around you, so that you can hold onto his hand.” Tsunade promised. “I know this can be difficult.”

“Thank you, Hokage-sama.” Ostu nodded, but Ostaka looked on in worry. He had written a will and given it to Kakashi when he sent Ostu out to get dinner for the both of them. She had no idea, but he had a feeling for the worse.

“Sakura, please prep for me.” Tsunade ordered politely, walking over to her patient with a cooler. “The lungs belonged to a young shinobi who unfortunately did not survive the last attack.” Tsunade sighed. “He will live on in you, though.” She smiled optimistically. Sakura noted a complete change in demeanor, as Tsunade expertly put on her best bedside manners.

Sakura organized everything to how Tsunade liked it and set out the sterilized instruments on a metal tray. She rolled it up next to Tsunade and took to the opposite side of the bed. Normally, they would move him to an OR, but Ostaka refused to be moved, stating that if he were to die, he wanted to die in a room with windows. And in the end, one set of sheets didn’t really matter. Ostu gripped his hand tightly, stroking through his hair to calm him. He was nervous and she could tell.

As gently as one could, Sakura pressed a needle into the crook of his arm, taping it off and hooking it
to an IV. The concoction flowing into his blood would numb him but keep him awake and clear headed. He blinked as he lost feeling. It was an odd sensation when not paired with the regular loopiness. However, the numbing agent was a thing of Sakura’s own creation. She used it when there was a delicate procedure that required the patient to stay awake and focused.

“It feels like I’m floating.” Ostaka laughed nervously. “Let’s hurry this along, I don’t like this feeling.” He said as Tsunade poked the bottom of his foot with a needle, testing whether or not he could feel anything. He didn’t even notice. Satisfied with her pupil’s concoction (and wildly impressed), she folded the blanket back, leaving it over his midsection and beginning to draw lines where they would open him up.

Sakura’s fingers began to itch as something overcame her.

“He’s already drugged, Sakura, but we must hurry. Itachi’s lungs are decaying quicker than the Kuren’s.”

Sakura stared down at Ostaka with wide eyes as Tsunade began to cut along the guides.

“Sakura, the ribs.” Tsunade said briefly.

Ostu watched, paler than before as she watched the two women open up her brother. She gripped his hand and he looked at her, too scared to look down at himself. They said nothing but maintained eye contact for a long while, before he began to shake in fear.

“Calm him down or we’ll have to use something that will disorient him.” Tsunade warned. Ostu’s eyes widened but she nodded. Ostaka had stated clearly he wanted to be conscious through it, in case the worst came to pass.

“Ostaka,” Ostu said quietly, removing herself from the chair to kneel on the floor. With that she was at eye level with her brother. Her eyes searched his face for a moment and he did his best to calm down. She smiled a little as he controlled his breathing. “Do you remember when our family took a vacation to go camping?”

“Yes, I remember that.” He chuckled, then gave her a smirk. “I remembered someone throwing a fit over where she had to use the bathroom.”

Ostu scoffed, setting her chin on the edge of the bed. “I don’t remember it that way. I remember you freaking out because a crab was in your jacket when you went to put it on.” She smirked back, equally mirthful.

Ostaka huffed. “I only freaked out after the tenth crab! Tenth!” He asserted. “If I’m not mistaken, you were the one putting them in the oddest places, too.” He chuckled, settling down and staring at his sister as she moved her thumb nervously along his knuckles. “Hey, it’s alright…” He whispered. “I don’t feel a thing. I actually feel better than I h-h-h-hhh…”

“Sakura!” Tsunade yelled. “Sakura—quick—your chakra!”

Sakura gasped, summon pink chakra and encasing his lungs completely, forcing them to work again. The two women took a deep breath when he returned to normal.

“It’s alright.” Ostu said with venom in her voice. “This is your fault, somehow. I don’t know how, but it is.” She said with a light smile.

“You are one major bitch.” He retorted.
“You love me. I’m your favorite sister.”

“You’re my only sister.”

Ostu smiled and gripped his hand a little tighter.

“Alright, he won’t be able to talk for a moment, or breathe. Sakura, we have exactly 20 seconds to remove them and get them connected… On the count of three.” Tsunade said.

“I do love you.” Ostaka confirmed, giving a small smile.

“One.”

“You’re going to be alright.” Ostaka told his sister.

“Two.”

“No matter what happens.” He said finally, then smiled widely, tears in his eyes.

“Three.”

Sakura brought her hands up, pulling the lungs up using the chakra and putting the new ones in with the same method. Tsunade’s eyes widened as she recognized those same hand movements. It seems she picked up on Sasori’s puppetry while she was under his mercy. Tsunade swallowed thickly and used a healing justu to seal in the new lungs, as if they had been there the entire time. Ostaka took a deep breath, looking at Ostu in amazement.

Ostu smiled widely and looked up to the two women, then back at her brother.

“I can breathe deeply.” He said.

“Yes, you should be alright. There is always a chance of them rejecting, but… well, you’re a Kuren. So, they’ll likely stay.” Tsunade said honestly. “You’ll be here for the week though.” She said, eyeing his ribs for a moment as Sakura healed them back into place. She stopped her pupil, examining them closely. “Ostaka-san… have you had a lung transplant before?” She asked incredulously.

“No, not that I know of, but…” Ostaka said, voice thick with worry. Ostu’s eyes found Tsunade’s, horror clear on her face.

“Sakura, please examine his lungs.” She instructed. “His old ones.”

“Right… what am I looking for?” Sakura asked, hands beginning to shake as the discovery was made.

“Any sign that they may not be his original lungs.” Tsunade said darkly.

Sakura swallowed thickly, looking at the now dead organ. She took a scalpel and opened them up. “W-W-Well, I suppose… maybe it’s nothing.” She said nervously.


“There are seven points of infection.” Sakura pointed to each one, ignoring Tsunade’s question. “But he doesn’t show any sign of being infected more than once.”

“I see…” Tsunade hummed, growing a bit pale at the look of guilt on Sakura’s face. The women
cringed at the thought that bugged her. It had gnawed at her since Sakura’s return. The possibility of betrayal. It seemed so lofty and ridiculous before. “I’m sure it’s nothing. Maybe I was just being paranoid.” She lied, continuing to heal. Sakura aided her and they were done in less than twenty minutes with only a light scar to show they had ever been there.

“Sakura-chan, Kakashi-san.” Tsunade said firmly. The two seemed nervous about something. There was something they were hiding from her. Kakashi kept glancing to the window, which puzzled her greatly. She had even turned as well to look a few times, but there was nothing more than the clear blue sky and a flock of black birds. “You will join me for dinner.”

“W-What?” Sakura stammered, blinking herself into reality. She had just woken from a hallucination, it seemed. Her decreasing awareness for reality was troublesome to say the least, and more and more she began an enigma, one that Tsunade would have to solve. She cared deeply for Sakura. In many cases, she saw Sakura as a daughter. Even though she had never been one for children after the loss of her younger brother, she saw found herself playing a maternal role in Sakura’s like, and doing her best to be there for the emotional girl through the heart ache of losing a teammate.

“It was an order. I want you two to meet me at the Akimichi’s family restaurant.” She said lightly, smiling. “It’s my favorite place to drink.”

Kakashi couldn’t stop his chuckle. “Of course, Hokage-sama. Is that all?”

“It is for now.” Tsunade nodded before looking at Kakashi directly in the eye “Well, I do have one inquiry.”

“Y-Yes?” Sakura managed, finding herself squirming under Tsunade’s stare.

“When did it happen?” She smiled, looking at how close Kakashi was to Sakura, how possessively he held her shoulder, how much it filled him with joy every time he looked at her.

“I honestly don’t know.” Sakura laughed with a bit of apprehension, looking up at Kakashi. “I just realized it recently, though.”

“I’m glad.” Tsunade said honestly. “I was certain Kakashi would die alone.”

“How kind of you.” Kakashi muttered, faking a pout. “I’m glad to see you have such faith in me.”

“I do have faith in you.” Tsunade said. “Just not in finding someone to spend time with. You have to know how difficult of a person you are!”

“I know no such thing.” He lied, holding his hand up to protest her statement.

“I know such a thing.” Sakura giggled, causing Kakashi to look down at her, a visible look of betrayal. She laughed harder when he crossed his arms.

“Disgusting, get out of my office.” Tsunade barked, though she was grinning.

Sakura couldn’t help but laugh as Kakashi flamboyantly waved in an angry fashion and stormed out. She followed after him but looked down the hallway both ways after closing the door. He couldn’t have gotten away from her that quickly—

Sakura barely suppressed a squeak when Kakashi grabbed her from behind and scooped her up. Her sides began to hurt from laughing as he buried his masked face against her neck, kissing her and
holding her tightly against his chest.

“Ah. Get a room.” Kurenai stared blankly at them, stunning ruby eyes void of emotion. Kakashi glared for a moment, before both of them slowly broke into grins. “I still find it odd how different he is in your presence, Sakura-san.”

“D-Different?” Sakura repeated dumbly, scratching her head and looking up at Kakashi. “O-Oh, you mean,”

“Showing my emotions should not be taken to be me being different.” Kakashi chastised. “If you did a little more of it, I wonder if Asuma-kun—“

“Shut it.” She hissed immediately. “I am perfectly open with my emotions.”

“Kurenai-chan, you looked him dead in the eye and told him that you found his taijutu to be ‘acceptable’.” Kakashi snorted. Kurnai bristled at the scrutiny.

“Well, it wasn’t amazing.” She huffed, crossing her arms and cocking her hip slightly to the side to symbolize her distaste for Kakashi’s arrogance. “Besides, he took it as the compliment it was.”

“Of course,” Kakashi chuckled and shook his head. “What are you headed in to do anyway?”

Kurenai’s eyes darkened a bit and she did her best to avoid Sakura’s eyes now. She schooled her expression.

“There’s been a bit of activity outside of the village. A bordering town on the river had said that a large man, with blue skin, shark teeth, and an Akatsuki robe was spotted by the river.” She began quietly, only divulging the information because of her trust in the two. “They say he was with a man. A shinobi from this village. We have a traitor within our walls.”

That makes two traitors then. A voice in the back of Sakura’s mind caused her to jolt. Kakashi hesitantly set her down so she could right herself. She blinked, a bit disoriented. “Kakashi-san, please accompany me in. I don’t wish to go in alone.” Kurnai said evenly.

“If… Sakura-chan.” Kakashi grimaced. “I’ll be right back.” He said, loathe to leave her there for even a moment. He tugged his mask down to plant a kiss on her forehead, but she quickly intercepted, tilting her chin up and standing on tip toe to meet his lips. His face all but turned red. She heard Kurnai snickering and smirked against his lips as he quickly tugged the mask back up, trying to play it cool.

“I’ll see you in a moment.” She promised. “I’m going to get some fresh air. I’ll be right outside.”

“Alright.” He sighed, trying to gather himself up under the gaze of Sakura and the mirthful scrutiny of Kurenai. With no other word, but a small wave from Kakashi’s colleague, the two were gone from her sight and Sakura wandered from the building, slow and leisurely. The soft afternoon air greeted her with a warm breeze, carrying the scent of the forest that surrounded the village. She smiled reminiscently, wondering what Ino was doing in the back of her mind. She decided to drop by later and see. No doubt, she was with Neji, whom she hadn’t seen at all since returning. It bothered her a bit, but she decided to ignore it.

“Sakura, come.” Sasori ordered, standing at a surgical table. She obeyed, looking down at his ‘patient’. She had wondered what he had been trying to accomplish. It looked like he was merely
playing around in the gore that was the man’s chest. Miraculously, and no doubt thanks to careful
ninjustu and torture, the man was alive, hooked on an adrenaline drip that kept him conscious
through it. His eyes wept a lake of tears.

Sakura couldn’t contain her gasp as she looked at the man’s throat. His vocal chords were not only
visible, but had been ripped out and laid across his neck. It was clear he could feel it, but he could no
longer scream. “W-W-Why?!” She managed, backing up until Sasori grabbed her with one blood
covered hand and yanked her back to him.

“This one betrayed me. I implanted him into Orochimaru’s numbers. He decided to out the others
and give up a few of my secrets. This tongue got him in trouble, so I want you, my loyal puppet, to
cut it out.”

Sakura stared in disbelief. Her hands tingled lightly and she looked up at Sasori, somehow begging
him not to make her. He simply looked down at her with those unwavering eyes that he always had
in a permanent judgmental glare. She tried to say something, but just like the man on the table, no
words came out.

“He will live through this.” Sasori told her. “But he won’t ever be able to tell anyone. You’re going
to make sure of that.”

“He already can’t speak, you cut his vocal cords—how is he still alive?” She managed, beginning an
argument.

“The symbolism.” He grunted, handing her a scalpel. “Detach it at the very base. There’s already an
opening in the throat, just start from there.”

“No! This is pointless, just end his misery.” Sakura growled, pushing it back in his hands. He
paused, staring down at her. She was showing ire and he enjoyed it, but the disobedience wouldn’t
do. His silence was enough to quell her short rebellion. She turned back to the man who had looked
to her with mercy. A chill ran up her spine. “I apologize.” She whispered, pushing a few things out
of the way and opening up the encasement. She sliced the base of his tongue then sent chakra
through the metal of the scalpel, putting it at a clean slice all the way up, severing all connection that
the tongue had to anything at all. Her breathing was shallow as she closed his throat up with her
healing.

A single deft hand entered his mouth and gripped tightly on the muscle. With her superhuman
strength she pulled it out slowly, letting it drag. The man screamed dryly and silently. Sakura’s grin
came about, slow but steady. Her hands were shaking, no. Her entire body was shaking. Fear?
Excitement?

Sasori steadied her, firm hands grasping her hips and pulling her back up against him. He treasured
her when she became more honest, more gruesome.

She laid the muscle out on a tray and sealed the wound. The silent man was crying again.

Anger rushed through her.

Fear rushed through her.

This man had been spilling secrets to Orochimaru about Sasori.

That was a personal offense. She glared down at him.

Sasori stayed in place, watching thoughts flash through Sakura’s mind like lightning breaking
through clouds. He was mesmerized by the beauty of her dichromatic nature that he barely noticed her hands until it was too late.

“You don’t deserve sight. You don’t deserve to look at him.” She told the man, thumbs falling over his wide eyes as he tried to fight the paralysis. “I will make your sad existence worse. You will be consumed by the darkness.” She told him. It didn’t feel like her voice. The words were thick and poisonous on her tongue, and she tasted blood. Blood mixed with tears as she plucked the eyes from his skull, setting them next to the tongue. A chuckle bubbled up in her belly, but she stifled it. “You won’t hear, or feel, or smell. You don’t deserve it.” She told him.

Sasori wanted to stop her, but his morbid curiosity was getting the better of him.

Pink chakra flowed from her fingertips like puppet strings. A few of them went to his ears, the others went to his nose. The only indication that he was in pain was the ragged breathing and fully body shaking as she severed the nerves there, blood flowing from nose and ears as well. “Oh… I have an idea for the cure.” She said blandly, degloving and going to her desk to write it down.

A scream wracked her body but it never came. She stared down at the Leaf Shinobi she was sitting on. Her breath hitched and she looked around. There was blood everywhere. She backed up, unable to make a sound. A crow looked between her and the body before pecking at it lightly. She began to sob, not sure what to do. What if Kakashi found her? What if Tsunade found out?

She looked to Itachi’s crow for some sort of help. She immediately fell under the genjustu but didn’t mind. Anywhere was better than facing her own actions. The world was simple. She was in a field. She had a feeling he was only keeping her there while he cleaned up after her. She would have to find a way to thank him. She knew just the way.

Something she never told anyone about, a little secret all to herself. After a childhood trip to a festival, before their academy years, Sakura held a small piece of Sasuke’s heart with her. More specifically, she kept it in her drawer, wrapping in paper to preserve it. Long ago, she had planned to give it to their daughter.

“Oho! So close, here you go, little girl. One last try. Just hit the target.” The man behind the counter prompted.

“Steady, sweetheart.” Sakura’s mother said, “Just focus on the center of the target and then throw it the best you can.”

“Haaa!” Sakura shouted, throwing the kunai as hard as she could. She practically exploded with joy, jumping up and in circles when the tip of the kunai pierced the very edge of the bottom of the target.

“Very good! Very good! Which prize?” The man cheered.

“That one!” She squeaked, pointing at a plush animal of a fox. “I want that one!”

“O-Oh, you didn’t quite get enough points for that one. You get to pick from the sweets bucket.” He mended, holding up a small bucket full of candy. Sakura’s smile deflated and she sighed, picking out a piece of candy and turning to her mother, face sodden with disappointment.

“It’s okay, honey! You did great! I’ll bet next time you’ll do even better.” Her mother promised, kissing her daughter’s cheek and smiling widely.

Just a short distance away, Sasuke watched, still gripping his older brother’s hand.
“Big brother!” He whispered, a blush tinging his cheeks. “Look.” He pointed to Sakura, giggling a little. “She’s going to start academy with me! I’ll bet she’s going to be like Izumi is to you.” He told Itachi, who smiled down at him, a bit worried. His sad smile never failed to please Sasuke though. “Oh… she didn’t win… c-can we try that one?!” He asked excitedly.

“Sure.” Itachi said, looking down at the last few notes he had in his hand. “We have enough for two attempts.”

It took about ten minutes, but Sasuke managed to win the fox plush. More to the point, it was ten minutes of Sasuke missing the target, and Itachi giving a crimson glare to the festival worker before the worker handed over the plush. Sasuke squeaked happily.

“Sakura-chan, right?” Sasuke chirped, running up to the girl and her mother. Her mother stood back and let the two interact, smiling widely at Itachi.

“R-Right! A-Are you…” Sakura managed shyly. Normally, all other kids her age did was tease her about her looks. But this boy just ran up to her holding—”Did you win that?” She gasped in awe.

“Y-Yeah.” He smiled widely, holding it out to her, cheeks red. “I won it for you!”

“Really?!” Sakura’s heart leapt and she hugged the boy, small, chubby arms wrapping around him. Itachi smile was heart felt now. His eyes softened. Sakura’s mother noticed as well, looking between the older and younger brothers. “Thank you! I-It was Sasuke-kun, right?”

“Right!” He confirmed with a hum.

“Come on, Sakura. Your father is fixing dinner tonight.” Her mother informed her. Sakura let go of Sasuke.

“I-I’ll see you later!” Sakura shouted, waving and running up to her mother. She grabbed her mother’s hand again and went on.

“See you!” Sasuke called and gripped his brother’s hand again. “Thank you, big brother.” He said, hugging Itachi closely. Itachi smiled down at him wearily.

“Sakura! You were attacked!” She heard Kakashi scream, running up to her and immediately gathered her up off the ground. “Sakura!” Her vision swam in that dark green lake, tittering on the verge between fully awake and lost to the world. He held her close as he was growing so fond of doing.

Her eyes looked dark and troubled, not at all like the normal pools of joy they were. He held her face carefully. She had been stabbed, scratched, bruised. It looked much like someone had attacked her, but the state of the body on the ground in front of her… the blood on her hands.

“I-Itachi,” She breathed.

“Itachi did this?!” Kakashi whispered, misreading the situation. “Yes, I can see the effects of a genjustu. Don’t worry. You’ll be alright. I promise, he won’t take you away,”

Sakura stared up at him, not sure what to say. Instead, she simply laid her head against his shoulder, deciding to let fate decide. Time escaped her, light escaped her. Her head lolled to the side.

“Ohhhh, if it isn’t Sssakura-chan.” In front of her was a giant Naga, staring down at her with a face, no, many faces, each undulating and ever changing as the boundless ocean. It’s tongues slithered out...
of what she assumed was its primary face, so she looked to that one when it spoke. Its skin was comprised of what could only be a combination of sloshing viscera and live, beating hearts. The pulsating and beating was deafening despite being silent. “It’ssss good to sssee your vissssage again.” Each word was like sand paper scraping against her ears. “Ssstand, Sssakura.”

Groaning in an aching pain, Sakura got to her feet.

“It’s you again.” Sakura said, unimpressed at the display, though it made her stomach roil and her eyes hurt. “Who are you? Why are you in my mind?”

“Sssso quick witted.” It said, sliding closer to Sakura. “Sssso curiousssss… Sssassori put me here.”

“Are you unable to talk normally?” Sakura said, no small amount of annoyance in her voice.

“Ohhh, dear.” He whined highly. “Sssso impatient.”

“Why are you here?”

“To keep my eyesss on you. To ssshape you. To help you.”

Sakura thought for a moment, finding it hard to concentrate under such an offense presence. She sat down, feeling dizzy. She considered its words quietly, keeping eye contact with it steady. Despite its downright frightening appearance, she seemed to stomach it. An eye focused on her as it leaned forward, coming face to face with her. She could smell something horribly like blood on rotten meat, like pungent mud.

“Would you like ssstability?” It asked. “I ssssense your ssstruggle.”

“I don’t want anything from you.” Sakura asserted. “I want to wake up, now.”

“Ohhh? You’ll be back.” It nodded. “Until nexssst time.”

Sakura stood up. She found herself in a hospital bed, surrounded by her friends. She looked up to meet a pair of arctic blue eyes. She muttered the name ‘Ino’, and the girl was visibly shocked. She felt someone grab her hand. She heard yelling but she couldn’t make out words. The girl leaned down, kissing her nose several times. Sakura couldn’t help the giggle that arose out of her. The tension trickled down to no more than an uncomfortable presence.

“I’m so glad you’re okay… that Akatsuki asshole tried to kidnap you! Looks like you did him a good one. I’m so proud! That’s my girl!” Ino shouted, punching an invisible enemy in the air.

Kakashi sat silently next to her, eye trained on Sakura’s face knowingly. She grimaced at Kakashi.

“You’re good to go. I still expect you for dinner. This doesn’t excuse you for the evening.” Tsunade said matter of factly.

“I can’t believe it! First Sasuke disappears, then Itachi tries to take you?!” Naruto yelled, speaking with her, then someone else. “What about that security you guys were gonna nail her with!” He was screaming at someone she recognized to be Ibiki.

“We needed her permission and did not get to her in time.” He said evenly, then turned to her. “It seems we will have to meet once again.”

Sakura groaned, trying to process it all.

“You guys, not now! Not now at all!” Ino hissed at them. “Everyone except you—“ she pointed to
Tsunade, “and you—” she pointed to Kakashi. “Get. Out!”

There was a scuffle of feet, nobody questioned Ino’s command when Tsunade turned to give them a look. “How are you feeling?” Tsunade chimed in, turning back to Sakura and brushing her hair from her face. Sakura smiled at the tender touch, a bit relieved at Tsunade’s gentle tone.

“Like I really ought to stick with someone, for a while at least.” Sakura said, honestly meaning it as well. There was a crow on the window seal, and she took great comfort in it. “I don’t remember much.”

“We only speculate… that Itachi attempted to kidnap you. There was another shinobi who was less fortunate than you, it seemed he may have tried to intervene. When you are well—“

“My dad’s gonna look at your memories!” Ino chirped proudly, gaining a look of warning from Tsunade, but ignoring it. “I insisted it would be my father. After all, I’m sure you don’t want to be cooped up in that room with Ibiki-san again. My father will treat you much nicer.”

“I appreciate it.” Sakura affirmed, giving Ino’s hand a small squeeze. The image of the Naga burned heavy in her mind, adding to the quickly piling mountain of fears, of anxieties, of troubles that plagued her. It became clear she couldn’t stay. “I’m feeling better. I think I’m ready to go.”

“And just in time!” Tsunade declared, looking at her watch. “It’s time for dinner.”

“Sounds like a good time to me.” Kakashi nodded, looking down at Sakura. Her eyes softened when they met his with emotions he could recognize: guilt, fear, love.

“Let’s head out—owowow…” Sakura looked down to the bandage at her shoulder. “Oh, right.”

“No straining.” Tsunade said, watching as Sakura collapsed back, trying to think of what to do. Before she came to a decision, Tsunade slipped her hand under Sakura’s back and pushed the girl up. “Asking for help in situations like this doesn’t make you any less of a kuinoichi.”

Sakura’s face showed little reaction to her words, but she swallowed thickly. Tsunade had always told her to do things herself, to make sure she could do them, to never rely on anybody else. Now that same woman was aiding her in such a menial task as sitting up. Sakura could cry if she hadn’t been horribly dehydrated by the medicine running through her system, aids to help her recover from the stabbing and the shock.

“Thank you,” Sakura breathed, voice coming out embarrassingly strained. She smiled up at her mentor, who returned it. Sakura stood up with Kakashi’s aid before she managed to stand on her own. She righted herself and took a deep breath. “Off we go!”

The atmosphere of the restaurant was homely and relaxed. If she was correct in remembering, it wasn’t Choji’s immediate family that owned it, but distant relatives. She smiled at the thought. Choji had always been an excellent cook. Ino would constantly invite Sakura to her team functions after the loss of her own. She had grown close to the three. Choji was high up on her list of favorite people. Shikamaru to follow.

Tsunade ordered enough sake for the three of them and looked over the menu thoughtfully. The waiter came to the table, smiling happily.

“Ah! Good.” Tsunade hummed, already buzzed. “I’ll have the horumon.” She decided after a
“Kushikatsu.” Kakashi said simply, then looked down at Sakura.

“Grilled gyoza, please.” Sakura smiled.

“Right away!” The waiter said, jotting everything down, then leaving quietly.

Tsunade turned her eyes to the two, deadly serious now that they had privacy.

“What the fuck is going on?” She asked, mostly addressing Sakura. “You’re hiding something from me and I don’t for the life of me know what it is—how you lied to Ibiki—what happened in that alley?”

Sakura’s breath caught and she looked down at her hands worriedly. Lying to a stranger was one thing, lying to the woman she considered a mother was something entirely different. She fidgeted for a moment before looking up. Tsunade looked stern, but heart broken.

She began from the start, telling her everything she had told Kakashi. Leaving out her participation, the way she had crawled into Sasori’s arms, the way she was friends with Itachi, the boyfriend Kisame had in the village.

Tsunade’s hardened expression grew soft and she reached across the table to hold Sakura’s hand, thumb ghosting over her knuckles.

“We won’t let them take you. I will not allow it.” Tsunade said earnestly.

“I don’t want anyone else to be hurt.” Sakura said lowly, she leaned forward now, eyes turning to Tsunade’s. “Besides, I think going back could be good for the village. I was able to send a messenger pigeon the first time. Perhaps I will be able to send in secrets, updates… weaknesses that otherwise we would not know about. If I get close enough, those bastards underestimate me already, so I’m sure I could easily poison one of them. Perhaps I could even get intel on their purpose with the jinchurikis.” Sakura’s words were calculated and even.

Tsunade’s shock showed obviously, then her face drew into a sad stare.

“But if we can stop you from leaving.”

Kakashi gripped her hand tightly.

“If the worst comes about, I need to be ready to take one for the team. I will never forgive you if I lose one of my friends because you sent them to protect me.” Sakura whispered, leaning forward. “I don’t plan to go back. I plan to fight off anyone who comes after me, but if someone takes me, I don’t want you to send rescuers. They would only be killed. These people… two of them are immortal, Sasori isn’t human, Deidara has flight, Itachi is too powerful and Kisame is too strong…”

“I can see the logic in it, Sakura, you don’t have to justify it. I just don’t want to see any harm come to you—you’re too knowledgeable. You’re too powerful to lose.” Tsunade urged. “They could force you to make poisons that perhaps would even stump me. They could use you to lure Naruto.”

Sakura grimaced and nodded. “I understand the risks. I could also die.” She noted, breath hitching. “It’s a risk I am willing to take.”

“Sakura-chan…” Tsunade whispered, heart growing heavy. “You’ve come so far from that little genin girl that came to me.” She couldn’t help the chuckle, giving a brief thanks as the waiter
brought the different dishes out. “I will respect your wishes—“

“Tsunade-sama, I don’t think that’s wise!” Kakashi hissed quietly. Sakura gave him a look of annoyance.

“Sakura is a talented kuinoichi, besides, we need to look at the true reason Sasori would want her back. I’m down to a few theories.” Tsunade began. “Theory one,” She took a bite of food, not minding that she was talking with her mouth full. She had never understood the appeal of being lady like. “Sasori wants to kill her because of spreading the cure. Theory two, Sasori needs Sakura to help keep the Akatsuki healthy. Theory three…”

Sakura swallowed, not liking how spot on everything she said was.

“He has grown fond of her.” Tsunade said carefully. “I gathered as much by her account of the torment. It is very far from romance, very sick, very disturbing, but I believe he wants her.”

“I… yes.” Sakura admitted, ashamed of it.

Kakashi gripped her hand. “Don’t feel the need to be sorry for his intentions. You cannot control them.” Kakashi whispered against her ear, causing her to smile wearily.

“If that’s the case,” Sakura said. “That leaves him another weakness to exploit. If I play his games, I could get close enough to kill him.”

“That’s true, but then escaping the wrath of the Akatsuki might not be so easy.” Tsunade said, considering it.

“They are not friends. In fact, Deidara hates Sasori almost as much as I do—all of them despise each other. They do not work well together. Often fighting, doing damage.”

“Interesting,” Tsunade mused, finishing her meal. “We have a lot to consider.”
Transformation

Sakura leaned against Kakashi, happy to feel much smaller than she was when pressed up against him with his arms around her. He idly played with her hair as she traced words on his bare thigh. This sort of intimacy did not bother her. He hadn’t pressured her for anything, hadn’t wanted for anything. He knew she would not want him in that way due to what happened with Sasori, so he respected her boundaries. Instead of guiding, he let her lead in what she was or was not comfortable with. This was as close as she was willing to get. Their naked bodies pressed against each other, sharing warmth and flesh.

He held her tightly with one arm, the other held his book, reading while she gazed out the window, watching the storm rage on outside. Rain splattered against the window. She smiled as thunder rolled through their village. She closed her eyes. Peace came hard for her, but in moments like these she found it. Day two was coming to a close.

There was a knock at the door. Sakura groaned loudly, not wanting to move. She clung onto Kakashi.

“Let’s pretend we aren’t home.” She decided, adjusting against him and pressing her front to him so she could bury her face in the crook of his neck. She adored the way he smelled like a storm. Perhaps that was why she enjoyed storms so much. She hated them as a child. It was only in recent years that she came to adore them.

The knock was loud and insistent and Kakashi now groaned.

“I’ll get it. Perhaps my nudity will deter any more late night visits.” Kakashi hummed, waiting for Sakura to move. When she didn’t he gave her a knowing grin. She wrapped her arms around his neck.

“With my superior weight, I will hold you here.” She smirked down at him, straddling his lap and causing him to become decidedly flustered.

“Mission accomplished.” He breathed. “But, um…” He looked down at his lap. “This injury is causing a bit of local swelling.” He tried to laugh the tension away. It wasn’t working. He was absolutely flustered.

“Oh my, that sounds serious,” Sakura said, feigning concern. “You should see a doctor.” She got up, standing in front of him then grinning. “Luckily, I know one.” She said triumphantly and turned around.

“You know a doctor I could see about this?” He asked, eyes drifting to her rear, then looking back up to her eyes. He let out a snort, having not expected her to turn around holding a fake mustache to her lip and having grabbed a pair of thick glasses. Where did she even hide those? And were those just lying around her room, waiting for the right moment?

“Oh my, that sounds serious,” Sakura said, feigning concern. “You should see a doctor.” She got up, standing in front of him then grinning. “Luckily, I know one.” She said triumphantly and turned around.

“You know a doctor I could see about this?” He asked, eyes drifting to her rear, then looking back up to her eyes. He let out a snort, having not expected her to turn around holding a fake mustache to her lip and having grabbed a pair of thick glasses. Where did she even hide those? And were those just lying around her room, waiting for the right moment?

“What seems to be the problem today?!” Sakura said, lowering her voice in the best impression of a man’s voice. Kakashi covered his mouth, trying his best not to laugh. When she made an impatient humming noise that sounded all too much like Gai, he snorted and lost his self-control. He leaned forward, gripping his side as he tried not to let that embarrassing wheeze come through that he had when he laughed too hard. Despite his best attempt to stifle it, it grew and soon Sakura caught on.

She began giggling, mostly at his reaction, but it ended with her erupting with a very similar
sounding, less than charming chortle.

The knock was much louder, now there was a voice.

“It’s Ostaka-san!” The unrecognizable voice yelled. Both of them stiffened, all sign of merriment gone. They dressed in a matter of seconds, running downstairs.

“We need Sakura-san! Please, hurry!”

When they opened the door, they were greeted by two Anbu, neither of them knew. They were escorted to the hospital, arriving in a matter of minutes. There was no one else in the room. The others, even Tsunade, had been sent away.

“I-I had hoped…” Ostaka complained with a small, weak grin. “Maybe it would be sunny when I died. Or morning, at least.” He breathed, obviously in an enormous amount of pain.

“Quiet, you.” Ostu said gently, seated on the bed. They were both sitting up, their foreheads pressed together. She held his hands in hers as he smiled and cracked jokes. “Mother was right. Even on your deathbed, you couldn’t be serious.” She cried.

“A-Ah, if it isn’t Kakashi-san. Sakura-chan.” He said without taking his eyes from his sister’s. He frowned now, only to have it waver and give way to another smile. “Ostu, you’ll have someone when I’m gone.” He offered. “You’ll have Kakashi and Sakura.”

“I can’t live without you, and besides, we both decided I would be the first to die.” She laughed quietly. “Remember, you bet 60 ryō on accidental drowning. Mother bet 500 ryō on bar fight when we turned of age.”

“You always hated the water, but loved to drink.” He remarked, voice growing quieter. “Come in all the way, you two. Don’t darken my door step. It’s already dark enough.”

“Ostaka-san… The lungs…” Sakura muttered.

“Rejecting. I took the medicine, they just… don’t w-work.” He told her, his hand pressed to his own chest, briefly letting go of his sister’s hand. It made her grimace but she didn’t say anything.

Kakashi said nothing. He couldn’t manage anything. Sakura walked over and smiled at the siblings. Ostu really would be lost without him. It was a terrible thought. She had known they were close, but she failed to realize the immense bond they shared as blood related siblings.

Ostu’s breath hitched. She felt an immense pain in her chest, but kept silent about it. She would be fortunate to die by her brother.

Ostaka smiled a little at her, eyes sad. He wanted her to go on, but selfishly, he also wanted her company in the after life. If he got there and had to deal with his parents alone he may have just haunted her instead.

“Remember what grandmother would tell us when we were younger?” He asked, revisiting the memory. “Show me, Ostu. Let’s watch it, one last time.”

Ostu opened her mouth to protest, but her heart was breaking with each passing moment. She nodded and sat up completely, signing then taking a deep breath and grabbing his hands again. With that, they were lost to their memories, eyes hazy, but still staring at each other, sharing their scene.

_The daisies were in full bloom. The two of them laid out, watching the cloud drift by, hand in hand_
“Ost! Ost!” They heard their grandmother calling. In her old age she had gotten tired of trying to tell them apart as they dressed just the same, acted the same, and rarely spoke words outside of their whispers to each other. “Come in! I have breakfast ready!”

The two of them smiled, still without looking at each other as they admired the sky a moment longer before standing and trotting back to the cabin. They were far away from their home village, visiting their grandmother for a month. It was cozy, small, serene. The two of them never really made friends with the other children. They were all each other needed, or so they thought. Morning rays danced with cloud interference along the dusty interior of the cabin.

“Oh, you two.” The elder hummed in delight. “I wish I had a camera!” She said then pointed at the table. “My silent grand babies.” She gave them each a kiss on the hand. “One of you better mature into a lovely lady so I can tell you two apart, but I feel I may not be that lucky!”

Ostu giggled. “Ostaka will be the lovely lady. I don’t like dresses.”

“That’s fine. More fun for me! Dresses give me an excuse not to wear pants! And I look great in bows!” Ostaka said, pumping his fist in the air.

Their grandmother laughed and sat their food down in front of them.

“You two only talk when it’s to each other. You know, I have a theory on why you were born siblings.”

The two of them looked up in wonder. They had never been told any sort of story on their birth. Their grandmother smiled and sat in front of them, setting her head in her hands and admiring her gorgeous grandchildren. Their love was a sight to behold.

“They say when there are tragic lovers in one life, they are born into the next life as siblings, so that they never have to part.” She whispered. The two of them smiled up at her.

“We never have to part.” Ostu whispered, holding a bit tighter onto Ostaka’s hand. He smiled at her. Their chubby cheeks reddened at the thought. There was no greater love than the love siblings had for each other. Suddenly the scent of daisies and fresh air faded, that of alcohol and blood overtook them once again. They spared once last glance, one last linger. Ostu's eyes trained on his intently. "We won't." She promised.

Sakura watched sadly as Ostaka went slack against the headboard, but she gasped when Ostu collapsed as well. Jumping up from her chair, she darted around to Ostu who had fallen against her brother, head on his chest, fingers still entwined with his. She had a smile on her face but she was unresponsive. She checked her vitals and looked to a nurse who stood in the door way.

“She has Do Not Resuscitate on her file, Sakura-sama.” The intern nurse said quietly, a frown evident behind her mask. Sakura grimaced and looked back down at Ostu. Ostu had tears gathered on her long lashes. Sakura shrugged her rain cloak off and used it to cover their faces.

Sakura looked down at the siblings, holding Kakashi’s hand. Her heart thrummed painfully in her chest when she turned away from them to see Kakashi barely holding himself together. He never did well with loss. Especially when he felt comradery with those that passed.

“She has Do Not Resuscitate on her file, Sakura-sama.” The intern nurse said quietly, a frown evident behind her mask. Sakura grimaced and looked back down at Ostu. Ostu had tears gathered on her long lashes. Sakura shrugged her rain cloak off and used it to cover their faces.

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They’re happy, now. They’re together.” She assured him quietly and gestured for the nurse to leave. She sat him down in a chair and hugged him tightly, letting him cry silently against her shoulder. She stroked his hair, doing her best to comfort him. “We shouldn’t cry. They are happy.
Ostaka isn’t bedridden, Ostu does not carry the burden of her past. They’re together.”

Sakura stared once again at the pair before noticing an empty phial that did not belong there. She looked around, then down at Kakashi. He was preoccupied with his tears. Carefully, barely breathing, she used her pink chakra to lift the phial and bring it to the waste bin and covering it with other trash. Sasori did this. Sakura understood the message. No wonder she hadn’t seen Itachi’s crows. Something in the plan had changed and he was now giving her the opportunity to disobey.

“Let’s go home.” She whispered. Kakashi nodded lightly. He opened the window, letting the rain in. He disliked the traditional route, and would not face the onslaught of people through the hallway, elevator, and lobby. He stepped out onto the window seal before bounding off, Sakura just behind him. He climbed in through her window and stripped himself of his wet clothes. He had brought a few of his personal items over when Sakura told him to move in with her. He didn’t hesitate.

The two of them dressed warmly and Sakura convinced him that sleeping would be best for now.

“I never thought I would lose a teammate to sickness until Tozlu. Then after you found the cure, I was sure again that it wouldn’t be like that. So that all I needed to do to protect my loved ones was become stronger… no matter how strong I am, I am not a match for something so simple as organs rejecting.” He whispered. “Or death by heart break.”

Sakura searched his face sadly. There was so much anguish there, she feared he may fall ill from it. She approached him and guided him to lay down, then carefully crawled next to him. She covered him up and traced patterns gently along his jaw in an attempt to calm him down. He subsided and eventually fell into a deep sleep. Sakura covered him completely in the soft quilt and stood up, looking down at him with sorrowful green eyes.

Kakashi,

I know it is cruel. I know it will hurt. For that, I am truly sorry. It is selfish in a way, that I won’t allow you to protect me. I know, however, that there will only be more deaths until I return. Ostaka was the first, and I intend for him to be the last. I hope that one day, I get to come home, either with blood on my hands or by spirit. Whichever it is, I do not ask you to wait for me. I want you to be happy. I want you to smile. Even if you hate me, I will love you, and from here, I will protect you.

Love,
Sakura

Ino,

I am so sorry for what I am about to do. You are the best friend anyone could ask for, you are my sister by all but blood. But you are in danger. I could not live with myself if I thought even for a moment that I may have been linked to any damage done to you. I love you, Ino. I never fully expressed how much you mean to me and I regret that. I don’t know if I’ll be able to write you, but believe that I will try. I will do my best to stay alive and come home one day.

Love,
Sakura

Tsunade,

Thank you for everything you have done. Thank you for your understanding, for your love, for your
mentorship. I am a better kuinoichi for all you have done for me. I promise to be honorable. I will not betray my village, but I will not sit back while I put it in direct danger. You were right about Sasori’s feelings for me. I don’t want to be the reason anyone else dies. We both know that Ostaka should have lived.

Love,
Sakura

Each note was placed in each respective home. Sakura shouldered a bag of her belongings, including the fox plush for Itachi, and one of Kakashi’s shirts. She would claim it to be her own pajamas and hope Sasori didn’t know how much she cherished it.

Slipping past the guards was easy as always, even with the heightened security. She stepped through the open gate, briefly turning on heel to look at the village behind her. She was partially down the road when she realized someone was following her.

“No goodbye, huh?” Naruto’s voice cut through the silence. She winced, but faced forward a moment longer. “Is this how you felt when Sasuke left the first time?” His voice was low, heavy with pain. She turned now, schooling her face to be emotionless. The last bit of her broke as she saw the way tears dripped down Naruto’s face. She stepped towards him, leaving an arm length between them. Her eyes were dark.

“No, I’m not.” She whispered. “I’m going… to make sure you all remain safe.”

“I am home. Come back. Kakashi-sensei won’t be happy.” Naruto returned, looking up to meet her eyes. His were that of a child being abandoned.

“Yes, abandoning him was exactly what she was doing. “You aren’t going after Sasuke, are you?”

“Let me come with you.” He urged, stepping forward and grabbing her arms. She remained unmoved. “I can help you! We can take down Sasori! I know that’s why you’re leaving. Something’s been off since you’ve been back—even I picked up on it!”

“No.” Sakura said carefully. “They’re after you, so sooner or later they would try to use me anyway. It’s better if I take that possibility away. Naruto, you are so much more vital than you think.”

“What do you mean? Sakura—you are too!” He cut in.

“So many people are counting on you. You can’t die by the hands of the Akatsuki. You still have to become the Hokage, remember?” She smiled, reaching up and cupping his cheek gently. She could feel his hot tears on the palm of her hands. “Naruto. I’m going to do my part to make sure that dream is realized. I’m going to protect Konoha from the enemy’s base.”

“They’ll kill you!” Naruto squeaked now, voice cracking with emotion.

“That’s fine.” Sakura whispered, dry eyes dampening. “That’s okay with me.”

“It’s not okay with me!” Naruto shouted. He could have dodged her strike easily. It was the same one Sasuke used on her all those years ago. He could have easily moved out of the way, or blocked her. He chose to let her hit him. When he slumped, she was there to catch him, using her strength to catch his shoulders with one arm, the other coming under his knees. She carried him back to the gates and sat him there. She pushed his bangs and head band out of the way to plant a kiss on his forehead.
“I’ll miss you, knucklehead.” She said idly, still not waking the guards. She headed out once more, watching the moon and the twinkling stars dance overhead. They were all very lonely in their long distance away from one another. The moon seemed to be particularly troubled. She watched the way the clouds would obscure her before retreating once again. The peaceful air didn’t last long. A presence made himself known far in front of her. She didn’t slow down her steady walking.

“You came of your own accord.” Kisame said in disbelief, looking her over with something similar to a sneer, though she could tell there was some amount of relief in his voice. “Saved us some trouble, I guess.”

She looked at the two and continued to walk towards them. She wouldn’t cry in front of them. She wouldn’t cry in front of any of them. She smiled. It was forced, but Kisame didn’t take notice.

“I got tired of the attention. So many questions, medical exams.” She played it off.

“You faced Ibiki and hid your memories from him.” Itachi said, mostly to let Kisame know. “That’s quite impressive. It takes strong will power.” He wasn’t lying. It was very rare to meet someone with the amount of control it would take to lie to someone such as the expert of psychological torture. Then again, she received her fair share of torture, psychological or otherwise, so Itachi factored that in as well.

“I have that in spades.” Sakura lied, then frowned deeply, brow knitting with grief. “No, it wasn’t determination that I used to block him out. It was fear.” She said honestly, brows raised and mouth pressed in a thin line.

“Just as powerful of a motivator as any.” Kisame cut in, patting her on the back. “So, traitor of the Leaf. You ready to go?”

“No,” She said honestly. “But if I don’t leave with you now, you’ll have to drag me back, and I take a certain satisfaction in depriving you of that joy.” She said smugly up at Kisame. He looked down at her and chuckled, ruffling her hair. She smirked at the interaction. She had honestly missed the two of them.

“Ohhhh! Who is that!?!” A high pitched voice came, throwing Sakura off severely. She jumped back, guarding herself from the newcomer. He was dressed in regular shinobi wear, but wore a bright orange mask that swirled towards the eye. She gave him a look. “She’s pretty!”

Sakura faltered now, looking at Itachi for answers. Itachi bristled at the new person, but remained that iconic wall of neutrality. If Sakura hadn’t had met him with his guard down, she wouldn’t have even noticed the slight anger that emanated from him.

“Tobi, keep your voice down, dolt.” Kisame growled.

“Tobi is sorry!” He held both hands up in defense but rushed over. “Wow! She’s prettier than Deidara! And her boobs are bigger!” The turn of his head indicated exactly where he was looking, and he made some sort of grabbing gesture.

Sakura felt her eye twitching, but she didn’t feel her fist until it connected with the man’s jaw. He flew back. “Oh. Sorry. Reflexes.”

“Those are rude reflexes!” Tobi whined, holding his face and flailing an arm at her. “She’s like a black widow! Sexy but deadly!”

“Refrain from making comments on Sakura’s sexuality. She seems to not like it, Tobi.” Itachi said smoothly, glaring at the masked man. Sakura pursed her lips, crossing her arms self-consciously.
There was something more between the two she wasn't quite catching.

“Who is this guy?” She asked.

“So your name is Sakura?! Like the beautiful cherry blossom, Not such a cheery blossom though! You could be an Uchiha with that sullen pout of yours!” He giggled, making faces behind his mask that translated to the others in the form of gestures and body language. Sakura rolled her eyes.

“Ohhh, where are my manners? I’m Tobi! I’m single! I’m 6 inches—“

“I don’t care, on second thought.” Sakura held her hand up, cutting off his ramble.

Tobi deflated, pouting. He even turned his back to the three. Something Sakura thought was either incredibly brave or incredibly foolish. “I almost forgot! There’s been an injury! Leader-chan has requested the healer’s presence immediately! I’ve already informed Sa-Sor-I! Come on, I’ll take her from here! Tobi can be trusted!”

“Fine,” Itachi resigned. He looked down at Sakura when she made a noise of indignation at her change in fate. He took her bag from her and put it over his own shoulder. She silently thanked him.

“We cannot deny orders from Pein.” He told her.

Pain. The name of the leader, no doubt. However odd of a name. Sakura filed that away mentally and nodded, stepping towards Tobi, standing tall.

“S-Say… She’s kind of scary. J-Just like Deidara! Scary but pretty!” He chimed, taking her hand and pulling her close. She cringed and put distance between the two.

Itachi and Kisame began walking again and Tobi looked down at her, though she swore she could see a sharingan in the shadow of his mask. The air around them changed when he grew silent. With the other two past them, he yanked her against him once again, securing her for transport. She couldn’t help the sudden shiver of fear as the world shifted and corrupted. She kept her eyes open.

“Brave one, hm?” His voice was deeper now, and she jumped, looking at him once again as a new scent struck her. The scent of rain. “Here.” He said, opening the iron trap of his arm and letting her free.

Sakura immediately backed up, startled by the sudden change in demeanor and atmosphere surrounding the masked man. He had been so jovial and happy one moment, now he sounded more like a vengeful god. She backed right into a pillar and looked around, taking in her environment. There were two figures under an arch. The room they were in was horribly dark but light from the outside spilled in, despite it being overcast and pouring.

“Konan.” One said. His voice was deep and commanding. “Please, keep your eyes open a while longer.” His eyes caught Sakura off guard as he looked up. They were a silvery violet and demanded her attention thoroughly. She instinctually approached when she saw the distressed woman in his arms. She was sweating and trembling.

Both of them wore piercings, some sort of sign that they matched. She eyed the couple before stepping closer.

“Yahiko…” The name on her lips came thin and deliriously. The man with orange hair visibly broke a bit and he looked at Sakura once more.

“Fix her.” He demanded. “Immediately.” Something in his tone told her more than the exactly three words he said to her. He told her that should she fail, she would die. He told her that he was quite attached to the woman in his arms. He told her a thousand tales all at once, each one dictating more
and more reason for Sakura to succeed. The woman in his arms wasn't human, it seemed.

Sakura came over, surprised a bit as she noticed a slight peeling of skin. It fell away to reveal she was made of paper. Sakura’s eyes scanned over her and she gently prompted the man to lay her down flat. She opened up the woman’s robes. There was no blood anywhere. Breath catching, Sakura leaned over and listened for a heartbeat. There was one, much to her surprise. Yet her body was made of paper. She scanned her then noticed a particular separation at the woman’s abdomen.

There was a deep valley of paper, but it did not look like it had been cut. She thumbed a few pages back similar to the way one would a book before her eyes widened. She reached in the woman, though that caused her an immense amount of pain.

“Do not harm the Leaf shinobi.” Tobi’s deeper voice called and Sakura turned to see some sort of sharpened rod right at her eye, the orange haired man holding onto it tightly and shaking ever slightly. “She is not doing her harm.”

“She is still a shinobi of the leaf.” She corrected in order to salvage her pride. She got no response, but didn't particularly mind.

She was fishing a moment more before she yanked her hand out, a venomous snake coiled around her hand and bearing down into it with its fangs. She hissed in pain but quickly strangled, holding it tightly around the head until it fell limp. Konan immediately gasped in relief, pain leaving her face as her body mended. “The foreign body was latching on, and I assume the regenerative process of your body was accelerated to the point of it being painful.” She said softly, holding two fingers against Konan’s wrist. The woman looked at her with truly golden eyes, like the sun rising over the ocean. "I can only assume this was Orochimaru's doing. He was responsible for the near loss of Itachi as well. It seems he is not fond of the organization." Sakura said, giving her full 'report'. She laid the dead snake in the man's outstretched hands.

“Thank you, Sakura Haruno.” Konan breathed, eyes staying open for a moment as she observed the girl with pink hair that knelt over, assessing her condition. Determining she was okay, Sakura sat back, smiling as a doctor to her patient. “I am sorry for worrying you, Pein.” Konan apologized with an incline of her head towards the leader.

Sakura drew her connections and looked at the man who had just threatened her life.

“You’ve earned your life.” Pein said evenly at Sakura. “You’ve proven your worth through quick thinking and intuition. You will join us so that we may maintain our forces.”

Sakura sat back, mouth slightly gaped. That threw a wrench in things. She blinked and mentally pinched herself, trying to determine whether she was hallucinating. She looked around now, for some sort of out to the situation.

“I respectfully decline. I’m fine being a puppet.” She said quietly.

“You don’t have a choice in the matter, and you will continue to be a puppet.” Pein said, surprised she didn’t already know that. “You will be assigned to Sasori for the time being, but with time and training, and modification, you will be the healer for the Akatsuki.”

“That would make me a traitor.” Sakura breathed.

“You’re already a traitor. You saved me.” Konan said, though Sakura did not find it very comforting. “Should you chose to join us, you would be free, and merely have to abide by orders and not defect as you did from your village.”
The words were cutting.

Sakura’s throat became decidedly dry. She looked back to Tobi, who was a bit closer, staring down at her. She got the distinct feeling that despite Pein being dubbed the leader, Tobi had a greater hand in all this. He had that sort of air about him that commanded respect. At least, he did now that he wasn’t goofing around.

“Yes, I can tell this one will be useful.” Tobi said, leaning down and focusing his eye on her. “The student of Hashirama’s granddaughter.” He hummed deep in thought. “I expect her to be able to use the same technique as that woman.”

Sakura stared silently up at the sharingan, trying to go over who that could possibly be. There were only three living sharingan users, and one of them was her lover. She hesitated to break eye contact, as if he would kill her the moment she did. Konan caught her eye however and she turned her head slightly.

“Sakura, you should know that you don’t have much of a choice in this.” Konan said softly, reaching out and caressing her cheek. The touch made Sakura shiver and flush just a bit.

“I realize.” She breathed.

“Then you’re being obstinate and it is less than amusing.” Pein said, not as patient as the woman with blue hair.

Sakura lowered her head and glared down at her hands before shakily reaching up and untying her headband. She pulled it from her hair and gripped it tightly. Konan dug in her cloak for a moment before producing a kunai. Sakura had just received the new headband in light of the damage to her old one that Sasori had done. Her throat clenched uncomfortably. Just that morning she was sharing breakfast with Kakashi and laughing with him about an old memory.

Her fingers felt oddly numb as she gripped the kunai and pressed it against the metal. She scraped an even line through it, brow furrowed as she returned the knife to the woman and stared at her headband.

“You will not receive a ring or a rank, but you will be assigned to teams as I see fit.” Pein told her. “Now, I believe Sasori has been awaiting your arrival. I will assign you to a team after your acclimation to your new body.”

Sakura’s eyes dimmed a bit and she tied her headband on correctly rather than use it to hold back her hair. She wanted to display her shame more obviously. She stood up. Someone gripped her again.

Tobi pulled her close with a strong arm around her waist. Unlike the contact with Sasori and Kakashi, there was nothing intimate about this. It was clinical and it made her skin crawl in the worst type of ways. The world fell into a void once more. This time it took much longer, and Sakura felt herself reeling to keep hold of reality. Tobi put one hand on her head, holding it back against his shoulder. She didn’t question his actions as a sudden jerking sensation took them and they careened forward.

“The problem with multidimensional travel.” He muttered, letting her go. She stumbled where she stood but braced herself on a familiar wall. She looked back at the man and he held the eye contact for a moment before the oppressive nature around him vanished altogether and he jumped goofily in place. “Deidara!!” He shouted and darted past her, going head first into the chest of the young artist.
“You filth!” Deidara hissed, trying to gain his footing but failing as Tobi landed on top of him. “Get off of me, hm!”

Sakura watched, perplexed and disturbed. She stood up, looking around. Shouldn’t she be frightened? It was her time, after all.

No, she was calm. She was tired.

Sakura walked past the two, earning her a comment she couldn’t hear from Deidara and Tobi’s rambunctious laughter. She opened the door to the work shop, causing Sasori to growl in frustration. He threw a knife at her head but she caught it and returned it, having it stick in the puppet version of herself just a little above the hip. He whipped his head around in anger but his eyes softened for half a moment before returning to their vicious state.

His vibrant display of emotion was off putting and she tried her best not to react to it. She stepped towards him.

“Puppet,” He began, then gestured towards the actual puppet laying on the table. “This will be your new body.”

Sakura approached it hesitantly, as though it would bite her. Her breath caught in her throat. It looked more like her own corpse. She noted it was somehow prettier than her, though in such a way she wasn’t able to name. She hesitated. It had much longer hair than her and the pink locks spilled all around the puppet, even reaching the floor. It had a colorful tattoo of a scorpion in the traditional Suna style of art, right along the left rib cage.

The skin was even soft to the touch. She ran her fingers along her own body, noting with a grim amusement that the breasts were even the same size.

“I am ready.” She told him, pulling her own knife from her pocket. “May I?”

Sasori simply stared.

“No. You may not. I have one more thing to do.” He said, grabbing her shoulders and guiding her to a chair. He put her down in it and watched her face. There was a tray on a table next to them. She now looked a bit worried. Her heart picked up and her fear seeped through her barriers. Sasori smiled. “I need your eyes and teeth.”

Sakura didn’t believe him at first, but she relented and slammed her back against the back of the chair as he reached for her. “Can’t you do that after I’m dead?”

“No. I won’t have enough time.” Sasori lied. He wanted to see the anguish on her face once more—her original face. Though she would be much better in this new form, there was something about the original that he would never forget. “After you die, I will immediately need to put your heart in you. I’m not giving you such a weakness that I have. You will be far more durable. The process has even inspired me to prepare and make my own changes.” He said with a kiss to her lips. He lingered there before drawing back.

“I would prefer you do this when I am dead.” Sakura tried, but he simply shook his head.

“Lean your head back.” He instructed. She took one last look at him, taking in his face. With lingering thoughts, she extended her neck, leaning her head back. A chakra string slinked from one of Sasori’s fingers and tangled in her hair, holding her head at that angle.

Unlike the surgical precision she had, he used his fingers to carefully part the eyelids with an artist’s
delicate touch. She felt her tears bubble past her defenses, not bothering to ask permission. It hurt. It hurt and she couldn’t move. She was gasping for air as he broke her lacrimal bone with sheer force. That made it much easier for him to gently encase the eye as blood poured between his fingers. He plucked it carefully and set it on the tray, doing the same to the second. Sakura was screaming at the top of her lungs and struggling wildly against the chakra strings. She even broke quite a few of them.

“Good. I only need your teeth now. That pain will pale in comparison to what you just experienced. I am merciful, that way.” He said, kissing her lips one last time before he picked up a separating gag and forced it between her teeth as she screamed. He cranked it until all of her mouth was bared. He then pushed it just a bit further so he had full access to the teeth.

The pliers were cold against the side of her cheek and a small drop of saliva escaped her. She sobbed, though her world was dark. Her head swam and her entire body felt to be numbing.

“Sakura! Come down! Your friend is here!” Her mother called up the stair case.

“Coming!” Sakura sang and practically leapt up from her desk. It had been a while since Sasuke had gone and Ino and her had long made up. She pulled her shirt on and tucked it into her skirt, as she hopped down the stairs. She toed into a pair of sandals and smiled at Ino as she patiently waited at the door. “Sorry, last minute studying!”

“You’re always studying. Let me guess, more on that chakra concentration stuff!” Ino huffed, quirking a small smile but crossing her arms to express her displeasure. “No man is going to be as fascinated in that as you think!”

“I don’t care if a man is fascinated in it or not.” Sakura pouted, heading out the door after saying a goodbye to her mother and father. “I want to be able to use the same seal as Tsunade-sama one day.”

“Sakura-chan.” Ino whined. “Don’t be disappointed if you can’t. Tsunade is like, the ONLY person, alive at least, who can use it! And she’s the descendent of someone super powerful so you know, it was probably in her blood or whatever.”

“No,” Sakura said assertively, though she wasn’t upset with Ino for her dissent. “Everything that Tsunade-sama has today, her strength, her rank, her station—she worked for all of that. She overcame a lot of heart ache too…” She murmured, remembering Tsunade informing her about the loss of her teammate, brother, lover and sense of self. It was meant to be inspiring to Sakura. It eventually became that as Sakura realized she too would have control of her emotions like that one day.

“Earth to Sakura!” Ino called, jumping in front of her and giggling when Sakura jumped nearly out of her skin. “There we go!”

“Don’t scare me like that!” She hissed. “By the way, where are we going?” She asked worriedly as they approached the shopping district. She’d no doubt spend money on things she didn’t truly need. That wasn’t to say she didn’t enjoy the time she spent with Ino.

“Guess!”

“Shopping.”

Ino scoffed. “N-No… well, not now. We’re going t-to…!” Ino tried to decide. “We’re going to eat what that vendor is selling!” She decided, grabbing Sakura’s shoulder and pointing to a boy about their age selling some sort of squid snack. Sakura made a face at Ino, showing her disbelief.

“And then we’re going shopping.” Ino relented causing Sakura to let a laugh escape her tightly
“Sounds fun.” Sakura decided, nudging Ino when the boy turned and waved them over. “Say, he’s pretty cute.” Sakura muttered to Ino. “He looks like your type, too.”

“If he was my type he’d already be stripping by now.” Ino jested quietly, giggling as the two walked over and purchased their individual snacks. They both eyed it warily.

“I assure you, it’s dead!” The boy had a bit of an accent and sharp teeth. He grinned handsomely.

“N-No, I believe you,” Ino said nervously, taking a small bite before flushing. “It’s good.”

Sakura watched her friend before testing it for herself. She did not like the taste but in order to preserve the boy’s feelings about it, she ate the whole thing, and hummed in feigned delight. Ino giggled, striking conversation with the boy.

Apparently he was a fisherman’s son who travelled to all of the different villages, though his mother was originally from the Leaf and he tended to stay in their home village more. Ino exchanged information with him though Sakura spotted him ball it up and toss it in a waste bin when the blonde wasn’t looking. She grimaced but pretended not to see it.

“Where should we go first?!” Ino chirped.

Sakura blinked. Her friend was gone in an instant, and each thing her eyes focused on disappeared as well until eventually she was left in total darkness with the thing. The thing, as she decided to call it slinked forward, this time fully appearing as Orochimaru. She glowered.

“How about now?” He hummed, nailing the voice and all. Sakura sneered.

“Fuck off, I’m not going to make a deal with you or whatever you’re trying to accomplish.” She retorted.

“Oh ssscertainly you’re feeling a bit powerlessssss.” He came forward, taking the liberty of grabbing a lock of her hair and playing with it as he leaned into her personal space. She put her palm flat on his face and pushed him hard, sending him flying back. He had yanked a bit of her hair out but she didn’t care so long as he wasn’t close.

“I don’t want your help.” She said firmly.

Cold washed over her. It was dark again, but she could hear more clearly. She tried to speak but garbled nonsense came out instead. There was a searing pain in her eyes and mouth. She let out a whimper and a sob. The pain was too much. She was wet with what she assumed to be her own blood by the smell of it.

“There, there. You’ll be better soon.” Sasori said against her ear, landing a small kiss to her temple. She couldn’t see. She couldn’t talk. She only cried and hoped he would somehow take pity on her and end her misery. Instead, he gripped her shaking hand and pressed her knife into it. “Go on. You have my permission, my love.”

Sakura did not hesitate, though she wished to end it more quickly. Rather than stab herself like she planned before hearing her heart was a necessary component, she pulled the blade to her throat and drew a thick line across it with a quick jerk so that her brain couldn’t stop her arm as it realized her
There was that green lake again. She could see once more. She was not in pain. There was a bright light and she kicked slightly, propelling herself towards the surface. She smiled widely.

“Sakura! You’re here… a little soon, though, don’t you think?” Her mother hummed, ever one to worry. "You shouldn’t be here yet."

“No, this is better.” Sakura smiled. “I’m glad you can’t see what all has happened.” She confessed.

“Well, either way, you’re here now. Did you find the cure?” Her mother asked excitedly.

“Yeah! I found it.” She said, neglecting to mention how. “Ino’s saved. I’m just… I’m sorry… I didn’t get home in time to—”

“Sakura,” Her father interrupted her, smiling warmly. “It is okay. There are a few people waiting for you here.”

“Sakura-chan.” She heard a soft, girlish voice call and she looked up to see a face that surprised her. She stared in disbelief for a moment before smiling. “You’re not with your team.” Haku said gently, then his smile wavered. “Will they be coming soon as well?”

“No, I hope not. Naruto-kun still needs to become Hokage, remember?” She asked with a small giggle. Zabuza stood behind Haku. He didn’t say anything to her, but he didn’t need to. The expression of serenity was enough.

“Oi!” Ostaka called, waving at her furiously to gain her attention. “What’s the big deal? Come on already! It feels like it’s been forever!”

“Sakura-chan,” Ostu nodded lightly, then grinned. Her eyes were a deep brown now. It was really a stunning color on her. “We all came to get you. Ostaka and I have decided—you’re too pretty for Kakashi! You’ll marry me instead!”

“I’m flattered.” Sakura smiled.

She felt a pull and looked down to see chakra strings attached to her hands. “I-It’s not time. I wish I could—but I have to stay alive a while longer.” She said with clarity she hadn’t felt since Itachi’s genjustu. Her objective was clear in her mind now: make sure no harm came to Konoha. “I have a mission.” She said firmly.

The pull became strong and the figures of her loved ones were swallowed by the light that seemed to grasp for her. She was yanked under the water.
When Sakura opened her eyes, she did not feel disoriented. In fact, she felt fine. She sat up and stared down at her hands. The hands were hers, right down to the slight, but permanent dent in her nail that resulted from an injury as a child. She flexed her hands, looking closely at her knuckles and trying to focus her chakra. The chakra came to her much easier and her eyes widened at the realization.

Pink chakra formed blades at her will, stemming from her knuckles. There was some sort of resonating factor Sasori had put in her hands.

Her mind felt clear. She rubbed her face, feeling the skin there as well. It was clear. Completely free of blemish. She felt her lips, teeth, eye lids. Everything seemed so much like the original, though she noted her eyelashes were darker and longer. She felt the hair of her eye brows, then went to run her fingers through the hair of her head. She was surprised when it was long, before remembering spotting it being so shortly before the transformation.

“Ah. I had hoped to see the moment you woke.” Sasori said, a bit disappointed as he entered the room. His eyes were dark. “I have gotten word that you are a member now.”

“You won’t be able to hurt me anymore.” Sakura nearly finished his thought, earning her a scowl.

“You won’t be getting any special treatment.” Sasori informed her. “You’re still crazy and can’t be trusted on your own.”

“That’s fine.” She said, sitting up. So the playing field had been evened. She stared at Sasori. “I expect then, some amount of freedom.”

“That is correct.” He said idly, leaning against the door way with his arms crossed.

“Sasori,” She said, dropping the honorific he had beaten into her. “I won’t leave. I can tell you’re worried about that.”

“What you do is none of my business.” He glared, stepping towards her in an attempt to intimidate her. “Don’t forget, you can still feel pain.”

“Don’t be bullheaded. It doesn’t change what happened, what I saw.” She said firmly. Something in her voice caused him to waver a bit. How the game had changed. He still saw that spark of insanity he had worked so hard to inspire in her, but now there was little fear of him. “I can break the strings you attach to me.”

“Not all of them. I could overpower you if I wished.” He reminded her. “I know all of your weak spots, as I was the one who put them there.”

“I’d rather not fight at all.” Sakura said honestly and approached him as best she could on shaky legs.
Despite her attempt, she stumbled. He was quick to grab her, holding her hand in his and wrapping his arm behind her shoulders to steady her. Her eyes found him and had she been capable of blushing, she would have. They stayed like that for a moment.

She wasn’t so sure she liked the even playing field now. It complicated that gaze he had for her. She hesitated but stood up straight, belatedly noticing the ground seemed closer. She made a hiss of disapproval.

“You’ll need to follow me back to the lab. Leader wants me to implant you with a device that will discourage disobedience from his orders.” Sasori instructed her, holding up a small chip. On it, a seal. She grimaced but nodded. “I’d rather not shed your blood here.”

“I have blood to shed?” Sakura asked curiously. She fell in step behind him. The height difference really was getting to her.

“Yes. It was originally going to be for my entertainment.” He said honestly, opening the door and stepping through. She hopped up on the table and waited as Sasori gathered a couple of tools.

“So what will it do? Explode? Create severe pain? Incapacitate me?” Sakura wondered a bit more calmly than she should have.

“I do not know. Nobody’s been dumb enough to activate it be betraying us.” Sasori deadpanned, glaring at her over his shoulder. A chill of excitement ran through her and her eyes darkened lustfully. Surely, there was something terribly wrong with her. That glare should have paralyzed her with fear, but she distinctively recognized her own arousal.

Sakura’s ankles brushed each other lightly and she crossed her legs before Sasori came over and separated them so he could step between them. Against her will, her heart fluttered. She briefly wondered if Sasori has somehow done that as well. She wouldn’t put it past him. Sakura leaned forward a bit, breathing in the scent of him. Despite being a puppet, he still had a lovely smell. It reminded her of a tree, sweltering in the heat of a hot day. She could pick up on hints of lacquer and oils used to treat wood. She caught herself licking her lips and she looked up to meet his unreadable eyes.

She looked foreign to him with that exquisite look in her eye. It was mischievously innocent. Perhaps she didn’t realize what she was doing to him, after all. He wouldn’t put it past her to be ignorant. The first time he confessed his love to her, she had seemed genuinely shocked, so it was entirely possible. Her eyes were enigmatic and he could no longer read her thoughts through them. It fascinated him and infuriated him all at once.

His fingertips fell to the robe he had dressed her in. He lightly tugged the gently tied sash and let it drop uselessly. His hand ghosted over her clavicle and shoulders as he pushed the robe from her shoulders. The robe crumpled on her lap and over the table. She was a goddess of alabaster skin, tainted eyes and a waterfall of roseate hair. She tilted her head, causing a long strand of it to fall from behind her hair. His eyes fell to it and instinctively he grasped it, pulling it up to his lips.

Her eyes widened lightly, but she watched curiously as he held her eye contact, showing appreciation for her beauty. She looked down at his hands as his fingertips glowed blue. She winced a bit as a line formed on her chest. Her skin pinched and pulled apart to reveal a panel. He opened it, handing her a mirror. Sakura was stunned.

“This…” she muttered, reaching inside of her own chest and touching her heart gently. It was encased in some sort of seal. She frowned. She never really valued her body more than any other person did, but she wasn’t certain on her new form. It would take much adjusting.
Sasori pressed the tiny device against her heart and sealed it using a justu. She kept her eyes on him the entire time. He could feel the way her heart beat like a rabbit’s against his touch. He hesitated there for a moment before closing the panel on her chest and closing the cracks on her skin with his chakra. He left the room without explanation and she decided to follow him.

He knew she was behind him, fixing her robe to cover herself as she followed. She wasn’t subtle. What he couldn’t figure out was why. Perhaps she was bored. Surely, it was only because she was bored and he should at no circumstances get his hopes up. He took a breath then stopped. She nearly bumped into him but managed not to. She looked up at him with an expression he couldn’t discern.

Nothing was said between the two, but he lead her back to the room Pein had instructed Sasori to give her. She dressed quickly and stared at him silently. The air between them was heavy. He could see the sorrow in her eyes and decided to exploit it. He began walking again, this time to where he kept her corpse. He had washed it, placed glass eyes and false teeth in it, returning it to its normal look. It looked more like she was sleeping.

Sakura stared at it for a long time, not sure what to say.

“Kind of odd, isn’t it? Wouldn’t you like to go back in it? I can put you there.” She heard Ino’s voice and turned slightly to see the creature perched in the window. It had Ino’s body. Sakura’s eyes softened as she stared.

“Can’t stand to look at your own body?” Sasori asked, noticing the way she was distracted, though he suspected it was not the case.

“Yeah,” Sakura lied, staring at Ino. It wasn’t Ino but it looked very similar. It had black eyes and its skin looked like it was ready to shed. Some of it even had. The hair was not the right shade either.

“You’re afraid to tell him what you see.” It hummed then chuckled. “I would be, too.” Ino winked at her and hopped down, sauntering over. Sakura remained silent before her face contorted in anger as the creature stood just in front of her, leaning forward as if to kiss her. “You should really let me do as I please. You won’t regret it. Orochimaru doesn’t.” It whispered, breath like a fog ghosting over her face. She glowered and turned away.

“What a face,” Sasori remarked casually, gathering up her corpse in his arms, holding it dear to his chest. Sakura’s expression dripped from her and now she looked concerned. “We’re on a delivery mission. Leader felt it would be good for you, help you cut ties, help you become aware of your new body and powers.” He told her briefly before he used his puppet strings to pull Sakura closer. She noted how much more control he had over her body with that technique now. She hesitated but didn’t fight it.

“Where am I going?” Sakura asked, gesturing towards her corpse.

“Your lover will find this lying next to him in bed.” Sasori hissed, thoughts of Kakashi causing him to anger. Sakura’s breath hitched and she angrily yanked herself free, fire burning in it.

“You wouldn’t!” She dared, leaning forward as if she were ready to kill him. Sasori leaned forward as well in a challenge.

“So you do love him.” He observed. “Faithless whore.” He stormed away, and almost immediately regretted his words, though he would never apologize for it. Sakura was left standing in the room, not certain whether or not to scream, cry, or simply ignore his short tirade.

“I love him more than I could love you!” She called. There was no response. Sakura rolled her eyes
and exited, deciding the creek was the best place for her now. As she wandered through the halls, she noticed how horribly lonely they all were. No wonder Sasori was insane if he spent most of his time in his workshop in such a desolate place.

No, Sakura, don’t empathize with him. Don’t humanize him. He’s a murderer, a rapist, he tortured you, he’ll hurt Kakashi. He deserves to die.

Sakura followed Sasori nonetheless. Her fists were clenched tightly at her sides. He disregarded her. He scorned her. He hurt her. She nonetheless followed.
Reconciliation

Chapter Notes

This is the last chapter of this part! Stay tuned for the sequel!! Mwah!

She soon discovered that what she thought was some sort of justu all the Akatsuki knew, teleportation was not a shared secret between them. Her and Sasori ended up having to walk all the way to some small town. Sasori had bought them separate rooms, as Kakuzu had not yet allocated her any money. She had been given an Akatsuki robe and wore it with a small amount of guilt. The hat as well, though she was thankful for that as it stopped anybody from recognizing her.

Sakura sat in the window, bathing in the sunlight that she was so thankful for. She had abandoned most of her clothing, besides her underthings and a tank top. She could feel the ball joints beneath the finely crafted muscles and skin. Everything on her was crafted with absolute excellence. Of course, she expected this. Sasori seemed to be a perfectionist in everything he did.

She sighed. It seems the thing had become a permanent fixture of her peripheral vision. This time it chose to appear as Kakashi, though had the same ailments of peeling skin and miscolored eyes. She ignored it in favor of tracing shapes against the window. A chill ran through her and she was oddly thankful she could feel such a thing. Sakura hesitantly stood and meandered about her room. Her hands tingled just slightly.

Why was her heart so laden with guilt? Since their falling out, she and Sasori hadn’t spoken but the bare minimum to each other and it hurt her. She was certain she was crazy and decided to sleep it off, if that would somehow help.

The sheets dented around her and she put her hand up towards the ceiling, admiring how perfect her hands looked as well. No callouses. No scrapes. No scars from Sasori. She was exactly as she had been before she went to him. Her mind drifted. She heard some of Sasori’s first words to her, prompting her to be safe, with Kabuto wandering around. Her pillow gave her no answer, even when she buried her face in it and groaned quietly. Some help it was.

Her stomach was in knots and eventually she sat up, glaring at the wall.

“I can make those feelings go away.” Kakashi spoke up behind her. She didn’t respond. “All you need to do is let me in.”

“Don’t use that voice.” Sakura’s own voice was deadly, dripping with venom. She heard a noise behind her, then a thousand quiet voices all at once.

“Asss you wissshh.”

Sakura continued to stare at the wall until she decided it wasn’t providing any comfort. She got up and sighed after just about every other breath, trying not to take her frustration out on any poor furniture. The last thing she needed was to break things, though she wanted to. She could imagine Sasori being even more miffed with her. She peeled her clothes off, leaving them in a trail as she headed into the shower. The water was warm and comforting, and she found herself curling up against the wall. Something felt missing, and though she wished herself ignorant, she knew what it
was.

She turned the water off with a growl and barely dried off before pulling her red and black robe tightly around her naked body. She slipped out of her room, careful to remember her key and headed next door, knocking lightly.

“Sasori, let me in.” She said quietly.

“Go away. I got you a separate room so you wouldn’t annoy me.” Sasori informed her.

“We both know I can and will break this door, just let me in.”

There was angry mumbling before he cracked the door and glared down at her, only one eye visible. His hair was a mess.

“I want in.” She reiterated and he glowered for a moment more before stepping back. She came in and shut the door behind her. “I want to sleep with you.”

Sasori stared at her for a while.

“I don’t need to sleep.” He said, selecting his words carefully.

“I want to fuck you.” Sakura said, testing the waters. He could hear the insincerity in her voice.

“No you don’t.” He mended and stepped closer. He could see the way she flinched and deep down, it made him wallow in remorse. He should never have taken her virginity the way he did. He almost admired her show of bravery, though.

Sakura deflated a bit. “You’re right, I j-just…” She grunted, then groaned, then covered her face dramatically. He rolled his eyes and picked her up.

“You’re just as emotionally inept as me, stupid girl.” He said and dropped her on the bed. She fell in a tangle of limbs before situating herself. His eyes, normally harsh, had grown soft.

“I want to talk about that.” Sakura offered.

Sasori sat next to her, facing the window, not looking her in the eye.

“I want to get to know you, Sasori.” Sakura said, crawling towards him. The proximity made her comfortable. He surely must have implanted some sort of seal in her. “More than I already do.”

“You have no loyalty to your village then.” He spat venomously. Sakura smiled. She was getting somewhere, and he did a terrible job of concealing that fact. She rolled over and laid her head in his lap, long pink hair draping over the bed and his pants. He looked down at her before hesitantly setting his hand against her cheek, lightly stroking. Sakura closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling.

There. That was it. That was what was missing.

“Apparently, I am loyal to the Akatsuki now. I have no choice but to be.” Sakura said softly, then opened her eyes to meet his. “I am loyal to you, by choice.”

“I find it hard to believe. Your heart belongs to your former sensei.” He said harshly.

“Jealously is a bad look for you, Sasori.” Sakura chastised, mouth quirking in unamusement. He resisted the urge to roll her into the floor then kick her out.
“Nothing is a bad look for me, I crafted myself to be handsome.” He quipped, causing her to laugh quietly. It was a good sound. Like bells. He listened to it contently before running his fingers through her long hair.

“I know what we should do. Let’s play a game, Sasori.” Sakura smiled up at him, white teeth showing ever slightly. Sasori found himself cautious but he nodded in agreement to whatever she was proposing. “I’ll tell you a fact about me, then you have to tell me one about you, that relates to the one I told you to begin with.”

“You’re terrible at explaining things, but I believe—thanks to my superior wit—that I understand.” He said, trying his best to make it an insult. Sakura only giggled and if he could blush he would have. He felt like a boy.

“Alright! Hmm… Oh! I was named after the type of tree that my parents met under!” She said happily. Her attitude was contagious, but Sasori showed his own happiness through a neutral expression and his shoulders relaxing from where they had been tensed.

“I was named after my great-grandfather. He was said to use a puppet that looked like a giant scorpion in combat, so people would refer to him as ‘Sasori’.” He said, surprisingly at ease with her little game. Sakura was absolutely brimming with joy at the progress she was already making. She was certain he would stay closed off forever.

“I was the top of my class.” Sakura said proudly.

“As was I.” Sasori hummed.

“After I became a genin, I was sent on more cat-search-and-rescues than I care to admit, because my team kept getting in trouble.” She smiled fondly, picturing Naruto yelling at the Third Hokage and landing them yet another bottom-of-the-barrel mission.

“I was the village’s first choice at pet rescues, because of my puppet strings.” Sasori allowed himself a small grin.

“Ah! That’s precious!” Sakura giggled, reaching up and cupping his cheek. He was certainly glad he was unable to become visibly flustered. He swallowed thickly and looked down at her as she smiled. It was a lovely sight. It far beyond rivaled the visage of her anguish. Sasori was extremely thankful to her that she came to him. “Okay, let me think… oh! My parents would always pick me up from academy together, because of the other children bullying me.” She admitted with a bit of embarrassment.

Sasori got the urge to find the now-adults that once bullied her and rip them to shreds, but he did not make that vocal. There was no visible indication of his sorrow when he said, “My parents were killed by your sensei’s father during the war. I was raised by my grandmother.”

Sakura stared, not sure how to respond for a moment. “I’m sorry for your loss,” She breathed.

“It was a war.” He shrugged indifferently.

“It doesn’t make it better just because they died in a war.” Sakura said insistently.

“If they didn’t die in a war, they would have died of illness, or heat, or bug bite, or any other manner of death that befalls the frail human body.” Sasori said casually. “Next.” He ordered, obviously not ready to open up about his parents.

“Shiratama Anmitsu is my favorite dish!” She said, changing the subject to make him more
comfortable. It worked and the small amount of tension she felt in his hand as he played with her hair seemed to melt away.

“I don’t have a favorite food.” Sasori said blankly.

“Wait…” Sakura said, face going pale now. “Will I be able to eat!? I can taste—but can I eat?!”

Sasori did nothing to stop the chuckle that bubbled up in his chest and escaped him. Sakura sat up, staring at him in fascination, like it was the most beautiful sound she’d heard. He gave her a look and straightened up. He cleared his throat.

“You shouldn’t be that concerned with food.” He remarked, eyebrow quirking at her pout. It was adorable.

“Not concerned with food?! You obviously don’t know me.” Sakura hummed, pretending she wasn’t annoyed. “Food is important!”

“Yes, you have a digestive system, but no need for it.” Sasori smirked. “Yes, you have a digestive system, but no need for it.”

“Not concerned with food?! You obviously don’t know me.” Sakura hummed, pretending she wasn’t annoyed. “Food is important!”

“You no longer require sustenance.” He informed her.

“Yes, but food is fun! And good!” Sakura determined, pointing at him accusingly. “That doesn’t answer my question!”

Sasori smirked. “Yes, you have a digestive system, but no need for it.”

“You do care.” Sakura determined and sat down, now patting her lap for her to lay down.

After a long moment of staring, he decided he would pick his battles with her from now on. He laid back and set his head on her thighs. Sasori was very proud of himself. He had made them just a bit thicker than they had been originally. It paid off. Sakura made the best pillow one could want. His eyes followed her every expression with reverie. Her fingers threaded through his short hair and he mentally thanked himself for having recently washed it.

Being mostly puppet, he often neglected showers, since he only needed to clean when he was dirtied. He didn’t sweat or produce oils.

“I had the hugest crush on a teammate until a year ago.” Sakura broke the silence.

“Sasuke Uchiha… Itachi’s younger brother.” Sasori hummed, not wanting to complete his part, though a stern look from Sakura changed his mind. He didn’t want to ruin the light mood. “I never had a crush before, but I have a deep fondness for you, Sakura.”

Sakura paused, looking decidedly nervous before she smiled shyly. She leaned down and kissed the tip of his nose. He thought it was too gentle a thing for someone like him, but graciously accepted.

“I had a fear of storms growing up.”

“I feared sand storms.”

“I have read every single book that Jiraiya-san published.” She said carefully. Sasori narrowed his eyes.

“Me too.” He added quietly, glaring as Sakura grinned down at him mirthfully.

“I didn’t take you for the type!” She giggled.

“I’m not. I don’t like them. I use them to research the matter of romance.” He said evenly. “I needed
“to know how to exploit it from my enemies.” He lied, though the lie was even and hard to discern.

“I’m a terrible cook.”

“I know, I’ve tasted the food you make.” Sasori smirked now.

“Rude! Okay, next. Next, next, next… hmmm….” Sakura focused, doing her best to think of something good. “I have nightmares! A lot of them, and sometimes I see what I think is another reality. I believe they’re visions from another life.”

Sasori’s eyes softened a bit, so he shut them. He had those too. So many times he pictured her and him together, fighting, sometimes with each other, sometimes other people. His fondest vision had been of them in some other country, living a different, more peaceful life.

“I do not have dreams.” Sasori lied. Sakura pursed her lips, but was glad he didn’t make fun of her for her confession. Sakura yawned and leaned back against the head board, though she hadn’t stopped playing with his hair.

“I wanted to be a pirate, growing up. The captain of a pirate ship.” She said, voice growing quiet as she grew sleepy.

Sasori gave a huff of amusement. “I grew up to be exactly what I wanted to. A strong warrior, part puppet, part human.”

“You wanted to be a criminal as a child?” Sakura asked.

“You did, too. Technically.” He said. “You know pirates steal and kill, right?”

“Well… I’d be a different pirate then.” She said stubbornly. She tried saying something else, but fell asleep midsentence. He let out a small laugh and removed her from her seat in favor of settling her under the covers. He pulled her robe from her, a bit surprised to find her naked. Still, he did not overstep his boundaries. Instead, he crawled in bed next to her, cupping her cheek and whispering a continuing of confessions about himself to her, half wondering if she could understand them in her sleep.

“Goodnight, Sakura-chan.” He said finally, in parody of what she did before. She smiled, waking slightly.

“Goodnight, Sasori-kun.” She whispered, nudging herself up against him and settling into a deep slumber.

In her dreams, she experienced a kind of serenity she hadn’t had in a long time. There was not only peace, but there was a presence by her side at all times as she wandered through her own memories. It kept her company and seemed to loom protectively over her as she reviewed the more bittersweet memories.

When she woke before Sasori, she was genuinely surprised, and took that time to write another letter.

Dear Home,

In reviewing the year behind me, I come to many conclusions. I have determined that I am much stronger than I initially thought, as the hardships I endured have been both sculpting and degrading. I have been irrevocably changed, but for that I am glad. I am in a much more stable condition now, and no longer have to worry about my body becoming ill with my near constant exposure to disease.
My heart yearns for Kakashi, but I know whom he truly loves, and that in many ways I resemble her. He is better off moving on before he tries to find someone he loves. As much as I genuinely love him, and hope for his happiness, I know that he is stuck in the past. He can't wash the blood off his hands though I've seen him try. He does everything to the benefit of others, hoping to somehow atone for sins he did not commit, hoping to make up for lost time and team members. I don't mind that I was used to temporarily fill that void. Though it was likely unhealthy in the long run, seeing that happiness on his face filled me with an incomparable joy.

Likewise, my heart yearns for another as well. Though, part of me knows it is the result of being his captive, I love my creator. I am confident in the knowledge that he loves me as well, even if he's a horrible person and a dangerous rogue. He is troubled, and I know that my presence and love can't fix that, but I hope that I can be there for him in the future.

A man named Pain, leader of the Akatsuki, has inducted me into the organization. It is with great regret that I inform you of me treachery. If I could disobey, I would. I'm afraid however, in gaining this new form that I never initially wanted, I am unable to deny orders from him. I fear for what the future may hold and loathe the day I face you while wearing these shameful robes. I come to tears just imagining it.

My greatest regret however, is leaving my best friend's side. Ino. My light in darkness. She was always there for me, and while I did manage to save her life, I possibly damned her as well, to anguish, to heart break, to survival. I know she will move on and be happy, but I selfishly hope that I will always have a place in her heart.

I will miss my teacher perhaps more than I mourn for the loss of my parents. Tsunade was maternal in ways that even my own mother was not, and she was certainly more honest. I learned more lessons from her than life could ever hope to teach me. She showed me a path that I could follow that was built on complete independence. I yearn to follow that path she showed me, and will do my best to follow in her teachings. I continually train. It's taxing, but my new colleagues don't at all mind, which is perhaps not such a good thing.

I fear for Naruto's reaction upon knowing that I am a traitor to the village, much worse than any treason Sasuke may have tried. It pains me to imagine him in pain. That flamboyant attitude and never ending smile sometimes would guide me through hardship and struggle. His words would fill me with hope. He is the beacon of the Hidden Leaf.

I know much more about my village now, than I did while living in it. I've learned of the corruption above the Hokage's station, of Danzo and his scheming ways. I can only warn you that he is truly an enemy to watch, perhaps more than the Akatsuki. There is no worse scum than a traitor after all.

It's odd how one can find such solace and companionship in the company of killers. Kisame is by far the most human, despite looking the least human. Though he's brutish and violent, he's well spoken and enjoys the serenity that a babbling creek provides.

Deidara is more simple, though he likes to think himself deep. His art is his focus, his primary force in life. He's a really good artist too, but his pieces never last long, it's a shame. If he would change his views, certainly museums would love to display his pieces and he would finally get the recognition he yearns for.

Even Hidan isn't as bad as I initially thought. After two or three beheadings, he simmered down on his urge to sacrifice me. Asking him about his religion usually works to change any lascivious subjects he tries to bring up. I've even began to enjoy listening to the lunatic ramble on for hours. It's comforting in a way.
Itachi is perhaps my closest friend. It's such a shame. He leads a tragic life. I wish I could help him. I wish I could write it on paper, but that would be a betrayal I could not commit.

Zetsu is an odd one. I just recently met him and it took me longer than it should have to register him as a person. The first time I saw him, the others laughed when I squealed in horror as the giant plant opened up and there was a head peaking out. He has two sides to him, and one seems to hold a certain amount of cannibalistic malice towards me, but the other half of him is honest and sweet and logical.

Kakuzu is still a mystery to me. I don't understand why he sticks around if all he does is complain about how difficult it is to keep the Akatsuki's financials in line. I do like to be paired with him on missions, though. If I had to pick someone to go with, it's always between him and Sasori. Kakuzu is down to earth and merciful in his own way. He doesn't waste any time on cruelty and perhaps that's what I find admirable. After all, when surrounded by such horrible people, it's the little things that make all the difference.

Konan is majestic, to put it simply. I was only paired with her once, but she showed me around the village I call home to and it is wonderful to see the positive influence her and Pein have over the civilians there. They refer to her as an angel, and I can see why. She has the most heart out of all of them, and I am inexplicably drawn to her, as if my heart wasn't being pulled in enough directions. She's teaching me origami through her projection of herself. We spend time together that way. She remarks that she enjoys my presence, and I very much enjoy hers.

Pein is an odd one. I thought I was crazy, but he's a new type of crazy that has yet to be defined by experts. He claims to be a god, though I have yet to seen him use his apparently godlike powers, so that is yet to be determined. But, he may as well be my god, because at any given moment I could drop dead at his command as he explained. He says I'm the only member of the Akatsuki everyone can agree they don't particularly want to maim. I've taken it as a compliment.

Tobi is one I don't like. He's jovial and downright adorable like Naruto is at times, but then at the drop of a hat, it feels like my heart is being crushed by his very presence, his voice will deepen, and I swear he has a sharingan. It's all too disconcerting, I don't trust him in the slightest, though he's taken a particular interest in my skills, and is personally training me towards the ultimate chakra control technique.

I expect the worst. I believe there will be some sort of all out war. What other reason would the Akatsuki have for a medic? Their plans are unknown to me, but I fear for the safety of my birth place and those I still hold dear in my heart. I still have the photograph of Team Seven. I take it with me everywhere.

Stay Safe,

Sakura Haruno of the Akatsuki

End Notes

Feedback is much appreciated! Hope you enjoyed.
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