Summary

Sakura traveled back in time with the intent of changing everything, but something went wrong, and now she's four years old having nightmares about impossible monsters and losing friends she has yet to meet.
(the first time one of her dreams comes true, it is a nightmare. It starts out innocently enough – she is playing with Ino, weaving daisies into chains, and the sky is deep blue overhead – then a man spits in a blonde boy’s face, completely unprovoked. Utterly random. The boy only stares at him, bewildered, spit dripping down his cheek. The man is too far away to hear what he is saying, but Sakura sees his red face twisting in anger. She sees the blur of movement behind him, the glint of a mask, an aborted movement. She only saw it because she happened to be looking. The boy doesn’t say anything to the man, just gathers his things, his face bright red in humiliation, then walks away. Sakura watches and thinks I should have done something)

When it happens again, she does.

It starts just the same as her nightmare, a normal day in which she and Ino have chosen to sit in the park and enjoy the sunshine, away from their parents’ watchful eyes. Ino picks a few daisies and offers them to Sakura, her face falling at Sakura’s horrified expression. Sakura manages to play it off with a shy smile, tilting her head and waiting for her hair to fall over her eyes. But Ino’s ribbon holds it at bay, her quickly-reddening forehead on display. Ino smiles indulgently, opting to just show Sakura how to weave the delicate stems together, her clever fingers flashing almost like –

(hands moving too quickly to see, but her mind follows the pattern – monkey – dragon – rat)

Sakura buries her face in her hands. What’s happening to her? She can hear Ino’s voice, low in concern, and then someone else. A man’s voice, deep and filled with anger unlike any Sakura has ever heard before. Her head snaps up just in time to see the man approaching the blonde boy.

She’s on her feet before she knows it, Ino jumping up to join her, but she’s too late, the man has done his spiteful deed and the boy is crestfallen, face glistening horribly in the sun and she had somehow seen this coming and still failed to stop it.

Sakura doesn’t stop to think. She just charges, her tiny legs carrying her across the park double-time.

“Hey!” She shouts, her voice an indignant squeak. The man gives her a surprised look, but it is the boy who is most affected. He flinches away from her as if expecting a blow. She feels something unpleasant burning in her stomach.

The man looks around him, seeming to realise where he is and what he’s done for the first time. His shoulders sag, he looks less like a man possessed by rage. It doesn’t dampen the fire of Sakura’s fury. “Look, sweetheart, you shouldn’t be hanging around this little freak.” He says, his voice all reasonable adult. You really should listen to me, you know. Sakura has heard that same tone a thousand times before, but never from someone less qualified than this beast.

“Say you’re sorry!” Sakura demands, hands on hips. She remembers from her dream, that flicker of movement, the white mask, and deliberately does not look in the direction it had been. But she feels… something. A flicker of interest, maybe. A rough feel of something shaped like a person, made of energy. She remembers lessons she’s never had with a woman whose voice could put you to sleep or send chills down your spine, depending on her mood. She remembers the woman putting her hands out and blue flickering around her palms.

Chakra, she thinks. There’s a person hiding over there who’s brimming with chakra.

The blonde boy is gaping at her, big blue eyes painfully wide. Sakura wonders why he’s so
surprised, then remembers that no one, including her, came to his aid in the dream. She grits her teeth and plants herself in front of him, glaring up at the bemused adult before her.

Ino is hovering in her peripheral vision, a buzz of expectant energy, like a cat about to pounce. She’s ready to leap to Sakura’s defence, if necessary. Sakura feels a surge of warmth towards her best friend.

(“No! Ino! Don’t you dare, you stupid Ino-pig! Ino, please!” A spill of platinum blonde hair, a streak of scarlet, and Sakura hopes with every breath that something will change, that those eyes will open once more –)

The man spits again, a disgusted, “Ha!” He sticks his nose in the air, “As if the beast doesn’t deserve worse. It’s an insult to the Yondaime’s memory to let the monster run around without a leash – ”

Sakura doesn’t think, she acts only on instinct. She draws her tiny fist back and strikes the man’s knee, hard. It buckles under the blow and he gives a shout of pain, nearly toppling over. His face purples in rage and he raises a hand as if to hit her back – Sakura feels a dark pulse in the boy’s energy behind her, like a slumbering beast twitching in its sleep –

– and an unfamiliar shinobi swoops in, intercepting the blow so casually it seemed as though both men had rehearsed beforehand. The newcomer smiles, a shiny needle sticking out of his mouth, and gives the man’s arm a friendly shake as if in greeting.

“Yo,” The shinobi says, dark eyes travelling over the group of them, lingering on Sakura the longest, “You ought to be more careful, Kenji-san. That might have really hurt the kid, you know? No one wants that, do they?”

Sakura sees the tiniest little shift in the shinobi’s grip. The man lets out a pained hiss and shakes his head, paling rapidly. “N-no. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to – ”

“I’m sure you didn’t. ‘Cause it’ll never happen again, will it?” The shinobi just sounds cheerful, his tone of voice so different from his actions that Sakura can’t help but narrow her eyes suspiciously at him, and for a moment, she tries to get one of those little flashes of something, dreams or whatever, but nothing happens. She’s left disappointed.

Sakura feels a little hand tug her sleeve. The blonde boy is still staring at her wide eyes, but he’s grinning madly now too. Her mouth twitches into a smile in response, shy and small. She shares a glance with Ino, who’s smiling too, but at Sakura, warm approval written all over her face. Sakura flushes.

She looks up just in time to see the shinobi release the man, patting his arm and ignore his wince.

“I’m – I’m,” He takes a deep breath, his jaw clenching as he struggles to form the words, “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to – ”

With that, he turns on his heel and leaves, limping ever so slightly. The shinobi watches him with an air of deep satisfaction. He isn’t wearing a white mask and his chakra is tightly restrained, but the feel of him is the same. He was the figure watching from afar.

The shinobi bends down to face them all at their level, “Everyone okay? No bumps, no bruises?”

Ino lets out a huff like she’s offended at the thought of that man being capable of hurting her. The blonde boy enthusiastically shakes his head, practically vibrating with excitement. His glittering blue eyes haven’t left her yet, nor has his hand on her sleeve.
The shinobi meets Sakura’s eyes, his brows raised in question. She shakes her head, all courage deserting her at once. Ino shifts closer and Sakura wraps a hand in her shirt, tugging it like she pulls at her mother’s clothes when she wants a hug.

“Okay then,” The shinobi says, straightening up, “I’ll get going if everyone’s okay. You’re sure you’ve all got your arms and legs?”

Ino giggles, waving a hand at him. Sakura just nods, half-hiding behind Ino.

The shinobi waves back, and with a casual bye-bye he disappears in a puff of smoke. The boy makes an awed sound at the sight, but Sakura’s too busy trying not to look at where she knows the shinobi went.

“Hey, hey!” The boy uses his grip on Sakura’s sleeve to spin her around. His grin is blinding, “Thanks! You were so cool! The way you yelled at that old geezer! And, ha! When you punched him in the leg and he went all wobbly and purple! You were so cool!!”

Sakura knows her face is as pink as her hair and since Ino’s behind her, there’s no hiding it. She just smiles as wide as she can, hoping he doesn’t make fun of her.

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto!” The boy declares, and Sakura feels the dream coming before it hits her.

(a big, white smile, a declaration of protection, of friendship, of love, Naruto is the sun, the light that blinds and warms and feeds the village, the people who once hated him so much for being the kyuubi’s container now love him and need him desperately.)

“Hello,” Sakura says quietly, “Are you a monster, like that man said?” She sees Naruto droop, feels the flicker of disappointment from the shinobi across the street, and hastens to add: “I don’t care if you are, I like monsters.”

Naruto stares at her, his mouth open, eyes tracing her face as though he has never seen anything like her before. Then he grins again, tears gathering in his eyes and she feels nothing but joy radiating from his chakra, so wild and radiant, just like him.

“Yeah!” He shouts, “Yeah, I’m a monster! I like pranking and ramen and I’m gonna be Hokage one day!”

Ino lets out a little disbelieving titter at that, but Sakura remembers the dream, the certainty of the villagers’ love for him, and knows he’s right.

“Of course you will,” Sakura says, “Can we still be friends then?”

“Friends?” Naruto gasps, “And – and you really think I’ll be Hokage someday?”

“Monsters are really strong, and you’re nice too. So, when you get bigger you’ll be the strongest and nicest person in the village, and they’ll have to make you Hokage.” Sakura explains.

“And of course we’re friends,” Ino grins, slinging an arm around Sakura’s neck and drawing her close, “Sakura-chan was gonna beat that guy up for you!”

“So, you’re Sakura-chan?” Naruto says, “Ne, ne, Sakura-chan, I’m gonna be Hokage and you’re gonna be my best friend, you’ll see! We’ll play pranks and run around and eat ramen every day!” He declares, pointing a finger at her. Sakura has the oddest flash of a boy with a bowl-cut making a similar gesture at her and talking about springtime.
“Okay. I’ve never had ramen before.”

This, out of everything, makes him gasp the loudest.

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Hello, friends.

This is a time travel fic, not that Sakura knows it, in which the process of coming back in time left Sakura’s memories scattered. Certain triggers cause them to return, but with zero context, making them very confusing for her. Sakura’s about four in this chapter, and these memories have given her an instinctive knowledge of how to wield, sense and mold chakra, hence why she could sense the ANBU (when he wasn’t actively suppressing his presence).

This is also a wish fulfillment casual fic. I haven’t read the manga or watched the anime in yonks. This is basically a fun little fic in which I right a few wrongs in the Naruto canon, such as Naruto’s friendless childhood and Ino and Sakura’s friendship being broken over a boy. I kind of want to prevent the Uchiha massacre, but tbh how could I do that without changing everything?? Also not sure how baby Saku could manage that. Maybe by smothering Itachi with his own martyrdom.

In case anyone’s interested, I have no idea who I will pair Sakura with in this fic, if at all. So…

Quick poll for fun: who do you want Sakura to end up with, romantic stylez?

A: Itachi

B: Sasuke

C: Gaara

D: No one

E: Your suggestion.
Chapter Summary

More characters show up and a cupcake is baked.

The next day, Sakura dashes to Ino’s house and bounces up and down on the doorstep, waiting for someone to come to the door.

Ino greets her with a big smile. “Come on in, Sakura-chan! Kaa-san’s got a surprise for you!” She sings out, pulling Sakura into the house.

“Ino – Ino-chan!” Sakura says, a little frightened. She almost forgets the suffix, because in her dreams she always called her Ino, or, mysteriously, Ino-pig. Sakura wasn’t very nice in her dreams. This is one of the reasons she hadn’t told her parents about them yet.

They both burst into the kitchen to find the Yamanakas deep in conversation. Sakura hides behind the doorframe, just barely peeking into the room.

“Sakura-chan’s here!” Ino announces unnecessarily.

Her mother gives a wry smile, “We can see that, Ino. Can you give us a minute? We’re talking.”

Ino’s father looks at Sakura curiously. Sakura feels her face redden. She tugs her hand free of Ino’s grip and backs up, away from the kitchen.

“Yeah, but – Sakura-chan’s surprise!” Ino whines.

“Later, Ino.” Her father’s voice is firm.

Ino gives a loud *hmph* and storms off down the corridor. Sakura peeks back into the kitchen, barely swallowing back a squeak when she sees the two adults stare at her.

“S-sorry. Thank you for having me. B-bye…” She manages to say, then rushes after Ino.

Ino’s waiting outside, a big scowl marring her pretty face. “You know, once we graduate from the Academy, we’ll be considered adults.” She says as Sakura reaches her. She looks so miffed that Sakura has to fight to stop herself from smiling.

“The Academy?” Sakura replies, confused. The dreams seem to indicate she will follow in her parents’ footsteps and become a shinobi, but she’s never mentioned it to Ino before.

“Of course!” Ino sniffs, linking her arm with Sakura’s and starting to walk towards the park, “If I have to go, so do you. Don’t worry, we’ll be amazing. I’ll teach you everything you need to know about poisons and ninjutsu, and then we’ll both be kunoichi, dazzling our enemies with our beauty!”

“But I’m not beautiful, Ino-chan.” Sakura says, surprised. Even with Ino’s advice to show off her forehead rather than try to hide it, it doesn’t change the fact that it’s ugly.

Ino stops and wheels around, her face darkening like thunder. Sakura shrinks back. “Who said
“You’re not beautiful?” She demands, static electricity sending sparks through her aura.

“N-no one, Ino-chan. Just me.”

“Well, don’t! Nobody insults my best friend, not even you!” Ino lets out another *hmph* and starts charging off to the park again, not waiting to see if Sakura was following.

Sakura hurries to get back to Ino’s side, struggling to match her pace.

*(I’m always so slow, she thinks, they keep leaving me behind. No, it’s more like I can never reach their level in the first place, so why bother trying?)*

Why bother trying? Because the end result is always worth it, Sakura thinks to herself, because getting to the point where she can stand at her friend’s side is worth the struggle it took to get there.

“You *are* beautiful, so there.” Ino says, her cheeks a little pink in annoyance.

“Thank you, Ino-chan.”

“*Hmph. And what about me?”*

“You’re beautiful too, Ino-chan.”

“Of course I am!” Ino tosses her head, her pale blonde hair shimmering in the sun, “I’m going to be a legendary beauty, like the female Sannin! And when we graduate from the Academy, I can move into my own house without my parents nagging me all the time. And you can come too if you want.” That last part is a rushed mumble that Sakura has to strain to hear.

“Thank you, Ino-chan.” Sakura says, but all she can think is: to stay by Ino’s side, she will have to start and finish the Academy at the same time. She can’t ever fall behind or rush ahead. She and Ino will have to be tied together.

She doesn’t really mind the idea.

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By the time they get to the park, Naruto’s already there, swinging alone. Sakura wonders if he ever left. Did he even have somewhere to go home to? She decides to ask him as soon as possible.

“SAKURA-CHAN!” Naruto bellows, having spotted them both. He waves madly, standing up on the swing with nothing but dumb luck keeping him from falling off.

Sakura flinches despite herself.

Ino notices, because she links arms again and slowly pulls her towards the grinning boy at the swingset. Sakura can see parents and children glaring at Naruto, but even more are simply ignoring him. It’s like he’s a ghost, swinging on his own for the rest of his afterlife. Sakura shakes the sudden foreboding the thought brings – Naruto’s going to be Hokage one day. Everyone will see him then. He will be fine. She has seen flashes of his future self, always grinning and radiating confidence.

More than anything, she felt *trust* when she dreamed of him.

“And Ino, too, huh?” Naruto says as they approach, his tone pondering.

Ino bristles, “Eh? If she’s Sakura-chan, I should be Ino-chan!”

Naruto studies her, frowning. “Nah! Doesn’t suit you.”
Ino makes a noise like a teakettle. “Then I’ll call you Naru-baka!”

“Ehhhhh?”

It takes some time for Ino and Naruto to calm down.

“What are we gonna play?” Naruto asked, buzzing with excitement, “Sometimes I play hide and seek with the other kids, but they don’t even know I’m playing ‘cause I’m the sneakiest! And then I pop out like HA and they get so mad. They say, ‘this game’s not meant for you, idiot!’ but they can’t stop me!”

Though his grin never wavers, Sakura can feel his bright light dimming as he talks. It hardens her resolve. Naruto swore they’d be best friends. She’ll make sure of it.

“Hide and seek’s dumb,” Sakura says, ignoring Ino’s surprised look, “Let’s play Monsters.”

Naruto’s grin widens and a spark lights up his chakra, “Ooh, ooh, really? What’s that?”

“Well…” Sakura stalls, having not thought past the name, “It’s when you pretend to be a monster, so you have to growl and stomp around and eat people.”

Naruto actually jumps up and down on the spot, clapping his hands, “I can do that! I’ll be the best monster you ever saw!”

“So, we can all be monsters?” Ino asks, trying to hide her interest.

“Uh-huh. And Naruto’s in charge, since he’s gonna be Hokage.”

Naruto gives a triumphant yell at that.

Ino rolls her eyes. “It’s not like monsters need someone to tell them what to do.”

“Yeah, they do, so they know who to eat! And I say we eat all the jerks in the village!”

Sakura smiles, feeling a surge of fondness. She’s not sure if it’s a dream feeling or not, but it feels real either way. She really likes Naruto. He’s as loud as Ino.

She gives Ino a sideways look and whispers, “Okay, now we gotta do it ‘cause he’s our Kage.”

Ino sighs but nods, even throwing in a little curtsy to Naruto, who giggles in surprised delight.

“Okay! First, you gotta growl.” Naruto orders, then demonstrates. He waves his hands in the air, fingers curled like claws, and makes a snarling face at them.

Sakura immediately regrets her idea, shrinking at the thought of looking silly or being laughed at. There’s lots of other people in the park, and Naruto draws a lot of stares.

But then Ino laughs and gives a high-pitched growl, sounding like a particularly annoyed cat. Some people look over at her, but Ino doesn’t give any sign of noticing.

Naruto and Ino both turn to look at Sakura. Ino smiles encouragingly. Sakura fidgets.

“Um… D-do I have to?”

“Of course!” Naruto says, “You’re a monster, Sakura-chan! That means you’re super scary! Remember when you punched that old guy? You were awesome! You can do it!”
“O-okay.” Sakura takes a deep breath. She knows she can be scary. She can feel it, right down to her bones. She remembers the looks people would give her, right before she – before she –

“You can do it!” Ino says, sounding completely confident.

Sakura can feel the ghost of chakra covering her knuckles, priming an explosive punch. She feels chakra forming a knife’s edge from her fingertips. She knows what it looks like when someone dies. How it feels when they die because of you.

She’s never felt more monstrous. And she still can’t do it.

Her face is turning red, she knows, so she tucks her chin down so her hair will shield her burning cheeks.

“Hey, it’s okay, Sakura-chan.” Naruto says, ducking down to meet her eye. He looks concerned. Sakura feels something ugly shift in her gut. He wouldn’t look at her like that if he knew she could feel blood coating her hands. “It’s okay, you don’t have to be a monster if you don’t want to. Nobody would ever think you were one, anyway. You can be normal.”

You can be normal.

It’s true. As long as no one ever finds out about Sakura’s dreams, there’s nothing strange about her besides her hair colour. She only ever gets bullied for her forehead and her blushing cheeks clashing with her hair. She’s not like Naruto, who’s followed by whispers and stares and is so hated that kids won’t even let him play hide and seek. Naruto can’t just give up being a monster. No one would let him.

Sakura grits her teeth. She raises her hands, the fingers like claws. She gulps, then lets out a pitiful little growl, like a puppy with a sore tummy.

“Wow!” Naruto explodes, “You did it! Well done, Sakura-chan!”

Sakura’s face is on fire and she feels like everyone in the park is staring at her, including the weird guy with the mask from the day before.

And she doesn’t care because she did it.

Sakura beams at Ino and Naruto. She can be a monster. Not the monster she is in her dreams – but she can be fierce and wild and not care what anyone thinks, just like her friends.

“I did it.” She says quietly.

“No, we gotta run around with our arms out like this,” Naruto flaps his arms like wings and starts running in a circle, “And we gotta eat the bad guys before they destroy Konoha.”

(The village has fallen. Stone buildings pounded into nothing. All colour is erased. Everything she’s ever known is gone.)

Sakura freezes, but Ino puts a hand on her shoulder and smiles like she knows for sure there will be a tomorrow. Sakura wonders what that feels like. There were no trees, no blue sky, just a colossal crater where home used to be.

“C’mon,” Ino murmurs, “We’ve got to eat the bad guys!”

When does it happen? When will Konoha be wiped out?
And what can she do to stop it?

She’s going to have become strong. They all will.

Sakura lifts her arms shakily and manages to follow Ino’s lead, running around and yelling like they’re in the midst of battle – and now she knows what one looks like.

“We’re going to be the best monsters!” Naruto yells.

“No,” Sakura says, a shard of ice in her heart, “We’re going to be the worst. We’ll find all the bad guys and eat them all up.”

Naruto howls.

Ino makes them leave the park after Naruto gets a little too rowdy, so they head to one of the nearby fields, roaring all the way.

Sakura’s not quite calm yet. The anger and horror of seeing her village being levelled has crystallised into something cold that sits in her chest. She pushes it out and roars just as loudly as Naruto, earning herself a delighted grin.

They’re all gone.

Sakura’s roar builds to a scream.

“Ugh, why are girls so loud.” A lethargic voice says.

Sakura pauses, embarrassment flooding her, but the voice registers and –

(A voice speaking in low tones, wretched words that stab thorns through her heart. “You get what I’m saying…” The words float around her mind. She’s always relied on her head to get her through tough times. This time, it is her heart that’s screaming the answer. “That’s why I’ve come... to ask your permission, Sakura.” He says, and she wants to die.)

Shikamaru.

He’s lying on his back, flattening the grass. There’s a large boy next to him who’s desperately trying not to make eye contact with any of them.

“They’re not girls, they’re monsters!” Naruto declares.

“Ugh, it’s you two.” Ino says with a scowl.

Shikamaru drawls, “And you. Tch, annoying. We were trying to get away from screeching girls, yet here you are.”

Sakura ignores Ino’s screeched reply in favour of sitting next to the big boy, whose face didn’t give her a dream. She wishes she knew how they worked. If she doesn’t dream upon meeting someone new, does that mean she wasn’t supposed to meet them?

The boy flushes at her proximity, squirming to increase the distance between them. Sakura doesn’t know him, now or then, but she knows what someone who’s been bullied all their life looks like.

“Hi,” She says warmly, “I’m Haruno Sakura. What’s your name?”
The boy’s face immediately turns bright red. He stammers out, “A-Akimichi Chouji.” He still won’t look at her.

“They’re loud.” Sakura says, nodding at Ino and Naruto, who are both bickering with Shikamaru, who’s barely responding, arms folded behind his head, eyes closed. He might actually have fallen asleep.

Chouji laughs a little, eyes bright when he looks at Shikamaru. *Maybe he’s Chouji’s version of Ino,* Sakura thinks.

“Is he your friend?” She asks.

“The best,” Chouji replies instantly, “He’s my best friend. He doesn’t care that I’m… He likes me anyway.”

“I can see why,” Sakura smiles, “You seem nice. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with you, but you join our team anyway, if you want.”

“Your team? Why do I have to have something wrong with me to join?”

“We’re the Monsters.” Sakura reveals, making her voice as mysterious as possible. Chouji’s eyes widen. “We make all the bad stuff everyone says about us true. S-some,” She swallows hard, “some people say I’m ugly. Or a freak. But with Naruto and Ino, it doesn’t matter. It just makes me more of a monster, and we like monsters.”

“That’s dumb,” Shikamaru says, his eyes still closed, apparently having been listening all along, “We’re not joining a thing like that.”

“We wouldn’t let you anyway! You have to be a monster to join.” Ino says, matter-of-fact.

“But – but, monsters are mean! I don’t want to be mean.” Chouji protests.

“Monsters don’t have to be mean.” Sakura corrects.

“Then what’s the difference between monsters and men?” Shikamaru asks, his sharp eyes flicking between them.

“Nobody likes monsters.” Sakura says.

Shikamaru and Chouji both gave Ino dubious looks.

“Ino’s an exception, she can’t help being popular, it’s not her fault.” Sakura says.

Ino tosses her hair smugly, “And! You have to accept one thing!” She adds. Shikamaru and Chouji exchange looks.

“Blood ritual?” Shikamaru yawns.

“Ew, no! It’s this – ” Ino begins.

“Naruto – ” Sakura continues.

“ – is Hokage.” The two girls finish.

Naruto beams at them all. Shikamaru’s dubious look intensifies. His eyebrows look in danger of levitating off his forehead.
“No, he isn’t.” Chouji says, baffled.

“Is too.” Sakura glares.

“He’s our Hokage. The Hokage of Monsters. And he’s the first one, so he’s the Shodaime.” Ino says bossily.

“The Hokage is the leader of Konoha,” Shikamaru points out, “Unless Naruto murdered the old man and took his hat, he’s not the Hokage.”

“Well, then…” Sakura looks around at them all, stumped.

Shikamaru sighs, like he’s resigning himself to something. “Naruto’s kind of like a hurricane… Or a wildfire. Nobikage?”

Naruto’s chakra flares with golden joy.

The Monsters gain two new members.

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After saying goodbye to their newly-dubbed Nobikage, Sakura walks Ino back to her house at Ino’s insistence.

“Wait here!” Ino tells her with quick grin, then darts into the house.

Sakura waits patiently. She remembers sensing the masked man in the park without even trying, but she wonders what would happen if she did. She closes her eyes and focuses, pushing all of her attention outward, seeking that flash fire feel of chakra.

She feels Ino’s presence through the house’s walls, her chakra like spring sunshine, weaker than Naruto’s but with the same warm feeling. Her mother is near her and she feels steady, reassuring. Sakura can’t feel anyone else in the house, so either Ino’s dad isn’t home or he’s trying to hide his chakra. She hopes it’s the first. Ino’s dad has a really scary look in his eyes sometimes, like he can see right through her. Ino complains about it often, since it’s almost impossible to deceive him or get away with anything.

Ino’s presence brightens. Sakura stands up straight, opening her eyes just in time to see –

“Ta-da!” Ino says, “It’s the surprise! Kaa-san made it after I told her about you beating up that nasty old man.”

Ino’s holding a little cupcake with _Fight! Sakura-chan!_ written on it in icing. Sakura feels tears well up at the sight.

“Thank you,” She says, her voice watery, “A-and thank your kaa-san for me too, please. This is – this is really, really nice.”

(“Shut up, Ino-pig! I’m the one he’s going to marry!”)

Sakura throws her arms around Ino to silence her own voice.

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Sakura grabs all the books on codes and encrypted texts that she can carry. Her mother is baffled by her choices, dithering next to the children’s section they usually peruse.
“I want to write a diary in code.” Sakura announces. It isn’t lying, because it’s almost true. Like looking at picture upside down and seeing a donkey when really it was a horse. It was true from one angle.

She has to write her dreams down so she never forgets anything important, but she can’t risk someone finding them. The only answer is a code.

“Oh… why?” Her mother’s supportive smile flickers. Sakura’s parents are both shinobi, but they’ve never said anything about Sakura following in their footsteps.

“Because I don’t want any boys reading it.” Sakura says sternly, pinning her mother with a serious look, “So, don’t tell anyone. Please.”

“Oh, okay! It’ll be our secret.” Her mother hides a smile behind her hand. Sakura wonders if she’ll always be so easy to fool, or if she’ll learn that Sakura’s not a wide-eyed little girl anymore. Or maybe Sakura’s guilt will eat her up before that happens.

With her mother safely squared away in the botanical section, Sakura looks around to make sure no one’s watching, and opens her first book.

She writes detailed notes specifying all known codes used by Konoha and other nations – though she assumes none were in current use, otherwise they wouldn’t be available for the public to read – and discards them all, one by one. She doesn’t want to use a code anyone would recognise, which means she has to make up her own and make sure it doesn’t have any similarities or overlap with a code that had already been broken.

After an hour of solid reading and extensive note-taking, Sakura finally creates a working code that manages to confuse even her. She gathers up every page with her writing on it and shoves it all into her bag.

She’s slipped a book on fire ninjutsu into the pile without her mother noticing. Hopefully, she can learn something to dispose of the code. It has to only exist in her head, so no one can copy it.

Sakura practises the basics of fire ninjutsu a few hours later in the garden, under the cover of several large trees. She told her mother she wanted to sit in the shade and write her encoded diary. Her mother waved her off with a smile, on her way to visit a friend. Sakura’s parents didn’t leave her home alone often or for very long, so she had to really make use of the time she had.

The book says to mould boiling chakra in your stomach and then breathe it out as fire. Sakura sits with the pages spread evenly in the grass, keeping her eyes closed.

She tries to focus on how she had felt when she sensed the shinobi’s chakra the day before. Energy was buzzing all around her. Life in the trees, the grass, the animals hiding in the bushes. She can feel it all. She tries to turn that sense inward, to peek into her own body and see what was there. To her dismay, there’s just a flicker of chakra in the massive, cavernous space inside her. She tries pulling on the chakra, but it sputters and nearly goes out entirely. Sakura feels faint and pulls back, unsure of what would happen if her tiny bit of chakra was used up, but unwilling to risk testing it. Another thing to read up on. She thinks of the chakra as a spark, and imagines blowing on it to feed it. She feels some kind of response from the well deep inside her, then, far too quickly to stop, the chakra shoots up through her body and out of her gasping mouth –

– and a hand clamps over her face, smothering the flames before they can reach further than her skin. Heat sears her lips and chin in a sudden shock of pain. Sakura wobbles, her well almost run dry, and her head meets someone’s shoulder as she droops forwards.
“Huh?” She says, her mouth awash with agony.

“Shh,” A boy says, patting her on the back, “Don’t talk, silly girl. You could’ve really hurt yourself.”

_Silly girl?_

Energised by indignation, Sakura pushes back to glare into the boy’s face. He is pale, with dark, messy hair and a small smile. She doesn’t recognise him at all, but his eyes seem a little… significant, somehow.

“’m ’kay,” Sakura mumbles, trying not to move her lips, ‘doesn’t ‘urt.”

“And I’m the Empress of the Universe.” The boy informs her tartly, raising his eyebrows.

Sakura frowns at him.

“I was kidding. There’s no such thing. There is however, such a thing as ranks for jutsu to prevent untrained idiots killing themselves attempting something far beyond their level. Katon is _dangerous._ How old are you? I don’t believe your Academy Teacher taught you this.”

He thinks she’s an Academy Student? She can’t help smiling, despite how it pulls at her burns. She holds up four fingers.

“You’re _four?_ Wow. Okay, little firefly. One last question, then I take you to the hospital. Who taught you? You can manipulate your chakra enough to attempt Katon – well, that’s… not normal. Your parents putting in a little extra training before you start at the Academy?”

Sakura shakes her head and grabs one of the pages she had meant to destroy. She eyes him suspiciously and pulls a pen from her pocket. She writes _‘no one taught me. I read it all in the library. I wanted to try it on my own. It was going to work, then you smooshed the fire in my face.’_

“I stopped you from igniting paper on grass on a dry day under a tree with low-hanging branches.”

He points out wryly, then pauses. “You… you read about the jutsu once and decided to try it out, all on your own? And… you nearly did it?”

Sakura nods, though she’d argue that she _did_ do it.

“Well… it’s a baby Itachi.” The boy says, gaping a little, “A tiny, pink-haired miracle. Has your mother ever met a man named Fugaku?”

“How should I know?” Sakura frowns, wincing at the tight, sore feel around her mouth. Something suddenly occurs to her and she gasps, grabbing at the boy’s hand. Sure enough, the flames had licked at his skin when he pushed the fire back into her mouth.

Her bottom lip quivers.

“Oh.” He says faintly.

“My fault.” Sakura says, tears springing up. She holds the boy’s hand very sadly, then –

_(She spreads her hands over a dying woman’s chest. Her palms glow bright, casting the woman’s pale skin in an eerie glow. Her mouth and chin are black with blood. She gazes at Sakura with an odd look in her eye. She’s not dying anymore.)_

She did that.
Or, she will do that.

Heal.

Sakura remembers how gently she pushed chakra into the woman’s body, how it was harder to do because she was crying and frightened, but this time she’s not scared at all. She takes the boy’s hand with purpose and tries to find that spark of chakra again, to push it through the boy’s skin. Already she can remember how to deal with burns, you have to seep into the skin and repair the damage –

“Oi!” The boy yelps, ripping his hand away. She nearly topples over, but he steadies her with a movement far too quick to see. “None of that,” He scolded, “You’ve barely got enough chakra to fill a thimble. Don’t waste it trying something impossible.”

Sakura glares at him defiantly. It is not impossible. She’d healed lots of people. And fish. Lots!

She lets him see that on her face, her absolute confidence in her abilities and annoyance at his doubt.

He huffs a mirthless laugh, “Oh man… You’ll be a terror in a few years, won’t you?”

She points at his hand, allowing herself a small smile of pride. She was a terror now.

He glances at his hand, actually twisting it to look at the whole thing, as if he had forgotten where the burn was. Well. Where it had been. The skin is now unmarred, pale and perfect once more.

“You – you – how did you – no,” He says, something oddly solemn in his eyes now, “You didn’t do this. You got that? If anyone ever asks, you tell them you can’t do anything. You have to pretend to be average. Are you listening to me? If anyone finds out what you can do without any training at all, I – you’ll be in big trouble. Okay? It’s like your little coded pages – ”

Sakura opens her mouth, outraged that he’d somehow peeked without her noticing, but he cuts her off with an impatient hand.

“ – listen to me. You wanted to keep your notes a secret. So just take it a little further, and keep the whole thing a secret. ‘cause if you didn’t, and your parents found out, they would be really mad at you.”

Sakura blinks up at him, lacing her fingers together. She feels tears forming again, “They wouldn’t…”

“They would.” He says calmly, so calmly that she knows he is lying. His chakra isn’t calm at all.

Sakura knows arguing with him won’t get her anywhere. And it isn’t as though she’s been planning on telling her parents about the dreams, or what she’s trying to do. But even if someone did find out and she did get in trouble, it wouldn’t matter. Because she’s going to be Naruto’s best friend, no matter what.

“Hey, why didn’t you heal your face?” He looks guilty, “I should’ve taken you to the hospital the moment it happened. I should’ve thought of another way to stop you. You should always heal your wounds before your comrades, you know. The medic is the most important person on the team. If you’re alive, they still have a chance. Do you understand me? You need to put yourself first.”

Sakura wrinkles her nose. He just laughs, apparently over whatever solemnity had gripped him.

“I’m Uchiha Shisui.” He says. Sakura waits for a dream, but nothing happens. Just a crow cawing overhead. The rush of wind sounds like a river.
“Haruno Sakura,” She says, just like her parents had taught her, and continues with a practised flow, “My parents are Mebuki and Kizashi and they’re chuunin and you shouldn’t mess with me because they’re very strong and mean, so there.”

“Chuunin, hm?” He says seriously, but his chakra ripples like laughter, “I’ll be careful, then. Let’s get you to the hospital.”

And with that, he picks her up and they’re gone in a flash.

***

**TERRIBLE NEWS.**

I don't speak Japanese. So... Nobikage? Might mean mouthwash, for all I know. It's *supposed* to mean 'wildfire shadow,' like how hokage means 'fire shadow,' but... Google Translate may have betrayed me.

So, the results of the last poll were... solidly inconclusive. It seems like most people really like the friendship and want to see more of it, and also more of tiny Sakura punching mean people, and the romance comes second. I’m totally okay with that. I think I’m going to write by the seat of my pants (which I never ever do btw, I usually try to plan every inch of a fic before I post it, which usually means I never end up posting it) and see who has the most natural chemistry with Sakura, if any. I’m not gonna start anything super shippy now, since she’s, you know… *four*. But we’ll see how this plays out!

I have very little of this story planned out. It’s kind of nice to write without having to constantly check a guide, but then there’s a huge blank horizon that I can’t see past and I’m like oh god why have I done this to myself. I’m trying not to write in my usual style so it’s more like baby genius Sakura’s level, but it’s haaaaar.

A wild Shisui appears! I know pretty much nothing about him except that he apparently has a sense of humour and *woow*, he’s already my favourite Uchiha. Speaking of which, is Mikoto an Uchiha in the sense that she married one, or that she already was one before she married Fugaku? Because she has identical colouring to every other Uchiha. Was she a ninja? Did she do more than die on Itachi? I want to know, Kishi! I literally stopped reading the manga at some point after Sakura skewered Sasori. I... I'm sure something else happened after that. But I can't remember it.

I’ve literally never written anything in present tense and it’s SOOOO hard. Why do I do these things to myself??

Hope you all liked this, since I really wasn’t expecting so many people to read the first chapter!! Thanks, everyone!

**Quick poll for fun:**

What would you change in Naruto if you could?

I would either change the reason for Naruto’s shitty childhood or have Tsunade adopt him and raise him as a Senju. I’d also make Sakura’s character development consistent, she has a nice flow of improvement up to the chuunin exams, where she gets a wonderfully cathartic wake-up call in The Forest of Death, but then after that, despite declaring everyone would have to watch her back, she’s slotted neatly on the sidelines. I’d also make it so that Sasuke isn’t a heartless robot in part 2 who treats everyone who loves him like shit but hahahaha that’s just my opinion.
I guess this fic is my version of the manga if it had been called *Sakura.*
The nurse is extremely unimpressed with Shisui’s cover story.

He claimed that he had been practicing and accidentally blew fire in Sakura’s face. The woman refuses to look at him the entire time she examines Sakura, apparently dismissing him as a careless fool. He is suddenly acting the part, rubbing his head bashfully and laughing a little too loudly. Sakura eyes him with intense scrutiny, aware that he was returning the favour, albeit with a tad more subtlety.

“I assume you did absolutely nothing after causing the injury,” The nurse says, her fingers cool on Sakura’s chin, her tone even cooler, “Like washing her face in lukewarm water? Applying cream? Anything at all?”

“Uh… no.”

The nurse sneers. “Lucky for you, this is a very mild wound. There’s no point healing it –”

“I’ll do it, Kuronuma-san.” A pleasant voice enters the room.

Sakura looks up and was hit hard with –

(“Sorry, Sakura-chan. Don’t feel too bad. Most people trust me.”)

A silver-haired boy with glasses peers around the doorway, “I need the practice, and it does look painful.”

“Go ahead, Kabuto-kun.” Kuronuma stands, allowing Kabuto to take her place in front of Sakura.

Sakura stares into his dark eyes. At some point, he is going to betray her. *Snake,* her mind hisses. But he looks so kind. He examines her face closely and gives a little wince of sympathy.

“How did you manage to do this?” He turns to look at Shisui, his voice mild, but his chakra feels a little like how Kuronuma’s sneer had looked.

“Training accident,” Shisui fidgets, looking every part the sheepish fool he was pretending to be, “I didn’t realise what had happened at first because – well, she didn’t cry out or anything.”

Kabuto’s chakra roils with menace at that. “That would be the shock, I think,” He says sweetly. He turns back, his hand beginning to glow, and reaches for her face.

(She hits the bridge hard. The baying of the beast grows louder until she can feel it in the wood beneath her cheek. She looks up and there’s Kabuto, gently erasing the festering claw marks on her arm. “There, there, Sakura-chan.” He breathes, and she hates him. He’s the monster, not Naruto.)

“No!” Sakura protests, ripping her face away from his hand. There’s a beat in which they are all silent and she can feel Kuronuma’s confusion, Shisui’s alarm and Kabuto’s suspicion. *You have to be average,* Shisui had said, and she understands. She allows the tears that are always threatening to emerge to do so, giving Kabuto a big, watery look of fear. “Hurts.” She says sadly.

Kabuto’s suspicion melts into low-grade annoyance, but it isn’t pointed at her. Shisui’s chakra isn’t sure if it should laugh or not. Sakura can see they are around about the same age, eleven or twelve, but Shisui’s chakra feels far more dangerous. Kabuto’s reminds her of mint, cool and faintly herbal.
“Don’t worry,” Kabuto says softly, placing his cool fingers back onto her face slow enough that she could move away if she wanted, “It won’t hurt one bit. You’ve been very brave.”

His hand glows. Sakura feels the pain melt away, along with the tight, raw feel of her skin. She pays close attention to the process, short as it was. Kabuto seems to notice her fascination, his lips quirking up, his chakra giving a pleased pulse.

Sakura works her jaw, testing how it felt. She must make a silly face, because Shisui’s own expression is carefully blank, despite the mirth she can sense from him. Kabuto turns to look at him, radiating polite dismissal.

“Why were you even training around a little girl?” Kabuto asks.

Shisui hangs his head a little, as though ashamed, “She snuck onto the training field and I couldn’t sense her, since her chakra is so… uh… small.”

Sakura gives him an indignant look. Shisui’s chakra ripples in answer, and it feels like him saying well it is!

Kabuto just tuts. He offers her a warm smile that feels real, but she remembers seeing him smile with blood-soaked lips and it had looked genuine then too. But Sakura is average. She isn’t supposed to be suspicious of a nurse’s assistant. So, she blinks back tears and gives him a weak smile in return.

“What’s your name?” He asks.

“Haruno Sakura.” She says, and takes a deep breath to continue the rest of the introduction, but Shisui snorts from across the room. She knew he thought her parents being chuunin was funny! But his chakra didn’t feel amused. He must not want her to name her parents, possibly in case the story of how he’d accidentally hurt her got back to them.

“Sorry,” He says, noticing Kabuto’s glare, “It’s just… her parents named her – uh, they didn’t really stretch themselves…”

“You’re very mean.” Sakura says severely.

Shisui blanches.

This time, it is Kabuto’s chakra that ripples with laughter. “Well, I think your name suits you perfectly.” He says with a brotherly grin. He reaches out and ruffles her hair, careful not to mess up her ribbon.

She tries not to hate him.

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After suffering through Kabuto’s gentle healing, Shisui takes Sakura out for dango, since, in his words, she’d been such a ‘brave little firefly.’ It seems her glare isn’t very effective at all, because it just makes him laugh as they walk to the market. Her mother has probably noticed she isn’t in the garden anymore, but Sakura guesses she’ll be in less trouble for wandering than for setting the garden on fire.

“So, why were you in my garden?” Sakura asked, having been thinking about it for a while.

Shisui lets out a big, dramatic sigh, “Well, I was just innocently passing by and I heard the sound of a fair maiden in distress.”
“I wasn’t in distress.” Sakura points out.

“But you are a fair maiden?”

“No, I’m four.”

Shisui laughs again. It sounds more genuine than when they were in the hospital.

Sakura glances at him out of the corner of her eye. He had seemed like a cheerful, carefree boy, but when she healed his burn, something changed. She didn’t know what it was, but it had been strangely intense.

“Why were you just passing by? You’re a shi-no-bi,” Sakura says, sounding the word out carefully, “Shouldn’t you be on a mission?”

Shisui doesn’t reply, a faint not-quite-smile on his face. A shadow passes over him, and his mouth twists into a grimace, “I’m on a break for now, Firefly. And I like walking through the residential parts of Konoha. It’s… peaceful. When there aren’t any brats setting themselves on fire, that is.”

Sakura thinks it sounds kind of boring. Just wandering around the streets, past houses and gardens and not stopping to talk to anyone? It reminds her of when she used to tell her parents she was going to hang out with her ‘friends,’ and then she would just sit in the library all day and come home with stories of what fun she’d had. Her parents always smiled when she talked about her friends, but after she met Ino they actually seemed relieved. Maybe they’d always known she was lying.

“My friends and I like to play in the park.” Sakura says, looking up at Shisui to see his reaction. He was annoyingly tall. Sakura can remember being as tall as her mother, once. She could see over counters and reach shelves.

“That’s nice.” Shisui says mildly.

“You can play too, if you want.” Sakura offers. He probably can’t be a monster, though. He’s too big.

Shisui stops walking. “Huh? Me?”

“Yes. I’ve got lots of friends now, so I don’t mind sharing some. Shikamaru is smart. Chouji always has food. They’re nice, I promise.”

“I’m a grown-up.” Shisui says bewilderedly.

“That’s okay, I don’t mind.”

“Well, I do! I’m almost ten years older than you and your little friends… ugh, that’d be so weird. What do kids even play these days?”

“We practice dangerous ninjutsu without supervision.” Sakura grins.

Shisui swipes at her head. She tries to dodge, but still ends up with a light thwack for her trouble. He gives her a speculative look.

“You’re planning on joining the Academy, right?”

“Ino-chan says so.”

“Well, if Ino-chan says so, then it must be so. How would you like to learn a few tricks? Just to get
you ahead of your future classmates? Nothing that would make you stick out.” Shisui says it casually enough, but his hand is twitching towards his belt.

Sakura considers this. Her hair and her tendency to turn red when embarrassed make her stick out enough on their own, as does her inability to go a day without sobbing over something small. If she is better than her classmates, will they hate her? But still, she remembers Konoha being decimated. She’s a monster now, so they’ll hate her if she’s weak and they’ll hate her if she’s strong. But if she’s strong, maybe she can save them all.

“Okay.” Sakura nods.

“You’re tiny, so you’ve got the chakra reserves of a one-legged kitten at the moment. We’ll work on building that up, then we’ll move on to agility and reflexes,” Shisui kneels down next to her and holds up one hand, “And eventually, I expect you to be able to dodge this.”

His hand shoots towards her face before she even has time to flinch, then slows until she can see the hit coming, but still can’t avoid it.

He pokes her forehead gently.

Sakura covers it with both hands, eyes wide.

“That’s your weak spot, right? It embarrasses you?”

Sakura’s lips wobble into a pout, but she manages to hold back tears. She nods slowly, afraid another hit will come if she bares her forehead again.

“You lie a lot, Firefly. Some people will overlook it, because you’re a kid and not many people bother to look for signs of deception in children, since they tell little lies about everything. ‘I didn’t break it, nii-san did, I ate all my dinner, blah blah.’ Kids are liars. But you’ve got something big to hide. You’ve got natural talent, the kind that stands out from the crowd. Shinobi that stand out have to be the strongest, or they’ll be cut down quicker than the rest. So, until you’ve got the skills to match that raw talent, you need to work on blending in. Learn to hide that target on your face, until no one but you knows it’s there.” Shisui smiles, and covers her hands with his, drawing them away from her forehead.

“So, we’re going to play shinobi?”

“Haha, sure. But only if you promise you won’t practice on your own. Chakra exhaustion can be fatal. That means you could die.” Shisui says, his dark eyes meaningfully wide.

“I know what fatal means.” Sakura snaps. She’s seen people die before. Sometimes beneath her own fists. Fatal is familiar now.

“I don’t doubt it.” Shisui says, his lips thinning into a white line.

“You should smile more,” Sakura says, feeling his hands tighten on hers, “Smiling suits your face. It looks wrong without it. All wonky.”

Shisui starts to grin, but then his head snaps up. A second later, he’s standing up in a casual slouch, hands in his pockets.

Sakura frowns, confused, then feels a hint of something approaching –

“Oi, Shisui!” A man shouts from afar.
She knows that voice.

Sakura gets up, turning to face the approaching figure.

It’s the masked man, only his face is bare today, like it was when he stopped the mean man from hitting her. His hair is shoulder-length and tied back with a bandana, and his smirk warped around the needle in his mouth.

Sakura looks up at him with astonishment. She only felt a dim impression of him as he approached, not the mass of chakra she had felt from him before. Was he hiding it?

“You again.” The man says, looking down at her. He puts his hands on his hips and quirks his eyebrows up, “D’you know this kid, Shisui?”

Shisui’s big smile is back in place, “Uh, not really. She had a little accident, I escorted her to the hospital. I was gonna take her to the market to get her some dango, since she’s been a little trooper.”

“Grunt work for you, seriously?”

“Yeah, and no one’s paying me.” Shisui laugh.

“I don’t believe it,” The man drawls, “what really happened, kid?”

“Shisui snuck into my garden to watch me play.” Sakura answers. That’s the story Shisui had told, after all.

Shisui splutters, waving his hands, “No – no! That’s not true! I – I WOULDN’T – ”

“Woah,” The man says, his smirk growing, “Shisui, have you got too much time on your hands? Or did you just miss playing with kids your age?”

“My age? I’m eleven! She’s three!”

“Four.”

“Four!”

“Ah, when you get to my age, all you kids look alike.” The man sighs exaggeratedly.

Sakura holds her hand up, like her mother taught her to do when she wants attention. The two older males blink down at her.

“I wanted to thank you, shinobi-san,” Sakura says politely, “You saved me from having to fight that man.”

“Uh…” The man shuffles a little on the spot, “That’s okay, kid.”

“Firefly…” Shisui says, something dangerous creeping into his tone, “What do you mean ‘having to fight that man?’”

“An old man spat in my friend’s face,” Sakura says bluntly, “So I punched him, but all I could reach was his knee. And then he wanted to hit me, but shinobi-san stopped him.”

Shisui was gaping like a fish, “What? Some random guy spat in a kid’s face? And then he tried to – who was he?”
“It’s okay. Nobody likes Naruto, except me and our friends. All the grown-ups hiss at him and say bad things. But we don’t need grown-ups, so we don’t care.”

Shisui’s face changes just a little when she says Naruto’s name.

The other man bends down to look Sakura in the eye. He seems to be appraising her. “Well, it sounds like this *Naruto* needs friends like you. My name’s Genma, by the way.”

“Hello. My name’s Haruno Sakura and my parents – ”

“Seriously, what’s this guy’s name? The tough guy who picks fights with little girls?” Shisui blusters, looking from Sakura to Genma, getting more frustrated when neither answers immediately.

There’s a beat of silence. Genma smiles at Shisui, his cheerful expression giving absolutely nothing away.

“I picked the fight,” Sakura says seriously, “But Genma-san called him Kenji, so – ”

Shisui is gone.

Sakura blinks.

He’s still gone.

She gapes at the empty space he left behind.

“Shisui-kun?” She calls out, a little forlorn. “We were going to get dango and play ninja…”

Genma gives her a helpless look as tears well up in her eyes. “Oh, come on, don’t cry… Okay, okay, how about this? I give you a piggyback ride to the dango stall, you get what you want and I walk you safely home. Sound good, Saku-tan?” Genma smiled, his eyes warm.

Sakura sniffed. “Okay.”

It turns out that Sakura is much taller when she’s sitting on top of a ninja. She can see all the highest tree branches and over fences. Konoha is beautiful at every view, it seems. She’s going to work very hard to protect it.

“Shisui-kun is *very* fast.” Sakura says, bobbing along on Genma’s back. His stride is laidback, they’re not getting anywhere in a hurry.

“Yep.” Genma says.

He isn’t very talkative.

Sakura likes him anyway.

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By the time Genma takes her home, her hands sticky and tummy full of dango, her mother is utterly furious.

“Who are you?” Her mother said icily, gripping Sakura’s hand.

“Leaving.” Genma gave a sloppy salute to her mother and a little wink to Sakura, then vanished in a puff of smoke and leaves.
Sakura’s mother glares at a nearby tree. Sakura can’t see anything, but she guesses that’s where Genma whooshed over to.

She waves at the tree, “Bye-bye, Genma-san!”

The tree’s branches seem to wave back.

Sakura’s mother looks down at her, exasperation written in every line of her face. “Sakura…”

“Genma-san bought me dango.” Sakura says.

“How nice,” Her mother says, her chakra pulsing in irritation, “Now you won’t eat dinner. So considerate.”

“I like him more than Shisui-kun, probably,” Sakura says, “Genma-san isn’t as fast, but he did stop that man at the park.”

Sakura’s mother frowns. “What man at the park, Sakura?”

“The old man,” Sakura says vaguely, stepping into the house and slipping off her shoes, “he spat in Naruto’s face so I punched him, then Genma-san told him off.”

“Sakura!”

Her mother had listened to her story of how a strange man had been so horrible to a boy in the park, and then erupted into a rage at the thought of a child being treated so poorly. Then, Sakura mentioned his name. Her mother’s mouth twitched the way it did when she was trying to hide something, and she tugged at her hair, lost in thought for a good few minutes.

It takes Sakura several tries to get her attention again, but when she does, her mother simply gives her a warm smile and praises her for standing up to a bully, though she asks her to next time look for an adult for help instead of wading in on her own – “I wasn’t alone, I had Ino!” Sakura insists – or with just another four-year-old for back-up.

“A good shinobi builds bonds with others,” Her mother says, waving a spatula like a sword, her eyes distant again, “They create alliances and fill their ranks with trustworthy people. You made a good start with Ino. And this… Naruto. It sounds as though he could use an ally or two, doesn’t it?”

“He said he was a monster,” Sakura reports, not missing her mother’s sharp intake of breath, “But I said that was okay ‘cause I like monsters.”

“Sakura, honey, you hate –”

“I like them now.” Sakura says, determined.

Her mother just laughs, ruffling her hair, then sent her off to wash her hands before dinner.

Sakura turns over in bed, still squeezing her eyes shut. She is trying to make a dream happen. Knowing Naruto was going to be attacked before it even happened had given her the push to act when it did. If she could keep getting the dreams, maybe she could keep helping the people she saw in them.

It has been hours of lying in bed with her eyes closed and it feels like all she was doing was fighting to stay awake. She remembers everything she had seen that day – Ino’s hair, matted with blood,
coupled with a feeling of intense denial – and knows that the dreams won’t go away. So, she has to be able to use them.

She hears birds singing from afar, gentle fluting sounds that heralded the start of a new day. Her eyes open and –

(\textit{Naruto looks at her. What he sees makes his face crumple in despair. He closes his eyes and does not move when the blow comes, but when the blade slices through him, his eyes bulge open, and she sees the light finally leave them.})

Sakura wakes up screaming.

Both of her parents dash in to see what was happening. It takes a long time to persuade them that it was just a nightmare, especially since she can’t stop sobbing. By the time they leave her room, she has analysed the dream and all of its implications.

\textit{Naruto}.

When she dreamed that a man would spit in a little blonde boy’s face, it happened only a few days later. What she saw last night – if it really was Naruto, then she at least had some time to prevent it, since he looked so much older. She can’t get the expression on his face out of her mind. That total despair, then resignation, had seemed utterly foreign on his cheerful face. And it seemed that looking at her had caused it?

Sakura wriggles out from the covers her parents had tucked her into and rushes over to her desk. She hadn’t managed to destroy the coded papers in the garden, but it was probably safe just to throw them away. She remembers Shisui’s dark eyes, so uncharacteristically solemn, as he talked about secrets. He won’t tell on her.

\textit{Dream No. 1.} she writes in her own special code, \textit{it was a normal day in the park}…

xxxxxxxx

Naruto’s swinging alone at the park again. Sakura’s stomach feels hollow at the sight, like pity bored a hole through her. Naruto seems to always be there, no matter what time of day it is.

“Sakura-chan!” He yells, jumping on the swing until it shook violently beneath his feet, “Let’s climb trees, Sakura-chan!!”

Sakura trails him to a cluster of trees that are further away from the park. She doesn’t know why he spends all his time around kids who won’t play with him and parents who hate him.

“I bet you can’t climb your tree faster than I can climb mine!” Naruto declared, grinning up at his tree, a sturdy oak. Sakura’s got a cherry tree, and she’s not sure if that was on purpose or not. She doesn’t think Naruto’s like Ino, knowing everything there is to know about plants and flowers.

“How am I supposed to beat the Nobikage?” Sakura demands, putting her hands on her hips just like Genma did. “You’re the best shinobi in the world!”

Naruto preens, “Hehe, you betcha! You’ll do fine, Sakura-chan! And if you fall, I’ll catch you! Like a princess!”

Sakura pouts, “Maybe I’ll catch you like a princess.”

Naruto staggers back, clutching his heart, “Sakura-chan, is that a challenge?”
“First one to fall off is a princess.” Sakura agrees.

“Even if I do, I’ll just be the best princess.” Naruto sticks his tongue out, then holds his hands up, preparing to scale the tree like a monkey.

(“It looks like the best at controlling chakra right now is…” A voice said in a low drawl, “Sakura.”
She’s sitting up high in her tree, beaming with pride. She did it on her first try. Maybe now he’ll be impressed. Maybe he’ll notice her. Maybe he – he – )

What was his name again, Sakura finds herself thinking as she grips the tree trunk, how could I forget it?

“Aaaaand – go!” Naruto shouts, leaping for a branch and missing by a mile.

Sakura climbs at a more sedate pace. Once, she ran the length of a massive tree, far taller than this, her feet sticking to the bark with the perfect balance of chakra. It was the last time she did better than her teammates. They were – who were they?

Sakura toes gingerly for footholds, then pulls herself up carefully. She wouldn’t mind being a princess really, but she doesn’t want to fall first. Not this time.

As she climbs higher, she gets the feeling that something is coming.

She peeks up and –

(A red eye spins. Tears glint, he blinks them away. “Sakura.”)

A young man is sleeping on a branch, his face covered by an orange book. His hair is silver and it sticks straight up. Sakura stares, fascinated. She shuffles closer, barely making a sound. His chakra twitches, and she holds her breath. Nothing happens. She gets to the branch next to his, and peers at the book’s cover. It’s got a lady on it. She looks happy.

Sakura tilts her head, and feels the man wake up all at once. His chakra roils uneasily. He makes no outward sign of having woken up. He hasn’t moved once.

But she knows he’s awake.

“You shouldn’t sleep in trees, mister.” Sakura says earnestly. The man still doesn’t move. “You might fall out and hit your head.”

Nothing. Just the leaves rustling in the wind and the faint sound of Naruto’s frustrated grunts from one tree over.

“I know you’re faking.” Sakura huffs.

He’s ignoring her.

Well, she might as well take the opportunity to find out what his book is about. She leans in closer, scrutinising the cover.

“Is that lady naked?”

The man shoots upright in less than a second. The book is gone. She can’t even see where he put it. He’s wearing a mask, but not like Genma’s. Just a plain black mask covering everything but one eye.

“Saaaakura-chaaaaan!” Naruto calls up, “I’m a pretty princess this time!”
Sakura giggles. The man in front of her freezes very subtly at the sound of Naruto’s voice. His chakra seems restless. Curious, she probes further, like she did when she tried to sense Ino’s family through walls. She hits something that feels like a bottomless well – grief – then he stiffens even further and before she knows it –
– he’s gone.

She realises something.

*Kakashi-sensei.*

***

Hi, it’s me.

I’m so tired. I’ve got to stop writing in the middle of the night!!

It is only midnight. I’m getting old.

I don’t think anyone guessed that the ANBU from the first chapter was Genma, but I think the only two clues were that he’s listed in the character tags and that Sakura sees him with a ‘needle’ in his mouth (a senbon, but baby Saku doesn’t know that).

Kakashi is one of my favourite characters, but I’m not a massive fan of his teaching style. It seems like Sarutobi made him Team Seven’s sensei for the symmetry of having a former Team Seven student become the new one’s teacher. And I guess because he and Sasuke had the last two and a half Sharingan between them. Besides Danzo, I guess. (Who I know almost nothing about tbh even though I know he’s apparently super important and maybe has an arm full of eyes?? But who doesn’t, at this point) Kakashi favoured Sasuke even though he didn’t seem to like him? Sakura seemed to be his favourite student, even though he taught her diddly squat. Maybe that’s why?

Kakashi’s eighteen at this point, and still ANBU, but hey. Even they have breaks. And what does he do when he’s not mournfully touching up the memorial stone? Sleeping in trees, of course.

Kabuto might be a spy, but baby Saku’s adorable. Nothing can defeat the power of cute. ‘lil Saku could probably redeem Orochimaru by crying on him. She’s crying a lot in this fic but tbh she’s four, so she doesn’t tend to have the best control of her own face. She’ll get there. She’s already got Shisui and Genma wrapped ’round her little finger.

Can I mention how hard it is to write an eleven-year-old ninja prodigy? Because I kept forgetting Shisui is literally a child.

I named the nurse Kuronuma after one of my favourite anime characters. Five gold stars if you figure out which one without looking it up! (I will know if you do, and you will only get four and a half gold stars)

The response to this fic has been insane. Bonkers. You guys are the best. I’m very fond of you all.

Naruto is the prettiest princess.

**Quick poll for fun:** Who are your top three Naruto characters?

Mine’s probably Naruto, Sakura and Lee. Gotta love the underdogs, ‘cause God knows no one else will.
His skin is ashen in death. She’s seen countless bodies, some with soft, relaxed features, as if asleep or at peace, and others with frozen terror etched on their faces. Naruto doesn’t look like he’s sleeping.

Sakura is writing down her latest dream, trying not to let her tears stain the paper, when she hears the noise.

A rattle of rocks against her window.

Some dormant part of Sakura stirs slightly, and she has to ignore the urge to grab the kunai she’s not carrying. Her parents are asleep, and she should be too, but she can’t shake the feeling of sleep being a luxury she cannot afford.

She goes to her window, pulling back the curtain just enough to cautiously peek through. For a moment, she only sees the horizon blacked out by endless rows of trees and houses cast in shadow, then she looks down and sees the little boy who’s growing up just to die.

Naruto jumps up and down when she spots him, waving his arms over his head. His grin is radiant even in the dim light of the moon. It’s a hot night with no wind, unusual for Konoha, and his shirt is sticking to him.

Sakura stares at him. He’s so incongruous standing in her front garden that it takes her a few seconds to realise he’s not a ghost risen from her thoughts. She hurriedly opens her window. Her mother had left it open after tucking her in for the night, and visions of black-clad enemies pouring in through the hole in the house’s defences wouldn’t leave her until she closed it again. She could cope with the heat.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto whisper-shouts from below, his hands cupped around his mouth, “Can you come out to play?”

Sakura has long since made the conclusion that the masked shinobi are following Naruto, for some reason. Hopefully not to hurt him, but she’s never dreamed about the Masks and can’t say for sure that they’re allies. She doesn’t like the thought of them hiding in the dark, watching Naruto walk the streets at night.

“Sure!” She whispers back, glad it’s not windy for once so she doesn’t have to raise her voice and risk waking her parents.

She doesn’t hesitate before stepping out of her window and onto the roof below. Her feet slip a little, but she remembers running up the tree and how she had funneled chakra through her body and down to the soles of her feet, and tries it out now.

Tiles crack under feet and she gasps, wobbling dangerously. Leaves rustle from a nearby tree. Sakura glues her feet down properly and steadies her stance. She doesn’t look at the tree. There’s still no wind tonight.

“Are you okay, Sakura-chan?!” Naruto calls, forgetting to whisper. Sakura makes huge shushing motions with her arms and nearly loses her balance again. She makes it to the edge of the roof and sits down, legs dangling. The distance between her and the ground seems insurmountable.

“How do I get down?” Sakura asks, trying to keep the panic from her voice.
“I’ll catch you!” Naruto says brightly, holding his arms up as if she’s about to leap into them any second.

Sakura remembers a time when she could vault over huge obstacles and hit the ground running like it was nothing. Sometimes she left craters when she landed.

This time when she drops to the ground it stays hard and unforgiving and she half-rolls into a heap, pain flaring in her ankles. Naruto gasps her name and falls to his knees next to her –

(“No, no, Sakura-chan, please... I can’t do this without you.” A voice pleading in her ear. At this point, the chakra flooding through her injuries is pure instinct, she can’t focus on anything beyond the blood on her hands. It isn’t hers.)

Naruto helps her to her feet, his worried eyes glinting with tears. “I’m sorry, Sakura-chan! I should’ve caught you!”

For once, Sakura isn’t crying. She manages a comforting smile for Naruto, ignoring the pain throbbing through her feet, little aftershocks from the impact. “It’s okay, Naruto. I shouldn’t have jumped. What did you want to play?”

Naruto fidgets, the tears gone as fast they came. “Uhh... guess we can’t play Monsters... too loud. And Hide and Seek’s no fun with just two playing... We climbed trees already today, so...”

*He didn’t come to play at all, did he, Sakura thinks, he just doesn’t want to be alone.*

“Where are you supposed to be right now?” Sakura asks, trying not to sound like her mother.

“The orphanage.” Naruto mumbles, shuffling his feet.

He was always at the park, all day every day. There was never anyone with him. No one to stop mean men from hurting him. No parents to love him.

“Do you not like it there?” Sakura asks, heart beating faster.

“Not really. Everybody gets adopted, so they line us up when people come. We have to be all clean and standing up straight. And they come and – and – they never even... I always do everything right. I clean really hard, even behind my ears, I do it ‘til it really hurts and it’s all red and there’s no dirt, there’s *not*, and I stand up the straightest – ‘cause I’m the tallest one – and I wait every time but they... they never even *look* at me. And Kaede-baa-chan just says it’s ‘cause I didn’t clean right. Or stand up straight enough. Everyone else gets to go, even the babies who can’t even clean themselves or stand up at *all* and it’s not fair!” Naruto’s red in the face by the end of his speech, chest rising and falling rapidly. As angry as he sounds, Sakura knows he’s just hurt because his chakra feels like an open wound, ready to gush out at any moment.

“No, it’s not fair.” Sakura says quietly. It isn’t fair that Sakura has two parents who love her very much when Naruto doesn’t even have one. No aunts or uncles, grandmothers or grandparents. Not even any cousins. Sakura would give them to him if she could.

Naruto’s lip wobbles. Sakura pulls him into a hug, patting his back the way her mother always does when she’s upset. Maybe she can be more than his best friend. Someone to pat his back and wipe his tears. Someone to come to when he’s feeling lonely. A safe space she makes just for him. Not a mother, but –

“Naruto, do you want me to be your sister?” Sakura asks, rubbing his back gently. She remembers thinking this about Naruto once, that he was her family and she was his. They were that once.
Maybe they could be again.

Naruto pulls back and stares at her, eyes wide. “Huh?”

“I’ll leave my house and you leave your orphanage, and we’ll build a treehouse in the park and live there.” Sakura explains. She can come back for supplies from her house after Shisui’s taught her to be sneaky, and this way she can keep a close eye on Naruto and make sure nothing happens to him. “When we’re older we’ll go to the Academy with Ino and become shinobi. They get paid for missions, so we’d do a lot and get money for a house. What do you think?”

Naruto is staring at her, his mouth hanging open. “Sa-Sakura-chan – I – you can’t! You’ve already got a house and a family, so you can’t! You shouldn’t throw that away for nothing, Sakura-chan.”

“It’s not nothing!” Sakura says fiercely, “It’s you! I wouldn’t be throwing anything away, I’d be getting a brother and that would be the best thing ever, so there!”

Naruto’s gaze is searching, his eyes boring into hers. She tries to radiate how sincere she is and how much she wants this.

“We – we could get a dog!” Sakura tries, “A stray! It would live in the treehouse and we could play fetch in the park!”

Naruto almost smiles, shaking his head.

“I could cook dinner! We could have whatever you wanted every day! I’m good at cooking, my mother says – ” Sakura shuts her mouth, quick, but she can’t take the word back.

“Sakura-chan… I don’t want you to live in a treehouse. I want you to live in your house. You should be in bed, all warm and tucked up. With a proper dog and toys and blankets. I – I wish you were my sister. But you’re not. So you’ve got to go home. Like you’re s’posed to.” Naruto says gently, putting his hands on her shoulders.

“Like I’m supposed to?” Sakura glares at him, “I don’t have to do anything. I’m a monster, remember? Just like you! I can do what I want, and what I want is to be your family!”

(“I could be your family! Please. I’d make sure you were happy every day. If you were to stay with me, you would have no regrets, I swear… I would do anything for you! Please… just stay with me…”) 

Someone is going to leave her and it’s going to break her heart. Even now, she can feel a cold ache in her chest, something that feels both familiar and unfamiliar. She would lie awake at night, her chest weighed down by a single name.

What was it?

Naruto’s touch startles her. He’s wiping away a tear she didn’t know was falling. She swore she wouldn’t cry.


“And get a dog?” Sakura sniffs.

Naruto takes her hand.

“Sure.”
The walk to the park is strange at night. The leaves rarely rustle, the lack of wind leaving the village hushed. It seems as though everyone is asleep. Except for her and Naruto and the Masks trailing behind.

Sakura’s eyes are sore. She hates how often she feels this way, how familiar she is with the sting of tears. She’s such a baby. Even with her loving mother and father, her big warm house and all of her friends, she still wastes time crying over things she can change. She has to be stronger.

“Hmm… Sakura-chan. Sakura… nee-chan? Sakura-nee? Hmm…” Naruto wonders out loud, tapping his chin with his free hand, the other swinging in Sakura’s grip.

“You can call me whatever you want.” Sakura promises.

“Hmm… then, how ‘bout Saku-baka!” Naruto cracks up, laughing at his own stupid joke.

“Ino-chan calls you Naru-baka already.” Sakura points out sweetly.

Naruto deflates a little, “Oh yeah. She’s cool, isn’t she? I bet she’s gonna be really good at being a ninja. She’s gonna have to work hard to be better than me, though!” He puffs out his chest proudly.

“She’s the coolest,” Sakura agrees, “She can help us with our mission, you know. We’re gonna keep you out of the orphanage and we’ll need someone smart for that.”

“We’ve already got you.” Naruto shrugs.

Sakura blushes, shaking her head, “Ino-chan’s smarter than me.”

Naruto makes a rude noise, “Yeah, right!”

“She is! Anyway, we’re gonna need supplies. Once we build the treehouse, I’ll get my toothbrush and the spare from hom – uh, from the house – and I’ll get you some clothes. Don’t make that face, it’s not all dresses! I’ll get you some pyjamas, and some crayons and paper and some books so we can tell each other stories.”

Naruto is quiet for a while. When he speaks, he sounds pensive, “Stories?”

“Yeah! I know a lot, ‘cause my – um, I go to the library all the time.”

Naruto wrinkles his nose, “Boring.”

“No, it’s not! There’s a world in every book, you know.” Sakura lectures him, barely noticing as they turn into the park and there’s just a bare stretch of unoccupied grass ahead of them.

“Is there?”

“Uh-huh. Sometimes it’s a whole world underwater, and everyone breathes out bubbles and swims like fish. They wear shells in their hair and as jewellery, and they sparkle in the sun that comes down through the sea. The sunlight makes a pattern on everything, like when it goes through leaves and makes shapes on the ground. It’s like gold is painted over the whole city – ”

Naruto looks captivated, “Gold?”

“Yeah, everywhere, and it’s a big city. People have got huge fish tied up to their fences like dogs, ‘cause they keep them as pets, and ride them when they get tired. When it’s night, like this, the sun
goes away and then it’s moonlight that shines down on the city, all painted in silver and shimmering like a pearl. Everybody goes to bed and you can see bubbles coming out of the windows where they’re snoring.”

Naruto laughs. “Books aren’t like that, Sakura-nee.”

“They are too,” Sakura grins, “It’s like hundreds of worlds that you can visit whenever you want and if you close your eyes and think about them, you’ll be there.”

Naruto sits under a tree, pulling Sakura down next to him very gently. He closes his eyes. “I can’t see it, Sakura-nee.”

“It’s night time, so remember it’s dark. There’s silver-painted windows and roofs. The roads are made of sand. Kids make sculptures out of them all the time. You’d have fun making rude shapes all day. There’s no wind, just a constant flow of water. It sounds almost like the wind rustling through the leaves, but softer. Fish swim in through windows and out through doors. They’re like birds flying around in the sky. The fish all have really pretty scales, shimmering with a thousand colours. The city’s even prettier. You’d love it there, Naruto.”

Sakura turns to smile at Naruto. He’s fast asleep, his head resting on the tree. His mouth is open and he’s softly snoring.

Sakura looks up at the branches above them. She sighs. She doesn’t know how to build a treehouse, but she may as well get started while Naruto rests.

A rustle makes her jump to her feet, scanning the darkness around them. One of the Masks is standing right in front of her. She had no idea they weren’t alone. Her heart thuds in her chest.

“Time to go home, Sakura-san.” The masked figure says quietly.

“No.” Sakura clenches her fists.

“It’d be kinder this way.” The figure sounds masculine. His mask has a snout, maybe a dog or a horse.

“What, leaving him to wake up alone?”

“We’ll take him home.” He says, his voice so faint she has to strain to hear it.

“That place is not his home! They don’t care about him there, I do! It’s not fair!” Sakura stares at him imploringly, silently begging him to understand. She needs Naruto and he needs her. She’s going to get strong and protect him and he’s going to be a real Kage. No one will ever be mean to him again.

“Who said anything about fair? You can only make do with what you’ve got, Sakura-san. Naruto’s stronger than you think. He may not have much, but you can be sure he’ll do everything he can with what he has.” The Mask doesn’t move an inch, his voice is slow and languorous.

“He’s just a boy. He needs a family. I – ”

(“I can be your family!”)

“It’s time to go home.” The Mask says, a little firmer this time.

Sakura bristles, ready to step forward and give him a piece of her mind.

“It’s okay, Sakura-nee.” Naruto says sleepily. Sakura jumps, whirling around to look at him. He’s
rubbing his eyes and yawning. “It’s gonna be fine. Go home. We can play in the park another day.”

“We weren’t playing, Naruto! This is serious! I’m not gonna leave you alone!” Sakura yells.

In a flash, she’s in the air, tucked under the Mask’s arm. She’s too scared to scream. She just clutches his arm, dangling above Naruto.

“It’s okay, Sakura-nee,” Naruto says kindly, “He won’t hurt you. All the mask guys are really nice to me. I think they’re the old man’s friends. You can go home now.”

You can be normal. He said that once, when she was too scared of looking weird to join in. Why does she have so much when he has nothing?

“Let go of me! Who are you?! Why are you even doing this – just let go! – why do you even care? We could be happy, I can look after Naruto! Someone has to!” She feels the man flinch, ever so slightly.

“It was just a game, Sakura-nee.” Naruto gives her a brave smile. It looks fractured, all wrong on his face. Like Shisui when he frowns. “You must’ve known we couldn’t play pretend forever.”

“I wasn’t playing.” Sakura whispers.

“I know. Thanks, Sakura-nee!” Naruto grins. It looks better now. “But I’ll be just fine, you’ll see! When I’m Hokage, I’ll buy us a huuuuggge house and we’ll get a pond and we’ll have some of those fish you were talking about, okay? It’ll be great!”

Sakura reaches out for Naruto. She should never have let go of his hand.

“Night, kid. He’ll be fine.” The Mask says, his voice rumbling through his body into hers.

The last thing she sees is Naruto’s smile fading into darkness.

(“Please wake up, Naruto, I need you to wake up… I can’t do this without you.”)

xxxxxxx

She wakes up, safely tucked in her own bed, and utterly furious.

Who are the Masks? Why has she never dreamed about them? And why do they follow Naruto everywhere? They stepped in when she was going to get hurt, but they let the man spit in Naruto’s face in the first place, and in the dream when she didn’t help out, they did nothing. Naruto just left the park without a word.

Whoever they are, they’re not his family.

Shisui said they could play shinobi today, if she could get out of the house. He’d stressed that she should definitely get her parents’ permission first, but if they said no, well… then she could practice being sneaky.

First, she should check the park, see if Naruto’s there. If he isn’t, she’ll just have to beat every bush in the village until she finds one with a Mask in it.

Her mother accepts her story about playing with Ino and her other friends with a happy smile. She is so thrilled that Sakura has real friends. Sakura hopes she never finds out that they’re all monsters.

The walk to the park feels funny after the night she spent there. There’s people everywhere, getting
in the way and trying to ask her where her parents are. If she was a proper shinobi with a hitai-ate, no one would treat her like a little kid.

She looks to the swings first, waiting to hear the traditional ‘Sakura-chan!’ Nothing. He’s not there. And she guesses he’s ‘Sakura-nee,’ now. If he still wants her to be.

She looks around the park, trying to keep her worry off her face. She doesn’t want to look like some lost child and have all the parents swarm her. But it’s hard not to look concerned when Naruto doesn’t appear to be anywhere.

Maybe he climbed a tree? But there’s so many… maybe she could try sensing his chakra? But Kakashi had definitely reacted when he felt her searching his chakra. The last thing she wants is to throw away Shisui’s advice of blending in by poking everyone in the park’s chakra.


Sakura turns to see a woman smiling at her. She’s beautiful, with very pale skin and long, black hair reaching her waist. She’s sitting on a blanket, with a picnic spread in front of her.

“You look like Shisui-kun.” Sakura says stupidly.

The woman raises her eyebrows, “Oh? Are you a friend of his?”

“Yes,” Sakura says, “But he’s not my best friend. I can’t find him. He’s always in the park but I don’t see him.”

“What’s your best friend’s name? What does he look like?”

“His name is Naruto and he’s tanned and has blonde hair and a big smile, with whiskers that go like,” Sakura demonstrates, splaying her fingers along her cheeks, “And he’s got blue eyes and he likes the swings.”

“I see,” The woman says. Her smile looks very tender, “Would you like some help looking for him? I’ve come here with my children, but they’re off playing somewhere. Perhaps they’re with your friend.”

“No,” Sakura shakes her head, “They wouldn’t play with Naruto. Nobody does.”

The woman’s smile doesn’t change, but Sakura thinks there’s something sad about her, sitting alone with a picnic set for three.

“Will you help me, please?” Sakura asks, thinking the lady might just want company, “My name is Haruno Sakura and my parents are – ”

“I know your parents,” The lady laughs, covering her mouth delicately, “Hello, Sakura-chan. I am Uchiha Mikoto.”

“Uchiha like Shisui-kun!” Sakura says.

“Just like Shisui,” Mikoto agrees, “He’s a cousin, of sorts. It’s nice to see he’s acting his age, making friends and having fun, not just focusing on his job. I bet you’re a very good influence on him.”

Sakura beams up at her. She’s so nice and pretty… Sakura wants to be like her when she grows up.

“Oh! Here’s one of my sons, now.” Mikoto stands up and waves.
A little boy with spiky black hair is running over. Sakura watches with a faint smile and then –

“Sasuke!” Mikoto calls.

And.

Sakura’s –

No.

(“Sasuke-kun!” She sings out, and sees his shoulders droop at the sight of her approach. Doesn’t he want to see her?)

(“Annoying.” He says, that one horrible word packed with more emotion than Sakura has ever heard from him. Loathing.)

(“Sakura – You’re heavy.” He’s insulting her but she doesn’t care because that’s how she knows this isn’t an illusion. Sasuke is alive!)

(“Sakura… Who did that to you?” His voice sounds just like that vile chakra feels, coated in poison and brimming with hate and even though she’s scared out of her mind, there’s one traitorous part of her that feels happy because doesn’t this mean he cares?)

(“Do you know what I want to do?” Sasuke asks, his dark eyes looking right at her for once. Glued to her. She has his complete attention now. Good, she thinks, the weight of the kunai at her hip a solid reminder of her burden, let him see me. “I don’t care! I’ll follow any order you give me!” She says. She can hardly believe that he’s here, looking right at her.)

(“Sakura.” He’s behind her. She didn’t even see him move. What is he going to do to her? He hates her. He always has. And then… “Thank you.”)

(Naruto doesn’t look like he’s sleeping.)

“Sakura-chan?” Mikoto says, her voice very far away.

Sakura is shaking all over.

“Is she okay, okaa-san?”

That voice.

His name was Uchiha Sasuke.

She loved him more than life itself.

She can’t afford to this time.

***

HI THERE I UPDATED

God, what a sad chapter. You’ll be happy to know I have some fluff and stuff planned out. Plus some comedy, which I will find hilarious because I happen to have the same sense of humour as myself.

Isn’t Naruto a sweetheart?
I hope you guys liked this :D Sasuke’s intro is the most dramatic, because he’s the most dramatic dude in the whole show, always talking about being an avenger and how he’s just too cool for friendship and whoa-ho-gotta-get-a-snake-bro. I was the biggest Sasusaku fan when I was a kiddywink. Like, ten years ago. I loved it passionately and tbff, I still like Part 1 Sasusaku, when it’s all subtle stuff and subtext and Sasuke’s not a huge doucecanoe, but you know. Things change. When he showed up with a massive ribbon tied to his butt I started to change my mind about him.

I keep. Using the ANBU. And then realising. There’s no real way to introduce who it is because they wear masks for a reason. Oh, well. Say hello to Masked Man # 3, everyone.

Mikoto seems nice. I’m digging deep for a personality on this one that’s more than ‘mother,’ and ‘reason for avenging.’ Fanon seems to say she was a good mother, the best she could be considering the circumstances, so I’m gonna swing that way too.

I truly did intend for Sakura to train with Shisui in this chapter, but her almost running away with Naruto took up way more space than intended! Oh well. They’ll have to train in the next chapter.

I’m still so frustrated with the clusterfuck that is Naruto’s childhood. Why. Why leave him alone? Why let everyone treat him like shit? Even from a calculating, rational point of view it doesn’t make sense – if you want to raise human weapons, either go the Winter Soldier route and depersonalise them to the extent that they depend only on you, oorrerrr treat them well, love them, earn their respect and loyalty. Naruto had zero reasons to be loyal to Konoha as a kid. If Iruka hadn’t taken that humongous shuriken to the back, then… there might have been trouble.

By the way, is Sakura from a teeny-tiny three-person clan? If not, why does she have a clan symbol? (the white circle thingamajig.) Come on, Kishi. Sakura deserves a cool backstory!

Also, I keep hearing that Sakura’s element is earth, so I googled extensively and found… zero canon stuff, because why would Kishi care about giving Sakura a single defining combat trait when he could be giving Sasuke wings and Naruto rainbows for eyes. She’s a shinobi, not a child bride waiting for Sasuke to come back for her, Kishi!! He can revive his clan with anyone! So, is Sakura earth? I know she punches the earth all the time. Maybe my google fu has finally failed me.

**Quick poll for fun:** If you lived in the Naruto world, what kind of person would you be?

I would be dead. Probably. I’m super not great at deception or seeing through deception. Though I’m surprisingly feisty in a fight. I want to say I’d like to be a Hyuuga, but their whole clan politics.. yuck. Maybe an Inuzuka? I’d get my own dog. And some bitching face tats. And some killer fangs.
Chapter 5

Mikoto’s worried face slowly comes into view, sharpening into focus as Sakura blinks. Tears fall down her face. She feels fuzzy. Distant. Why was she crying? Mikoto’s mouth is moving. She must be talking. Sakura tries to pay attention, but her mind slides away from the concerned words. What’s happening?

There’s a boy peering over Mikoto’s shoulder. Uchiha Sasuke. Sakura studies his baby face with puzzled interest. This is the one who will break her heart? He’s just a boy. The same age as Naruto. And Sakura, she guesses, though she never really feels four anymore. Sasuke’s head is tilted like a curious puppy.

Spots of colour dance in Sakura’s vision. Ah, she thinks drowsily, the blood vessels in the eyes... often the first to... to what? Sasuke’s face gives her a warm, fluttery feeling for a pleasant moment, then –

(“Ah, is that Sakura?” He says. She hasn’t heard his voice in years. It has deepened. Changed beyond recognition.)

Sakura opens her eyes and finds herself being supported by Mikoto, the older woman’s arms wrapped around her. Sakura’s chin is digging into Mikoto’s shoulder. Sasuke looks worried too, now. I must have passed out, Sakura thinks. How horrible – there was no memory of falling, just a blank space where her memory should be. One minute she was standing, the next she was kneeling on the ground, her limbs uselessly heavy.

“– es, fetch a medic, please. Right away.” Mikoto’s voice is calm, right next to Sakura’s ear. It’s soothing. A special kind of parental power, the ability to always sound comfortingly in control. Sakura’s own mother is a master at it.

“I’m very sorry for the trouble,” Sakura says politely, pulling out of Mikoto’s slack grip, “I didn’t mean to worry you. Goodbye!”

“Wait, Sakura-chan, you need – ”

Sakura bolts.

She looks behind her as she goes and sees Mikoto pull Sasuke back, who had evidently planned to chase her. She gulps and speeds up. The last thing she wants is to be caught by that boy.

Being four has its advantages sometimes. She’s short enough that she can weave around or through the legs of anyone in the way, and she quickly races through a crowd without slowing down, hoping Mikoto will be too polite to push through if she’s following.

There are times when Sakura feels like an entirely different person. Every time she dreams, she does so from her older self’s perspective. She experiences events as the older Sakura, and thinks the same thoughts, feels the same feelings. From the sudden influx of dreams about Sasuke, Sakura now knows that he is her older self’s biggest weakness. She can either ignore Sasuke completely and hope cutting him out doesn’t change things beyond recognition, or she can try to befriend him even better than she did in her dreams, so he never wants to leave her.

The first seems like the most rational choice.

As she runs through the streets of Konoha, she spots a teenager bending over, his hands on his
knees, coughing hard. He has bags under his eyes and his cough sounds nasty. Sakura has a flash of regret, what if I’d done something, what a waste.

She dodges him neatly as he makes a half-hearted grab at her – she may have raised something of a ruckus, barrelling through the crowd as she did – and files away the thoughts in her mind. So, there’s a sickly-looking teen she regretted not doing something about. One more thing to change.

She can do it.

If she avoids Sasuke, she won’t have to worry about her heart getting broken even if he does leave. It doesn’t matter that she can feel how much she loved him. She’s got more important stuff to do.

Shisui had told her to meet him in a disused training field near the Nara Forest. Sakura runs the whole way there like she was being chased by a pack of wild dogs.

Shisui is idly spinning a kunai on his finger when she arrives. “Firefly, I thought you’d never show up. I’ve warded this field with seals around the perimeter, so I’ll know if anyone approaches. We should be safe to practice without interference.”

Sakura sniffs hard and scrubs her face clean of all the residual tears, wanting to look tough since they were going to be playing shinobi.

Shisui’s head shoots up like a shark that’s scented blood in the water. “Please tell me I don’t have to fight someone today, Firefly. I got in enough trouble for scaring the hell out of three different Kenjis until I found the right one. Apparently fruit baskets aren’t enough of an apology when you accidentally on purpose give someone a heart attack. Who knew?”

“Why would you have to fight anyone?” Sakura asks.

“Because you’ve been crying,” Shisui points at her red eyes, “So, what happened? Did you fall over? Do I have to fight the ground?”

Sakura clamps her mouth shut, eyes wide.

Shisui chuckles at the sight of her, “Okay, it’s safe to assume you want to keep it a secret. We have got to work on your tells, Firefly.”

Sakura gives a relieved sigh. They don’t have to talk about it. She doesn’t have to remember those horrible dreams with Sasuke.

“Oh no, don’t get me wrong. You’re still going to tell me what happened, or I will leave you dangling from a trap in the middle of the market.” Shisui grins.

Sakura stares at him, betrayed. “Someone would help me down.” She grumbles.

“Are you willing to take that risk?”

She shakes her head, pouting. Shisui could be really mean sometimes. “I ran into a boy at the park and it hurt.” She says. There. Technically true, every bit of it.

Shisui is raising an eyebrow. “Better. But still not the whole truth.”

Sakura thinks, hard. She’s not told anyone about the dreams yet because she doesn’t know what they are. She’s been assuming they’re visions of what’s going to happen, but what if they’re glimpses into another world, or some kind of long-term genjutsu or even hallucinations? Whatever they are, she’s
sure she could get in trouble for having them.

She has to tell Shisui something that’s true enough that he believes it without question. Something so embarrassing or horrible so he wouldn’t question why she hadn’t wanted to tell him. Something like –

“I used to like him!” Sakura blurts out, her face instantly turning red.

Shisui looks positively gleeful, “Oh, really? And who is the little heartbreaker?”

Sakura flinches. *How did I ever forget him?* Or more like: *Did I ever really know him?*

“His name is Sasuke.” She mumbles, eyes on the ground.

Shisui lets out a squawk, startling her into looking up. “No! No way! Little baby Sasu-chan? Were you one of the little girls that followed him everywhere? Wow, Firefly-chaaan,” He sings out, “You’re advanced in *every* area, hm? Ooh, do you want me to introduce you two?”

“No!” Sakura protests, clutching her arms. She takes a step back, noting how Shisui’s sharp eyes catch the movement.

His mood considerably dampened, Shisui kneels down to meet her eyes, his voice gentle as he asks, “Why not? You don’t like him anymore?”

“No. I *used* to. But boys are silly and I don’t like them. I have to get stronger, just like you said.”

Shisui tilts his head. His chakra is very sad. “No time for boys? None at all? That’s a lonely life, Firefly. You could always train up to chunin, take a position in the village and maybe settle down with someone nice. You could work in the hospital *now* at the rate you’re going. You don’t have to be alone if you don’t want to be.”

Sakura hides her hands behind her back, mindful of how he’s watching her every move. Her fingers curl into fists against her back. She tugs at her shirt, trying to ground herself. There’s a restless energy building inside her.

(“I love you more than anything in the world!” She shouts, not caring how loud she’s being. To her surprise, Sasuke doesn’t make a move to shut her up, even though it could get him caught. He just silently stands there, listening as her heart spills out and tries to reach him.)

“I’m not alone. I have friends. I have the Monsters and you and Genma-san. I don’t need a boy.”

She watches him mouth ‘*monsters*?’ to himself, an amused look flitting across his face before the seriousness of the conversation chases it away. He reaches out and ruffles her hair. “I guess you are a little young to be talking about settling down. I just… be open to the possibility, okay? I’m not doing this just to make another child soldier or fodder to feed the enemy. This might be about survival, Firefly, but the point of survival is to *live.* You need to find meaning in life, a reason to wake up every morning beyond the next mission. Many people find meaning in the people around them. It’s okay if you don’t, but make sure you find something to keep you going.”

Sakura combs through her hair with her fingers, glowering at him for messing it up. He chuckles in response, then pulls out a bag from nowhere.

“Look what I’ve got!” Shisui declares, “Weapons! Yay! How exciting are these?”

He tips the bag over on the grass and its contents spill out: three rubber kunai, a blunted shuriken and
some paper balls – bombs, her mind supplies – which are probably as harmless as they look.

Sakura scowls. “Toys?”

“Weapons,” He stresses, “Because you are a very small child and if you hurt yourself with a kunai I supplied, I may have to fall on it, because the hospital staff hate me now they think I barbecue brats in my spare time. Hence, these nice, safe weapons that mimic the real deal as authentically as I could find in the twenty minutes I spent looking in the market.”

“Toys,” Sakura says, “Toys that I already own.”

Shisui looks thrown for a moment, but soon recovers, “Well, I bet you don’t have this!”

He picks up one of the paper bombs and cracks it open. Inside are hundreds of tiny pink petals that spill out and lazily float to the ground. Sakura holds her hands out and catches some, unable to hold back a smile of real pleasure at the sight.

“Cherry bombs,” Shisui says in a salesman-like voice, “For the future kunoichi at home. I didn’t know how many you’d want so I bought twelve.”

“Thank you, Shisui-kun,” Sakura says politely, giving him a dazzling smile, “That’s very thoughtful of you.”

“With manners like that, you’re practically an Uchiha already.” Shisui observes.

“What?”

“Nothing! Except that if you marry Sasuke then we’ll be cousins! But that’s a plan for the future. Like… twenty years in the future. Maybe longer. You know what, you were right, dating’s a bad idea. Stay a cute little kid forever, okay?”

“I would have to die young to do that.” Sakura points out.

Shisui’s face falls. “Well hello, Miss Spoilsport. Why are all the baby geniuses so gloomy? We’ve already established that you’re not gonna die young. Not with my amazing training, anyway. Which we should probably get back to. If you’re done playing with your toys.”

Sakura stops messing with the petals and stands up straight, ready for action.

Shisui pulls yet another bag out of nowhere. This one contains weights, each one with different words scrawled on them in thick, black ink. ENDURANCE. STRENGTH. DETERMINATION. They’re in all the colours of the rainbow, for some reason. Sakura wracks her brain, but can’t remember anything about weights besides –

(Lee grins, so confident and bold, and her heart sinks. The boy from Suna is so evil and Lee is too kind to be ripped apart or beaten bloody. She wishes she could intervene, save him like he saved her, but then he’s dropping his leg weights and the resulting explosion shocks her into silence. She forgets her concern completely. Who knew Rock Lee was so incredible?)

“Here you go,” Shisui says, strapping some of the brightly-coloured weights to her wrists and ankles, “I got the lightest possible option. You’re welcome.”

Sakura tests the added weight, lifting her legs and rotating her arms. Overall the difference is barely noticeable. “What’s the point in using these? They’re too light, Shisui-kun.” Whoever Rock Lee was, his weights were closer to mountains. Hers are practically pebbles.
Shisui’s smile widens. “Oh, you’ll see. Run the length of the field and back, please.”

Sakura looks across the field. The edge is marked by trees and the seals Shisui slapped down. It looks very far away.

“I’m not going to ask again, Firefly.”

Sakura takes a deep breath and runs. She runs as she normally would, limbs floppy and with little thought for her momentum or balance. She nearly keels over at one point, but pretty soon the trees ahead get closer and closer and her chakra sings out a warning. She just misses one of Shisui’s seals and wastes time avoiding it.

She stops, waves at Shisui, then starts running back to him.

Shisui’s face is a picture. He looks poleaxed. “Wow. We’ve found something you’re not automatically amazing at. I don’t know if I’m happy or disappointed. For my ego, let’s go with happy. I was expecting you to blaze across Konoha, land in Suna, then long-jump all the way back home. First off, pay attention to how you run. Don’t just shoot off wobbling into the horizon. Keep your head up. Don’t look at your feet. That’s a great way to run into a tree. Or worse, an enemy. Shoulders down and relaxed, not hunched over and tense. Don’t just wave your hands around as you run – keep them firm, but not tight. When you swing your arms, swing them forward so the momentum will propel you forward. Don’t swing them across your body. Don’t bend forward so much or you’ll end up landing on your head. Lean your body forward slightly. Hips should be stable and facing forward, just like your arms and your head. Don’t stick your butt out unless you want to waddle like a duck. Bend your knees slightly when you land, don’t lift them too high or else you’ll bounce everywhere and waste your stamina. And remember, you want your footsteps to be light and quiet. Stealthy. Not like war drums thundering towards the enemy. Breathe sloooowly. In and out. Not rapid in-and-out-in-and-out like a dog, okay? Work on all of that and then maybe we can start working on your speed.”

Sakura stares at him, daunted.

Shisui laughs, “Don’t worry. I know it seems like a lot, but learning the basics early and learning them right is important. It’ll affect the rest of your career. Anything you build on a weak foundation is sure to crumble. Don’t forget that. Now. Go run the length of the field five times.”

“Five?” Sakura says, aghast.

“There and back, so more like ten.” Shisui says sweetly.

Sakura pouts and turns, ready to race off to the trees. Shisui heaves a put-upon sigh and pokes her posture into place. Her shoulders are pushed down, her chin is lightly-tapped up and he jabs her stomach back.

“There is a core inside you. Imagine a straight line running through it. It goes from your head to your toes. Everything has to be in line with it. Head up, knees down, and go.”

Sakura charges. The difference is immediate and obvious – she no longer feels like she’s about to topple over or that her legs are running too fast for her top half to keep up. For a moment she feels proud of her progress.

Then Shisui hollers, “STOP STICKING YOUR BUTT OUT, DUCK-FACE!”

Sakura neatly changes course and sprints straight at the annoying older boy, who yelps playfully, holding up his hands in surrender as she rains harmless blows on chest.
After Sakura runs up and down ten times, the weights feel like anchors pulling her down. It’s a fight to keep her posture right, to keep swinging aching arms and lifting feet she’d rather drag. She’s sweating more than she’s ever sweated before.

She feels absolutely disgusting.

(“Being a kunoichi means being beautiful no matter what,” Sakura says to herself, winking at her reflection. “Let the boys play in the mud while I ace every mission, looking perfect every time!” Maybe then, Sasuke-kun would notice her.)

“I did it!” Sakura yells, falling face first at Shisui’s feet.

She’s smeared in dirt, sweat and who knows what else, but she’s beaming. She did it. All by herself. With added difficulty. She can really do this!

“Well done. Now, stop breathing in bugs and sit up,” Shisui says, waiting for her to struggle into a sitting position, “Good. Cross your legs. I want you to reach into that fire in your stomach. You know what I’m talking about, Firefly. Close your eyes and feel your way through your system. Can you feel your chakra? Good. Try stoking the flame gently. Yeah? That’s how you access your chakra. I suspect your chakra control is freakish, considering the fact that you almost performed a katon jutsu – that would’ve totally blown up in your face, by the way – and you actually managed to heal. Freakish. If you can grow your reserves, you’ll stand a much better chance of making it through missions alive.”

Sakura’s breathing has gentled from the harsh panting she’d had during the run. Now she breathes in – the fire dims – and out – the fire surges. She can feel the fire throughout her entire body. The world falls away, Shisui’s voice reduced to a distant murmur, and she’s left with nothing but in and out, the fire growing ever so slightly with every breath.

“– c’mon, wake up. Firefly? Sakura! Wake up!”

In and out.

The fire burns brighter.

In… and… out.

Then, thud! Something hits her squarely in the forehead.

Sakura lets out a strangled gasp, eyes flying open.

Shisui looks unimpressed, tossing a rubber kunai up and down. “Well, that was unsettling. Try not to go so deep. Have you done this before? I mean, I know you’ve accessed chakra before, but have you ever actually meditated?”

Sakura isn’t quite sure. She might have done before, or she might eventually do it. She settles for a half-hearted shrug.

Shisui eyes her. She knows he’s curious about how she can do what she does. She hopes he just assumes she’s yet another gloomy genius, as he’d said. Maybe she is. Does it count if you learn things from dreams instead of books?

“Informative, thank you. Well, I guess that’s enough for today. Unless you feel up for strength
training? That involves a mountain, a goat, and a stick. No? Shame.”

Sakura feels exhausted, right down to her bones.

“Thanks, Shisui-kun.” She smiles, glowing with happiness. She gets the feeling she’s going to be thanking him a lot in the future.

“No problem, Firefly.” He pats her on the head, then fusses with his belt. He produces another bag of toys from nowhere and throws it at her face.

“I’m just testing your reflexes!” He insists, cackling as she tries to chase him, forgetting the weights dragging her down.

Sakura’s walking home when she spots them.

Genma, dressed in normal clothes today, no mask in sight, is walking with Kakashi. Her future sensei. While she felt a great sense of trust from Naruto, she felt pain from her teacher. She hopes it can be different now.

Sakura purposefully walks straight for them. Genma’s lips quirk up at her approach. Kakashi doesn’t seem to notice, his nose stuck in a book even though he’s walking in the street.

“Hatake Kakashi.” Sakura says confrontationally, stopping right in front of him.

He doesn’t look up from his book, moving to walk around without breaking his stride. Genma reaches out and tugs him back, with an air of anticipation as he looks between Sakura and Kakashi.

“Yes.” Kakashi says.

“That’s your name.” She replies, looking him right in the book, rather than the eye, since she wasn’t tall enough to see it.

“I know it is.” Kakashi says tonelessly.

“Well, where’s your face gone?” Sakura asks. Genma doesn’t always wear a mask. His face is right there. But even in her dreams, Kakashi is always wearing a mask.

“It hasn’t gone anywhere.” Kakashi’s book twitches.

“It’s not there.”

“It’s – it’s covered, but it’s still – where are your parents?”

“Where’s your face?”

Genma is shaking with laughter at this point. Kakashi gives a very slight sigh, grabs Sakura by the collar with one hand, and moves to deposit her on the ground out of his way. Sakura clings to his arm like a monkey, dangling a few feet off the ground.

“Tell me where your face is.” Sakura insists, shaking her head to try to dislodge his grip on her collar.

“Look, Genma, it’s a wild beast.” Kakashi says in neutral tones, like someone might say ‘there’s a cloud.’
Genma is laughing too hard to speak.

Sakura’s counting on Kakashi having enough morals to want to avoid hurting her by just shaking her off. Kakashi is obviously going to be one of her precious people, so she needs to make him like her as soon as possible so she can keep an eye on him and keep him safe.

What she didn’t expect was to find herself standing a few feet away before she could even blink.

Kakashi is back to reading – or maybe he never even stopped? – and is starting to walk away.

Sakura runs as fast as she can and just about catches up to his casual stroll. “Kakashi-san!” She shouts, pointing at him as she jogs by his side, “You’re gonna be my friend, you wait and see!”

Genma lets out a helpless giggle, “Sounds like a challenge, Kakashi. Better not tell Gai, or he’ll try to befriend every kid in Konoha.”

Kakashi’s groan is barely audible, yet somehow pointed. “Okay, listen. Little girl. I am not your friend. I do not know you. I’m a busy guy. Shoo.”

“You’re going to like being my friend,” Sakura says conversationally, ignoring her sore muscles to keep up the pace to avoid being left behind, “Both my parents can cook and bake and they’ll make you food if you want. And – ”

Kakashi stops.

“Go. Away.” He says brusquely. Sakura’s mouth shuts at the tone instinctively. “I do not want or need a friend, especially not one that happens to be a toddler. Bother someone else.”

Sakura can’t help it.

She bursts into tears. Loud, heart-breaking sobs that sound like they’re being wrenched from deep within her soul.

(“Sensei, are you okay?” She asks, concerned by the rather helpless way he’s lying on the ground. “Heh, sure. Nothing a few weeks of intensive care won’t fix.” Kakashi reassures her with a joke, his eye curving up into a smile. Nothing calms her quite like her sensei.)

“Oh, now you’ve done it,” Genma mutters, “Saku-tan, please don’t cry… the mean old man will buy you some dango if you stop crying!”

Kakashi huffs, “I’m eighteen.”

“He’s just a horrible, crotchety old man. Don’t take him seriously.”

“B-but, I wanna be his f-friend and he – hic! – just w-wants to read about naked ladies!” Sakura wails.

Kakashi’s book disappears.

“I don’t have friends,” He tells her sternly, “I have acquaintances, the rare few people who don’t make me want to gouge my eyes out – ”

“– You only have one eye.” Sakura sniffs.

“– my eyes out, and you are most definitely not one of those people. Maybe in a few years, you’ll grow up and become tolerable. If that’s the case, look me up and apply for the position of friend
again. You probably won’t get it, but, you know. Points for trying.”

Sakura looks up at him with big, teary eyes. “But I want to be your friend now.”

Kakashi looks down at her, unmoved. “No. Don’t waste your time trying for impossible things.”

As he says it, Sakura feels a change in the energy around her. It’s just the smallest shift in his chakra, and Sakura isn’t even looking for it, but she finds something.

“You made me go to sleep.” Sakura says slowly.

Kakashi hums. “Interesting.”

Quick as a flash, she’s dangling from her collar again, this time on a roof with a much more perilous distance between her and the ground.

Kakashi leans in close, “Now, what made you think that?”

***

I got info for Shisui’s lengthy rant on running here, though I obviously reworded it. >>>>> https://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/c25k/Pages/how-to-run.aspx

Sakura is so so bad at pretending to be average. But to be fair, even canon Sakura was above average, and proudly so. She’s also four now. I have to keep reminding myself that!

Shisui is just a barrel of laughs. I’m loving writing him. To the point where the training sequence was supposed to be one medium-length scene, which ended up being over 2500 words long… my god… I had to end on a mildly dramatic note with Kakashi, rather than the much more dramatic end I’d planned, because I didn’t have room for the preceding scenes! Darn you, Shisui. Also, stop making casual jokes about you committing suicide, you buttbumch. It hurts me to write it.

I’ve read all the stuff on Shisui and his death and, honestly? It was kind of pointless?? So Danzo ambushed him and managed to steal one eye using a forbidden technique that took Shisui by surprise (before this, Shisui was dominating the fight). So, Shisui’s like fuck this I’m out and just high-tails it up to Itachi, where he's like bleeding from his empty eye socket, and then he fucking writes a vaguely incriminating suicide note, throws himself in a river and literally erases himself from existence?? WHY?? Have I been misled?? Because… why didn’t he just go to the Hokage? Like he did with the whole Uchiha Coup? Hi Sarutobi, your crazy former teammate just tried to murder me and steal my eyes for his murder-arm, could you maybe deal with that please? Remember how I warned you about my family’s coup and thus prevented your potential assassination??

I still don’t get the Uchiha Massacre, though I’ve read up on it extensively. I think I might have a plan for how to deal with it, but it might break your hearts. Hmmm… We’ll see.

Thanks everyone for your super-helpful comments!! I now know way more about Mikoto :)

(why does Kishi waste potentially awesome characters just because they don’t have penises, whyyyy)

I’m still not over the fact that Sakura. Becomes. A. Housewife. While Sasuke’s out in the wilderness finding himself on an epic quest of bullshit because why not, and Sakura waits at home with her child like Elizabeth Swan stuck on the island for ten years until Will returns because WHY NOT. There’s nothing wrong with being a housewife, but if your previous profession was 1) smashing boulders with your little finger 2) manually beating someone’s heart for them externally and even 3) being
potentially the second best healer in the world (possibly even the best!!) … then you probably should be off on an epic quest too. Just saying. Ninja have got to have daycare. Leave the salad at home, go smash mountains, my super-strong child.

The idea that Sakura came from a civilian family made so much more sense than her having chuunin parents. Why didn’t they ever mention that maybe training and survival skills are more important than boys and haircare??

**Quick poll for fun:** What was your most favourite and least favourite plot twist in Naruto?

My most favourite plot twist was… no, I don’t have one. I’m just picturing Tsunade scaring the shit out of Orochimaru and Kabuto by smashing that wall. My least favourite plot twist is probably the Tobi-is-Obito-is-Tobi-is-Madara-is-really-Obito-I-swear-this-time stuff that Kishi pulled. That hurt my brain. It still does. When I think about how I have to include Obito in this fic, I just want death. Can’t I cut him out? Please?? I like *Obito*, but not raving lunatic delusional still in love with a dead twelve year old girl Obito.

P.S. People have said that they like my author’s notes. Thank you. They like you too. They’re sorry that they’re so very long.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

A wild Kakashi POV appears!

The pink-haired terror dangles from his fist with a surprising lack of fear.

Kakashi ignores the urge to bare his Sharingan and scan the little demon. She’s a precocious brat, but nothing about her has been insincere or forced so far.

Genma lands behind him, soundless as ever, and if it were anyone else Kakashi might have flinched. He doesn’t trust many assassins, but he does trust Genma. Though, knowing him, Kakashi’s just given him a good reason to knife him in the back. Genma’s great with kids. Any minute longer and he can expect a minor spike of killing intent from the man.

“You should put me down, now,” The little girl says earnestly, eyes wide, “My parents are both chuunin and they say they’ll beat up any bullies who’re bigger than me, and you’re huge.”

Kakashi nearly points out that he’s outranked her parents for the last six years, but that would feel too much like trying to outdo a toddler. “I’m not huge, you’re just tiny.” He says instead, holding her a little higher up to emphasise the height difference. She is not reacting as a normal civilian child should at this point. She should be screaming, crying, pleading for her mother. She looks calm. Maybe even a little annoyed.

Genma’s hand lands on his shoulder and he says very calmly in Kakashi’s ear, “Put the little girl back on the ground or I will use you for target practice. With poisoned senbon.”

“I’m not convinced it is a little girl.” Kakashi drawls, but swings her to safety regardless. Genma can be scary when pressed.

Sakura lands like a cat after he lets go. Her parents must be the demanding type, forcing her to train all day every day. There’s no other way she could stick that landing so soundlessly, without a wobble, unless she had done it over and over again until it became a reflexive reaction.

Kakashi hates that type of parenting. It never works. It creates young prodigies who view killing as a way to impress dear old mum and dad. It’s enough to fracture anyone’s psyche. No wonder the girl’s so bizarre.

“I am too a little girl!” Sakura stamps her foot, glowering up at him.

“An adorable little girl.” Genma mutters, too quietly for normal ears to pick up. Which is why it’s strange when Sakura’s cheeks flush and she deliberately looks away. Kakashi’s Evil Parents theory is getting stronger by the minute. Chakra-enhanced hearing or lip-reading is miles too advanced for a puny shrimp like this kid.

“Nope, this is clearly a wild beast.” Kakashi says, stooping to look at her face. That look of sullen embarrassment is priceless. She’s an oddball, for sure, with her occasionally-too-mature vocabulary and her standard childlike phrasing. Perhaps she ate a thousand children’s books for breakfast.
Her face brightens, “Yeah, I’m a monster!”

A Monster.

Kakashi hadn’t been on watch the day Sakura met Naruto – the way Genma tells it, it was adorable and precious and he may have even shed a drunken tear during the first retelling – though he hadn’t been sorry to have missed it. Seeing some old bastard spit in Naruto’s face and then having to hold back his rage would’ve been too difficult a task to manage.

No, he would’ve done it. He’s been at this job for too long to let a little thing like emotion get in the way of duty. But it would’ve been one more rock for the weight on his shoulders. He can picture the moment easily despite having missed it, because Sakura’s declaration that they were going to be friends no matter what he said showed him her character. It takes guts to stand up to an adult, especially when that adult is doing everything short of murder to get rid of you. He’s glad Naruto’s finally made friends, especially one that’s willing to stand in the way of danger for him.

But, Kakashi isn’t willing to let some little kid attach herself to him. Especially not one going down such a perilous route in life. One of these days, the kid’ll pick a fight she can’t win, and Naruto will lose one more precious person. Kakashi can’t bear to lose another himself.

“So, brat. What made you think I put you to sleep?” He asks, interested despite himself. How the hell did some toddler recognise him out of his ANBU gear? What gave him away? It has to be a gaping hole in his defences, if a child could pick it out.

“It was something you said,” Sakura says guilelessly, like a kid answering a teacher’s question in class, “‘Don’t waste your time trying for impossible things.’ And the mean man said, ‘you can only make do with what you’ve got.’ I don’t know anyone else who’s as grumpy as that.”

That… cannot be the full truth. Or, could it be that the kid actually just happened to connect two dots correctly and he overreacted? It seems implausible at best.

“Also,” She chirps, “Your mask was a dog and you smell like a dog. Is the dog-face your real face, Kakashi-san?”

He has to stop letting Pakkun roll all over him.

Genma smirks.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Kakashi replies, sounding convincingly baffled. But still the kid narrows her eyes at him suspiciously. Not many adults can see through all the layers of bullshit Kakashi drapes himself in, there’s no way a kid could.

“Liar!” She jabs a finger at him, and Kakashi is just going to stop assuming anything about Haruno Sakura. It only leads to unpleasant surprises.

Sakura once managed to sneak up on him while he was sleeping in a public area. Even though he was in the middle of Konoha, surrounded by trusted allies, during peacetime, that didn’t mean he was relaxed or that his guard was down. He is always ready to wake up and defend himself instantly. And yet, she had crept up next to him, and he had no idea how long she’d sat there before he woke up. He could only assume it was the fact that she had no chakra signal to speak of and made hardly any noise whilst moving that he didn’t immediately skewer her the moment she climbed up to him.

To his astonishment, the strange kid who’d woken him up had then proceeded to reach out with her chakra and touch his. It had felt like a request for information, a bright flash of curiosity and interest. To be able to instinctively manipulate chakra was a feat worthy of bringing to an Academy Teacher
and requesting her early admission, or even just a tutor (though her parents were apparently doing a
good job on their own). But for some reason, despite how unsettled she’d made him, he hadn’t
wanted to take her out of her happy childhood, playing Monsters with Naruto, and drop her into the
kind of life where she’d soon meet very real monsters. That life would chew her up and spit her back
out.

Then he watched her leave her house via the window to meet Naruto, just about managing to stick to
the tiles with her feet, though it was a clumsy attempt. He had nearly intervened, imagining Naruto’s
face if his new friend cracked her skull open in front of him, but she managed to recover her balance.
She landed awkwardly on the ground, but again, it was a practised move.

If she was a clan kid, like Itachi or one of the Main House Hyuuga, then her abilities would make
sense. She’d still be considered advanced, but it was normal for clan children to start their training
from the moment they could walk. But as far as Kakashi knows, the Haruno family is just that. A
family. No kekkei genkai, no traditions or history to speak of.

High intelligence, that much was clear from the vocabulary and the bedtime story she told Naruto. A
sudden friendship with the village’s most dangerous and volatile weapon – a lucky break for Naruto,
or a calculated placement of an asset?

“You were the mean Mask guy, so that means you took Naruto away from me!” Sakura declares,
narrowing her eyes at him. Kakashi feels oddly chastised, like it was an old woman scolding him, not
some prepubescent brat. “He’s my friend, not yours. I know what’s best for him.”

“Who’s Naruto?” Kakashi asks, his voice bland. Frustratingly so, judging by the way Sakura grits
her teeth.

“You know who he is! You and the other Masks watch him all the time, but you don’t take care of
him! No one does! You sent me to sleep and then you put me in my bed, you – you – ”

Sakura charges at him. Well, no one’s taught her how to fight, at least. Kakashi stops her with one
hand, pushing her face back.

“Now, now, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi tuts, “You’re really letting yourself down with this behaviour.”

Sakura lets out a guttural noise of rage, little more than a squeak in her high-pitched voice, and her
tiny hands scrabble at his, trying to dislodge his grip. “I don’t care! Naruto is my friend and I’m
going to look after him, no matter what you Mask guys do! You can put me to sleep a thousand
times but I won’t stop waking up and coming back for him!”

This little girl has a spine of steel, Kakashi thinks with begrudging admiration, I can’t bully her
away.

Kakashi would have to go to the Hokage and inform him of the situation. He had already been
updated on the incident in the park, and Naruto’s sudden acquisition of friends, but Kakashi hadn’t
reported Sakura’s determination to improve Naruto’s living situation, having thought it an irrelevant
quirk that the kid would outgrow or get bored of. No normal four-year-old would fixate on the issue
like this, especially not after being discouraged by an adult. Surely, if Sakura was a plant by the
Council, or an enemy of the village, she wouldn’t want to disrupt the status quo so obviously, but
Sakura was literally yelling at anyone who would listen that Naruto was being neglected, and had
actually tried to change things herself.

The odds of Haruno Sakura being a spy were becoming surprisingly slim.
“And I won’t stop being your friend, either!” Sakura declares, “I’ve got Genma-san and Shisui-kun, Naruto, Ino-chan, Shikamaru-kun and Chouji-kun, and you’re going to be my friend one day, too! If anyone messes with you, I’ll fight them. I promise!”

Genma makes a noise that sounds suspiciously like ‘awww.’

Kakashi can’t blame him. The kid is so terrifyingly earnest. His resistance almost crumbles with those sincere words coupled with her bright eyes, so open and real. There is something so unspoilt about her, with her naivety and kindness, that he can’t help but envy it. He can’t remember ever being that way. His childhood ended along with his father, but even before that, he had been a solemn child. Excelling in every way tended to curb any kind of childish urge, including enthusiasm.

Sakura is a genius, one of the rare few civilians with shining potential. One way or another, her spark will be ground out. Her softness will be broken down and replaced with duty, honour and sacrifice, and the rest of her will harden to match that steel spine.

He can’t watch that happen.

“Stick to playing with your dollies, kid.” Kakashi replies, making sure to coat his voice in as much condescension as humanly possible. “My enemies are too big for you to tackle.”

“The old man who spat at Naruto was big, but I would’ve fought him properly, even without Genma-san’s help. I would have kept fighting until the end, because it was the right thing to do. If people are mean to you as well, I’ll fight them all, no matter how big they are.” Sakura says, still painfully earnest, and Kakashi cannot do this.

“My enemies are real monsters, Sakura, the kind that skin people alive just to watch them squirm – ”

Genma jabs two fingers into Kakashi’s spine. A polite warning. Stop.

But Sakura is undaunted. She darts forward and takes one of Kakashi’s hands in hers, “You don’t have to be my friend, Kakashi-san, but I’ll always be yours.”

Why? What has he done to deserve such loyalty? He fled from her during their first meeting, without speaking a single word. He dragged her away from Naruto and broke her illusion of a happy ending for her friend. He’s been consistently rude and cruel and done absolutely nothing to warrant the child’s ardent devotion.

Genma has stepped back a little, as if to give the illusion of privacy. Undoubtedly, he can sense Kakashi’s struggle.

“Why?” He asks finally.

“Because you’re sad. And you said it yourself, you don’t have any friends. I didn’t have friends once, and sometimes I wished I was never born. Then I got my very first friend and the sun came out and it was the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I want to be that for you, Kakashi-san. I can be your sun.”

This girl isn’t Obito. She’s not Rin. She isn’t Minato or Kushina, or any one of the dozens of people Kakashi has known and loved and lost. She’s something else entirely.

Sakura’s head tilts to the side, like a puppy listening for its mother. Her eyes scan the crowds below, and she perks up, having spotted something. “I’ve got to go, Kakashi-san, Genma-san! We’ll play later. Bye bye!”
Then she goes to leap off the building.

Kakashi hauls her back by her collar on instinct. His heart would have fallen with her. It feels like it did, beating as hard as if he’d just finished some particularly gruelling training.

Hope is dangerous. He cannot afford to put his faith in one, fragile girl. He lost everything once. The only way to avoid suffering the same fate again is to not have anything to lose.

Sakura dangles from his fist again. She peers up at him, exasperated. “I said we’ll play later, Kakashi-san. I’ve got to go.”

Then she reaches out with her chakra and pokes him in his, a solid jab that surprises him enough into letting go, though he catches her again in the same breath.

Genma is hovering somewhere behind them, presumably waiting to leap into the fray just in case Kakashi decided to punt the kid off the building himself. Honestly, you make a name for yourself as being unreliable and unpredictable and suddenly everyone thinks the worst of you.

Well, he thinks, looking at the strange, inexplicable fondness in Sakura’s eyes, not everyone.

He lowers her down, very gently.

“Stay alive, if you can.” He says, and it feels like a concession of something. A surrender.

Sakura beams up at him, then hugs him tightly, her little arms reaching around his knees.

Then she kicks off, and soars.

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That should have been the end of it, but she had to go and make herself interesting.

In Kakashi’s world, interesting means dead. Obito died the same day he finally activated his Sharingan, his potential. Rin… Rin took on a heavy burden and paid the price. Whenever Kakashi looks at Genma, at Gai, at any of his colleagues that pair up with him on missions and trade information, blows, smiles… all he sees is the blank space on the Memorial Stone, waiting for their name to take its place.

He cannot live to see Haruno Sakura carved in stone.

Genma studies him. “You can either put her in a cage to keep her safe, or set her free and risk her flying away for good. You know how she’d fare if you trapped her.”

“Better trapped than dead.”

“You think so? Either way, you’re missing the point.”

“And that is?”

“You don’t have a choice. It’s her life. Not yours. That means that whatever happens, it’s not your fault. Believe me. You’re not the only one who failed to save someone important, Kakashi.”

Genma’s tone is soft, but the words hit hard. He knows his grief isn’t special or even particularly rare. Even before the Kyuubi attack, every single shinobi in the village had known loss.

Kakashi watches Sakura’s little form dart through the crowds, her pink hair highlighting her position amongst the taller, dark blurs of civilians.
Without a word, Kakashi leaps to the next building to follow her. He doesn’t have to check to see if Genma is behind him.

Sakura walks into the library.

Kakashi jumps down into an alley and transforms into a plain-looking woman. He joins a crowd of people and strolls into the library, ignoring the geeky teen who slips in next to him. Genma barely glances at Kakashi, his posture slouched, fully inhabiting the form of an awkward youth.

Sakura is frowning at a display of books, each one too high to reach. Kakashi watches from the corner of his eye, pretending to browse through the shelves. Sakura is looking at medical textbooks. This kid just gets weirder and weirder.

The librarian retrieves each book Sakura points to, giving her an indulgent smile along with each tome. The older woman shows no surprise at Sakura’s selection, which means she must have come here before to read similarly advanced books.

Sakura heaves the books onto a table and clambers onto a chair, her feet swinging way above the ground. She studies a page, propping her chin up on her hands. She doesn’t use her finger to follow the words, she doesn’t read aloud as she goes. Her eyes never waver or lose focus. Genius.

Kakashi can see the page she’s reading from across the room and upside down – it’s a detailed illustration of the lungs. She’s studying anatomy. At four.

Genma is in Fiction, in the perfect position to observe Sakura without being noticed, but Kakashi sees the moment Sakura looks up and sees Genma. She sees right through his henge, her eyes widening in surprise and then narrowing in realisation, a quick succession of barely visible micro-expressions. Her eyes snap back down to the page, but she’s lost focus. She fidgets in her seat. She’s trained enough to see through weak illusions and knows enough to want to avoid showing she can do so, but isn’t actually skilled enough to hide it.

Interesting.

She knows he’s here too. It’s painfully obvious in the way her body shifts, searching for the unseen threat. She refuses to look up from the page.

Genma has retreated into a shadowy corner. Sakura can’t see either of them now, and Kakashi watches the tension in her body rack up a few notches. Accustomed to danger. Clearly ready to fight, if necessary.

Sakura gives a ferocious glare around the room and slams her book shut. She crams it into her bag and hauls it out the door, offering the startled librarian a tense smile and a wave on her way out. Sakura is staggering a little under the weight of the book. Kakashi and Genma ghost behind her, dogging her footsteps.

Sakura does her best to lose them. She leads them on a merry chase, going from a casual stroll to a flat-out sprint in seconds – and the kid knows how to run, he’ll give her that – only to stop abruptly and change direction at random. It’s cute, how hard she’s trying.

She seems to think she’s outrun them at one point, her posture relaxing, loosening her grip on the bag. Kakashi and Genma watch silently as Sakura darts behind a tree, just in time for Hayate to step out of the hospital.

Sakura is staring at Hayate with an alarming intensity. As far as Kakashi knows, Hayate is a sickly chuunin, mid-teens, has potential but is hampered by poor health. There’s no real reason for Sakura
to be studying him with such focus. She digs out a notebook from her bag and starts scribbling away.

Kakashi uses his Sharingan to observe the movements of Sakura’s pencil. She’s writing quickly but neatly, in a practiced, mature hand. There’s none of the sloppiness you would expect from a child, nor the grammatical errors.

“She’s writing down Hayate’s symptoms.” Kakashi informs Genma.

“After borrowing a book on anatomy from the library.” Genma raises his eyebrows.

Sakura has memorised enough medical terminology to stump Kakashi – he can understand lung capacity and bronchi, but not much else. It’s pretty clear what she’s doing, anyway.

“She’s trying to figure out why he keeps coughing.” Kakashi says, trying not to sound like he thinks it’s cute. But he really, really does.

A genius kid like that, with a ravenous need to consume information and learn, she’d soar through the Academy in no time at all. And if she actually pursues medicine as a career, she’d have no shortage of opportunities. Rin had been very gifted for her age and had a lot of options lined up. She didn’t need to be a frontline fighter. She didn’t even need to fight. She could have stayed in the tents, patching up soldiers and bolstering their numbers. She didn’t.

“She wants to help him. This is too much for my poor heart, Kakashi.” Genma said dryly.

It was a shame she couldn’t help him. Hopefully she would figure that out on her own soon enough, before she got her hopes up. Failing to save a life could be crushing.

Hayate walks past Sakura, failing to notice her scrutiny. Sakura watches him go, her thoughtful frown smoothing out. She closes her notebook and nods to herself, then slips back into the crowd and heads off once again.

She ends up at Ichiraku, peering into the restaurant. Kakashi watches her light up, and knows what she must have seen.

Naruto comes barrelling out of the shop, yelling, “SAKURA-NEE!!”

He collides with her, nearly knocking them both to the ground, but Sakura hardens her stance and meets him withoutwavering. The children embrace, and Kakashi finds himself hoping despite himself. Hoping that Sakura is exactly what she appears to be: a friendly, mature child with more love in her heart than sense in her mind. Hoping that whatever Sakura is, that she will be good for Naruto, and won’t leave him worse off than he was before they met.

Kakashi observes Sakura’s hand hover briefly over a graze on Naruto’s arm. Just a flash of movement. His normal eye might have missed it. But Obito didn’t.

Sakura just healed a scrape with the smallest twitch of her hand.

Kakashi inhaled sharply.

One second and Naruto’s skin was marred by a fresh wound. The next second and the skin was tan, whole, untouched.

One second and she was Haruno Sakura, alive and happy, smiling at her best friend. The next second and she was Nohara Rin, dead and broken, empty eyes staring at her killer.
Kakashi can’t do this.

Genma nods at him from across the street, standing in the shadows.

Kakashi takes the reprieve and vanishes, the rough feel of Rin’s name already against his fingertips, hewn in stone.

Later, Genma tells him he didn’t miss much.

xxxxxxx

“I thought the whole point of the Monsters was that no one got left out.” Chouji says.

Sakura doesn’t look at Sasuke, who she is decidedly leaving out.

“He’s too popular to play with us,” Naruto says, disgusted, “He’s got a hundred friends. Loads of girls chasing after him. He doesn’t wanna play with us. So he can’t.”

The utter vehemence in his voice was both uncharacteristic and worrying. Sakura figured Naruto had already considered playing with Sasuke – had maybe already tried to extend a hand of friendship – but had, for whatever reason, decided against it.

Sasuke’s mother isn’t with him today.

Sakura hasn’t seen Mikoto in two days, not since she ran away from the older woman. She wasn’t looking forward to the possibility of bumping into her again when Naruto decided they should play in the park, and had been very relieved to see Sasuke’s grumpy face all alone. And then she had felt a dozen other emotions, only some of which felt like her own.

Grown up Sakura was a nuisance. She felt things so deeply. So many complicated, conflicting things. How could one person love another person so much if the mere sight of them could inspire fear of all things?

Sakura has loved before. She loves her parents so much. They’re parts of her. She loves Ino, and Naruto, and maybe she will love the rest of the Monsters in time. But the love she felt – feels – for Sasuke… it’s different. The kind of different she would usually take to the library and study until it rolled over in submission. She knows there’s a bunch of old poems that talk about love, but she doubts there’d be anything useful. Solid. Something to fight against.

Because she does want to fight.

She’s not going to let herself become who she dreams about. She’s never going to call her best friend Ino-pig. She’s never going to skip meals because she’s afraid of being fat. She will never lose sleep worrying about what a boy thinks of her before they’ve even spoken.

She didn’t let herself sit back and let Naruto face the mean old man alone. She became someone better than that.

Sasuke is watching them play. He’s sitting alone, with dark, envious eyes. She saw him like that once before.

(“Thanks, Sasuke-kun. You saved me, didn’t you?” She smiles at him warmly, and means it. His coal-black eyes meet hers with none of the disdain or annoyance that she is used to. He takes in her smile, then his eyes begin to smoulder with something familiar. Rage. He turns his eyes on Naruto, and finally says, “No. It was Naruto who saved you.” Sakura is pleasantly surprised, and almost
misses the poisonous look of loathing he sinks into Naruto’s unaware skin.

Sakura became better because she had the chance to change.

Whatever her dreams are, she isn’t the only one they’ve given another chance.

Sakura kneels in front of Sasuke, sitting alone in the grass, and extends a hand and a smile.

“Hi. Do you want to play with us?”

***

Hello.

Sorry for the horrifically late update. I’ve been a bit sick recently. Still am, tbh. Can’t keep any food down. I’m living off high-calorie drinks. I’ve got rubbish lungs, so whenever I get a cough, I sound like a ninety-year-old man who’s been smoking since he was ten. Either that, or a barking seal.

So I probably have some kind of virus/cold, maybe?? It matters not. Except for the fact that I could barely eat any of my Christmas dinner, which my mum made and thus SHOULD have tasted INCREDIBLE, but OH NOOO, my stomach just COULDN’T BE COOL.

There’s nothing more enjoyable for me at the moment than writing this baby Sakura. She’s so much fun to write. I’m much more used to angst than fluff, so I guess this is good practice! Kakashi’s POV was challenging, not gonna lie. Eighteen-year-old sadsack Kakashi is quite different from baby Sakura. Don’t expect a ton of POV changes. This is still Saku-tan’s story. But Kakashi just wouldn’t shut up, so I had to let him speak.

I hope you all had a great Christmas, and if you don’t celebrate Christmas, I hope you had an especially good Monday. Maybe you found some money on the floor, or maybe you boiled a really great egg.

Can you tell I always write these darn things in the middle of the night whilst sleep-deprived and occasionally feverish? Because if anyone tells you I do, they’re a filthy liar. On an unrelated note, I’m sooooo bloody tired.

I was horribly spoiled for Christmas. I got a bunch of stuff. If I hadn’t been stricken by the plague, I would have been literally bouncing up and down all Christmas morning. I may be twenty-something, but I have the heart of a small, obnoxious child, who really loves Christmas. My family keep trying to smother me and I don’t know why!

This is still a casual fic with very few things set in stone. So, feel free to tell me what you want to happen. Maybe it will. Stranger things happen at sea.

(I read every single comment more than once, just so you know)

**Quick poll for fun:** Which characters do you relate to, and why?

They don’t have to be from Naruto :)

As a small human, I related very strongly to both Sakura (THIS HAS NO BEARING ON MY CURRENT LIFE/FANFIC CHOICES, HOW DARE) and Hermione Granger.
Sasuke blinks at her.

He is sitting very nicely on the grass, his posture stiff and upright. He hasn’t fidgeted once in the whole time Sakura’s watched him.

“What are you playing?” He asks cautiously.

“Monsters. You have to run around and eat bad guys.” Sakura says proudly. She’s not embarrassed by being a Monster anymore. She made the game up all by herself. She doesn’t feel as shy and timid as she used to, not after running around and growling at strangers for so long.

“I – I don’t think my mother would let me play that.” Sasuke balks, looking off to the side as if seeking help. Naruto lets out a tiny scoff from behind Sakura.

All of the Monsters have swarmed both Sakura and Sasuke. She can see Ino leaning against a tree, watching them closely through narrowed eyes. Shikamaru and Chouji are lurking behind her, both of their chakra’s tense as if waiting for something to go wrong. Naruto is standing so close to her that she can feel the heat from his body.

“Well, is your mother here now?” Sakura demands.

“No…”

“So, c’mon, let’s play! What’s your name?”

Sasuke straightens up, “Uchiha Sasuke.”

That name has hurt her too much. She won’t ever say Sasuke-kun again, not with joy or love or anguish. Not anymore.

“Okay then, I’ll call you Sasuke.”

His face slowly turns red. “Y-you can’t! That’s too familiar, you should be more –”

“And I’m Haruno Sakura. You can call me whatever you like.” As long as it’s not Sakura, the way he says it in her dreams, all deep and drawling. This Sasuke’s voice is barely deeper than hers.

“Sakura-san, then.”

“Hmm… Not Sakura-chan? Or even just Sakura?”

“No!”

This isn’t going very well. Naruto’s chakra is bristling like an angry cat. A ripple of offense went through it when she called him Sasuke. Oh dear.
Sakura decides to be reasonable. She sits down in front of Sasuke, so she’s not towering above him anymore, and offers him a warm smile. His chakra stutters a little.

“\textit{I want to be friends with you,}” She says slowly, “\textit{So I’d like it if we could be less formal with each other.}”

Sasuke looks deeply suspicious. “\textit{Why do you want to be friends with me?}”

Ah. Naruto had said something about how he had a ton of girl fans, and from what Sakura has gathered about her dream-self, she must have been one of them. He must be worried that she like likes him.

“Because every time I see you at the park, you’re either alone or with your mother.” Sakura says frankly.

Sasuke’s face reddens again. “\textit{What’s wrong with that?}”

“Nothing. I’ve met your mother, she seems really nice. But I thought maybe you needed someone to play with who’s your age.”

“How old are you?”

“Four.”

Sasuke squints at her, then at Naruto. “So, why does he call you Sakura-nee? Naruto’s four, too.”

Naruto takes in a deep breath, clearly about to yell something. Sakura cuts in hastily, “\textit{My birthday’s in March, Naruto’s is October. He’s only just turned four, I’ve been four for ages. He’s my little brother.}”

Sasuke frowns, “\textit{No, he isn’t. Naruto doesn’t have any family.}”

Sakura feels the hurt pierce through Naruto, and grits her teeth. She says very clearly, “\textit{Yes he does. I’m his big sister. I am, because I say so.}”

“That’s not how it works. I have a big brother, because we’ve got the same parents.” Sasuke says patiently, as though he’s actually trying to teach her something.

“And is your big brother nice to you?” Naruto demands, suddenly throwing himself down on the grass next to Sakura. Sasuke looks startled for a moment, then nods hesitantly. “\textit{Is he really cool? And does he treat you like you’re special?}”

“Yes.” Sasuke whispers, looking at his feet.

“Well, Sakura-nee does all that for \textit{me.} When we’re bigger we’re gonna live in a house together with a pond and fish and probably even a dog. You’re right, I don’t have parents to share with her. But who cares? I don’t even know who my parents are. Maybe we are really brother and sister. You don’t know! C’mon, Sakura-nee. I told you he didn’t want friends.”

Sasuke flinches, his lips pulling into a scowl that warps his childish face into something more dangerous. “\textit{Whatever! I don’t care, dobe.}”

“\textit{Seems like you do, brat.}” Shikamaru drawls, mimicking Sasuke’s scathing tone.

No. \textit{No.} They have to be friends.
“Is everything okay?” Mikoto calls. She’s walking over with another Uchiha at her side, the classic dark hair and eyes giving him away. He looks almost familiar.

Sasuke bites his lip and nods. “Yes. They just wanted to play, but… I said I was busy.”

“Are they bothering you?” The strange Uchiha asks. He’s almost as tall as Mikoto. He’s wearing his hair tied back in a low ponytail and he has lines on his face like Shisui.

“Itachi-nii – ”

(Kakashi bursts out of the ground, his arm outstretched in an uppercut. Itachi dodges casually, without the slightest change in expression, and brushes Kakashi’s fist aside. Sakura feels a gut punch of terror – he’s going to kill Kakashi-sensei and there’s nothing she can do!)

“Sakura-nee?” Naruto says, his voice high and afraid. He’s put his hand on her forehead, as if testing for a fever.

She’s broken out into a sweat. The world around her has faded into static and white noise, a dull roar pressing against her.

Itachi wore a black coat with red clouds. He looked older, but she could never tell how much. All grown-ups looked the same. One thing was certain: Sakura had been scared out of her mind just by his mere presence. She had been absolutely convinced that he was going to kill Kakashi. She still hasn’t dreamed Kakashi’s death, but that doesn’t mean anything. This boy – Sasuke’s precious big brother – might grow up to murder her newest friend.

“Sakura-chan, please – sweetheart, can you hear me? Are your parents nearby?” Mikoto keeps asking questions, her voice a low drone of concern buzzing in the background.

It’s like the time she meditated with Shisui and couldn’t stop. She can’t break out of the dream-state – Then, the smell of freesias and two hands on her shoulders.

Ino’s pale blue eyes stare into hers.

“This isn’t funny, Sakura-chan. What’s wrong?”

Sakura blinks. Her eyes feel raw and tender, like she’s rubbed them a bit too hard. She blinks a few more times, until the world comes back into focus.

Ino’s face fills her vision, so Sakura tilts her head back and sees Sasuke, looking pale and concerned. Shikamaru is blank-faced, his posture casual, but his chakra is awake and aware, scanning for details. Chouji looks sick with worry. Naruto’s chakra is just as worried, but with an acid touch of dark fury at its core. It feels wrong in ways Sakura can’t describe.

And Itachi is standing a little far off, arms folded, eyes narrowed. He’s pulled his chakra right back. Like he’s hiding.

“Are you back with us, sweetheart?” Mikoto asks, reaching out to Sakura, who can’t hold back a flinch. She feels like her feelings are written on her face for the world to see. An open wound, blood seeping through white cloth.

“Ino-chan.” Sakura says, faint. Ino’s hands dig into her shoulders.

“I’m here.” Ino says, fierce as always.
“Can we go home, please?”

Ino slowly takes her hand, entwining their fingers together. “Of course. We’re leaving, Uchiha-san. Naruto, let’s meet up tomorrow. Same time, same place, okay?”

Naruto is holding back tears. He manages a nod.

Ino wraps an arm around Sakura’s shoulders, tucking their clasped hands in-between them, and starts to guide her out of the park.

“My dad is really good at helping people,” Ino says in a low voice, tugging Sakura away from the crowds, “He’ll know what to do.”

“Oh, please don’t tell him.” Sakura says, aghast. She hates the idea of Ino’s father thinking she’s odd. That there’s something wrong with her. He already scares her a little bit.

Ino frowns at that, “But I don’t know how to help you. And… Sakura-chan… you do need help. You just froze. You went all pale and shaky and it took ages for you to snap out of it. It… it was like you were having a nightmare with your eyes open. You started crying and you said, ‘please, don’t hurt him.’”

Sakura goes cold. She spoke out loud during a dream? Right in front of Mikoto and Itachi, and all of the Monsters? What if she’s done it before? She might have given something important away to someone she knows she can’t trust, like Kabuto or Itachi or… maybe even Sasuke.

“You can’t tell your dad. I-if you do… I’ll never forgive you, okay?” Sakura pulls away from Ino, freeing her hand from her lax grip and ducking under her arm.

Ino’s chakra recoils in hurt. “Sakura-chan…”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Ino-chan.”

Then, Sakura does what she’s been doing a lot lately.

She runs.

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Stop crying, you baby, she thinks angrily.

She’s almost home.

She stopped running a little while back, when it occurred to her that someone might find her stamina suspicious. She is just so tired of having to hide everything. It’s so hard, pretending to be normal. She keeps slipping up in the stupidest ways, and now apparently she’s messing up in ways she can’t even control.

She has to find out the truth behind her dreams. She needs to figure out how to control them. If she could decide what to see when she needed to see it – that would be incredibly useful. Much more useful than the random flashes of trauma she keeps seeing.

“Hey, Forehead!”

Oh.

Sakura stops.
Ami is smirking at her from across the street, surrounded by her friends. Sakura had imagined meeting her again, but this time with all the Monsters by her side, ready to defend her with claws and fangs if necessary.

But, she’s alone.

“H-hello.” She says hesitantly.

Ami bursts out laughing, as if she’s said something hilarious. The rest of the girls follow suit. “H-h-h-hello!” Ami mimics her, “I’m Forehead Girl, a walking freak of nature! Wow, I can’t believe you’re out in the open, where anyone could see you. I thought being that ugly would make you stay indoors all day!”

“I-Ino-chan thinks I’m beautiful.” Sakura says, self-consciously tucking her hair behind her ear. She understands why Ino told her to keep her forehead bare, to show she’s not embarrassed, but… she is embarrassed. Like Shisui said, it just feels like a big target.

“Yeah, right. Ino just feels sorry for you. In fact, I bet the only reason she’s nice to you at all is because she looks prettier with someone like you by her side.”

“I don’t think Ino cares about looks as much as you do.” Sakura suggests. Ami sucks in a breath, her gaze turning venomous.

“I don’t think you think at all, Forehead. I think your brain is so hideously swollen that you can barely talk. We saw you trying to talk to Sasuke-kun just now. You actually thought he’d want to join in your freakish little games!” Ami lets out a little peal of laughter. Sakura’s face feels hot.

“Look at you! With your gross, red forehead! As if Sasuke-kun would hang out with someone like you! You actually started crying, didn’t you? It was so pathetic!”

Sakura is shaking again. She won’t cry. She won’t.

“Do you know what’s truly pathetic?” A voice says, smooth and casual. Sakura jumps – she hadn’t sensed anyone approaching.

Itachi emerges from the shadows, Sasuke in tow. Itachi looks as blank and stoic as ever, but as Sakura concentrates, she can feel traces of anger in his chakra. Sasuke is outright glaring.

Ami has gone pale, “U-um…”

“Little girls who think they can go through life picking on people who won’t fight back. Do you know what the problem with that is?” Itachi smiles, a gentlemanly kind of smile. It looks eerie. “Eventually, you’ll find someone who will fight back. And since you’ve wasted so much time being concerned over looks and what boys think, you won’t be strong enough to defend yourself. Am I wrong?”

Ami’s eyes are darting around. She looks as if she wishes the ground would swallow her up.

“I would hang out with Sakura.” Sasuke says hotly. Sakura notices Itachi’s eyes flicker between them, the faint pulse of amusement at Sasuke’s familiarity. “I don’t even know who you are, and yet you think you know me?”

Ami looks close to tears herself, now.

The other girls have stepped back.
“It’s okay,” Sakura says softly, “He doesn’t hate you, I swear. It’s okay – you don’t have to – ”

“Shut up!” Ami bursts out, “Don’t try to suck up to me, you little – ”

Itachi glares, red flashing across his eyes. Sakura feels a swoop of fear in her stomach at the sight.

Ami and the girls run for it.

“You’re not supposed to do that,” Sasuke says, “You know how much trouble you’ll get in?”

“Only if someone finds out.” Itachi winks at his little brother, who ducks his head to hide his smile.

Could Sakura’s dream be wrong? Itachi seems nice. He defended her from Ami. He clearly loves Sasuke. Maybe her older self misunderstood the fight with Kakashi. Maybe they were just sparring.

Maybe Naruto really was just sleeping.

But probably not.

“Thank you.” Sakura says, offering a little bow.

Itachi’s smile matches his chakra, unrestrained. At ease. The complete opposite of when they were in the park with everyone else.

“A friend of Sasuke’s is a friend of mine.” He says, returning the bow with a little nod. Sasuke flushes.

“We’re not… actually…” He mumbles.

“We can be.” Sakura speaks up, surprising herself. “If you can come to the park tomorrow, we’ll all be there. And if you want to, you can play with us. Whatever you want.”

Sasuke stares at her for a long moment.

(“You really are…” Sasuke turns to look at her, with an expression she’s never seen before on his face. A rueful smirk, a touch of… fondness? Could he really – “Annoying.” He finishes, his smirk tightening at the corners.)

Sasuke gives her a tiny smile. “Okay. If I’m free tomorrow… I’ll see you at the park.”

Sakura beams at him. “Great. Bye bye!”

“Good – uh, bye bye.” Sasuke gives an awkward wave, a flush covering his cheeks, then he sticks his hands in his pockets and starts to leave.

“Feel better soon, Sakura-san.” Itachi says over his shoulder. The last thing she feels from him before he restrains his chakra is a flicker of concern.

“Be good.” Sakura says.

Itachi stops. “Excuse me?”

Sakura looks him right in the eye. “Be good, okay?”

Itachi seems baffled. “I will… try my best?”

Sakura studies him. There’s not a trace of red in his eyes. Maybe… maybe he’s as nice as he seems.
Maybe not. Either way, she’ll be nice to him until the day she finds out whether or not he really is
good. And then, she’ll protect Kakashi.

She gives him a smile. “Thank you for helping me.”

Itachi studies her right back. What he finds seems to be good, because his answering smile is
breathtaking. “Next time, fight back.”

Both her parents are home for once, which is nice.

Sakura is sitting at the top of the stairs, waiting to be called down for dinner. She’s puzzling over her
notes. She remembers how she used to diagnose problems – she would investigate her patient’s
system with her chakra – and even recalls specific instances of dealing with lung problems. They can
be nasty, with black, curling disease eating away at the organs, choking the breath out of the poor
patient. She remembers the satisfaction she would feel after clearing someone’s lungs and hearing
their breathing even out, the crackling easing, the relief on their faces.

Being a medic had felt right. She had been consumed by fears of being useless, helpless, a waste of a
hitae-ate. And then… something happened to change that. She became someone useful. She’s going
to do that again.

She’s pretty sure Hayate is going to die soon. At least, in future Sakura’s lifetime. She has maybe ten
years to figure out how to save him. She’s going to.

A quiet knock at the front door disturbs her concentration. She scrambles away from the stairs,
scooting back on the landing. She can still see the door from her position, but whoever is visiting
would have to work hard to see her.

A door opens from inside the house, the smell of dumplings curling out of the kitchen. Sakura’s
mother hurries down the hall, wiping her hands on her apron.

Mikoto smiles at her mother from the doorway. Sakura feels a sickening jolt of anxiety. What is she
doing here?

“Mikoto-san?” Sakura’s mother sounds as confused as she is.

“Hello, Mebuki-san. I’m so sorry for the intrusion at this late hour. I was wondering if I could have a
moment of your time?” Mikoto’s voice is so quiet that Sakura has to strain to hear it.

Sakura’s mother lets the other woman in, her face carefully blank. Sakura can feel her curiosity,
mixed with a little trepidation.

They go into the living room, where Sakura’s father greets them, his voice a low murmur. Sakura
shifts, creeping down the stairs quietly. She’ll have to keep track of the adults by the pulse of their
chakra.

“What’s this about, Mikoto-san?” Sakura’s father asks, cautious but polite.

“Well, recently, your daughter has become friends with my son, Sasuke. I’ve had cause to notice
certain… issues. She’s a very sweet, polite young girl, but I’m afraid that, in my professional
opinion, she appears to be traumatised.”

A flare of anger from her mother. “Excuse me?”
“I’ve seen cases like hers before. In children as young as her.” Mikoto is calm, unlike both of Sakura’s parents.

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that my Itachi fought in a war at Sakura’s age. And when he came home, he kept what he had suffered inside. But on occasion, upon facing certain triggers, he would show signs of fear or anger – we could be having a normal dinner and someone would say something, and then his eyes would glaze over and… do you know what it’s like, to see your child change like that? To be happy, loving and just like every other child their age, and then overnight, they’ve become something… damaged?”

There was a long silence.

“…Yes.” Sakura’s mother whispers.

Sakura stumbles back. Damaged? Her mother thinks she’s damaged?

“But Sakura has never fought at all, let alone in a war. She’s completely untrained, she’s never even been in a scrap with another kid. How could she be traumatised?”

“Does she have nightmares?”

Another telling silence.

“I know both of you quite well, if you don’t mind me saying. I don’t believe Sakura is suffering at home. But she is suffering from something.”

“Or someone.” Her mother says, her voice coated in anger.

“It’s possible,” Mikoto says heavily, grief in her voice, “I’m so sorry. I wouldn’t wish this on anyone.”

“This is my fault. I let her walk around Konoha alone all the time.” Sakura’s mother says, choked.

“It’s not your fault, Mebuki,” Her father says gently, “How could you know… how could any of us ever think something like this…”

Her mother lets out a broken sob.

Sakura’s stomach clenches. This is her fault.

“Itachi saw someone for a while. It seemed to help. If you want, I can pass on Sakura’s details…”

Sakura can’t hear anymore. She runs upstairs, soundless as ever, and throws herself on her bed. She tugs the blanket over her head. It’s dark and already too warm.

Sakura squeezes her eyes shut and prays for sleep.

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“Hello, Sakura-chan,” The woman smiles at her from across the desk, “My name is Sasaki Mariko. You can call me Mariko.”

“Hello, Sasaki-san.” Sakura replies.
Everything about the room seems carefully designed to put her at ease. The walls are soft pink, the curtains are pale blue. The desk is low, so she isn’t struggling to see over it. The chair she sits in is cushioned and comfortable. There are even toys in a box in the corner. The ones she can see are the sort she used to enjoy playing with.

Sasaki’s smile does not waver, but she does discreetly write something down. Sakura imagines she’s noting her refusal to use Mariko. The woman will probably interpret that as an attempt to create distance between them by sticking to formalities. Sakura just doesn’t like talking to grownups.

“Do you know why we’re here today?” The woman asks. Her voice is sweet, like she’s talking to a treasured friend.

“I’m here because my parents told me I had to come,” Sakura replies honestly, “I guess you’re here because someone told you to come, too.”

Sasaki laughs. “I suppose that’s true, in a way. But in my opinion, Sakura-chan, you’re here because your behaviour has proved troubling to some of the people around you. Troubling doesn’t always mean that there is a problem. After all, I imagine most of us end up being troublesome to someone at some point, right? But it’s always best to get these things checked out, in case there really is a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Sakura asks.

“Well, a person’s behaviour is a reflection of their feelings. If we feel badly, we may behave the same way. Sometimes, the only way to see how someone is feeling is to observe how they behave.”

“I haven’t been badly behaved.”

“A poor choice of words on my part. How about this: if you have a stomach-ache, you might hold your tummy and look sad, right? That shows how you’re feeling on the outside. And if you are going through a bad time, you might cry a lot or act out. That shows how you’re feeling, too. Can you tell me how you’re feeling?”

“I’m a bit bored.” Sakura says.

“Let’s get right to the point, then. You’ve been having nightmares.”

“Yes.”

“What about?”

“Everybody dying.”

Sasaki blinks. Her pencil lowers to the page, then stops, hanging in mid-air. “I see. What do you mean by everybody?”

“Ino-chan, Naruto. Me too, sometimes.”

“Can you tell me about these nightmares?”

“I guess. Ino-chan hurts her head when she falls down and then she doesn’t get up again. Naruto… he’s looking at me, but he can’t see me. Because he’s dead.”

“Have you ever seen someone die in real life, Sakura-chan?”

Dreams don’t count as real life. “No.”
“When did these nightmares start?”

“I don’t know.” It’s true. Her grasp on time isn’t the best. She doesn’t know how long she’s known Naruto.

“Did something happen to you?”

(“What a shame,” The enemy nin breathes his foul breath in her face, the kunai twisting in her gut, “What a waste of a pretty face.”)

Sakura stiffens in her seat. She’s broken out into a sweat. The blood rushed from her face, leaving her pale. She touches her stomach tentatively, expecting to feel the warm wetness of blood. It’s a relief to feel nothing more than the soft fabric of her dress.

Sasaki’s sharp eyes missed nothing.

“You’re a very smart girl, aren’t you?” She says, her smile warm. Sakura just nods, confused by the abrupt change in subject. “I bet your parents are very proud.”

They are. Her mother pins her drawings up on the wall. Her father smiles whenever he sees her reading.

“They’re both shinobi, right?”

“Uh-huh. Chuunin. They go on missions a lot.”

“What happens to you while they’re gone?”

“My grandmother comes over.”

“Do you like seeing your grandmother?”

“She’s okay.”

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

Sakura thinks about it. She knows what she should be – a medic nin. But Shisui had pointed out that she could potentially have any kind of medical-related job. She could be an Academy teacher. She could open a shop and sell useless knick-knacks. It’s difficult to think about what can be when you know exactly what you will be.

“I don’t know if I’ll specialise in anything yet, but I’m going to join the Academy and become a shinobi.”

“Like your parents.”

“Yeah.”

“Is that what they want?”

“I don’t know. We’ve not talked about it yet. But they help people and that’s what I want to do.”

“Do you think your parents want you to be a shinobi?”

“No. I guess it’s dangerous and they would probably want me to do something safer. Like be a librarian. But my grandmother – she’s my mother’s mother – she’s not a shinobi. And she’s okay
with my mother being one. So it’s okay.”

“I see. What kind of games do you play with your parents?”

“Sometimes my dad lets me climb up the stairs without using the stairs.”

Sasaki’s eyes widen slightly. “O-oh?”

“Yeah. I walk on the bannister instead. It’s okay though – he’s always ready to catch me.” Sakura frowns as something occurs to her, “Don’t tell my mother, okay? She’d get mad.”

“And what’s your mother like when she gets mad?”

Sakura giggles, “Funny! Her face gets red and she starts whistling so she won’t say bad words. Then my dad tells a joke and she laughs and doesn’t whistle anymore.”

“What about when your dad gets mad?”

“Dad doesn’t get mad.” Sakura says, matter-of-fact.

“Everyone gets mad.”

“Dad doesn’t.” Sakura eyes her suspiciously.

“Well, that’s nice. What do you do when you get mad?”

Sakura sits back.

(She strikes the man once in the chest. His ribs splinter, blood spurts forth. He looks shocked. Dead people often do.)

Sakura pushes the dream away, flinching at the memory of the man’s face.

“I see.” Sasaki says calmly.

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Kakashi, please read the attached file. It’s an updated report on Haruno Sakura’s psychological profile. If possible, you should call for a meeting to discuss the contents.

Genma.

‘Haruno Sakura

Symptoms:

Nightmares

Flashbacks

Sudden change in mood

Advanced maturity

Difficulty relating to peers

Secretive
Unusual knowledge of death

The subject displays high intelligence and an above-average vocabulary. Her ability to communicate borders on adult, and she shows preoccupation with unchildlike issues, such as the economical state of the village and clan relations. Her advanced maturity, coupled with an intense fear of her loved ones dying violently, seems to indicate that she has witnessed violent acts. Haruno briefly described one of her nightmares of Uzumaki Naruto’s death, and mentioned that he was ‘looking at her,’ even though he was dead. She referred to another friend, ‘Ino,’ as having died of a head injury, mentioning that she ‘fell down’ and her head was hurt.

Haruno is extremely anxious about the living conditions of her friends, particularly Naruto, whom she seems to view as solely her responsibility. I asked her why she has to look after Naruto and she replied ‘because no one else wants to.’ Her friendship with Naruto borders on co-dependent. I would not recommend separating the two at this stage - both would struggle without the other – but they need to be encouraged to seek out other friends, not just each other and ‘the monsters,’ as Haruno refers to them. As it stands, Haruno’s obsession with looking after Naruto is causing her an unusual amount of stress and guilt. Haruno needs to be reminded of her age, and to be allowed to simply be a child. If Naruto’s home life improves, she may feel less responsibility towards him.

Haruno also displays hypervigilance. She was uncomfortable sitting with her back to the door and constantly shifted positions to accommodate herself. She may suffer from flashbacks, as she frequently gazed into the distance and became unresponsive to questions, often in response to questions. Certain ‘trigger’ phrases included were: ‘Did something happen to you?’ – she indicated fear and disgust and covered her stomach with her hands as a self-comforting gesture – and ‘What do you do when you get mad?’ – she indicated shame and guilt.

Reports seem to indicate that Haruno is starved of affection. She approaches other children and adults with the same desperation to make friends with them. She seems unaware of the appropriateness of this behaviour. This need for attention would ordinarily indicate parental neglect, which does not seem to be the case in this situation. Haruno requires constant supervision.

I cannot confidently make any sort of judgement based on one session, but I can say with some certainty that I believe Haruno Sakura is not a normal four-year-old girl. If she has not previously been abused, then she is currently being abused. At this point it seems highly unlikely that the potential abuse is coming from home – Haruno had no negative indicators regarding her parents, and displayed none of the usual signs of a child with an unhappy home, aside from an unusual lack of separation anxiety from her parents, despite her age. I recommend vetting the people who have access to Haruno, and making sure she is not being exposed to anything harmful by outside influences.

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Whoops.

Sakura, you had ONE JOB. BE COOL. ACT NORMAL.

To be fair, I thought long and hard about how Sakura would appear to all the adults around her, and figured… it looks bad. She really does display some worrying signs. I don’t think even ninja would jump straight to ‘she must be a time traveller,’ sooo they’ve jumped to completely the wrong conclusion! What fun.

(How do you think Kakashi, Genma, Shisui and all the rest of the overprotective badasses Sakura has somehow befriended will react to the news that Sakura is potentially being abused? I think it’ll be fine. No drama at all. Muahahahaha!)
Also, befriending Sasuke took almost the entire chapter. MY GOD, MAN. I kept rewriting the opening scene because Sasuke is so hard to write. Pray for me.

I actually didn’t make up Ami! She’s a legit Naruto character. She has purple hair and she’s really mean to Sakura for no reason. Ino owns her in a beautifully legendary way.

I’m almost completely better, by the way! Thank you for putting up with my whining. I still have a headache and my appetite is very slowly recovering, but everything else is 100% okay! :D I guess it was just a long-ass virus that took its sweet time pissing off.

I had originally planned to age Sakura up by this point but… baby Saku is so much bloody fun to write! I hope you’re prepared for more of her ;)

What happens when a baby genius meets another baby genius? Sakura and Itachi happen, that’s what. I’ve been almooooost writing Itachi into pretty much every chapter, then chickening out at the last minute. But here he is! Smiling and friendly! It’s super weird writing pre-massacre Itachi. He’s a completely different character. Especially since he’s like, nine, here. To be fair he’s apparently thirteen when he does The Murder and he looks at least twenty-five. Like what the fuck, Kishi. The boy was prepubescent??

More than one person is concerned that this is SasuSaku. Have no fear. The OTP has not been chosen yet. It might even turn out to just be a BROTP. Sakura has a lot of shit to sort out. She doesn’t have time for love!

It’s 2018! WHY DON’T WE HAVE JETPACKS YET

Quick poll for fun: What’s your favourite Naruto OTP?

No judgements here, friend. If you like crack pairings, it’s better than real crack.
Kimura Ryuu introduces himself as a teacher. His smile looks genuine, but his chakra is cool, restrained. Tucked away.

Sasaki sits next to him, wearing her own slightly-less-genuine smile, smoothing her hands down her clothes over and over again. A nervous tic, Sakura’s mind supplies. She doesn’t know what that means. But apparently, she will.

They’re all gathered in her family’s living room, Kimura and Sasaki on one sofa, Sakura on the other. She feels very small beneath their collective gaze. She can feel the seals on the walls, new and hastily-slapped on. They’re probably privacy seals, meant to keep this conversation from her parents in the next room. Sakura guesses they weren’t allowed in just in case Mikoto was wrong and they were the ones behind her sudden issues. She hates the idea that someone might think her parents would hurt her.

“So, Sakura-chan,” Kimura begins, his voice light and breezy, “How do you feel today?”

Sasaki’s chakra gives a pulse of mirth Sakura recognises from interactions with Shikamaru – Sasaki is expecting something to be funny. Probably the answer she’s about to give.

“I’m a little hungry.” Sakura says, testing the waters. As expected, Sasaki has to hold back a laugh. “And I saw a dog yesterday.”

“Did you?”

“Uh-huh. Big one.”

“Do you like dogs?”

“Yeah. They’re cute.”

“You don’t find them scary?”

“Well, I guess some are. But that doesn’t mean they’re not cute.”

“You think some things can be scary and cute?” Sasaki interjects, an eyebrow raised in interest.

“Yes. My friend Ino-chan is very pretty, but when she gets mad she can be pretty scary. She doesn’t like bullies, you know. She’s always nice to me, though.”

“Have you met many bullies?”

Sakura thinks about it. Ami was mean to her, yes, but there were a lot of conflicting emotions going on inside her. She was oddly afraid of Sasuke’s anger. His opinion had meant a lot to her, and they’d never even spoken. Sakura thought that was sad.

“A few.” She says vaguely. “An old man was mean to Naruto, once. I hit him in the knee.”

A curl of trepidation in Sasaki’s aura. She didn’t like where this was going.

“Do you often hit people?” Kimura asks.

“No.” Sakura says honestly. She did in her dreams, but she hasn’t yet. Though she would have hit
Kakashi if she’d gotten the chance. She really needs to learn more from Shisui.

Relief from Sasaki.

“So, tell us more about this mean old man. What happened?” Kimura sits forward, his face open and interested. His chakra is coldly calculating – like Shikamaru’s, but without the warmth of curiosity or concern – and focused solely on her.

“I was in the park with Ino-chan and I saw a man go up to a boy and spit in his face. For no reason at all! And then he started shouting at him and I got really mad. I told him to say sorry and he got even meaner! He said horrible things about Naruto. He wouldn’t say sorry and my parents always said I should stand up to bullies, so I did. They also said I shouldn’t stand up to anyone who’s bigger than me, but everyone’s bigger than me! He called Naruto a monster so I punched him in the leg. I’m not sorry!” She looks up at them, defiant, daring them to tell her off.

Sasaki is secretly proud, for some reason.

“Is this when the nightmares started, Sakura-chan?” Kimura asks softly.

Sakura blinks, startled. She looks down at her feet, which barely meet the end of the sofa cushion. “Yes.” She says quietly to her shoes. She feels Kimura’s satisfaction at her answer. She doesn’t look up to see if his face matches.

“Can you tell us a bit about these nightmares?” Sasaki asks.

“O-okay… Um… They’re… they’re horrible.” Sakura blurs out, desperate to finally talk about the awful things she’s seen, “I keep seeing Naruto dying over and over again… and there’s never anything I can do! And if I can’t stop it, that means it’s basically my fault, right? Be-because what if I’d never stopped that man in the park? What if I never said anything to Naruto? He didn’t have any friends before we met! If I hadn’t done anything that day, what would have happened to Naruto? Would he still be alone? A-and how long was he alone before I met him? I’ve got two whole parents who love me and they’re really nice to me and Naruto d-doesn’t have anyone but me! I was fine before we met and if I’d let that man be horrible to him, my life would still be fine, right? But Na-Naruto! He… he… he needs me.”

Sakura scrunches up her face, trying to keep the tears from spilling over. They’re welling up, blurring her vision. Sasaki and Kimura’s concerned faces look strange and distorted.

“You know Naruto has people to take care of him. At the orphanage.” Sasaki says gently.

Sakura violently shakes her head, “No! They’re horrible! They don’t care about him at all! Naruto told me all about it. And all the other kids get ‘adopted but he never does because people like that horrible old man think he’s a monster but there’s NOTHING WRONG WITH HIM!”

Sakura’s shout rings through the room. She freezes. Somewhere in the back of her mind, a faint voice hopes the privacy seals kept her parents from hearing that little outburst.

The adults are silent.

“He… he’s so nice.” Sakura says, her voice shaking. Pleading for them to understand. “He smiles all the time. He barely has any food but he still tries to share his ramen with me. He deserves a mummy and daddy to love him and take care of him. I wanted to take care of him, but no one will let me. Please… please let me take care of him. I’ll be really good, I swear. I can cook! I’ll clean my room every day, I’ll do all my chores and my dad’s, I’ll sell my books so I can buy food for Naruto and…”
“Sakura-chan, Naruto is not a pet that you can adopt and take care of with your parents’ permission.” Kimura says matter-of-factly.

Sakura stares at him, trembling, barely noticing the fresh round of tears springing up. “I never thought that. I don’t want to keep Naruto. I want to keep him safe.”

“You don’t think he is?” Sasaki asks, sounding politely interested. Her chakra shows just how interested she really is.

“I’ve played with him a lot and I’ve seen how mean some of the grown-ups are around him. They shout at him and some of them won’t let him in their shops. I’ve got other friends and this never happens to them. Never. That old man didn’t even know Naruto and he got so mad at him that he spat in his face. I don’t ever want that to happen again.”

“How would you stop that?”

“Well, Naruto would live with me and I’d keep him safe.” Sakura says seriously.

“You know that’s not going to happen.” Kimura says in that I-know-better voice so many adults use.

“Why shouldn’t it?” Sakura scowls, crossing her arms.

“It just won’t. Now, let’s discuss your first meeting with Naruto one more time, please.”

Sakura lets out a long, dramatic sigh – a bad habit she’s picked up from Shisui – and starts the story again, in a bored monotone.

Sasaki’s chakra twitches in amusement three more times that day.

xxxxxxxxx

It’s been a week since Mikoto came to Sakura’s house and broke her parents’ hearts.

Since then, Sakura’s been treated to three meetings with Kimura and Sasaki. Kimura seems to be the interrogator, albeit a softened version to keep her from getting scared, and Sasaki is the therapist. Kimura wants to know what happened, Sasaki wants to know why. Since she’s not meant to know about the potential abuse claims, the two pretend that they’ve come just for a nice chat every time. Sakura thinks even a real four-year-old would be suspicious of that.

Sakura hasn’t seen Naruto or the Monsters in a whole week. She hasn’t seen Ino since she forced her into silence – which didn’t even make a difference, thanks to Mikoto’s terrible timing – and the longer it gets, the worse Sakura feels. She wonders what would have happened if Ino really did tell her father. Would he have helped? Or would things be even worse than they are now?

It couldn’t get much worse than having a scheduled playdate with Sasuke, organised by Mikoto and chaperoned by Itachi.

Sakura tries not to sigh, because Itachi is on high alert and would undoubtedly notice. Sasuke is clueless, walking alongside them down the street. His chakra says he’s happy, probably because his big brother’s with him. Itachi feels like the Masks – his chakra is a void, completely gone. If she couldn’t see him, she would have no idea he was there.

The three of them are heading to Sasuke’s house, because apparently Mikoto just had to have Sakura round for lunch. Sakura thinks about all the things she would rather be doing right now. Climbing trees with Naruto. Making daisy chains with Ino. Sharing food with Chouji. Cloud-watching with
Shikamaru. Playing shinobi with Shisui. Bickering with Kakashi while Genma laughs in the background.

Itachi seems to be waiting for an attack, which is silly. They’re in the middle of Konoha, heading towards his own home. Why would he be worried about being attacked?

Sakura senses two familiar chakra signals approaching. They slow down as they get closer, coming towards them at a politer pace. Itachi stops walking. Sasuke follows suit so quickly that he almost trips.

“Yo.” Kakashi drops down onto the ground in front of them, book in front of his face. He’s scanning the pages, looking completely disinterested in their presence despite greeting them.

Genma appears next to him, offering Sakura a little salute and a grin, though his chakra gives a sad twinge at the sight of her.

Itachi moves in front of her smoothly, cutting off her view of the two older shinobi. “Hello, Hatake-san, Shiranui-san. Can I be of service?”

Genma is amused now, for some reason. Kakashi’s a little irritated, though it doesn’t show in his voice.

“Yeah, we need a chat. Now would be great.” Kakashi says, false cheer permeating his words. Sakura grimaces at the sound, and almost misses Sasuke frowning at her reaction.

“I’m busy watching my little brother and his friend.” Itachi says.

“Oh, not with you. With Sakura.” Kakashi says blithely. There’s a flicker of mischief in his chakra.

Itachi’s stance tightens, just a tiny shift of his feet. His hands twitch towards his belt, just like Shisui’s do whenever he gets nervous. “What do you need with her? And how do you know her?”

“We’re old friends.” Genma remarks. Sakura can hear the smile in his voice, though she still can’t see him, thanks to Itachi’s back solidly blocking the way.

“…with a four-year-old.” Itachi says dryly.

“Time is relative. And wasting with every second of this. This is official business, Itachi. You can take it up with our superiors – and with their superiors, if you like.” Kakashi says.

“Am I in trouble?” Sakura pipes up, poking her head out from behind Itachi. Sasuke very gently tugs her back, though not before she sees Genma give her a wink – and another twinge of sadness. What’s wrong with him?

“Not at all, Sakura-san,” Itachi says softly, “I’m just going to talk to my colleagues for a moment, okay? We’ll be right over there if you need us.” He points to a nearby spot down the street.

“I told you, we don’t need to talk to you – ”

“Yes, you made that very clear, Hatake-san. But I need to talk to you.” Itachi says, his voice chilly and formal.

Sasuke gives Sakura a conspiratorial grin, bright enough that she feels compelled to return it.

Genma snickers.
“Okay, then.” Kakashi says calmly, though he’s getting more irritated by the second.

The adults – and Itachi – walk off a fair distance, far enough that they would have to strain to hear them, but not too far to keep track of them. Sakura can see Itachi’s face pointed squarely in their direction. It’s clear where his focus is, despite the conversation going on.

“This is boring,” Sakura says to Sasuke, “Want to go find Naruto and the others?”

Sasuke looks sorely tempted for a moment, then glances at his brother, “No, they’d see us leave.”

“They can’t catch us both if we run different ways!” Sakura declares.

Then they both get lightly whacked over the heads.

Shisui smiles down at them, “They absolutely could catch both of you. Just one of them could catch six of you with his hands tied behind his back, blindfolded. Also, the first rule of teamwork is don’t split up, dummy.”

“Shisui-kun!” Sakura says happily. She’d once said that she liked Genma more, but she changed her mind at the sight of Shisui’s amused face. She really needed to talk to him about this whole mess.

“Why were you planning to run? Tired of being babysat by a baby?” Shisui asks, jerking his head towards Itachi, who was staring straight at them. His intense focus had faded somewhat at Shisui’s arrival, he was clearly relieved to see him.

“Itachi-nii’s not a baby.” Sasuke says, scowling up at his cousin.

Shisui laughs, ruffling his hair, “You’re all babies to me. So, what’s going on?”

“Someone’s hurting Sakura so Itachi promised our mother he would look after her.” Sasuke says, straightforward as ever.

Shisui gapes at him, “What?!!”

Sakura flinches as his chakra surges in rage.

xxxxxxx

Kakashi had known from the moment Sakura had warned him not to sleep in trees, concerned that he – a complete stranger – might fall out and hurt himself, that he was in deep trouble.

He had been worried about the future, when Sakura inevitably became a genin and started taking on missions. He was worried about the kid with too much heart being sent off to kill other people, worried that she would find herself in a fight she couldn’t win and die young just like Obito, just like Rin. He was worried about the chance that Sakura, talented little genius Sakura, would turn out to be good at killing after all. Just like him.

With her ever-present smile, joyful words and boundless enthusiasm, he never thought to worry about the present. The battles she might be facing now.

But the report Genma had sent him, the one he read half a dozen times before the words sank in, it made it clear in terse, precise language, that Sakura was under attack by an unknown force. And he hadn’t noticed. He’d assumed her parents were the overbearing, controlling type, forcing their little girl to train over and over again, but for some reason he hadn’t considered the fact that they might go beyond that particular evil. The therapist had seemed convinced that Sakura’s parents were innocent,
but Kakashi wasn’t willing to rule them out just yet.

Without having to discuss it, both Genma and Kakashi had waved off Naruto-Watch for the day, leaving him in the capable hands of the rest of squad. They met up early, both still tired from their last mission from a few days ago, and headed out to find Sakura. And some answers, if possible.

He hadn’t expected to find Sakura being lead through the street by Itachi, who looked more on edge than Kakashi had ever seen him outside of a mission.

“How can we help?” Genma asks, the senbon in his mouth shifting with every word, reflecting the sunlight. He’d taken the news of Sakura’s psych eval a lot better than Kakashi had, so much so that Kakashi wondered how much of this he’d seen coming.

Itachi straightens up, looking about ten seconds off a salute since he’s facing down two of his superiors. He’s one of those poor kids who’ve had every inch of innocence and joy beaten out of them by life, the very picture of what Kakashi doesn’t want for Sakura.

“I’d like the truth of how you know my brother’s friend. You said this was official business, but I happen to know that nothing official has been implemented regarding the Haruno family.” Itachi says stiffly. For Kakashi, it’s like looking into the past and seeing himself in all his stuck-up, rules-obsessed glory. He can’t say he misses being that uptight.

But maybe Itachi’s not as uptight as he appears, if he’s willing to lie to his superiors’ faces. Because the issue of Haruno Sakura is about as official as it gets now. Not only has she been forced to see the therapist more than once, Kimura Ryuu from T&I has been tasked with gleaning exactly what has happened to the kid, using the mildest form of interrogation possible.

Kakashi’s not an idiot. He knows why Itachi is stiff and defensive right now. There’s an invisible threat surrounding Sakura and she was reported to have regularly approached adults, seeking friendship. Kakashi has worked with Itachi a number of times, despite his comparatively low rank, knows he’s pegged for ANBU one day. He knows Itachi is naturally suspicious and protective of younger children, thanks to his bond with his little brother.

And if Kakashi was in his position, babysitting a potentially-abused child, he would be very interested to know why two jounin wanted a chat with her.

“Sakura’s far too curious and determined for her own good. She decided we were going to be friends and that was it. We didn’t have any say in the matter. But then, when we heard the rumours about the civilian child being treated for trauma, cause unknown, we suspected…” Kakashi glances meaningfully over at Sakura.

Who is standing with Sasuke, where they left her, but with the sudden addition of Uchiha Shisui, Itachi’s older cousin. The boy is smiling down at the younger children, mischief alight on his face. Kakashi knows him well enough to shudder at that look.

Itachi has been carefully keeping the children in his eyeline throughout the conversation. Kakashi is reminded of the way sheepdogs watch their flock.

“I witnessed her suffer from a flashback, recently. If that is what it was – the situation was unclear. She became very pale and was unresponsive for several minutes. She said, ‘please don’t hurt him.’ Upon ‘waking,’ she was still very disoriented and upset. There was no apparent trigger, but my mother has seen her similarly afflicted once before, also without any obvious reason. It seems likely that she suffers these attacks frequently.” Itachi says, in the same tone he uses to deliver reports.
Kakashi has known many shinobi suffer what Itachi is describing. Being suddenly besieged by your worst memories and nightmares all at once. Being trapped inside your own mind. A civilian girl of Sakura’s age has no reason at all to have the same condition as a veteran shinobi.

A spike of killing intent has them all whirling around.

Shisui is blank-faced, a telling sign that he is absolutely furious, too angry to bother slapping on a smile.

He sets his jaw and heads over to them, leaving the two kids staring at him, bewildered. A line appears between Itachi’s brows, the closest the boy gets to looking concerned.

“Did you know.” Shisui demands, glaring up at Kakashi. Whatever it is, it’s not a question.

“Know what?”

“That Sakura’s being – that someone’s – ” Shisui splutters impotently.

“Ah. No. I didn’t. Should I have?”

Shisui’s hands flash out, spelling shinobi code: You’re on the squad that watches the jinchuuriki kid. She’s his best friend. You must have watched her too.

Kakashi doesn’t bother dignifying that with a response. Shisui’s angry, and probably guilty, and lashing out to blame others instead of himself.

“Sakura once said that you were her friend,” Kakashi says lightly, “She listed all of her best friends and your name came up. Imagine my surprise.”

Shisui looks between Kakashi and Genma, his dark eyes narrowed and assessing. It’s a foreign look on the normally cheerful shinobi. “Genma knows the story already. I was an idiot, I accidentally hurt Sakura with a Katon while training. I took her to the hospital and at some point between there and back she decided we were the very best of friends.”

“You said she got hurt and you took her to the hospital, not that you were the one who hurt her in the first place.” Genma points out, his tone deceptively mild.

“I was ashamed,” Shisui snaps, “It was my mistake. It should never have happened.”

“Shisui-kun!” Sakura says brightly, peeking around him. “Don’t be upset, Shisui-kun. Everything’s okay. I saw a dog last week. And I’m going to have dumplings again tonight. You should have dumplings too. They always cheer me up.”

“I’m not upset, Sakura-san.” Shisui says, the formality coming off a little false.

Sakura tilts her head, her eyes inquisitive. “Sasuke said that someone is hurting me, so Itachi-san has to look after me. I don’t think anyone has hurt me, Shisui-kun. I would probably notice. So, everything’s okay! Oh, hello, Kakashi-san, Genma-san. I didn’t get to say hello before. Hello!”

Kakashi and Genma both chorus hello in return, shamefully quick to return the greeting.

Sasuke appears at Sakura’s side, “Sakura, I think we should be going. Okaa-san’s waiting.”

“Okay!” Sakura agrees cheerfully, then quickly seizes Shisui around the waist, squeezing tightly for a few seconds.
She toddles over to Genma, who willingly opens his arms and kneels down for a hug, then she looks up at Kakashi hopefully. He sighs, returning his attention to his book, but doesn’t simply vanish in a swirl of leaves. For him, that’s practically an invitation. Sakura hugs him carefully, as though afraid he might break.

Itachi looks briefly terrified at the possibility that Sakura might want to embrace him too, but she just offers him a respectful nod, which he slowly returns, a little smile gracing his face.

Sakura gives them all a considering look, lingering the longest on Shisui. “Have you all been worrying about me? I don’t really understand what’s going on, but you should know that I’m just fine. I promise. Please don’t worry anymore. Bye bye!”

“Bye bye.” Sasuke repeats in a much more solemn tone, following after Sakura without hesitation.

Itachi gives Kakashi and Genma a shallow bow, looking stressed, then hurries off after the two children.

“I heard something about Mikoto, which means lunch can’t be far. I’ll be off too, then.” Shisui grins, no trace of his anger remaining, and flickers away with his trademark speed.

Genma and Kakashi look at each other.

“Should we verify his story at the hospital?” Genma asks.

As much as Kakashi trusts Shisui, this is pretty much the only lead they have so far, and it fell in their laps so obligingly.

“In and out as quickly as possible,” Kakashi says with a shudder, “I’ve discharged myself from that place so often that they’ve started trying to jab me with needles the moment I walk through the door, just in case.”

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Showing their hitae-ate at the hospital gets them through several doors and up the chains of command until they find someone who remembers seeing Sakura.

A harried-looking woman pushes them on a young boy, who looks more like an apprentice than anything official, then hurries off to continue working. Shinobi hospitals are always bustling.

“Hello,” The boy says, his smile friendly enough but there’s a hint of caution in his dark eyes, “I’m Yakushi Kabuto. What can I do for you?”

“We’re here about a recent incident involving Haruno Sakura.” Genma says, leaning against the counter Kabuto’s standing behind. They have an unspoken agreement to let Genma do the talking on missions like these. He’s friendly and approachable, Kakashi is perverted and obnoxious. Genma’s also an assassin with a massive body count and Kakashi uses his terrible reputation like a shield, but no one really needs to know that.

Kabuto pauses, tapping his chin. “Little girl, pink hair?” He asks after a moment of thinking. When they nod, he frowns. “She came in with minor facial burns. My superior, Kuronuma-san, wasn’t going to heal them, but since facial wounds scar so easily, and she was so young, I decided to do it.”

“How did she get the burns?” Genma asks.

Kabuto’s lips purse, “An idiot. He was practicing in a training field and failed to notice he wasn’t
alone."

"Does this idiot have a name?"

Kabuto’s glasses glint, and Kakashi gets the feeling the boy’s used to receiving payment for handing out information like this. He’s young for an information broker, but they’re not uncommon in shinobi villages. The only really bad thing about them is that they don’t like handing out facts for free.

"Shisui. He looked like an Uchiha. He seemed contrite enough."

So far, Shisui’s story is checking out in full. It makes sense. Kakashi doesn’t really have a reason to doubt Shisui. His only real concern was a vague thought that he might be protecting someone else, taking the blame for Sakura’s injury on their behalf.

"Can we see Sakura’s medical file?" Kakashi asks.

Kabuto is silent for a long moment, dark eyes shaded by his bangs, then: "No, I don’t think so."

"Pardon me?" Genma says, eyebrows raised.

Kabuto glances back up, smile firmly in place, "I don’t believe I have the authority for that. You’ll have to take it up with someone else. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a lot of work to be getting on with."

And with that, the bespectacled brat leaves without a second look.

Kakashi says, vaguely wounded, “Do we look suspicious or something?”

“I think we might.” Genma smirks.

It takes a while to find someone free enough to talk who actually is willing to give them Sakura’s file, then it takes even longer for them to actually retrieve said file, by which point Kakashi is considering lying down in one of the vacant beds and checking himself in with exhaustion.

The file is slimmer than Sakura’s official one, which is full of copies of Naruto-Watch’s reports that include her, as well as her psych evals and transcripts of her therapy sessions.

“She was born outside Konoha,” Kakashi notes, “Her mother gave birth on the way back from visiting some relatives. Other than that and the Shisui thing, there’s pretty much nothing."

It’s a pretty big relief. If Sakura was being abused, you’d expect records of hospital visits, and if she had wounds or scars during a check-up, they would not have been overlooked.

Sakura had seemed pretty certain that no one was hurting her.

But he owes it to Naruto to make sure she’s right.

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One second Sakura was walking alongside Sasuke, the next she was tucked under someone’s arm and speeding away.

Terror gripped her. She instinctively lashed out with her chakra, which was lazily batted away like it was nothing.

“Settle down, Firefly,” A familiar voice says, amused, “Anyone would think you didn’t want to hang
out with me.”

Shisui!

Before she could shout, Shisui deposited her on the ground gently. She staggered, looking around. They were in a far-off, deserted corner of Konoha.

“The only place they wouldn’t dream of looking for us is somewhere no Uchiha would ever go,” Shisui says, by way of explanation, then leads Sakura down a passage, “Put this on over your eyes, please. Clan secrets, you know. Boring stuff.”

He offers her his hitae-ate. Sakura clutches it with an odd feeling of déjà vu. She had one of these once. Or she will, one day. She loved it more than anything, except –

(There is a picture on her dresser, of her and Naruto, Kakashi-sensei and Sasuke-kun. In it, only she and her teacher are smiling. Maybe it was a sign of things to come. Looking at it only brought her pain these days, remembering the times she used to stroke Sasuke’s face through the glass. Team Seven has shattered beyond repair.)

Team Seven?

Her teammates were Naruto, Sasuke and Kakashi? That’s perfect, Sakura thinks happily, I can look after all of them together. And this time, Team Seven won’t break. We’ll be the strongest team in the village.

Sakura puts the hitae-ate on as a blindfold, then stumbles as a wash of familiarity hits her again –

(“When you fight the Sharingan,” Kakashi says patiently, standing across from her in a field, “Your only chance is to close your eyes. But it’s basic human instinct to open your eyes to seek information, so if there’s a sudden noise, pain or any kind of distraction, you’re done. So, short of mastering the Gai technique of being too insane to be distracted by stimuli, your best bet is to blindfold yourself. So, today, let’s learn how to fight without sight.”)

Shisui is holding her hand, and she’s walking without realising it. They’re underground – she can’t hear any birdsong or feel the breeze, and there’s a suffocating sensation of earth overhead.

Shisui releases her hand and they both stop. He mutters something, she hears fabric rustling, a tell-tale sign of quick movement – hand seals, maybe? – and then there is a shift of stone.

Shisui leads her through a doorway – or something like a doorway – then tugs off the hitae-ate.

“Sorry for the subterfuge. It’s not that I don’t trust you, it’s that you’re four and you’ve proven that you don’t have the capacity for deception. Not a bad thing in a kid, but a terrible thing in a shinobi.”

They’re in some kind of shrine, with red and white fans painted on the walls. The floors are wood, but they didn’t creak under their feet as they walked, despite their obvious age.

“So, Firefly. I think it’s time you told me what’s going on. The truth, please.”

***

Hello, friends.

For reasons totally unconnected to this fic I swear, can anyone tell me about summons? I’ve googled (again, this is where I get all my Naruto info. It is not 1000% effective, sadly) but I didn’t find much.
Where do the contracts come from? Can you buy them? Can they be customised to summon specific animals? I DON’T GET IT, PLEASE SEND HELP

Shisui is Not Happy. He also snatched Sakura away right in front of Sasuke, but behind Itachi’s back. I’d like you to take a moment to imagine the Uchiha brothers’ faces at that very moment.

Sakura’s youth has kept her from the Torture and Interrogation department, but they still sent a dude out to interview her a couple times and make sure there’s nothing weird going on. I figured they wouldn’t resort to Yamanaka intervention unless there was a potential threat to the village, and I don’t know if a potentially-abused civilian kid counts? But these are ninja. A suspicious bunch.

Everyone in this chapter was overly suspicious and jumpy and it was hilarious to write.

Sakura was only supposed to hug Shisui originally but my fingers slipped on the keyboard and everyone got a hug because FLUFF

(I deleted a scene of Genma and Kakashi getting drunk because it didn’t fit, but who knows, it may come back at some point. With a vengeance.)

Also, Kabuto is petty and isn’t going to hand over potentially-sensitive info for nothing, especially not when it might affect the nice girl who smiled at him one time.

Sakura’s attempts to diffuse tension is pretty much HEY I SAW A DOG, YOU GUYS

Also, she’s going to adopt Naruto if it’s the last thing she does! Being four won’t stop her from being the best big sister ever! Some of you talk about Sakura like proud parents, and it warms my heart.

**Quick poll for fun:** What was the saddest moment of Naruto for you?

For me it was the scene where Hinata confesses her love for Naruto and gets ping-ponged around by Pain, because it was the very first time someone ever said that to Naruto and meant it (romantic stylez) and he had to WATCH HER GET BEATEN TO A PULP. ARGH. MY POOR HEART.

But younger me also sobbed all the way through Zabuza and Haku’s deaths. I was very much Not Okay.

(did you know that Sakura saw a dog? A big one.)
Sakura sinks to the floor.

This is a conversation she should probably be sitting through. Shisui joins her, cross-legged and sprawling to accommodate his longer legs around hers. There’s not a lot of space.

*Okay, Sakura thinks, it’s easier to tell the truth than to lie, sometimes.*

“Mikoto-san told my parents that she thinks I’m being abused and now I can’t play with my friends or go to the library on my own.” Sakura says sadly.

“Are you being abused?” Shisui demands, a sharp flare of outrage in his chakra.

“No! Of course not!” She huffs, frustrated.

“Mikoto isn’t a fool. Why would she think that if nothing’s going on?”

“Because… well, because… she’s seen me get upset a few times…”

“You still can’t lie to save your life. Firefly, please. I need you to be honest with me now. I promise I won’t get mad, and I definitely won’t tell anyone.” Shisui ducks his head to make eye contact with her. He looks very serious for once.

“I can’t explain because I don’t understand it.” Sakura says quietly, looking at the floor, breaking his gaze. “I really don’t. It…” She takes a deep breath. Is she really doing this? Shisui is kind, Shisui cares, and she has never, ever dreamed about him. He might be a friend, an enemy, he might leave Konoha like Sasuke or hurt someone like Itachi. Shisui is the definition of a wild card. But… he saved her from activating a dangerous jutsu. He kept her from spilling secrets when it didn’t benefit him in the slightest. He’s taught her without expecting anything in return.

Sakura slowly takes out one of the paper bombs Shisui once gave to her. She cracks it open and examines the contents. Hundreds of fragile petals are packed inside.

Shisui is looking at her, an uncharacteristic frown on his face.

“Sakura.” He says her name for the first time since they met. “Please, be honest with me.”

“I have dreams.” Sakura says, not looking up from the paper bomb. Her heart is racing and she feels cold all over. She’s so, so scared. “Of things that are going to happen. Before they happen. I saw Naruto in the park. I saw the man spit at him. And I did nothing. Then, it really did happen right in front of me, just like I dreamed it, and this time, I stopped it. I helped Naruto. I changed something. I’ve seen so many things, Shisui-kun. I’ve seen Naruto and Ino-chan die. I know Naruto is something called a ‘kyuubi jinchuuriki,’ and that one day the whole village will love him even though they think he’s a monster right now. I’ve seen Sasuke leave me and break my heart. I’ve seen him hurt me. I’ve seen so many things and I don’t… I don’t understand them.”

She tips the paper bomb up and lets some of the petals spill out. They float lazily to the floor. “It’s like I can see my future in bits and pieces,” She catches one of the petals, “It’s never in order and sometimes it doesn’t make sense at all. I’ve seen things that are going to happen in a few days, and other things in years and years to come.”

Shisui’s mouth opens and closes several times, like he’s trying to come up with something to say.
eyes are wide. He shakes his head, dazed. “Firefly… I thought you were going to tell me about some evil guy… someone I could fight, something I could stop. This… this is insane.”

Sakura flinches, “You think I’m crazy?”

Shisui doesn’t even hesitate to reply, “No. You shouldn’t know that about Naruto, and I know there’s not a single person in the village who would’ve told you that. Not even your own parents. You aren’t insane, the situation is. I – I don’t… I don’t know how to fix this. I… how can I keep you safe when I couldn’t even… not even Itachi… what should I do?” He mutters, pacing up and down the shrine. His hands are in his hair, tugging it until it sticks up wildly.

“Okay,” He whirls around, pointing at her, “How does it work? I want to test it out. What have you dreamed about me?”

Sakura freezes, staring back at him. Her mouth feels glued shut.

Shisui’s eyes widen a fraction, then he laughs, a dark, bitter thing. “Oho. It’s like that, is it? If you don’t see someone’s future, maybe they don’t have a future, huh? That’s… haha… it doesn’t matter. This isn’t about me. Tell me what you’ve seen about Itachi.”

Sakura digs her fingernails into her palms. “I haven’t seen anything about him.”

“Liar.” He grins. His chakra is swirling in a constant torment of anxiety and grief. Sakura can hardly bear it. “Tell me about him, please.”

“I – I guess it’s one of the reason’s Mikoto-san misunderstood. She saw me react to Itachi-san, when I dreamed about him for the first time.” Sakura takes a deep breath and lets her grip relax, the pain from her nails vanishing. “I saw him fighting Kakashi-san. He was wearing a black cloak with red clouds and he looked older, maybe ten years or so. His eyes were red. He wasn’t sparring with him. I was really, really scared. He – ”

“What did his hitae-ate look like?” Shisui asks tonelessly, his gaze steady on her face. His chakra is like a focused point.

Sakura thinks about it. He wore it across his forehead, like many shinobi did, but there was something…

“Oh! It had a scratch across it! Through the symbol!” Sakura says eagerly, hoping it was the right answer.

Shisui slumps, covering his face with his hand.

“Shisui-kun?”

He turns away.

“Shisui-kun?”

He’s silent for a very long time. His shoulders are shaking. “O-okay, Firefly. Enough about Itachi, for now.”

“Is he going to be bad, Shisui-kun?” Sakura presses. From what she has seen, Itachi’s family loves him and has no idea that he might grow up wrong. He seemed kind when she talked with him, too. The only real worrying sign was the edge of darkness he had when facing down Ami. His anger was unsettling.

“He might… he might do something bad.” Shisui murmurs, his eyes distant.
“So, you want to stop him.”

“No, I want to save him.” He corrects, poking her forehead. “But, I may have to leave that up to you, my little student. If your dreams really are visions, it seems significant that I’m not in any of them. I don’t know how Itachi would fare without me. The Uchiha clan is so secluded and isolationist, it doesn’t tolerate any outside ideas or anything that might not benefit the family. Itachi wasn’t made for that life. Being the perfect son is already killing him. He needs a friend. Someone to keep him from whatever path he’s on at the moment. And who better than you, someone who can see every path?”

“He scares me, Shisui-kun.” Sakura confesses, her voice watery.

Shisui wraps his arms around her, “I’m sorry, Firefly. But whatever you saw about Itachi was years into the future, right? In the same way that we aren’t who we used to be, we aren’t who we will be either. Itachi’s not that person yet. You have to look at him as he is now, as hard as that might be.”

They don’t say anything for a while, just holding on to each other. The only sound in the tiny shrine is their breathing, like a quiet, rhythmic breeze.

“Shall I tell you about who Itachi is now?” Shisui asks gently.

Sakura nods, burying her face in Shisui’s shoulder.

“He pretends to be stoic and serious, but he can’t hide the fact that he’s a kid. He loves sweets. Dango’s his favourite. He’s only nine but he’s already miles ahead of every shinobi his age. He’s naturally gifted, sure, but a lot of his abilities come from hard work. He’s always pushed himself far too hard. Probably because his dad’s such a – uh, mean person – who’s always pressuring him to be the best. He loves his little brother more than anything. Who knows why, Sasu-chan’s such a little brat. Just kidding, don’t glare at me! So, Itachi’s a pretty great kid. He’s… he’s my best friend. He means a lot to me.” Shisui finishes with a deep sigh, his arms tightening around her.

“He can’t be a Monster,” Sakura says sternly, ignoring the tears in her eyes, “He’s too old. And he’s no fun. But I’ll be his friend anyway, okay? So, don’t be sad. I don’t like it when you’re sad. You should always be happy.”

“Thanks, Firefly.” Shisui says quietly. She can hear the smile in his voice. “I’ll try, for you.”

“You talk about how Itachi and I are really young, but so are you, Shisui-kun. You need to have fun too. Not just when we’re playing shinobi, okay?”

“Ah. I guess I better change the course I’m on, too. Who knows if it’ll do any good, but it’s worth trying. Okay. No more just playing the fool. It’s always nice to play down to people’s expectations, right?” Shisui laughs, with the first real curl of mirth in his chakra since they entered the shrine.

“I don’t know what you mean, Shisui-kun.”

“Oh, just that I’m not going to try to meet impossible standards anymore. If I’m the village idiot, it’ll take some of the focus off Itachi. They’ll all be far too busy shaking their heads over me to coo over his success. And he’ll look better without having to kill himself working too hard, because I’ll look so terrible by comparison. Do you know, Firefly, one of my Academy Teachers once said I had ‘deplorable skills in strategy?’ I’ll show him. That old fart. You shouldn’t call people that, though.”

“Okay, Shisui-kun.”

“Such a good kid. You know, this explains so much about you. The way you talk, act, how much
you know – and don’t know – and the reason you were so upset after seeing Sasu-chan at the park. I gave him a sternly-worded lecture about that, did you know? It’s good to keep him on his toes, so I won’t apologise. Your ‘dreams’ sound an awful lot like visions of the future. It’s possible that you’ve developed a kekkei genkai. It might be the first of its kind, or there might have been others like you, secretly altering the course of the future. Phew. Just the idea of it is… phew. Normally, kekkei genkai are passed down through families, though there have been cases of just one person activating one. Like the Shodaime Hokage. Your parents are chuunin, right? Stands to reason that they don’t secretly have the power to change the world.”

Shisui let out a wild laugh, sounding rather giddy. “Oho, Firefly. The things you’re gonna do. I always knew you were special and that you were gonna be great, but this is beyond anything I imagined for you. But… remember when I told you never to tell anyone you can heal? And I just got why you can do that, wow. Well, this is like that, but a thousand times worse. Do not EVER tell ANYONE about your dreams. Ever. There are people in the village who would do bad things if they knew. To you and everyone you care about. Right now, it seems like Mikoto’s theory of abuse is working in your favour. Lucky you. Stick to it. Now, let’s get planning. I need you to teach me how to read your code, so I can understand your notes. We can pass messages along that only you and I can read.”

“It’s a secret.” Sakura pouts, folding her arms.

“You and I have no secrets,” Shisui says, unimpressed, “We are open books. You like books, right? So, c’mon. Gimme your secret code. Stop being so stingy. I could crack it myself, but I wouldn’t want to embarrass you.”

Sakura lightly hits his knee, sulking. “I made it up all by myself. It took ages. But, I didn’t burn the code because you stopped me, so I guess you can have it. You have to keep it safe, though. Or I’ll get mad.”

“The horror.” Shisui rolls his eyes.

“I can be scary when I’m angry! I can punch mountains and then they go boom!”

Shisui pauses. “Well. That’s. Okay, that’s mildly terrifying. And somehow, I feel very proud. You’re gonna build bridges with that sweet personality of yours, and then destroy them with your bare hands. Tell me about everything you’ve dreamed yourself doing. Every technique you can perform. If you don’t know the name, just describe it.”

Sakura sat with Shisui for half an hour, talking at length about the things she had seen herself doing. He listened to her stories of caving in men’s ribs with one strike without flinching, and seemed impressed by her tales of bringing people back from the brink of death with healing.

“Okay, half of these techniques belong to Tsunade – ” Shisui said finally, after listening intently to everything Sakura had to say.

(Tsunade-shishou is like the older, more bitter version of herself. She’s still everything Sakura wants to be, and more. She was the first person to give Sakura a chance. To look at her and see something beyond her weak, current self. She saw potential.)

“Was that a dream?” Shisui asks, eyes narrowing at her.

Sakura nods, a little dazed by the wave of fondness and gratitude she had felt for Tsunade.

“It isn’t hugely noticeable. You clearly lost focus and gazed into the distance, but it just looked like
you were daydreaming. I’m guessing it wasn’t a particularly traumatising vision.”

“I called her Tsunade-shishou.” Sakura informs him.

Shisui grins, “Knew it. There’s no chance you could have learned any of this without her tutelage. She was one of the Sannin, some of the best shinobi of their time. She left Konoha before you were born. If she teaches you, she must come back at some point. That’s some good news, at least. It’s going to be pretty difficult seeing you for a while, until the rumours about your abuse die down. Itachi’s in guard dog mode and his mother won’t be much better. I’m going to have fun explaining this little sojourn to them.”

“Sojourn means break or rest.” Sakura informs him.

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“This wasn’t restful.” Sakura sticks her tongue out at him.

Shisui laughs, and does the same, then his tongue turns purple and wobbles around goofily. Sakura falls about laughing.

Then, his tongue goes back to normal but his eyes are red and –

(A single red eye, streaming with tears. “Live, Sakura.”)

Sakura gasps, reeling back.

“Oh! Sorry, Firefly! It was just a little genjutsu, I thought it’d be funny!” Shisui says frantically.

“Why are your eyes red, Shisui-kun?” Sakura asks faintly. She’s seen eyes like that before in her dreams, spinning and spinning sickeningly until she’s dizzy with regret and fear.

“What did you see?” Shisui’s chakra pulls right back. Sakura’s learned that people do that instinctively to protect themselves, as if they’re awaiting a blow.

“Someone with red eyes, crying. They told me to live.”

Shisui sucks in a breath. “Good advice,” He says, pained, “I hope I never give it. My eyes are red, Firefly, because that’s my kekkei genkai. The gift of the Uchiha. Sharingan.”

(Red eyes burning through unfamiliar chakra, so intensely potent that it hangs around him in clouds. “Who did that to you, Sakura?”)

Sakura shivers.

“The Sharingan improves vision immeasurably,” Shisui pokes her forehead again with unerring precision, despite her attempts to dodge, “Hence why I noticed you dream again just now.”

“I think it was Sasuke. He was really, really angry. He said, ‘who did that to you?’ His eyes were like yours.”

“Interesting. So, your dreams can be triggered by speech. I said ‘Sharingan’ and you had a vision of Sasuke using his, at a particularly upsetting moment. As your sensei, I’m giving you an assignment. Try to focus on a certain person or thing. See if you can force a specific vision. If you could get even a small amount of control over your power, it could be very useful for you.”

“I tried that once. I tried to see Naruto. I think I fell asleep and had a real dream. He died. I don’t
want to do that again.” Sakura says imploringly.

“Okay, Firefly. Have you ever had a bad dream about your mother?”

Sakura shakes her head, sniffing.

“Try to have a dream about her this week. Do your best, kiddo. Also, can you sense when a dream’s about to come or does it happen randomly?”

“Sometimes I get a warning. It’s like… a nostalgic feeling. It comes over me really suddenly.”

“Great! Whenever you feel that, bite your tongue. Not hard, just enough to ground yourself. Hopefully, it’ll help mask your body language when you dream in front of people.” Shisui says knowledgeably.

Sakura tries to practice sneakily, biting her tongue when he’s not looking. “Ow!” She cries, covering her mouth with her hands. “Owowowow.” She sticks her tongue out and fans it, as if that’ll help.

“Too hard.” Shisui says sympathetically. “Silly. Do not heal that. You still have the chakra reserves of a one-legged kitten, even if you have the kekkei genkai of a Kage.”

“I’m not gonna be a Kage,” Sakura says indignantly, lisping a little through her sore tongue, “Naruto is! I’ve seen how much the village loves him one day. And I’m going to be his best friend because he won’t forget me, even when he’s really important and has lots of other friends.”

Shisui picks up a handful of the fallen petals and throws them at her face. “Stop being cute! You being adorable and trying to befriend strangers is what got you into this mess in the first place. Do you know how hard it is to lie to Hatake Kakashi?”

“Yep.” Sakura says, matter-of-fact.

“You’re a know-it-all of new and interesting proportions, huh. I like it. Well, Kakashi looked like he was going to skewer me when I admitted to hurting you by accident. Which isn’t even true!”

“It is if you look at it sideways,” Sakura says, tilting her head, “Kakashi-sensei always says to look beneath the underneath.”

Shisui freezes, a delighted grin blooming on his face. “Kakashi… sensei?!”

“Oh yeah. He’s the leader of Team Seven. That’s me, Naruto and Sasuke.”

“Sensei?! The Hokage gives Hatake Kakashi his own genin team? Aaaaand I can’t even tell anyone. Great. And Sasu-chan’s on your team? That’ll make it easier for Itachi to worry about the both of you at the same time.”

“You wanted me to be friends with Itachi-san, right? So, how do I make him like me?” Sakura asks.

Shisui gives a wry grin. “You’re already well on your way there. Just be yourself. Remind him he’s a kid. Break down his walls. But not with your fists, okay? You’re going to have monstrous strength someday.”

“Do you think if I try really hard, I can pick up really big dogs?”

“Sakura, no.”

xxxxxxxx
Shisui walks Sakura to Sasuke’s house in the Uchiha Compound.

It’s huge.

Sakura stares up at it in awe. They could fit three of her house in there!

“When I’m older I’m gonna live with Naruto in a house just like this and we’re gonna have a dog and some fish.” Sakura tells him very seriously.

“How about I visit?” Shisui smiles down at her.

“Sure, whenever you want. I can cook. I’ll make your favourite. But you have to take your shoes off, because it takes a long time to clean the floor when there’s so much of it.”

“You make a good point. What do you – ”

“Shisui.” Itachi says from behind them, his voice somehow polite yet seething in rage.

“Itachi! Look what I found! A lost child!” Shisui points at Sakura, beaming. “And I delivered her all the way here, too.”

“You stole her.” Itachi says bluntly. “And now she has missed lunch. Okaa-san is furious. Sasuke was very upset. You and I are going to spar, right now.”

Shisui raises his hands slightly, his grin turning manic, “Uh, right now? I’ve got a… a very important mission. With the Daimyo. Right now. Bye bye!”

He vanishes before Itachi can take a step.

Sakura stares sadly at the empty space he used to fill. She wanted to talk more with him. He was the only one who understood.

“Sakura-san,” Itachi says softly, “I hope you’re still hungry. Okaa-san has made a spread of food, since she didn’t know what you like. If you come over more often, you can tell her your favourites and she will make them for you.”

Right. She was supposed to be making friends with Itachi now.

“Thank you.” She says sweetly, smiling at him unreservedly. She feels a slight pleased hum in his chakra. “I’m very hungry. Shisui-kun and I took a walk and we talked about lots of things.”

“What sort of things?”

Sakura makes herself frown. “Well, everyone thinks I’m upset all the time, but I think I’m okay. He wanted to know if anyone was making me upset. He made lots of jokes.”

“That… certainly sounds like Shisui. Would you like to come inside?” Itachi asks politely.

Remind him he’s a kid, Shisui said.

“Okay!” She chirps, taking his hand. She feels it startle in hers, like a wild animal spooked by a loud noise. “Let’s play shinobi, Itachi-san!”

Itachi doesn’t move a muscle for a long moment. Then, his hand grips hers and all of a sudden he’s holding her hand, rather than the other way around.
“Lunch first,” He says firmly, “Then… you and Sasuke can play and I will watch.”

He starts walking towards the house.

Sakura refuses to budge.

He looks back at her, confused, when she fails to follow along behind him.

“I want you to play, Itachi-san. You helped me when Ami was being mean. I can do all sorts of things, but when people are being mean, I just… I can’t do anything. And I hate feeling helpless more than anything. You helped me, so I want us to be friends.” Sakura says solemnly, surprised to find it was true.

She was grateful to him for what he did. Her kekkei genkai might have given her a huge advantage over the other kids, but deep down she was still that shy little girl who couldn’t handle conflict. Itachi had cut through Ami’s words like they were nothing, when to Sakura, they were everything.

Itachi studies her. The lines beneath his eyes make him look older than he is. Shisui has the same, but they’re more like her father’s laughter lines. They just make him look more alive. Itachi always looks tired, right down to the bone.

“You told me to be good, once. What did you mean?” He asks.

Sakura thinks about it. She can hardly tell him the truth, that she saw him hurting Kakashi and that she was frightened of him.

Then again, sometimes it’s easier to tell the truth than make up a lie.

“Shisui-kun told me about you. He said you like dango and sweets and that Sasuke’s your favourite person in the world. I know you’re very strong and you work hard, but that’s not all you are, or all you can do. You can be a kid again. I can help. I’ll show you all my toys and books and puzzles, and I’ll teach you how to play games with me and my friends – that includes Sasuke, too! – and you can be better than great, you can be good. Like everyone else.”

Naruto has shown her that she can blend in. She has the luxury of appearing normal. Naruto doesn’t. Neither does Itachi. But she can help with that.

Itachi stares at her. His face is completely blank but his chakra is fluctuating with emotions, rapidly shifting with each one. Surprise – happiness – confusion – suspicion – hope.

“Lunch first,” He says again, his voice a little hoarse, “Then… we’ll see what comes next.”

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Hello again.

I would’ve updated earlier, but I was busy graduating :) I am now the proud owner of a Master’s degree. The ceremony was cool, no one fell over and I shook hands with a local celebrity.

In other news, Itachi is suspicious yet also heartbreakingly hopeful in the face of Sakura’s aggressive friendship.

So the Shisui-Sakura convo was SUPER long. I hope you guys liked it, because it was a long time coming. Sakura FINALLY told someone! She forgot to mention a few things (Kabuto is going to betray her, she can sense emotions through chakra and also she’s seen herself die, not just Ino and
Naruto. Also *coughs* Konoha gets destroyed *coughs*) Shisui assumed Sakura has a kekkei genkai because it actually kind of makes sense, unlike the whole time travel thing. That’d NEVER happen.

Shisui finds out he’s probably going to die and his instinct is BUT IS ITACHI OKAY??

No Monsters in this chapter, but they’re well on their way. It’s taking two chapters for Sakura to finally get that food from Mikoto.

Btw THANK YOU SO MUCH for the HUUUUUGE response to the summons question. You guys are the BEST.

Speaking of questions, when exactly did Orochimaru leave Konoha? The timeline is a little iffy. Also, I know ‘chibi’ is a cute word for little, but is there a big equivalent? Like a nickname for a bigger version? I’m thinking of Sailor Moon, with Usagi and Chibiusa, but I can’t remember anything useful. (I’m tired of mentally referring to older Sakura from the dreams as older Sakura or future Sakura.)

Thank you for each and every comment. They really do keep me writing. There’s just no motivation like getting a long comment!

Who will Sakura befriend next?? THE SUN???

Quick poll for fun: Who are your LEAST favourite Naruto characters?

Pick as many as you like, and feel free to rant about them.
Chapter 10

Sakura keeps holding Itachi’s hand as they enter his house – or rather, he doesn’t let go of hers – and that’s exactly what Mikoto sees first.

Mikoto is anxiously pacing up and down the hall until she sees them come in, then a warm smile blooms across her face, making her look younger. “Sakura-chan! Where did you find her, Itachi?”

“It seems Shisui wanted to interrogate her on his own terms,” Itachi says dryly, “They went for a walk and he asked her about what’s been going on.”

“I see.” Mikoto says, a curious gleam in her eye that told Sakura she was going to seek out answers from Shisui as soon as possible. “Well, are you hungry, Sakura-chan? It’s a little late for lunch, but your parents aren’t expecting you back for a while, so would you care for some food?”

Sakura swings Itachi’s hand in hers. His is so much larger. When she dreams, she’s taller and more in control of herself, and her hands are slim but calloused from years of work. Now, they’re soft and small. Not good for much.


“I will eat if you will.” Itachi says stiffly. She needs to work really hard to make him have fun and relax.

“Sakura!” Sasuke bursts into the hall, his little face alight in joy. It looks foreign someone she remembers wearing a scowl more often than not. “You’re here! Shisui just whooshed you away! But now you’re here again!”

“Sasuke, indoor voice.” Mikoto reminds him with a tolerant smile.

Sasuke looks sheepish.

“Is Otou-san here?” Itachi asks, his chakra pulling back slightly.

Mikoto turns her smile on him, though it seems a little strained. “Not until tonight, sweetheart.”

Itachi’s chakra breathes out, and his grip on Sakura’s hand slackens. She hadn’t even noticed he was holding on so tightly.

*Itachi doesn’t like his father*, Sakura notes. Well, then. Neither would she.

Sakura’s stomach rumbles.

Everyone looks at her.

She’s not embarrassed. It sounds like a little monster. Sakura puts her hands up like claws and aims them at Sasuke. “Roar! If I don’t eat something soon, I’ll have to just gobble you up!”

Sasuke shrieks with laughter and hides behind his mother, “Noooo!”

Sakura pounces, grabbing at him with her finger-claws, the two of them giggling helplessly.

Then, they’re both seized by the scruff of their necks and pulled apart.
“No.” Itachi says firmly. “Not in the house.”

“Oh, Itachi, let them have their fun.” Mikoto sighs.

Sakura sulks, hanging in the air from Itachi’s grip. She can’t poke him in the chakra like she did to Kakashi. Who knows how he would react to that? There’s only one other possible solution.

“Roar!” Sakura kicks out wildly, swinging in mid-air. Itachi simply holds her further away, looking baffled. “C’mon, Itachi-san, play!”

“Itachi-nii never plays.” Sasuke says grumpily.

Itachi’s chakra ripples with sadness. “I try to, when I have time…”

“Lunch first,” Sakura says decisively, “Then, we all play.”

Sasuke’s getting better at having fun.

Sakura runs the way Shisui taught her, giggling as Sasuke chases her. She’s a little faster than him, something he clearly hasn’t missed, judging by the pout on his face as he strains to catch her. But his chakra is alive and bubbly, lit up with happiness.

They’re in front of the Uchiha house, a large, elegant structure that puts her home to shame. But with all its clean lines and obvious wealth, it doesn’t look lived-in. The grass is all cut exactly the same length and untrampled, unlike the scuffed dirt-path leading to her own house. The flowers are regimented.

Mikoto is standing in the doorway of the main entrance, looking out at them with a fond smile. Her chakra is the same blend of worry, tenderness and caution as it has been all day. Itachi isn’t far from her, leaning against the house with a deceptively casual stance. His eyes are sharp and alert, watching the two younger children having fun.

Sakura dodges Sasuke and calls out, breathless, “Itachi-san! C’mon!”

Itachi shakes his head, a small smile on his face. He’s quite content where he is. Sakura certainly isn’t.

She ducks under Sasuke’s flailing arm and hollers, “ITACHI-SAN! WE’RE PLAYING NOW!”

Mikoto delicately covers her giggle with a slight cough.

“I can see that, Sakura-san.” Itachi replies calmly.

“You should play too!” Sasuke calls, giving his brother a hopeful smile. He lunges for Sakura and misses again.

“Maybe next time – ”

Sakura darts right up to Itachi. She feels him stiffen, along with Mikoto, but ignores it in favour of beaming in his face. “It’s time now! I don’t need help to beat Sasuke, but I’m sure he’d like your help to beat me!”

Sasuke lets out a scoff, his cheeks pink from exertion. “I could beat you… if I wanted to…”
Itachi looks to Mikoto, as if asking for permission. She smiles and nods.

Sakura seizes Itachi’s hands and yanks him towards Sasuke, bouncing all the way. “Okay! I’m the monster and you two have to catch me. If you don’t, I’m going to eat everyone.”

“Oh dear,” Mikoto laughs, “Surely you don’t have room after such a big lunch?”

“Monsters can eat lots and lots.” Sakura explains.

“You go that way, Itachi-nii!” Sasuke says, pointing to the left. He’s grinning madly, his chakra overflowing with joy now his brother’s come to play. “I’ll go this way!”

“The trouble with that strategy, otouto, is now she can anticipate our movements.” Itachi says seriously.

“Oh, just go!” Sasuke rolls his eyes and takes off to the right, heading straight for Sakura.

She prepares to run, then finds herself in the air. Again.

Itachi is holding her by her collar.

Again.

“There.” He says casually. “The monster is caught.”

Sasuke groans. “That was too fast, Itachi-nii! That’s no fun!”

“I thought the object of this exercise was to capture Sakura-san, who is playing the role of a monster. If a monster was let loose in Konoha, the best course of action would be to neutralise it as soon as possible.” Itachi says, a touch of uncertainty in his voice. “Right?”

Mikoto’s chakra flinched at something Itachi said.

“No! Some monsters are good.” Sakura tells him. “You have to talk to them first. Some of them just need someone who cares about them.”

“But you declared your intention to eat everyone.” Itachi says, baffled.

“And you won’t stop me this time! Let’s start again, but slower this time, okay, Itachi-san? You don’t have to catch me as fast as you can. You just have to have fun.” Sakura wriggles out of his grasp and lands neatly.

Itachi steps back in place with Sasuke, his chakra a little more restrained. He’s not having fun at all.

Sakura pounces on Sasuke, who goes down with a yell. Sakura tickles him as gently as possible. She can feel every ounce of Itachi is straining not to intervene as Sasuke shouts with laughter and rolls around on the ground.

“What are you waiting for, Itachi-san?” Sakura looks up at him with a grin. “Save your little brother.”

Itachi doesn’t hesitate.

Sakura finds herself placed carefully on the ground a few feet away. Itachi has Sasuke behind him, who looks equally confused by the sudden move. Itachi must have picked Sakura up, whisked her away, put her back down and then pulled Sasuke behind him. All too fast for her to see.
I really need to learn more from Shisui, Sakura thinks mournfully, oh well. I’ve got more tricks up my sleeve.

“Distraction!” Sakura yells, throwing a paper bomb down –

Itachi catches it before it can land and throws it high into the air.

They all watch the petals sail harmlessly to the ground.

“New plan.” Sakura says, ignoring how amusing Mikoto is finding all this. “Itachi’s the monster. Sasuke and I have to catch him before he eats Mikoto-san.”

“No!” Sasuke yells, outraged. “You can’t eat Okaa-san!”

“Of course I won’t – ” Itachi begins, exasperated.

“Get him!” Sakura shouts.

Sasuke charges at his big brother, face screwed up in an attempt at a snarl. Itachi dodges automatically, then catches Sakura’s eye. She shakes her head and raises her eyebrows. _Play_, she mouths at him.

Itachi pauses, then slows down. Sasuke’s next desperate grab nearly connects. Emboldened, Sasuke dashes forward and seizes Itachi’s arm. Sasuke’s face lights up in astonished delight, victory sparkling in his chakra.

“C’mon, Sakura!” Sasuke yells.

Sakura leaps for Itachi’s other arm and yanks. Itachi staggers, not even pretending this time. She feels his surprise and winces. _Oops. Be average, dummy._

Sasuke hooks his foot around Itachi’s ankle and pulls. Itachi allows himself to fall with an insincere look of shock. Sakura pins his arm to the ground and Sasuke does the same with the other, laughing at the look on his big brother’s face.

“We got you, Itachi-nii!” Sasuke squeals, overjoyed.

Itachi smiles, patting him on the head. “Well done, otouto.”

Sakura feels his genuine pleasure, as warm and comforting as a hug. His chakra is content.

Which is why it feels like an icy shock when he suddenly feels dread, dark feeling spreading through his aura.

“Shouldn’t you be training?” A deep voice says from above them. “This kind of behaviour is not befitting a proud member of the Uchiha clan, Itachi.”

“Otou-san!” Sasuke gasps, scrambling to his feet.

Sakura gets up a little slower, keeping her wary eyes on the newcomer.

Itachi stands up straight, jaw clenched. “I apologise, Otou-san.” He says stiffly. “It will not happen again.”

Sakura opens her mouth to protest – Sasuke had _so_ much fun, and so did Itachi! – but Itachi catches her eye and shakes his head, ever so slightly.
Mollified, the Uchiha patriarch nods. He looks at Sakura and his eyes narrow. “And who is this?” He asks, directing the question to Mikoto, as if Sakura is incapable of answering.

“My name is Haruno Sakura and my parents are – ”

“Haruno Mebuki and Kizashi. I know.” He interrupts. As cold as he looks, he still felt pity when she introduced herself. No doubt Mikoto already explained her sad situation to him. Sakura bites down on the instinctive flare of anger the thought produces. She has the best parents in the world, but the world doesn’t know it. Shisui said that Mikoto’s misunderstanding could only help her, but it doesn’t feel like it.

Sakura politely averts her eyes and says nothing more. She’s probably already in his bad books for interrupting, but he’s in hers for making Itachi feel so bad just by being nearby.

“I am Uchiha Fugaku, Itachi and Sasuke’s father. You are welcome in my home for as long as you require it.”

“Thank you.” Sakura says respectfully, inwardly making a face at him. “Would you prefer Uchiha-san or Fugaku-san?”

“There is no need to stand on ceremony, though the fact that you asked does you credit. Fugaku-san will suffice.”

“Thank you, Fugaku-san. I’m only visiting today, because Sasuke and Itachi-san are my newest friends and I wanted to show Itachi-san how to play, because he’s a bit too grown up.” Sakura explains.

“I see.” Fugaku replies, sounding unamused. “Itachi, Mikoto, let’s talk inside for a moment.”

Mikoto stays behind while a blank-faced Itachi follows his father into the house. “Come on in, sweethearts. I’ll make you some snacks.” She gives them a genuine smile, but it’s a little frayed at the edges. Fugaku’s sudden appearance has unsettled all of them.

“I’m not hungry, Okaa-san.” Sasuke says reluctantly. “I want to play with Sakura.”

“Sasuke, I can’t leave you outside alone.”

“Why not? You always used to.”

Mikoto very deliberately does not look at Sakura. “Please don’t argue, darling. Let’s go.”

The house is a little cooler inside, all wooden floors and thin walls. Sakura feels the presence of several seals nearby, though she can’t tell what they are for. The light-hearted air of the day has been sucked away by the vacuum of Fugaku’s presence. They make a silent procession to the living room, Sasuke feeling glum and trapped and Mikoto getting more nervous with every second that passes with Itachi alone with his father.

“Sakura-chan, Itachi will walk you home as soon as he’s finished speaking with his father. Please wait here until he comes for you.” Mikoto says, offering them both one last smile and a pat on the head, then she turns and leaves through a sliding door.

Sakura can feel her chakra signal approaching the other two in the house – Fugaku’s aura is imposing and prickly, Itachi’s is resigned – and she can pinpoint their location just by the feel of them. She did that once with the Yamanaka family, but couldn’t detect Ino’s father. Perhaps she’s getting better at sensing chakra? She sighs at the thought of Ino. She hasn’t seen her in forever.
“We can’t play in here.” Sasuke says unhappily, sitting up straight on the sofa. “We might break something.”

“Rock, paper, scissors?” Sakura suggests.

Sasuke nods, presenting his hand with grim determination. Sakura giggles. He’s so competitive about the silliest things.

“He cheats.” Shisui comments from across the room.

Sakura and Sasuke both flail in shock, Sakura nearly falling off the sofa. She glares at Shisui. “Shisui-kun! What are you – ”

“Sasu-chan, why don’t you take these and practice that trick I showed you? I know Itachi would be pretty impressed if you could do it by yourself.” Shisui says, offering some shuriken.

Sasuke jumps up eagerly, taking the proffered weapons and leaving with a wave to them both and a slightly shy smile for Sakura.

“Fugaku’s in the Room of Doom with Itachi, isn’t he?” Shisui says, twisting his mouth in derision. “The what?”

“It’s a room the servants aren’t allowed to enter if someone’s inside. There’s a whole bunch of seals meant to keep all noise from leaving, to prevent eavesdropping. Fugaku uses it for his top-secret meetings and to scold his kids.”

Sakura frowns, reaching out to sense the three occupants of the Room of Doom. Itachi is feeling pressured and stressed, a black dread weighing him down like storm clouds on the horizon.

“If Itachi is ‘bad’ in the future.” Shisui mutters. “This is why.”

“If he’s mean to both his kids, why is Itachi the one who goes bad?” Sakura asks. Sure, Sasuke leaves and breaks her heart, but she still has hope for him. She was so afraid of Itachi in her dream.

“Remember when I said you needed to blend in, because the shinobi who sticks out the most gets cut down the quickest? It’s the same with clan relations. Shinobi politics are just one, big, drawn-out battle. Itachi stands out because he excels, so Fugaku expects more of him than Sasuke, which puts more pressure on Itachi, which makes him less than perfect, which angers Fugaku and pushes Itachi to work even harder… you can see where this is going.”

“I’ll help him, Shisui-kun. I promise.” Sakura says quietly. She means it. Whatever Itachi might become, he’s just as lonely as Naruto was, in his own way. He needs a friend just as badly.

Shisui smiles at her. “Thanks, Firefly. I’ve been thinking about your situation, and I think you need to tell your parents the truth. They think you’re being abused, so they’re restricting your movements. We need you to be able to come train whenever I’m free, because you’ve got a lot to learn and I know you’re capable of everything I know and more. I’m going to assess your parents for a week or so, then I’ll let you know if it’s safe to tell them.”

“Assess? What for?”

“To see if they’d keep your secret or toss you into T&I.” Shisui says bluntly. “I’ve had harder missions than spying on fellow nin on home turf. If the worst happens and they react badly to the truth, I can always make them forget.”
Sakura’s eyes widen. “Really?”

Shisui grins at her. “Yep. It’ll all work out, though. Don’t forget to focus on dreaming about your mother this week, okay?”

“Oh!” Sakura had forgot.

The door slides open.

“Mission over already, Shisui?” Itachi says dryly. “Excellent. Now we can spar.”

“You’ll never catch me alive.” Shisui says, deadpan, then disappears in a flicker.

Itachi sighs, shaking his head. Then he looks up and smiles at Sakura. “Time to go, Sakura-san.”

“Oh! I—”

“Okay. You played really well today, Itachi-san. Did you have fun?”

Itachi pauses, considering the question. A slow smile spreads across his face. “You know, I think I did.”

Sakura takes his hand again, and this time Itachi doesn’t flinch.

Fugaku catches up with them before they reach the exit. “Itachi, I was not finished talking to you.”

“I’m sorry, Otou-san, but Okaa-san reminded me of my duties. I must see Sakura-san safely home before her parents start to worry.” Itachi says, tightening his grip on Sakura’s hand. Fugaku’s eyes drop down to their clasped hands. His frown deepens.

“Mikoto can do that later. I’m sure the girl’s parents won’t care if she’s a little late returning home. No doubt they hope their daughter’s association with my sons may prove profitable to them in the future.” Fugaku says, derision heavy in his tone.

“Excuse me, Fugaku-san, but my name is Sakura. Not ‘the girl.’” Sakura says curtly. She cannot defend her parents, as much as she wants to. But she can defend herself.

“My apologies, Sakura. I can’t help but notice that you did not deny the claim about your parents.” Fugaku says, raising an eyebrow. He’s… testing her, somehow. She just can’t understand why.

“My father always says that taking the time to deny something that is obviously untrue only lends more credence to the lie.” Sakura says, and that’s a lie. Kakashi said it once. Or, he will.

Fugaku regards her with dark, interested eyes. “What are your plans for the future?”

“I’m going to be a shinobi and I’m going to live in a big house with Naruto and we’re going to have a pond, a dog and some fish. The fish will live in the pond, probably.” Sakura says, matter-of-fact.

“Naruto? The Uzumaki boy?”

“Yes. He’s my little brother. I adopted him.” Sakura says. Kakashi also said that if you say something enough, it eventually becomes true.

“Interesting.” Fugaku says, like you might say manure. His lip curls.

“If you don’t mind, Otou-san, I should take Sakura-san home.” Itachi says hastily, pulling her behind
him slightly.

“I told you to wait.” Fugaku says coldly.

Mikoto seems to be summoned by his sharp tone, because her pale face appears almost at once.

“Fugaku! Would you mind – ”

“Not now, Mikoto. Itachi, you’ve heard my opinion on the matter and you will respect it. As my heir, I expect you to reflect my values and uphold our name. I want you to remember – ”

“I don’t like the way you talk to Itachi-san.” Sakura says.

Silence rings in the hallway.

Mikoto feels a gut-punch of dread. Itachi isn’t much better off, clutching Sakura’s hand.

“I beg your pardon?” Fugaku glares down at her.

“Well, you can’t have my pardon. Itachi-san is nine. Most genin are at least twelve. He’s fought for his whole life and he’s never been allowed to be a child. He deserves the same basic happiness every other kid his age gets. He doesn’t even know how to play! He’s sad and lonely and he needs a friend, so I’m going to look after him. If you don’t start talking to him properly like you love him and care about him, I’m going to get very angry!” Sakura crosses her arms and glares right back up at him.

“With a tongue as uncivil as that, no wonder your parents discipline you so harshly.” Fugaku says coldly.

“*Fugaku*.” Mikoto snaps.

Sakura can’t take anymore. “My parents love me! They do! And you know how I know that? Because they talk to me like they care, they don’t treat me like you treat your poor kids! Everyone’s saying bad things about my parents, but maybe they should say bad things about you!” Sakura stomps her foot angrily.

Cracks appear in the wooden floor.

She stares down, shocked.

*(She crashes down to the ground, leg outstretched, and the ground shatters beneath her. Kakashi appears in the crater, astonished. She feels a surge of deep satisfaction. I did that, she thinks. Me.)*

“I – I’m not sorry! Be nicer to Itachi-san or I’ll break your whole floor!” Sakura shouts. “Come on, Itachi-san! Let’s go play!”

Sakura tugs Itachi out of the house, utterly fuming.

xxxxxxx

Itachi is silent the whole trip home.

His chakra is pulled back, so she can’t tell how he’s feeling. She’s too angry to think about it. Why is Fugaku so mean? Doesn’t he love his son?

Sakura refuses to let go of his hand when they reach her house. “Stay for a while.” She mutters. Itachi’s grip loosens and his head drops. He looks very weary all of a sudden.
“I must go home.” He says hoarsely. “My father will be furious.”

“I’m sorry, Itachi-san.” Sakura says, patting his hand. “It’ll be alright. I promise. I said I’d look after you, remember?”

Itachi laughs. It doesn’t sound quite right. “Sakura-san. You cannot imagine the things I have seen. The things I have done. I’m not the one who needs to be looked after.”

(Sakura has so much blood in her hair that it is matted against her face, flaking copper and rust across her skin. She can taste death with every breath and somehow it doesn’t seem like the fight is anywhere close to over.)

“Look at me, Itachi-san.” Sakura says, quiet but fierce.

He does, his eyes hollow and bleak.

“I’ve seen things too.” She says, letting him see the horror and misery etched in her mind, echoed through her eyes. “You’re not alone.”

Itachi’s face crumples, for just a second.

Then, her front door opens and her father peeks out. “Sacchan?”

“It’s Sakura.” She whines, reverting back to her real age at the sound of the hated nickname.

“Everything okay?” He asks, eyes darting from her to Itachi.

“I’ve brought a friend.” Sakura says, holding up their clasped hands as evidence. “Can he stop over tonight, please?”

Itachi looks at her in horror. “Oh, no, I couldn’t – ”

“His father is really mean and I broke his floor.” Sakura says bluntly. “Itachi-san is very nice and he walked me home, so could he please stay the night? Please?”

Her father just stares for a long moment. “I’ll ask your mother.” He says, disappearing back inside the house.

After a second, his head pops back out. “And we’ll talk about breaking clan head’s floors later, missy.”

“You never said I couldn’t.” Sakura points out.

Her father pauses. “You know, I don’t think we did. Huh. Well, consider it off-limits from now on!”

“Okay, Otou-san!” Sakura grins at him.

He winks and vanishes back inside the house.

Itachi is watching her when she turns back to him. He looks contemplative. “You and your father get along well.”

“Yep.”

“I was afraid your home life might be unpleasant, considering the rumours.”
“Nope.”

“Then… I’m glad to hear it.” Itachi says with a tired smile.

“You can share my dad, if you want. You’ve already got a nice mother, so you don’t need mine.”

“That’s very generous of you.”

The front door opens again. Sakura’s mother raises an eyebrow at both of them.

“Nope.” She says slowly. “Please tell me your father was exaggerating when he said you broke the Uchiha’s floor because Fugaku was ‘being mean.’”

Sakura gives her mother a sheepish smile. “It was an accident?”

Her mother raises her eyes to the sky and mutters a prayer for strength. “Fine. The Uchiha are far too obsessed with manners to storm over here and make a scene, so your little friend can stay over if you promise you will never do anything like that again. Sakura? Hm?”

“Okay! Thank you, Okaa-san!” Sakura chirps, bouncing up the steps, still holding onto Itachi.

Sakura’s mother regards him with sympathy. “Come in, Itachi. We’ve got hot tea and the second-best blanket waiting for you.”

“That sounds lovely, thank you.” Itachi says, sounding quite sincere.

“So polite!” Sakura’s mother observes with a smile. “You can keep this one, Sakura.”

“I’m going to.” Sakura says nonchalantly.

***

To the two people who wanted to see Sakura yelling at Fugaku… ask and ye shall receive ;)

One big Uchiha chapter! The Monsters are coming in the next chapter, I SWEAR! THEY’RE ON THEIR WAY! Naruto is leading the pack!

I like to imagine Shisui spent this chapter teleporting from room to room, because if I was as fast as he was, that’s what I’d do! One second someone’s asking me to do the dishes in the kitchen, the next second I’m upstairs, frightening the life out of the cat in the bathroom.

Shisui has Plans. I know some of you were concerned about his motivations in the last chapter. All I can say is, he may be the nicest Uchiha, but he’s still an Uchiha. Plus a genius child shinobi. Buuuut I wouldn’t worry too much about his intentions.

Thanks so much for all of your kind words of congratulations on my graduation! You’re all the best :)”

Sakura nearly made it out the door without causing an incident. Nearly.

I couldn’t squeeze a dog into this chapter and I’m already disappointed in myself. Oh well. Everyone imagine your favourite dog mauling Fugaku, please, or just being hugged by Sakura. My favourite’s a Shiba Inu!

Itachi is having his very first sleepover and he’s quite nervous. Any ideas on what you’d like to happen? I wish there were facemasks in the ninja world. And movies and popcorn. Sakura showing
Itachi some classic romcoms would be *hilarious*.

I’m so glad a lot of you like Baby Saku. She’s doing her best.

**Quick poll for fun:** Where would you live, if you could?

A: Narnia

B: Hogwarts

C: The Avengers Tower

D: Your choice! (it can be a country, a fantasy world, anything!)

I’d like to live in a library that only I can go in. Can you imagine? I’d have squashy chairs to sit in, and window seats and a crackling fireplace, and hundreds of books to read! I could finally achieve my lifelong dream to be crushed by a pile of books!
“What are your feelings on hot cocoa?” Sakura’s mother asks Itachi.

He blinks back at her. “I have no strong opinions on the subject.”

“What about preferences? What would you like to drink?”

“Whatever is most convenient to make, I suppose.”

Sakura’s mother raises an eyebrow at him. She holds a hand out and lets it hover over various boxes of tea and tins of cocoa, watching his face for reactions.

“Green tea it is, then.” She says with satisfaction, amusement diffusing through her chakra at the sight of his surprise. “Sakura? What would you like?”

“Hot kitty cocoa, please.” Sakura says eagerly.

Itachi looks perplexed.

“Coming right up.”

They’re all sitting in the Haruno kitchen. The furniture is spindly and scratched, older than she is – perhaps even older than her future self – but the chairs are covered with squishy cushions and the wooden floor has a threadbare rug her grandmother made as a wedding present. It’s warm and cramped and one of her favourite places in the world.

Just as Sakura’s mother reaches for the green tea, Sakura remembers something Shisui told her once.

“Itachi-san likes sweet things.” Sakura pipes up.

Itachi gives her an alarmed look. She smiles innocently. He scoots his chair a little further from hers.

Her mother tilts her head. “Oh? Perhaps you would like a hot cocoa after all, Itachi?”

“I don’t know, Haruno-san. I have never tried it.” Itachi replies.

Sakura gasps, clutching her chest as if in pain. “No!”

Sakura’s mother is considerably more composed. “You can call me Mebuki, you know. And I suppose there’s a first time for everything. Two orders of hot kitty cocoa, it is.”

“What is hot kitty cocoa?” Itachi whispers to Sakura.

“Wait and see.” She grins, wriggling in her seat. She’s so excited for tonight! She’s going to show Itachi all of her toys and make him have lots of fun.

“Fugaku isn’t happy,” Sakura’s father informs them, sticking his head into the kitchen, “I told him that we wouldn’t mind letting Itachi stay the night, then he told me that it was ‘out of the question’ and ‘an enormous imposition.’ I told him that we were fully capable of housing another child for a single night. He looked at me like I was the scum on the bottom of his shoe and he’d be happy to scrape me across the floor, and said: ‘Fine. I expect him back tomorrow morning. This will not affect his training.’”
Itachi raised his shoulders and tucked his head down, trying to make himself look smaller. His eyes were on the floor. “I can go back now. It’s not a problem.”

“Yes, it is!” Sakura’s mother declares, whirling around with two steaming mugs. “You haven’t even tried hot kitty cocoa yet!”

“Ooh, you’re breaking out that ol’ treat, huh?” Sakura’s father whistles. “What I wouldn’t give for hot kitty cocoa right about now…” He reaches out longingly for the mugs.

Sakura’s mother dodges him, laughing, “You know you’re not supposed to have sugar.”

“It would be worth it.” He says fervently. “Besides, your poor husband just trudged through the freezing cold all the way to the Uchiha Compound to face a really scary man. Don’t I deserve a little treat?”

“We could trade, Haruno-san. I could have green tea, as originally decided, and you could have my… hot kitty cocoa.” Itachi says politely, stumbling over the cute name.

Sakura’s father looks at him, aghast. “I’m not allowed sugar! Are you trying to poison me?”

“O-of course not!” Itachi protests.

“I’m just kidding. Lighten up, Itachi.” Sakura’s father says, giving the boy a bright grin. Itachi’s shoulders lower a fraction, as if relieved. “Now, weren’t you promised the second-best blanket?”

“I was.” Itachi says cautiously.

“Back in a mo.” Sakura’s father says, turning on his heel and hurrying out of the kitchen.

Sakura’s mother rolls her eyes and places the two mugs on the table in front of the kids.

Itachi studies his with a strange intensity.

Sakura’s mother makes hot kitty cocoa the same way every time: She fills a third of a mug with cold milk, mixes in the cocoa, sugar and a touch of cinnamon. Then she stirs furiously until it’s frothy and free of lumps (sometimes Sakura is allowed to do this part) and then adds the boiling water (Sakura is never allowed to do this part). The cocoa ends up with inches of froth on the top.

Then, Sakura’s mother takes marshmallows and some chocolate sauce, and turns them into kittens. She adds little sugar triangle ears and paws, with a tail to grip onto the rim of the mug. She uses the chocolate sauce to draw faces and whiskers on the cat marshmallows, then adds them to the froth.

It’s Sakura’s absolute favourite drink, even when her dad tries to make it and she ends up with drowned blobs of failed kittens, bobbing in lumpy cocoa.

Itachi’s eyebrows shoot up. He brings the mug close to breathe in the scent of cocoa.

“You have to cool it down first.” Sakura tells him, demonstrating. The marshmallow cats float lazily as she carefully blows on the cocoa.

Itachi copies her, his chakra bright with wonderment and curiosity. They sip their drinks at the same time. Itachi’s eyes go wide.

“It’s good!” He says, surprised.

“Here we are.” Sakura’s father says, holding two blankets aloft.
Sakura’s mother takes the second-best blanket, soft, worn and faded blue, and wraps it around Itachi.

“I’m not cold, thank you, Mebuki-san.” Itachi says politely, sipping his cocoa. He looks very cosy, tucked up in his blanket. He’s tall for his age, but the blanket is long enough to reach his ankles as he sits up straight.

Sakura’s father tucks the best blanket around Sakura. Her grandmother started knitting it before she was born, embroidering little mirrors along the hem, since Sakura was supposed to be called Kagami. It was a patchwork quilt, with patches of green silk and dusky pink fabric. Her grandmother added a cherry blossom pattern after Sakura was born with pink hair in Spring.

“It’s not about being cold, it’s about being comfy.” Sakura tells him severely, her froth moustache bobbing as she spoke.

Itachi takes one look at her and bursts out laughing, the sound high in surprise. She can tell he isn’t used to laughing out loud, since he covers his mouth self-consciously.

Sakura’s parents gave her matching satisfied grins.

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After dinner, Itachi went with Sakura’s father to dig out some old clothes to wear tonight, while Sakura stayed in the kitchen with her mother.

“So,” Her mother began, sitting at the table across from her, “What happened at the Uchiha Compound, Sakura?”

Sakura takes a deep breath, not eager to get scolded. “I went with Itachi-san and Sasuke to have lunch with Mikoto. We all played and had fun and it was great, then Fugaku-san came and was really mean. Fugaku-san told him off for playing and said he should be training. He kept being mean and Itachi kept getting sadder and I just got so angry. I didn’t mean to, but I stomped my foot and the floor went crack! I’m sorry, Okaa-san.”

Sakura’s mother is quiet for a while, tapping her nails on the table. “Why are you sorry?”

“Huh?”

“What do you think you did wrong?”

“I shouldn’t have broken the floor.”

“No, that was an accident. What shouldn’t you have done?”

“Umm…”

“You shouldn’t have lost your temper in the first place, honey. Think about this – who is going to suffer the consequences of your actions?”

Sakura frowns. “I don’t…”

“It’s not going to be you, is it? If you say Itachi is scared of his father and his father was mean to him, do you think things will be better or worse for Itachi tomorrow when he goes home?”

“But why does he have to go home? He can stay here with us. I can look after him.”

“Sakura, no. He’s the clan heir, he’s very important to his family – ”
“Then why don’t they treat him better?!” Sakura burst out.

“Well… do you remember that old toy you used to have? The bear? You loved it a lot, but you didn’t know how to take care of it because you were so young. No one had taught you to be careful with the things you loved yet. You bit off its eye and ripped its ear, and it got filthy from all the times you played with it outside. But did you love it any less than the rest of your toys? No. You loved it more. You just didn’t know how to show it. Maybe Itachi’s father loves him very much, but no one has taught him what to do with that love.” Sakura’s mother explained, reaching out to take Sakura’s hand.

“Can I show him, Okaa-san?” Sakura whispers.

Sakura’s mother laughs. “I don’t doubt you’re qualified. You’ve got more love in your heart than most people. But Fugaku is a proud man. I don’t think he would be willing to learn anything from a child, no matter how smart you are.”

*That wasn’t a no*, Sakura thinks.

“Just remember, sweetheart. Think before you act. Even if you think you’re doing the right thing, like standing up for Itachi, you may end up making things worse.”

Sakura’s father flares his chakra gently on the stairs, alerting them to his approach. Itachi is in tow, following him into the kitchen. He’s wearing some of Sakura’s father’s old clothes, which swamp him, the shirt falling past his waist, the pyjama bottoms pooling at his ankles. He looks soft and rumpled, but content.

“Bedtime, Sacchan!” Her father announces cheerily.

“Nooooo.” Sakura whines.

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They are given a bit of time before bed to wash up and get settled down for the night.

Sakura drags Itachi to her room, ignoring his startled protests.

She takes him on a tour, showing him the faded glow in the dark stars her father placed on her ceiling years ago, the rainbow stain from when she melted crayons and let them drip down the wall, the collection of petal bombs Shisui gave her – minus a few, sacrificed in battle with the Monsters – and her giant army of toys, all placed neatly on her bed.

“Here’s Raccoon. She’s a raccoon. And this is her husband, Akio. He’s younger than her, which is why he’s smaller. He’s a cat.” She chatters away, picking up each toy and presenting it to Itachi for inspection. He regards each one with razor-sharp focus, as if there will be a test at the end.

Sakura grabs her favourite toy, squeezing him and burying her face in his chest. He always smells like her bedsheets and apples.

“And this is Mr Minty!” She says proudly. “Isn’t he pretty?”

“He… certainly is a handsome rabbit. Should he be green?” Itachi asks, bemused.

“Of course!”

Mr Minty is a huge green rabbit with soft fur. His paws are like velvet, with flowers embroidered on
them. His eyes are big and brown, his nose is emerald. His fluffy tail is white. He’s almost as big as her.

Sakura has spent many nights cuddling him, wishing he would turn into a real rabbit that could talk.

“You can hold him.” Sakura decides, shoving Mr Minty into Itachi’s arms. “I have to get my brush.”

“What? Why do you need a brush?”

“Because,” Sakura says impatiently, “I need it to do your hair.”

It takes several long minutes to persuade Itachi to sit still long enough for her to make a start on braiding his hair. He’s sitting on the end of her bed, his legs dangling over the edge, while Sakura kneels behind him, brushing his hair. She’s using the soft-bristle brush her parents use on her. It whispers through his hair, leaving it silky and free of knots. It falls just past his shoulders.

Sakura puts the brush in her mouth, holding the handle with her teeth, and gets to work on braiding. She gets lost in the motions of her own fingers, weaving in and out, dark hair lacing together into a short plait. Itachi is quiet and calm, soothed by the gentle sensations. He’s just been stroking Mr Minty’s fur in silence the whole time.

Sakura takes a hairband and secures the braid. It’s not perfect, a little asymmetric and wonky, but it’ll do.

“Done!” She says, the brush falling out her mouth.

Itachi starts, nearly dropping Mr Minty. He huffs out a laugh, touching the braid. His chakra is warm with mirth. “Thank you very much, Sakura-san.”

“Now you do my hair!” Sakura says, bouncing on the bed.

“Oh, I don’t know how.”

“It doesn’t matter!” Sakura drags a box of hair accessories out from under her bed. “Just have fun!”

At first, Itachi is hesitant. He takes out her red ribbon, the one Ino gave her, and puts it to the side. He brushes her hair so softly she can barely feel it. Then, he seems to gain some confidence, combing through the tangles. He adds some glittery butterfly clips, making sure they are level with each other, and braids some sections of her hair. He doesn’t seem to have a clue what he’s doing. Sakura can’t help but find it funny. They’ve found something Itachi’s not good at.

But he’s having fun.

He tugs on her hair gently. “I’m done, Sakura-san.”

Sakura shakes her head, feeling the clips rattle against each other. She grins up at him. “Thanks, Itachi-san!”

Sakura’s mother opens the bedroom door. “Night, Sakura – what on earth have you done to your hair?”

xxxxxxxxxx

Sakura lies awake in bed, her eyes squeezed shut. She’s trying to do what she promised Shisui – bring on a dream of her mother.
Itachi is in the guest room. He’s not asleep yet either.

Sakura tries to focus. She pictures her mother, with her tired smile and warm hugs, the way she always knows what to do, no matter what.

It’s not working.

She can’t help but be distracted by Itachi’s chakra in the next room. He’s worried, filled with the same dread that hit him when he saw his father arrive.

Sakura sighs, climbing off her bed and padding over to the door.

She opens it as quietly as possible, looking around warily. Her parents both seem to be asleep, their chakra is still, peaceful. It feels better to concentrate on theirs then Itachi’s, which is a seething mass of fear and anxiety, so Sakura concentrates on the gentle glow of her mother and father as she makes her way down the hall to the guest room.

“Hello?” She whispers.

Itachi rolls over in bed, peering at her through the gloom.

“What’s wrong, Sakura-san?” He asks.

He assumed she was here for his help, rather than the other way around. Sakura shakes her head sadly. He needs to learn that it’s okay to be the one being helped, sometimes.

“I can’t sleep.” She says quietly, making her eyes really big and sad. “Can you stay in my room tonight?”

Itachi gives her a soft smile. “Of course, Sakura-san.”

He follows her back to her room obediently enough, but when she offers him her bed he protests fervently.

“Absolutely not. I shouldn’t take your bed, it’s not right! You need a good night’s sleep.”

“So do you!” Sakura points out. “And you’re the guest, so you’ve got to be pampered and stuff. So take my bed, please!”

Mr Minty is splayed across her pillow, looking bored.

“Sakura-san, I am perfectly happy to sleep on the floor.”

“Well then, so am I!” Sakura insists. Itachi just blinks at her, confused. Sakura rolls her eyes and drags her blankets onto the floor, sending a few toys flying in the process.

She arranges some pillows and her squishiest toys with the blankets and regards her creation with pride.

“You’ve made a mess, Sakura-san.” Itachi says, exasperated.

“No, I’ve made a bed. We can both sleep on the floor, with all my blankets and stuff. It’ll be nice and comfy, and there’s tons of room!”

Itachi laughs softly, shaking his head. His braid is still mostly intact.
Sakura lies down in the nest of blankets, wriggling to get comfortable. She looks up at Itachi expectantly. He sighs, but obeys, grabbing Mr Minty and lying down next to Sakura. He places the big bunny between them and rests his head on a fluffy cloud-shaped pillow.

“Now we have to sing the sleepy-time song.” Sakura whispers. Itachi looks askance at her. “That’s the song that makes you sleepy. It goes like this: la la la, sleep now little petal! It’s time to sleep, little flower! La la la. Something something metal rhymes with petal! And power rhymes with flower! La la la, sleep now! My dad made it up.” She adds proudly.

“Sleep now, little petal.” Itachi repeats, yawning. “La la la… la…”

Sakura feels him fall asleep. His head grows heavy, dropping off the cloud pillow and onto the carpet. He curls up, breathing softly.

Sakura smiles up at the glow in the dark stars on the ceiling. She did it. Now, she has to focus on dreaming about her mother.

This time, without the distraction of Itachi’s worried chakra, she manages to slip into that almost-state of dreaming, like the moment before a sneeze or a yawn. One minute she’s breathing in Mr Minty’s apple scent, the next she’s –

(Sakura has the house’s foundations on her back. She’s running out of chakra. She can’t feel the pain anymore, just the burning urge to save her – to save them all. The sound of crumbling rock and groaning wood fills her world. Her eyes are squeezed shut, dripping sweat like tears off her face. And beneath her shaking legs is the broken body of her mother, her weak chakra signal flickering. Sakura holds onto that feeling like the house on her back. She knows her mother’s chakra as well as her voice. People are screaming in the distance. Her mother’s chakra flickers once, then —)

Sakura wakes up, barely holding back a howl of anguish. She claps her hands over her mouth and breathes hard, tears streaming down her face. She can’t keep quiet. Little noises keep escaping, whimpers and sobs.

“Sakura-san?” Itachi whispers, sounding very young and lost in the darkness of the bedroom. “Did you have a bad dream?”

Sakura wonders absently if his mother told him her symptoms – does she have nightmares? – and what he thinks of them. Of her. It isn’t cold, but her shoulders are shaking anyway.

“It’s alright. It wasn’t real.” He says, hovering close to her but not touching her. She can feel his chakra like a blanket of worry sweeping over her. It buzzes against hers, making her itch and clench her teeth.

“It was.” She murmurs.

“What?”

“It was real. That makes it worse.” She’s staring at the wall, a fuzzy outline in the dark. Somewhere beyond it, her mother is sleeping soundly, safe in bed. She has to believe that.

She held up the crumbling remains of her home on her back, muscles screaming in protest at the weight. Her chakra was dwindling to nothing and she knew any second that it would run out and she would be crushed. Just like –

Sakura begins to cry in earnest, childlike wails that erupt from her unbidden. What had she ever had to cry about before the dreams came? Ami being a bully? Not getting her way? Nothing like this.
She had never had to feel pain gnawing through her ribs like this before. Her heart ached.

“Tell me what’s happening to you.” Itachi says, low and urgent. “I can help you, as you have helped me.”

It’s painfully ironic that one of the only solid threats in her life wants to help her. Itachi. Sasuke. Kabuto. All friendly on the surface, but on a deeper level, seeds lay buried that might grow into monsters. The worst kind. Human.

“You can’t help me. It’s all in the past.” She says, wondering at the possible truth in her words. If Shisui is right, she is seeing visions of the future, not reliving a broken past. Which would be worse?

“Then… what happened to you?”

“It’s all over now. It’s just… in here.” She touches her forehead. Her tears are finally starting to dry up.

“Are the people who hurt you dead?” Itachi asks, something chilling in his tone. Sakura leans away from him, clutching her blanket. She doesn’t correct his assumption.

“They’re all gone.” She says, unable to keep the grief from her voice.

“What happened?”

Sakura thinks about it. She doesn’t quite know, but there was a dream of her bleeding and waiting to die, once. Naruto was right there with her.

“Someone saved me.” She says, and it feels right.

Itachi hesitates, then reaches across the blankets to take her hand. “I’m glad.” He says fiercely, “I’m glad they saved you. I wish I could have done it. If anyone ever bothers you again – the one who gave you nightmares, or even that horrible girl on the street – just tell me, and I’ll deal with them for you.”

“Thank you.” Sakura says. “But I’m doing okay, I promise. You don’t need to worry about me.”

*Just remember, sweetheart. Think before you act. Even if you think you’re doing the right thing, like standing up for Itachi, you may end up making things worse.*

What if… what if she’s the reason her mother dies? What if she tries to help, but just makes things worse?

Sakura sniffs, trying to keep the tears at bay. Itachi squeezes her hand.

They fall asleep like that, still holding hands, and Sakura’s mother fails to hide her amusement when she finds them.

xxxxxxx

“I don’t want to go home.” Itachi whispers, his shoulders slumped. They’re outside the house, just waiting for Sakura’s parents to join them, then they’ll take Itachi back to the Compound.

Sakura’s heart breaks. Then she gets an idea.

“Wait here!” She shouts, rushing back into the house. Itachi’s chakra signal fades slightly as she gets further away from him, but she still feels the sour edge of fear and longing follow her all the way.
Sakura returns and thrusts her toy at his chest. “Keep it.” She says firmly. “You need him more than I do.”

Itachi clutches Mr Minty, his face creased in confusion, barely visibly over the green furry head. “What? I don’t need –”

“He likes being hugged every morning and every night,” Sakura says, struggling to hold back tears, “He’s really warm because of his fur so he doesn’t like to play dress-up in the summer, okay? He’ll keep you safe.”

Her parents have told her the story of Mr Minty so often that it just feels like another fact of life. When her mother was pregnant with her, she got really sick and they were scared that Sakura would never get born. Then, Sakura’s uncle gave them a present for her, because he was so convinced everything would be okay. That was Mr Minty. He was a lot bigger than a baby, but some nights her parents would hold him and cry, worrying about the future.

They said they poured all the love they had for Sakura into the rabbit, until he got even bigger and turned green. The same colour as her eyes when she was finally born. They said she never cried when she had Mr Minty at night, because the love her parents gave him kept her safe and warm.

Itachi needs that love now.

“I brush his fur whenever I get my hair cut.” Sakura continues, her vision blurring with tears. “And I tie his ears into a bow on my birthday. He likes to look smart. If you look after him, he’ll look after you.”

“Sakura, I can’t take this. I know how much this means to you…”

“It’s okay! I can come visit him at your house!”

Itachi pauses, his grip tightening on the rabbit. “You’ll come over? More than once?”

“As much as possible!” Sakura grins, bouncing on the spot. “I want to see you two all the time!”

Itachi smiles.

Sakura’s parents join them after a bit. Sakura’s mother raises her eyebrow at Sakura when she notices Mr Minty in Itachi’s arms, but Sakura just shrugs.

“You know, Itachi.” Sakura’s father begins, his tone conversational. “You’re always welcome in the Haruno Home. I know it’s pretty scruffy and we can’t even offer you the best blanket, since that goes to our precious little madam over here, but we like it well enough. I hope you come to stay again soon.”

Itachi gives him a hesitant smile. “So do I, Haruno-san.”

“Kizashi, please! Haruno-san is my wife.”

xxxxxxx

They get to the Compound without incident. Sakura suspects the Masks are following them today instead of Naruto. She can feel blurred forms of chakra nearby, some high up, some in alleys as they pass by. Her parents either don’t notice them or simply ignore them, though Itachi gets more and more alert as time goes by.
Mikoto is waiting for them at the gate, a strained smile their only greeting as she hurries them in. She smooths down Itachi’s hair, giving his braid a bemused tweak, but sends him along with the rest without a word.

Sakura’s parents are unimpressed by the extravagance of the manor and unintimidated by Fugaku’s frowning form at the door as they approach.

“Fugaku-san,” Sakura’s mother calls in greeting, “It’s good to see you.”

“Mebuki.” Fugaku returns, giving nothing away. “Kizashi. And the little terror herself, Sakura.”

“Hello.” Sakura says bashfully, half-hiding behind her mother.

“Good morning, Otou-san.” Itachi says respectfully.

Fugaku nods at Itachi. “Good morning. I trust you slept well?”

Sakura is confused by the civility. Why isn’t Fugaku angry? Is it because her parents are here this time?

He hasn’t even mentioned the fact that Itachi is holding a very large green rabbit.

“Very well.” Itachi replies, unable to hide his smile. “The Harunos were considerate and gracious hosts.”

Why were they talking like this had all been some prearranged visit that Fugaku authorised?

“I’m glad to hear it. Shall we talk inside?”

They all congregate indoors – awkwardly stepping over the broken floor being attended to by servants – the adults swiftly joining together and heading off into the Room of Doom, leaving Itachi and Sakura to wait for their return.

Sakura senses Itachi’s chakra being funnelled to his ears. Why is he doing that? She tries to copy him, sending sparks of her limited chakra to her eardrums. Suddenly, she’s bombarded by the noise of the Room of Doom. She jumps a little, giving Itachi a weak smile at his questioning look.

She can hear the adults talking. They must not have activated the privacy seals in the Room of Doom.

“I’m sorry to tell you this, Mikoto-san,” Sakura’s mother says, “but we have reason to believe your son might be traumatised.”

Mikoto’s chakra gives the energy equivalent of blushing, a mixture of anger and embarrassment. “I suppose you find this situation amusing?”

“On the contrary, there is nothing amusing or even pleasant about it. You told me your son was the way he was because of the things he had experienced during the war. I agree with you for the most part, but after what Sakura has told me, I think there’s more to it.” Sakura’s mother says, a trace of contempt entering her chakra. “I believe there are problems at home in his case.”

“I have argued your case and defended you where others have turned away.” Mikoto says hotly. “Sakura-chan shows every sign of a victim of abuse. Every single one. The simplest solution would be to point the finger at you or your husband. Most others have done so, because it is easy. I know your character, Mebuki-san. I know you would never do anything to harm your child. Can you not
“No.” Sakura’s mother says bluntly. “I cannot. Sakura is an honest child and when she says Fugaku-san spoke poorly to Itachi, I believe her. When I saw how Itachi reacted at the news he would be going home soon, I saw fear and dread. Two things no child should feel at the thought of returning home. I don’t pretend to know your personal characters in detail, or what goes on in your home, but I know how proud Fugaku-san is of his family, the potential lengths he would go to sustain his legacy.”

Fugaku is still silent, just watching the conversation unfold. His chakra is unbearably calm. Sakura had been expecting him to explode with rage at several points in the last few minutes, but he seems utterly unaffected by what is going on.

“If Itachi’s situation does not improve, I will be forced to report what I have observed – perhaps to the lovely pair of T&I specialists who keep gracing our home with their presence. It was your recommendation that sent them to us, wasn’t it? Kimura Ryuu and Sasaki Mariko? You talk of how you defended us and believed in us, but if that were the case, why would Kizashi and I have been subjected to interrogation? You may not have wanted to believe we were capable of such things, but you were unwilling to put your personal feelings above your duty. We are all shinobi, here. You did what you had to, despite yourself. How can you begrudge us doing the same?”

“What would you have us do?” Fugaku speaks up for the first time. “Neither of us willingly mistreat our children. I do what I do to keep them strong. They will need to be, for the lives they will lead.”

“You are going to treat your children – both of them – with respect. Speak to them as you would equals. Do not belittle or deride them. Remember that while you are a Clan Head, and that is extremely important, you are a father first. That is more than important, it is everything. You are your children’s entire world. They trust you, look up to you. They take their cues from you. At this rate, who do you think they will grow up to be? Well-adjusted members of your clan? I find that hard to believe.”

“You speak too freely.” Fugaku says coldly.

“It’s a trait I have unfortunately passed on to my daughter.” Mebuki sighs. “It is useless for a shinobi, but excellent for a parent. You asked for my advice and I gave it. But I may as well attempt to be a shinobi, if only for a moment… how about this? If you don’t follow my advice, and Itachi seems as unhappy as ever, I will take this issue to the Hokage. Is it absurdly beneath his attention? Of course. But the mere act of raising it with him will cause rumours to spread like wildfire. Can the Uchiha clan really afford such scrutiny? I know that in clan politics, any flaw can look like weakness, even off-hand parenting. Kizashi and I know all too well what happens when shinobi suspect one of their own of hurting children. Do you?”

“Mebuki-san!” Mikoto gasps.

“I’m trying to threaten your husband into being a good father.” Sakura’s mother snaps. “I hardly think that warrants offense on your part.”

“He’s a trait I have unfortunately passed on to my daughter.” Mebuki sighs. “It is useless for a shinobi, but excellent for a parent. You asked for my advice and I gave it. But I may as well attempt to be a shinobi, if only for a moment… how about this? If you don’t follow my advice, and Itachi seems as unhappy as ever, I will take this issue to the Hokage. Is it absurdly beneath his attention? Of course. But the mere act of raising it with him will cause rumours to spread like wildfire. Can the Uchiha clan really afford such scrutiny? I know that in clan politics, any flaw can look like weakness, even off-hand parenting. Kizashi and I know all too well what happens when shinobi suspect one of their own of hurting children. Do you?”

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“I’m trying to threaten your husband into being a good father.” Sakura’s mother snaps. “I hardly think that warrants offense on your part.”

“With all the rumours surrounding you,” Fugaku begins, sounding truly irritated for the first time, “How difficult do you think it would be for your custody of your daughter to be revoked?”

“Very difficult, considering the fact that Kizashi and I were subject to exhaustive interrogation and Sakura’s psych evals have proven we are not the cause of her trauma. Even with your position in the village and in your clan, you cannot push us around.”
“But I *can* make life very difficult for you, if you insist on this unwise course of action…” Fugaku says in a low voice.

Sakura’s heard enough.

Ignoring Itachi’s yell of surprise, Sakura tears across the house to the Room of Doom, bursting through the door.

“No no no!” Sakura shouts. “Please don’t fight! I’m sorry! I’m really sorry! I shouldn’t have broken your floor, Fugaku-san, but I didn’t mean to! I just… I just really wanted you to be nicer to Itachi-san. My parents are the best people in the world, so I get upset when other people’s parents aren’t as good. Please just…”

*Can I teach him to be good?* She wonders, faltering.

*I don’t doubt you’re qualified. You’ve got more love in your heart than most people,* her mother had said.

“I want to help this family.” Sakura declares earnestly. “I really want to make sure everyone’s happy and nobody’s sad. I’ll do anything you want if you just let me help! I’ll tidy my room *every* day!”

Fugaku stares down at her.

Mikoto is horrified.

Sakura’s parents are seconds away from leaping front of her, as though a bomb is about to go off in her face.

Itachi is holding onto her hand from behind.

“I can do it.” Sakura says fiercely. “I can help.”

“Fugaku-san – ” Her father begins breathlessly.

Fugaku holds up his hand. “One favour from you, and I will let you ‘help’ to the best of your ability.” He says, dark eyes carving through her.

“One favour.” Sakura agrees.

“One.” Fugaku says, almost, *almost* smiling.

xxxxxxx

As they are about to leave, Sakura’s father hesitates at the door. “And how much for your floor to be repaired?” He asks sheepishly.

“We’ve paid them with a good dose of humility, Kizashi.” Sakura’s mother says waspishly.

“And yet, my floor is still cracked.” Fugaku replies wryly. “Money is not a concern, however. What concerns me is the raw strength your child possesses. To be capable of manipulating her chakra at her age instinctively – for it was clearly an accident, despite her blustering in the aftermath – is extremely impressive. Have you considered putting her forward for early admission to the Academy?”

“No. We would prefer her childhood to remain free of bloodshed.” Sakura’s mother says, her tone brooking no further comment.
Fugaku is undeterred. “You are wasting her potential with every second she remains untaught. We would be happy to –”

“No.”

“I was not finished.” Fugaku says, his tone darkening in annoyance. “You cannot dismiss an offer from our clan so lightly.”

“Watch us.” Sakura’s mother says. “I don’t care if my child is capable of wonders. I don’t care if she can tear down mountains or uproot trees. If she wants to be a bookseller, she will be a bookseller. If she wants to be a shinobi, it will be her choice. Parents don’t always know what’s best for their children. They might, if they actually listened to them.”

“It is naïve to think she will follow any other path. She is Sasuke’s age, isn’t she? I would hope relations between our families only improve as the years go on, and perhaps one day arrangements can be made that would suit both parties.”

“I believe Mebuki has said no enough times today, so I’ll take this one.” Sakura’s father says cheerfully, but with a palpable air of menace, “No. We’ve made it clear that Sakura will choose her own path in life. To the exclusion of all ‘arrangements’ that might be made. There is nothing you can offer us that we need.”

“And Sakura?” Fugaku says. “A girl of her talents, from such a… young, unestablished family? Do you really believe she wouldn’t benefit in any way from my clan’s assistance?”

Sakura’s parents glance at each other.

“Itachi’s sleeping over at ours again tonight.” Sakura pipes up, uninterested in the conversation the adults had been having.

“Excuse me?” Fugaku raises his eyebrow at her.

“Yep. Itachi and Sasuke – if my parents don’t mind, I guess. They’re stopping the night. I’m helping your family be better, right? Well, this is part of how I’ll do it.” Sakura smiles sweetly at him.

Fugaku is briefly speechless.

“Sorry about your floor.” Sakura’s father says cheerfully. “Let’s go, kids!”

***

Wow.

So this is 2000 words longer than I usually write each chapter. Whoops!

AND STILL NO MONSTERS.

WOW.

They just wouldn’t arrive! I think they got lost on the way!

(I’m pretty sure they’re in the next chapter. Don’t worry. You’ll get your Monstery goodness soon)

Is it wise for two no-name chuunin to antagonise the head of one of Konoha’s biggest clans? Nope.
Do they care? NOPE.

Sakura had a dream about her mother.

Wasn’t the best, tbh.

I invented hot kitty cocoa!! I’ve never made the actual cat marshmallows, but I just thought about what kind of cute drink I wanted Itachi to have and came up with hot kitty cocoa!

I used a few of your ideas for the sleepover, like Sakura braiding Itachi’s hair :) I avoided the painting of the nails thing because I’ve tried to avoid putting too many British words and slang into my fics so I couldn’t write nail varnish, as I normally would, but I couldn’t bring myself to write nail polish. Sorry! You can imagine it happening in-between scenes!

Mr Minty is based on a large green rabbit toy I had as a child, but I made up the story attached to him. Katlou was born pretty easily after a fairly chill pregnancy, I’m sure you’ll all be happy to know.

(Fun fact: My mother came up with the username Katlou303 for me when I was about ten years old)

Sakura now owes Fugaku a favour.

We’ll see if anything comes of that.

(Another fun fact: Fugaku casually referencing the possibility of his young son marrying Mebuki’s young daughter was inspired by a guy I knew when I was a kid. I was friends with his son, we were both under ten, and he was super rich and often made comments about ‘joining the families’ and joked with my mother about arranging our marriage. Mum didn’t find it funny.)

Why is this chapter so long?? I’m so sorry!

To the few who were confused: Sakura does NOT have a kekkei genkai. That was Shisui’s assumption. This is still very much a time travel story!

Though if she did have one, it’d probably be called ‘Dream Vision’ in Japanese, or something even cooler.

Quick poll for fun: If you could bring one character back to life, who would it be? (They don’t have to be from Naruto!)

(beware of potential spoilers in the comments)

still no dogs in this chapter, but there is a raccoon called Raccoon.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

We've got art! Beautiful, amazing art! sleepysatsuma on tumblr posted a pic of Sakura with dogs! (gosh I hope I link this properly)

https://sleepysatsuma.tumblr.com/post/169792212634/in-which-smol-baby-genius-sakura-proudly-shows-off

“What kind of favour can a four-year-old give a Clan Head?” Sakura’s father mutters. “Does he want to borrow her dolls?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s more to do with her breaking his floor than her toy collection.” Sakura’s mother replies, rolling her eyes.

Sakura is holding their hands, swinging between them as they walk down the street. “I didn’t mean to! I just went _stomp_ and the floor went _crack_!”

“Sakura instinctively channelled chakra to her foot to amplify the strike.” Itachi supplies helpfully.

Sakura’s father says a bad word, then coughs belatedly. “Well… I love having more things to worry about. Don’t you, Mebuki?”

“Can’t get enough.” She replies dryly, swinging Sakura a little too high up, much to her delight. “How did you know how to do that, Sakura?”

“There’s books in the library.” Sakura says guilelessly. “You can make chakra go _anywhere_. I didn’t mean to put it in my foot.”

“Remember that game we used to play, where you’d hug me as hard as you could to try to break my ribs?” Her father says wistfully. “Yep. We’re never playing that again.”

“Aww.” Sakura whines.

Her parents swing her higher between them, as if she weighs nothing. When Sakura is big, she’s going to swing Naruto like this.

“Do you want to break your precious father?” He demands.

“No!”

Her parents laugh and bicker for a while, and Sakura tunes them out automatically, focusing on the chakra of the boys walking behind her.

Itachi isn’t quite as content as he was the night before, but he’s getting close. His chakra is settled. Warm.

Sasuke’s aura is edged with green. He’s feeling envious of something. Sakura wonders what it could be, then tightens her grip on her parents’ hands.
She can’t imagine Mikoto and Fugaku ever walking down the street, swinging Sasuke between them.

“Okaa-san, Otou-san, can you give Sasuke a turn, please?” Sakura asks.

Her parents stop in their tracks. Her mother examines her and Sasuke in equal measures, eyes flicking back and forth between them. Sasuke squirms beneath her gaze, clearly embarrassed. There’s a thread of hope running through his chakra, despite his attempt at a blank face.

“Do you want a go, Sasuke?” Her father asks, smiling down at him.

Itachi nudges Sasuke towards Sakura’s parents. Sakura lets go of their hands and beams at Sasuke, gesturing for him to take her place. He flushes, but steps forward.

“O-okay.” He says, hesitantly taking Mebuki and Kizashi’s hands. They pull him up off the ground, feet swinging in the air. He giggles in surprise, kicking out.

Sakura falls into step with Itachi, walking behind her parents. Both of them watch her parents swing a gleeful Sasuke back and forth as they head home.

“Ohh, I’m so out of shape.” Kizashi moans, struggling to breathe as he lifts Sasuke higher.

“That’s what you get for skipping training all the time.” Mebuki points out, unsympathetic.

Itachi takes Sakura’s hand. She looks at him, surprised, but his eyes are still on Sasuke, full of fondness.

“When I was younger, I used to watch the other children with their families.” Itachi says quietly. “I would see parents pick their kids up from the Academy, all smiles and laughter. Giving out hugs as if they were free. I envied them so much. They all carried lightness within them. I wanted that so badly. When Sasuke was born, I vowed I would give him that light.”

“You did.” Sakura says. Sasuke adores his big brother.

“I tried. But I couldn’t give him this.” Itachi gestures to Sasuke, laughing freely between her parents. “Not on my own.”

Sakura squeezes his hand. “You’re not alone. I promised I’d take care of you, and Sasuke too.”

“You shouldn’t have made that deal with my father.” Itachi says grimly. “There’s no telling what he will ask of you.”

She’d heard as much from her parents, who had spent the first fifteen minutes of the walk home chastising her for being reckless and dabbling in clan politics aged four. *If I have my way, you’re not marrying until you’re at least forty,* her father had said, *so just hang Fugaku’s little favour at the end of his arrogant nose.*

“It was worth it. Now I get to help you as much as I want and he can’t do anything about it. He likes manners and keeping promises, right? So he won’t try to interfere so much when I take care of you two. I think we should have some picnics with Mikoto-san, and maybe you could play with the rest of the Monsters at some point. I’ve got lots of ideas.” Sakura babbles happily, swinging Itachi’s hand and skipping so energetically she almost takes flight.

“Sacchan! Tacchan! Let’s get going already!” Sakura’s father calls.
“Tacchan?” Itachi says, highly affronted.

“Leave the boy his dignity.” Sakura’s mother chastises her husband.

“Sasu-chan and I are going to leave you all in the dust, aren’t we?” Sakura’s father grins down at Sasuke, who beams back. Sakura’s father hoists Sasuke up on his shoulders and takes off, hooting.

Sakura’s mother mutters something rude under her breath, then speeds up to catch him, unwilling to be left behind.

Sakura and Itachi don’t even have to look at each other.

They chase after the Harunos and Sasuke, hands clasped tightly together.

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Sakura’s father flops down on the sofa, exhausted. “Phew! Being winners is hard work, right Sasu-chan?”

Sasuke sat next to him, radiating smugness. He and Kizashi won the impromptu race, mostly because Kizashi cheated at least twice, at one point flinging a hanging flowerpot at his wife’s face. Mebuki had responded by tripping him. Sasuke remained entertained, hanging onto Kizashi for dear life, but Itachi had been more than a little concerned.

“Oh-huh.” Sasuke says, smirking at his older brother, who was trying not to look out of breath.

Sakura was trying to look out of breath. Learning to run from Shisui had made a huge difference.

“Getting old, Kizashi?” Sakura’s mother says sweetly.

Sakura’s father responds with a word Sakura is definitely not allowed to say.

“Can we go play in the garden, please?” Sakura asks, looking at her mother with pleading eyes.

“Keep the noise to a minimum.” Her mother winks. “We wouldn’t want the neighbours to think we’re murdering you.”

“Don’t want them catching on to our dastardly plans.” Her father mumbles into the arm of the sofa, already dropping off to sleep.

“Let’s go!” Sakura says, grabbing both Sasuke and Itachi’s arms and dragging them out of the house.

They’ve only been playing for about ten minutes when all hell breaks loose.

“Now!” Naruto yells, and the Monsters climb over the fence – Chouji falls flat on his face – and spill onto the lawn.

“Operation Distraction is a go!” Ino cries out, tugging Chouji up and running with Shikamaru to the end of the garden.

Sakura’s parents are suddenly right next to her, regarding the chaos with mild interest.

Ino lets out a war cry and hurls something into a tree.

Oh dear, Sakura thinks. That was one of Naruto’s paint bombs, his favourite method of mischief-making.
A Mask leaps out of the tree, partially-splattered with paint. They shake their head bemusedly as Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji surround them. Ino looks particularly wild, fingers raised like claws.

Naruto grins at Sasuke, “Great, Sasuke-teme’s here too! We’re here to bust Sakura-nee out!”

Itachi barely restrains himself from tugging his little brother away from the crazed-looking child.

“Naruto!” Sakura cries. She flings herself at him and they hug. She breathes in his familiar scent of dirt, grass and ramen and feels tears spring in her eyes. His grip tightens on her and she hears him swallow, hard.

“Children.” Sakura’s mother says. “Please explain.”

Chouji shouts something and swells up like a ripe tomato, nearly running the Mask over. Shikamaru subtly points to Ino and she nods.

“Okaa-san, Otou-san, this is Naruto. He’s my little brother.” Sakura says, a little nervous. She hasn’t told her parents about him yet. She was hoping she could just bring him home one day and they wouldn’t mind. Or she could just keep him in her room and sneak him food.

Sakura’s father smirks at his wife. “My, my, Mebuki… Keeping secrets, are we?”

“Oh, shut up. You know giving birth once was more than enough for me.” Sakura’s mother snipes back at him. Then she looks at Naruto and softens, taking in his anxious face. “Naruto, huh? Sakura’s talked a lot about you. You’re her best friend.”

“Her male best friend!” Ino hollers from the other side of the garden, still circling the lone Mask. “I’m her best girl friend!”

Sakuraflushes. So, Ino was probably not mad at her. Thank goodness.

Sakura’s mother kneels down, meeting Naruto’s nervous blue eyes with a gentle smile. “So, you’re my little girl’s brother, hm?”

Naruto fidgets with the hem of his shirt, twisting the fabric in his hands. He doesn’t quite dare to look her in the eye. “Y-yeah. Sakura-nee picked me. Nobody ever ‘dopted me. But Sakura-nee…”

“From what Sakura’s told me about you,” Her mother says gently, “I can see why she would choose you to be part of our family.”

Naruto’s eyes fill with tears. “Really?”

“Of course.” Sakura’s father chimes in. “Any prankster of your calibre is welcome here!”

Ino lets out a shriek of glee as she springs a trap at Shikamaru’s instruction, hundreds of flowers pelting the Mask over and over. Chouji rolls over to them and almost ploughs through the Mask once again. Itachi hides a smile behind his hand.

Sakura’s mother mouths, “Well at least we know the ANBU are still watching the house,” to her husband. Sakura isn’t great at lipreading. She wonders what the an-boo is.

Another Mask drops down next to them. Sakura looks up suspiciously. Where did they come from?

She perks up, feeling their familiar chakra wash over her.

*Genma!*
Then she droops. She can’t let him know she knows who he is. Kakashi dangled her over a building for the same thing.

Genma’s posture is completely different – rigid and upright – nothing like his usual relaxed slouch. “Sorry about this,” He says, his voice monotone and dissimilar to his usual drawl, gesturing to the kids running wild in the garden, “We’ll have them out of your hair in no time. C’mon, Naruto.”

“No!” Sakura cries out, clutching Naruto. He pales, trembling under her fingertips.

Sasuke stomps over to Naruto’s side, glowering up at the Mask. “Naruto’s not going anywhere.”

“Please!” Sakura looks up at Genma, begging for him to understand. Kakashi hadn’t, but surely Genma would?

Sakura’s parents look at each other, then at Genma. “Fine.” Sakura’s mother says coolly. “But just know that we have every intention of giving Naruto exactly what he needs – be that affection, attention, or even just weekly groceries. You can put that in your report, if you like.”

Naruto gapes at her in awe.

The other Mask is patting Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji on the heads, like a proud parent.

Genma’s chakra twitches in amusement.

“C’mon, kid.” He says to Naruto, his voice a little warmer than before. “I’ll treat you to ramen. I’m sure Sakura’s parents will let you see her again soon.”

Sakura and Naruto look at each other, both teary-eyed.

Naruto starts to put on that brave smile that Sakura hates, so she shakes his shoulders and brings her face close to his, crossing her eyes at him. He laughs unreservedly, pulling her into another hug.

“Don’t disappear again, okay?” He murmurs against her shoulder. Sakura can feel his tears seeping through her shirt.

“Okay.” Sakura sniffs, clutching him tightly.

The other Mask comes over with the rest of the Monsters. They’ve given Chouji a new bag of chips. Their chakra is amused. “Operation Distraction has been successfully foiled.” The Mask reports, his voice male and blank of emotion, despite the mirth rioting inside him.

“Says you.” Shikamaru yawns. “The whole point of Operation Distraction was to give Naruto enough time to reach Sakura. We did that, and then some.”

The Mask wants to laugh, very, very badly. He settles for patting Shikamaru on the head again.

“Naruto, can we induct Sasuke’s big brother into the Monsters?” Sakura asks urgently, having only just remembered her plan to keep them all together and happy.


“Uh, bring him in. Make him a Monster.”

Naruto eyes the older boy. Itachi stares back at him, solemnly. “He’s got to go through trials.” Naruto says. “We were too easy on Sasuke-teme. We need to make sure his brother is Monster-material.”
“He is!” Sasuke declares.

Itachi coughs. “Well. I don’t know…”

“He’s tall.” Shikamaru points out. “Good for pranks.”

Every one of the Monsters shares an evil grin at that.

“Ramen time, Naruto.” Genma nudges him gently.

“Yay!” Naruto cheers. “See you soon, Sakura-nee! Sakura-nee’s parents! Bye bye!”

“Bye bye.” Sasuke says pointedly, affronted at being forgotten.

“Sasuke-teme too, I guess.”

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The Mask escorted Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji out through the house, each one of them waving sheepishly to Sakura’s parents as they left. Genma let Naruto climb onto his back and then leapt onto the roof.

Sakura left Itachi and Sasuke playing in the garden – Sasuke ‘tackling’ Itachi and Itachi falling down with painfully wooden acting – and headed to her front door.

“Sakura…” Her mother says, her tone setting off warning bells in Sakura’s head. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going to find Kakashi-san.” Sakura says. “Then, he’ll take me to the Hokage and I can talk to him about Naruto.”

Sakura’s mother sighs. “Believe me, we will do something about Naruto. But sweetheart, there’s no way you’re going to get an audience with the Hokage. Especially not for such a trivial matter.”

“It’s not trivial! And that’s why I need Kakashi-san! He’s important for some reason, so he can get me to the Hokage’s office.”

Sakura’s father flops back down on the sofa with a groan. “I’m going to question the Hatake boy extensively about you. Later. After sleep.”

“You aren’t going to give up on this, are you?” Sakura’s mother asks, hands on hips.

Sakura shakes her head, eyes burning with determination. Naruto has been alone for too long.

Her mother sighs again, but her chakra is fond. “Very well. I’ll help you find Hatake, and we’ll see what happens from there.”

Sakura beams.

“I’ll look after our boys.” Her father promises sleepily, waving in the direction of the garden.

Sakura’s mother opens the front door –

- to reveal Shisui, standing with his hand up to knock.

They blink at each other for a moment, before Shisui smiles in greeting. “Hi. Can I come in?”
“Shisui-kun!” Sakura squeals.

Sakura’s mother pinches the bridge of her nose and sighs deeply, then asks flatly, “Sakura. Why do you know everyone in the village.”


“Fine, but if a parade of Uchiha set up camp outside my door, I’m done.” Sakura’s mother rolls her eyes, beckoning him to step inside.

“Oh, are we adopting another Uchiha?” Sakura’s father yawns, rolling over to peer at them blearily. “Why not. The more the merrier.”

Sakura bounces up and down excitedly. Shisui’s familiar chakra meets hers with the energy equivalent of an amused smile, a casual brush that sends her nerves singing. His chakra feels like crackling ozone, electric to the touch.

Shisui regards the two Uchiha playing in the garden with a pleased grin. “Firefly, you little miracle-worker. Well, we’ll need absolute secrecy for this conversation. Any chance you’ve got some privacy seals lying around?”

“We don’t have a Room of Doom.” Sakura pipes up.

“Ah, what house is complete without one?” Shisui sighs. “We’ll have to make do. Firefly, you know why I’m here, right?”

Shisui had said something about testing her parents, making sure they were trustworthy enough to learn her secrets.

Apparently, he must have already tested them without any of them noticing.

Sakura nods.

“I wish I knew.” Her father says, sitting up on the couch. His eyes are sharp and alert, all trace of sleepiness gone.

“You don’t mind me telling them, do you?” Shisui asks, ignoring her father.

Sakura thinks about it. Telling Shisui the first time had been hard enough, and she hadn’t gone into detail about most of her dreams. She knew her parents would want to know exactly what she had seen. The idea of rehashing it all was unpleasant.

Especially one of her most recent dreams. Her mother, crushed in the wreckage of their own home while war raged around them. She couldn’t think about it, let alone talk about it.

But, she knew her parents were worried about her. She remembered the sound of her mother’s sobs the night Mikoto came over, the dark circles beneath her father’s eyes the next day, his strained attempt at a smile when he saw her.

They desperately wanted answers for what was happening to her, so how could she deny them that?

“I don’t mind.” Sakura says quietly, trying to pretend she’s not afraid.

Shisui rests his hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his chakra pressing against her comfortingly.
“What is going on?” Her mother asks icily, not liking the hand on her daughter one bit.

“I’ve got a kekkei genkai.” Sakura says.

Shisui snorts. “Tactfully put, Firefly. You couldn’t have softened the blow at all?”

Sakura’s mother’s face creases in confusion. “Sakura, what on earth – ”

“I get dreams of things that happen. I know that Naruto is a – ”

Sakura’s father looks staggered, slumping back against the sofa. “But… how could…”

“Who knows? How did the Shodaime develop his technique? Sakura frequently has visions of future events, some that will happen soon, others far into the future. That is why she suddenly developed symptoms of trauma. Because of the things she has seen, not what she has suffered. She’s not being hurt by anyone, I promise.” Shisui says, his voice soft.

Sakura’s mother shudders. “Sakura? Is this true?”

Sakura looks up at her mother with big, teary eyes, suddenly afraid of rejection. What if her parents don’t believe her? What if they get scared of her?

Her father is by her side in an instant, having moved the second tears began to emerge. “Sacchan, you know we love you more than anything in the world. More than ramen…”

“More than sake.” Sakura’s mother continues, getting a little teary herself.

“And even more than dumplings!” All three of them chorus, familiar with the family phrase.

“We’re behind you, no matter what.” Her father says.

“Okay,” Sakura says, wiping her eyes, “It’s true. I get dreams. Only one of them’s come true so far. I saw the old man spit at Naruto before it happened, and in the dream I didn’t do anything, but when it happened again, I stood up for him.”

“That is when this all started…” Sakura’s mother says distantly, deep in thought. “When the jounin bought you dango and you told me about Naruto. You started showing signs after that.”

“No one’s hurting me.” Sakura promises them, looking them both in the eyes so they know just how sincere she’s being.

She didn’t expect them both to burst into tears at that, and judging by the way Shisui flails back at the show of emotion, he didn’t either.

Sakura’s parents both seize her in a tight hug, lifting her up off the ground and swinging her about. Sakura thinks that if she could sense her own chakra, she would see how full of love it is, sparkling with happiness.

Shisui lets them embrace for a long time before he clears his throat reluctantly, breaking the moment.

“As cute as this is, I didn’t just come here to tell you about Sakura’s kekkei genkai.” Shisui says solemnly. “I’m sure you both understand how perilous Sakura’s situation is. I may have been the first
to find out her secret, but if she keeps going at the rate she’s going, I won’t be last. And you know just how many people would kill for a gift like hers.”

Sakura’s mother clenches her jaw. “No one is going to touch her.”

“For that to happen, no one can ever know. That’s our best case scenario – no one ever finds out. But I don’t think that’s likely. So, we need to plan for what happens if someone does find out. Sakura isn’t a clan kid, protected by a large, powerful family. I’m sorry to say this, but the name Haruno won’t keep her safe. She needs a clan to back her up –”

“So that’s your game,” Sakura’s mother spits, her chakra bristling and hostile, “You want her to join your clan.”

“What? No! That’s the last thing I want! If she became an Uchiha, she’d just be another pawn in their game, someone to be used and discarded at will. I was thinking perhaps the Inuzuka, or even the Akimichi…”

“Both of those clans are mocked for their softness,” Sakura’s father points out, “The Inuzuka are considered little better than animals, despite how untrue that obviously is, and the Akimichi are often derided for being lazy slobs – no matter how much they’ve done for Konoha. The whole point of attaching Sakura to a clan is that their name means more than ours.”

“She’s not joining the Uchiha.” Shisui says darkly. “They’d be far too happy to have her. The Hyuuga probably wouldn’t accept an outsider, lucky for her. The Aburame have the same issues as the Inuzuka and the Akimichi… Hmm… I don’t want the Yamanaka looking too closely at her… The Nara are too smart for their own good, they’d figure her out in a second.”

Shisui is going somewhere with this. Sakura can sense the way he’s leading them down a path, pushing away all other options and herding them where he wants to go.

“Enough.” Sakura’s mother says dismissively. “It’s a moot point, anyway. We’re not going to lose custody of our daughter just so she can become a plaything in village politics. Sakura wouldn’t last a second amongst all the secrecy and infighting, the ruthless machinations… She’s staying with us.”

Her father nods resolutely. “Now that we know what’s going on, we can help keep her secret.”

“Do you know how I met Sakura?” Shisui asks, his tone dangerously sweet. “She was trying to practise Katon in your garden, alone.”

Sakura’s mother gasps in horror.

“She has accumulated a massive knowledge of ninjutsu. She can instinctively manipulate chakra. She is already far beyond any other child her age. She might even surpass Itachi, at this rate. Maybe you’ll manage the impossible, and keep the kekkei genkai a secret. But there’s no way you can hide her natural talent, which will draw plenty of attention. She needs a clan. She needs –”

“We will keep her safe.” Her father says firmly. “She doesn’t need a clan. She needs her family.”

Shisui’s chakra burns with frustration. He puts on a smile anyway. “We’ll see. If you ever change your mind, let me know. I have some ideas on how to keep her safe.”

“Why were you in our garden in the first place, when you met Sakura?” Her father asks, suspicion darkening his chakra like storm clouds.

Shisui is silent, his chakra laced with bitterness. “I saw a little girl playing, and wished I could join
Her parents both feel sorry for him now. Sakura doesn’t think Shisui would like it if he knew.

Shisui looks out the window again. He smiles at the sight of Sasuke jumping on Itachi’s back. “If you’ll excuse me.” Shisui says cheerfully. “I have a playdate to crash.”

They leave her father snoozing on the couch, finally getting his nap, as Shisui watches over Itachi and Sasuke.

They find Kakashi asleep in the park, bathed in sunlight. One of his mysterious books is splayed across his face. His chakra twitches as they approach.

“Kakashi-san!” Sakura says happily. “I know you’re awake!”

Kakashi groans. The book disappears, even as Sakura watches it closely. “No, I’m not.” He grumbles. “I’m fast asleep. Still in the middle of a very interesting dream…”

“Hatake-san.” Sakura’s mother says coldly.

Kakashi snaps fully into wakefulness, his single eye fixing on Sakura’s mother. “Oh. What is this. What’s happening.” His tone is flat, like he’s just waiting for the punchline of what he knows will be a truly a terrible joke.

“I need you to take me to see the Hokage, please.” Sakura says.

Kakashi’s eye switches to the sky, staring up as if though waiting for the meaning of life to be written in the clouds. “Huh.” He says, thoroughly unimpressed. “No thanks.”

“It wasn’t a request.” Sakura’s mother’s glare drills a hole in the side of his face. Kakashi seems unaffected.

“I’m busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Walking the dogs.” Kakashi says innocently.

“Dogs?!” Sakura perks up.

Her mother puts a firm hand on her shoulder. “There are no dogs. Hatake-san, my daughter actually does need your help, so I would appreciate – ”

“I guess you could say they walk themselves.” Kakashi says, lazily pointing behind him.

Sakura lets out a squeal when she sees them. A whole pack of dogs! Big ones, small ones! Fluffy ones! All cute!

“Oh, here we go.” Her mother says.

“Dogs!” Sakura shouts, charging over to them.

They all look up at her approach, a surprisingly keen intelligence in their eyes as they study her. Sakura stops right in front of them, almost giddy in excitement. She opens her arms wide in hope of a
hug.

“Who’s the pup?” The pug says, looking over her shoulder at Kakashi.

“You can talk!” Sakura shrieks. “With people words and everything!”

The pug winces. “Yeah, and our hearing’s pretty great too. So maybe tone down the volume, okay?”

“Oh!” Sakura whisper-shouts, still staring at him with wide eyes. “Wow. You must be a really smart puppy. I’ve never met a dog that can talk before!”

The pug preens a little. “Well, I am pretty advanced.”

“And cute!” Sakura beams right in his face. “Can I pet you? Please?”

The pug looks as if he’s considering it.

“Pakkun is – ”

(“You… use the same shampoo as me.” Kakashi-sensei’s dog says in a deep, gruff voice. Sakura is filled with absolute horror. “I use the same thing as a dog?!”)  

Sakura giggles. “You smell nice!” She says, pretending to take a big sniff.

Pakkun is clearly flattered, his ears flopping back. “Thanks. You smell like flowers. Not much like a pup should. Maybe you should roll in the grass a little. That always helps me.”

Sakura goes to do so, only to be caught by her collar by her mother. “Sakura, sweetheart, don’t you have somewhere to be?”

“Oh, yeah! Kakashi-san, please please please can you take me to the Hokage, please? I need to see him right away!”

Kakashi lets out a considering hum, though his chakra is mostly bored. How can he be bored when he has so many dogs?

A grey dog with spiky fur says, “Go on, take the pup, boss.”

Kakashi sighs, long, drawn-out and dramatic. I’m so put-upon, his chakra says.

“I’ll pet all of you later.” Sakura promises, smiling when many of the dogs’ tails start to wag furiously.

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“So, how did you get your summons?” Sakura asks. She’s been chattering away ever since they left the dogs in the park, Kakashi apparently not all worried about leaving them unsupervised.

“I had to fight twelve bears on a mountain.” Kakashi says dryly. “I left when they tried to make me their king.”

“That isn’t true.” Sakura says disapprovingly.

“Isn’t it?” Kakashi says, so briefly convincing that Sakura is taken aback for a moment. “We’re here.”
“Huh? Oh!” Sakura looks around. There’s a big door in front of them that must lead to the Hokage’s office, and there’s a few shinobi milling about. All of their chakra is alight with curiosity and interest, most of which is pointed at Kakashi.

Sakura’s mother lays a hand on her head, smiling down at her when she looks up. “There’s no need to worry. The Hokage is a great man. He’ll listen to you, no matter how young you are.”

Kakashi stretches, making obnoxiously loud noises as he does so.

Sakura’s mother twitches.

“Can I go now?” Kakashi asks, even though his body language is pointed straight at the door and his chakra is just as curious as the people around them. He wants to know why they’ve come.

“Nope.” Sakura says. “I need you to get me in. You’re a big deal, probably.”

“Probably.” Kakashi actually chuckles at that. “Okay, kid. You coming too?” He addresses her mother, tilting his head to look at her with his one eye.

“Of course.” Her mother says firmly.

“Fair enough.”

Kakashi flares his chakra sharply, then knocks twice.

The answering flare from inside the room nearly knocks Sakura off her feet. The Hokage – because it must be the Hokage – has to be incredibly powerful. She’s never felt chakra like it.

“Come in.”

Kakashi strolls in without hesitation, but Sakura needs her mother’s guiding hand on her back to propel her into the room.

She catches sight of an old man behind her desk and staggers beneath the weight of a dream.

(For once, she doesn’t care what she looks like. She wore the black clothes her mother laid out for her that morning without thinking much of it. The sky is crying along with the whole of Konoha today. It feels as though the centre of the village has just been violently ripped out from under them all.)

Sakura clutches her mother’s leg, eyes wide and teary, fixed on the Hokage. She was so sad in the dream. So unsettled and worried in a way she had never been before. It must have something to do with the old man in front of her. Is he going to die?

“Hello.” The Hokage says softly, a kind twinkle in his eye. “And who might you be?”

Sakura’s mother holds her hand and leads her to the desk. She can’t see over it. She lets out a huff of annoyance and climbs onto one of the chairs in front of it. She still has to stretch up to see the Hokage’s smiling face.

“Hello, mister.” Sakura says. “I’m Haruno Sakura. My parents are Mebuki and Kizami and they’re chūnin and – ” She cuts herself off abruptly. Maybe she shouldn’t say the rest to the Hokage of all people. He might get mad.

“Hokage-sama.” Kakashi corrects under his breath.
“Hello, Mister Hokage-sama.”

The old man’s eyes crinkle with amusement, “Hello, Sakura-san.”

“I know another Kage.” Sakura says, like she’s letting him in on a secret.

He leans forward in his chair. “Oh?”

“Yeah. Naruto. He’s the leader of the Monsters, the Nobikage. Oh, and he’s the first too, so he’s the Shodaime.”

The Hokage gives her a warm smile, the kind her father gives her when she’s said something particularly nice. “I was unaware of this. Ordinarily, a Hidden Village only has one Kage, but I don’t see anything wrong with having another one.”

“Konohagakure is the biggest Hidden Village.” Sakura informs him. “There’s lots of room for Kages.”

“Solid logic. So what brings you here today?”

“I want to adopt Naruto.” Sakura says, matter-of-fact.

Her mother takes in a sharp breath. “Sakura – ”

The Hokage’s eyes are shrewd and unwavering. “You are aware, of course, that a child cannot adopt another child?”

“Well, why not?”

“Because for anyone to adopt a child, they must be capable of looking after them. Pardon me for saying so, Sakura-san, but you are far too young to even look after yourself, let alone another child.”

“I can cook and clean and I’m Naruto’s big sister now. He needs me. Nobody’s ‘dopting him at the orphanage, so it doesn’t matter that I’m only four, because it’s not like anyone else is going to do it. He’d be better off with me than alone.”

“And what do your parents think of this?” The Hokage asks, lifting his eyes to her mother, whose chakra is a mixture of embarrassed and proud.

“Well, I don’t know about adoption, but I know Kizashi and I are concerned about the boy’s welfare. I’ve barely interacted with him, but it was enough to realise he’s been severely neglected.”

Sakura’s mother sounds much more respectful than Sakura has ever heard her, but her chakra is much less so. “I wanted to let you know that we are prepared to help out in any way possible.”

“Taking on another child may be too much of a financial strain, now that Kizashi is on leave.” The Hokage says, actually sounding concerned. “And there are far more ramifications involved in taking Naruto in than your average child.”

“Because everyone hates him, right?” Sakura says bluntly.

The Hokage doesn’t move, but his chakra felt her words like an icy blow. His face shows no signs of his inner turmoil. “Well, not everyone hates him, clearly. Not if he has a good friend like you.”

“Exactly, I’m the only person who really cares, so I’m going to look after him.” Sakura says.

“Sakura, please. Mind your manners.” Her mother says wearily.
“Sorry. I’m going to look after him, please. Naruto can have my room. I don’t mind if I have to sleep on the floor. He can have all my toys and I’ve still got some of my birthday money from my grandmother, so I can use that to get him some boy clothes.”

“And when the money runs out?” The Hokage raises his eyebrows.

“I’ll go to the Academy and become a ninja and then go on lots of missions. Naruto’s favourite colour is orange, so I’ll get some orange paint for my room. If my parents don’t mind.” She tips her head back to look at her mother, whose eyes are misty, for some reason. She smiles brightly at her, waiting for the mist to clear, then looks back to the Hokage. “Naruto’s not happy where he is. I know I can make him happy. So can I, please?”

The Hokage sags a little in his chair. He closes his eyes. “I’m sorry, Sakura-san, but I’m afraid I must say no.”

“Why?” Sakura demands, leaning forward and planting her hands on his desk. Careful, a voice in her head that sounds an awful lot like Shisui says, don’t lose your temper.

“A number of reasons, which I will gladly discuss with your mother. I must say, however, that I am indescribably grateful that Naruto has found a friend in you, Sakura-san. Thank you for caring so deeply.”

Sakura takes her hands off the table. There’s no telling what would happen if she broke it like Fugaku’s floor. The Hokage’s chakra probably wouldn’t be suffused with sadness and bittersweet relief anymore.

That was her last avenue. She had felt so sure that the Hokage would understand. Everyone said he was the greatest man in the village and since she knew Naruto was going to have his job one day, she assumed the old man would be similar to him. But, no. He’s just another Mask, only his is a smile.

She can picture her life with Naruto so clearly. He would never have to use that awful brave smile again. He would be happy with her.

“Sakura, I’ll stay behind and have a chat with the Hokage while Hatake-san takes you home, alright?” Her mother says softly.

Tears sting Sakura’s eyes. Normally she would be convinced that her mother was about to solve everything, fix the problem just like she always does, but something about this feels utterly, horribly final. That by going to the Hokage, she’s just sealed Naruto’s fate to stay at that horrible orphanage, alone and unloved.

“Up we get.” Kakashi says quietly, offering her a hand.

Sakura is so bitterly angry all of a sudden. Her chakra flares in response, hard enough to lift her hair as if in a gust of wind. She ignores her mother’s strangled gasp and seizes the chakra, forcing it back down with nothing but a twitch of will. Anger has brought her a cold clarity.

She steps up off the chair and onto the desk, meeting the Hokage’s surprised eyes head-on. “You’ll see, Mister Hokage-sama. I’m going to be there for Naruto, even if no one else will.”

Kakashi tries to yank her off the desk, but lets go the second he realises what she’s done. She glued her feet to it with chakra.

The Hokage looks back at her, his gaze unreadable. “Of that, Sakura-san, I have no doubt.”
Kakashi walks her home in silence.

Sakura’s sure he’s deliberately walking slower to accommodate her much shorter legs. She’s not sure if she’s grateful or angry.

“You can drop the san, you know.” He says casually, hands in his pockets.

“Huh?” Sakura screws up her face, confused.

“You keep calling me Kakashi-san. Makes me feel old. I’m only eighteen, after all.”

(“Chin up, Sakura.” Kakashi says lightly. At least he’s not using some cutey nickname like he usually does. Sakura always has to fight a smile when he does that. “Team Seven would be lost without our only kunoichi.” He makes a point of saying it loud enough for Sasuke to hear, who doesn’t acknowledge the jab, but it warms Sakura enough to finally smile after a long mission of feeling completely and utterly useless.)

“Well, then… what about Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura says innocently, hardly daring to breathe.

Kakashi almost trips. “Uh. Sensei of what now?”

“Me. Sensei of me. You’ve taught me a lot, you know.” Sakura says sincerely.

Kakashi looks blank. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

“Well, tough. It’s sensei or san, so you have to pick.”

Kakashi walks on ahead, his hair gleaming silver in the sunlight. “Hmm… I guess sensei isn’t so bad.”

Sakura smiles to herself. It feels like the first victory of the day.

Kakashi suddenly freezes, his head whipping to the side like a dog catching a scent.

Sakura hears a distant, booming voice. It sounds faintly like a man saying, “ETERNAL RIVAL!”

Kakashi grabs her collar and they zip down the street in a blur. He deposits her at her door and bounds off hurriedly.

“Bye bye, Kakashi-sensei!” She calls.

He tosses a wave of acknowledgement back, then vanishes.

When she opens the front door, she sees her father napping on the floor. There was nothing weird about that. Her mother often compared him to a cat, saying he could – and would – sleep anywhere.

What was weird was that Itachi and Sasuke were both hovering over him, their chakra a mixture of distress and terror.

Sakura stops in the doorway.

Her father.

She can’t feel his chakra.
Itachi looks up at her, desperate. “Sakura-san! Shisui has gone for help. Don’t worry. Everything will be alright.”

(“Everything’ll be fine is something liars or idiots say,” Kakashi drawls, his eye a half-moon smile. “No one really knows how everything will be. The future isn’t something we can anticipate with full clarity, which is why we live in fear of it.”)

Her father is lying perfectly still. Itachi’s hand is on his neck, like he is checking his pulse. Sasuke is in tears, kneeling by his side.

Sakura can’t move.

“Otou-san.” She chokes out.

She has never dreamed of him. Not once. Just like Shisui. If you don’t see someone’s future, maybe they don’t have a future, huh?

“Otou-san!” She shouts, leaping forward.

(Sakura is alone in The Forest of Death, seeing images of her own death over and over again until she is sure she has gone mad.)

Sakura bites her tongue, hard. Not now, not now!

(How could the sun be shining on a day like this? When the light has been taken from her life? Sakura can’t lift her head anymore. She huffs a bitter laugh into the dirt. She’s spilt her blood and her killer’s into the same ground. She hopes the flowers that grow from it are as beautiful as she was. Ino. She’ll see her soon.)

A sharp pain in her hands pulls her back. She’d dug her nails into her palms. She’s sweating and the room is swaying around her, but she’s full of a determination she has never known before.

She crosses the room in seconds, ignoring Itachi’s flinch at her speed, and gently lays her hands on her father’s chest. It is rising and falling shallowly, with every laboured breath.

Sakura closes her eyes.

She sinks into his system, sending exploratory chakra everywhere to determine the source of his ailment.

Dying, her instincts wail at her, he’s dying!

Memories that aren’t hers forcibly flood into her mind – diabetes, long-term complications, kidney disease, kidney failure – he is comatose and he will die without help.

He needs a medic nin.

He needs Sakura.

Sakura pushes her chakra into his system, her tiny, meagre supply immediately burning out and leaving her with nothing, barely scratching the surface of her father’s illness.

“No!” Itachi exclaims, trying to shove her away, but Sakura is as rigid as stone, leaning over her father.

Sweat drips from her face. I have more, I have to have more!
Chakra erupts from her, flowing into her father’s system and busily repairing every issue it comes across. The kidney failure is reversed, the kidney disease itself is attacked and shredded. His kidneys are revived and rejuvenated. She pushes and pushes and refuses to stop.

“Sakura, please!” Sasuke sobs in her ear, pulling at her sleeve.

Her vision is spotting. Of course, she thinks, dazed. The blood vessels in the eyes are often the first to go.

“Sakura-san!”

She collapses like a puppet with cut strings.

—

In the time it takes to blink, she goes from staring down at her father through blurred eyes to looking at herself in the mirror.

Except, when she does blink, it’s not herself.

At least, not her four-year-old self.

This Sakura looks at least sixteen.

She regards her younger self with impassive eyes.

“Finally.” She says in the voice Sakura knows so well despite never having heard it before. “You made it.”

***

So, following on from last chapter’s two thousand words too long mess, here’s a THREE thousand words too long EVEN BIGGER MESS!!

*Maui voice* You’re welcome! ~~

Shisui still has Plans, but parents keep getting in the way!

So, Kizashi has diabetes in this fic, which I vaguely hinted at in the last chapter with the whole ‘not allowed sugar’ bit with the hot kitty cocoa. He was going into kidney failure in this chapter, because of his kidney disease, which can be a complication of diabetes. Kidney disease actually has very few symptoms, which sucks, but one of them is being unusually tired. Another is having difficulty breathing. Probably shouldn’t have raced your wife when you’re on sick leave, silly billy.

Sakura has met… Sakura?

Interesting.

The Monsters return! A lone Mask is felled by a brutal attack by baby InoShikaChou!

So, I have some Naruto fic recs, just to spread the love (because you guys are seriously awesome and you make my day with every single comment, thank you so much!)

The first is one of my ABSOLUTE FAVOURITE fics of all time, reverse, by blackkat. It’s on archiveofourown and it’s the best thing since sliced bread. Time travel Naruto fix-it with tons of detail and clever plotting and just general awesomeness. It’s super long and actually finished! That’s
always a major plus.

The second is *How Long is Forever*, by aoutrance. Another time travel Sakura-centric fic! Very satisfying Sakura characterisation here.

The third is *backslide*, also by blackkat! If you like fluff, here it is!

If any of you guys want to talk to me or ask me any questions, I’m also katlou303 on tumblr.

**Quick poll for fun:** What is your favourite book, TV show or movie, and why?

You can pick more than one if you really have to ;)

(remember how I asked you which character you would bring back to life? Well congrats. They’re all alive and having a picnic in a field of flowers)

Sakura saw MANY DOGS
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I recommend All We Do by Oh Wonder as the theme song of this chapter. You may have to listen to it twenty billion times, as this is another long one. Buckle up!

Sakura stares in utter astonishment.

The girl from her dreams, right before her eyes.

The older Sakura is sat with her back to the wall, her arms chained and hanging above her. Her eyes are shadowed, just a slice of cold green visible. Sakura gazes into her eyes and remembers seeing that look before on someone else.

“You’re thinking of Gaara.” The older Sakura says. “You can’t have any visions here, so you didn’t see one of my memories of him.”

“I – I don’t understand.” Sakura stammers. She’s kneeling down, and the floor feels real beneath her, but when she looks around all she can see is a fuzzy, indistinct landscape. There is a haze of red hanging over everything.

“I know. It will be difficult for me to explain. I don’t have much time, or the freedom to say what I wish I could.”

“Who are you?”

The older Sakura smiles, a grim twitch of her lips. “I’m you. The you from a future that will never be, if you do this right. My name is Haruno Sakura and my parents are Mebuki and Kizashi… I’m sure you know the rest.”

“So, we’re like sisters?” Sakura says breathlessly, amazed by the possibility.

The older Sakura gives a derisive laugh. “I remember wanting a sister, once. Then I met Ino, and I thought I’d found one.”

“Ino-chan’s the best!”

“She was. She still can be, if you save her. Like I failed to.”

Sakura remembers seeing Ino lying down, still and unmoving. A splash of red on the ground.

“How do I save her?”

The older Sakura grimaces. A seal flickers over her mouth. She opens and closes it, then pauses to think. “You can save her… if you don’t trust anyone. That’s the best you can do. Don’t ever put your faith in someone and expect them to reward you for it.”

Sakura blanches. “That’s… horrible.”

“Worse than watching the people you love die?” The older Sakura asks, coldly amused.
“Who are the people I love, if I can’t trust anyone or put my faith in them?”

The older Sakura raises her eyebrows, considering the question. “You can’t help loving people. I won’t even bother trying to make you stop. You have too much love to give. That’s always been our problem. Love Ino, Naruto, Kakashi… whoever. But don’t forget – they are shinobi, and so are you. Don’t trust blindly. Always be on your guard.”

“What about Shisui-kun? Can I trust him?” Sakura asks, even though she knows in her heart that she already does, and will continue to do so, no matter what this girl says.

The older Sakura seems to know what she’s thinking, judging by the amused quirk of her lips. “I never met Shisui. But my best bet is no, you can’t.”

“Is he dead?” Sakura asks in a quiet, weak voice. “In your time?”

“Probably. Many people are.” The older Sakura shrugs.

Sakura feels the tears prick in response, but her older self glares at her until she blinks, startled, and they go away.

“No more crying, Sakura. Don’t waste your tears. You need to be strong.”

Sakura clenches her jaw, squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t believe you’re really me.” She mumbles, wiping her eyes. “You’re nothing like me.”

“It’s been twelve years since I was you. Things change, Sacchan.”

“Don’t call me that! That’s what – ”

“Your father calls you? Yes, I remember. But for me, he died when I was four years old. I barely remember him. He had diabetes and while on medical leave, he went into a coma and died alone. But not for you. Because of me. Without my knowledge, my skills and my chakra, you would have lost him too. I grew up without a father. My mother told me all kinds of stories about him, all so romantic and sweet. I wanted nothing more than to have that for myself. I didn’t get it. But that’s okay, Sacchan, because we don’t need it. Do you understand?”

“No!” Sakura cries. “I don’t understand anything you’re saying! My dad is not dead, he’s not!”

“Your dad isn’t. Well done, by the way. Your first healing, aged four. You’ll make quite the stir. But don’t expect much. Shisui might worry that you’ll be spotted, but we never drew much attention. No matter what we did. That’s your superpower, Sacchan. Invisibility.”

“If you’re going to call me Sacchan, I’m going to call you something.” Sakura grumbles.

“How about Kagami?” The older Sakura says, the chains clinking as she leans forward. “That’s what our father wanted to call us. Until we were born – ”

“With pink hair.” Sakura says, wide-eyed. “You really are me.”

“Not anymore. You’re going to be better than me. You don’t have a choice.” Sakura – no, Kagami, says grimly.

“Well, what’s wrong with you?” Sakura asks. “You’re even grumpier than Kakashi-sensei, but I bet you’re not so bad.”

Kagami smiles. She looks a lot prettier with it, even though sadness still clings to her. Sakura realises
that she can’t sense Kagami’s chakra – can’t sense anyone’s chakra.

“That’s because you’re inside your own mind.” Kagami says. “But even I don’t have answers for why you can sense chakra as you can. I have perfect chakra control, but I never managed to discern what others were feeling from their auras.”

“Is it part of my kekkei genkai? Like you?” Sakura asks.

Kagami pauses, her eyebrows shooting up. Then, she huffs out an incredulous laugh. “Kekkei genkai, really… well, why not? Call it whatever you want.”

“So, when I have dreams… is that you?”

“Yes. There’s a thin connection between us. I’m trapped in your mind.” Kagami yanks at her chains. “I can’t do much, or even say much. I have access to most of your thoughts and I can see what’s happening as you do, so when familiar topics come up – such as a name, or a face – our minds connect and mine supplies yours with the missing information. You end up seeing one of my memories. It’s not perfect. Sometimes it happens at random. I’m sorry for that. You’ve seen me at my worst.”

Sakura thinks of how much she’d disliked the Sakura of her dreams. Always calling Ino names, shouting at Naruto, crying over Sasuke. But she looks at Kagami, at the self-deprecating smile on her face, the dark circles beneath her eyes, and can’t help but feel sorry for her.

“Onee-chan.” Sakura tries hopefully.

Kagami finally gives her a smile she can recognise, one she’s seen reflected many times before.

Even without sensing her chakra, Sakura knows she’s made her happy.

xxxxxxxx

Kakashi’s pretty sure he’s finally managed to shake Gai off his tail. A singular need drove that man to be annoying, and he excelled at most things he strived for. It had taken a fair few wrong turns and classic switcheroos to finally lose him.

Kakashi-sensei, huh, he muses, sitting on his apartment building’s rooftop. He had a book held in front of his face, but his mind was elsewhere. Sakura was a weird kid, that was for sure. But when she said he had taught her a lot, she meant it. Could he have made some kind of impact on her without knowing it?

A frightening thought.

The sun was just starting to set. The sky was a mixture of pastel colours, pink and yellow clouds streaking through the blue. Kakashi generally preferred dawn, when the darkness of the world began to recede, the day breaking through the night. He studied the wisps of pink and gold in the sky and shook his head, laughing at himself. What was he doing, watching the sunset and feeling vaguely optimistic for the future? How unlike him.

He feels the approach of a very familiar chakra signal.

He could flee, as he had before. He could even pretend he was sleeping – Gai tried not to wake him when possible, believing his Eternal Rival needed as much rest as possible – though Gai might see fit to take him home, which could prove awkward. Kakashi preferred not to be carried unless he was bleeding out and unconscious. Sometimes, not even then.
He could leave and bury himself in a bar, drinking until the sun was long gone and Gai with it. But for some reason, he found normality with Gai – as ironic as that statement was – since Gai knew him better than most living people did, and didn’t hesitate to call him out on his bullshit when needed. Gai was good for him. Despite everything.

Kakashi settles back, tearing his gaze away from the fading sunlight and focusing on the pages in front of him. He didn’t have long to wait.

“AHA!” Gai booms from just behind him. “There you are!”

Kakashi turns a page.

Gai makes an odd squeal, as if he was deflating. “Argh! How cool you are, my eternal rival! How like you, to be so unaffected by an ambush!”

Kakashi stifles a giggle. Kimiko-chan was so naughty! Ah, it didn’t matter how many times he’d read this one. You can’t beat the classics.

“Kakashi, I know what you are doing. You are ignoring me in the hopes that I will leave, daunted by your staunch refusal to acknowledge my presence!”

Well, points for observation.

“So instead, I shall stay exactly where I am until you face me!”

Points deducted for predictability.

Kakashi stands, nose still deep in his book – and, by proxy, Kimiko-chan’s cleavage – and hops off the roof.

“Ohoh!” Gai, naturally, takes it as a challenge, launching himself high in the sky, sailing well above where Kakashi landed.

Kakashi takes a sharp turn into an alley, ignoring the general chaos behind him from Gai’s crash-landing.

When he took Sakura and her mother to the Hokage’s office, he hadn’t had a clue what they wanted. Somehow the way it ended up was entirely unsurprising, with Sakura standing on the Hokage’s desk, staring him down in a battle of wills. For a moment, he had allowed himself a moment to imagine the Hokage granting her request. The Harunos adopting Naruto, and him becoming Sakura’s brother in every sense of the word. Naruto having a home and a family, a safe place with people that loved him. A beautiful dream, but just that. A dream.

The Hokage’s rejection stung, no matter how predictable it was.

Sakura’s fierce reaction was equally predictable, but her little chakra-enhanced outburst wasn’t. Kakashi had deliberately failed to mention Sakura’s ability to mould chakra in his reports on Naruto after witnessing her sticking to her roof, not wanting to draw undue attention to the child. Then Sakura did it right in front of the Hokage.

The girl lived to give him heart attacks, it seemed.

She had been so upset when they left the office. Maybe he should’ve stuck around a little longer? Ducked away from Gai at her place, gave her a little encouragement to keep her going? Damn. He wasn’t good with kids. It should’ve been Genma that she picked for her sensei.
Kakashi abruptly turns on his heel, avoiding a kick slicing at his back, and starts to head back to Sakura’s house. Gai lets out a guttural noise of frustration, charging at him from behind. Kakashi replaces himself with a nearby rock, appearing on a roof overhead. Gai blunders about in the alley for a moment, confused.

Kakashi gazes up at the sky.

Sakura’s mother hadn’t been what he expected. He’d done some research on Sakura’s family after the abuse claims came out – and he certainly hadn’t been the first, or last, to check out her file recently – and by all reports, her parents were distinctly average.

Her father suffered from poor health, having extended breaks in-between missions to recover, and was similar to Hayate, in that he was a talented shinobi hampered only by his body. Sakura’s mother was partnered with her husband, and had been since they made genin together. Their third member had been killed in an ambush on a mission, and Mebuki and Kizashi had still managed to save their sensei and recover the information they had been sent to retrieve. Mebuki had been reprimanded for risking her life to retrieve her friend’s body, but that only raised Kakashi’s estimation of her. She could’ve made jounin numerous times, but each time turned down the promotion unless it would be extended to Kizashi as well. Since it never was, they stayed the same rank.

Neither of them seemed like the type to push their child into the kind of training Sakura had obviously been through. On paper, they seemed like the ideal Konoha nin – driven by teamwork and the mission, not ambition or power. In person, Mebuki had been cold and disapproving, but she only knew him by his reputation as a friend-killer and local pervert, and he was the weirdo her kid had befriended. He couldn’t blame her for not being especially warm and friendly to him. He had observed her with Sakura, and couldn’t deny how close they seemed, how encouraging she was to her daughter. How many parents would take their kid to see the Hokage because they had something they considered especially important to tell him?

It was good to confirm Sasaki’s findings, but it left him with fewer answers and more questions. **What** was going on Sakura? **Who**, if anyone, was behind it?

“Kakashi, I challenge you!” Gai declares, having finally realised where Kakashi had disappeared to.

Kakashi makes a little *hm* sound of vague interest, still not bothering to turn around to face his friend.

“A push-up contest! The first to pass out loses!”

Kakashi frowns.

They’re a couple buildings down from Sakura’s street, and he can see a group of people milling around by her door. He tugs his hitae-ate down and peers through the gloom of the oncoming dusk.

There are… Uchiha. Lots of Uchiha. Never a good sign. He pulls his hitae-ate back in place. They’re not fond of him at the best of times, since he ‘stole’ one of their precious Sharingan. Best not to rub it in their faces.

Kakashi vaults over the building in front of him and lands neatly in the middle of the street, ignoring the startled civilians stumbling back.

Shisui is standing at the Haruno’s door, stone-faced. Itachi is delivering a report to an older man. A teary Sasuke is clutching his brother’s hand.

Mebuki is holding onto her husband as if he’s about to be ripped away any second, her arms wrapped around him so tightly that he must be in pain. He doesn’t show it, burying his face in her
neck. He’s shaking. A medic-nin is trying to get his attention.

Sakura is nowhere in sight.

Gai lands next to Kakashi. For once, he’s silent, taking in the situation.

Kakashi approaches Shisui, the only one who doesn’t look like he’s rapidly approaching a breakdown – Itachi might fool most people with that blank stoicism, but Kakashi can see the cracks in his mask. He’s not coping well with whatever’s happened here.

Shisui greets him with a crappy excuse for a smile. “Hey. You here to join the party?”

“I brought the fun.” Kakashi says, gesturing to Gai. “What happened?”

Shisui’s not-quite-smile turns into a snarl. “Itachi has all the answers, and he’s happy to give them. Why don’t you ask him?” He jerks his head to where his cousin is debriefing a jounin, who’s taking notes. Well, that’s… foreboding.

Itachi is talking in the same bland, detached voice he uses when discussing all the horrible things he’s seen on missions. (Genma and the others make a game of it, to try to turn the trauma into humour, but Itachi doesn’t understand the meaning of the word. They recount their worst memories with good old-fashioned black comedy, and Itachi just sits there, blank and distant.)

“So that’s why Shisui was angry at Itachi. He was spilling out everything automatically, trained to recount every detail from missions without skipping any pertinent information. And now they all knew exactly what Sakura could do.

He had known she was a genius. He knew she was interested in medicine. He had even witnessed her healing Naruto on one occasion. But he had no idea that she was a prodigy.

There weren’t many left alive in the village. Kakashi was one. Another was standing right in front of him, barely concealing his emotions in the face of a traumatic event. Neither of them were the best examples of mental health or happiness.
“Thanks, Itachi. I’m all caught up now. As for you…” Kakashi winks at the jounin, enjoying the muscle twitching in his jaw at the sight. “Keep up the good work. Great… note-writing.”

Gai places a hand on his shoulder, still unsettlingly quiet. Gai likes kids, too. Just like Genma. So many people would’ve been a better teacher to that poor kid. Gai wouldn’t have dropped her off at her door and left her there by herself to face tragedy alone. What was so important that he’d left in the first place? Avoiding his friend? Reading porn and watching the sunset?

Kakashi’s gaze drifts over Sakura’s parents. Mebuki is pale, staring into the distance. Kizashi has bowed his head, his hands in his hair. They’re both flanked by Uchiha on all sides. Kakashi’s pretty sure that’s the only reason they’re not at their daughter’s bedside in the hospital right now. Chakra exhaustion. At four. That could so easily be fatal.

“A most talented individual.” Gai murmurs, squeezing his shoulder. Kakashi closes his eyes, allowing that touch to ground him. “Such a strong girl in the prime of youth won’t succumb to anything, Kakashi. Least of all death. Trust in that, and her.”

He really can’t hide anything from Gai. It’s a blessing and a curse.

“Hatake-san.” Mebuki speaks up, sounding drained. Her eyes are hollow when she looks at him. “They won’t let us see her. They’re going through our house and our belongings and they’ve been questioning us for the past hour and they won’t let us see her. We don’t even know for sure if she’s…”

“I’ll check on her.” Kakashi says, ignoring the urge inside him to run as fast as he can until he reaches the Memorial Stone.

“I tried to persuade the Hokage.” Mebuki says wearily. “For Sakura’s sake, I tried. But he refused. I know his reasons, but I don’t understand them. I was dreading coming home to tell her I failed, that she wouldn’t be getting a little brother after all. Then I came home and she was…”

“It’s not your fault!” Gai booms, despite knowing half the situation and none of the people involved. “We cannot know the twists and turns Fate takes us on ahead of time, or all the spontaneity and joy would be gone from life! But rest assured! Your little blossom will bloom a second time and be even more beautiful for it! Do not despair!”

Well, at least Mebuki doesn’t look so broken now. She’s too busy looking shell-shocked in the face of Gai at his most Youthful.

“Right, then. I’ll leave you in Gai’s capable hands.” Kakashi says, barely finishing his sentence before he disappears in a flicker.

Shisui gladly uses the distraction Gai’s mere presence causes to whisk the Harunos back inside their home.

Itachi is still outside with Sasuke, discussing the case with the rest of the family. Shisui, who has recently been playing up his cheerful idiot persona, was sadly not invited to the conflab.

Kizashi is pale and shaky, and sinks down onto the couch without a word. Mebuki paces up and down the living room, working off a restless energy that’s been infecting her since she came back from the Hokage’s office. Shisui will never forget the look on her face when she saw her husband and daughter, lying side by side on the floor, both being attended to by medics.
Shisui wonders what his face looked like, when he saw Sakura. He had flickered as fast as he could to the hospital, the world passing by in a blur of leaves and red sky. All he could think of was that there was no way he was going to let Firefly grow up without a father. And then he alerted a team of medics, brought them back with him – barely managing to restrain himself to their pace – and burst into the Haruno’s house, expecting nothing but the same sight he’d left behind, Kizashi unconscious and unmoving, Itachi and Sasuke by his side.

Which is why it was such a violent, jarring shock to see Sakura in Itachi’s arms, chalk-white and still. He realised what happened pretty quickly. Sakura had healed his tiny, minor burn after half a minute of knowing him. There was no way she would leave her father to die just to protect herself. Shisui couldn’t help but wish she had.

Guiltily, he avoids looking at Kizashi when he finally speaks, breaking the solemn silence that has fallen over the room. “All our talk about keeping Sakura’s talent a secret, and then…” He trails off, feeling useless.

Kizashi flinches. Shisui only sees it out of the corner of his eye. He wordlessly turns his back on him, facing Mebuki instead. “You know what you have to do.”

Mebuki returns his gaze, her eyes hard and unflinching. “I don’t trust you, or your intentions. Whatever happens, we will protect Sakura. You can rely on that.”

“She’s our little girl.” Kizashi says, his voice breaking. “It wasn’t long ago that she was wetting the bed and just learning to walk. We can’t… we can’t just give her up…”

“Which would you prefer losing? Custody of Sakura? Or Sakura?” Shisui says pitilessly, ignoring the sob Kizashi barely manages to swallow. “She’s shown what she can do, now. We’ve gone beyond the point of no return. There’s no ‘if’ in this scenario. When you give Sakura up, who can you stand taking her?”

Mebuki and Kizashi look at each other, helpless.

Good. They were faltering. Time to push.

“If it helps, it’s not an entire clan I have in mind. Just one person who has the skills and renown to back Sakura, but won’t want to take her from you.”

A flicker of hope in Mebuki’s eyes.

Shisui spreads his hands, ever the showman. “Tsunade of the Senju clan. Sakura has seen her returning to Konoha in the future, where she will take Sakura on as her apprentice. That’s why Sakura could heal you, Kizashi-san. That’s why Sakura was able to break Fugaku’s floor. Tsunade’s tutelage is the only explanation people will believe regarding Sakura’s abilities. I suggest you reach out to Tsunade, ask her to adopt Sakura – only legally, technically she’ll still be your child to raise as you like – and give her a name that would make even the darkest figure in Konoha hesitate to mess with her.”

“Tsunade-sama, one of the Legendary Three.” Mebuki repeats, her voice flat and unimpressed. “She abandoned Konoha. She has no reason to care about our problems.”

“Which is exactly why she won’t interfere in Sakura’s upbringing.”

“The Senju were one of the strongest, most influential clans. Wouldn’t giving Sakura their name make her even more of a target?” Kizashi points out.
“Only if she was a blood-related descendant. In this case, Sakura would just be a ward. An honorary member of the clan. We’re no longer dealing with hypotheticals, here. This isn’t a matter of if Sakura is found out, she has been. You need her to look less of a prodigy, but with more security behind her. Have Tsunade take her on and all of the village’s questions will be answered.”

If Sakura hadn’t accidentally revealed her Tsunade-specific skillset, Shisui would’ve pushed for the Inuzuka or the Akimichi. Kizashi clearly wasn’t familiar with clan politics, just the rumours he and his wife must have heard from their fellow chūnin, but Sakura would have been safe with either clan. Protected and respected for her talents. The Akimichi would have fed her up and married her off to some merry clansman (but only if all parties were happy with it), and the Inuzuka probably would’ve given her a dog and blown her mind. He makes a note to find out when her birthday is and see if some of his blackmailing efforts are worth a pup or two. It pays to keep tabs on all the interpersonal drama going on in the village.

“I’m going to find out where Tsunade is. Someone’s bound to be tracking her movements. When I do, you’ll go out and find her with Sakura, and you’ll persuade her to help. How, I don’t know. My guess is Sakura will bat her eyelashes at her and she’ll be yours. You’ll tell everyone you decided to get Sakura an apprenticeship with a healer after she revealed her innate talent, and you were lucky enough to find Tsunade. It’s not a perfect story, but it doesn’t have to be.”

A perfect story would be Sakura managing to mask her abilities until it was safe to reveal them, but as it is, Shisui can only work with what he has. Tsunade was the Hokage’s student and they were reportedly close, so hopefully Sakura’s connection to her will only help her case with the Sandaime. He couldn’t turn a blind eye if anything happened to her then.

Shisui can’t die just yet.

He still has things to do.

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Sakura’s not sure how long she’s been kneeling in front of Kagami, listening to her talk in her croaky, untested voice. Whenever she’s about to say something important, she winces and backtracks. It seems safe for her to be vague, so right now she’s trying to impart life lessons, rather than share secrets.

“The mistakes we make leave scars to remind us not to do it again.” Kagami says gravely. Sakura’s eyes move, unbidden, to the floor. She sees something she’s sure wasn’t there before – a pool of blood. Sakura’s breath catches. She crawls forward, bile creeping up her throat.

She peers behind Kagami, the small space between her older self and the wall she is chained to, and sees blood dripping down her back. There’s a gaping wound, right between her shoulder blades.

Sakura gasps. “You’re hurt!”

“I’m dead.” Kagami says dryly. “But, shh… listen.” She holds up a hand, and Sakura waits.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The sound of Kagami’s blood dripping. Over and over again.

“When I lose focus, I ground myself with that sound. That is why I’m here. Because I turned my back at the wrong moment. Because I trusted the wrong person.”

“Who?” Sakura asks desperately.
Kagami frowns. The seal around her mouth appears again, flaring violently. “I can’t say. I’m sorry. Just be careful.”

“Does it… hurt?” Sakura reaches for the wound, waiting for healing chakra to gather in her hand. Nothing happens.

“We’re in your mind, remember?” Kagami says, amused. “No chakra, no healing.”

“No pain?” Sakura says hopefully.

Kagami laughs. “I wouldn’t say that. There’s always pain, Sacchan. But it’s alright. It’s just another reminder to keep me going.”

Sakura sits back and takes in the sight of her older self, seeing her with new eyes from everything she’s learned. She’s pretty, which part of Sakura is very happy about, and her hair is the same length as Sakura’s, only a little more unkempt. She’s wearing a dark green jacket, which has rips in the sleeves and pockets bulging with items. There’s a tiny purple seal on her forehead. Sakura feels strong waves of nostalgia at the sight of it.

_Tsunade?

Kagami nods.

There’s bruises stamped across her neck like fingerprints, broken blood vessels forming a grotesque necklace. Kagami tosses her head when Sakura notices, settling her hair a little over the marks. Her wrists are manacled. There are chains twisted around her shoulders to her lower arms, cruelly digging into her skin.

“If this is my mind.” Sakura says slowly. “I don’t want you to be in pain here. Can I change it?”

“You’re welcome to try.”

Sakura closes her eyes. She imagines Kagami’s bruises fading away, the chains withdrawing until the welts they leave behind disappear completely. She pictures the horrible wound on Kagami’s back closing up painlessly, the blood drying up and vanishing.

_Drip. Drip. Drip._

She opens her eyes.

Nothing has changed.

Kagami smiles. “Don’t forget. This is my mind, too.” Sakura notices Kagami’s teeth are flecked with blood. Sakura shudders.

_This_ is who she grew up into?

The red fog starts to lift.

Kagami looks around, eyes narrowed. “Time’s up.”

Sakura hears voices all around her, faint and indistinct.

“Be kind to Naruto. And Rock Lee. And stay away from Gaara, if you can. If you can’t, make sure to –”
Sakura falls.

(The monster swipes, and she goes flying. She hits the tree hard, knocking all the air out of her, and then the clawed hand begins to squeeze and she can’t breathe. A rib cracks and she screams.)

Sakura wakes with an agonised howl.

“Sakura-chan! It’s alright, Sakura-chan!” Sasaki says, touching her shoulder.

“What did you see?” Fugaku asks. “What happened?”

“Enough, Uchiha-san!” Sasaki snaps, pushing him back. “Here, do you want some water, Sakura-chan? Can you sit up for me? There we go. That’s it. Drink up.”

Sakura sips at the water, barely noticing it spill down her chin. Kagami– no, not Kagami. Sakura winces. Sasaki wipes her face with uncommon tenderness.

She’s in a hospital room. An IV line is connected to her, glowing softly with blue chakra. She still feels drained and empty. Confused. She tries to find her older self in her mind, closing her eyes and thinking hard, but there’s not a whisper of Kagami to be found. Was it real? Was she?

Sakura can’t feel anyone’s chakra. She looks at Sasaki’s face and thinks it looks worried, but she’s not sure. Fugaku looks stoic. She has no idea what he’s thinking.

Scary, she thinks to herself.

“What happened?” Fugaku presses, his dark eyes flickering over her face, examining every inch.

Sakura frowns, then winces at the sharp pain in her forehead.

The door opens and Kabuto bustles in, not sparing the other two adults a glance, only having eyes for his patient.

“Hello again, Sakura-chan.” Kabuto smiles, touching her forehead gently, chakra flickering in a colourful haze right in front of her eyes. “How are you feeling?”

“Kabuto-kun.” Sakura says, surprised. “Hello. I’m okay. Whose room is this?”

“It’s a private room, for special patients.”

“Why am I special?”

“Sakura-san, if you’re feeling better then we really must discuss what happened.” Fugaku interjects.

Sakura shrinks back. He sounds annoyed, but is he? It’s so much easier to talk to grown-ups when she knows what they’re thinking.

“Umm…” She pauses. Her head’s all foggy. What did happen? She saw Kagami, who was sad and scary, then a monster attacked her and she felt her ribs splinter, digging into her insides like knives…

She doesn’t realise she’s biting her lip until Kabuto taps her chin lightly. She tastes blood. She looks up at him, eyes stinging from the pain. He looks sympathetic and his smile is warm, but is it real? She can’t tell.
“Sakura-chan obviously isn’t up to being interrogated right now.” Sasaki says acidly. “Perhaps you can wait a little longer for your answers, and Sakura-chan can have some time to recover from what I shouldn’t have to remind you was an extremely Traumatising. Event!”

It was –

“Otou-san!” Sakura gasps. Kagami said she healed him, but what if she was wrong?

“He’s fine.” Kabuto says, ignoring the glare Fugaku aims at him. “You saved him, Sakura-chan. You were very brave and you worked so hard. I’m sure he’s very proud of you.”

“Absolutely.” Sasaki nods.

Sakura sags back into the pillows. Thank goodness, she thinks, exhausted. She did it.

“So, how did you manage such a feat, Sakura-san?” Fugaku asks, his eyes sharp and suspicious.

Sakura is too tired to make something up. “Okaa-san says I can do anything I put my mind to.” She says blithely.

Fugaku makes a strangled sound.

xxxxxxx

“Kakashi.” The Sandaime says warily. “Two visits in as many days. Is war on the horizon?”

“Possibly.” Kakashi takes his hands out of his pockets and makes an effort to straighten out his slouch. “Haruno Sakura passed out from chakra exhaustion last night after healing her father’s kidney failure.”

The Sandaime stares at him, his gaze unreadable. He could be thinking one of a thousand things. “I heard.” He says, finally. He puts his hands together in a steeple and breathes in deeply. “Few things surprise me, at my age. That did. But what does that have to do with your appearance here this morning?”

“Her parents aren’t allowed to visit her.”

“A mere precaution, until the events of the day are made clear.”

“I wanted permission to go see her myself.” Kakashi doesn’t bother masking the intent in his voice. He wants this, and the Hokage will see through any attempt to play it cool.

“To assuage her parents’ concerns, or your own?” The Sandaime asks.

“A little of both, I think.” Kakashi says brightly.

The Sandaime pulls out a piece of paper and starts writing, a little furrow of concentration between his brows. Kakashi isn’t fooled. The old man’s focus is still squarely on their conversation.

“Tell me honestly, Kakashi – were you surprised to hear that Sakura had such an ability? You certainly were not taken aback by her display in my office yesterday. Sakura has become Naruto’s closest friend and as such, is linked to him in every report I read about his daily life. If you did know of her talents, you failed to mention them. Why is that?”
“I didn’t think it was relevant to Naruto’s case.” Kakashi says stiffly.

“Then, by all means, give me a report on Sakura.”

“Yes, sir. I witnessed her reading advanced medical textbooks and I saw her heal a small injury of Naruto’s. I never mentioned it because I thought that if Sakura’s talent was discovered, she would be placed in the Academy, and she and Naruto might grow apart. She’s… good for him. There’s not a single member of his guard that would say otherwise. I shouldn’t have omitted the facts, Hokage-sama.”

“Well, if you did, so did every other one of Naruto’s guards.” The Hokage smiles, his pronounced laughter lines deepening around his eyes. “I agree with you. Sakura might be a talented child, but I see no harm in leaving her for one more year, so that she may enter the Academy with Naruto and the rest of her friends, rather than alone.”

Relief lifts the weight off Kakashi’s shoulders. He hadn’t realised just how worried he was until he wasn’t anymore. “Thank you, Hokage-sama.”

“It wasn’t a difficult decision. We’re in peacetime, now. We can allow our children the luxury of a childhood. Most of them, at any rate. Mebuki offered to take on Naruto on a permanent basis, you know. She said she hadn’t discussed it with Kizashi, but she wouldn’t need to, because she knew he would feel exactly as she did. If the situation were in any way different, I would grant the Harunos’ request in a heartbeat. But it hardly matters now, in the wake of everything that’s happened. Hopefully, they will still be good to Naruto. He could do with some happiness in his life.”

Kakashi pushes away the memory of Minato and Kushina, so bright and excited for the future that once seemed so golden.

He tries not to waste time wishing for impossible things.

***

Hello, friends.

I think one person guessed that Shisui was angling for the Senju. Well done! A thousand cookies for you! :) His plan is very definitely not perfect, but he’s still only twelve. (I somehow hecked it up and got his age wrong. He’s not eleven. He’s been twelve this whole time. Lying to us.)

(I occasionally get comments in languages I can’t read, which is anything but English. I don’t mind getting them, but just know I run them all through google translate and hope for the best)

So older Sakura’s a big ol’ buzzkill. I literally called her Kagami just because it means mirror, hahahaha, laaaame. I forgot there’s already an Uchiha Kagami, who is in fact, a man.

The idea behind this fic was that I’ve read a bajillion time travel fics, and sometimes they have the future self briefly battle with and then overcome the past self, and I wondered if Sakura’s ‘two-soul’ thing might affect that somehow. When Ino used her jutsu on Sakura, she caught Sakura, but Inner Sakura was revealed to be an entirely separate entity that could fight against mind control. Which is unbelievably cool for what was apparently just a running gag, so obviously nothing ever came of it.

But I thought, what if Sakura travelled back in time and took Inner Sakura’s place instead of Sakura’s? Time Flies Like An Arrow! (so whenever any of you asked about Inner Sakura’s place in this fic, I unashamedly lied. I am not sorry. Yes I am. Please forgive me)

If All We Do by Oh Wonder is Kagami’s song, the opening song for Puella Magi Madoka Magica,
*Connect,* is baby Saku’s theme song, for real. Oh God. Is baby Saku a magical girl, trapped in a ninja world?

But seriously, Connect: *I won't forget the promises we exchanged, I close my eyes to affirm it, I will shake off the overwhelming darkness to move forward, When will I ever be able to see the lost future from here again? <<< it's Sakura!*

Deciding the possible pairing for this fic now feels like trying to see who’s good enough for my tiny child to marry.

Should Sakura have her hair long or short, by the way? I think she’s absolutely adorable regardless, to be honest.

**Quick poll for fun:** What’s your favourite Naruto story arc?

Mine’s either the Chuunin Exam or the Rescue Gaara arc. Both have Sakura kicking butt and making huge strides.

(No dog in this chapter, but Shisui briefly considers buying Sakura one.)
Sasaki seemed to think Sakura could be distracted with paper and crayons, and for the most part, she was right.

“I am not good at this.” Sakura says cheerfully, scribbling over her attempt at a cloud, turning it into a deformed, morbidly obese seagull.

There was something fascinating about the way she could have the image of what she wanted to draw so clearly in her mind, but when she tried to translate those thoughts on paper, they immediately turned to shapeless blobs.

*Just wait ‘til they make you sketch your target’s likeness in The Academy,* Kagami says sourly, *Iruka-sensei said he was impressed at my ‘creative’ attempts at creativity.*

*Onee-chan!* Sakura bounces a little on the bed, missing Sasaki’s bemused expression. *You’re real!*

*Just because you hear a voice in your head, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re real,* Kagami says snidely, then pauses just long enough for Sakura to panic. *I am, though. Your chakra is recovering. I gave you some of mine when you healed our father, so your reserves are larger now. They won’t be able to tell your levels used to be much less. Now, stop staring into space, you’re freaking Sasaki out.*

Sakura sits bolt upright, sending crayons flying. She meets Sasaki’s confused gaze and gives her a vague approximation of a smile.

“I’m hungry.” She says sheepishly.

Sasaki scrambles out of her chair to go get her some lunch. Sakura feels something that *might* be worry from her chakra, a frazzled *zap* that feels like static in the air. Sakura shakes her head, frowning. She’s been struggling to reconnect with the chakra around her ever since that awful moment, waking up unable to sense anything. It had been like being surrounded by tasty-looking food that smells of absolutely nothing. It *looks* real, but it may as well be cardboard for all you know. People without chakra felt like paper dolls.

*Fugaku is staring at you,* Kagami informs her, *punch him in the nose.*

*That’s not very nice,* Sakura sniffs, reaching for her favourite pink crayon, *I’m not talking to you if you’re going to be like that.*

*I have access to your every thought. How can you possibly ignore me?*

*La la la la…*

*Ugh, you are such a child.*

“Sakura-san.” Fugaku says, making her jump. His chakra gives a faint hum of amusement. “Sorry to disturb you. You seemed deep in thought. I just wanted to go over the events of yesterday with you again.”

*Again?* Sakura struggles to hide her pout. Why did grown-ups always insist she tell the same story over and over again?
They’re trying to see if you slip up somewhere. Making you tell the same story more than once increases your chances of forgetting something if you were lying, Kagami says wearily. Sakura wonders how many stories she’s had to tell over the years.

“I went to see Mister Hokage-sama –”

“As I said last time, it is still ‘Hokage-sama.’ Not, ‘Mister Hokage-sama.’”

“I went to see the old man and he wouldn’t let me adopt Naruto, even though I’m his best friend and I even know what I’m going to make his bedroom look like.” Sakura flips the paper up and shows Fugaku.

The walls are orange, the bed is orange and the floor was orange but the crayon broke halfway through so now it’s orange-pink. There’s a bunch of white clouds on the walls and a fat seagull. Truly stunning, Kagami says.

“Lovely.” Fugaku says in the same tone. “Back to the events of yesterday?”

“So I went home and Kakashi-sensei –”

“He’s not technically a teacher, so the correct form of address would be –”

“Kakashi-sensei had to leave really quickly. I went inside and my dad – he was on the floor. I thought he was napping. He does that a lot. He gets sick really easily, you know? So he needs to sleep. Okaa-san and I play the Quiet Game when he’s sleeping. That’s when you have to be so quiet that you don’t wake Otou-san up. It’s really easy. So, I didn’t think it was weird until I noticed Sasuke was crying. I ran over and I put my hands on my dad’s chest and I could see through my hands,” Sakura demonstrates, holding her hands in front of her eyes, “and I was looking inside his body and I could see where it had gone bad. I’ve read lots of medical textbooks and I’ve done a little bit of healing before, but I’ve never done anything that big, so I was really scared. But I did it. And then I woke up and you were asking me what happened, and then I told you and now I’m telling you again. And now I’m done.”

Fugaku frowns. “Sasuke cried?”

“Well, yeah.” Sakura says, like he’s being purposefully dumb. “He was upset.”

Fugaku’s chakra actually feels troubled at that, his aura edged with the crackle of concern.

Sakura looks mournfully at the door Sasaki left through. “I’m still hungry.”

“I’m sure she’ll be back soon. How did Itachi react to the situation?”

“He didn’t cry, if that’s what you mean. He was scared, though. But he still told me everything was going to be okay. And he tried to stop me from using all my chakra. Even though he was scared.”

Fugaku looks down. He’s feeling a mixture of pride and concern, with a noxious undertone of regret. People wear their feelings differently, she’s noticed. For some people, regret is a weight that pulls them down, making their chakra sag slightly. For others, it’s a black cloud that immerses their entire aura, seeping through and infecting every other feeling. Happiness ends up tainted, its bright glow dimmed. That’s what it’s like for Kakashi.

For Fugaku, his regret is oil that he feeds a flame of anger.
“You promised I could help you with your family.” Sakura says.

“And I honour my promises.” He replies flatly. “Just as long as you remember that you owe me, and I intend to collect.”

“Otou-san thinks you want to borrow my dolls.” Sakura says innocently.

Fugaku twitches. “Does he? I’m afraid, on this occasion, your father is quite wrong.”

“So, what do you want?”

“All in good time. Now, how do you plan to help my family?”

“First, you’ve got to tell me what you think is wrong with them.” Sakura says.

Fugaku raises an eyebrow, but then he seems to shrug off his suspicion and answers. “Itachi is pulling away from me, and in doing so, the clan. He’s distancing himself. Ever since the war, he has struggled with the reality of life. War is all he has ever known. He does not know how to live in peace, though I believe it to be his dearest wish. If pressed, he could become the greatest soldier the Uchiha clan has ever produced. But, my wife fears that he will simply break if put under more pressure. What do you suggest?”

“Why does he have to be a soldier?” Sakura asks. “We’ve got lots of shinobi. I’m going to be one. So’s Sasuke, and all the rest of my Monsters. Why can’t Itachi just be a kid? He could take a few years off, even, and work on living a normal life. Then he wouldn’t be so close to the breaking point.”

“This is exactly the issue your parents have with you.” Fugaku says darkly. “You are young, so they want to let you wait as long as most children, to allow you to have a childhood. But all that will accomplish is delaying your progress. Itachi is so exceptionally skilled – ”

“Because you make him work so hard.” Sakura says simply. “He’s strong because he has to be. So right now, he seems super strong and the best of his age, when really he’s just been pushed beyond his limits. That’s not real strength, you know. If you let him develop at his pace, and let him be happy and healthy, he would keep the strength he obtains. But if you just push him over and over again, he’ll break, and that strength will turn to weakness.”

“You are a most unusual child. There are many intelligent, young children in the world, but hardly any wise ones. Do you know why?”

Sakura shakes her head.

“Because wisdom is derived through experience. No one is born wise. And yet, it seems, you were.”

“I’ve read lots of books and also my parents are the best in the world.” Sakura informs him. “I had a good start in life.”

Fugaku lets out a long sigh. “Itachi is the pride of his clan. He is our hope for a better future. The higher he climbs, the further we progress. Itachi is excelling so much that the rest of Konoha cannot ignore it. His strength opens doors for the rest of us. Konoha have to accept that one of its best is an Uchiha.”

“Well, why can’t the Uchiha and Konoha live together?”

“That would truly be something.” Fugaku says heavily. “But legacies are not always positive.
Sometimes they are simply anchors, weighing us down, dragging us through the dirt.”

“So, change.” Sakura says.

(“Every change is a death,” Kakashi says, looking up at the sky rather than the genin before him, “Not necessarily a bad one, but a death nonetheless. We cut down trees to build homes, and the loss of a Hokage brings the birth of a new leader for the village. Konoha is constantly changing, just like the forests surrounding it.”)

“Clinging to the past won’t help the future.” Sakura says slowly, shifting in her seat. “If people don’t like the Uchiha because of who they used to be, you should show them who you are now.”

Sakura swings her legs, wishing her feet could touch the floor. “I can help you make Itachi better, you know. I promised I would.”

“And how would you accomplish this?”

A kicked dog may do anything for the affection of its owner, but it runs no faster than one that is loved, Kagami whispers. Sakura senses pain splintering inside her, images of Sasuke before her eyes. Sakura thinks of birthday mornings and the smell of meadows, and Kagami’s pain slowly fades. Living with her memories is like swallowing glass, every tiny movement might shred her from the inside.

“I’d make him happy. I’d be nice to him and let him make his own choices. I wouldn’t put pressure on him, because I’d trust he would work hard on his own. If he’s really the pride of your clan, he’ll succeed with or without the burden of expectation.”

Fugaku seems to be considering her words, so Sakura pushes on.

“And I wouldn’t compare Itachi and Sasuke. Sasuke needs to grow at his own pace, too. He can’t do that if he’s constantly using Itachi as a measuring stick, only concerned with equaling or surpassing him instead of getting strong on his own account. Sasuke shouldn’t be competing with his own brother.”

“I did.” Fugaku says, then looks surprised at himself. A corner of his mouth lifts. “I loved my older brother, but I always knew that I had to surpass him one day. If I couldn’t, I would be worthless. And then Konoha sent him on a suicide mission and I became the clan heir. In my father’s eyes, I was a weak, poor alternative to his firstborn. He never let me forget it.”

“Do you think any of that made you stronger? Having to fight your own brother? Trying to meet your father’s impossible standards?” Sakura says, repeating Kagami’s whisper in her mind.

“It is hard to say. I became stronger through necessity, but it is impossible to determine what would have become of me had my upbringing be different. I cannot risk leaving my sons weak, possibly at risk…” Fugaku pauses, his eyes far away. He gives a slight sigh, barely audible, and straightens in his chair. “Would you believe I have been accused of being too soft on my children?”

“No.” Sakura says, suspicious.

Fugaku’s chakra ripples in amusement. “I suppose that is fair. My fellow clansmen have often made a point of saying how open my sons are with their emotions – Sasuke cried after falling once, and I never heard the end of it – and how it is my fault, for allowing their mother to coddle them. She does not. Mikoto is a good mother, who dotes on our boys, but she understands our position in both the clan and the village. As do I. My father used to beat me. Usually in response to a mistake. Sometimes to keep me in line. Occasionally just to toughen me up. It worked. I became strong because I had to,
and I did not break, even under the worst strain. When I had my sons, I wanted to give them the same chance I had in life, but I could not bring myself to lay a hand on them. You say I am too harsh with Itachi, but I have spent the last few years cursing myself for not being harder. He suffers nightmares from the things he has seen in battle. He cries at night, when he thinks I cannot hear him. If I had been firmer with him… surely, he would be able to stand our way of life? As it is, he finds it unbearable. And it is my fault.”

Sakura looks away while Fugaku collects himself. He’s not exactly teary-eyed or openly emotional, but he’s struggling.

“If your father was still alive, I’d punch him.” Sakura says conversationally, when she’s sure he’s regained his composure.

Fugaku chokes. “I beg your pardon?”

“He sounds really mean. You shouldn’t hit your kids for any reason. I bet you were a good son, but he was a bad father.”

Fugaku looks stricken. “Everything he did, he did out of necessity – ”

Sakura blows a raspberry. “Pfft! Nope. He was just mean. I don’t think you are, otherwise you wouldn’t be so worried about hurting your children. You really do want them to be happy, you just don’t know how to do it.”

Fugaku stares at his hands as if he has never seen them before.

Sakura shows him another one of her drawings. It’s of Sasuke and Itachi, smiling and holding hands. Fugaku studies it with the same intensity Itachi had while inspecting her toys.

“They’re your kids. Raise them your way, not your father’s. I think you turned out okay in spite of him, not because of him. Why don’t you help your sons along, so they don’t have to fight you all the way?”

Fugaku gives the smallest of smiles, barely there, but visible. “How many children have you raised, Sakura-san, to be so knowledgeable on the subject?”

“Well, just Naruto so far, and he’s not very big yet, so he’s not fully raised.” Sakura smiles down at a picture she did of her little brother, his hair a mass of yellow spikes.

“You must know that you will never be allowed to live with Naruto?” Fugaku asks cautiously, a thread of pity in his chakra.

“That’s what the Hokage said.” Sakura agrees, not looking up from her picture. “But I’m going to do it anyway.”

“Ignoring a direct order from the Hokage would be treason.”

“Naruto’s nearly Hokage anyway so it doesn’t matter.”

“That isn’t even remotely how that works.”

Sasaki bursts in, panting. Her arms are laden with a huge pile of assorted food. “I didn’t know what you’d want, so I got a bit of everything.”

Sakura grins at her. “Itadakimasu!”
There were Uchiha at Sakura’s house, and now there were Uchiha outside her hospital room. Kakashi was beginning to suspect a link.

Fugaku was having an in-depth discussion with Usagi, of all people, the weirdest ANBU Kakashi has ever had the displeasure of serving with. Out of all of the soldiers who didn’t serve directly under him in his own team, he only really enjoyed working with Tori and Tora, the married couple.

Usagi was the kind of ANBU who would literally interrupt a mission by falling down a hole. So, this was who they had guarding Sakura. They must be running low on people. The only person who wasn’t currently in ANBU who was good enough to be in ANBU was Gai, and there was no way that screwball could survive the mind games or horror missions. Though Usagi had completed at least one assassination mission by sneezing at exactly the right moment, distracting a target long enough for them to walk off a cliff.

Hey, maybe Gai really was ANBU material.

“Fugaku-san.” Kakashi greets the man, noting an odd… relaxed air about him.

Fugaku gives him a stiff nod and nothing else, immediately turning back to Usagi. “I expect better than this. It took me twenty-three seconds to slip under your guard and right outside Sakura-san’s hospital room. I could have been an assassin.”

“I let you pass because it was you, Uchiha-san!” Usagi squeaks, fidgeting nervously. Kakashi fought the urge to bark at him to straighten up. You’re not in the mask now, Hatake.

“I could have been anyone under a henge.” Fugaku counters, folding his arms. Kakashi got the feeling he was enjoying himself. So, this was how the Clan Head got his kicks. Tormenting idiot ANBU. Well, who could blame him?

“I… I would know if someone was using a henge…” Usagi murmurs.

Fugaku scoffs.

Wait…

Kakashi groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Shisui…”

‘Fugaku’ stiffens, turning slowly to face him. “Er… what about my idiot relative? He’s not here, is he?”

“Yes.” Kakashi says, staring directly at him. “He’s right here. Usagi, you complete and utter moron.”

“He fooled you too!” Usagi splutters, his rabbit mask twitching indignantly.

Fugaku giggles – a nightmare-inducing sight – and disappears in a puff of smoke. A much smaller Shisui emerges, giving Kakashi a thumbs up.

“You’re the first one to notice since I arrived!” Shisui says gleefully. “Fugaku’s actually already in Sakura’s room. I’ve been questioning ANBU the whole time.”

“Distracting them from their job?” Kakashi says dryly.

“Reminding them of their job. Now they can fill all the holes in their security.”
“I distinctly remember leaving you with the Harunos. What happened?”

“We chatted, they cried, I got uncomfortable. It was a little weird. They sure do like to hug, don’t they?”

Something must have happened to cheer Shisui up. He was as close to furious as he ever got last night, but now he was pulling pranks and wearing that smugly satisfied look he always had after winning an argument.

“Have you been reinstated?” Kakashi asks in a low voice.

Shisui’s smile disappears. “Not yet. The Hokage said something about speaking to the Council, but you know how it is…”

Sadly, Kakashi did. Shisui had made one tiny mistake on a mission, one that would normally call for a temporary dock in pay and a stern talking to from a superior. Shisui got several months’ suspension. The decision had Danzo written all over it.

Shisui was grounded, so he couldn’t even treat the time off like a vacation and go somewhere nice to decompress. Instead, he was stuck aimlessly wandering Konoha, day in, day out. Poor kid, Kakashi thought, no wonder he’s messing with ANBU. He couldn’t imagine what he would do if he was banned from missions. Go crazy, probably.

“So, what’s Fugaku doing in Sakura’s room anyway?” Kakashi asks, just to change the subject.

Shisui rolls his eyes. “I listened in not long ago. It sounds like Fugaku signed up to the Toddler Therapy Hour. She’s counselling him on his family issues in-between showing him her drawings. Nothing that kid does surprises me anymore.”

The door to Sakura’s room begins to open.

Shisui flashes behind Usagi, using the older man as a cover.

Fugaku steps out of the room. He offers Kakashi a stiff nod, then glances at Usagi. What he sees makes him sigh, shake his head, and walk away without a word.

Shisui peeks out from behind Usagi. “Do you think he saw me?”

Between Usagi, Gai and Shisui, it was a wonder anyone found Konoha’s shinobi intimidating.

xxxxxxx

Shisui elects to remain with Usagi in the corridor. Kakashi knows he’s always struggled with hospitals, having had more than his fair share of visits. It seems sad that this is the closest Shisui can come to checking on Sakura. She may never know he even came.

Kakashi doesn’t think she’ll mind, because he brought his secret weapon to see her.

Pakkun sits unresistingly in his arms, too lazy to move as Kakashi wrangles the door open with his elbow.

Sakura doesn’t see him at first, chatting away to a plain-looking woman sitting beside her bed. This must be Sasaki, the therapist. Sakura’s chest is covered in paper and broken crayons, colours bleeding into the white bedsheets.

“Yo.” Kakashi says. Sasaki starts violently, jolting upright in her chair. Untrained civilian, he notes
absently, filing the information away for later.

“It’s the puppy!” Sakura says, eyes wide. “Sasaki-san, he can *talk*!”

“I’m not a puppy.” Pakkun says grumpily.

Sakura claps her hands to her face, squashing her cheeks. “*He’s so cute!*”

Kakashi obligingly dumps Pakkun into her lap, ignoring his grumbles about getting revenge later. Sakura gasps, then very gently strokes his ears.

“Hello, Mister Pakkun.” Sakura coos. “You are the cutest dog I have ever seen, and I have seen lots of dogs. Your face is very squishy and furry. Your ears are very soft! And you have the *best* tail. It’s a curl, like Shisui-kun’s hair! I like everything about you.”

Sakura doesn’t seem to understand that Pakkun understands everything she’s saying, nor does she recognise the signs of doggy embarrassment. Pakkun hides his snub nose with his paw, but that only makes Sakura sigh over his cuteness even more.

This was a great idea. Kakashi is really enjoying himself. Sakura is happy and Pakkun is horrifically embarrassed. What could be better?

But then –

“You haven’t even seen my paws, yet.” Pakkun says suddenly, extending his foot invitingly.

*Wait... was the old mutt having fun?*

Sakura accepts the invitation, carefully touching Pakkun’s pink pads. She looks euphoric.

Sasaki is sitting back again, relaxed and amused at the sight of an enraptured Sakura charming a veteran ninken.

“There is a type of therapy that recommends the use of even-tempered animals.” Sasaki remarks. “They can do wonders for patients.”

“I’m going to have a dog with my brother Naruto. I thought it would be a big one, but I really like Pakkun, too.” Sakura bites her lip, looking torn.

“You’re not gonna find a dog like me.” Pakkun says modestly. “I’m one of a kind.”

Sakura nods, seemingly convinced. She leans forward eagerly. “Do I smell more like a puppy today?”

Pakkun sniffs her delicately. “No. You smell tired. There’s a patch of earth that smells the best near The Academy. You should roll in it some time.”

“Ohay.” Sakura says seriously.

“No rolling in mud, *either* of you.” Kakashi says warningly.

`Sakura grins up at him. “Please, Kakashi-sensei?”`

So, he was still her sensei, huh. Even after leaving her at the worst possible moment. Kakashi feels his chest tighten and fights the urge to press against it, anything to alleviate the weight on his heart.
Instead, he kneels beside her bed and asks softly, “How are you holding up?”

Sakura blinks, clearly not expecting the question. A spasm of pain crosses her face. “I… I thought he was dead. I couldn’t feel his chakra and I thought…”

“But he isn’t dead, because of you. Because you saved him.” Kakashi says. He doesn’t think about his own father lying on the floor, long-dead by the time he got there. He died alone. Kakashi’s not going to think about that.

The look on Sakura’s face is oddly knowing, as if she can read his thoughts. He wonders if he’s accidentally signed up for Toddler Therapy Hour, too.

Sakura gently rotates Pakkun’s front paws, as if he’s paddling. “The bed is a boat.” She tells the dog quietly. “We’re adrift at sea. Sasaki-san’s chair is a sailboat. Kakashi-sensei is swimming. Quick!” She grins at Kakashi, making her eyes wide in faux-horror. “There’s a storm coming! Get on the boat!”

Pakkun looks at him flatly, quite clearly saying be cool and play along.

So Kakashi spends the next hour perched on the end of Sakura’s bed, pretending to hoist and pull and tow at Sakura’s whim. When she decides Sasaki’s sailboat is capsizing, he enacts a daring rescue.

It’s the most fun he’s had in a very long time. He can’t really find it in him to judge Pakkun anymore.

It happens not long after she says goodnight to Sasaki and closes her eyes.

Wake up now, Kagami snaps, someone’s in the room with you.

Sakura’s eyes fly open.

A Mask stares down at her, retracting the hand that was reaching for her face.

“Sakura-san.” The Mask says, voice hollow. “Would you like to see Naruto? He’s asking for you.”

“Really? Okay!” Sakura beams, all uncertainty and worry gone, and goes to get up.

Wait! Kagami shouts. What do you sense from him?

Nothing, Sakura thinks, confused. But, isn’t that normal for Masks?

If they’re hiding their chakra, yes, but is he?

Sakura frowns, reaching out subtly, putting out feelers. No, he wasn’t hiding – his chakra was right there, but there was nothing in it. He didn’t feel anything. How?

A frisson of fear runs up her spine.

Pretend to be average, Shisui had said, and Kagami repeated it again now.

Sakura forces a smile. “Isn’t it a bit late, Mask-san? Naruto must be asleep by now.”

“He wanted to have a sleepover. Wouldn’t you like that, Sakura-san?” The Mask said tonelessly, holding out his hand for her to take.
Wait for him to get close, then gather chakra in your hand and punch him as hard as you can, Kagami says in a low, urgent voice.

The door flies open.

Mikoto is there, eyes blood-red, face grim.

She hurls two kunai, clipping the Mask’s arm, and whirls into the room in a blur of motion. In less than a second, the two were trading blows, Mikoto ducking and weaving in elegant motions Sakura has seen painted on ancient scrolls.

The Mask rears back, hands flashing seals.

Mikoto sends him flying with a single kick, ruthless in its execution. He crashes into the wall and rolls with the movement, needles sticking out from between his fingers. Sakura almost shouts a warning, but Mikoto lets out a disdainful hmph and spins, dodging the flashing needles. They sink into the wall behind her, having been thrown with deadly force.

Mikoto stamps down, barely missing the Mask’s head, and follows up with a punch to the throat. He wheezes, his body curling up in pain. Mikoto stabs a kunai through his shoulder. He doesn’t make a noise, just rips it out and rears upwards, slashing at Mikoto’s face. She knocks his hand aside and slaps his head into the wall, a loud crack echoing through the room. His mask slips for a second and Mikoto is there, ready to catch his gaze.

She slams him against the wall, snarling. “You don’t touch that child, you don’t touch any of my –”

His hands flash into seals once more.

She lunges for his hand, bones cracking under her grip, but he freezes and sags to the ground and she lets go.

“Suicide seal.” Mikoto says, disgusted. She looks around and then notices Sakura’s face. Mikoto’s eyes go wide.

The Mask… his chakra just… stopped. It’s not like when someone hides their chakra. That’s like a curtain falling over a window, shade drawing across the light. The sun’s still there, you just can’t see it. This was like if one second the sun was shining in the sky, then the next it was gone and all the light in the world went with it.

He’s dead, Kagami says calmly, but that’s okay, because you aren’t.

It’s not okay, Sakura thinks numbly, someone must have loved him. And now he’s gone.

Kagami doesn’t have anything to say to that.

“Don’t worry, Sakura-chan.” Mikoto says soothingly, as if there isn’t a corpse between them. “Everything is fine.”

Sakura’s too shocked to even cry. Good, Kagami says warmly, you’re not a baby anymore. You’re doing really well.

Mikoto removes the dead man’s mask, no recognition spiking in her chakra, then rifles through his clothes.

A scroll drops out of the man’s pack, unfurling on the ground. Mikoto narrows her eyes. There’s a
puff of smoke and –

Sakura’s breath catches.

It’s… it’s her.

It’s Sakura, lying on the floor. No chakra. Dead.

_Not you_, Kagami says fiercely, _that is not you._

Mikoto hides her horror well, resealing the corpse with an efficient flick. Sakura still feels the backsplash of her pain at seeing a dead child. Sakura won’t cry. Only babies cry, and Kagami said she wasn’t a baby.

“Who was that?” Sakura asks, pained.

“Just an illusion, sweetheart.” Mikoto says, smiling weakly.

“No, it wasn’t. She was a little girl. She looked like _me._”

“She was – ” Mikoto stops herself, glancing at the scroll in her hand. She sighs. “She wasn’t real, darling. I promise. It was just a trick scroll, like Naruto’s pranks.”

_Liar_, Kagami says, _it was a little dead girl, made up to look like you. I bet they planned to replace you in the night, make it look like you died in your bed. Tut, tut._

Sakura won’t cry.

“He was going to kill me – o-or worse, wasn’t he?” Sakura clutches her bedsheets, staring at the fallen man.

“I don’t know.” Mikoto says with forced calm. “But look at me, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura looks up, blinking furiously to stop the tears.

Mikoto smiles at her, still radiant despite the horror of the night and the blood in the air. Sakura feels something relax in her chest. “I won’t promise that nothing like this will ever happen again. But I know that you are always surrounded by people who love you, people who will do anything to keep you safe. And I trust that we will. Do you?”

Kagami mutters something dark and acidic, but Sakura ignores the words burning across her brain.

“Yes.” Sakura says truthfully, because no matter what Kagami says, she loves her family and her friends and she trusts that they will always try to help her when she needs them.

There’s a gasp from the corridor.

Mikoto stiffens, all warmth gone from her eyes in a second. She stands in front of Sakura, kunai in hand, a restless predator raring for a fight.

Kabuto appears in the doorway, his face white in shock. His chakra doesn’t reflect his face. He is fiercely satisfied and relieved at the sight of Mikoto, half-crouching in front of Sakura and the dead man on the floor.

“Kabuto-kun.” Sakura says, trying to smile. “There was a man in my room but Mikoto-san pushed him into a wall.”
Kabuto smiles at her, then meets Mikoto’s eyes unflinchingly, despite her Sharingan still actively spinning. “Uchiha-san, I take it you are not responsible for the unconscious ANBU in the corridor?”

“No.” Mikoto says grimly. “I am not.”

“I’ll fetch help.” Kabuto says, then vanishes from the doorway.

Sakura’s not quite sorry to see him go. She’s not sure why he was relieved – did he want the Mask to fail? Did he know what was going to happen?

What did happen?

Someone tried to take you. Probably someone who wants a pet healer on their side. You better start bringing a kunai to bed, Sacchan.

xxxxxxx

“I can’t sleep.” Sakura says. It’s not just the events of the night that are troubling her – it’s the Masks she can sense hovering around her room, out of sight, and Kabuto sitting right next to her bed, all too present.

Kabuto gives her a patient smile. “Would you like to hear a story?”

“I can tell stories.” Sakura says proudly.

“Oh, really?” Kabuto makes an impressed face. His chakra is just faintly amused. He’s not impressed at all.

Sakura fights a pout. “Yes! I can tell you one right now. Okay, so there was a lady who kept her kids in her attic. She didn’t have room for them in the rest of her house, because it was full of cats. The kids could never sleep at night because the cats would just meow and scratch for hours. The lady spent hours every day feeding the cats, and by the time she was done she’d forget to feed the kids, too! So they would stay up all night, tired and hungry, listening to the cats fight. One day, it started raining fish. There was a big storm over the sea and it picked up all the fish and whooshed them around the town. The fish smacked against the house’s windows. The cats all clawed at the walls, trying to get out. The lady couldn’t get through the crowd of cats to open the windows, so the cats all poured onto one side of the house, trying to get out the front door. The house rocked and shook under the weight of all the fat cats pushing against the walls, until finally it exploded! The wall came crashing down and the cats sailed out on its wooden planks, catching all the fish and eating them. The lady looked up and saw the kids in the attic and was shocked. ‘Oh no!’ She said. ‘I forgot about the kids!’ And so she remembered her kids and fed them with leftover fish, and they never went hungry again but they got bored of fish and the lady’s house was still all broken, the end.”

Kabuto was chuckling all the way through the story. Sakura was a little distracted as she was telling it, because she could sense the amusement of the nearby Masks, too.

“How are you feeling?” Kabuto asks, after wiping away a tear of mirth. Sakura’s gratified to note it was genuine.

“How like when you squeeze all the juice out of a box. I’m the box.” Sakura replies. Kagami says she’s got more chakra now, and that’s nice, but it’s taking a long time to come back after she drained her supply. It feels wrong, not having it.

“And what about what happened tonight? Do you want to talk about it?”
“Not really, if you don’t mind. Mikoto-san just… she killed him. Really easily. She didn’t even have to think about it.” Sakura says, dejected. Mikoto is lovely and beautiful and… Sakura has seen her stab a man with absolutely no hesitation. And she did it for her. This is the world she’s growing into. This is what she has to become in order to protect her precious people.

*When the world is hard, you must become harder,* Kagami says, unrepentant, *there’s no shame in that.*

Kabuto takes her hand in his. “You must have quite the talent for healing. Who taught you?”

*Ah, fish away. That’s all you’re good for,* Kagami says sourly, and quite unhelpfully. What on earth does that mean?

*It means he wants information, Sacchan. Either lie or tell him nothing. The truth will be wasted on him.*

“Nobody taught me.” Sakura says, a not-quite-lie. Tsunade taught Kagami, whose memories informed Sakura. “I read a lot in the library. I wanted to heal Hayate-kun, who’s always sick. And… I guess I hoped I could help my dad, though I didn’t realise…”

Kabuto has bought it. She can see it in the heightened interest in his chakra, the bright flare of his aura. He thinks he’s found a prodigy.

*He’s not wrong,* Kagami says, a touch of pride in her voice, *you and I learned from the best. We’re going to be great.*

“I noticed you were interested, when I healed you.” Kabuto says. “Would you like to learn more? There are things books cannot teach you.”

*Say no. Stab him in the throat. Rip out his lying tongue.* Kagami is incensed, for some reason. Well, the first dream Sakura ever had of Kabuto was of him betraying her. But this Kabuto is young and, for some reason, seems softer to Sakura. Unhardened. Part of him genuinely does seem like a medic, eager to share his knowledge.

“Maybe when I’m better?” Sakura says, offering him a weak smile. “When I’m not such a squashed box.”

Kabuto laughs again, and leans back in his chair.

Sakura breathes a little easier, and goes to sleep to the sound of Kagami reciting methods of killing a man with your bare hands.

***

Hello, friends.

I promise Sakura won’t just be in a hospital bed in the next chapter. There may even be a bathroom break.

One of the funniest things for me to write in this chapter is the fact that Shisui as Fugaku greets Kakashi *‘with a stiff nod,’* and then the real thing does exactly the same. I don’t know why, but this tickled me. I was chuckling the whole time.

Remember when I asked you guys if Mikoto was ever a shinobi? Heh heh heh…
I love how Sakura has grown to automatically trust guys in masks, the absolute worst lesson to take away from befriending Naruto.

Fun fact: the Usagi mentioned in this chapter is the ANBU who was so proud of InoShikaCho before. He’s an idiot. But he’s okay-ish at his job. I headcanon that he’s dead by the time of canon Naruto, so let’s see what happens here. (I just really wanted a dumb bunny boy in this story)

Another fun fact: I make up all of Sakura’s stories on the fly, so they’ll be illogical and random enough for a four-year-old who reads too many books :)

A few of you have commented on Sakura being a realistic depiction of a child and I am SO relieved. Seriously, I know very few children, none of which are Sakura’s age, so I was kind of winging it. Her being a genius with the memories of an angrier genius gives me some wiggle room for maturity and vocab, so it’s been a pretty fun writing experience.

Also, Sakura’s going to be a kid for a while yet. I have several arcs planned for her youth. I’m not going to skip ahead just yet, because there’s the Uchiha Massacre looming on the horizon. I’ve planned out what I’m going to do with that, and I’ve even written a large portion of it, though it obviously won’t be posted for ages yet. I’m just hoping you guys like how I handle it!

I’m nearly twenty-five, by the way! Almost a quarter of a century old, now! My mum doesn’t believe this is a milestone birthday, which I find very rude.

I had a pug for twelve years, so I love Pakkun very dearly :)

**Quick poll for fun:** Where would you like to be in five years? (you can be as unrealistic and fanciful as you like. If you wanna be Queen of Narnia in five years, you go Glenn Coco. Find that wardrobe. Live your dream)

I would like to live in a tiny house with a fat cat and a medium-sized dog, with more than adequate shelf-space and an attic bedroom filled with plants and books. I would also like an endless supply of herbal tea and dairy-free chocolate, because lactose disagrees with me.

(Sakura saw one dog, and it was the Best Dog. A Very Good Boy)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

We’ve got more art!! Have a gander at these beauties!

https://akatsukixsakura185.tumblr.com/post/170577368516/i-felt-like-i-needed-to-give-something-back-in


The consequences of Sakura’s file being attached to Naruto’s is that it meant whenever anything official happened regarding her case, all of Naruto’s guard was informed.

Which meant that it only took four hours for Kakashi to find out that someone tried to take Sakura in the night. Literally only hours after he left. They may have even been waiting for him to leave.

Genma had been the one to drag Kakashi out of bed and all the way back to the hospital, bleary-eyed and spitting mad. Genma’s fury burned cold rather than hot, meaning he could still plot and plan despite his anger, so while Kakashi muttered threats at the world at large, Genma stayed cool and efficient.

They tracked down Mikoto fairly quickly.

They only had to follow the shouting.

“It is simply unacceptable that you left one guard on his own, considering the potential risks! If I hadn’t come along when I did, what would have happened to that poor little girl? You should have posted at least three members of a squad. You’re lucky that this was the outcome. It could have been so much worse!”

Mikoto was laying into Tora, the Captain of Usagi’s squad, while Usagi sat on a hospital bed, holding an ice pack to his head, looking glum. He was without his mask for once. A bruise was forming on his forehead from a hard hit. His silver-blond hair was out of its usual ponytail, a tousled mess that came to his shoulders. He had a pretty ordinary face, with round cheeks and a slight overbite. It was no wonder he’d been lumbered with a rabbit codename, the first of its kind.

Kakashi had always known Usagi was the same idiot kid as his former classmate, Takumi, but he had never actually seen him without his ANBU mask to prove it. Whenever he saw Takumi on the street, he tended to run the other way to avoid talking to him, so he’d gone a while without hearing his voice.

Tora was taking the verbal beating like a champ, nodding and shaking his head at the right intervals, showing he was actually listening to Mikoto’s rant.

“Uh, Uchiha-san, could we have a word?” Genma interjects as Mikoto opens her mouth to shout
again. She turns, face flushing at the sight of them.

“Of course, my apologies. And, ANBU-san, I hope you will take this event as an opportunity to improve. I didn’t mean to raise my voice. I’m very sorry.” Mikoto gave a slight bow, her hair spilling like ink over her shoulders.

“Why aren’t you mad at him?” Kakashi asks, jabbing a thumb at Takumi, who looks alarmed at being singled out.

Mikoto sighs, lifting a hand to indicate Usagi’s mask, cracked in two on the bed next to him. “I found the poor boy like this, unconscious from a severe blow to the head. I’ll have a word with him later, when he’s feeling better. Poor thing.”

Takumi ducks his head, clearly embarrassed.

As they’re leaving the room, Kakashi looks back and sees the dignified, silent ANBU Captain flick Takumi in the head, then laugh. The other ANBU squads are obviously not as professional as Kakashi’s.

“So, what happened?” Genma asks later, when they’re sequestered in a far-off corner of the hospital they’ve been assured is hardly used. Kakashi’s still on high alert, just in case.

Mikoto is still visibly fuming, but she forces herself to breathe in and out a few times and ends up giving them a strained smile with too many teeth showing to be comforting. “Fugaku received a tip that Sakura-chan may end up a target by ‘inside forces’ after she managed to heal her father. That was all we knew. Fugaku decided we would take it in turns to watch over Sakura-chan. He took the day, I took the night. He came home to take over looking after the children, and I left to keep watch outside Sakura-chan’s room as she slept. When I got there, her ANBU guard was sprawled out on the floor, his mask broken in two. I entered her room and found another ANBU reaching out towards her. I attacked at once. We fought, then he activated a suicide seal before I could use my Sharingan on him. I…” Here Mikoto hesitates, her eyes dropping to the floor.

Kakashi and Genma look at each other. That’s never a good sign, Kakashi thinks.

“He had a scroll on him that contained the corpse of a child identical to Sakura-chan.” Mikoto says, her jaw tight in anger.

Kakashi stands up, jamming his hands in his pockets, and whirls around to stare out the window. Windows are such pointless holes in defences, he thinks absently, why do we even need them? He was not thinking about the scroll, or its grisly contents. He wasn’t.

Genma continues the conversation as if Kakashi is still involved, not slowly descending into madness in a corner of the room. “You think he planned to switch them? Make us think she’d died in her bed?”

“I don’t see any other possibility. Chakra exhaustion is often fatal, and in a girl as young as Sakura-chan, I can understand why many would accept her death at face value.”

This had to be ROOT. Danzo wanted to get his grubby hands on the latest batch of talent Konoha had produced. Well, tough. If it had been Kakashi who had found that man in Sakura’s room, he wouldn’t have died to a suicide seal. No, it would have been much slower than that.

No matter what horror show he had to endure during the course of his time in ANBU, he always had that same comforting thought getting him through it: at least I’m not ROOT. At least I won’t be ordered to assassinate my own Hokage. At least I won’t have to oversee the torture of children.
His father had chosen his allies over the mission. Kakashi couldn’t disrespect his memory by doing any less. ROOT might be of Konoha’s making, but it was not for Konoha’s sake. Kakashi was going to make things very uncomfortable for Danzo.

“Is there anything else?” Genma asked.

“I had a medic keep watch over Sakura while she slept, and I summoned another squad to survey the area. Sakura spent the night telling stories and sleep-talking about clouds, apparently.” Mikoto smiles, but it’s bittersweet. Mikoto was the first one to raise the alarm about Sakura’s trauma symptoms. She must know that Sakura isn’t the type to show her feelings if they’re likely to worry someone.

Kakashi made a note to give Sakura some kind of gift basket to get her mind off things. What do kids like, these days? Shisui must know.

Kakashi leaves Genma politely interrogating Mikoto and ambles back to Takumi’s room. The idiot kid wouldn’t have stood a chance against an ambush on home turf during a long, uneventful shift. Hell, he was probably asleep before the ROOT agent got there.

Takumi is miserably examining his broken mask when Kakashi returns. Tora is discussing something with a nurse, not emoting or gesturing at all as he spoke, apparently unaware how unnerving civilians find that sort of thing. Kakashi does know, but does it anyway because it’s funny and ANBU isn’t exactly the most cheerful gig. You take your laughs where you can get them.

“You know, breaking an ANBU mask is twenty years’ bad luck.” Kakashi says.

Takumi’s eyes bulge in horror. “No!”

“No. How did you ever pass – never mind. Let’s just say it’s twenty years bad luck for the bad guy, okay? And can you tell me about him?” Kakashi asks patiently.

“Not at all.” Takumi says, much more cheerful now the threat of decades of misfortune has passed. “I didn’t sense anyone approaching, just the medic nins moving around in the building, then I looked to the left and that’s it. That’s all I remember. I woke up on the floor, surrounded by medics. Some of them were really cute… They covered my face with a towel, so no one would see me without my mask, but then I couldn’t breathe so I nearly died again. But it’s okay! I kept it covered, Kakashi-senpai!”

“I’m not your senpai.” Kakashi says, rubbing his temple to alleviate the ache gathering there. Just talking to Takumi was exhausting. It was easier when he was Usagi. He at least tried to seem like a full-grown man when he wore the mask.

“Oh right!” Takumi claps his hand over his mouth, then winks conspiratorially at him. “Kakashi. Not my senpai. Got it.”

Why bother maintaining secret identities? Why not just scream your name at every enemy you meet? Why didn’t Kakashi smother himself with a pillow this morning? Ah, the questions life gives you…

Tora’s mask looks oddly sympathetic. Kakashi spares a moment to thank whoever might be listening for not putting him in charge of Usagi.

“Did anything else happen?” Kakashi asks wearily.

Takumi abruptly soberes up, fingers tightening on his mask. “I don’t know. I didn’t get to see the little girl after… they tell me she’s alright, but… if Mikoto-san hadn’t arrived when she did… How could
I have forgiven myself, Kakashi-senpai?"

Kakashi lets that one go. "You don’t have to forgive yourself. You just have to live with yourself. The hardest thing to learn in life is that you can’t save everyone. Not even the people that really deserve it. It never gets easier to bear. Try not to dwell on close calls, at least. "Hypocrite, he thinks, the faces of the fallen in the front of his mind. “Spare your sorrow for a day that deserves it.”

Takumi nods solemnly. He sets his mask back down on the bed, a broken shell. Then he grins. “I kind of want to give you a hug, Kakashi-senpai. You’re so cool!"

Kakashi flickers away, not missing the slight, dry sound of an ANBU Captain chuckling beneath his mask.

Shisui waits for Kakashi to leave the ANBU’s room. Mikoto pointed him this way, not blinking at his presence at the hospital. She must have assumed Fugaku sent him. It’s not often being related to him is useful, so he decides to make the most of it.

Sakura was unhurt, happy and telling stories. That was what Mikoto said. Shisui repeats it to himself on a loop, because the alternative is picturing the worst and spiralling from there. He wants to go to her at once, to see for himself that she really is okay, but he can’t stand the sight of someone he knows in a hospital bed. There’s something about it that knocks the breath out of him.

Sakura is okay, he tells himself, watching Kakashi hurry back to Genma. His eyes are barely open, but they still see everything. His mouth twists. You should always be smiling, Sakura said once. How can I, he thinks back to her, hoping she can hear somehow, when you’re not here, Firefly?

Sometimes he wishes he could open his eyes and see nothing at all. Just darkness, stretching on for miles in every direction. If he was blind, he would be even more useless than he was now. The clan would wash their hands of him. He could stop using their name. He might even avoid his fate that Sakura cannot see.

But as it stands, his eyes are special, the elders say, their wrinkled mouths pursed. It couldn’t have happened to a worse Uchiha.

Shisui remembers meeting his little cousin Itachi for the first time. That was a sight worth savouring. A solemn little kid with eyes like his, five years old and already weary of war and death. Itachi had been fighting for at least a year before he and Shisui even met. As much as their burgeoning friendship had helped Shisui, he couldn’t help but wish he had been able to prevent Itachi from losing his innocence. He’d never seen Itachi look truly happy. Even when he had his new baby brother in his arms, he couldn’t let go of the ever-present fear that something would happen and peace would be over.

And then Shisui met Sakura. Exactly the age Itachi had been when he first saw violence.

Shisui had been moping that day. He was sitting in a tree, avoiding his relatives. Ever since his last mission, they had been unbearable to be around.

Shisui made a mistake, most people said.

Shisui could have ruined us all, his family said.

He had met an enemy on the field, and let them go.
His relatives had screeched about their reputation, how rumours already spread about their treachery and untrustworthiness every day, how could he add to that with his own cowardice poisoning the name of the clan?

*Cowardice?* Shisui had repeated. *For letting a child run instead of running him through? So what if he was in the way of the mission? I completed it without killing him, didn’t I? It was mercy, not cowardice.*

The Hokage had sympathised, though not completely. “Take care not to lose sight of what you fight for, Shisui-kun. The village should always be in your mind during missions. Misplaced mercy can do more harm than good. The boy may grow up to be an enemy, after all.”

*Not after I saved him!* Shisui had wanted to shout. Why were they all so blind? They hadn’t seen the way the boy had looked at him, the tears of relief in his eyes when he finally realised Shisui really was letting him go. That boy would remember what Shisui had done for him, because it wasn’t done. Ever. He would remember that a Konoha nin spared his life at his own expense. And if he didn’t, Shisui didn’t care. He’d do it again if he had to.

Shisui had sat in the tree, tired down to his bones, when he felt the presence of another below him. A little girl was sitting in the garden Shisui’s tree stood in. He watched, leaning against the trunk, as she spread papers over the grass and scribbled something down, a look of intense concentration on her face. For the first time in days, Shisui’s mouth twitched. He almost smiled.

He activated his Sharingan, curious, and glanced at the girl’s writing. He raised his eyebrows. It was a collection of codes from recent history – all of which had been broken and written on record. Was this some kind of torturous homework the Academy Teachers had devised? He’d never been happier to have left school early.

The girl had created her own code. She was using certain characters to indicate others in a twisty, ridiculously complicated system. Well. *Top marks for this kid,* he thought. *If she can actually remember any of this enough to use it, I’ll eat my hat. I’ll have to get one first, but the point still stands.*

The girl gave her work a satisfied look, then closed her eyes as if meditating. Shisui cocked his head, interested. Weird kid.

Then the tiniest surge of chakra travelled up in a familiar spark and Shisui had just enough time to think *Katon – dangerous – have to stop her from doing it now or ever again,* then he flashed down into the garden right in front of her.

His hand covered half of her face, all except a little snub nose and a pair of wide green eyes. Fire licked at his palm, barely escaping the cracks of his grip. Shisui had felt the same thing a thousand times over when he was this kid’s age and practising the Katon himself, so the pain barely registered, but the little girl’s eyes immediately welled up.

He cursed himself. *Idiot, of course she’s not used to pain. It’s not normal for kids to be used to pain.*

The kid wobbled, eyes glazing over, and she sagged forward. Shisui moved to meet her, letting her head rest against his shoulder.

“Huh?” She said.

Shisui shushed her, patting her on the back, “Don’t talk, silly girl. You could’ve really hurt yourself.”
The little girl is outraged. She pushed back and glared right in his face. Her anger burned out as quickly as it sparked, because she just rocks back and looks away.

“‘m ‘kay.” She mumbled, barely audible. “‘doesn’t ‘urt.”

“And I’m the Empress of the Universe.” Shisui said.

The girl frowned at him, as if considering his claim. *Kids*, Shisui thought, cracking a grin. *It’s so adorable how they believe everything.*

“I was kidding. There’s no such thing. There is however, such a thing as ranks for jutsu to prevent untrained idiots killing themselves attempting something far beyond their level. Katon is dangerous. How old are you? I don’t believe your Academy Teacher taught you this.”

To his surprise, the girl smiled for the first time. Even though her mouth looked raw and painful, her smile was a welcome sight. Here was someone who didn’t know Shisui was a failure, a coward, a joke.

The girl lifted four fingers and Shisui resisted the urge to gape. He had assumed she was just a small six-year-old, or even older. He’s not great at guessing kids’ ages. They all look like unformed blobs.

*Why the Katon?* He wondered. Of all the dangerous things for her to be practicing, his clan’s favourite jutsu is up there with the worst of them. She might as well juggle knives in the dark, something Shisui does very well indeed.

“You’re four? Wow. Okay, little firefly. One last question, then I take you to the hospital. Who taught you? You can manipulate your chakra enough to attempt Katon – well, that’s… not normal. Your parents putting in a little extra training before you start at the Academy?” He asked, managing not to let any condemnation slip into his voice. He wasn’t fond of parents who treat their children like inexperienced shinobi.

Firefly shook her head, picking up a piece of paper off the grass and writing: ‘no one taught me. I read it all in the library. I wanted to try it on my own. It was going to work, then you smooshed the fire in my face.’

*Smooshed.*

How precious.

She’d be less precious if she’d actually succeeded, though, since her head would be on fire.

“I stopped you from igniting paper on grass on a dry day under a tree with low-hanging branches.” He said, amused, then paused. “You… you read about the jutsu once and decided to try it out, all on your own? And… you nearly did it?”

Firefly nodded, looking proud. Even after he let her silly idea literally blow up in her face, she was proud of herself. He had to change that, or soon she would be flinging herself off cliffs to teach herself to fly.

“Well… it’s a baby Itachi. A tiny, pink-haired miracle. Has your mother ever met a man named Fugaku?” Shisui briefly imagined Fugaku cheating on Mikoto. Every scenario ended with Mikoto beating him about the head with a rolling pin.

“How should I know?” Firefly said, fairly reasonably, then winces. Realisation flares in her eyes, then she dives forward to seize his hand.
They both stared down at the minor burns on his skin, Shisui with confusion – he’d forgotten they were there – and Firefly with shame.

“My fault.” She said very sadly. She gazed at nothing in particular, looking lost in thought.

Poor thing. Still, perhaps this whole ordeal would scare her off becoming a shinobi for good. Maybe one day he’ll come home from a mission and see a pink-haired civilian working in a shop, perfectly ordinary, happy and whole.

His burn itched. He looked down idly, and felt a zip of foreign chakra meeting his.

“Oi!” He yelled, ripping his hand away. She nearly crashed face first on the ground, but he steadied her with his other hand just in time. “None of that. You’ve barely got enough chakra to fill a thimble. Don’t waste it trying something impossible.”

Firefly glared at him defiantly, certainty written in her features. The kid genuinely believed she could heal him. So cute.

She wasn’t someone he could steer off the path to shinobi life. She had already planted her feet firmly on the ground and started to run before she could walk.

Shisui remembered a kid roughly her size, broken and bloody on the ground and –

He forced out a laugh. “Oh man… You’ll be a terror in a few years, won’t you?”

She pointed at his hand, a smug smile on her face.

He looked down again, exasperated. He turned his hand, confused, then panicked. What? The burn was… gone.

Healed.

By an untrained four-year-old with such tiny chakra reserves that it had to be her first time even attempting to heal.

Itachi’s face flashed across his mind, eyes heavy with all the things he had seen, face grimmer than any child ought to be.

“You – you – how did you – no. You didn’t do this. You got that? If anyone ever asks, you tell them you can’t do anything. You have to pretend to be average. Are you listening to me? If anyone finds out what you can do without any training at all, I – you’ll be in big trouble. Okay? It’s like your little coded pages – ” He held his hand out when she tried to interrupt, and her mouth snapped shut in response. “ – listen to me. You wanted to keep your notes a secret. So just take it a little further, and keep the whole thing a secret. ‘cause if you didn’t, and your parents found out, they would be really mad at you.”

A test as well as a threat, really.

If Firefly’s parents were the ones who trained her, she wouldn’t be concerned by them finding out and she certainly wouldn’t believe she’d be in ‘big trouble’ with them for practising.

If her parents didn’t train her, then she should –

Aha. The little girl’s face screwed up, a telltale sign that she was trying not to cry.

“They wouldn’t…” She said without much confidence.
Shisui ignored the part of him that felt guilty – it was the same part of him that had stayed his hand in the face of a little boy enemy, and it wouldn’t help either of them now.

The girl hadn’t even started The Academy and her parents weren’t training her. And she had pages of coded notes, a book on fire ninjutsu, the first fledgling attempts at a Katon, and a perfect first healing session.

But Firefly had baby pink hair and apple green eyes. She was no Uchiha. Her genius didn’t necessarily mean she was doomed to the same life Itachi suffered.

“They would.” Shisui said firmly. She had to believe this. If her parents didn’t already know what she could do, he wouldn’t help them figure it out.

The sunlight glinted on her face, the little burns raw and blotchy. Shisui pictured the little boy enemy’s trembling smile, the disbelieving laugh, and his guilt dissipated.

“Hey, why didn’t you heal your face? I should’ve taken you to the hospital the moment it happened. I should’ve thought of another way to stop you. You should always heal your wounds before your comrades, you know. The medic is the most important person on the team. If you’re alive, they still have a chance. Do you understand me? You need to put yourself first.”

The girl looked unconvinced, wrinkling her nose cutely.

Shisui laughed. “I’m Uchiha Shisui.”

The name meant nothing to her, he could see it in the blank look on her face. The thought cheered him slightly.

“Haruno Sakura.” She replied in kind. “My parents are Mebuki and Kizashi and they’re chuunin and you shouldn’t mess with me because they’re very strong and mean, so there.”

He bit back a laugh. What an introduction! He should start saying that. He imagined the confused looks the rest of his clan would give him.

But that name, Sakura… the short-lived blossom, blooming and dying in Spring… It didn’t suit her. This little genius, with her sparks of chakra and explosive determination, she was a firefly. Perhaps equally short-lived, but no matter what happened, Shisui could tell she would be something special one day. Whatever end she met, she wouldn’t fade into obscurity. She’d go out in a blaze of glory, a wildfire.

Shisui smiles to himself, leaning against the hospital wall. Kakashi is long gone, and the ANBU’s waited long enough.

He knocks on the door.

There’s a long moment of silence, then the door swings open and he’s forced to look all the way up at the figure that appears. A man, much taller than him, wearing an ANBU mask painted with orange and black swirls. A tiger.

“Hello.” Shisui says innocently. “Mikoto-san said that the ANBU named ‘Usagi’ was in this room? I need to talk to him about last night’s incident.”

Silence.

Shisui gets the feeling the man is looking him up and down. It doesn’t take him long, presumably
because Shisui is built like a human, not a tree, unlike this tiger-man.

“Uchiha Shisui.” The man says.

Shisui’s smile becomes significantly more strained. Does he know the tiger-man? Oh God, is he one of the few Uchiha that Shisui doesn’t know in ANBU?

“You can come in.” Tiger-Man says magnanimously, as if there wasn’t a long stretch of time in which he was clearly calculating how long it would take to kill and dispose of Shisui.

“Much obliged.” Shisui wobbles into the room, his cool dented beyond repair.

The only other occupant of the room is a man wearing an ANBU mask covered in heart-patterned band-aids.

Shisui stares at him, unsure if he is delighted or even more worried for his life.

“Hello.” The new ANBU says cheerfully – and just hearing emotion coming out of an ANBU is horrific enough without the accompanying visual of cutesy band-aids decorating his mask – “Don’t mind me. I was trying to stick my mask back together and I got a little carried away. The nurses didn’t mind!”

“Ohhhhh-kaaaaaay.” Shisui grimaces, looking from Tiger-Man to Madman, wondering which one actually was his doom. This is how he dies. Thank goodness Firefly didn’t see it coming. It’d scar her for life.

“It’s me!” The ANBU says. “Usagi!”

Oh.

It’s the idiot rabbit who fell for the Fugaku trick three times.

He’s the one who got knocked on the head and nearly let Sakura get kidnapped.

Now it all makes sense.

“Usagi-chan, I barely recognised you with your face all… the way it is. Can I have a quick word?” Shisui asks, glancing at Tiger-Man in what he hopes is a subtle signal to leave the two of them alone.

Tiger-Man stares back at him, then leaves without another word.

Shisui rubs his chest, wishing he could directly massage his heart back into a proper rhythm, and turns back to Usagi.

“Everyone wants to talk to me today.” Usagi informs him. “Even Kakashi-senpai – uh, Kakashi.”

Kakashi, one of Sakura’s ever-growing jounin army. If ever there was a hobby she could have that Shisui would support, it’s the collection of elite killers.

It doesn’t take long for Usagi to recount what had happened to him the night before, though he doesn’t know much about Sakura.

Shisui’s interest is piqued by the mention that Usagi was found out in the open, in the same place he’d apparently been ambushed. If it was Shisui on this mission – and it never would be, because he’d kidnap the kid just as planned and then take it home, and apparently that’s cowardice – he would neutralise the guard, then hide him to prevent exactly what happened last night – someone
stumbling across him and raising the alarm.

Interesting.

Why would someone who was skilled enough to get the drop on an ANBU – even a dumb bunny one – just leave him where he fell? Something stinks here.

“What do you think happened?” Shisui asks, preparing himself for a stupid theory about spirits or demons.

He’s not prepared for Usagi to hang his head dejectedly, clasping his hands in his lap. “Well… I saw a flash of my attacker. It was enough to convince me of something. They looked like ANBU to me, though I didn’t recognise the type of mask. He seemed to be wearing all black with a hood. He caught me off guard because for a second, I thought he was one of us.”

Shisui frowns in confusion. A foreign nin did this? He had been so sure this was an internal issue.

Then Usagi lifts his head, scratching his pale hair. His hands are trembling slightly. He’s stressed. Afraid. Of what?

“You’re a talented shinobi, Shisui-kun, and… and you’ve recently had trouble with the Hokage. That’s a volatile combination. Do you… do you know what happens to some people in your position? Some invitations are unwelcome, you know?”

He doesn’t know. He’s baffled, for once.

Usagi takes a deep breath, then draws a seal on the wall in ink. Shisui feels his chakra blanket the room and finally gets his answer as to why Usagi is an ANBU at all. He’s good at what he does. They’re in another Room of Doom.

“What I’m going to tell you cannot go any further than this room, okay? I’m only telling you this because I don’t want you to go down that route. It’s… there’s normal ANBU, that’s regulated by the Council and answers to the Hokage. That’s what I am. But once, when I first joined up…” Usagi shakes himself, gathering his courage, and blurts out: “Danzo approached me with an invitation. He had a special team, he said, of only the best people, doing the work no one else wanted to do. He said even though everyone said I was useless, he could see my worth. He said I’d do well on his team. I… I was very lucky. My Captain stepped in when I told him, he said he couldn’t spare me. The Hokage agreed. Danzo had to let it go. But, Shisui-kun… the things they do there… ROOT… They’re the kind of people who would kidnap children from their own village, you know?”

Shisui feels ice pierce through him, terror chilling him down to the bone.

That’s who tried to take Sakura?

Shimura Danzo?

Shisui’s lip curls. Well. It’s always nice to have a tangible threat to face. Now he didn’t have to flinch at shadows. He knew exactly what lurked in them.

“It’s weird though, because if I was infiltrating a hospital, I’d dress up as a member of staff, like a doctor or a nurse. I wouldn’t go in my ANBU uniform. It’d be easy enough to use a surgical mask to hide my face and still blend in.” Usagi says thoughtfully, a little calmer now he’s spilt his secrets and nothing blew up.

Fair enough, Shisui nods, then it hits him.
A member of staff.

Mikoto said she left a medic watching over Sakura in the night.

*A nice young boy who came running right after I took out the kidnapper,* she said.

Like a plan B, the second plant in the hospital, ready to swoop in and complete the mission in case the first agent failed.

No.

“I’ve got to go.” Shisui mutters, disappearing halfway through his sentence, and then he’s flashing through the hospital, weaving through the brightly-coloured blurs, missing everything and no one, his eyes examining every inch for a specific combination of baby pink and apple green just in case.

And then he’s there, outside the door he had avoided a day ago, watching Kakashi go into with his ninken, listening to Sakura’s delighted laughter through the wall.

He bursts in, all thoughts of blood-splattered hospital beds gone, and hangs in the doorway, panting.

Sakura stares at him, confused.

Kabuto is standing opposite him.

For a split second, Shisui is seized by the urge to take out the threat, barely wrestling down the killing intent before it can overcome him.

Then, before he can do something stupid, a bright voice says:

“Shisui-kun! You’re finally here!”

Sakura is beaming at him.

Shisui deflates, his anger leaving him in one exhale.

He smiles at her, ignoring the ROOT in the room.

“Sorry I’m late, Firefly.”

Shisui stays for ages.

Sakura makes him wear a paper hat and steer her bed-boat, since he’s the captain now Kakashi had to go. Sasaki is napping in her chair. Kabuto is hovering for some reason.

Sakura is still troubled by what happened when Shisui burst into the room. His chakra was a haze of terror and rage and it clashed with Kabuto’s, which rose as if to meet a threat. Then Sakura had tried to diffuse the situation by greeting Shisui, which had helped him to calm down, but Kabuto was still on edge.

Shisui doesn’t seem ready to leave yet, even though it’s getting late and the room is awash with pinks and oranges of the sunset coming through the window.

“Aren’t your parents waiting for you to eat dinner, Shisui-kun?” Sakura pipes up.
Shisui’s chakra flinches, but he smiles readily enough. “Not tonight, Firefly. I’m all yours.”

His eyes land on Kabuto, his smile darkening at the edges. Kabuto bares his teeth in a smile of his own.

“Kabuto-kun likes stories.” Sakura announces.

Kabuto’s smile turns real when he looks at her. “I like your stories, Sakura-chan. The one about the bird and the dog was my favourite.”

“The dog ate the bird and then he could fly,” Sakura informs Shisui when he gives her an inquisitive look. “But then he felt bad and he burped the bird up. He fell, but the bird saved him. They became best friends and the bird flew him across the world.”

Sakura is wearing Shisui’s paper hat, which is two sizes too big for her and keeps slipping over one eye. She likes it, because now she looks like Kakashi.

“How big was the bird?” Shisui asks.

Sakura thinks about it, then holds her hands wide apart. “Big.”

“Okay, but how big was the dog?”

Sakura frowns, rubbing her chin pensively.

“Big enough to eat the bird, but small enough for the bird to lift.” Kabuto supplies, flashing Shisui an oddly competitive smile.

Sasaki opens her eyes, peering at them all blearily.

“Sakura-chan, how are you feeling?” She tries to cover her yawn, stretching up in the chair.

She gives Sasaki a gummy grin and a thumbs up. “I’m good, thank you… Mariko-san.” She adds daringly.

Sasaki – no, Mariko – gasps, visibly touched. “Sakura-chan! I – well – ” She gives up on words and starts scribbling notes down. Sakura imagines she’s writing about her ‘progress’ and feels oddly fond. Silly Mariko.

Kagami was right. She needed to seem ‘better’ for the adults, even though there was nothing really wrong with her.

*Debatable*, Kagami says. It sounds like she’s smiling.

Sakura feels two very familiar chakra signals coming down the hall. She bounces off the bed and starts gibbering in excitement.

The door opens and Sakura throws herself at her parents.

She doesn’t know which one she’s holding onto, but she’s never letting go. Her eyes are squeezed shut so the tears can’t escape and even though she said she wouldn’t play the game where she holds on tight anymore, she can’t stop herself from clutching desperately.

“Sacchan.” Her father says, his voice broken and barely there. “You were so brave. Thank you, darling.”
“Otou-san!” Sakura gasps. “I was so scared! Okaa-san…”

“You scared us too, honey.” Her mother says softly. “This silly old man even cried.”

“I did not.” Her father sniffs, then laughs. “Okay, I did.”

“We both did. We’re so glad you’re okay.” Her mother says tenderly.

Sakura is sobbing against her mother’s shoulder, her tears dampening her clothes, but her mother doesn’t seem to mind, stroking her hair while her father rubs her back.

*I’m sorry for crying like a baby, Onee-chan,* Sakura thinks forlornly.

*Silence.*

Then.

*Who wouldn’t, stupid?* A slightly watery voice responds. Kagami is crying too. Sakura smiles, pressing her face against her mother to hide it. Kagami cares.

Shisui, Kabuto and Mariko are all being very quiet, trying not to disturb them.

Her mother carries her back to the bed, setting her down gently. She holds up Raccoon, much to Sakura’s delight. “We wanted to bring you Mr Minty, but he’s off visiting your friend, isn’t he?” She says, amused. “We thought Raccoon would do instead.”

Sakura clutches Raccoon to her chest.

“Thank you!” She says happily. She didn’t feel right, sleeping without her toys. It’s been hard enough not saying good morning and good night to Mr Minty after giving him away, being completely removed from her treasures had been even harder to bear.

“If you’ll excuse me.” Kabuto says politely, skirting around her parents and slipping out the open door.

Shisui aims an unimpressed look at his back.

Sakura’s father gives Mariko an apologetic look. “Um, I’m sorry, but would you mind…”

“Oh, of course!” Mariko says, flustered, stuffing her things into her bag and standing up, notes spilling out without her noticing.

She hurries on after Kabuto.

Sakura’s father shuts the door behind her.

“So.” He gives Shisui a meaningful look. “We’ve been thinking about your offer, and we’ve decided to let Sakura decide.”

Shisui looks aghast. “She’s *four*!”

Sakura pouts. “I’ll be five in March.”

“That’s still *next year*!”

“Regardless, this is a big choice, and it’s rightfully Sakura’s.” Her mother says firmly. “After the
things she’s been through and everything she’s seen… I believe Sakura knows what’s best for herself.”

How right she is, Kagami murmurs.

“What am I choosing?” Sakura asks.

“Well… we believe that you will be safer if you have a clan name. For that to happen, you would have to be adopted. Remember how we talked about this, sweetheart?”

Sakura nods. “But I want to be a Haruno. I don’t want to be in another clan.”

“No, no, honey…” Her father kneels down beside her bed. “You could join a thousand clans and you would always be a Haruno. You can’t get rid of us that easily!”

“What do we always tell you?” Sakura’s mother prompts with a smile.

“To introduce myself like: Hello, I’m Haruno Sakura and my parents are Mebuki and Kizashi and they’re chuunin and you shouldn’t mess with me because they’re very strong and mean, so there.”

“What? We… I never told you to say that!” Sakura’s mother blinks, confused.

Sakura’s father smiles sheepishly.

Sakura’s mother mutters something under her breath, then starts again. “You know we love you more than anything in the world. More than ramen…”

“More than sake!” Her father straightens Sakura’s paper hat for her. She shakes her head and it still doesn’t come off. She beams.

“And even more than dumplings!” They all chorus.

Including Shisui, who mumbled along with them.

They all turn to stare at him. He flushes bright red and stares at the ceiling as if it contains the meaning of life.

Sakura giggles. “Okay. I’ll join a clan, if it’ll keep us all safe.”

“It’s about you, not us.” Sakura’s mother pinches her cheek lightly.

Ask them which clan, Kagami says, if they say Uchiha, throw yourself out the window as a form of protest.

“Which clan?” Sakura asks, tucking her legs under her blanket so they won’t be tempted to jump out the window.

“The Senju.”

(“Every one of them died, Sakura.” Tsunade says, a drunken flush on her cheeks, sake spilling in her hand. “All of them. Except for me. The last of the Senju. Isn’t that something.” She smiles bitterly, downing the drink in one go. Sakura watches her mentor grimace at the taste and wishes there was something, anything she could do.)

“Ohayou.” Sakura says at once.
Tsunade was very sad in Kagami’s future.
Sakura will make sure she’s happy in hers.

***

Hello friends.

So, remember when I was sick for ages and I was like, oh it was a cold or a virus or something? Nope, it was flu. I know that now because I have it AGAIN and so does my mum and everything is MISERY AND PAIN.

But.

This story still brings me joy so that’s good.

Remember when every chapter was only 4000 words long? *cries into pillow*

I’ve had an idea for another Naruto fic that I’ve had to brutally beat to death. I don’t have time to write what-if SasuSaku/ItaSaku/EveryoneLovesSaku fics! It’s pretty much just the standard ‘what if Sasuke accepted Sakura’s offer to come with him to join Orochimaru,’ because I couldn’t stop thinking about 1) how Sakura would’ve reacted because she canNOT have been serious, right?? 2) what would’ve happened during the Retrieve Sasuke mission if Sakura was on his side and not… waiting at home for some reason. Even though people who barely knew Sasuke, who were the same rank as Sakura was, got to go and she didn’t. 3) How I would write canon SasuSaku so I actually liked it again, the way I used to when they were genin and Sakura’s love wasn’t hopelessly unhealthy and Sasuke wasn’t actually trying to murder her. 4) What would Sakura become as one of Orochimaru’s shinobi? A mini-Kabuto? What would happen to her morals, her personality, her attachment to Sasuke?

BUT I DON’T HAVE TIME.

I put off tidying my room to post this, and that’s while I’m riddled with disease like a plague rat!

So I’ll put that idea on the backburner and kick it every so often to see if it still lives. (I also had the vague idea of a Team Seven in which Sakura is a boy called Kohaku, Sasuke is a girl called Kei, and Naruto is occasionally a boy called Naruto and sometimes a girl called Naru. But tbh that’s it. That’s the whole idea.)

For the people who say they’ve found themselves reluctantly shipping ShisuixSaku because of this… I’m so sorry. I bet there’s no fanfic out there to sate your needs. Crack pairings are the best, but also the worst. The lack of content burns us, precious. Well, there’s a lot of Shisui moping about Sakura in this chapter, so I hope that was enough for now! :D

Usagi the dumb bunny boy was almost recruited into ROOT, but Tora the scary tiger man got him out. Lucky rabbit. Usagi is Takumi, Kakashi’s former classmate who is basically that kid from school you try to avoid making eye contact with when you see them in public.

(I am that kid from school, woe is me)

Have I ever mentioned how much I love you all? Because I love you all with a passion and I think you’re all the bees’ knees.

**Quick poll for fun:** If you could visit any time period with zero consequences, where and when would you go?
I would go to Victorian London to have a picnic while wearing an excessively frilled and frocked gown. This is actually the plot of one of my favourite books, To Say Nothing of the Dog. There’s dogs and cats in that book, guys. 10/10 would recommend.

(Sakura saw no dogs, but she told a story about a dog and a bird.)
Sakura wakes up in her own bed.

She sees her glow in the dark stars on the ceiling and smiles, knowing she’s home. Her parents took her home from the hospital the day after their talk with Shisui, then they fed her a huge dinner until she had to waddle off to bed, stuffed full to bursting. She’d fallen asleep warm and content, feeling safe from the prying eyes of the Masks.

“Sakura!” Her mother calls through the door. “Time to get up, sweetheart! Your dad’s made breakfast for once!”

“Miso soup?!” Sakura bolts upright in bed, sending her toys flying. Tofu, she thinks, suddenly ravenous.

“His specialty!” Her mother says cheerfully. “Do you want milk with that?”

“Hmm…” Sakura taps her chin, thinking.

“You could have hot milk or strawbe – ”

“Strawberry milk, please!” Sakura blurts out, forgetting her manners.

Luckily, her mother doesn’t seem to mind, chuckling to herself. “Okay, coming right up! You can get dressed by yourself, right?”

“I can do it!” Sakura says, wriggling out of bed. It’s still a long way down from her bed to the floor. Kagami’s memories all involve just swinging her legs off the edge, her feet instantly touching the floor. Sakura longs to be tall.

She hauls her drawer open and peers inside at the selection of clothes. A glance behind the curtains tells her it’s sunny today, so she kicks the drawer shut and opens her wardrobe instead.

_Onee-chan, what should I wear?_ Sakura asks, looking at each dress slowly so Kagami has time to see.

Kagami sighs. _What do I care? The purple one. Just be quick. Miso soup sounds good._

_Can you taste what I eat?_ Sakura says, interested. She grabs her purple sundress and throws it on, spinning around and letting the skirt fly up.

_Kind of, _Kagami says, sounding pensive. _It’s not like the real thing. But it’s good._

_What’s your favourite food?_ Sakura asks, wanting to give her a treat.

_The same as you, dummy. We’re the same._

“Dumplings.” Sakura says out loud, hands on hips. It makes sense that her big sister likes something so tasty. “Oh!” She gasps, something occurring to her.

_Onee-chan! If you’re my big sister, then you’re Naruto’s big sister too!_

Kagami doesn’t say anything.
Naruto’s eyes are bright blue even in death, so beautiful even without the spark that usually lights them up. His big, shining grin, his determined gaze… It’s all gone. And it’s her fault.

Sakura frowns. She closes her eyes and thinks of Naruto’s beaming face the day she first met him in the park, how happy he had been to finally have a friend. She feels Kagami’s grief slowly wane, but to her surprise, a dose of self-loathing overtakes it.

Do you know why the man spitting at Naruto was the first dream you ever had? Kagami asks, her voice dead, toneless.

No... Sakura clutches the hem of her dress, apprehensive.

Up until that point, there was no connection between us. I hadn’t been awake for long, and I barely stirred as you went about your normal life. Then you were playing with Ino, and I suddenly remembered that day. She made flower crowns and daisy chains, and then a man spat a boy in the park and I watched and did nothing.

And it was about to happen again. I was desperate to stop it, to change it, so I pushed the memory as hard as I could at you, hoping you’d see it somehow. You did. You actually defended Naruto. I couldn’t believe it. I never thought I would have done that, back then. You did what I never bothered to do – you befriended the poor orphan boy everyone hated. In my time, I never spoke to Naruto until I was forced to, and even then I belittled and mocked him, acting like his mere presence was the worst thing imaginable.

That day in the park was my first regret. Looking back, I could see exactly how much Naruto needed someone. Anyone. But I couldn’t be that person.

Sakura holds her own hand, wishing she could send the feeling to Kagami somehow.

When Kagami speaks again, her voice is low, contemplative. The bitterness is gone. You are that person. The girl I should have been. I’m glad.

Thank you, Onee-chan.

You’re welcome, Sacchan.

xxxxxxxx

“Tofu, tofu, tofu!” Sakura chants, running down the stairs. She imagines the steps are made of spongy tofu and she hops down the last few.

Someone knocks on the front door just as she lands right in front of it. She stumbles on the dismount, wobbling to the door.

She’s not technically supposed to answer the door, but it’s been a few seconds and her mother’s still not coming, so maybe she didn’t hear the knock?

Sakura opens the door slowly, ignoring Kagami’s whispered advice on how to disable a person at knee-height.

Ino, Shikamaru and Chouji are on the doorstep, each one clutching flowers.

Sakura beams in delight. “Ino-chan! And Shikamaru-kun and Chouji-kun! Hello!”

Ino elbows both boys until they hand over their flowers.
“My father said you were sick, so I got you some flowers to make you feel better.” Ino says proudly. Sakura holds the three bouquets carefully, resisting the urge to bury her face in the petals to hide her red face.

“They’re peonies, pansies and daisies.” Ino points each of them out. “Shikamaru wanted to get you a boring old book and Chouji thought you’d like food.”

Sakura grins at them all, noting Shikamaru’s feigned disinterest and Chouji’s red cheeks. “That all sounds good.” She says diplomatically. “Do you want to come in?”

“Just Ino.” Shikamaru says. “Me an’ Chouji are busy doing nothing today. Hope you’re feeling better. Head’s up, my ma’ll probably bring you more food than you’ll ever need.”

“Why’d you come at all if you weren’t gonna come in?” Ino stomps her foot.

Shikamaru is unimpressed. “Because you dragged us all the way here and shoved flowers in our hands. Bye, Sakura.”

“Bye bye! I’ll bring you leftovers from Shikamaru-kun’s mother, Chouji-kun!” Sakura waves, stepping aside to let Ino in.

Chouji smiles at her, a little less shy than when they first met. Whenever they hung out, Chouji seemed to be waiting for one of them to make fun of him. Now he seems a lot more confident in their company. Sakura’s glad.

Ino takes her flower-patterned shoes off and arranges them carefully against the wall.

_Onee-chan, did you know Chouji-kun?

(She’s too late. Chouji’s collapsed from exhaustion, his side blackened with ash and gore. Ino is close, face-down in a puddle of blood. Shikamaru is still alive, she thinks, though not for long.)

No, Kagami responds curtly, and that was that.

Sakura brings Ino in to the living room, bursting with excitement. Ino hadn’t come over before – Sakura’s parents probably doubted Ino existed – and the possibilities of what they could do made Sakura’s head spin.

“Okaa-san!” Sakura sings out, holding Ino’s hand. “Ino-chan came! She bought me flowers, look!”

Sakura’s mother admires the flowers, making impressed sounds that make Ino blush, looking pleased with herself.

“How lovely! I’ll put them in a vase in Sakura’s room, how about that?”

“Yes, please! Can I have the lumpy one?” Sakura asks.

“As if I’d give you any other.” Sakura’s mother laughs, beckoning them to join her in the kitchen.

“Oi!” Sakura’s father calls out. “Are there any children who shouldn’t be in the kitchen?”

“No!” Sakura giggles, hiding behind Ino.

“Are you sure?” Sakura’s father asks, whirling around, fork in hand. He’s wearing the apron Sakura gave him for his birthday, the one with the flowery print. “Because if there are any children here…”
they’ll have to go in the oven!”

Ino seems amused, but then draws back, startled, when Kizashi points his fork at her. “You there! You haven’t seen any children around, have you?”

“Um… no…” Ino says uncertainly.

“Good! Then come on in! There’s plenty for everyone.”

Breakfast is a fun affair.

Ino seems to quickly adjust to the Haruno family, joining in the laughter and conversation with the ease of a regular. Sakura remembers Itachi’s bafflement fondly. He seemed to view them all as utterly foreign, a new nation he had to learn the etiquette of as soon as possible. Ino, on the other hand, charms both of Sakura’s parents without much effort and is pretty good at eating with just one hand (the other busy holding Sakura’s).

Ino pulls Sakura upstairs the moment she finishes eating. Sakura sees that Ino is breathing a little harder after running, so she mimics her – maybe a little too enthusiastically, since she gets dizzy and has to sit down on her bed to recover.

Ino is practically vibrating off the ground with excitement. “So, guess what? Remember my parents were being really weird, when they kept talking all seriously together and they wouldn’t let me join in? Well, my dad wants me to try for The Academy a whole year early! I said I’d only do it if you did too, because we’ve got to go together, just like we planned, remember?”

Sakura does remember. Should I, Onee-chan? I do want to be with Ino-chan, but what if I’m not put on Team Seven with the boys?

Kagami lets out a pained grunt, accompanied by the clank of chains. I was wrong when I said you wouldn’t get noticed. Someone tried to kidnap you pretty much the moment you showed what you can do. If you join The Academy a year early, not only will your test scores and ability reveal your potential, the mere fact that you gained early entry will get you even more attention. You don’t want that.

But it’s Ino-chan…

Say no.

Ino is staring at her, bright-eyed and beaming.

“Are – are the other Monsters going to do the test, too?”

Ino’s chakra gives a pulse of displeasure. “No. It’s just you and me, okay? I’m happy that you’ve made new friends, but… you’re my best friend.”

Sakura remembers the promise she made to herself once. To stay by Ino’s side, she will have to start and finish the Academy at the same time. She can’t ever fall behind or rush ahead. She and Ino will have to be tied together.

“You’re my best friend, too. I – I’ll have to ask my parents.” Sakura says hesitantly.

Ino lets out a squeal, darting over to give Sakura a hug. “They’ll say yes! We’ll go together and we’ll be one step closer to graduating and being adults! We can get a house and everything!”
She’s so happy that Sakura can’t help but smile, but thoughts of Naruto and the house they will one day share plague her. Team Seven, with its splintered, broken future. Kakashi-sensei, her teacher in name only if she doesn’t end up on exactly the right team at exactly the right time.

*What can I do?*

*Fail the test.*

*But then Ino will be alone in The Academy!*

*Only for a year. It was her parents’ idea anyway, it’s their problem. Not yours.*

Ino is chattering away happily, arranging Sakura’s dolls to her liking.

Sakura fights the sinking feeling in her stomach.

Whatever happens, happens. She’ll deal with it then. For now, she’s got a best friend to play with.

xxxxxxx

Ino has to go home at noon, right after Sakura’s placed the last of her glittery clips in her hair.

Ino wears her misshapen curls with pride, hugging Sakura as she leaves. “Don’t forget to ask your parents about school!” She says, hushed. “I’ll lend you my lucky pencil for the test. Bye bye!”

“Bye bye!” Sakura waves her off.

It’s okay. Even if she goes to The Academy before Naruto, that just means she’ll start earning money faster and then she’ll be able to buy the house for them. And Ino too, apparently.

Sakura stands on her doorstep, lost in thought. “A big dog would be great for playing in the park…but a little dog would be good for cuddles… Hmm… Kakashi-sensei has at least twenty dogs. I could start with ten?”

“Start with one, Firefly.” Shisui says.

Sakura yelps, nearly toppling backwards in shock at his sudden appearance. “Shisui-kun!”

*Someone should put a bell on that boy,* Kagami says grumpily, sounding as if she got scared too.

*Who could catch him?* Sakura replies, a little peeved.

“Hi.” Shisui waves belatedly. He’s holding a single, drooping flower. He looks down at it, a little sheepish. “People get flowers when they’re sick. You were sick. Ergo… flower. Er… do you like it?”

Sakura takes the flower, feeling the petals’ waxy texture between her fingers. She smiles. “I’ll put it in the lumpy vase.”

“I’m… sure that’s a good thing. How are you feeling?”

The first time she woke up, her head ached as if she had fallen on it, hard. Her mind had felt overtaxed, fuzzy. She hadn’t been able to concentrate on Mariko’s gossiping or Fugaku’s questions. Not having chakra had been awful. Then, it had slowly started to creep back. It was like a black and white world slowly gaining colours, an unfurling flower. She still had a slight headache, but Kagami wouldn’t let her waste her chakra on healing it.
Kagami had been right about one thing.

Sakura’s chakra supply was bigger. She had meditated before bed and felt a growing fire inside instead of her familiar little spark.

“Better.” Sakura says.

“Good! Because I think it’s time for the next stage in your training!” Shisui says cheerfully.

_Tell him to go away, you’re still recovering._

“If… if it’s anything to do with chakra…”

“Oh no, of course not!” Shisui hurries to say, something dark twitching in his chakra at the reminder. “You’ll be fine. I don’t want you to use chakra for the next ten years, okay?”

“I can’t promise that.” Sakura says honestly.

“Five years?”

“Nope. I’m going to heal Hayate-kun.”

Shisui’s smile freezes.

_Here we go, Kagami says._

Shisui picks Sakura up and lifts her so their faces are level. “No. Firefly. No. You nearly died saving your father. I’m proud of you for doing the impossible, but you can’t do it twice. Or at least, you certainly shouldn’t _try_. I know Hayate. There’s not a chance in hell that he’d let you even try to heal him. He wouldn’t want his health to come at the expense of yours.”

“It wouldn’t!” Sakura protests, swinging her legs in the air. Why does everyone always pick her up? Though it does offer her a chance of being tall for once.

“You don’t know that for sure, do you?” Shisui raised his eyebrows at her. “If Hayate wouldn’t want it, and me and the rest of your elite squad of killers wouldn’t want – ”

“Elite squad of killers?”

“Oh, you know. Me, Kakashi, Genma, etc. Maybe even that squirrely little bastard, Kabuto. Oh. I said a bad word, Firefly, you shouldn’t say that word, okay?”

“Squirrely?” Sakura repeats innocently, fighting a smile.

Shisui sticks his tongue out at her. “Cut the sass, kiddo, or I’ll drop you.”

Sakura looks down at the minimal distance between her feet and the ground, then looks back at Shisui, unimpressed.

Shisui makes a pained face. “There was a time when that would have worked on you, Firefly. Why do they grow up so fast?”

“I ask myself that every day.” Sakura’s mother says wryly.

Shisui lets out a manly squeal, very nearly dropping Sakura as promised. “Whoa – Haruno-san, hi, when did you get here?”
“You mean, at my own front door?” Sakura’s mother asks.

Shisui meets Sakura’s eyes and visibly realises what he’s doing.

He plops Sakura back on the ground at once, patting her head perfunctorily. “Uh, I was just saying hi to Sakura-san. By picking her – uh, you know what? I’ve got a mission. With the Daimyo. This keeps happening, it’s weird, I’ve gotta go – ”

Sakura grabs a hold of his sleeve. “No, you promised you’d play shinobi with me.” She lets her bottom lip tremble sadly, hoping it’ll sway him.

“Oh, you’re evil.” Shisui says, almost impressed.

“Excuse me?” Sakura’s mother smiles dangerously.


“Shisui-kun got me a flower.” Sakura says proudly, holding it aloft.

“Ah, yes, straight from the garden, by the looks of it.” Sakura’s mother remarks.

They all look at the flowerbeds at the front of the house.

“Well, so it is!” Shisui lets out a high-pitched laugh, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Can I go play shinobi with Shisui-kun, please?” Sakura asks, deciding to take pity on him and change the subject.

Sakura’s mother folds her arms. “Be back by five, please.”

“Yay!” Sakura jumps up, grabbing Shisui’s hand. “Let’s go!”

“Shisui-san.” Sakura’s mother says, stopping them both in their tracks. “Please keep an eye on Sakura. Just in case.”

“Of course.” Shisui says soberly, glancing down at the little girl by his side. “Always.”

xxxxxxx

“Run ahead, Firefly.” Shisui says, patting her on the back. She does so, using the technique he taught her. He takes a moment to appreciate that.

Then he turns back to Sakura’s mother and says, “By the way, I’m getting Sakura a dog soon byeee!”

“Wait, what?”

He flickers down the path and swoops Sakura up, laughing under his breath at the faint sound of Sakura’s mother freaking out.

When he sets Sakura down in the middle of their usual training field, she gives him an uncharacteristic pout.

“What?” He says, startled by the sudden change.

She points at him, her face deadly serious. “When I can use chakra again, I’m gonna pick you up and carry you around.”
Shisui can’t help but laugh. “Go right ahead! That’ll give the clan something to talk about.”

Sakura tilts her head, looking off to the right as if listening to someone talk. Then she makes a face. “Uh, are you still pretending to be a dummy?”

“Who’s pretending? Haha, yeah. It’s keeping the family from breathing down Itachi’s neck. Those old geezers prefer to complain about kids like me rather than praise kids like Itachi, anyway. It’s win/win. Yesterday I made sure to walk into a wall right in front of an Elder. You should’ve seen his face.” Shisui grins, taking care not show his resentment of how easily his family believed his act as an idiot.

But Sakura seems to see it anyway. She looks a little sad. “Shisui-kun, I’ve already helped Itachi-san with his dad. Fugaku-san is nice, he just needs some help. I think Itachi-san will be okay with just this. You don’t have to pretend to be something you’re not anymore.”

“As much as I believe in the restorative power of Toddler Therapy Hour, unless you work your magic on the rest of the clan, Itachi’s still going to be under pressure. And he might go bad, like you said. Unless… have you had a new dream about him?”

Sakura frowns, her eyes going distant. Anyone else would assume she was daydreaming. Shisui knew better.

His palms are slick with sweat. He braces himself. Every time Sakura reveals something new about the future, it’s terrible. To the point where Shisui wonders if his death might be a blessing, in the end. If he does die, he’s not sure how he can prevent it now. Knowing he *might* die in the near future isn’t very helpful. Or comforting.

Shisui’s an orphan. His parents were two of the many casualties of the last war. He grew up being praised for his eyes, his talent, his abilities. After he lost his immediate family, he began to see what the rest of his family was really like. Nothing at all like his parents, who loved him for him. The clan valued him for his eyes. There was a big difference.

Some days, he felt like a vessel, carrying the key to the Uchiha’s success for the next generation. He’d marry some distant cousin, have a few children to secure the name, and pass on his power. The power he gained by watching his best friend die.

Sakura’s eyes refocus.

She blinks, then looks up at him, aghast.

Shisui’s smile weakens.

“Itachi-san…” Sakura says, biting her lip. “Itachi-san was wearing a black cloak with red clouds in my last dream of him, remember? I know what it means now. It’s from a group called Akatsuki.” Sakura looks around, lowering her voice, “They hunt people like Naruto.”

*What?*

Shisui frowns. Why on earth would Itachi join some mercenary group that targets jinchuuriki? He knows Itachi witnessed the Kyuubi’s attack, but it didn’t leave him with any kind of resentment towards jinchuuriki. If anything, his cousin pitied them for their miserable fates. What happens between now and then, to poison his view of them so badly?

Could Sakura be mistaken? But what could she have witnessed that would give her the wrong idea? *Akatsuki.* Whoever they are, they’re linked to Itachi’s downfall. That makes them Shisui’s enemy.
And if their enemy is the jinchuuriki… that makes them Shisui’s allies. Well, Sakura keeps calling the Kyuubi kid her little brother. That makes him good in Shisui’s book. If Itachi will be pushed to hunt Naruto down one day, Shisui will be there to save him from himself. And Naruto, who deserves better.

Sakura’s breath is visible.

Shisui shakes himself, looking up at the sky. It’s full of white clouds, like a blanket of fresh snow.

“You cold, Firefly?” He asks, concerned. She’s just wearing a purple dress and leggings. Her little arms are exposed to the icy wind.

Sakura shakes her head stubbornly. “Nope! I’m okay! Let’s play shinobi, Shisui-kun.”

Shisui ruffles her hair. It’s getting long, brushing against her shoulders. He pulls his jacket off and drapes it over her shoulders. “It’s okay to need help, Firefly. Don’t pretend you’re fine for the sake of it.”

Sakura buries her face in the jacket’s sleeves, only the tip of her red nose and her big green eyes visible. “Thank you, Shisui-kun. Aren’t you cold now?”

“Nope! I’m too cool to get cold.” Shisui poses, flexing his arms.

Sakura just huffs out a little laugh, apparently unconvinced. “That’s silly. If you get too cold, you’ll turn into a snowman.”

“Who told you that?”

“My dad.”

“Ah. That’s somehow unsurprising.”

Shisui thinks about the plan he’d had for today. He was going to show Sakura some basic taijutsu forms, give her some tips on self-defence. It wouldn’t help her in the long run against ANBU-level enemies, but it wouldn’t hurt for her to know something. The element of surprise could be very useful at times.

But Sakura looked cold and moved slowly, like she was still recovering. Shisui had suffered chakra exhaustion only once. He’d been comatose longer than Sakura had, and had still bounced back twice as fast. It must have had something to do with her age and her tiny chakra supply.

Whenever Sakura referred to their training as ‘playing shinobi,’ Shisui couldn’t help but wish that was all they were doing. He wished he didn’t know that Sakura was going to be in a life or death situation one day, and that the time she spent with him could save her life. Or end it.

He wished the only weapons she had to use were rubber kunai and cherry bombs. He wished he didn’t know exactly what kind of lessons she would get as a kunoichi, that he never did. He wished a lot of things, but wishing never got anything done.

“Hey, Firefly. You want to go see your little brother?” Shisui asks, just to see that dazzling smile.

He’s not disappointed.

“Really?” Sakura beams at him, still swaddled in his jacket. “Yay! I haven’t seen him in ages. He’ll be at the park, let’s go!”
“You gonna carry me there?” Shisui grins.

Sakura is sitting on Shisui’s shoulders, still covered in his jacket. Its hem trails over Shisui’s head, but he doesn’t seem to mind.

“If he’s not at the park, he’ll be at the ramen stall. And if he’s not there, he’ll be somewhere else. Maybe the orphanage? I don’t know.” Sakura frowns, resting her chin on the top of Shisui’s curly head. She doesn’t know much about Naruto’s life beyond the Monsters.

“Tell me about Naruto.” Shisui says. He’s walking at a very leisurely pace, even with snow threatening overhead. He really doesn’t seem to be cold at all.

“Well, he likes ramen and pranking – ”

“Nononono. Tell me about his situation. You know, how he lives.”

“Well. He lives at the orphanage. They’re really mean there. No one ever adopts him even though he cleans behind his ears every time. Not many adults like him. They shout at him and some of them won’t serve him in their shops. Some adults are okay, though. There’s Genma-san, Kakashi-sensei… Hmm… the ramen man… I don’t know. I think Mister Hokage-sama is nice to him sometimes, but he won’t let me adopt him.”

Shisui’s chakra roils with annoyance. It’s not directed at her, so she doesn’t pay it much attention. Shisui got mad when he heard about the old man spitting at Naruto. She’s not surprised he’s angry at hearing more bad things about Naruto.

Shisui takes a deep breath, his hands squeezing her ankles. “I bet when you’re a Senju, you’ll be able to do more for him. Like ask your clan head to beat the holy hell out of every shi – er, have Tsunade yell at the bad guys.”

“I already do that.” Sakura says absently. Sometimes Ino gets there first. Shikamaru is really good at saying cutting things in a flat tone, insulting people without them realising. Chouji gets surprisingly mad at bullies. Sasuke hasn’t seen Naruto being harassed yet, but Sakura has high hopes for him. After seeing him confront Ami, she knows he won’t take any bullying lying down. The same goes for Itachi, who has the dubious bonus of being really, really scary when he’s angry.

“How often do you have to yell at strangers for being mean to your friend?” Shisui asks, sounding more than a little disturbed.

“Oh, just if we go anywhere with other people.” Sakura says. She has her arms wrapped loosely around his neck, her chin resting on his head. She’s barely walked at all today and she’s still tired out. She perks up, spotting an orange blur in the distance. “Oh – it’s Naruto! NARUTO!” She bellows, not noticing Shisui flinch at her volume. “NARUTO, OVER HERE!”

The orange blur freezes, then starts to tear over to them at breakneck speed. “SAKURA-NEE!”

“NARUTO!”

“Oh, god.” Shisui moans. “I think my ears are bleeding.”

Sakura slides down Shisui’s back, running to meet Naruto. He catches her in a hug, just about lifting her off the ground. She squeals in delighted surprise, clutching his back.
“I was looking for you, Naruto.” Sakura says happily, muffled by his shoulder, his hair tickling her face.

“You were? I haven’t seen you in forever, Sakura-nee! I… I thought you might have forgotten about me…” Naruto mumbles, kicking at the ground.

Sakura pushes back, furious. She grabs him by the shoulders, glaring into his face. “Forget about you? How could I? I was sick, so I couldn’t come to play. I would never forget you, Naruto.”

Naruto sniffs. “I know. Sorry, Sakura-nee. You were sick?”

“Just a cold.” Sakura says breezily, waving a hand. Shisui gives her a lopsided grin, which she charitably chooses to ignore. “I’m all better now.”

“Good! Because it’s the Rinne Festival next week, Sakura-chan, and I’m getting you the best present EVER!” Naruto declares, his eyes sparkling with glee.

Shisui coughs. “Ahem. Well, that can’t be true, because I’m getting her the best present ever.”

Naruto squints up at him suspiciously. He looks at Sakura, jabbing a thumb at Shisui. “Who’s this guy?”

“Shisui-kun is Sasuke and Itachi’s cousin.” Sakura says.

“Oh. Well, I’m definitely getting the best present for you because I’m your best friend and it’s my job.” Naruto says, puffing his chest out.

“I know I’ll like whatever you get me, because it’ll be from you.” Sakura says sincerely, looking at them both.

Naruto rubs the back of his neck, self-conscious, his face turning a dull red. “Thanks, Sakura-chan.” Shisui just laughs.

Sakura didn’t realise the festival was so close. She’ll have to go to the market with her parents. It’s the first year she’s had so many friends to buy presents for.

Sakura feels like a bubble bath, overflowing with joy. She beams at the two of them and yanks them both into a hug, pushing her face into Shisui’s stomach and hooking her arm around Naruto’s neck.

“Argh, Sakura-nee!” Naruto complains, wriggling in her grip. He makes sure not to try too hard to break free, she notices with a grin.

Shisui sighs, his chakra bright and unburdened, and kneels down to return the hug. He includes Naruto, too, ruffling his spiky hair.

“It’s nice to finally meet Sakura’s little brother.” Shisui says gently, smiling down at Naruto’s astonished face.

Naruto quickly recovers from his surprise, giving Shisui one of his bright grins. “Yeah, that’s me!”

“How about some ramen, Sunshine?” Shisui asks.

Naruto gasps. “Really?”

“And a piggyback ride, if you want.” Sakura adds. “Not from me, though. I’m not big enough yet.
Shisui-kun can do it, though he’s not as tall as Genma.”

“There is no pleasing you.” Shisui rolls his eyes, but obediently kneels down for Naruto to climb up.

Naruto hesitates. “Do you mean it? You’re not gonna knock me off or put me somewhere high up so I can’t get down?”

Shisui’s smile doesn’t waver, though his chakra surges with anger. “Of course not, Sunshine. I think you seem like a great kid. And great kids get free rides and ramen. Those are the rules. Besides,” He adds with a wink, “I hear you’re gonna be my Hokage someday.”

Naruto gapes at him in shock. He turns away and scrubs at his eyes. “Y-yeah! You can be one of my bodyguards, if you want!”

“Then I’ll start my sacred duty of protecting your body with this piggyback.”

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It’s not quite five yet, but Shisui wants to get Sakura home in time so he’s hurrying her along to their last stop of the day.

They’re back at the shrine from before, when she told him about her dreams. She’s glad he was the one who found out. Having to lie and keep secrets about things she didn’t even understand was so hard to bear. Shisui made it easier.

“The last time we were here, I blindfolded you.” Shisui says. He’s been in a funny mood ever since they dropped Naruto off at the orphanage. “It wasn’t because I didn’t trust you. I just didn’t want to burden you with secrets. I didn’t realise you already had more than me. This is a shrine that only the Uchiha clan know about, and can access. You can use it to hide if you need to, if anyone like that guy from the hospital comes after you again. It’ll be okay.”

Sakura thinks about holding his hand, but isn’t sure if he’d mind. It’s not like with Ino, or Itachi, where she can just reach out and be confident that the gesture will be accepted. Shisui might seem friendly on the outside, but she knows from experience that he’s got a lot of darkness and sadness trapped within.

Something’s gripped him ever since she told him about her dream of Akatsuki – not a dream at all, just Kagami doing her best to communicate what she knows, despite her chains.

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone about this place, let alone show them how to get inside. I’m breaking rule number one of the clan code.” Shisui takes in a deep breath, hands twitching towards his belt. He forces a laugh. “Well, if I get caught, it can only help my position as Top Disappointment in the clan, right?”

“You’re not a disappointment to me, Shisui-kun.” Sakura says gently.

Shisui squeezes his eyes shut. “I know, Firefly. Thanks.”

When he shows her how to open the shrine, Sakura manages to pluck up the courage to take hold of his hand.

He doesn’t let go.

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Shisui told her to be at the shrine the next day by noon.

Sakura arrives bright and early. She’d told her parents the truth when they asked where she was going. They seemed sad, but understanding. She knew they were just grateful they knew for sure she wasn’t being hurt by anyone.

It was nice to be able to walk the streets on her own again. She’s missed her little freedom. The park, the library, Ino’s house… all familiar roads that had suddenly been barred to her.

She performs the ritual Shisui showed her, sticking her tongue out to concentrate really hard even though Kagami said it wouldn’t help.

The stone shifts and the entrance is revealed.

*Showing you how to get in here was a huge sign of trust,* Kagami comments, *Shisui’s either an idiot or he has a lot of faith in you. Pray it’s the latter.*

Sakura stops, surprised at the sight of a figure in the shrine, bending down to pick up some paper petals off the ground. Shisui was here already?

*No, it’s a Mask,* Sakura thinks. She’s not seen this one before. Their mask has pretty ice-blue swirls on it with a flash of gold down the centre.

*Do we know them, Onee-chan?*

*I don’t think so,* Kagami replies, sounding unsure.

“Good morning.” The stranger says, their voice tinny behind the mask.

*The ANBU must have tabs on you,* Kagami says urgently, *they knew you were meeting Shisui here and they came here first to intercept you.*

“What are you doing here?” Sakura blurts out.

Kagami lets out a world-weary sigh. *Dummy.*

The stranger cocks their head. “I was just tidying up. This place is a little dusty, isn’t it?”

Sakura looks around. It’s not *that* bad. At this point, the dust is a part of the woodwork. Like a little grey carpet.

She examines the ceiling and winces. *Oh.* “There… there’s a spider.” She says mournfully. “Spiders live here. I don’t like it.”

“You don’t like spiders? I can take care of it for you, if you like. Want to see some magic?” The stranger asks, clasping their hands together.

*Say no, for the love of God, say no,* Kagami groans.

“Yes, please, I’d like that very much.” Sakura says, wide-eyed. She settles on the floor, cross-legged.

“Keep your eye on the spider.” The stranger says.

*Don’t you dare let this person out of your sight just because they told you to. We share a body and I will not get murdered by a random ANBU because you were dumb enough –*
“Okay!” Sakura chirps.

She’s not dumb. She can feel the Mask’s aura. Right now they feel a little sad. Bittersweet. That’s not what people feel like when they want to kill someone. Mikoto’s chakra had crackled with unrestrained energy, burning with the desire to protect.

Sakura manages to look at the spider, only covering her face a little bit just in case it jumps at her.

“Are you watching?”

“Yeah – Oh!! Look!” Sakura gasps, kicking her legs out.

The spider had vanished.

What? Kagami is perplexed. Genjutsu? Or…

“It’s gone! It went *phwoom* and then it was gone!” Sakura stares at the Mask, open-mouthed. “How’d you do that?”

“Magic.” The Mask says.

“I want to do magic too! Then I can make all the spiders go *phwoom*! Oh, but I hope they don’t get hurt. They’re scary but they don’t deserve to die just because they’ve got so many legs.”

“I’m afraid only I can do this magic. It’s special. Only people who’ve been to Hell can use it.” The Mask says seriously.

Okay, so this Mask is either crazy or they want you dead. Kagami says, sounding a little more assured now she thinks she knows what’s going on.

You say that about everyone! Sakura thinks back, annoyed. The Magic Mask is the best and she won’t let Kagami spoil it.

“You went to Hell?” Sakura asks, tucking her legs back in, anticipating a good story.

“Hell isn’t so much a place as a state of being.” The Mask says, tapping their chest. “Imagine being utterly alone in the world. Having nothing and no one. Not even a name. There is no sun. No moon, or stars. Just black sky, stretching on forever. Endless. That’s Hell.”

Kagami is very sad. Sakura tries to think about happy things like Naruto eating ramen or Ino picking flowers, but nothing makes a dent in the crippling shroud of grief that surrounds her big sister.

“So you can be Hell?” Sakura asks curiously. She doesn’t really get it.

“In a way, I guess. If you go through Hell, you become it. You need love and light in your life to avoid being hateful and lost in the dark. But I do know some magic that people like you can use, if you’re interested.”

“Oh! Oh, I am! But – what’s people like me?”

The Mask laughs quietly. “Innocent.”

Sakura looks at her feet. There’s a hard lump in her throat. “I… I don’t think I’m very innocent anymore, Magic Mask.”

“Why is that?”
Sakura remembers the dead Mask on the floor. Kagami’s memories fresh in her mind, her voice in her ear, sharp nails curling around her heart.

“I’m not going to cry.” Sakura says, determined. “Crying’s for babies.”

“Says who?”
Sakura looks up. “Huh?”

“Everyone cries. Everyone. Even the Hokage cries.”

Sakura thinks of Naruto, the day they first met, the tears of joy beading in his eyes. They sparkled like jewels in the sun.

“I bet Kakashi-sensei doesn’t cry.” Sakura mumbles.

“I bet you all the money in the world that he does.” The Mask says softly.

“I don’t have all the money in the world.”

“Tough. You owe me. I guess you’ll have to help me clean this place, huh?” The Mask puts their hands on their hips, their hooded head moving around as if they were examining the shrine at large.

Sakura grumbles under her breath. Tidying her room is bad enough. Her room doesn’t have spiders, but when it does, her mother comes in, picks them up and very politely tells them not to come back. They never do.

“Okay.” Sakura nods. “If Kakashi-sensei does cry, I’ll tidy this place from top to bottom!”

The Mask kneels down on front of her and flicks her forehead. “Silly. Aren’t you going to be a shinobi? Think about it. What would happen if you cleaned this shrine?”

Sakura frowns. But they told her to do it!

“Someone would notice you’d been here, Kagami supplies, the people who are meant to be in here clearly haven’t bothered to keep it clean.”

“Oh.” Sakura rubs her forehead. “So, why did you tell me to do it?”

“The first step towards learning magic, Sakura-chan, is to accept the fact that everyone lies. Even the Hokage. Genjutsu is all about deception, after all.”

I can’t help you with genjutsu, Kagami says sourly, I never learned beyond the basics.

“Genjutsu isn’t magic.” Sakura says frankly.

“Isn’t it?” The Mask says, tilting their head. Sakura is struck by a strong sense of déjà vu. What?

You never told them your name, Kagami says hurriedly, so why did they call you Sakura-chan?

Sakura tucks her chin in, staring the Mask down with big, solemn eyes. Everyone lies, huh? “Do you have a name, Magic Mask? I’d introduce myself first, but what’s the point?”

The Mask laughs hollowly. “Oh, you noticed? You don’t have many secrets anymore, Sakura-chan. Everyone knows who you are and what you can do. It’s very impressive. You should be careful. And as for my name… you may as well call me Izanagi. It’s as good a name as any.”
Hello friends.

Thanks for all your well wishes. I’m totally not sick anymore!

I posted the what-if SasuSaku story, by the way :) It’s called On Lightning’s Wing, A Petal Learns to Sting. (I never claimed to be good at naming things) I’m pretty darn excited about it.

It’s cold and snowy, even though it’s nearly Spring. Hmph. I want cherry blossom and I want it now. My birthday is March 30th, just two days after Sakura’s! (I’ll be twenty-five, though I still can’t buy age-restricted products without ID. I got ID’d for a 12 rated DVD last year. I blame my hobbit height.)

Three guesses who Izanagi/Magic Mask is.

Shisui meets Sakura’s little brother, who gets a nickname of his own.

The Rinne Festival is apparently the Naruto equivalent of Christmas, or at least it’s presents + cold weather. So obviously I had to include it. Anyone care to guess what the Monsters will get each other? If the Rinne Festival is actually a holiday that strictly about romance or sledding or whatever, then whoops? This story just got a little more AU.

I keep trying to work out what Hogwarts House Sakura is in. I would go for Hufflepuff (like me), but I’m no Sorting Hat.

My laptop is dying :( I keep worrying about losing all the files I have on this story, then I remember that I have them all backed up. Then I forget, and I worry again. The cycle begins anew. Anywho, my internet abruptly crashes every few seconds and I want MURDER

I have Spotify playlists for Sakura and Kagami, though I’m not sure how to link it… I hope this works:

Sakura - https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/1Q4p7tnltpy2ipPi8ftxae

Kagami - https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/5bB5zsh5TSbskrfO7Ntfj

Quick poll for fun: What’s your top three favourite anime?

Kimi ni Todoke, Natsume Yuujinchou and K-ON all have special places in my heart :) Please watch them. Kimi ni Todoke in particular is sweet as heck, has an adorable slow-burn romance, beautiful art, and a lovely, peaceful atmosphere.

(Sakura didn’t see any dogs, but Shisui plans to get her one)
“Tell me about yourself, Sakura-chan.” Izanagi says, settling on the floor in front of her.

“I want to be a medic nin.” Sakura says proudly.

Izanagi stills – not a single twitch of a muscle – and she feels a hint of something in the air. A dark haze of grief, perhaps, hanging over him like a storm cloud.

“That’s an admirable goal. Do you think you can do it?”

“Yes.” Sakura says, not cockily, just with absolute certainty. She knows what she’s capable of. Kagami had worked very hard to get where she was. Sakura can’t do anything less.

“Being a medic nin will put a target on your back in every single fight you enter. Have you thought about that?”

“I have to be really quick and good at dodging. And strong enough to protect myself and my precious people!”

“And… who are your precious people?”

“Well, there’s my parents and my grandmother, then my two best friends, Naruto and Ino-chan, and the rest of my friends, Shikamaru-kun, Chouji-kun, Sasuke, Kakashi-sensei, Genma-san, Itachi-san and Shisui-kun.”

“That’s quite a few people to hold so dearly.”

“And the whole village is precious to me as well, but I don’t know everyone’s names, so… I guess Konoha’s precious too.”

“What makes the village worth protecting?”

“The people in it.” Sakura says promptly.

“Really? So, if the people moved somewhere else, Konoha wouldn’t be worth anything anymore?”

“Well, I guess there would still be memories. You know, people’s homes. Where they grew up. Got married and stuff. I think that’s precious. But that’s the sort of thing you can take with you. So maybe Konoha’s not the village. Maybe it’s the people. So, wherever they are, Konoha is.”

Izanagi is silent.

Then he laughs and says, “Interesting. You know, you aren’t anything like I thought you’d be.”

Why did he have an idea of what you would be like in the first place? Kagami asks grimly.

“What did you think I’d be like?” Sakura repeats the question, opting for a less interrogative tone than what Kagami had used.

“The whole village is talking about you. The brand new prodigy, clanless, born to mediocre parents –”

“Hey!” Sakura jumps up, glaring. “My parents are the best!”
“So you say. At any rate, you seem to make a habit of surprising people. I had expected you to be shy, like most girls your age.”

Kagami makes a curious sound. In other words, he expected you to be like you were a few months ago. Why?

Maybe he’s someone I know under the mask… Someone who knew me before I started dreaming?

Kagami hums thoughtfully. Maybe. Try to think of possible candidates, then.

“So.” Izanagi says, breaking the silence. He waves a hand and a rose appears in the air. Sakura stares up at it, astonished, but it disappears the moment she tries to touch it. “Do you want to learn some magic, Sakura-chan?”

Say no. Turn around and leave. Kagami is unusually agitated.

But Sakura wants to make roses, just like Magic Mask can. And she’s always eager to learn. She smiles brightly, wriggling a little on the floor. “Okay! Thank you, Izanagi-san.”

“We’ll just go over the basics, today. When you use genjutsu on a target, you push your chakra into their system, a subtle invasion that will go undetected. Provided you have enough control.” Izanagi lectures.

He didn’t want her to demonstrate any of the lessons she was learning, apparently aware that her chakra was still recovering. Sakura is touched by his concern. Kagami is suspicious of his intentions.

“The method of direction differs between technique and user. Doujutsu relies on visual genjutsu, requiring eye contact. Tactile genjutsu needs the target to be close enough – and unresisting – to be effective. Therefore, the best method is auditory. Why do you think that is, Sakura-chan?” Izanagi asks.

Because it – Kagami begins, sounding bored, but Sakura hurriedly interjects, wanting to do it on her own.

“Because it can be done from far away, which means your target is less likely to notice they’re under attack and it leaves you less vulnerable while you perform the technique!” Sakura declares, jiggling her foot excitedly.

“Correct. You would need a special instrument to perform such genjutsu, and iron-clad control over your chakra. I think you should start with the basics and work up. Genjutsu can be very dangerous, even for the user, if done improperly. What is the biggest risk when performing such a technique?”

Sakura pauses, thinking hard.

Kagami is silent and sullen. She clearly knows the answer. Sakura carefully redirects her thoughts, not wanting to cheat by accident through her connection to her big sister.

“Being vulnerable to attack?” She suggests, wincing.

Izanagi says nothing.

At close quarters, his mask is slightly eerie. The flash of gold in the centre is jagged, as if from an attack. The eye holes are black and angled upwards. There is no painted mouth, just an expanse of white. The mask itself is too long for a human face, giving a slightly alien appearance.
“Um…” Sakura draws her legs up, sitting back.

Izanagi is kneeling in front of her. He’s much taller than she is.

“Genjutsu is powered by will. If your heart is not in an attack, it will be reflected in its effectiveness. Think of it this way: when you physically strike someone, the injury you deal is a result of the force you use. If you hesitate or pull your punches, the damage will be lessened. The same can be said for genjutsu. If you are unwilling to inflict debilitating techniques, you simply won’t be capable of it. You need willpower, intelligence, chakra control and the ability to cause harm to others. Do you think you are capable?”

Now she understands why he said his magic came from Hell.

She knows Kagami has killed people. Sakura knows what it feels like, because of that. She remembers the consistency of fresh blood between her fingertips. She can feel it now.

Even so, she doesn’t know if she can do what Kagami did. Kagami’s first kill was clumsy. Kakashi had almost intervened, but had let her finish the enemy off at the last moment. Kagami’s memories are conflicted on whether or not she had felt grateful for the chance.

“I don’t know.” Sakura says honestly. “I want to be strong, to protect all my precious people. Healing is nice to learn because it just means I’ll be even better at helping others. But hurting their minds… I don’t know if I would be any good at that.”

“If you think medic nin never hurt anyone, you are very wrong.” Izanagi says quietly. “There are countless techniques that only they can perform that are very effective and very, very deadly. There is not a single field of study within the shinobi arts that cannot be applied on the battlefield. That’s where you’re heading, you know. You can’t avoid it. Do you think the enemies you face will have the same doubts as you? The same empathy within that causes them to hesitate? Or will they take advantage of your kindness and strike you down?”

“Who can say? I hope I don’t have to go to a battlefield, and I really hope I never have to hurt anyone, but I know that if I do, I’ll have to have a very good reason for it. Maybe I won’t hesitate. Maybe I will. I can’t know for sure, yet.” Sakura says, offering him a big smile. “I do know for sure that I’m going to help lots of people! So if you get hurt, I’ll be able to help someday!”

Izanagi taps his mask, his chakra curling around him in contemplation. He’s wearing a black hooded cloak, so she can’t see anything beyond his mask. She smiles at it, hoping he’s smiling back.

Then he seems to decide something, flexing his hands in front of him. “You can’t be a medic nin if you can’t survive. That big heart of yours is an easy target, Sakura-chan. You must weaponize it. Genjutsu enables you to turn the worst of what you have endured into the best of what you can inflict.”

He stands up, motioning for Sakura to stay seated when she scrambles to follow his move.

“I think a demonstration is in order.” He says, without malice or interest. His chakra says he is feeling resolute.

In an instant, Sakura is in darkness.

Naruto is at her feet. He’s so small. She looks at her hands – bigger, etched in scars and lines, hardened by time and hard work. She’s Kagami.

Naruto’s eyes are blank.
He’s not sleeping.

*Wake up,* she tries to shout, but her voice won’t work. To her horror, she sees another version of herself before her, small, weak, useless. The little Sakura pulls at Naruto’s clothes and cries over him. She doesn’t even see the blow coming. It takes a long time for her to die.

Sakura can’t cry. She whirls around in the darkness and sees an endless pile of corpses, faces of people she had known and loved, strangers she had wanted to meet, friends she already missed.

*Wake up,* Sakura begs, but her mouth won’t move.

Tsunade has blood dripping down her chin. She’s long dead, but the blood won’t stop. Sakura never got to thank her for taking a chance on her, or tell her that she was almost like a mother at times.

Birds sing behind Sakura, a cacophonic melody of a thousand voices screaming as one.

She’s not fast enough.

She feels the hand go through her back.

Her flesh sizzles. It smells like the barbecue pork she used to have with Ino. She’s burning. Agony has set her nerves alight.

Sakura looks back.

Sasuke’s eyes are blood-red and utterly devoid of emotion.

Sakura tries to scream, but nothing comes out.

Then Kagami stands up, chains digging into her flesh, and pulls Sakura into her arms.

Kagami strains against her restraints, and Sakura feels a distant *snap* as something is severed. Kagami sags back against the wall, her grip on Sakura loosening.

Sakura opens her eyes.

Izanagi’s chakra is gone. She hadn’t even realised it was inside her mind until it wasn’t anymore. He claps. “I thought as much. You’re very talented, Sakura-chan, but you waste your potential. You cannot assume the best of everyone you meet. Life is dangerous. It will be short, too, if you don’t fight for it.”

Sakura’s head feels heavy. Tears are leaking out, unbidden. Izanagi wipes them away.

“I fight for more than myself.” Sakura croaks out. “I hope I never have to see Hell, Izanagi-san, but if I do, it’ll be because someone needs me to. Not because I want to be strong. I’m going to be a healer one day.”

Izanagi’s head bows a little, not quite a nod. “From what I hear, you already are. Stay alive for the next lesson, little petal.”

Then he disappears, just like the spider.

Sakura feels chakra approaching. She holds onto the wall for support, shakily pulling herself up.

Kagami is kneeling down, her head in her hands. Sakura can feel her exhaustion and the bone-deep agony in her limbs. *That man is an enemy,* Kagami pants, *I don’t know what he did, or what I did to*
stop him, but he was going to hurt you. Do not trust him.

I won’t, Sakura replies, pushing away the faint memory of his sadness, the bitter tang of regret in the air between them, the way his chakra was focused intently on her. She sees Sasuke’s eyes, the colour of an arterial wound, and shudders. Her back itches.

I’m going to rest for now, Sacchan, Kagami says, be on your guard.

Okay, Onee-chan. Sleep well.

By the time Shisui makes it into the shrine, Sakura has fixed her smile and stopped shaking. Even so, he stops dead at the sight of her.

“What happened, Firefly?” Shisui asks, rushing forward, his eyes flickering from her head to her toes.

“I’m just tired.” Sakura tries to widen her smile. “I had a nightmare.”

Shisui pats her head. “Oh dear. Do you know what I do when I have a nightmare?”

“No. What?”

“I laugh.” He says, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “The nightmare was scary and horrible, but I woke up. I was fine after all. The day looks even brighter after a dark night. Don’t you think so?”

Sakura’s smile grows on its own. “Yeah. Thanks, Shisui-kun.”

“Can anyone else get in here?” Sakura asks after an hour of going through taijutsu forms.

Shisui pauses. “Only the Uchiha clan and whoever’s been shown how to enter. As far as I know, you’re the only outsider who’s ever been in here. Why?”

“So, this is a super-secret hideout, then?” Sakura grins, ignoring the question.

Shisui can always be relied upon to leap on frivolity. He chuckles, “Yeah, I guess so. We’re in a secret club, right? Just the two of us? We’re the only ones who know about your kekkei genkai. Well, minus your parents, that is. I’m too old to be a Monster, so maybe I can be something else?”

“You said you were going to be Naruto’s bodyguard, right? Why don’t you start now instead of waiting for him to become Hokage?”

Shisui grimaces. “Sure. I guess I might not see – never mind. You said… you said that you saw Naruto die. How did it happen?”

Sakura sees Sasuke’s eyes again, blank and dispassionate as he drives his hand through her back. She squeezes her hands into fists to stop them shaking, and lightly touches the place she can still feel fingers stabbing through.

“I think Sasuke kills him.” Sakura whispers.

Shisui’s face slackens in shock. “No. Sasu-chan? He wouldn’t… Naruto’s his friend. Sasuke’s a good kid.”

Shisui scrubs a hand over his face, breathing hard. “Not this. We won’t let it happen, okay? We’re going to stop it. Naruto’s going to be Hokage – you’ve seen that – and he’s going to have you and Sasuke by his side.”

“I think Sasuke kills me too.” Sakura says, almost inaudible. She cringes, waiting for Shisui’s reaction.

He goes white. He drops to his knees, grabbing Sakura’s shoulders and looking into her eyes searchingly, looking for a hint of uncertainty or falsehood. Whatever he finds makes him sag, his hands coming up to cover his mouth.

“How?” He says finally, voice muffled but his anguish still coming through loud and clear.

“He stabs me in the back.” Sakura says, reaching behind her to cover the place between her shoulder blades. “I don’t know why. Then Naruto sees me dying and he just… gives up. Sasuke gets him too.”

Shisui’s agony is palpable, hanging in the air like smoke. Sakura holds his hands in hers, squeezing lightly, wishing she could take away all types of pain, not just physical.

“How can you stand it? To even look at him, let alone be friends with him?” Shisui grips her hands too tightly.

Sakura thinks about Sasuke’s eager little face, the way he follows Itachi like a puppy, the way he blushes sometimes when he’s embarrassed.

“‘In the same way that we aren’t who we used to be, we aren’t who we will be either.’” Sakura says softly. “Remember? Right now, Sasuke’s my friend. He’s a Monster, just like me. Something big will have to happen to change that. I bet I’ll see it coming before it does. We can fight it.”

“That day when you came to me, crying.” Shisui says slowly. “You said you ran into a boy at the park and it hurt. You said you used to like Sasuke. But then, for whatever reason, you said you were giving up on boys. Was that the first time you met Sasuke?”

Sakura nods, unsure what he’s getting at.

“I laughed. I teased you, after you watched this boy kill you – or Naruto – or whatever horrific thing you saw him do in that first dream of him. I just – you have to tell me, Firefly. Tell me when you see something like that, when you know someone will be an enemy one day.” Shisui releases her hands, flexing his fingers. His chakra is righteous fire. “You can’t carry this burden all by yourself.”

I’m not, Sakura thinks, reaching for Kagami reflexively. There’s no response. Oh. She must still be sleeping.

“Oh. Um. My first dream of Kabuto-kun was of him saying ‘Sorry, Sakura-chan. Don’t feel too bad. Most people trust me.’ And then in the next dream, Naruto hit me and Kabuto-kun healed my wound, but he was mean about it and I hated him.” Sakura says, ignoring the spike of killing intent in front of her. “He’s nice to me now, but I don’t trust him. I think I can make him better, though, like Fugaku-san.”

“That son of a – bad word. He was going to hurt you in the hospital, but I guess Mikoto spooked him or something –”

“What? No, he wasn’t. He was relieved when he saw her.” Sakura says, confused.
“What makes you say that?” Shisui cocks his head.

Sakura’s eyes go wide. She nearly spilled another secret. She waits for Kagami’s caustic response, but gets nothing.

“Firefly.” Shisui says forebodingly. “Are you going to tell me the truth or am I going to have to dangle you from a trap in the middle of the market, hm?”

“Kakashi-sensei did that once.” Sakura says unthinkingly, then claps her hands over her mouth.

“What? To you?! Oho… wow. We’ll put a pin in that issue, and then we’ll stab Kakashi with it later, okay? Now, what else have you been hiding? We can’t be the Super Secret Squad if we don’t know each other’s secrets, Firefly.”

“Icansenseemotionsfrompeople’schakrasometimes!” Sakura blurs out.

Shisui blinks, then makes a circular motion with his hand. “Run that back one more time, please? But at like, half the speed.”

“I can tell how people are feeling, sometimes. From their chakra.” Sakura admits.

Shisui looks like his brain just stuttered to a stop for a moment.

His grin gets manic and his chakra extinguishes like a bucket of water thrown over a fire. He grabs Sakura’s face, squishing her cheeks. “Come again, kiddo?”

“I’m not saying it again.” Sakura says waspishly. “I can do it. I know you just hid your chakra.”

Shisui pats her cheeks, looking dazed. “Just when I think you’ve run out of surprises, you hit me with another one. This is taking years off my life, Firefly. This is how I die. Slowly, of heart failure, because you keep. Being. Incredible!”

“Sorry?” Sakura says, baffled.

“How am I feeling right now?!?” Shisui demands, hands on his hips.

“I can’t tell. You hid your chakra.”

“I suppressed it.” Shisui corrects, but he barely blinks before his chakra returns in a big wave of confusion, astonishment and fear.

“Why are you scared?” Sakura asks, upset.

“Not of you, Firefly. More… what you must think of me. Not many shinobi wear their emotions openly, you know? Some pretend to only feel anger, others nothing at all. Kakashi wears a mask for a reason. I wear a smile. It… it should be enough. But if you can sense how I’m feeling… I…”

“I like you a lot, Shisui-kun.” Sakura says solemnly. “Not despite how you feel, but because of it. I know you’re more serious than you pretend, but I know you keep the smile up to brighten people’s spirits. You always crack jokes to break tension and you never fail to arrive at the right moment. I’ve been able to tell how you’re feeling since the moment we met, Shisui-kun. Nothing you’ve felt has changed my mind from my first impression.”

“…Which was?” Shisui asks after a breathless moment.

“I thought you were nice and that you should always be smiling. But only when you really want to.”
Sakura says gently.

Shisui’s face doesn’t change, but his chakra shudders, then vanishes.

“You don’t have to hide.” Sakura says. “It’s so easy for you to tell what I’m thinking, just from the
look on my face. It’s the same for me with you. That’s not bad.”

“And what if I never want to smile?” Shisui asks, voiced ragged.

“Then that’s okay, because I’ll know when you’re happy no matter what. If you let me. If you don’t
hide.”

Shisui exhales shakily. His smile wavers, then fades to a neutral expression.

With that, his chakra is back and easy to access. It seems interested, inquisitive. The equivalent of a
tilted head. “Okay. This is good. This gives you an inbuilt defence. You can compare what someone
says to what they feel and hopefully work out their true intentions from there. My best guess as to
why you can do what you can do… You gained the memories of your future, which must have
taught you how to use chakra instinctively. So you could use it without even thinking, the first time
you ever used it at all. It stands to reason that your abilities might be a little more honed than the
average person. At this rate, you’re a very powerful sensor with strong healing abilities and
Tsunade’s monstrous strength. That’s… well. You’re probably a genin already. Without ever
entering The Academy.”

As Shisui shakes his head incredulously, Sakura hides her guilty face. As much as she wants to be
completely honest with Shisui, she knows she can’t tell him she’s considering taking the test to join
The Academy. He’s sure to agree with Kagami and Sakura doesn’t think she can ignore him the way
she does her big sister.

“Ask me anything.” Shisui says, his smile encouraging and open. He looks relaxed, his legs splayed
a little, his shoulders down.

“What’s your favourite colour?”

“All of them.” Shisui says promptly.

Sakura screws her face up, “That’s stupid.”

“That’s not a question.”

Sakura huffs out a breath, but concedes with, “What’s your worst memory?”

Shisui’s face doesn’t change, but his chakra reels back from the question. He laughs under his breath,
“Wow, you went right in there, huh? I’d have to say… watching the person closest to me die on the
battlefield.”

“You’re ashamed,” Sakura says curiously, “And hurt. Are you okay, Shisui-kun?”

Guilt – self-loathing – fear – frustration –

“You don’t like that I feel sorry for you. Why? Do you think you could’ve saved your friend?”

Fear – pain – anger –

Shisui sucks in a breath, “Maybe.”
“Yeah, you do. You think it’s your fault.”

Pain.

“I’m sorry.” Sakura leans back, trying to draw away from Shisui’s chakra.

“I’m not.” Shisui grins, a savage rictus contorting his face. “I was trying with all my might to detect your scanning and I couldn’t feel a thing. Unless you actually reach out with your chakra, your victims won’t sense the invasion.”

*A subtle invasion that will go undetected,* Izanagi had said.

Right before he disappeared and about a minute later, Shisui showed up.

Maybe he didn’t disappear at all. Maybe the spider was genjutsu from the start, and Izanagi was just quick enough to flicker away on the spot as if vanishing. Like Shisui always did.

No. Sakura can’t believe Shisui would do what Izanagi did to her. Force her to watch her worst nightmares just to teach her about genjutsu?

Just like he did when he forced the fire back into her mouth, burning them both. He taught her a lesson. She never did it again, after all.

Shisui has noticed her inattention. He gives her a hesitant smile. “Firefly?”

Shisui’s concern when he saw her in the shrine was real. Izanagi had wiped her tears with hard, cold fingers, his chakra distant, unmoved. Shisui threatened to fight the ground for her if she fell over. Shisui gave her piggybacks and called her Firefly. He kept her secrets and took on her burdens as if they were designed for him to share.

Sakura’s glad Kagami is sleeping. She’d probably leap on the first suspicious sign and not let it go.

Sakura smiles at Shisui, just as genuine as his own expression. “I think we should go see Sasuke. I have to be friends with him no matter what, and I’ve not seen him since I went to hospital.”

Shisui rocks back on his heels. “Sounds good. I’ve missed the little monster, after all.”

He goes to stand, but Sakura is filled with a sudden, fierce surge of fondness. She jumps at him, wrapping her arms around his stomach. Shisui starts under her grip, but quickly relaxes. His hand touches the top of her head.

“Let’s go.” He says softly. “With one little stop on the way, okay?”

xxxxxxx

Sakura’s glad she’s wearing a cardigan. The breeze sends a harsh chill through the village as she and Shisui make their way to the hospital. Occasionally the clouds break enough that she can see a thin slice of blue sky between them, but not often. The sunlight is weak and watery.

“You got your story straight yet?” Shisui asks after a cautious glance around them. There’s hardly anyone in sight, and Sakura can’t feel anyone following them. Still, she understands his caution. It’s not really a topic to discuss in public.

“Yep.” Sakura swings her arms to keep them warm. Her dress drags across her itchy back. She makes a face and scratches it.
She’s going to trick Kabuto today.

For some reason, Shisui wants her to get Kabuto alone for him. He promised he wouldn’t hurt him or start a fight, and Sakura believed him, though it didn’t stop her worrying. Kabuto and Shisui had nearly come to blows the last time they were in a room full of other people, how would they get on all by themselves?

They’d talked about secrets as if something was going to change between them, but Sakura hadn’t told Shisui about Kagami or Konoha’s destruction, and he hadn’t volunteered the reason behind his meeting with Kabuto. She would feel guilty if she knew Shisui was being completely honest with her, but he wasn’t. It was clear he was just used to lying, or simply keeping things to himself. It would take time for him to fully open up. And some secrets were just too horrible or unbelievable for Sakura to share.

She desperately wishes Kagami would wake up. As tiring and draining as her cynical commentary can be, she does understand people a lot better than Sakura does, and her presence is a constant comfort in times like these. She had been suspicious of Izanagi from the start, and had intervened when he went too far.

Now Sakura has to confront Kabuto without him knowing it’s a confrontation at all. She sighs as the hospital comes into view over the hill. She hates the idea of tricking him, but being tricked by him would be much worse. She’s going to have to be vigilant.

“Remember, if he gives you any trouble, just flare your chakra. I know your signal as well as my own. I’ll come running. And I’ll throw him out the window.”

“No.” Sakura frowns at him.

“Okay, I will politely escort him out the window.”

“No!”

“Aww, you never let me have any fun.” He grins, strolling up to the hospital’s entrance.

Sakura eyeballs him. His smile matches his chakra. Good.

“You won’t see me, but I’ll be close by, okay? He won’t be able to lay a finger on you.” Shisui promises.

Sakura doesn’t bother to point out that she’s not the least bit scared of Kabuto. “I’ll know you’re there.” She says, smiling, and pokes him in the chest. “I can feel it.”

Shisui just looks at her, startled, then a slow smile spreads across his face. “See you later, Firefly.” He vanishes just as Sakura walks through the double doors.

She walks alone to the front desk, pouting when she realises she can’t see over it. She drags one of the plastic chairs by the door to the desk and clambers up, meeting an amused pair of eyes.

“Hello. How may I help you?” One of the receptionists asks, her chakra warm with mirth.

“Hi. I want to see Kabuto-kun, please. He works here.” Sakura says, trying to sound confident and like she does this all the time.

“Oh, of course! Is he your big brother?”
Sakura thinks about it. She shakes her head decisively. No, Kabuto’s not one of her family, a friend or even a Monster. He’s something else altogether. Maybe an enemy. Maybe not. Only time will tell.

“He’s on the third floor, sweetie. Would you like a lollipop?”

Sakura wavers for a moment. She’s supposed to be mature and grown up, fetching Kabuto in this very important task for Shisui.

Then she takes a strawberry swirl from the pot and says, “Yes, please. Can I take more for friends? Thank you very much!”

Sakura wanders up to the third floor, lollipop firmly in mouth. She doesn’t get much more than a passing interest from the people around her, just a few smiles here and there. Ino says she’s beautiful and Genma once said she was adorable. She wishes she could see more than people’s chakra. If she could see their thoughts, she’d know once and for all if she was really pretty.

She feels a hint of cool chakra, like biting into a peppermint sweet, and drifts down the corridor, following the familiar signature.

She registers Kabuto’s surprise and interest before she sees him, and realises he’s sensed her presence too. For some reason, he allows her to collide with him as he exits a room. He grabs her wrist and saves her from a fall.

“Oh!” Sakura splutters, her lollipop nearly popping out. “Kabuto-kun! Thank you!”

“Hello, Sakura-chan. Nice of you to drop in.” Kabuto says, amused. “Back for a check-up?”

Kagami would probably mutter something darkly about Kabuto pretending not to know Sakura’s file from start to finish. Sakura doesn’t mind not hearing it.

“No, I came to see you.” She makes a show of looking around, then lowers her voice. “You said you could teach me healing.”

Kabuto’s chakra surges in interest, though he reins it in and only shows a mild dose of it on his face. “Oh? Are you interested in learning?”

Sakura feels Shisui hovering somewhere behind them, presumably glaring from a safe distance. Kabuto doesn’t notice.

“Yes, please, if you don’t mind. I want to be able to heal my father’s diabetes.” She lies. Her dad wouldn’t take a cure if it existed. He always says his diabetes is as much a part of him as his creaky knees and loud laugh.

Kabuto nods, looking sympathetic. His chakra just says he’s curious. “I’m free after work today, at three. If that doesn’t suit – ”

“That’s fine!” Sakura says, a little too fast. Kabuto’s eyebrows raise a fraction. Oh well. Hopefully he’ll just assume she’s really eager to learn.

“Well, where should we meet?”

“My house is fine. My parents don’t mind if I have friends over.”

Kabuto’s chakra gives a pulse of amusement at the word ‘friend.’ “Then I’ll see you there after three.”
“Okay! Thank you.” She beams at him. She digs around in her pocket and takes out a strawberry lollipop. “Here you go!”

Kabuto takes it, bemused, and waves her off as she leaves.

Shisui circles around and meets her at the stairs.

He holds his hand out expectantly.

Sakura sighs, handing over another lollipop.

xxxxxxx

“Good afternoon, Sakura.” Fugaku says, inclining his head.

She gives a wobbly, unpractised bow. “Hi, Fugaku-san! Is Sasuke in?”

“He is, indeed.” Fugaku steps back. His chakra is pleased when Shisui comes into view, presumably because it means Sakura wasn’t wandering the village unescorted. “Come in, please.”

They enter the hall together, Sakura yanking off her shoes as she goes, and because she is watching Fugaku, she sees the moment he registers Shisui’s tense posture and his unsmiling face. A thread of concern worms its way through Fugaku’s chakra.

Sakura remembers something and turns on her heel. She bends down, inspecting the floor. It looks good as new. She smiles sheepishly at Fugaku, who simply rolls his eyes and gestures to the stairs.

“I believe the boys are in Itachi’s room. Shisui, you will supervise.”

“Of course.” Shisui says. “That’s why I’m here of my own volition. To be ordered to do the things I already planned to do.”

Fugaku is too restrained to gape, but he furrows his brow all the same. “Is something wrong?”

“Just the usual.” Shisui returns cheerfully. “C’mon, Firefly, before the boys have all the fun without us.”

Sakura and Fugaku exchange glances, then he seems to realise he’s treating a child as an equal and his gaze hits the ceiling.

Sakura follows Shisui up the carpeted stairs. It’s very soft beneath her bare feet.

Itachi’s bedroom door is oak. Shisui’s knock resounds through the empty corridor, and the quiet sound of conversation on the other side of the door stops immediately.

A little face appears through a crack in the door, peering suspiciously through the gloom of the hallway. Sasuke lights up at the sight of Sakura, shoving the door open and running straight at her.

“Sakura!” He cries out joyfully.

She winces, feeling her body jerk away instinctively. She can feel his hand sawing through her ribs.

Shisui snatches Sasuke up, holding him by his collar. “Where’s my greeting, Sasu-chan?” Shisui demands, giving him a little shake.

Sakura places a hand on her chest, trying to calm her fluttering heartbeat down. She couldn’t help but
react at the sight of Sasuke charging at her, even though he was obviously thrilled to see her and his eyes were dark, not red-raw and wild. She’s grateful for Shisui’s swift intervention, though she’s not sure if he did it for her or not.

“Shisui!” Sasuke whines. “I haven’t seen Sakura in ages. I thought she died and no one wanted to tell me! She wouldn’t wake up after she healed her father, even when the medics came and woke him up.”

Itachi appears at Sasuke’s shoulder, giving Shisui a confused look. He promptly drops Sasuke.

Sasuke barrels into Sakura. She grits her teeth and returns the embrace, the tension melting away as she registers the sound of Sasuke’s quiet sobs.

“There, there.” She says gently. “I’m alright. And so’s my dad, because you and Itachi-san and Shisui-kun helped him.”

“I was useless.” Sasuke snarls. “I couldn’t do anything. He wasn’t bleeding so I couldn’t tell what was wrong with him and then I was too weak to push you away when you started draining your chakra, and then I couldn’t wake you up and you wouldn’t move at all and –”

“And I’m alright.” Sakura says firmly.

Sasuke clutches her tightly. “Don’t do that again.” He orders. “We’re not supposed to use that much chakra until we’re bigger.”

“Sorry, Sasuke.” Sakura says, closing her eyes and finally shaking away the memory of Sasuke’s last attack.

She peeks through the gap between Itachi and the door and sees a very neat bedroom, with dark sheets and matching curtains. Then she notices Mr Minty, sitting on the dresser, pride of place.

Sakura beams.

Itachi follows her gaze. When his eyes return to her, his cheeks look faintly red.

“Lollipop?” Sakura offers.

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Sakura and Shisui make it back to hers for two, and then Shisui takes Sakura’s parents off into the other room to have a hushed discussion. Sakura sits and waits for them to finish, a little sour that she’s apparently not allowed to hear certain things even after everything that’s happened and all that she already knows.

Sakura’s parents sequester themselves upstairs. Sakura is meant to answer the door. Shisui has been actively suppressing his chakra since they left the Uchiha Compound. He’s leaning against the wall, out of sight from the doorway.

They’re waiting tensely for Kabuto’s arrival. Sakura’s pretty sure he believed her when she said she wanted him to teach her, but it’s entirely possible that he’s paranoid enough to suspect a trap even in the hands of four year olds.

She stops breathing at the quiet knock at the door, a little after three.

Shisui offers a smile from across the room. She returns it and hops off the sofa, leaving the living
room to answer the door.

“Hello, Kabuto-kun.” She says brightly.

“Hello, Sakura-chan.” He replies, his voice fond. “Are your parents home?”

“Not yet.” Sakura says, using the lie she and Shisui had settled on. They wanted Kabuto to feel as comfortable as possible. “They went out for a while.”

“Okay.” Kabuto says, though oddly enough his chakra is disapproving at that. “May I come in?”

“Oh, of course!” Sakura says, unused to playing host.

She ushers him inside and then barely holds back a scream.

Shisui had flashed across the room and caught Kabuto in his red glare.

Sakura feels his chakra go from mild interest to terror. It finally settles on placid as he sags against the wall, his face blank.

“Shisui-kun!” Sakura protests.

“He’s not hurt and he won’t remember a thing, I promise. Look at me, Firefly.” Shisui says, his chakra calm and focused.

Sakura squeezes her eyes shut. She can’t look at those eyes.

“Oh dear.” Shisui mutters, then he pats her head. “You don’t have to look, Firefly. Just remember, I keep my promises. Kabuto won’t have a clue of this happened. He’s not afraid.”

“He was.” Sakura says softly. “I felt it.”

“I’m sorry. But this is necessary. If it’d keep you safe, I’d – ” Shisui cuts himself off, clicking his tongue impatiently. “I’m going to talk to Kabuto in the living room for a few minutes. You can keep watch from here so you know for sure I’m not hurting him. Okay?”

Sakura takes a deep breath. “Okay. I believe you.”

She feels, rather than sees, Shisui’s smile.

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Kabuto went home with Shisui an hour or so ago. His smile had been vacant, his eyes unfocused. Shisui swore he’d alter his memory after taking him back.

The irritating itch between Sakura’s shoulder blades has intensified to a burning sensation. She breathes out shakily, and pulls the collar of her dress down, trying to catch a glimpse of her back in the mirror. She twists, straining to see, then freezes in shock.

A scar is marring the flesh of her back, a little larger than an adult’s palm. It looks like something tore through her skin, leaving a jagged wound, edged with shiny burns. The itch is from her skin, healing a wound she has yet to receive.

Kagami’s bleeding injury.

Sakura can almost hear the constant drip drip drip of blood. She touches the scar hesitantly. It feels
rough.

She looks at her wardrobe, at the dresses she can’t wear anymore. She can’t risk anyone seeing this mark. It’s quite clearly a mortal wound. Not something little Haruno Sakura should have endured, even with the rumours about her parents. Though with her newfound healing powers, it was possible that people would assume she’d saved her own life, just as she had saved her father.

Sakura slowly tugs her dress back in place, checking the mark is hidden. Why had it appeared in the first place?

She closes her eyes, reaching out to Kagami. She’s still sleeping, a restless slumber marred by twitches and the occasional cry of fear. Sakura sends out soothing thoughts, hoping Kagami will feel better for it.

She had wanted to take Shisui’s pain.

Maybe she can take Kagami’s instead.

***

Hello friends.

So, Kabuto. The poor little lamb. He just keeps getting brainwashed!

Izanagi the Magic Mask might not be quite so magical after all. A bit of a meanie, to be honest. But at least Kagami’s finally acting like a real big sister.

Interesting moral conundrum: how do you react to finding out your beloved younger cousin will one day murder your friend in cold blood?

Speaking of which, the Rinne Festival is in the next chapter, and there’s sure to be plenty of Naruto and Sakura family bonding to come!

My computer lets me open maybe one or two tabs and then it freaks out and explodes. Sigh.

By the way, if any of you need/want to talk to me, I’m katlou303 on tumblr and if you ask there, I can give you better methods of contacting me.

Tsunade is currently drunk in a bar, if anyone wanted updates. Shizune is pig-sitting. (I kind of wish there’d been a stupid plot twist in which Kaguya was the pig all along)

By the way, nononono, Kaguya the alien moon goddess is not showing up. No. I stopped reading Naruto about five thousand twists before the moon came into the equation and I refuse to read up on it! I won’t do that to myself! (what does this mean for Zetsu, you ask? I don’t know, I reply, then I dance away. You’re too entertained by my dance moves to question my lack of forethought)

Sakura now has one of Kagami’s many scars. Ouch. She’d have a heck of a time explaining that one if someone saw.

Why did Izanagi mind-whammy Sakura? Who can say?! (I can. I can say. I won’t, though)

Quick poll for fun: What’s your favourite mythological creature?

Mine’s mermaids, has been ever since I watched Peter Pan as a kid and they casually tried to murder Wendy for funsies. I could never relate to Ariel wanting to be a boring human.
(Sakura didn’t see any dogs at all but Kiba was one of the corpses on the pile. Does that count? I think it does.)
Chapter 18

Shisui smiles at Kabuto.

He promised himself he would stop faking smiles, unable to bear the thought of how many Sakura has already seen through. This smile is genuine. The trap worked. He knew Kabuto had some kind of interest in Sakura, something that would drive him to seek her out. It’s always nice to be right.

“So. Are you a member of ROOT?” Shisui asks straight out, seeing no point in beating around the bush.

“Yes.” Kabuto says placidly.

Shisui barely manages to stop himself from reaching for his kunai holster. “And what is your mission regarding Haruno Sakura?”

“I don’t have one.” Kabuto responds, much to Shisui’s confusion. “I was not chosen to retrieve Sakura because of my position in the hospital. If I was revealed, Danzo-sama would lose a valuable spy. I was informed of the mission so I would not accidentally interfere.”

“You knew it was going to happen? That someone would try to take Sakura?”

“Yes.”

“And you did nothing?”

“No. I sent Uchiha Fugaku an anonymous tip, warning him that someone would come for Sakura in the next few days. I believed the Uchiha clan had an interest in her safety, for their own means. I stayed in the hospital past my shift and waited on Sakura’s floor. The ROOT agent attacked Sakura’s ANBU guard and hid him in a locked room. I retrieved him and placed him in the open, aware that Uchiha Mikoto was on her way. If she failed to stop the ROOT agent, I planned to poison him with a suicide pill.”

Shisui boggles at the other boy. “What? Why would you do all of that?”

“She’s just a child. She wants to be a healer. I came from an orphanage filled with children just like her. I’m in ROOT because Danzo-sama demanded to have one of the orphans join in his service, so I volunteered to spare the others. If I ever get the chance to spite Danzo-sama without risking myself, I always do.” Kabuto spoke without emotion, his eyes distant.

Shisui takes a step back. He had sensed something off about Kabuto from the moment they met, while he treated Sakura’s burns. He thought he was a threat. But now he was saying he had helped Sakura?

“Then why are you always hostile to me?” Shisui asks hesitantly, wondering if he’d misread the boy all along.

“Because Sakura lied about how she received those burns.” Kabuto replies. “And so did you. I suspect it wasn’t an accident. Also, it is well known that Fugaku has plans for her. I don’t trust Uchiha.”

Shisui sighs. It would be easy to twist Kabuto’s perception of him, to erase the suspicion and remove his latent antagonism towards the Uchiha, but it wouldn’t be right. Kabuto was wrong – mostly – but
he had the right to be. Looks like Shisui had to endure more thinly-veiled glares and snipes from the other boy.

It was the least he could do after what he had planned for him.

“Fine. Now you’re going to help me with something…”

xxxxxxx

On the morning of the Rinne Festival, Kagami finally wakes up.

Sacchan? She says drowsily.

“Onee-chan!” Sakura gasps out loud, falling out of bed.

“Who?” Sakura’s mother says from her bedroom doorway, a hint of laughter in her voice. “And are you okay, sweetie?”

“I dreamt I had a big sister!” Sakura says, muffled, face-down on the floor. Not technically a lie, right? “I’m fine, Okaa-san. Is everyone’s presents ready?”

“They’re exactly the same as they were last night, Sakura. Do you want to check up on them anyway?”

Sakura lifts her head, spitting out fluff from the carpet. “No. Yes. Maybe later. I’m going to dress myself today.”

“Are you sure? You have to be very careful with your outfit, honey, it’s very special.”

“I will!” Sakura says, standing up. When her mother gives no sign of leaving the doorway, she rushes over and says, “I’m closing the door because I’m going to be naked now, byeeeee!”

“Sakur – ”

She closes the door and holds onto the handle, just in case her mother tries to come back in. After a few seconds, though, she hears her mother laugh and her chakra signal drifts down the stairs.

Phew.

What did I miss? Kagami asks.

Not much. Oh, Shisui-kun had me bring Kabuto-kun over and then he stared at him with his Sharingan for a while and took him home.

Kagami somehow rolls her eyes audibly. Did Shisui say what he did to Kabuto?

Uh… no.

And you helped him anyway?

Sakura has nothing to say that wouldn’t either annoy or amuse Kagami, so she grimaces and keeps silent.

Well… let’s just keep an eye on the situation, then. At least we know it happened. Shisui could’ve ambushed him somewhere else, after all.
You don’t feel bad about Kabuto-kun?

No, Kagami’s voice is cold, I don’t. I wouldn’t shed a single tear over his wretched life. I don’t care that at this point he’s just a child. I know who he’ll become.

Who?

Kagami lets out a frustrated groan, yanking against her chains. I can’t say. Just watch out. If Shisui considers Kabuto his enemy, I’m more inclined to think Shisui is our ally. Keep him close.

What about Izanagi?

An unknown, Kagami grunts, I don’t remember him from my life, so it’s possible you changed something and drew his attention. Don’t go to that shrine without Shisui. If he tells you to meet him there, wait outside until he arrives.

Okay, Sakura says, downcast. Izanagi had scared her very badly, but she couldn’t help but wonder if she could make him happier, the way she did with Fugaku. The way she wants to with Kabuto. If Kagami never met Izanagi, that must mean he wasn’t her enemy then, so why should he be now?

“Are you ready, Sakura?” Her mother calls up the stairs.

“Oh!” Sakura jumps. She’d forgotten to get dressed, too consumed in her conversation with Kagami. “Um, nearly!” She shouts back, hurrying to her wardrobe.

Dummy, Kagami says, sounding almost fond.

Her special dress was dusky pink and full of ruffles and beads. It had a lot of layers of gauzy fabric. It fell to her knees and stuck out, solid as she twirled in it.

Sakura beams at her reflection. She quickly brushes through her hair, tying it back with her red ribbon, and gently sprinkles a little bit of gold glitter on her scalp, shaking her head slightly to let it settle evenly through the locks. The glitter was her mother’s, she kept it in a pot for special occasions. Today was the first time she was letting Sakura use it without supervision. She pulls on a thick pair of sparkly tights.

Do I look pretty, Onee-chan?

What does it matter? Kagami says bluntly, don’t make the mistake of placing too much importance in appearances, Sacchan.

Sakura pouts.

…Fine. You look acceptable.

“Thank you!” Sakura jumps on the spot, watching her dress swish up and down. It’s kind of itchy – Sakura freezes. She touches her back.

Um…

What? Kagami asks, her voice hard.

I… how is your back, Onee-chan?

Why – what does that have to do with anything?
Just tell me how it is, please.

With the distinct air of just humouring someone, Kagami reaches behind her and touches the same place Sakura is touching now.

Kagami stills. Her fingers press hard against her spine, searching for a wound that’s been wiped away.

What… what happened? Kagami is shaken.

I don’t know, Sakura lies, feeling a dull ache between her shoulder blades, maybe it healed while you were sleeping?

I – m-maybe, Kagami says uncertainly, I never thought… I thought it would always be with me. As a reminder of my mistakes…

I don’t think you’ll ever forget what’s happened to you, Onee-chan. I don’t think you need scars. I think you deserve to heal and move on.

Kagami withdraws, pushing away from their connection. Sakura still feels the distant hum of her sadness, the hope singing through her thoughts.

Sakura smiles to herself.

It’s hard to say whether or not she looks pretty. It’s always easier to judge other people’s looks rather than your own. Kagami had thought Sakura looked beautiful.

Sakura presses a hand against the ugly scar on her back.

What does it matter how I look?

It only matters what I do.

Sakura was too excited to eat breakfast. She gobbled some while running around the kitchen, but spent the rest of her time checking on the bento she’d placed on the side, all tied with bows, looking neat and pretty.

By the time there was a knock at the door, Sakura was so excited that she let out a little scream.

“Sakura!” Her mother scolds, though her chakra thinks it’s funny. “Indoor voice, please! Now, do you want to go see who that is?”

Sakura frowns. She’s not supposed to answer the door normally.

“Just do it.” Her mother winks.

Sakura rushes out the kitchen and heads straight for the door, her little legs barely managing to keep up with the pace she sets herself. Shisui would probably tell her off for her bad running form if he saw her.

She opens the door and feels her face light up with a huge grin.

“Sasuke!” She says. “Itachi-san!”
The Uchiha family were on her doorstep. Mikoto looks beautiful and demure in navy blue, a splash of red at her lips and cheeks. Her hair is pinned back in an elaborate plait. Fugaku’s hair has been combed neatly and he’s wearing charcoal-coloured robes.

Sasuke is dressed in a smart, dark blue suit and a dazzling smile. Itachi is wearing light grey, his hair loose and falling past his shoulders. His smile is small, but just as happy as Sasuke’s.

Sakura bounces and waves her arms. “Hi! Hello! Come in, come in! Oh, I’ve got presents for you, you’re gonna like them a lot, I swear!”

The Uchiha file in, shedding their outer layers of clothing and shoes, putting them all away. Sakura hovers in the background, eager to be a good host and help if needed.

She grabs Itachi’s arm the moment he slides his last shoe off and drags him away, “C’mon, everybody! The presents are this way!”

She leads them all to the kitchen and stands in front of the counter, eyes sparkling with excitement and pride.

The Uchiha regard the bento on display with matching smiles – even Fugaku’s mouth twitches upwards – and Sakura pulls a stool over to stand on.

“Okay, so this one is Mikoto-san’s.” Sakura says bossily, sliding the bento over to the older woman. “I didn’t know what you liked, so I asked my mother, but she didn’t know either, so I asked my – ”

“Okay, Sakura, I think they get the point.” Sakura’s mother says, amused.

“It’s full of healthy things because all grown-ups like healthy things.” Sakura says knowledgeably.

Mikoto smiles warmly. “May I open it now, please, Sakura-chan?”

“Of course!”

Mikoto’s chakra sparkles with happiness at the sight of the opened bento. Sakura filled the edges with leafy greens and other gross things Sakura didn’t personally like, but the star of the show was the onigiri she had shaped herself. It has cat ears.

“Oh, thank you so much, Sakura-chan.” Mikoto says appreciatively.

“Okaa-san helped.” Sakura says bashfully, cheeks flushing. “This one’s yours, Fugaku-san!”

Fugaku gives a proper smile as he opens his, “Thank you, Sakura. This was quite thoughtful of you.”

“And these are for Sasuke and Itachi-san.” Sakura pushes the last two forward, a little flutter of nerves in her stomach.

Sasuke looks up at his mother for permission, who scrunches her nose up at him and then laughs, nodding. Sasuke leaps at the bento, tearing the ribbon off and opening it in one fell swoop. His eyes widen. Sakura filled his bento with okaka onigiri with sliced tomatoes arranged to look like flowers.

“It’s all my favourites!” Sasuke marvels.

“I might have asked Mikoto-san…” Sakura mumbles, stretching her leg to toe at the floor awkwardly, nearly slipping off the stool.
Sasuke gifts her with a bright grin, his cheeks pink. “Thank you, Sakura!”

Sakura flaps her hand shyly, “That’s okay…”

“My turn.” Itachi announces cheerfully, smiling at Sasuke’s pout. He ruffles his little brother’s hair, and picks up his bento.

“Oh.” He says, his expression shuttering at the sight of the lunch she made specially for him. Onigiri with cabbage and seaweed, made to look like a smiling face. It has a separate section of dango for dessert, since she knows he likes sweets so much. It had been a huge struggle not to eat the dango herself.

_Doesn’t he like it?_ Sakura thinks, biting her lip.

_Ignore his face, read his chakra_, Kagami suggests.

He was… touched. Disbelieving and confused, but very moved by her present. Sakura’s cheeks flush darkly.

“Thank you very much, Sakura-san.” Itachi says, his eyes crinkling upwards from his wide smile. He looks so tender and fond that she has to cover her burning cheeks with her hands, averting her gaze to the floor.

“You’re welcome.” She squeaks, overwhelmed. No one ever warned her that giving gifts could be so embarrassing.

“Would it be possible to adjourn to the living room?” Fugaku asks Sakura’s mother, raising his eyebrows meaningfully.

“Of course.” Sakura’s mother says, something furtively merry in her chakra. Sakura tilts her head at her, confused, but her mother just chivvies her along with a hand at her back. Sakura resists the urge to cringe away from even that light touch. Her new scar is very sensitive. Just moving her arms drags the fabric of her dress across the wound, an almost unbearable sensation.

Just as they leave the kitchen, they hear the front door open and Sakura’s father sing out, “I got cake!”

Sakura grins. He must have found an open store after all.

Sasuke freezes, then bolts.

The rest of them follow, concerned, as Sasuke charges towards Kizashi. He throws himself at the older man, suddenly sobbing.

“I thought you might have got sick again!” Sasuke weeps. “I saw Sakura but not you so I wasn’t sure if you were really okay!”

Kizashi looks comically terrified for a moment, confronted with a lapful of crying child, then his face softens and he pats Sasuke’s back. “It’s okay. I’m not going to get that sick ever again. I’m going for regular check-ups at the hospital, so they would notice if something’s wrong well before anything happens to me. Don’t worry.”

Sakura feels a foreign twinge of sadness and realises it’s not her own. She looks around, trying to pinpoint the origin of the feeling. Beyond Fugaku’s stoic face, his chakra is faintly wistful and dejected. He is gazing at Sasuke.
Oh, Sakura thinks, *he probably never hugs his kids.*

Well, time to change that.

Sakura waves to get his attention. Fugaku blinks down at her. She points at the floor with an expectant look. Fugaku obligingly bends down. He’s not quite low enough for what Sakura had planned, but she does it anyway.

She throws her arms around Fugaku’s neck, feeling him immediately tense beneath her. “It’s nice to see you, Fugaku-san!” She tells him brightly, surprised to find that she really does mean it. “Now you’re supposed to hug me back.” She whispers in case he doesn’t know.

Fugaku’s chakra ripples in mirth. He pats her back and goes to withdraw almost immediately, but something stays his hand. His chakra darkens like a storm cloud at once.

Sakura feels icy terror in her veins. Can he feel the raised scar tissue through her dress?

“I’ll have to leave you to supervise, Mikoto-san.” Sakura’s mother says, walking around Fugaku, Sakura dangling from his neck. “I’m off to get Sakura’s present.”

Sakura drops to the floor immediately. “My what? Oh. Oh, I get presents, too, don’t I?”

“So of course!” Sasuke says. “Why wouldn’t you?”

Sakura shrugs, a little embarrassed. She’d got a little wrapped up in making sure everyone’s presents were perfect for them, so she must have forgot to get excited about her own.

*Onee-chan, I didn’t forget you. We’re going to have dumplings tonight, a present for me and you,* Sakura thinks.

Kagami just laughs softly, sending a wave of amusement Sakura’s way.

“I better get this cake to the kitchen before Sasu-chan swipes it.” Sakura’s father says cheerfully, gently extricating himself from Sasuke’s grip.

The boy makes a face. “I hate sweets.”

“Sasuke…” Fugaku says reproachfully.

“Good thing you’ve got a bento full of things you love instead!” Sakura points out. Sasuke grins at her.

Sakura’s father returns from the kitchen and waves them all into the living room, his chakra gleefully devious, like he knows a secret.

Sakura sits on the sofa. Sasuke doesn’t hesitate to join her. Mikoto and Fugaku take the other sofa while Sakura’s father gladly sinks into his favourite armchair. Itachi hovers for a moment, eyes darting around the room uncertainly.

“Sit here, Itachi-san!” Sakura insists, patting the space next to her.

Itachi offers her a shy smile and sits gingerly on her left, boxing her in between the two Uchiha sons. Fugaku is pleased with himself for some reason. Sakura gives him a suspicious look that he doesn’t deign to notice.

“I think it’s time.” Mikoto says, hands folded demurely in her lap. Fugaku and Sakura’s father nod.
Mikoto takes out small scroll and unrolls it on the floor. Sakura flinches, images of her double lying dead on the floor filling her mind. Kagami gently pushes the memory aside and sharpens her focus on what’s going on in front of her in the here and now.

A spike of chakra, a puff of smoke, and –

Sakura gasps.

A pile of presents appears in the middle of the room.

Sakura flails, narrowly missing hitting Sasuke in the face. “Oh, wow! Who are they for?”

“Well, we opened our presents earlier at home.” Mikoto says. “So, I suppose they must be all yours, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura’s mouth falls open. “All for me?”

“That one’s from me,” Sasuke points eagerly, “Open that one first!”

“All right!” Sakura chirps, hopping up off the sofa and bounding over to the presents. She seizes the one Sasuke pointed to and looks to her father for permission. He laughs and nods, shifting in his seat to get a better look. She unwraps the present and finds a thin book titled *The Dog and the Blossom*.

She looks up at Sasuke from her position on the floor, her eyes alight with joy. His little face is radiating smugness.

“Thank you, Sasuke!” Sakura squeals, then rushes over to the sofa to squeeze him in a big hug. He grumbles and pushes her away, but his chakra is happy.

She picks up another present, small and soft. Maybe clothes? Or a toy?

Itachi smiles at her, “That’s from me, Sakura-san. I hope you like it.”

She opens it carefully, pulling a single red ribbon out of the paper. She looks at it, puzzled, and absently touches the ribbon already tying her hair back.

“It will be useful later.” Itachi says, a corner of his mouth rising in a smirk he can’t seem to supress. By the feel of everyone else’s chakra, Sakura’s missing out on a very funny joke.

She pouts, but thanks him sincerely enough, giving him a hug and tying the new ribbon to her wrist. It looks pretty, but she’s still confused. How could a ribbon be useful?

“This one is from Mikoto and I.” Fugaku says, holding out a large present. The lines of his face seem less deep than normal. There’s a quiet kind of peace about him.

Sakura takes the present and goes to shake it to see if it jingles. Mikoto laughs and taps her hands, tutting, “I don’t think so! Open it now if you’re curious!”

Sakura slowly tears the wrapping off, already having a vague idea of what might be inside based on its shape and weight. A brand-new kimono settles in her lap amidst shreds of paper, muted pink with white flowers, its hem and obi a matching sage green. The belt itself is much bigger than she would have expected, with a detailed filigree pattern.

“For the New Year’s Festival.” Mikoto clarifies, smiling at the awed expression on Sakura’s face. It looks and feels like the most expensive outfit she’ll ever wear.
“I’m going to look pretty.” Sakura murmurs, astonished. How could she not, in a kimono as beautiful as this? She’s only ever worn a little yukata with an already tied obi.

“Of course you will!” Mikoto laughs, tweaking a lock of Sakura’s hair.

Sakura screws up her face, sticking her jaw out. She’s not going to cry. Not today. She’s not even sad, she’s just so happy that it’s trying to burst out of her.

“Thank you very much.” Sakura says sincerely, feeling warm and light, as if she might start to float from happiness.

“You are very welcome.” Fugaku says. “We’ve already discussed this with your parents, but we were hoping you would all spend the New Year with our family. Nothing would bring me more pleasure.”

By the feel of their chakra, Itachi and Sasuke agree.

“Yes, please.” Sakura says, feeling a little shy. She doesn’t do well with too much attention, and at the moment everyone is pouring it on her.

The front door opens. They all turn to look, as if they can see through the living room wall. There’s an audible giggle, then a loud shushing sound.

“Sakura, your present is here! We couldn’t get it delivered, I had to collect it. I hope you don’t mind the wait!” Her mother calls.

“More presents?!” Sakura blurts out.

“This one’s from your mother and I.” Her father says warmly, getting up out of his chair and moving to the door. “You want to come see?”

“Yes!” Sakura yells, forgetting her manners. She flaps her hands, “Sorry, sorry. Yes, I’m coming.”

Sakura opens the door, peering out into the hall, and squeals shrilly, bouncing up and down on the spot.

“Naruto!” She cries out, rushing over to him.

He’s standing beside her mother, red-cheeked and beaming, wearing a new coat and boots. Snow is melting on the welcome mat.

He’s stuffed his bare hands in his pockets, but he takes them out now and reaches out to her, “Sakura-nee! I came for the Rinne Festival! Your mum said I could stay for a sleepover!”

“You’re my present!” Sakura says, delighted, “Oh, we’re going to have so much fun, I promise!”

She and Naruto hug for a long time. Sakura closes her eyes and imagines a time in which this is normal, just how she greets Naruto whenever he comes home.

“Okay, but first I’ve gotta give you my present!” Naruto grins, blue eyes sparkling. “C’mon, you’re gonna love it!”

“Go put your winter coat on, Sakura, and your big boots.” Her mother says, smiling fondly down at them both. “You’ve got a trip to go on.”

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Naruto had untied the ribbon from her wrist and threaded it through her hair, covering her eyes as a makeshift blindfold.

So that’s what Itachi-san meant by ‘it will be useful later,’ Sakura thinks, stumbling a little in the snow, he must have known what Naruto planned. I wish I knew. Do you have any idea, Onee-chan?

Ritual suicide? Kagami responds dryly. I have no idea. I can’t see either. Try listening.

But Naruto was chattering constantly, his chakra bubbling with excitement, so Sakura couldn’t quite catch any identifiable sounds besides the crunching of snow underfoot and the faint whistle of the wind.

“We’re here!” Naruto yells, right next to her ear. She winces and struggles to gain her bearings. Where’s here?

Little hands gently brush her face and the ribbon falls away. Sakura blinks, Naruto’s beaming face filling her vision. He moves aside and –

They’re in the park, the same place they always meet.

Sakura looks up at the cherry tree, the one she saw Kakashi sleeping in, and gasps loudly.

A treehouse!

It’s a little crooked and ramshackle, but it’s solid and fixed into place, a tiny house in the middle of the cherry tree.

Tears sting her eyes.

Naruto’s grin is lopsided, his chakra a little uncertain. “Do you like it, Sakura-nee?” She can see his hands now. They weren’t hidden in his pockets because of the cold. There’s a bunch of fading marks, scrapes and bruises on his skin.

He made them a home.

Sakura bursts into tears and flies at him, picking him up and whirling him around in one breathless moment of pure joy.

Naruto shouts in delight, laughing his head off as she swings him.

“Thank you, Naruto.” Sakura murmurs against his sunshine-gold hair, holding him tight.

“No, thank you, Sakura-nee.” He says, uncharacteristically serious. “You stood up for me. You were my first ever friend. You ate ramen with me. You never shouted or told me to leave you alone. You… you like hanging out with me. You really do. A-and… you gave me a family. That’s more than I ever thought I’d get. And I know you want to get us a big house and a dog and a pond with some fish. I do too. But don’t forget, I don’t need a house, because you’re my home.”

Sakura clutches Naruto. Inside her mind, a weight is lifting from Kagami’s crippled shoulders.

Sakura and Naruto embrace at the base of their treehouse for a long time, and nothing comes along to spoil it, not a heart-breaking dream, a nasty old man or a Mask bent on keeping them apart.

“You’re my home, too.”

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After she and Naruto got back home, Itachi and Naruto swapped places, Naruto being ushered inside to enjoy his first mug of Hot Kitty Cocoa, while Itachi grabbed a bag and Sakura’s hand and suddenly they were off again.

Sakura is happy she’s not blindfolded this time, though it might have been useful for hiding her red, watery eyes. Itachi had frowned at the sight of them, his hand twitching towards her face as if wanting to wipe away tears that had already fallen.

“Where are we going?” Sakura asks. They’ve barely made it down her street. She’s been having fun sliding as much as she wants on the frost-slick ground and icy puddles, Itachi’s grip on her hand unbreakable and his footing solid. She knows he won’t let her fall.

“Not far. I didn’t want to give this to you in front of everyone.” Itachi admits, his face cool and calm, but his chakra is fizzing with nerves. He holds out a large bag.

“But you gave me this ribbon!” Sakura protests, holding up her wrist as proof.

“That was for Naruto’s surprise, he worked very hard on it and he didn’t want it to be spoiled for you. Your mother says she and the rest of your friends have been having a hard time keeping you from going to the park during the treehouse’s construction.”

“Oh yeah…” Sakura frowns, all the times in which Ino had brushed off an invitation to play in the park suddenly coming to mind. “Wait, everyone knew?”

“All of us Monsters.” Itachi says with a tiny, hesitant smile, looking up through his thick lashes. “I found the perfect gift – well, I think it’s perfect – I hope, um, please just take it.”

Sakura giggles, taking the bag to put him out of his misery. She peeks inside and her breath catches. It’s a toy rabbit, around the same size as Mr Minty. It’s cream-coloured and soft, with lilac flowers embroidering its paws and tail. She’s got big brown eyes.

“I thought you could call it, well, um, Miss Magnolia, or something – whatever you want, that is if you even like it at all, it was probably a terrible idea – ”

Sakura throws her arms around Itachi, the bag with Miss Magnolia in it hitting him squarely in the back. “She’s perfect! Itachi-san – ”

“You don’t use any honorifics with Sasuke.” Itachi points out, sounding nervous. “We’re… we’re friends, aren’t we? You call Shisui, ‘Shisui-kun.’ Would you mind… doing the same for me?”

Sakura smiles, burying her face in his chest. She called him Itachi-san at first as a deliberate attempt to distance herself from him, so convinced that he was bad and a threat to Kakashi. Shisui had had to talk her into befriending him in the first place, and now he was an honorary Monster, learning to be good instead of great.

“Thank you, Itachi.” Sakura says softly.

“O-oh. Um. You’re welcome… Sakura.”

By the time they’re let back in the house, the party is in full swing. Sakura’s father is passing round the sugar-free cake, telling everyone it’s disgusting and they shouldn’t have any – then hiding in a corner with three slices all to himself – and Sakura’s mother is pouring little drinks of every possible colour. The ones Sakura’s allowed to have are all in paper cups.
Itachi passes on a brightly-coloured glass of something that smells strong, and takes a heart-patterned cup of juice, smiling to himself on the sofa. Sasuke is curled up next to him, reading the book he got for Sakura. Their chakra is coiled together, softly burning like embers.

Fugaku and Mikoto have been forced into trying Sakura’s father’s cooking, and they’re being very polite, eating odd-looking snacks off paper plates without a hint of the discomfort Sakura knows they’re feeling.

Naruto is sat with Sakura’s mother, watching her make little marshmallows look like cats. He’s utterly entranced.

Kabuto is the latest guest to arrive. He gave Sakura a collection of medical herbs with a hand-written note on what each one was and what they were used for. He doesn’t seem in any way affected by whatever happened with Shisui. Sakura gave him the trivia book she bought for him ages ago, hoping he didn’t already have it. The pleased surprise in his chakra told her he didn’t.

“There’s a strange man here.” Sakura’s father announces cheerfully, leading a slouching Kakashi into the room.

Kakashi looks as though he’d dearly love to bury his face in a book when the room’s occupants all look up to stare at his arrival.

“Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura chirps, rushing over to her little table and grabbing a specific piece of paper. “I’ve got a present for you!”

Kakashi accepts her drawing of the two of them with twenty dogs, his visible eye curving up in a smile. “Thanks, kid. I’ve got something for you, too.”

To Sakura’s ecstatic delight, Kakashi gives her a stuffed toy that looks exactly like Pakkun, grumpy expression and everything. Sakura coos over it, squishing its face, and Kakashi passes her something else.

“Here’s a card. Pakkun signed it. He said to tell you not to forget to take care of yourself and make sure you eat all your dinner, or you’ll never get bigger.” Kakashi says, proffering a store-bought card with an inky pawprint splattered inside.

Sakura clutches her presents, beaming. “Thank you! Please stay for the party, Kakashi-sensei! We’ve got food and drink and we’re going to tell stories soon!”

Kakashi visibly wavers, glancing at the door, and Sakura seizes his arm, dragging him over to the empty sofa. He seems to catch sight of something in the kitchen that arrests his attention. Sakura can’t see anything but Naruto, standing on a stool and carefully piping icing at Sakura’s mother’s instruction.

Kakashi sits down, holding the picture she gave him as if it was made of glass instead of paper. His chakra says he’s feeling a little overwhelmed, so Sakura gives him a bright smile and doesn’t push a hug onto him.

Sakura puts her Pakkun toy next to Miss Magnolia on the table, arranging them to sit nicely together. Miss Magnolia dwarfs the little dog.

Sakura swirls around the room in her party dress, chatting with each guest and checking up on Naruto from time to time. He seems content to help her parents cook and prepare food. He’s sitting on the counter, a little cupcake in his hands, but his focus is squarely on Sakura’s mother as she decorates the rest. He’s holding the cupcake like it’s buried treasure he found all by himself, not a
homemade treat made just for him. Sakura can’t help but worry about him, even though his chakra is effervescently joyful.

“So you can’t have any sweets at all, Sakura’s dad?” Naruto asks pityingly, his eyes big and horrified.

Her father just laughs. “I can, but only very special ones. My body’s too much for normal sweets, they can’t handle me. And you can call me Kizashi, okay?”

Naruto goes bright red and shakes his head roughly.

“So think about it. Maybe later, yeah?” Sakura’s father says kindly, ruffling Naruto’s hair.

Naruto looks as if he’s been handed the world’s best gift, his mouth gaping open. He takes a tentative bite of his cupcake and laughs, the sound a little watery. “It’s sweet!” He announces.

“Oh, really? Oh dear, that was the one with poison in. It wasn’t supposed to taste good.” Sakura’s father says, mock-mournfully.

Naruto snorts, crumbs going everywhere.

Sakura smiles, leaning against the wall. Whatever happens tomorrow, today she has Naruto where he belongs, safe at home, happy with his family. Maybe she doesn’t need to worry so much about their future together. She knows she’s going to take care of him, no matter what. That’s all there is to it.

Sakura feels a faint flicker of chakra brushing against her awareness. It passes by like lightning, a brief flash that knocks the breath from her.

Shisui.

*He’s outside*, Kagami informs her, *waiting by the door. Possibly an ambush.*

*So he flared his chakra to alert me to his presence?* Sakura thinks, exasperated.

*Bait,* Kagami says stubbornly, then pauses. *Okay, he’s probably not here for that. But be on your guard anyway.*

Sakura nods to herself. She looks up and meets Itachi’s eyes, seeing the spark of awareness in them. He must have felt Shisui’s arrival too. She gives him a little smile and slips off towards the door, moving as quietly as she can. She makes sure to grab Shisui’s present on the way, having kept it on her little table for at least a week.

If Shisui didn’t just knock on the front door, he must have a good reason. Maybe he didn’t want to encounter Kabuto? Though Sakura hadn’t told him he was coming to the party, since she hadn’t really known until the day itself.

Still, if Shisui doesn’t want to advertise his presence, she better leave as silently as possible.

She slithers out through the barely-open front door, squeezing through the gap she’s made for herself, then very gently closes it, holding her breath as it clicks shut.

“Hi, Firefly.” Shisui says from behind her. He’s wearing a thin coat and a knitted indigo scarf, well-worn and faded with age.

She doesn’t jump this time, just rolls her eyes and blows out a harried breath. “What’s wrong, Shisui-kun? Don’t you want to come in?”
Shisui looks wired. He grins, too many teeth showing, and shifts from one foot to the next. He turns around and offers her his back. “Climb aboard, Firefly. I want to take you somewhere.”

“If you built me a treehouse, Naruto beat you to it.” Sakura remarks, delicately climbing onto Shisui, the ruffles of her dress getting in the way.

“Carpentry isn’t my strong suit.” Shisui shrugs, nearly dislodging her with the simple movement. “I’m more of a delegator.”

“It’s okay if you didn’t get me anything.” Sakura says earnestly. “I got you this, see?”

She shows him the bauble. It’s silver and simple in design, but if you add a spark of chakra, little spots of light start to glow from within and the ornament glitters bright white, like fireflies in the snow, and then changes to suit your chakra.

Shisui takes it, instinctively channelling his chakra through it. They both watch the fireflies dance in silence.

“You can store chakra in it for as long as you want.” Sakura says, anxious to point out the practical elements too, in case he thinks it’s silly and childish. “And it goes a different colour based on your chakra type.”

“What colour did you get?” Shisui asks, still examining the bauble as if it contains the secrets of the universe.

“Okaa-san said it was aqua and amber, but I thought it was more like blue and brown.”

Shisui’s fireflies are red-gold, the bauble turning copper at his touch. “Thank you, Firefly.” He says softly. “This is the nicest gift I’ve ever got. I’ll treasure it.”

Sakura rests her forehead against the back of his neck, cheeks burning in embarrassment. She’s very glad he likes it, but she kind of wants to wriggle out of her skin after all the lovely compliments she’s been hit with today. His scarf functions as a sort of makeshift pillow for her. It’s very soft and it smells a bit like smoke.

The sky is full of white, fluffy clouds, not a patch of blue in sight. It starts to snow again, big fat flakes drifting lazily down. Sakura raises her face and the snow kisses her cheeks.

“What was your favourite gift?” Shisui asks.

“Seeing everyone today. I’m going to see the rest of the Monsters tomorrow, and Naruto’s going to sleep over tonight. It’s perfect. Especially since I got to see you, too.”

“I’m glad. I hope my present makes your day even better.” He says slyly.

Then there’s a tugging sensation and the world blurs around them.

Sakura blinks, looking round.

She’s not sure where they are. There’s nothing in sight that could function as a present for her. Unless he’s bought her a house inside a compound? She hopes not. The birthday money from her grandmother has almost run out after she bought all her friends presents for the festival. She’s not sure how much you have to pay to keep houses.

Shisui flares his chakra again, not bothering to knock at the door.
Someone answers quickly enough that Sakura suspects they were waiting for them. Kagami is agitated by this unexpected turn of events, though she’s keeping quiet and trusting Sakura to deal with the situation herself.

The person who answers the door has wild, spiky hair and red markings on their face. Sakura stares, fascinated.

“This the girl?” The woman asks gruffly, jerking her head at Sakura.

“Yep. Can we come in?”

“Sure, if you don’t step on anything and keep your hands to yourself. Some of the guys like to bite first, ask questions later.”

“Well, if anyone bites Shisui-kun, I will bite them right back.” Sakura says, affronted.

The woman cackles, revealing gleaming white fangs. Sakura gapes.

“Yeah, she’ll do just fine.” The woman says. “I’m Inuzuka Tsume, kid. Who’re you?”

“My name is Haruno Sakura and – ”

“We’re here for her very special surprise present.” Shisui says. “Is it ready?”

“That depends on them and the girl.” Tsume says cryptically. “This could end in tears, you know.”

“It won’t.” Shisui says, with quiet confidence.

Tsume leads them past a bunch of doors, one of which briefly opens to reveal a child of Sakura’s age. He winks at her, showing off his fangs in a big grin. She gazes back as Shisui carries her away.

Am I going to get eaten, Onee-chan? She asks, only half-joking.

Nope. I’ve figured out exactly what you’re going to get, Kagami says, uncharacteristically pleased.

What?

I’m not telling you. Wait and see.

Sakura fumes, wishing she had doggy fangs of her own. She would bite everyone who kept secrets and made everything a surprise.

“Here we are.” Tsume says, stopping at a door that is pretty much identical to the rest. “Now, Sakura. Remember that you aren’t picking them, they’re picking you. If nobody fits you, you won’t get one. That’s nothing to be ashamed of. You can come by another time and try again. It’s better for you to be matched with one that suits you instead of trying to force a bond. It doesn’t always happen the first time you try, so don’t get too upset if it doesn’t. Are you ready?”

“For what?” Sakura is terrified. What does she have to pick? What does it mean to force a bond with whatever ‘it’ is?

“Ah, you’ll see.” Shisui tips her off his back gently, letting her slide down to the floor. “Just go in and wait for one to come to you.”

Was she going to have to fight something?
Sakura steels herself. Okay. She can do this. She clenches her fists and gets ready.

Tsume laughs, then unlocks the door, pushing her inside without any ceremony or time to prepare.

Sakura wobbles, nearly falling into the room, and the door closes behind her.

She looks up and sees –

**Puppies.**

She covers her mouth to muffle the instinctive squeal, remembering what Pakkun said about puppy hearing being very good.

“Hello!” She whispers, wide eyes scanning the room. There’s puppies everywhere. They’re all bundled together in piles, some yawning, others collapsed on the floor, boneless.

“Babies.” She murmurs, clutching her face. “So many babies.”

*Yeah, and one of them might pick you,* Kagami says.

*What?!!*

*You heard what they said. If you’re meant to have one of these dogs, they’ll come to you. You’ll know if it happens.*

Sakura’s knees stop working and she plunges to the floor, barely catching herself in time to stop herself faceplanting for the second time that day. The puppies regard her with interested eyes.

*I get to have one?* She says breathlessly, *Really?*

*If one chooses you, yeah.*

Sakura buries her face in her hands. The idea of almost getting a dog but not being good enough is too much to bear. What if none of them like her and Tsume and Shisui are disappointed? Would it mean something bad about her if she didn’t get picked?

A little yip makes her look up.

A black and tan puppy is sitting in front of her.

Sakura gazes at it, hardly daring to breathe. “Hi.”

The puppy’s tail wags. It seems to grin at her, its tongue flopping out of its mouth.

“Do you like me?” Sakura asks. The tail wags furiously. “Do you want to come home with me? I would pet you all the time and give you treats, but not so many that you got fat because that’s bad for dogs. I would walk you all the time and read you bedtime stories. You could sleep in my bed and if we didn’t fit once you got bigger, I could just sleep on the floor. Would you like that?”

The puppy yawns, then crawls into her lap. Sakura freezes. What does that mean?

*Onee-chan?* She asks, frantic.

*I have no idea what this means. It could just be a friendly dog, I guess?*
her with big blue eyes.

“Hello.” Sakura says softly. “Do you like me, too?”

The dog tries to bark, a high-pitched squeal escaping it. It climbs on top of the black and tan pup, wriggling to make room.

Two? Kagami says, shocked. Two picked you?

Maybe one’s for you? Sakura suggests.

Kagami falls into stunned silence at the thought.

The door creaks open quietly behind her.

Tsume lets out a quiet oath. “I don’t believe it.”


“This hardly ever happens with outsiders.” Tsume says, beginning to grin. “She’s been chosen by two dogs.”

“Whoa! You go, Firefly!”

“Are… are they really mine?” Sakura asks, not quite daring to believe it. If Tsume says no, she’ll be crushed.

Tsume’s grin softens to a smile. “Of course. You all chose each other. Congratulations.”

Sakura’s tears splash down. The silver pup whines and noses at her cheeks, wiping them. The black and tan pup rolls over in her lap and gently takes a ruffle from Sakura’s dress between its teeth, pulling ever so slightly.

Shisui comes into view, beaming. “I knew you could do it. But, well, I asked Itachi to get you just one ribbon, so…”

Sakura looks at the ribbon tied around her wrist. “This was from you?”

“Well, I mean he paid for it, and it was supposed to be for Sunshine’s tree thing, so I maybe piggybacked on that idea.” Shisui admits shamelessly. “But yeah, I figured you could have it as a collar for your pup, so you’d match. I didn’t expect you to get two.”

Sakura looks down at the dogs. “Oh dear.”

Shisui pulls his scarf off and drapes it over her head. “Use this. It’ll be too big now, but it’d make a good neckerchief for the grey one when it’s bigger. You could fit a hitae-ate on it.”

Sakura sniffs, wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, and ties the ribbon around the black puppy’s neck. She takes Shisui’s scarf and carefully winds it around the silver puppy as a coat. It looks nice and warm. She doesn’t know how, but she can tell both dogs are happy with their new clothes.

“Thank you so much, Shisui-kun.” Sakura sobs. “I – I’m so happy I could burst!”

Shisui brushes a barely-there kiss against her forehead. “Good.”
EVERY TIME YOU GUYS WERE LIKE ‘SAKURA NEEDS TO GET A DOG RIGHT NOW’ I KEPT GIGGLING TO MYSELF THINKING SAKURA’S GONNA GET TWO DOGS AND NOBODY KNOWS BUT ME

Hello!

I hope you all enjoyed this extra-specially-long chapter!

Shisui has PLANS… about dogs. STEAL ALL THE DOGS AND GIVE THEM TO SAKURA now that’s a cause I’d donate to

Apparently Inuzuka doggies are NOT the same as Kakashi’s dogs. They can’t talk, but their ‘owner’ can understand them.

The Harunos invited the Uchiha over for the day because they figured the poor thing’s would be stuck hanging out with some fuddy duddy relatives, eating boring health food and discussing politics.

I updated Kagami and Sakura’s playlists and made a BRAND NEW Shisui playlist that I spent way too much time on!

Shisui: https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/53b6V0gaotNruimxvGXiz8

Sakura: https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/1Q4p7nltpy2ipPi8ftxae

Kagami: https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/5bB5zsh5TSbskrftO7Ntfj

So, Kabuto has a weird backstory in canon tbh. As far as I know, he joined ROOT as a kiddywink (not by choice, because Danzo’s a big bag of dicks) and then was sent on a suicide mission that led to him killing his parental figure without knowing it was her, devastating him. Orochimaru saved him from that mission and recruited him (Oro was also in ROOT at the time) and they both left ROOT. Kabuto then encountered Sasori, who turned him into a sleeper agent against his will. Orochimaru recognised the signs of sleeper-agent-stuff and removed it, then used Kabuto as a double agent against Sasori. All the while Kabuto was a spy in Konoha, working for Oto.

So basically I had Shisui brainwash him because the boy’s a magnet for it anyway. At this point in the canon timeline, Kabuto is ROOT, but he hasn’t met Orochimaru yet.

Quick poll for fun: Operation NAME SAKURA’S DOGS IS A GO!

Please suggest some names for Sakura’s new doggy friends! One’s a boy, one’s a girl :D The boy is calm and protective, the girl is playful and rambunctious. He’s silver-white, she’s black and tan. They look like Shiba Inus. I’d prefer Japanese names, so they don’t stand out too much in the setting of the story.

(Sakura. Saw. MANY DOOOOOOOOOOOOGS!!!!)
Chapter 19

Tsume gives Shisui a bag full of supplies and a list of instructions while Sakura pets all the dogs in the room. They look like they’re from the same litter, since most of them are black and tan. Her silver puppy stands out, his fur gleaming like moonlight on marble.

What should I call them, Onee-chan?

Hmm… Kagami tilts her head, a boy and a girl…

I still think one of them is yours, Sakura says, kissing the black one on the nose. This one feels like mine. She came to me first.

Kagami feels a little like Sakura did when she was worrying about not getting picked. You and I are the same person, it wouldn’t make sense if one dog picked you and the other picked me… how would it even know about me?

He, Sakura corrects, picking the silver puppy up and looking into its pale blue eyes. It feels like it’s looking past her. Kagami almost reaches out as if to touch it, but scowls at herself, grabbing onto her chains instead.

He’s a boy and he loves you, Sakura says knowingly, you can tell, right?

Kagami grits her teeth and looks away.

Kagami once said that she had wanted a sister, too, just like Sakura. She must have wanted a dog just as badly as Sakura did. She was just too afraid to have something nice in case she lost it. Sakura could tell the puppy wouldn’t get lost. He yawns, a little squeak emerging. Kagami bites her lip.

He says he’s yours, Onee-chan. So give him a name. Make it a good one!

I… Kakashi-sensei told me about his father, once. He was a great man who put his teammates above the mission and lost his good name for it. I… I would like to honour him, somehow. His name was Sakumo. But, no, it’s a dumb idea, people would wonder how you knew and they’d be suspicious, I – I –

Sakumo, huh. Like Sakura! But with a… Ooh! Momo! His name could be Sakumo, but I’d call him Momo and no one would know! What do you think? Sakura lifts the puppy into the air, watching his ears flap up and down.

Kagami gives a quiet laugh, well… maybe, Sacchan. That doesn’t sound too bad.

“Your name is Haruno Momo.” Sakura tells him seriously. But it’s really Haruno Sakumo, she thinks, looking intensely into his eyes to transmit the message. The pup yips as if in agreement.

“Yay! Shisui-kun, this one’s called Momo!” Sakura says triumphantly, cuddling him against her cheek.

Shisui grins at her, “Cute. A little girly, don’t you think?”

Momo snorts.

The black and tan puppy rolls over, tail wagging as if saying don’t forget about me!
Sakura giggles, rubbing her belly. *What about her, Onee-chan?*

*Oh no, this is your puppy. You get to name her,* Kagami smiles, a rare, unburdened smile. Sakura is heartened by it and pats the puppy’s tummy.

*What do you think, puppy?* Sakura looks into her amber eyes, seeing a spark of mischief in them, *you like playing and you’re very pretty. You deserve a pretty name. And if Onee-chan named hers after a secret hero… I can too. Kagami and Sakumo.*

Kagami draws in a sharp breath, *Sacchan, I’m no hero… You know what I’ve done.*

*You saved me,* Sakura says solemnly, *in the hospital. You woke me up. And without you, we couldn’t have saved Otou-san. I’m sorry, Onee-chan, but you’re a hero whether you want to be or not.*

*So, Kagami in secret…*

“*Misa for short!*” Sakura says excitedly. Misa barks, rolling over. “*Misa and Momo! Do you like your names?*”

Sakumo licks her hand. Misa wags her tail so hard her body wiggles back and forth.

“I named them!” Sakura announces, picking both dogs up. She struggles to keep them steady, Misa wriggling with enthusiasm and Sakumo climbing up to peek over her shoulder.

“Well done,” Tsume says, flashing her fangs in a big grin, “So, are you prepared to be responsible for two dogs? They’re like babies at this age, you know. They’re nine weeks old, just about ready to leave their mother. You’re not replacing her. The three of you will be equals in the pack, though you’ll obviously get the final say. It’ll be close to a partnership.”

“I can do it. What’s the pack?”

“You, the dogs, your family. Anyone close to you who carries your scent. Someone you protect, or they protect you.”

“Oh.” Sakura looks furtively at Shisui, then holds Misa up a little higher, pointing her nose in his direction. Misa lets out a negative-sounding bark and Sakura deflates. “*Shisui-kun, you don’t smell enough like me! How are the doggies supposed to know you’re good?*”

Shisui looks bewildered. “Uh, they… does it matter?”

“Of course it matters! You’re in my pack, ‘cause I look after you and you look after me! Tsume-san, how do I make Shisui-kun smell like me?”

Tsume’s chakra says she’s very, very amused by all this. “You scent-mark him. You aren’t exactly built like a dog, so… you’re not gonna pee on him. I hope.”

Sakura rears back, clutching her dogs protectively. “*No!*”

“Then, proximity works, or just wearing each other’s clothes.”

“Momo’s already wearing Shisui-kun’s scarf. Hmm…” Sakura looks down at her party dress.

“I’m not wearing that.” Shisui says immediately, backing up a step.

“Okay, then, proximity!” Sakura says, carefully tucking a dog under each arm and heading for Shisui. He raises an eyebrow at her. “This should work!” She tells him, then looks up at him
Shisui sighs, then pulls her and the dogs into a hug. Misa immediately starts gnawing on his sleeve, but Sakumo just snuffles, adjusting himself to get comfortable.

“I’ve heard you know Hatake, kid,” Tsume says, a light of mischief in her aura, “Better not let him catch this one smelling like you.”

“Why not, Tsume-san?” Sakura says curiously, her face smushed against Shisui’s arm.

“The Hatake are pretty similar to the Inuzuka. A territorial bunch. What’s mine is mine, you know? And if you start scent-marking all your other little friends, well, he’ll be sure to feel left out…”

She’s messing with you, Kagami says, unimpressed, she’s hoping you’ll embarrass Kakashi-sensei by trying to scent-mark him.

“He won’t mind!” Sakura insists.

“I don’t care if he does.” Shisui huffs, suddenly ruffling Sakura’s hair violently as if trying to scrub his scent on. “He doesn’t scare me!”

“Sure.” Tsume’s grin only widens at his protestations. “Everyone knows that Kakashi’s soft as a kitten. Wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

Momo whines.

“Shisui-kun’s okay, don’t worry. Kakashi-sensei probably won’t eat him up.” Sakura reassures the puppy. She pulls away from Shisui’s grasp, tucking her puppies a little more securely in her arms. “Let’s go home! I can’t wait to show my parents that I have dogs now!”

Shisui laughs nervously, rubbing his neck, “Yeah… me neither.”

xxxxxxx

“I have one dog, I have two dogs,” Sakura sings, skipping all the way home, “You have one dog, we have two dogs! One for you, one for me, everyone gets a puppy!”

Shisui trails behind her, holding Sakumo. He’s petting him absently, looking deep in thought. Kagami told Sakura he probably didn’t get permission from her parents before getting the puppies, so they’re probably going to get mad at him. Sakura will stick up for him.

“I’m glad you’re so happy.” Shisui says, finally speaking up. Sakura looks back, surprised, and sees a warm, fond smile on his face. It matches his chakra, so Sakura smiles back. “I wanted to get you a dog sooner, but Tsume said she wouldn’t give any up until they were at least eight weeks old, and by then I figured I should just wait for the Rinne Festival. I kind of… wanted to give you the best present of the day.”

“Everyone got me the best presents,” Sakura says fairly, “I got to have Naruto over for a sleepover and he made us a house and Sasuke’s parents got me a kimono and – ”

“They did?” Shisui interjects, looking slightly constipated.

“Yeah, a really nice one. It was heavy. They said they wanted my family to come over to play during the New Year. I’m gonna wear it then and I’ll put glitter in my hair again.”

“That’s great.” Shisui says vaguely. “Great… If Fugaku tells you to sign anything, run like hell,
Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good girl. I wonder which one he wants you for? Can’t be the heir. He’s gonna get stuck with some hard-faced cousin for sure, to get the best offspring… but the spare? Sure, mix some new blood in the next generation, why not… Hmm… You’re not marrying Sasu-chan, not unless I magically forget what he did – uh, never mind, I was babbling.” Shisui almost forces a smile, his lips twitching, then he sighs.

He’s thinking almost as far ahead as we do, Kagami comments, unless he truly believes Fugaku plans to embroil you in a child bride plot. I’m glad I never got to meet him.

“What?” Sakura says out loud, stopping. Misa pushes her cold nose against Sakura’s chin.

“Huh? You okay, Firefly?”

Sacchan?

You never got to meet Fugaku-san? Sakura thinks, trembling.

Silence.

The clank of chains, a frustrated groan.

Onee-chan?

Sakura whirls around, her face set in determination. Shisui looks taken aback at the hard glint in her eye. “Shisui-kun, I think something’s going to happen to Fugaku-san!”

Kagami curses inaudibly, her throat working in agitation.

Shisui narrows his eyes. “Room of Doom, Firefly.”

Sakura shuts her mouth. But this is important! She wails internally, what if this is why Sasuke and Itachi go bad? Because they lose their dad? Just like –

Kagami flinches.

“Will this something happen soon?” Shisui asks quietly, after looking around the deserted snow-covered streets and apparently deciding it was safe to talk.

“I don’t… I don’t know.” Sakura says, frustrated. Kagami didn’t know Sasuke very well, she annoyed him up until they became genin together. “Definitely before I’m twelve.”

“Okay.” Shisui says flatly. “That gives us a window of eight years. We better act fast.”

“I’m nearly five!”

“Nearly eight years, then. Can you narrow it down at all?”

Sakura thinks hard. Kagami had thought Sasuke was dark and mysterious during The Academy, maybe that was after his dad died?

Onee-chan, can you help at all?
The seal lights up around Kagami’s mouth. She snarls, then locks eyes with Sakura. Light flares and she flinches, trying to step back from the sensations rocketing towards her until –

(Sakura turns Shikamaru over just in time to feel his chakra cut off. Dead. Just like Chouji. Just like Ino. Sakura feels a scream building up inside her. Is this a nightmare? It has to be. She can’t live in a world where her friends can be torn away so easily, so cruelly, so close to home. To help. Wasn’t she supposed to be done with being useless now? She feels oddly disconnected from herself. She looks up, vision blurring, and sees Sasuke. Watching her. “Where’s Naruto?” He asks. She does scream, then.)

“Firefly? Firefly!” Shisui shouts, holding her face in his hands. She stares back at him blearily, confused. Misa is gently nipping her fingers, the faint pain sharpening her focus.

“He kills Naruto, me, Ino –”

“Room of Doom!” Shisui says fiercely, tears in his eyes. “Not here. And he’s not going to kill you, he’s never going to touch you, do you hear me? If I have to sit on that little punk until he learns some manners, I will! I’ve got months to spare, I can do it!”

Sakura laughs shakily. “Thank you, Shisui-kun. We’re going to make things better, aren’t we? You already have, you know. I never dreamed about having dogs, before. And now I’ve got them. That’s a change you made. I’m going to save Hayate-kun and adopt Naruto and Tsunade-shishou. I know I can do it. If I have you to help, I can do anything.”

Shisui’s face crumples, pain stabs through his aura. “You know…” He clears his throat, voice breaking, “You know I might not be around forever, Firefly.”

Sakura gives him a fierce glare. “Yes, you will! Trust me! If you can promise me that Sasuke will never even hurt me, I can promise you that no matter what’s supposed to happen, I’ll keep you safe! You’re my friend! I don’t think we were even supposed to meet, you know? But I don’t care what was supposed to happen. If I had to do everything over, I’d still be your friend no matter what. Every change I make after that has to be good, because it started with you.”

Shisui’s smile is weak, but it’s real. “Thanks, Firefly. I’d like to change things for the better. I want to believe that Sunshine will one day be Hokage and we’ll be right there with him. That’s the goal, right?”

“Yes. Right now, he’s the Nobikage, but adults don’t care about that. They’re still really mean to him. When he’s Hokage, he can do more than just growl at them – they’ll actually listen to him. We can make that happen. You know, before I started dreaming, I only had one friend. Now I have a whole bunch! And dogs! I know the dreams only ever seem to bring bad news, but I’m a lot happier now than I was then. I think that’s a sign that we’ve already changed things for the better.”

Momo barks in agreement. Misa is asleep in Sakura’s arms, but she would probably agree too if she was listening.

Shisui ruffles her hair, a wide smile spreading across his face, “You’re going to change the world, one day. Now let’s go home so your parents can brutally murder me, okay?”

xxxxxxx

Itachi lets them into Sakura’s house, a strange, disconcerting sight. It felt bizarrely backwards, as if she’d opened her front door to another world.

He looks deeply unimpressed. “Shisui, again, really? I can’t keep covering for you whenever you
want to kidnap Sakura.”

“Ooh, what happened to Sakura-san?” Shisui says, delighted.

“You stole her, again, obviously.” Itachi says, completely missing the point.

“Hi, Itachi! Look what I’ve got!” Sakura holds up both dogs, applying a tiny bit of chakra to stop her arms from aching under their combined weight.

Itachi looks at the dogs, then at his cousin.

“You are a fool and I have no sympathy for you.” He says flatly, stepping aside to let them enter.

“I love you too.” Shisui grins.

“I’m ashamed to know you.” Itachi rolls his eyes.

“Don’t be mean to Shisui-kun.” Sakura frowns up at him. Itachi seems to wilt under her disappointed stare.

Shisui beams, pulling Sakura to his side and heading into the living room, not a single trace of fear or concern in his chakra anymore, even though they had been plaguing him ever since they left the Inuzuka compound.

“Otou-san, Okaa-san!” Sakura sings out as they enter the living room, “Look what Shisui-kun got me for the Rinne Festival!”

Sakura’s mother’s eyes narrow instantly, taking in the sight of a sleepy Misa curled around Sakumo.

“No.” She says promptly. “No dogs. No.”

“Honey…” Sakura’s father starts, but her mother jerks her hand up violently.

“What were you thinking, Shisui-san?” Sakura’s mother asks, aggrieved.

Shisui steps behind Sakura, twiddling his thumbs.

“We got them from the Inuzuka and Tsume-san said they picked me because we’re meant to be together.” Sakura says, making her eyes big and watery. Her mother scowls, powerless to resist.

“Well, we always said we’d have more kids if we could.” Sakura’s father points out, his tone reasonable. His arms are folded, his face carefully neutral, but his chakra is glistening with glee.

“They’re not kids, they’re dogs!” Sakura’s mother gives him an incredulous look. Her chakra rises defensively as she realises she’s alone in her argument.

“Exactly, they’re much easier to take care of!” Sakura’s father says triumphantly.

Shisui sidles off to a corner of the room, opening a window and wafting the cold air on his face, as if hoping it will revive him.

“We have to keep them.” Sakura says woefully. “I love them and they love me.”


“Nope. Bye, Firefly!” Shisui says cheerfully, then leaps out the window.
Sakura’s mother stares at the open window for a long moment. Sakura winces, waiting for the explosion that’s sure to follow.

“Itachi, go after him and drag him back.” Fugaku says tiredly. “I’m sure he didn’t think much past jumping out the window, so if you don’t fetch him, he’ll spend the rest of the festival hiding in the snow.”

Itachi nods and heads for the window, offering Sakura small smile as he goes. He carefully climbs out with a great deal more grace than Shisui did.

“Do I get to keep the babies?” Sakura asks, wide-eyed.

“Please don’t call them that.” Sakura’s mother pinches the bridge of her nose.

Sakura’s father strokes Misa’s dark head with one finger, winking at Sakura, “I vote we keep the babies. Anyone else?”

“Yeah!” Naruto yells, bouncing up and down in his seat.

“Keep the puppies!” Sasuke says, raising his hand as if in class.

Mikoto laughs, then raises her own. She grabs her husband’s hand and raises it for him when he fails to move.

Kabuto smiles into his cup of tea and slowly puts a hand in the air.

Kakashi hasn’t taken his eyes off his book the entire time, but he pokes a finger out and wiggles it. Genma, who must have arrived at some point after Sakura left with Shisui, gives her a lopsided smirk and lifts his hand.

Sakura’s mother’s mouth flattens into a thin line. She exhales through her nose, shaking her head, “Okay, okay, but you’re going to have to learn how to take care of them properly! They deserve a good life, so make sure you – ”

“Thank you thank you thank you!” Sakura squeals, darting over to hug her mother. The dogs barely move as they collide with her mother’s stomach, Misa still deep in sleep and Sakumo too chilled to even grumble at being squashed yet again.

After a few minutes of Sakura passing around the puppies to the guests, Mikoto admiring Misa’s glossy coat and Sakumo’s blue eyes, Sakura finally makes it round to Kakashi’s corner of the room. He’s sitting with his back to a wall, pretending to read. His chakra is relaxed and faintly amused as Sakura approaches.

She sits on the chair next to him, surreptitiously glancing around, then plops Momo into his lap. Kakashi doesn’t miss a beat, shifting slightly to accommodate the new weight, turning a page without looking up.

“I heard my parents talking about your dad.” Sakura says softly. Kakashi stiffens, his chakra bracing itself as if preparing for a blow. Sakura feels Kagami’s desire to comfort him, so she gently lays a hand on his arm. “They said he was a hero and one of the greats. I didn’t know your dad, but he sounds really amazing.”

Kakashi tears up, very slightly. He lifts his book a little higher to cover his face. Sakura pats his arm.

“I named this puppy Sakumo,” Sakura whispers, “But he’s Momo for short. I wanted him to have a
Kakashi’s eye stays fixed on the same sentence. Then he lets out a little huff of laughter, snapping his book shut and tucking it away. He strokes Momo’s silver head, then picks Sakura up by the collar of her party dress, ignoring her indignant yelp, and tucks her under his arm in a half-hug. She ends up sitting on the same seat as him, just barely managing to fit.

“Thank you, Sakura.” Kakashi says quietly, barely audible. Momo curls up in his lap, giving a long, doggy sigh. Kakashi scratches his ears.

“That’s okay, Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura says, taking the opportunity to cuddle him. “Tsume-san said I’ve got a pack now. So, you’re in it. No takebacks!”

Kakashi laughs again, a little incredulous, then brushes the back of his hand against her face. “Sure. Why not?”

Misa ambles over to them, apparently bored of her many admirers – Genma and Kabuto, bonding over petting puppies – and tries to jump into Sakura’s lap. She barrels into the chair and flops back onto the floor, looking dazed.

Kakashi leans over and scoops her up gently, settling her alongside Momo in his lap. The two dogs stay glued to them both for the rest of the day, and Kakashi’s little book never makes a reappearance.

Naruto is wearing some of Sakura’s pyjamas. They’re white with lilacs on the sleeves, but he doesn’t seem to mind. He’s sharing her bed, his head at the foot of the mattress, Sakura’s head at the other end. Sakumo is nestled against Naruto’s stomach. Misa is sharing Sakura’s pillow.

Kagami is lost in thought, dwelling on happy memories for a change.

“Sakura-nee?” Naruto whispers.

Sakura scoots up in the bed, peering through the gloom. She can just about see Naruto’s silhouette. “Yeah?”

“I can’t sleep. I’m so excited! You really did it. I made us a house and then you got a dog. Two dogs! Just like you said, we’ve got a house and a dog now! All we need is a pond with some fish and then we did it!”

Sakura smiles up at the fuzzy, indistinct ceiling. She can hear the faint amazement in Naruto’s voice, she knows he wasn’t as convinced as she was of the dream they shared.

“We’ll live in the treehouse and make friends with the squirrels. We’ll trade nuts and acorns for food. We’ll sleep in hammocks and have a whole pile of books to read. I’ll tell you a bedtime story every night and I’ll never run out, because the owls will know lots of things and they’ll tell us if we make them some glasses out of twigs, so they can see better in the dark. They’ve already got really good eyesight, but with special glasses they’ll be able to see every star in the sky. We’ll spend our nights counting them. If you can’t sleep – ”

Sakura looks up, but the blurry, dark form at the end of her bed isn’t moving and his chakra is peaceful, in the midst of a sweet dream.

Onee-chan? Sakura says sleepily.
Yes, Sacchan?

Can you tell me a happy story, please?

There’s a beat of silence while Kagami struggles, then: you know I’m not much of a storyteller, Sacchan.

Well, I am, so you must be too, Sakura counters.

Ha. Okay. Once there was a flower that was too small to bloom. It was surrounded by beautiful blossoms, all of which overshadowed the tiny bud. Then one day, the sun noticed the little bud and felt bad for it. The sun decided to shine directly down onto the misshapen flower. It got hot, uncomfortably so, and the flowers around it complained, some even moving to other flowerbeds to get away from the effect of the sun’s rays. The little flower enjoyed the feeling, basking in the warmth of the sun’s attention, astonished that such a radiant being would notice her, help her. Although there were problems in the garden, the soil wasn’t quite right to help her grow, the competition from other flowers sapped the nutrients she needed, and bugs and snakes took bites out of her whenever they got hungry enough, the little flower still grew as stubbornly as she could. One morning, she woke up to find she had blossomed into a beautiful rose, with perfect petals and sharp thorns to keep the snakes away. She had grown a little crooked because of the bad soil, but the sun thought she was the nicest flower in the whole garden.

How was that, Sacchan?

Sacchan?

Sakura’s smile stays with her, even in sleep.

xxxxx

“Hi, guys.” Shisui says, raising his hands in automatic defence at the sight of them.

Sakura’s mother rolls her eyes. “Shisui-san, we’re not angry with you. You can stop diving into bushes whenever you see us.”

“Oh, that only happened once and it was for a really good reason.” Shisui says seriously. “I’ll tell you it later. So, I should come in. It’s really important.”

Sakumo lets out a single yip from where he’s sitting on Sakura’s feet. “Momo says he can come in.” Sakura reports.

“Momo said you should be allowed cake for breakfast this morning.” Sakura’s mother says, amused. “Something tells me not to listen to Momo.”

“He did say it.” Sakura pouts.

“I believe you, Firefly.” Shisui winks, breezing past Sakura’s mother in the doorway, slipping off his shoes as he goes.

“Of course you do, the two of you are practically partners in crime.” Sakura’s mother says, reluctantly amused.

They go into the living room, Sakura sliding her feet carefully across the floorboards so Momo won’t fall off.
“Is your husband in?” Shisui asks.

“He’s taking a nap upstairs.”

“It’s technically Quiet Time, so you better not make too much noise!” Sakura whisper-shouts, jabbing a finger at him.

Shisui mimes zipping his mouth shut. “You got it. So, I came straight here because I finally got word on Tsunade’s location.”

Sakura’s mother’s chakra lights up, “Where is she?”

“She’s still travelling, but word is that she intends to stop off in Suna – who knows why anyone would willingly go there – so if you leave within a week, you should be able to intercept her. This is the closest she’s come to Konoha in years. It’s your best chance at getting her to sign off on adopting Sakura.”

Sakura remembers seeing Tsunade’s dead face in the horrible dream Izanagi forced her to have, the regrets that welled up inside her at the sight. This is her chance to meet her mentor, the woman who gave Kagami a reason to continue after losing so much.

“Then let’s go!” Sakura declares, bouncing on the sofa. Momo scrabbles to safety, climbing onto her mother’s lap instead. Misa immediately takes his place on Sakura’s lap, giving him a smug look.

“Quiet Time, Sakura.”

“Sorry!”

“You can’t go.” Shisui frowns. “Not after what happened at the hospital.”

“I got attacked here, so maybe there aren’t bad guys out there and I’ll be safer.” Sakura says.

“I… cannot argue with that logic. Haruno-san, a little help?”

“It’s Mebuki, and no. I agree with Sakura. This is her mission. She deserves the chance to see it through. And we can hardly expect Tsunade-sama to agree to adopt a child she’s never even met.” Sakura’s mother says, squeezing her shoulder in support.

Shisui stares off into the distance, idly thumbing his belt. “Fair enough. And I guess your best chance at getting Tsunade to agree is to have Sakura just cute her into submission. You’ll have that Sannin eating out of the palm of your hand, Firefly.”

“Like Misa and Momo?” Sakura asks, wrinkling her nose. She doesn’t want to feed Tsunade like a puppy.

Dummy, Kagami says, holding back a laugh.

“I sincerely hope not. Okay, I’ve got it. The three of you say you’re going on vacation. You want to take a break from missions while your husband is still recovering, and you want to get Sakura out of the village for a while. But you don’t want to go too far in case Konoha has to call you back, so you decide to get some sun in Suna, since it’s close by and dirt-cheap. While you’re there, you just happen to bump into Tsunade, who is so utterly charmed by your precocious daughter that she declares her to be her ward.” Shisui says. His chakra seems to expect applause at the end of his speech.
Sakura’s mother does not clap. She runs a hand through her hair, shaking her head slightly. “It’s all too far-fetched. No one would believe it.”

“They don’t have to believe it, they just have to accept it. The goal of this is just to obtain the Senju name for Sakura and the protection that goes along with it. We’re not trying to run some scam. Don’t think of it as a mission, more like… a story.”

Sakura perks up. “I like stories!”

“I know you do.” Shisui says fondly. “And in this one, you go to Suna and bump into one of the most powerful kunoichi in the world. Do you think you can persuade her to help?”

“Yes.” Sakura nods, squishing Misa’s muzzle gently, fascinated by her little face. She doesn’t seem to mind, her amber eyes looking up at Sakura trustingly. “Can I take my dogs?”

“You’ll have to. Tsume said you need proximity to maintain the bond while it’s in its early stages. They’re old enough to travel, so you should be fine.”

“I will carry you in a little bag.” Sakura tells Misa, poking her nose. “It’ll be like one big walk. You’d like that, right?”

Misa sneezes.

“That’s a yes.” Sakura says, beaming. “What about you, Momo? Do you want to go get Tsunade-shishou from Suna?”

Momo stretches, licking Sakura’s hand.

Sakura looks up, noticing Shisui’s big grin for the first time. “Something funny, Shisui-kun?”

“Well, I’ve just thought of someone who’s really not gonna like this.” Shisui snickers.

xxxxxxx

When her mother said they were going to visit the Uchiha, Sakura had thought it was another Mikoto-sanctioned playdate.

Now, sitting awkwardly in an enormous room filled with expensive furniture and rising tension, Sakura thinks maybe this isn’t going to be fun after all.

“We believe that if you are going to take Sakura out of the village, you should be provided with an escort to ensure nothing goes wrong.” Fugaku says with forced calm.

To translate, Kagami says wryly, ‘we believe your daughter is in danger, possibly from you, and how dare you think you know what’s best. We want to send a bunch of stuffy Uchiha along to babysit and make sure you don’t throw your child off a cliff, what’s so bad about that.’

“And we believe that as Sakura’s parents, we are the best-equipped to determine the right course.” Sakura’s mother says icily.

‘We believe you should shut your smug mouths.’ Kagami helpfully supplies.

“Suna is a scant distance from Konoha and Sakura desperately needs to get out of the village. It’ll do her good to have some fun in the sun, don’t you think?” Sakura’s father says.

‘Please stop arguing, I think I’m going to cry.’
Otou-san wouldn’t say that, Sakura thinks, mildly offended.

I’m telling you, he’s thinking it.

“Oh, oh!” Sakura bursts out, a thought suddenly occurring to her, “Shisui-kun, you could do it! You could escort us! Then you could come on vacation, too!”

Shisui’s chakra shrinks back, almost vanishing. Fugaku’s and Mikoto’s both grow dim, heavy with secrets.

“Sorry, Firefly. Another time, okay?” Shisui says, the platitude coming out strangely without the aid of his usual fake smile. He looks oddly solemn.

“Why not?” Sakura asks, shoulders slumping.

Leave it, Sacchan.

“I’m a little busy at the moment.” Shisui says, his eyes pleading through the lie. “I’ll take you somewhere else one day.”

When is ‘one day?’ Sakura wonders, clutching her dogs in her lap, what if… what if something happens to Shisui-kun while I’m gone? What if I’m supposed to be here to help him and I don’t and then he –

What if, what if, Kagami interrupts, what if nothing, Sacchan. There are no what ifs for you and me. He can’t go, you have to, that’s the end of it.

Sakura sniffs, nodding to herself. Okay. I’ll go. And if he’s not fine when I get back, I’ll just have to save him.

“That’s fine, Shisui-kun.” Sakura gives him a big smile. “I’ll bring you back a souvenir.”

“Yay.” Shisui says, deadpan. “Can you get me some sand? Only if you can find some, of course.”

“Okay!” Sakura wriggles on the sofa, happy now that Shisui seems to have cheered up. She meets Mikoto’s amused eyes and beams at her. She’s not so scary now it’s been a while since she fought the Mask. Sakura already can’t remember the sound his body made when he hit the floor. “We’re going on vacation! It’s my very first! I’m going to wear all my sundresses even though it’s snowy in Konoha!”

“Don’t forget a hat.” Fugaku says, seemingly unable to help himself.

Sakura tilts her head, confused. “A hat?”

“It is very important to protect yourself from the sun. A hat can shield your eyes and skin from intense sunlight, which can be very harmful.” Fugaku says gravely.

Okay.” Sakura says, a little daunted. She didn’t know the sun could be scary.

“And you cannot overlook the importance of hydration.” Fugaku lectures. Sakura notices Shisui’s eyes glaze over. “You can get dehydrated extremely quickly in Suna, so don’t forget to carry several bottles of water with you at all times.”

As Fugaku continues and everyone else loses interest, Sakura stays absorbed, leaning forward and staring in awe. Fugaku knows so many things about the sun!
It takes Shisui an unexpectedly long time to find out where Hatake Kakashi lived.

Probably because he was a social recluse. He was known for drinking in bars and always being up for a spar, but not anything more than that. The only time Shisui had ever really seen him with a friend – if you could call him that – was when he and Maito Gai arrived in the aftermath of Sakura’s dramatic unveiling as a genius. Kakashi hadn’t seemed affected by any of the tension in the air, the Harunos sobbing and the grim-faced Uchiha lurking, but Gai had still saw fit to squeeze his shoulder, as if in comfort.

It was that small, humanising action that made Shisui pay attention to Kakashi’s behaviour regarding Sakura. He’d watched him in the hospital, doing precisely what Shisui had come to do, investigate Sakura’s attack on his own time. It had reminded him of the time Kakashi and Genna interrogated him about Sakura’s burns – why had Kakashi even cared? Why was he there at all? Friend-killer Kakashi was ANBU, untouchable, cold. Not exactly interested in the wellbeing of random children, unlike Genna.

Shisui had soon discovered he was just one of the many victims of Sakura’s magnetic pull. Many elite shinobi had fallen into her orbit, just as Shisui had. Kakashi was no different. Which was why Shisui was going to him for help.

Kakashi answers the door with a suspicious glint in his eye, his hair tousled as if he’d just dragged himself out of bed.

“Oh. Not-Itachi.” He says.

“Technically true.” Shisui lets that one pass, not because Kakashi scares him, obviously. “Can I come in? I need to talk to you about something I don’t think your neighbours care to hear.”

Kakashi looks at him, then turns around and walks back into his apartment. He leaves his door open, which Shisui takes as an invitation.

Following the older man in, Shisui tries not to notice the unlived state of the place. There’s barely anything personal in here, just a few pictures and an old-looking rug with a dark stain. Nothing that shows anyone lives here on a permanent basis. Is this Shisui’s future? If he has a future at all, he hopes it’s one with better interior design.

Kakashi leans against his kitchen counter, looking vaguely in Shisui’s direction. “So. Talk.”

Shisui goes to sit down, then thinks the better of it. There’s no point making himself even shorter than he already is during this conversation.

“The Harunos are going to Suna on vacation.” Shisui says, with a calmness he doesn’t feel. There’s a constant buzzing energy under his skin these days, a growing sense that something’s on the horizon, an axe about to fall.

Kakashi’s eye moves a little closer to Shisui, almost but not quite looking at him, the only sign that he has any interest at all in this conversation. Shisui spares a moment to pray that he’s not misjudged the other man, that Kakashi hadn’t been fulfilling orders from on high and secretly doesn’t give a damn about some weird kid who’s a magnet for trouble.

“Fugaku’s insisting they go with an escort. He’s pushing for Uchiha, since Sakura was attacked inside the village and he doesn’t quite trust… well…” Shisui gestures at Kakashi, a symbol of Konoha’s darker side if there ever was one. Kakashi inclines his head, as if accepting a compliment.
“He wants to send Sakura with a bunch of clansmen. He genuinely thinks that will keep her safe, and gather information for the clan. I’m not quite so optimistic.”

And Sakura had asked him to go. She’d wanted him to be the one. And he had to refuse, under orders to stay grounded in Konoha until told otherwise. Mikoto had tried to reassure him that Sakura wouldn’t mind, but Shisui couldn’t help but feel guilty. He couldn’t even tell Sakura why he couldn’t go, even though they were supposed to be completely honest with each other from now on. It wasn’t even that he particularly cared about obeying orders and keeping his punishment a secret, he just didn’t want Sakura to know why his role as the village idiot came so naturally to him. Why it was so easy for them all to believe.

“And you want me to go.” Kakashi says, utterly still. His voice is toneless and the mask is keeping Shisui’s sharp eyes from catching whatever microexpressions might be flashing on his face.

“Yes. I trust you and I know you actually care about Sakura. I’d be a lot more comfortable with you on the mission than one of my second cousins just trying to suck up to the Clan Head.”

“I’ve never liked Suna. Not a great place for a vacation.” Kakashi says.

Shisui keeps his face neutral. What he’d give for a mask of his own right now.

Kakashi’s not an idiot. He knows there’s something else going on. But unless he’s got powers as miraculous as Sakura’s, he’s not going to be able to predict the real reason the Harunos are taking their daughter into the political minefield of Suna.


“For all three centimetres of your exposed skin?” Shisui says, baffled, before his brain catches up and he realises what Kakashi’s saying, “Wait, you’ll go? You’ll go with the Harunos?”

“I will request a place on the squad that will inevitably be assigned to protect the family.” Kakashi drawls. “Fugaku might have tried to get there first, but the Hokage gets final say and he’ll want his own on this.”

“ANBU.” Shisui nods, grimacing at the thought of ROOT infecting the squad. At least with Kakashi there, that’s one less potential plant.

“I have no idea what you’re taking about.” Kakashi says blandly. “I’m a regular jounin.”

“Okay, whatever. I also need to know where I can find Usagi-chan, the idiot bunny ANBU.”

“Why would I know?” Kakashi tilts his head, looking genuinely confused. This is why Shisui doesn’t like him. It has nothing to do with being scared of him, because he isn’t. It’s because he can feign emotion without blinking.

“Because you’re ANBU.” Shisui says, gritting his teeth. “That’s a well-known fact. Everyone knows you’re Inu.”

“I’m not actually a dog, Shisui. That’s a very hurtful thing to say.” Kakashi says, his single eye widening at him. Shisui actually feels guilty. And filled with hate.

“Just tell me where I can find him, please.” Shisui barely tamps down the annoyance in his voice, still refusing to paint on a fake smile. “It’s important.”

“Well, if I was looking for an ANBU, I’d ask the Hokage. And then promptly be refused, because
ANBU is anonymous for a reason.”

Shisui points a finger at him, trembling with rage, “Just you wait, Inu. I’m gonna find that dumb bunny, and then I’m gonna deliver him right to your door!”

“No thanks, I’ve got a nice chicken in for dinner. I don’t need any rabbit.”

Shisui actually growls at that. “Agh! Fix your apartment! It’s depressing as hell!”

Kakashi pretends to gasp in dismay.


Shisui pictures the face Sasuke makes when he’s mad, that stupid pout, and it calms him down enough to say, “Look, I know about ROOT.”

Kakashi doesn’t move.

“Usagi-chan told me that he thought his attacker was another member of ANBU for a second, since he was dressed just like one. Then later he figured it must have been ROOT. If you’re right and the Hokage really does send an ANBU squad with the Harunos, I’d like to make sure it’s not full of Danzo’s people.”

“Usagi told you he thought his attacker was ROOT.” Kakashi says flatly. “That’s odd. He never said a word to me.”

“Well, maybe –”

“You’re too free with your words and your trust.” Kakashi says, almost pityingly. “Usagi had a good reason not to tell me. I used to be ROOT.”

Shisui blanches, calculating the time it’ll take to reach the door.

Kakashi sighs, tipping his head back and exposing his neck. A nonthreatening gesture. Shisui’s eyes stop itching, Sharingan threatening to emerge.

“You don’t leave ROOT. You’re meant to stay until you die. Life expectancy’s around twenty to twenty-five. Danzo goes through a lot of fresh talent, cycling through the lot. I lasted long enough to find the regular ANBU missions a relaxing field trip in comparison. Usagi’s right. ROOT was behind the attack on Sakura. There’s no doubt in my mind.”

“What did they want from her?”

“At a guess? To recruit her. Talented kids go missing all the time. Just another village tragedy, right? It happens everywhere. Sakura would’ve been just another missing kid. Then she would’ve grown up in a mask – that’s if she even managed to survive long enough to earn one.”

Shisui wants to be sick. “You can’t let that happen. I can’t go with her, you know that. So you’ve got to do it. Keep her safe.”

Kakashi closes his eye, gripping the counter behind him. “I don’t exactly have the best track record for that kind of thing.” He says lightly.

“Sakura thinks you’re amazing. She made a paper pirate hat and wore it over one eye to look just like you. She calls you Kakashi-sensei and quotes you constantly. And it doesn’t matter what happened before, it only matters what happens now.” Shisui says, with a sudden fierceness. He has
to believe that the past is pointless, the future too far to consider – all that matters is the time he has left. Now.

Kakashi drums his fingers against the counter. “What happens now is you never mention the name ROOT again. I’ll take care of this escort mission. You forget we ever had this conversation.”

Shisui only nods, crossing his fingers behind his back.

He’s got a bunny to hunt.

He turns to leave, then smirks to himself, subtly palming a cherry bomb from his pouch.

“By the way… this is for dangling Sakura off a roof.”

“What –”

Kakashi doesn’t bother to look up from his book, which is why Shisui manages to nail him directly in the face with a paper bomb, petals exploding all over his book.

“Gotta go!” Shisui cackles, flickering out the door just in time to avoid a barrage of shuriken.

***

Hello, friends!

The reason why this is a slightly late update is purely because I couldn’t decide what to name the bloody dogs. I went through every single comment and wrote down all the suggestions and agonised SO MUCH, then eventually picked two very early suggestions because that’s how life rolls! (Multiple people suggested Sakumo, and GirlWithFlower mentioned the names Sakumo and Momo and my brain went ding! Undercookednoodle suggested Kagami, and I decided to use a nickname for it to avoid confusion between the two Kagamis)

Thank you to EVERYONE who gave suggestions, there was such a huge response!!

To all of you who find this story comforting to read, I also find it comforting to write. It never fails to make me smile, writing goofy dialogue and cute scenes. I’m far too used to angst, I guess!

The search for Tsunade begins in Suna!

(I started planning the Tsunade arc approximately a bajillion years ago, I’ve no idea why it’s taken so long to get to this point! Well, I do. Dogs.)

If you tell Fugaku you’re going on holiday, he’s going to sit you down for an hour-long lecture on travel safety and skincare. Just so you know.

Quick poll for fun: What are your favourite words? (pick as many as you want!)

Mine are: serendipity, celestial, effervescent and ethereal.

(Update on DogWatch, Sakura is now living with two dogs. More updates to follow)
“I want to submit a formal request to be assigned to the squad attached to the Haruno case.” Kakashi says steadily, maintaining eye contact with the Hokage.

The Sandaime leans back in his chair, smoke unfurling from his pipe. “No such squad yet exists, Kakashi.”

“Then, in the event of its creation, I’d like to be considered.” Kakashi says lightly, expertly sheathing his irritation out of sight.

“I have been informed of the Haruno family’s upcoming vacation. Mebuki requested the time off in order to give her husband time to recover, and to take Sakura’s mind off recent events. I thought it was a very good idea, indeed. They did not request an escort, so I did not provide one. Suna is not far and they are currently eager to stay on Konoha’s good side, so I don’t anticipate trouble from them.”

“Trouble could come from anywhere.” Kakashi comments neutrally. The Hokage isn’t stupid, he must be aware of the target on Sakura’s back. He must have a reason for not giving her a guard – perhaps because the last time she had one, he got himself knocked out.

“I try not to consider trouble that is impossible to anticipate. It’s much softer on one’s sanity to focus on the kind that is close at hand. Why are you interested in this case, Kakashi? This is the first time you have specifically requested to be assigned to something. I’m pleased to see you take an interest in anything outside of your missions, but I’m curious as to why you care at all.”

Did he truly seem that heartless? Shisui had been frightened of him. By the end of their conversation, Kakashi had managed to subtly wear down that fear with a combination of tone and unthreatening body language, until Shisui grew rather too comfortable for his own good. Still, Kakashi hadn’t experienced teasing or messing around with a comrade until Gai. Obito had tried, but Kakashi’s head was too far up his own backside for him to notice. Gai had broken his walls down and forced him not to take himself so seriously, a rare thing for him at the time. Now he had friends like Genma, whose casual banter and quips kept him calm during and after missions.

Shisui’s transition from terror to delight had not been… unpleasant. Kakashi had chased him down and taught him why he should never try to mess with his elders, of course, but he had enjoyed the playful moment.

For some reason, it seemed odd that the Hokage didn’t see the change in him. Or maybe he did, and that was why he was probing. Probably trying to get him to show his softer side. Kakashi wasn’t convinced it truly existed.

Though, when Sakura told him the name of her silver puppy, he had never felt more vulnerable. It had been like transforming into his younger self, a few stubborn traces of naivete still intact inside him, before his father’s loss burned them out. Sakura’s parents thought his father was a hero. Kakashi hadn’t heard that for a long, long time. He never talked about him with anyone, not even Gai. Everyone who knew him knew to skirt around the topic of family. But not Sakura, it seemed. Or her parents, who were strange and warm and kind in increasingly baffling ways.

“I care,” Kakashi started to say, then cleared his throat, “Because there was an attack in the middle of Konoha and I want to know why.”
It was true, but not the whole truth. He cared, because it was Sakura.

The Hokage doesn’t look disappointed with his answer, he’s too good a shinobi for that, but the sheer absence of tacit approval speaks volumes. He prefers his subordinates to speak with candour, even knowing he won’t return the favour. The Hokage is a great man, which means he holds himself above the standards he sets for others.

“Do you have any theories regarding that attack?” The Hokage asks, eyebrows lifting slightly in question.

ROOT.

The Hokage knows of its existence, he knows what Danzo is, but he refuses to act.

Kakashi personally saved him from an assassination attempt, risking his life to expose Danzo, and had expected with every fibre of his being to receive the order to take him out, to carve out the rotting centre of the village. He had been ready for it, almost eager to do it. This was the village he fought for, the one his team died for. He wanted to rid it of its toxic waste.

But the Sandaime had done nothing. Danzo melted back into the shadows, snatching children and twisting the shinobi he had been entrusted with – and knowing now that Usagi, Kakashi’s old classmate and not-quite-friend, had almost been ensnared, Kakashi wanted nothing more than carry out that absent order.

If only the Hokage would give it.

Would the Yondaime have allowed Danzo such freedom?

“I only know that the attack took place in Konoha and so far, there’s been nothing to indicate the threat came from outside it.” Kakashi says mildly.

The Hokage blows out a gentle stream of smoke, deliberately angling it away from Kakashi’s face.

“That certainly is the logical conclusion. So, do you believe that by taking Sakura out of the village, her family will have removed her from the danger?”

Kakashi has to tread lightly here. “I think it’s likely that, regardless of the danger’s origin, it will follow her regardless of where she goes.”

The Sandaime nods, dark eyes fixed on the dissipating smoke hanging in the air. “Possibly. So, if we are to protect Sakura – and we must do so, at any cost – we must follow her, regardless of where she goes. Still, I am loath to send ANBU forces into Suna at this delicate stage. I would have to inform the Kazekage ahead of time, and be held accountable for whatever may occur during the mission. If the threat originated from inside Konoha… no doubt, they would take any opportunity to destabilise our alliance with our closest and weakest ally.”

Kakashi swallows. If the Hokage sent ANBU into Suna, with the Kazekage fully aware of their presence, and ROOT followed them in to take Sakura, it could only mean disaster.

“However, if I were to send a small band of off-duty shinobi – all of whom have experienced some recent tragedy or trauma – to Suna with the request that they be housed for a short period of time in order to recuperate, that would mean trusting the Kazekage with the village’s most vulnerable people. There is very little chance he would ever risk harming them, as he is aware of the repercussions such an act would have. In doing this, I would be showing the Kazekage a great deal of trust and respect, something he dearly needs. I would also establish a positive line of contact between our villages.”
“And if the Kazekage did risk harming us?” Kakashi tilts his head, fingers brushing against the book in his pocket.

The Hokage’s smile could have been etched in stone. “Then our fragile alliance would break and I would have just reason to retaliate.”

By which he meant: wipe out the village and assimilate those allowed to survive into Konoha, increasing its ranks and its fierce reputation, which had been dampened somewhat by the recent Hyuuga incident.

“But it will not come to that. I will tell the Kazekage that the child I am sending him is being targeted by unknown forces. He will enjoy my admitted ignorance on a subject, and possibly even apply himself into solving the issue himself, in order to strengthen our alliance and to prove himself the better leader. If these unknown forces truly are bold enough to follow Sakura out of Konoha and into Suna, then their interference will not spark a war if the Kazekage is forewarned, and he may even deal with them for us. We will see how it plays out.”

Kakashi nods. A thought occurs to him and he holds back a smile, “And… who will join this band of traumatised victims?”

“You and whoever you think best to bring. A three-man team, plus the Haruno family, should be sufficient. A handful of damaged – forgive me for the term – shinobi will not be much of a lure to any anti-Konoha dissenters in Suna, but the Harunos will certainly enjoy their vacation a lot more if they know they are safe. And they will be, with you.” The Hokage meets his eyes, the kindness and understanding in his gaze too strong for Kakashi to maintain eye contact for long.

There it is. That tacit approval Kakashi fights so hard to earn.

He bows deeply.

He already has a team in mind.

Shisui had said that Fugaku wanted his men on this. Well, he could spare a boy, instead. Itachi’s file stated he had seen the same therapist Sakura had been lumbered with, so he must have the ‘damaged’ quality the Hokage wanted. Also, Itachi would never allow a younger child to be hurt in his presence, so he would fight hard for Sakura’s safety.

Genma was far too level-headed and normal. He could feign emotional damage and play the role of the war veteran he actually was, minus the cool façade, but presumably the Hokage wanted people who genuinely had reputations of being messed up, so the Kazekage would feel less threatened by their presence and more as if he had been temporarily handed some broken hostages to dangle over Konoha if things went wrong.

Anko was too screwed up. She’d probably gut some diplomat and set the village on fire.

Gai just flexed his muscles and deflected oncoming trauma. No one would buy him as a broken shell of a man looking for recuperation in Suna’s hot climate.

As Usagi, Takumi was a brainless fool without sense or reason. As himself, Takumi was a war orphan who had been placed in ANBU against the advice of essentially all of his superiors. Not because he wasn’t good enough, but because he wasn’t strong enough. He was already as good as broken. And since he’d failed Sakura once, he wouldn’t want to do it again.

Kakashi sighs. He hopes he’s not making a mistake.
“Uchiha Itachi and Yamaguchi Takumi.” He says with more confidence than he feels. “They’re the ones I’ll take on this mission.”

“Vacation, Kakashi, vacation,” The Hokage smiles, eyes twinkling, “If you can pry Itachi-kun out of his father’s grip for the length of this break, I imagine it will do everyone the world of good. As for Takumi-kun… he has yet to be on a mission without his Captain overseeing his every move. It may be good for him to get a little space to breathe.”

How had the Hokage found out that Kakashi knew Takumi was ANBU? Stupid question. The Hokage probably knew exactly which title of *Icha Icha* he was currently carrying. A terrifying thought.

Kakashi stiffens. “If anything happens to Takumi…”

“It is entirely possible that his captain will skin you alive, yes.” The Hokage says, far too cheerfully, “More motivation for you to complete this vacation without error, Kakashi.”

Excellent. He was supposed to be babysitting the four-year-old, not the idiot bunny.

xxxxxxxx

There’s lots of people in Sakura’s house.

The vacation is today and Sakura wasn’t allowed to pack her own bag, since her mother claimed she’d just stuff it full of toys and forget everything important. She was right, but it was still annoying. Sakura now had plenty of backless sundresses and very few cardigans to pair them with. She was going to have to get creative to hide her scar. She’s tied a large cloth bag to a stick, so she can carry her puppies while running. Kagami insisted. Her parents thought it was funny and neither of the pups minded the test run she did to make sure they wouldn’t fall out.

Ryuu, the man who helped Mariko interrogate Sakura, is lounging on the sofa with a smaller man. Ryuu isn’t pretending to be nice today, his surly face matches his chakra. Not here for her, then. The man next to him has silver-blond hair, almost like Ino if she’d been dipped in moonlight. He has a round, youthful face with a sprinkling of pale freckles over his cheeks. His pale red eyes remind Kagami of someone called Kurenai.

He smiles at Sakura, “Hello! I’m Usa – *ow!*” He glares at Ryuu, rubbing his arm from where the other man had pinched him. “I’m Yamaguchi Takumi. How are you?”

“Usa Yamaguchi Takumi is a long name.” Sakura tells him.

“U-uh, no Usa, just…”

“My name is Haruno Sakura and my parents –”

“Sakura, please stop introducing yourself like that.” Her mother sighs. Her father gives her a thumbs up.

“Sorry, Okaa-san!” Sakura says, flopping down on the sofa next to Takumi.

*I don’t like having all these people here,* Kagami says restlessly, *if there’s trouble, you should –*

*Jump out the window, I know,* Sakura replies absently. She plonks Momo onto Takumi’s lap, a highly accurate test of character.
Momo looks up at Takumi, making intense eye contact. Takumi stares back, mouth slightly open. Momo sniffs his hand, then licks it. Sakura relaxes.

*He’s a good boy,* she tells Kagami.

Kagami only huffs, unconvinced.

“We’re going on vacation.” Sakura tells Takumi. “You can’t be in the house when we’re gone.”

“I – I, uh, we’re going to – ”

“They’re coming with us, Sakura.” Her mother says, her smile only a little strained.

Sakura frowns, confused.

*Oh. I see. They’re undercover ANBU, here to act as your guards,* Kagami says.

“You couldn’t get your own vacation?” Sakura asks.

Ryuu leans closer, squashing Takumi against the back of the sofa, “We’re friends of your parents, so we wanted to spend time with them.”

Sakura’s face contorts. He thinks she’s *stupid.* That she’s either forgotten his strained interactions with her parents during his investigation, or that she never even noticed in the first place.

She reaches over and places Misa in Ryuu’s lap.

Misa burps.

Sakura hums pensively, “I don’t know what that means.”

Ryuu reacts as if she’d spilled food on him, regarding the dog in his lap with undisguised distaste. “If it’s going to be sick, it should do it on Takumi.”

Takumi stops rubbing Momo’s belly, “Hey!”

Kakashi’s chakra approaches the front door. Sakura barely manages to stop herself from jumping up in glee. When he knocks, she pretends to be surprised.

“Kakashi-sensei!” She squeals when he enters the room, following her mother in. He nods at Sakura, then flicks his eye over the rest of the sofa, narrowing it at the sight of Takumi and Ryuu.

Itachi comes into view, his chakra neatly suppressed.

Sakura beams at him. “Good morning, Itachi!”

“Good morning, Sakura.” Itachi says, hardly blushing at all despite the informality.

“This is a bigger party than I expected.” Kakashi says, raising an eyebrow at Sakura’s parents.

“Last minute addition. Hope you don’t mind.” Ryuu says.

“The Hokage didn’t select you for this – ”

“Vacation?” Ryuu interjects, “I wasn’t aware the Hokage cared about Council-mandated breaks.”

Kakashi says nothing, but annoyance seeps from him.
“Mariko-san says breaks are very important to keep everyone working smoothly.” Sakura pipes up.

“My mother says the same.” Itachi nods.

“I haven’t had a break in three years.” Takumi announces cheerfully.

Over the years, Kakashi had made a game of figuring out his fellow ANBU’s identities. Most were an open secret, with distinctive hair or verbal tics giving them away, but some maintained an almost unhealthy level of mystery.

Kimura Ryuu was one of these soldiers. It took Kakashi years to confidently pinpoint him as the man behind Tora’s mask. The man was completely different in and out of uniform. As Tora, he was reasonable, good-natured, patient, the very image of the perfect leader. As himself, he was surly, stoic and uninterested in the comings and goings of the people around him. Tora was the captain of a squad, protective of his subordinates and exceptional in battle. Ryuu was a part-time T&I interrogator, cold and calculating.

And now he was sitting on the Harunos’ sofa, waiting to embark on a vacation with them.

If Kakashi had known poaching one of the man’s underlings would result in him tagging along on the mission, he would’ve picked literally anyone else.

“Well, I like dogs and cats.” Takumi says earnestly, stroking both puppies at once. Sakura listens intently, eyes wide. She’s made yet another friend. It’s practically a kekkei genkai at this rate. “I think people who think you can only like one are so wrong.”

“It’s a very limiting view.” Sakura agrees. “Puppies and kittens are both the best.”

“Takumi, are you ready to seal up the Harunos’ belongings?” Ryuu cuts in, exasperated.


Kakashi stares at the other man, who is smiling guilelessly at him.

While Ryuu couldn’t be more different from his ANBU identity of Tora, Takumi is simply an unmasked version of Usagi. It’s terrible.

“He’s not your senpai, he’s the same age as you.” Ryuu points out, valiantly managing to keep most of the annoyance out of his voice.

“Oh. Oh! Right. Kakashi…san, did you bring anything with you?”

Kakashi pointedly looks around, holding his empty hands aloft. “You tell me.”

“I’m bringing my dogs and my summer clothes even though it’s winter.” Sakura says. “I’ve got some emergency coats, though. Are you going to make them a seal?”

“I’m going to seal them into a scroll, so we don’t have to carry it all the way to Suna.” Takumi smiles down at her.

He spreads a scroll across the floor, all traces of idiocy fading from his demeanour. This is his area of expertise, where he has always shone. Kakashi remembers his pride at finally excelling back at the Academy, when he managed to seal away a kunai before anyone else in the class. That look of
astonished joy never faded from Kakashi’s memory.

“I could carry it anyway because I’m very strong.” Sakura says proudly, then winces, clamping her mouth shut.

“I’m sure you are.” Takumi says, but not as if he’s humouring her. His gentle smile is sincere. *Dumb bunny.*

Itachi leaps into action, seizing Sakura’s bags before anyone else can and carrying them over the scroll. Momo yips at him, wagging his tail. *Sakumo.* Kakashi is glad no one can see his smile.

Takumi seals Sakura’s bags with barely a flicker of chakra and a big smile. Kakashi wonders what Danzo would have done with him, with his talent trapped inside an unsuitable personality. Probably would’ve wiped him clean, left him blank and unfeeling, nothing left but his ability to be useful to ROOT.

Kakashi glances around the room, noting the distance between Sakura, Itachi and Takumi. He decides she’s safe enough and retreats into the kitchen, where the adult Harunos have gathered.

They look up at him as he enters the room, shutting the door behind him soundlessly.

“Yo.” He says, a little amused by Kizashi’s overly-innocent look. He wishes he’d bothered to listen in to their conversation instead of Takumi and Sakura’s chat about cats. “Any particular reason you wanted to go to Suna this week?”

“Any particular reason you wanted to tag along?” Mebuki returns, her tone acidic. Her husband winces. Clearly, Sakura inherited her father’s looks and disposition, and nothing of her mother. Lucky her.

“For the same reason you’re going, I assume. Someone’s after Sakura and you want to keep her safe.”

Mebuki narrows her eyes. “And you want to keep her safe, too? It doesn’t matter. This is about Kizashi’s recuperation and Sakura’s recovery. I don’t know if it occurred to you, but having to live in the same place as where you endured a great trauma isn’t the healthiest thing for a child.”

“Seeing as I lived in my father’s house until recently, it did occur to me.” Kakashi says, as sweet as poison.

Sakura claimed her parents were the ones who told her Kakashi’s father’s name, and that they thought he was a hero.

Seeing the flash of sympathy on Mebuki’s face was enough to convince him it was true. His shoulders sag just a fraction, his defensiveness punctured.

Kizashi looks like he wants to hug him. Kakashi avoids eye contact in case it spurs him on.

“Well, I’m sorry.” Mebuki says slowly. “But then you must know why we’re doing this. If Sakura truly is in danger here, then taking her away is obviously the best course of action. And if she gets to have a little fun in the sun while we’re there, even better.”

Kakashi raises an eyebrow. They’re not telling him the full story, but they clearly don’t bear him any ill-will. It’s not personal. He can roll with that.
As they near the village gates, Sakura feels chakra rush at her like a kunai thrown at top-speed.

“Wait!” Shisui yells, flickering in front of Sakura.

She tenses, fists raising halfway up before she registers who it is. “Shisui-kun!”

He smiles at her, a little out of breath. Did he run from the other side of the village at full-speed?

“Hello, Firefly.” He says warmly. He casts the gate a lingering look, then shakes his head, kneeling down in front of her. “I just wanted to tell you to be careful. Don’t forget what you’ve learned, okay?” He pokes her in the forehead. Itachi shifts his stance, turning his body to face them. “Be good. Don’t get burned.”

Sakura doesn’t need Kagami to tell her that Shisui isn’t talking about sunburn or travel safety. She nods, feeling tears prickle in her eyes. She examines his face as if it’s the last time she’ll ever see it. He’s still got boyish good looks, his face as soft and round as Takumi’s. It makes him look deceptively young and innocent.

Sakura swallows, hard. There’s a painful lump in her throat. “Thank you, Shisui-kun. You… you be careful too, okay?” She lowers her voice, taking a step closer to him. “Don’t forget that you’re my friend and I need you to be okay. You have to take care of yourself while I’m gone.”

Shisui gives a breathless laugh, turning his face away to hide how it twists at her words. He covers his mouth, but she can see how his eyes are glistening in the mid-morning sun. His chakra feels like a thousand pinpricks of pain.

She pushes through it and pulls him into a hug. He lets out an oof, surprised, his hands coming up to clutch her shoulders to keep from toppling back.

“You’ll be fine, and so will I.” Sakura tells him, resting her chin on his shoulder so she can talk into his ear. His curly hair tickles her face. “We can play shinobi when I get back.”

“Don’t forget why you’re going.” Shisui whispers back. “I know you can do this. And don’t forget why you’re coming back, too.”

“We made a promise, Shisui-kun. We’re going to save Konoha.” Sakura says, barely audible over the rustling leaves in the wind.

Shisui nods, patting her shoulder. “Then you better get started, Firefly. I’ll be here when you get back.”

“You better. Take care of Naruto for me, please. You’re the Nobikage’s bodyguard, after all.” Sakura mumbles, wiping her eyes. “Bye bye, Shisui-kun.”

“See you later, Firefly.” He says heavily, not smiling because his chakra doesn’t feel like it and he’s still trying to be honest with her. Sakura’s heart feels lighter at the reminder. He’s changing, bit by bit, and so maybe his fate will change with him.

She wants to say something else, but she feels too embarrassed with everyone watching. She settles for waving awkwardly, then darting behind her mother, her face quickly turning scarlet.

Itachi is blank-faced as usual, but his chakra feels contemplative, with a dash of concern. Her parents are sad, though not as sad as Shisui, and Kakashi is reading his book. Takumi is looking up at the clouds and Ryuu’s attention is on the crowds of people behind them, his eyes constantly scanning the faces.
A stream of merchants pour in through the gate, having been waved through by the guards. Kakashi puts his book away and begins to stroll towards the exit, clearly assuming they’ll follow. Ryuu’s face sours even further.

Sakura’s father puts a hand on her back, gently steering her away. She looks back at Shisui. He waves, then disappears in a cloud of leaves. She feels his chakra reform not far off, and subtly glances over.

He’s sitting on a rooftop, a vantage point with a good view of the exit. He raises his hand again, a tiny flicker of pride in his aura when he realises she noticed where he went. Sakura smiles back, walking with her father’s hand to guide her, keeping her eyes on Shisui until he becomes a dark, indistinct figure.

It takes more time for his chakra to vanish, so she feels him stay in place long after she’s disappeared from his sight.

xxxxxx

_I’m not used to being on this side of things_, Kagami muses.

_What things, Onee-chan?_

_Well, I used to be the escort on the mission, not the escorted_, she says dryly, _I wish we could join Kakashi-sensei instead of just sitting here._

Sakura just hums, not quite agreeing. She’s very comfortable in the back of the wagon, her parents sitting opposite her. The clumps of snow along the road have started to turn into puddles, and the brisk chill has faded into a slight breeze. She’s stopped having to hide her hands in her cardigan, baring them to the wind no longer feels like exposing them to blades.

She’s enjoying the rhythmic movement of the wagon, the clip-clopping sound of the horses pulling them along. Kakashi and Ryuu are walking alongside the wagon, and Kakashi wouldn’t get in no matter what she said to him. Takumi and Itachi are sitting opposite each other. Itachi is pretending to be relaxed, but his chakra is focused. Ready.

_If this was my mission, Kagami continues, and I’d already bothered to disguise the ANBU as vacationers, I’d have them act like it. Kakashi and Ryuu would be in the wagon, not clearly guarding it._

_Why aren’t they doing that, then?_

_Probably because they know that their enemies are aware of Konoha tactics and also have the ability to recognise them on sight_, Kagami says darkly, _there’s no point in sacrificing readiness for combat in favour of furthering a disguise that has already failed against a particular enemy._

_So why would you do it if you know why they aren’t?_

_Because I wouldn’t want ROOT to know I was aware that my enemy was Konoha-born. I would sacrifice the few seconds it would take for Kakashi and Ryuu to meet a challenge for the chance to avoid alerting ROOT of my knowledge._

_Hmm… I wonder why they aren’t doing that after all. Surely it’s best for ROOT not to know we suspect them?_

_I imagine neither of them intend to leave any agents of ROOT alive to warn Danzo, Kagami says._
grimly.

Oh, Sakura says sadly.

Misa pops her head out of the cloth bag to lick Sakura’s hand. Momo is sleeping, his little ears flopping back and forth as the wagon rocks. The bag they’re in is attached to the large stick Sakura is holding. Her hands haven’t got sore yet, even though Kagami says it’s been a few hours. The puppies seem to be enjoying the ride, sticking their noses out to smell all the unfamiliar scents on the wind.

This is the first time Sakura’s ever left Konoha. She was born outside of its walls, but ever since she was brought home, she’s stayed there. She looks around her with great interest, noting the differences in the trees, some with bright leaves, others with skinny trunks. Winter doesn’t seem to have touched the area the area they are travelling through.

Kakashi is walking with his hands in his pockets, seemingly at ease. Ryuu is striding at the same speed as the wagon, one hand loosely holding the horses’ reins. Kagami whispers something about how Ryuu will change the horses’ speed and direction in the event of an attack, while Kakashi stays behind to cover their escape.

Sakura blocks her out, closing her eyes and tipping her head up. Her mother gave her a blanket to use as a pillow. It’s soft and smells of home. She can see light playing over her closed eyelids as clouds float across the sun.

She imagines Tsunade is sitting in the wagon with them, coming home for the first time in years. Even if Sakura can’t make that happen, even if she can’t get her to be her family, she will still do everything she can to make Tsunade happy again. If she can’t be happy in Konoha, Sakura won’t make her come back. There has to be something she can do.

She falls asleep to the sound of Kagami telling stories about her old mentor, the soft, wistful tone of her voice lulling her into slipping off, the lights of the world around her finally dimming.

They find an inn after night falls.

Sakura is buzzing with excitement, refreshed from her nap. Her puppies share her eagerness, craning their necks to look at everything as they enter the inn. It’s a small establishment, with wooden walls and floors, thin rugs and scant decoration.

The owner smiles at her wide-eyed reactions to everything, amused by her attempts to see over the front desk. She peers up at him. He looks as tired as her parents, with grey in his hair and frayed cuffs on his sleeves. She gives him a little smile.

Takumi and Ryuu fall into step with each other naturally, heading up the stairs to check the rooms out before allowing the rest of the party to join them. Kakashi and Itachi wait with them, Itachi close enough to grab Sakura if needed. Kagami narrates what’s going on and translates the meaning behind it all for Sakura’s benefit. She’s a little miffed that no one seems to really be having a good time, even though it’s supposed to be a holiday.

It’s decided that Sakura will be in a room with her parents, with Kakashi and Itachi opposite them. Nothing is said about Takumi and Ryuu. Sakura can’t even feel their chakra anymore.

Sakura bounces up the stairs, singing a little whisper-song under her breath, “We’ll have sun and we’ll have sea, we’ll splash and jump and have lots of tea!”
Itachi sounds a little amused when he replies, “Sakura, you know there’s no sea in Suna, right?”

He’s walking behind her on the steps, her parents in front. She’s been neatly sandwiched between the group for the whole journey.

She levels him with a stern look, spinning on the stairs to say, “Itachi, there’s sea everywhere. It’s so big! It’s as big as the sky!”

Kagami sighs.

“We’ll see when we get there.” Itachi says, his tone light and teasing, the way it is sometimes when he’s talking to Sasuke.

Momo sneezes at him.

Itachi blinks, affronted.

Sakura is lifted up by her mother, carrying her up the rest of the steps, “Come on, Sakura. You’ve had dinner, now it’s time to wash up and go to bed.”

“I want more dinner.” Sakura says mournfully. If she eats more, she feels like she’s sharing with Kagami.

“Then run and make some for yourself.” Her mother says lightly, tossing her up in the air.

Sakura shrieks and giggles, clutching at her mother, “Okaa-san! Okay, okay, I’ll go to sleep!”

_Sorry, Onee-chan!

_It’s not a problem, Sacchan, _Kagami replies warmly.

Sakura waves at Itachi, nestling contently into her mother’s arms, basking in her warmth and familiar scent. Itachi smiles back at her, but his chakra is still on alert, scanning all around them.

“Don’t forget!” Sakura points at him, deadly serious, “This is a vacation and you have to have fun! It’s like you failed a mission if you don’t have fun on vacation!”

Itachi blinks at her. It seems as though the analogy worked, since his chakra quiets, sinking back into contemplation rather than intensely sweeping for signs of danger. “I will try, Sakura.”

“Goodnight! We’ll build sandcastles in the morning!” Sakura declares.

“That sounds perfect.” Itachi smiles.

xxxxxxx

Sakura is in a very deep sleep. Sakura is – Sakura –

(Sakura doesn’t die peacefully in her own bed, surrounded by the family she has made. She doesn’t even die on the battlefield, surrounded by enemies and corpses.

_Instead, Haruno Sakura dies in a quiet little copse, completely and utterly alone, aged sixteen, almost seventeen.

_She dies in agony, pain wracking, tearing and biting through her in waves until she almost loses her mind. She holds onto one thing: I wasn’t easy to kill._)
Sakura’s fingers hurt. She’s clutching her bedsheets. She can smell something faintly chemical.

(Sakura is walking through a broken forest, trees wrenched up at the root, snapped in half or turned to charcoal, some still smouldering. She’s following a half-hearted request an unfamiliar jounin gave her – some chuunin went to scout ahead in the woods and have yet to return. She’s not expecting trouble.)

There’s the clink of chains, a pained grunt, a bitten-off cry that sounds almost like her name –

(The first sign that anything is wrong isn’t the rapidly-weakening chakra signals or the unnaturally quiet forest. It’s the sight of platinum-blonde hair spilling across the grass, silken threads winding through green reeds. It’s the sickening lurch in Sakura’s stomach as she recognises Ino’s body without her spirit in it. It wouldn’t be so unsettling to see, if Sakura didn’t take one more step, Ino’s clouded-over eyes coming into view.)

Sakura is asleep, tucked up warm and safe in bed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

(“It’s you.” Sasuke says, utterly detached. When he looks at her, he sees nothing at all. “Where’s Naruto?”

Sakura wants to scream. Ino is dead dead dead dead dead dead and it was Sasuke.

and she’s alone)

The wind sounds like a voice, a cry in the night. It happens sometimes. Her mother says it’s nothing to be afraid of.

(Sasuke withdraws his hand from her ribcage, a slick-wet sound that has her cringing despite the crackle of agony in her chest. Her chakra kicks into overdrive, years of endless drills with Tsunade finally paying off. Energy rushes through her veins.

Sakura turns to look at Sasuke, relishing the slight surprise in his eyes. Ino is dead at her feet and Sasuke’s hands are coated in blood, but Sakura took a Chidori to the back and she is still standing. Even when Sasuke’s blade whistles through the air and slices across her chest, Sakura just smiles, baring her blood-stained teeth. Chakra hisses, sealing the wound.

“Try again, Sasuke-kun.” She says, sweet venom coating her voice, then she draws back her fist and drives it through his stomach.)

WAKE UP

In the morning, Sakura is going to build sandcastles with Itachi and find Tsunade and make her family.

WAKE UP!

(It’s taking Sakura a long time to die. Longer than Chouji, who gasped his last a while ago, his midsection soaked in scarlet. Longer than Shikamaru, still propped up in his thinking pose, his throat missing. Longer still than Ino, who lay in gentle slumber not far from where Sakura had fallen. For every wound Sasuke dealt her, she healed it with a twitch of will, drawing from the deep well of chakra she had fed for so long. She is drenched in her own blood. She must look like a murder scene.)
Which must be why Naruto reacts as he does, when he finds them.)

Wake up, Kagami sobs, please, please, wake up!

The blood is slick between Sakura’s fingers as she grasps the bedsheets. It smells faintly sweet.

(Sha must have looked seconds from death. Naruto’s eyes fill with despair at the sight of her.

“There you are.” Sasuke says, his sword swivelling to point at the new target. “Do you know what Konoha did to my family? The village you want to lead?”

The wound Sakura gave him is fatal, black-red pooling in his stomach, but he doesn’t even seem to notice she’s killed him.

For a moment, Naruto’s eyes are scarlet, but then he blinks and fat tears start rolling down his cheeks. “It can’t be any worse than what you just did to my family.”

Sakura barely holds on as they clash, her vision blurring over. At the end of it all, she sees the moment Naruto gives up. They lock eyes, faded apple-green touching watery blue, a sky full of rain, and then Sasuke’s sword plunges through him and he lets it happen. Sakura waits for the furious bellow, the swell of demonic chakra, but nothing comes. Nothing happens.

He gave up.

She’s alone.

Sasuke spins his blade, nothing in his gaze as he looks down at her, blood-soaked and alone and still, still refusing to die.

“Your turn.” He says.

He takes a step, then freezes, clutching his stomach.

“You first.” Sakura tells him, a savage grin touching her trembling, bloodless lips.)

Kagami wrenches one arm free, her chains clanking against the ground.

Wake up now.

Sakura comes awake with a cry of alarm, a burning line of agony bleeding across her chest.

A hand covers her mouth in an instant. Her mother is bending over her, a scarf covering her mouth. Something chemical is hanging in the air. Her mother makes a hand-signal meaning quiet. Sakura’s brow furrows.

Sakura’s father is asleep in the bed next to hers, his face pinched, the lines around his mouth deepening. Sakura’s mother flashes hand-seals at him and he disappears before Sakura’s eyes.

Her mother marches over to the window and slips something thin and metal into the lock.

Kagami is doing something to Sakura’s lungs. Filtering her breath. She didn’t even have to ask, she just did it. Sakura twists in bed, head reeling, and sees an almost imperceptible cloud of gas being pumped in under the door.

Sleeping gas, Kagami says grimly, it got to you while you were already asleep, too big a dose for such a little girl. Even I couldn’t reach you for a while.
Sakura fumbles at her sheets, terror making her movements too fast in her urgency. She finds Momo and Misa, curled up underneath her blanket, boneless in sleep. She breathes out shakily, quickly finding her stick with the cloth bag, thankful for Kagami’s paranoia, and she gently slips both dogs inside.

Her mother lifts her into the air without warning, the stick slipping from her hands. Thankfully, it falls on her bed, the dogs not stirring from the rough handling. Her mother carries her over to the now-open window, and stuffs her head outside.

*She’s trying to keep you from inhaling any more of the stuff*, Kagami comments.

Sakura sucks down deep gulps of fresh air, drinking in relief. Kagami was filtering for her, but she still felt *something* affecting her as she breathed in the gas.

She senses lightning-quick chakra scaling the wall before her, heading for the window. She pulls back to scream, but her mother yanks her all the way inside the room, forcing herself in front of the window.

As a dark figure perches on the windowsill, blocking out the moonlight, Sakura’s mother draws her arms apart and wire glints. The figure falls apart, spilling back out the window.

Sakura steps back, trembling. Her mother just *killed* someone. Without hesitation.

*She did it for you, just like Mikoto, just like you would do for someone you loved*, Kagami says calmly.

Sakura shivers. She’s clad only in a short-sleeved shirt that reaches past her knees. She’d insisted on wearing it tonight. *Stupid.*

Just as her mother turns to her, eyes wide in concern, another person rises behind her.

“No!” Sakura shouts as her mother falls to a blow to the head. Sakura catches her, barely staggering under her weight. The figure advances, stepping into the room.

Sakura backs up, dragging her mother with her. Her father is gone, her dogs are asleep. She’s alone.

*Not alone. You’re never alone*, Kagami says fiercely, *I will always be with you.*

*Thank you, Onee-chan*, Sakura thinks, teeth chattering. Images of Kagami’s death play in her mind. She was alone, then. Sakura can’t be scared now, not when she’s got someone with her and Kagami didn’t.

She is scared, though.

The figure is wearing a mask. Their chakra is blank and unfeeling.

She wishes Mikoto was here. Kabuto. Someone to hold her hand and tell her everything would be okay.

Kagami flexes her newly-freed hand, *it will be, Sacchan. If you let me help you, I swear you will be fine. You’re not alone.*

“Haruno Sakura.” The figure utters her name with the same blank-nothingness Sasuke of the future spoke with. Sakura shakes.

*Thank you, Onee-chan*, Sakura says once more, her own hand stretching out.
Kagami takes it, and draws it back in a now-familiar stance.

Sakura’s body moves on reflex, unbidden. She shuts her eyes as Kagami swings.

She still feels it when the man dies, both in the shock of contact between her fist and his gut, and in the sudden absence of his chakra.

Sakura does not cry when she opens her eyes. She doesn’t cry even when Kakashi appears, gently steering her away from the corpse – the man, he was a man with a name and a life beyond that horrible mask. She does not cry.

Not even when she turns and her shirt falls down just a little and the moon splashes light against her back.

And Kakashi’s eye widens in horror.

***

Hello, friends.

Thank you to everyone who’s donated so far :) You’re too kind! And thank you to everyone who has read this story, your views and comments mean so much to me <3 This is the longest fanfiction I have ever written. I’m so happy to have made it this far!!

Did Kakashi see something he shouldn’t have seen? Oh dearie me! Whoops!

Yes, Sakura’s mother tore a ROOT agent apart with wire. I have a headcanon that we see so few mothers in Naruto because they’d break the story with their awesome.

Ryuu the mean interrogator man is also Tora the scary tiger-man. I figured at least some ANBU must have jobs outside of their ANBU-ness? Maybe? Usagi/Takumi continues to be terrible at being ANBU.

This is Itachi’s first holiday, and first outing without his family or a mission.

I’ve been very surprised by how many of you are now backing Shisui/Sakura as the OTP of the story. It is nice to see, since I enjoy writing their dynamic the most. But Shisui is very sad and so am I. I don’t like writing the sad bits!

Speaking of which, I did not enjoy writing Kagami’s death. T’was sad. Sasuke killed Sakura, she killed Sasuke, and Naruto technically killed himself, since he refused to let the Kyuubi heal his fatal wounds. Ah, Team Seven in all its tragic glory. With Sakura’s huge chakra supply and instinctive healing, I imagined her facing a foe she can’t technically defeat alone, without the will to defend herself and… a painful death scene emerged.

(If anyone’s curious about how Kagami’s timeline diverged from canon, resulting in her death, it was Sasuke stumbling across Team 10 after Konoha’s destruction, having just realised he missed out on punishing the village for what they did to Itachi. Ino’s death brought about the rest)

This story is following the canon Naruto timeline, btw, so I wonder how many of you know exactly when Shisui died in canon? Or when the massacre happened? Who knows if it’ll all happen the same way here… (me. I know)
I… truly intended for them to make it to Suna in this chapter?? I don’t know what happened???
Word vomit, I guess! My bad.

**Quick poll for fun:** What song lyrics mean the most to you?

I really like asking you guys these kinds of questions, it’s so interesting to see all your differences and similarities!

(Sakura carried her dogs in a bag on a stick. They had fun)
Kakashi lost Itachi shortly after the attack. He’d ducked into a room to pursue one of the attackers and by the time he came out into the corridor, the boy was gone. Kakashi ignores his misgivings and reminds himself that Itachi is a genius, he can take care of himself. *Just like me at his age,* he thinks grimly.

He circles back to the room Sakura is sharing with her parents. ROOT had targeted the windows of his and Itachi’s room, clearly trying to draw them out, and when that had failed, they came through the bedroom door. Just opposite Sakura’s room.

Kakashi can smell blood.

He kicks the door down, not bothering with stealth.

Sakura is standing in front of the open window, framed by moonlight. Kakashi tugs his hitae-ate back over his Sharingan, not wanting to scare her. Then he sees Sakura’s mother, crumpled on the floor. Her father is still in bed, wreathed in heavy genjutsu to hide his presence.

Sakura is shaking.

There is a masked corpse lying at her feet.

Her hand is coated in blood, the stain going all the way up to her elbow.

*Oh, no. Please, no.*

He takes a step forward. She doesn’t seem to hear him. She didn’t look up when he knocked the door down, either. A bad sign.

“Sakura?” He says cautiously, approaching slowly so as to not alarm her.

She doesn’t move.

“…Onee-chan.” She says quietly, eyes on the dead man.

Kakashi stops. Sakura doesn’t *have* a sister. She doesn’t have any siblings at all. Perhaps she was referring to an older female friend?

Kakashi touches her shoulder gently, moving her away from the corpse. He can see a tiny fist-sized hole in the man’s abdomen. Sakura’s displayed signs of unusual strength before – what she did to Fugaku’s floor, how she can hold both her dogs for a prolonged amount of time, and the comment she had made earlier in the day about how she could carry all of her belongings to Suna if she wanted to. He had considered it just another one of the many mysteries of Haruno Sakura. And now she had used it to kill an agent of ROOT.

Her first kill. *At four years old.* This could ruin her.

He glances down and sees –

A twisted and ugly scar the size of a grown man’s hand, spread across her tiny back.

*Impossible.* No one has ever survived the Chidori. He would have known. He is the only one who can use it.
He falls to his knees, clutching Sakura’s hands.

She stares back at him with wide, watery eyes.

_Rin._

He forgets ROOT, he forgets Itachi, he forgets where he is and why he is there.

He breaks down.

xxxxxxx

Kakashi is crying.

Sakura isn’t sure who’s more unsettled by it – her or Kagami.

_I’ve never seen him cry before,_ Kagami says, _what happened? What did he see?_

Sakura tries not to think about it, tries to tuck it away deep in the back of her mind, but Kagami chases it.

There is nothing but silence for the next minute, as Sakura waits for Kagami’s reaction and bends down, looking into Kakashi’s tear-filled eye. He can’t see her at all.

_Why do you have my scar?_ Kagami says with deadly calm, _the wound I got from – you know… how could you possibly have that?_

_I don’t know,_ Sakura says honestly, trying to remove her hands from Kakashi’s vice-like grip, _it was after you fell asleep, after Izanagi used his hell magic on me._

_I thought it was a sign,_ Kagami says, her voice thick with emotion, _I thought it meant I was redeeming myself, making up for the past. I thought it meant we were on the right path. I thought it was a reward. And now you tell me… it just passed to you?_

_I’m sorry, Onee-chan…_

_Don’t be sorry for something you didn’t do. Be sorry for lying to me._

_Onee-chan_ – Sakura tries, but Kagami turns away.

Sakura swallows. Her mother is still on the floor, with a head injury. She’s alive, Sakura can feel it, just like she can feel her father’s presence nearby, and the overwhelming riot of Kakashi’s emotions in front of her.

“Kakashi-sensei,” She whispers, trying to pull her hands out of his, “Please let go. I’ve got to heal Okaa-san and wake up my puppies and my dad. Kakashi-sensei?”

“Rin.” He gasps, sounding absolutely gutted. “Rin, I’m so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I was trying to _save_ you.”

Sakura shakes her head. “That’s not me, Kakashi-sensei. My name is Haruno Sakura, remember? It’s okay. Whatever’s bothering you, we can talk about it and figure it out. Mariko-san says an untalked about issue leads to tissues. So don’t cry! We – ” She can’t help it, she looks at the man on the floor and shudders, squeezing her eyes shut. She clears her throat, “_U-um… we’re okay. I’ll keep you safe, I promise._”
His grip is growing painful. Sakura bites back a whimper. She doesn’t want to use chakra to break free because it might hurt Kakashi’s hands.

A surge of foreign chakra has her reeling, ducking as if to avoid a blow.

There is a Mask standing next to her. She stares up in horror. She can’t fight them, her hands are trapped.

The Mask examines Kakashi, snapping their fingers in front of his face. Nothing happens, the glazed look in his eye remains. The Mask starts to reach for his hitae-ate –

*They want his eye!* Kagami screams.

Sakura jolts, confused and frightened, then kicks out as hard as she can. The Mask twists at the last second and she only clips them. They still go flying back, hitting the wall.

“Let go, Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura yells, then gives his chakra a good *poke* with her own.

He frowns, his grip slackening around her hands, “Sakura?”

He’s still not completely awake and aware, but it’s enough for Sakura to pull her hands free and stand up, moving to cover Kakashi.

The Mask picks themselves up slowly, their mask pointed straight at her. Their chakra is blank.

“Go away, please.” Sakura tells them, her voice shaking. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to.”

“My orders are to not damage you in any way, but I have no such orders regarding Hatake. If you surrender now, quickly and quietly, I will not hurt him. If you do not surrender…”

Sakura doesn’t need to read their aura to know they’re lying. They want Kakashi’s eye, for some reason. They’ll hurt him no matter what.

Sakura holds her arms out, shielding her sensei.

In a split second, she’s in the air, a strong grip around her throat, and a hand is pressing something against her mouth.

*Don’t swallow it!* Kagami commands, *it’s either poison or a sleeping pill!*

“Not this time!” Takumi yells, tackling the Mask. Sakura falls back down, nearly knocking Kakashi over from his kneeling position.

Takumi had entered the room *through the wall*, a big seal appearing on the wallpaper. He’d plunged through it, intangible.

He punches the Mask once in the throat and they wheeze, sagging against the floor. Takumi bites his thumb and then paints a tiny, bloody seal on the Mask’s chest. Their chakra’s white noise is smothered, calming down into sleep.

Takumi gets up. Sakura realises her whole body is wracked with tremors. She was so, so scared and now she’s unbelievably grateful that someone is here to help. She risks a glance at the corpse she left on the floor and flinches violently, squeezing her eyes shut.

“Are you okay, Sakura-chan?” Takumi asks, his voice very gentle and soft. She opens her eyes a
little, vision blurred by tears. “It’s alright. You saved Kakashi-senpai. I wish I was as brave as you.”

“You – you are,” Sakura says, baffled, “You beat the Mask all on your own!”

Takumi gives her a cheeky grin. He has over-sized front teeth, like a rabbit. “Not alone, Sakura-chan. I had you! You were the distraction. Without you, I would have had to face them all by myself. But you helped! Thank you, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura sniffs, her face crumpling, “I should’ve healed the Mask. They hurt my mum but… but –”

“Buuuuut nothing, Sakura-chan!” Takumi says, squeezing her cheeks, “You did your best! You should never have had to fight in the first place, so it’s more mine and Ryuu’s fault! You can’t blame yourself for not failing, after all. Because that’s what would have happened if you didn’t stop them, you know. They would have killed your parents and taken you away. Would that be better than you stopping them?”

Sakura shakes her head fiercely, “No!”

“Exactly! So, well done for saving your family all by yourself!”

Sakura smiles hesitantly, wiping her eyes. She didn’t do it alone. She had her big sister to help her.

“Now, let’s get this room secure or Ryuu will scold me again.” Takumi says brightly, standing up straight. “Do you mind if I pick you up?”

“N-no… Why – oh!” Sakura squeaks as Takumi lifts her up and carries her over to her bed.

He finds her sleeping puppies and tucks them carefully under the sheet, still inside their cloth bag. He draws a little seal above Sakura’s bed, and she feels his chakra wash over her. Then he does the same to her parents’ bed, after checking her father’s breathing.

He carries her mother to bed, putting a tiny bandage on her scalp.

“I can heal her!” Sakura says eagerly, starting to get out of bed.

“Nope! Save your chakra, silly. The bleeding’s already stopped and she’ll wake up on her own soon.” Takumi says.

He crouches next to Kakashi, carefully angling his body away. “Are you awake, senpai?” He asks in a low voice. Kakashi doesn’t move. Takumi sighs, then he strikes Kakashi in the neck.

Sakura gasps as Kakashi sags, unconscious, into Takumi’s arms.

“He’s fine, Sakura-chan.” Takumi says, huffing slightly as he lifts Kakashi over his shoulder. “It’s just safer if he’s sleeping now.”

Takumi carefully places Kakashi into Sakura’s bed. She immediately curls up next to him, worriedly checking the mark on his neck. It’s just a faint bruise. Her shoulders slump in relief. His chakra is calmer now, not the riot of emotions from before, when he called her by the wrong name.

“What’s wrong with him?” Sakura asks, checking his temperature with the back of her hand.

Takumi gets out a kunai and starts scratching symbols on the windowsill, “He’s not shed his battle-armour yet. One from an old fight. He’s still wearing it, so it’s like he’s still there. He’s just confused.”
He’s exhibiting symptoms of immense trauma, Kagami says acidly, from seeing your scar – you know, the one only Chidori could make? The technique Kakashi invented, and hasn’t taught to anyone yet?

Oh, Sakura thinks sadly. Kakashi thought he did it.

Someone appears in the doorway. Sakura almost calls out in fear, but relaxes upon seeing it’s only Itachi. Takumi is still working on the windowsill, his back to them.

That’s not Itachi! Kagami snaps, run!

Not-Itachi makes hand-seals and a great gust of wind flies at Sakura’s bed.

Takumi flashes in front of her and Kakashi, arms outstretched to protect them. The wind slices through him, blood flying.

“No!” Sakura yells, struggling to get out of bed.

Takumi snaps forward the moment the wind ceases, unsheathing his blade and shoving it through the boy who looks like Itachi.

Sakura freezes.

Itachi.

Not him, Kagami says, a Mask in disguise.

As they die, their form changes, growing taller and wider until they’re adult-sized, with a blank-faced mask on their face. Takumi pulls his sword free and wipes it down, sheathing it once more.

He kneels down in the doorway, drawing several complicated-looking seals in his own blood. Sakura can feel his chakra bleed into the entrance.

He comes back to her bed, still bleeding, large cuts all over his face and body. He doesn’t seem to notice, giving Sakura a reassuring smile, “You okay? That was scary, huh?”

“Why are there so many Masks?” Sakura clutches her blanket to her chest. The image of Itachi’s corpse won’t leave her mind. “There was only one in the hospital. And they only wanted me – this time, that Mask wanted Kakashi-sensei’s eye.”

Takumi’s face changes subtly, “How do you know that?”

“They tried to move his hitae-ate to get to his eye, but I kicked them into the wall.” Sakura says.

Takumi puts on a smile, but his chakra is anxious. “Then it’s a good thing you were here, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura tucks Kakashi in under the blanket, her puppies snuggled against his chest.

“I can heal your cuts, if you want.” She says, leaning forward to reach one of his lacerated arms, still bleeding sluggishly.

He pulls it back at once.

“Not right now, please. We both have to conserve our chakra. Like you said, there were more attackers this time than last. Ryuu and I were on the roof when we were attacked – they hit us hard
with everything they had, about six of them. Once we… um, stopped them, Ryuu went to clear the inn and I came straight here. The way they’ve structured this assault…” Takumi stops, his brow creasing in worry, “It can’t be a coincidence… the one mission with the three of us… possibly even Itachi-san… all of us targeted the moment we separated.”

ROOT, Kagami says darkly, I don’t know who they are. I never encountered them in my lifetime. But one Mask tried to take Kakashi’s eye and several others came for you with orders that you not be harmed. They might not just be here for you this time. They might have taken advantage of you and the others being out of the village at the same time. If any of you were to get hurt, or disappear, in the same incident, it would be a lot less suspicious than a series of entirely separate events.

“So, the Masks want me and Kakashi-sensei… and you?” Sakura asks, a little confused.

Takumi blinks. “Oh, was I talking out loud? Whoops. Ignore me.”

Sakura is about to respond when Takumi suddenly dives over her, shielding her and Kakashi with his body. The wall caves in, a large tree trunk winding its way into the room. Most of Sakura’s view is impeded by Takumi, but she gapes at the little she can see.

A tree broke through the wall!

A small figure appears. For a moment, Sakura thinks it’s another Mask trying the same trick again, pretending to be Itachi, but the cloud of dust from the rubble clears and she sees them properly for the first time. They’re wearing a cat mask with unsettlingly wide eyes and an exaggerated frown. They’re a little taller than Shisui.

In an instant, Takumi leaps off the bed and points his sword at the intruder, his chakra a forced mass of calm.

Sakura copies what Takumi did for her, leaning over Kakashi and trying to cover his face as best she can. If only she was taller.

The Mask’s chakra is pointed squarely at Kakashi. Sakura trembles again, this time with rage. She remembers dreaming about Itachi hurting Kakashi, the horror she had felt at witnessing it. That will never happen now, and this Mask won’t get to hurt him either. He’s part of Sakura’s pack, he promised.

“Go away.” Sakura growls her best Monster growl. It’s quite convincing, if the flicker of surprise in Takumi’s aura is any judge. “You can’t have Kakashi-sensei.”

“I’ve come for his eye.” The Mask says, his voice quiet. Toneless, but not in the same way as the other Masks. He’s calm, not blank. For some reason, that’s scarier.

“Come get it, then!” Sakura shouts, raising her fists. Chakra glows in the dark, her hands aflame.

Takumi steps in the way, blocking her view of the masked boy. His voice is kind, like he’s talking to a friend when he says, “Come on, now. No one has to get hurt. I know you have your orders, but it’s still your choice. Do you want to do your duty and die here? Alone, wearing a mask and a fake name? Or do you want to make a different call, and live to receive better orders one day?”

The masked boy’s chakra quivers. He’s wrestling with himself. Sakura’s jaw drops, he’s upset. But he raises his hands to form a seal, so slowly that he must know Takumi will cut him down before he can complete the jutsu.

Sakura jumps off the bed, springing across the room. Kagami helps her dodge Takumi’s instinctive
grab, then Sakura stands right in front of the Mask.

She’s surrounded by corpses, one of her own making.

But there’s a scared boy who thinks he’s going to die and Sakura can’t just sit back and let it happen.

“My name is Haruno Sakura.” She says, ignoring Kagami’s groan about identifying herself to ROOT agents. “I’m four, almost five. I like dogs and flowers and I’m going to be a medic nin one day. Do you want to be friends?”

Takumi is giving her a chance, but she can tell he’s tense, waiting to jump in at any second.

The boy says nothing for a moment, his hands shaking as they almost form a seal. “I am called Kinoe.” He finally mumbles, indecision muddling his chakra until a bright light of determination sparks through. He lifts his mask, just a fraction, “But my name is Tenzo.”

(“I’m always the useless one.” Sakura says, looking down at Naruto’s sleeping face. Yamato stands next to her, not the same as Kakashi, but not the worst change she’s ever known. “I think you’re too harsh with yourself, Sakura. You’re your own worst critic. Believe in your abilities. You are as much a part of Team Seven as any of us.” Yamato says, his ghoulish facebrightening with a smile.)

There’s a seal on his tongue, Kagami says.

“Hello, Tenzo-kun!” Sakura beams. She gently reaches out, giving him time to move away, and takes his hands in hers. “Let’s be friends!”

Flowers start to grow on the tree branches.

xxxxxxx

By the time Itachi and Ryuu burst into the hallway and promptly get stuck at the warded door, Sakura has persuaded Tenzo to sit down on the floor with her and play word games while Takumi secures the room.

“Pretty.” Sakura says brightly.

“Poisonous.” Tenzo replies.

Sakura frowns at him, “You’re supposed to say something nice.”

“Poisons can be useful.”

That’s when Ryuu arrives, yelling through the doorway for Takumi to let him in. Takumi scrambles to do so, then gets a whack on the head for not trying to verify Ryuu’s identity beforehand.

Itachi follows behind the older man, hesitating at the sight of Sakura, sitting and holding hands with a Mask.

Ryuu heads immediately to Sakura’s bed, where Kakashi lies sleeping. Her parents are in the next bed, curled up together as if taking a nap.

“Sakura, are you okay?” Itachi asks urgently, hurrying to join her on the floor, his dark eyes scanning every inch of her. They freeze at her hand, so Sakura looks down.

Her hand is covered in dried blood, rust flaking off her skin. She feels tears spring to her eyes and blinks furiously to make them go away.
Tenzo takes her hand in his, blue chakra gently cleansing her coppery skin. “It’s your turn to pick a nice word, Sakura-san.” He reminds her, his voice soft, barely audible.

Sakura smiles at him, “Thanks.”

“Who are you?” Itachi asks, directing his question at Tenzo. There’s an uncharacteristic hostility in his voice.

“I was called Kinoe. But my sister said I am Tenzo.”

“And you were with the force that attacked us tonight?”

“I can’t say.” Tenzo shakes his head.

Itachi scowls, his little face darkening at once. “We’ll see. Ryu-san, Sakura has caught one of her assailants.”

Ryuu looks over, brow raising at the sight of them on the floor. “Nice work, kid.”

“I didn’t catch Tenzo-kun, we’re friends now.” Sakura informs them all, gripping Tenzo’s hand.

Ryuu turns his incredulous stare on Takumi, “Did you know about this?”

Takumi makes a face. “I’m not at liberty to say. Sakura-chan made me promise.”

Ryuu flicks Takumi’s forehead.

“Ow! Okay, well, Tenzo – sorry, the **assailant**, entered the room via tree and tried to steal Kakashi-senpai’s eye, but Sakura-chan befriended him before he could. He never stood a chance.”

Ryuu gives Sakura a severely unimpressed look, “No. You are not keeping the viper in our nest. I don’t fancy getting my throat slit in the night and he wasn’t cleared to enter Suna. If he gets in with us, he’ll have the perfect chance to start an incident. No.”

“I will go back to Konoha and report to – ” Tenzo cuts off, his chakra buckling as if under a blow, “To my superior. I will say the mission was a failure, with a catastrophic loss, and that I did not manage to achieve my goal. None of that is false, so my superior will not question my report. It’s likely they will just be happy at least one of their agents survived.”

“You can’t go back to ROOT!” Sakura protests. “They’re horrible! They put a seal on your tongue, that’s just gross!”

“Ah. So, it’s not so much that you won’t talk, it’s that you can’t.” Ryuu surmises. He turns to Takumi. “Do you think you can take a look at it?”

Takumi nods, crouching in front of Tenzo and Sakura.

“You’ll have to take off your mask.” Takumi says.

Tenzo’s hand trembles in Sakura’s, just a little.

“It’s okay, Tenzo.” Kakashi says, his voice a low, sleepy rumble. Sakura jumps, delight soaring through her at the sound of his voice, but the way he was deliberately not looking at her dampens her enthusiasm.

“You know this kid?” Ryuu asks, hands on hips.
“Our paths have crossed before.” Kakashi says evasively, pulling himself into a sitting position without so much as a groan, even though Sakura knows he’s in pain.

“You vouch for him?”

Kakashi looks at Tenzo steadily, then nods.

“We’ll close our eyes if you take your mask off.” Sakura promises earnestly.

“I won’t.” Ryuu says.

“I need my eyes to see,” Takumi says sheepishly, “Otherwise I might start sealing his nose, or something.”

Tenzo unlaces his fingers from Sakura’s and reaches up to his mask. Sakura looks away politely, even though she’s seen his face in her dreams.

“Open your mouth, please?” Takumi says. “Okay. Phew. Wow, this is… some nice, but really, really mean work.”

“Think you can disable it?”

“Yep, but I can’t remove it fully. It will remain until the death of the one who used it. In this case… you know who. Presumably not an intentional choice, since that means all of his agents will be free to talk the moment he dies. I don’t recognise the seal work. It’ll take me a couple hours to fix it up.”

Ryuu nods, looking faintly proud, then defers to Kakashi, “What should we do with him?”

“Fix his seal, have a pleasant chat, then escort him back to Konoha – directly into the Hokage’s custody.” Kakashi says. Tenzo makes a small noise of protest. “The Hokage has ignored his actions for too long. With an actual agent of Root, captured alive, willing and able to talk, he has to see reason.”

“And if he doesn’t, what happens to Tenzo-kun?” Sakura asks sharply. “If Mister Hokage-sama doesn’t believe him, won’t he give him back to ROOT?”

An uncomfortable silence hangs in the air.

“We can’t just cut him loose. He’s the key to unlocking a conspiracy, one that has repeatedly put you in danger.” Ryuu says, an uncompromising slant to his chakra. Takumi is uneasy. Kakashi has pulled his chakra right back. “ROOT agents commit suicide to avoid capture. They always have. This is the first real chance we’ve had to obtain vital intelligence.”

“But he’s a boy, not a scroll.” Sakura says, confused. “You can’t just pick him up and take him where you want because he knows stuff you don’t. He’s got a name and he likes flowers too. If taking him to Mister Hokage-sama means he might get hurt, then I won’t let you do it!”

The grown-ups are silent. Itachi’s chakra says he’s tense, waiting to spring into action. The way he’s looking between Ryuu and Takumi makes Sakura think he’s on her side, not theirs.

“It’s alright, Sakura.” Tenzo says calmly. “I’ll be fine. I promise.”

Sakura turns to look at him, forgetting her silent vow not to peek at his bare face. She’s surprised by how young he looks, with big eyes and long hair. He looks a bit older than Shisui, maybe.

“If they give you back to ROOT, I’ll find you.” Sakura says solemnly, meaning it whole-heartedly.
Kagami might pretend to be mean, but this time she’s in perfect agreement. Tenzo is going to become Yamato, her friend and a member of Team Seven.

A dim, muffled emotion starts to blossom in Tenzo’s chakra.

*Joy, Kagami tells her, he’s afraid to feel it, so he’s pushing it back.*

Sakura feels a pain in her chest. She throws her arms around Tenzo, ignoring his slight *huff* of surprise and the alarm blaring from Itachi’s chakra. She tucks her face into the crook of Tenzo’s neck. *You’re going to be fine,* she thinks fiercely, *whatever was supposed to happen that leads you to becoming one of Team Seven, I’ll make sure it happens again.*

When she looks up, Kakashi is looking at her for the first time since he woke up. She’s not sure what his chakra means.

After Sakura’s parents are revived and her puppies wake up, everyone debriefs and starts the long process of cleaning up. Sakura is hugged to death by both parents, then licked back to life by her dogs. She doesn’t say anything when the man with the hole in his stomach is dragged out. No one has mentioned what happened to her parents yet, and she hopes they never find out. What if they didn’t want to hug her anymore after they knew what she’d done? That their little girl had taken a life?

Kakashi is studying one of the masks when she finds him. Momo sniffed him out for her, Misa left to supervise Takumi’s clean-up. Kakashi is standing in the middle of his room, surrounded by broken furniture and scorch marks. Sakura hesitates in the doorway, uncertain of the welcome she’ll receive. She doesn’t think Kakashi is mad at her, not exactly, but he’s not happy with her either.

Sakura picks Momo up and holds him aloft like an offering, “U-um, Kakashi-sensei?”

He turns slightly, tossing the mask in his hands up and down. He doesn’t say anything. Sakura winces, then steps into the room, holding Momo in front of her face as a shield.

*“Are you okay?” She asks. “You were really sad. Was it because of my back?”*

Kakashi’s chakra is still restrained, so she can’t read his reaction at all. His visible eye just continues to stare at her blankly. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think he wasn’t listening to her at all.

*Do you remember what to tell him?* Kagami asks.

*Uh-huh,* Sakura replies.

She shuts the door behind her, wishing they were in a Room of Doom. This isn’t the kind of conversation she wants to be overheard by anyone.

*“I got that scar when I was nearly kidnapped by Kumo.”* Sakura lies steadily, keeping her face straight and neutral. A little of Kakashi’s chakra slips out, a wash of shock. *“They found me in Konoha when I was alone. I didn’t have any friends back then, so I used to just read in the library and then walk home by myself. It was only one man, I think. I went into an alley and then I couldn’t move. I was really scared all of a sudden. And then the bad man grabbed me. I screamed really loud and a Mask came. They fought and I was too afraid to run, then the bad man tried to hit the Mask and I got in the way by accident. It was… like a sword, but it crackled and it was really bright to look at. It… It was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. Worse than when I fell out of a tree when I was only little. And then I felt my chakra move. It went to my back and I… I knew what to do. I couldn’t heal*
it all, but I tried. When I was done, the Mask had taken the bad man away.”

Kakashi sits down on the overturned bed, lacing his fingers together in a pensive pose. “How do you know they were from Kumo?” He says finally, his voice hoarse.

“I’ve read lots of books in the library and one of them talks about all the big villages! And Kumogakure has lots of lightning jutsu and the people there usually have dark skin, like the man I saw.”

“When did this happen?”

“I think it was last year? I’d already had my birthday, so I was four, not three. Not like I am now, which is four, nearly five. I think?”

“So, you managed to heal a potentially fatal wound on your own, without hand-seals.” Kakashi says flatly.

Well, Kagami did.

“Yes.” Sakura says with certainty. “I couldn’t get rid of the scar because, well,” She twists, trying to reach her shoulder blades, without much success. She flaps her hands demonstratively, “Didn’t work.”

“And no one else came to help while all this was going on?”

“It was really fast.”

“Do your parents know?”

“No! Of course not! They’d only worry.”

“Sakura… it’s normal for parents to worry about their kids. Especially when their kids are getting attacked in the streets.”

“Well, I fixed it. It didn’t even hurt anymore, really, so as long as I kept it hidden, they’d never have to worry. But I was scared afterwards… I kept having nightmares and then sometimes I thought I saw the bad man watching me. When that happened, it was like I was in the alley again and my back hurt so much… It happened twice in front of Mikoto-san! And then my parents worried anyway.”

Sakura looks down, feeling genuinely bad. If she had been able to hide her reactions to the dreams better, her parents would never have thought she was being hurt. They wouldn’t have been so stressed.

“Sakura.” Kakashi says.

She looks up, startled.

His eye curves up in a smile, “How would you feel if I told you I never talked about my problems? That I just let them fester and rot inside me, until I couldn’t breathe against the pain?”

Sakura’s face falls, “I’d hate it, that’s horrible!”

“That’s what you’re doing.” Kakashi tells her, his posture returning to his usual sprawl. His chakra rushes back in a mixture of sadness, grief, horror and a rage, burning dark inside him.

Sakura opens her mouth to argue, but pauses, thinking about it.
“I’m going to tell the Hokage about this, too.” Kakashi says. “You go to Suna with Ryuu, Takumi, Itachi and your parents. Have fun in the sun, okay? I’ll take care of Tenzo.”

“Okay,” Sakura mumbles, fiddling with her shirt, “Don’t forget to take care of yourself, too. You were really upset last night.”

A heavy hand lands on her head, ruffling her hair. “About that… I’ve been told I owe you a thank you. You saved me, didn’t you?”

Sakura flushes, shaking her head under his hand. “N-no! I just kicked the Mask when they tried to get your eye! I didn’t even know you had one under your hitae-ate.”

“It’s special. It was a gift, from a friend.”

Sakura is awestruck. You can give people *eyes* as a present? Where do you get them? She’s never seen any in the shops and stalls in Konoha.

*Dummy*, Kagami laughs.

Sakura puts Momo in Kakashi’s lap, smiling at how his hand automatically drops to fuss the puppy. “I owe you a thank you, too. I… when I… stopped the man, I felt – well, I felt like I did whenever I remembered getting hurt in the alley. Like everything froze and only the worst things in my head stayed. And then the next thing I remember is you. So, thank you for being there, Kakashi-sensei.”

“Not a problem. I’m sorry I wasn’t much use after that.” Kakashi says, stroking Momo’s soft little ears.

“It’s not your fault! Takumi-kun said you hadn’t shed your battle-armour yet, but I didn’t see you wearing any at all? It sounds heavy, Kakashi-sensei. You probably shouldn’t wear it.”

Kakashi laughs, then says slowly, ponderingly, “Maybe I won’t.”

Sakura isn’t allowed to heal anyone.

She sulks in the wagon, her little face contorted with her best frown. It looks like Fugaku’s, because his is so impressive.

Her mother’s head isn’t bad anymore and her father had just breathed in too much sleeping gas to wake up on his own, so Ryuu had done something weird where he *pulled* the smoke out of his lungs through his mouth, and he woke up just fine. Takumi’s various cuts and scrapes have been cleaned and bandaged by Ryuu, not Sakura, even though Kagami told her how to do it and everything.

She told everyone that she felt fine and they seemed to believe her after quickly checking her over. She didn’t bring up the deep bruises she had on her wrists from where Kakashi had grabbed her, because she didn’t want him to feel bad. Her throat hurts from where the Mask picked her up.

But worst of all is the cut across her chest.

She only discovered it when she got changed out of her bloody clothes, ready for a shower. Then she saw the red line, going from the tops of her shoulders and meeting at her collarbones. She remembered the moment Kagami received it in her life, when Sasuke flashed his blade at her, testing to see if she could heal it too after she survived the Chidori. He’d cut right across her chest. Kagami had sealed the wound at once. For Sakura, it looks like a couple days’ old wound, scabbing over. It’s
itchy and painful.

Sakura tries not to scratch it, not wanting to draw any attention to the hidden wound.

_You’re healing that as soon as possible, _Kagami _says._

Sakura doesn’t reply, trying to push her thoughts into a box that Kagami can’t access. She doesn’t want her big sister to hear that she has no intention of healing either the slice across her chest, or the lightning-burn on her back.

What if healing them just means they go right back to Kagami? Kagami couldn’t heal them herself. She had been trapped inside Sakura’s mind for months, but her wounds still bled and they still hurt her. She grunted whenever she moved because she was in constant pain. If Sakura can slowly take those wounds away, time will heal them for her.

Kagami’s death had been horrific. She had been alone and in utter agony, every nerve alight. Sasuke had hurt her over and over again out of spite, out of frustration that she just wouldn’t die. She was covered in wounds that she didn’t deserve.

If Sakura can help, she will.

xxxxxxx

Getting into Suna wasn’t as climactic as she had been expecting. They just signed some forms, flared their chakra, and went through some tests to see if they were who they said they were. Sakura clutched her dog-stick just in case someone tried to snatch her babies from her, but she seemed to pass the tests without much bother.

They entered Suna, leaving the wagon and the horses with one of the civilians who’d met them at the entrance. Which was way too long and creepy, in Sakura’s opinion.

“Suna is hot.” Sakura informs the group. She’s beaming, chuffed. It is a vacation! There’s no sea, not yet, but she’s sure it’s close by. Everywhere looks like a beach.

“You have a talent for observation.” Ryuu says dryly.

_You do, actually, so he can shove his sarcasm where the sun –_

_Onee-chan!_

_Sorry, sorry._

“Sakura, we’re going to head to the marketplace. You wanted to get your partner in crime a gift, right?” Sakura’s mother says. She’s holding Sakura’s dog-stick, insisting that she must be tired. Momo and Misa are panting, grinning down at her.

Sakura hops up and down, “Oh! Oh, yes! I forgot, Shisui-kun wanted sand, but only if I could find some.”

They all look around them at the desert they’re standing in the middle of.

Sakura drops to her knees and starts scooping up sand.

“Sakura…” Her mother says warningly.

Sakura frowns, but lets go of the sand. It kept falling out of her hands, anyway. She’ll have to find
some better sand for Shisui.

Ryuu, Takumi and Itachi go to secure the new hotel they’re staying at, to make sure it’s not full of ROOT this time.

Sakura trails behind her parents as they shop and chat, acting just as they normally would. She stares at their backs, wondering what’s wrong with her. She can’t seem to get past what happened last night, the feel of her fist punching through another person. It wasn’t like when she stomped on Fugaku’s floor. She can feel herself slipping into something calm but remote. She feels very far away from her parents, even though they’re right in front of her.

Sakura stops walking, waiting for them to notice.

Their chakra is relieved, happy. They’re glad to finally be here.

Sakura feels them slip away around a corner. She’s never left their sides before, not like this. She’s never run off or been naughty or done anything really wrong. They trust her so much. If they knew that her dreams had made her different, not the Sakura they knew and loved, if they knew that she had hurt someone on purpose last night…

Sakura finds a stone bench under some desert willows and sits down. Her thoughts feel heavy, with a strange weight to them that she’s not used to.

The Mask wasn’t going to attack her. They were just standing there, and she attacked before they got the chance to do it first.

*You had to,* Kagami says softly, *they’d just hurt Okaa-san and they would have hurt you too. You know that.*

But for that split second before her fist made contact and the Mask still lived, she felt emotion crack their blank slate chakra for just a moment. *Fear.* They were afraid. Of her.

Sakura cries very quietly, not wanting to disturb anyone shopping nearby. Her shoulders are shuddering as she tries to hold her sobs in, tiny cries escaping. She squeezes her eyes shut, tears pouring down her cheeks and landing in her lap, like a little shower of rain.

*I know I had to do it,* she thinks, gulping in air between the wrenching sobs, *but I wish I hadn’t. If Tenzo-kun was good, if he could be my friend… what if they all could? What if the Mask Mikoto-san killed had a family? And all of the Masks in the inn, at least one of them had to be good. If I’d talked to them… just one more… I could have saved at least one more.*

Takumi hadn’t killed one of the Masks. He’d sent them to sleep. Sakura heard Ryuu say they weren’t necessary anymore, just as her mother carried her out of the room. She’d heard the sword come down. She’d felt the chakra vanish.

*Just one more.*

“Why are you crying?”

Sakura freezes, her cries cutting off abruptly. She wipes her stinging eyes and looks up.

A little boy with blood-red hair and pale green eyes stands before her.

*(The monster swipes, and she goes flying. She hits the tree hard, knocking all the air out of her, and then the clawed hand begins to squeeze and she can’t breathe. A rib cracks and she screams.)*
Kagami had said, *stay away from Gaara, if you can.*

Sakura sniffs, then offers him a watery smile. *I'm not scared of you,* she thinks wearily, *you're just a little boy.*

Gaara’s eyes widen a fraction at being on the receiving end of a smile. There’s no blood-red kanji on his forehead. Besides the dark marks around his eyes, he looks like any other kid.

She knows Gaara of all people won’t judge her, so tells him the truth, “I killed someone last night when they hurt my mother.”

Gaara just looks at her, his little blank face unchanged by her admission. “If they hurt your mother, they deserved to die. Some people don’t deserve to live.”

Sakura shakes her head, a rueful smile on her lips, “That’s not true. Everyone deserves to live. We all deserve the chance to do better tomorrow if we didn’t do well today.”

Gaara stares at her. His chakra is constantly seething, a rage of bleak resignation and anger warring with faint hope and need. She can feel him drifting closer to her, drawn in.

*He isn’t as volatile as I had anticipated,* Kagami says, sounding surprised, *but still, don’t let him get too close. The Gaara I knew killed for fun until he met Naruto. Naruto changed him. He was just a lonely boy, in the end.*

Sakura smiles faintly to herself. She knows how to help lonely boys, after all.

“Can I tell you a secret?” Sakura asks, leaning forward on the bench.

Gaara nods, eyes wide.

“I’m a Monster.” Sakura says.

Gaara’s mouth falls open.

***

Hello, friends.

So many of you were like, oh I hope Gaara shows up!

Of course he does! This precious raccoon boy is the LIGHT OF MY LIFE. At this point in the canon timeline, Yashamaru is still alive and Gaara isn’t quite so murdery. Not yet, anyway.

Sakura is very tired but Toddler Therapy Hour waits for no one!

Here’s a slightly early update, because the last one ended on a mean cliffhanger and I’m SORRY. I mean, not really, but… hehehe.

Does Kakashi believe Sakura’s Kumo story? Possibly! How did Kagami think of it? She remembered the Hyuuga Incident, in which Kumo tried to kidnap baby Hinata, which happened when they were three. Yes, I’m sorry, Neji’s dad is already dead.

You thought the next sad boy Sakura would adopt would be Gaara, but nope! Sad Flower Boy got there first! In canon, at this point in the timeline, Tenzo is sent by Danzo to steal Kakashi’s Sharingan, but they actually already know each other and they’ve been through some Stuff together, so through the Power of Friendship, Tenzo’s like screw it! I’m choosing my friend over my
brainwashing community of terrifying orphans! And then Danzo’s like: *evil laugh* I shall see you all HANG IN HELL

But then the Sandaime shows up and he’s all like, nope. I’m taking Plant Boy. For the good of Konoha, which you’re all about, right Danzo, ol’ pal?

And Danzo’s just: *sad evil laugh*

So technically Tenzo should’ve tried to steal Kakashi’s eye a couple months ago. But… because reasons. It happened now.

So, the Sandaime got Danzo a mission full of his favourite targets for the Rinne Festival! Lol jk Kakashi chose the team, but seriously, Danzo’s after Kakashi’s Sharingan (or Itachi’s, if that fails), Usagi’s sealing whatnot and Sakura’s healing. And they’re all sent out of the village, practically gift-wrapping them for ROOT. At least, in Danzo’s eyes anyway.

His creepy, stolen eyes.

Too bad Ryuu tagged along!

Quick poll for fun: Who’s your favourite villain? (they can be from any book, show, anything!)

If you don’t have one, like me, who’s your favourite sidekick? Mine is Robin. I just love that colourful, cheerful kid so much.

(Dogwatch Update: Two dogs had a Very Good Nap.)
Chapter 22

The hope and awe in Gaara’s soul is almost painful. But not everything inside him is as beautiful. There’s a black mass of hatred and rage at his centre, a bit like the edge of darkness that sometimes touches Naruto’s aura.

*He’s a jinchuuriki, like Naruto. That means he has a demon inside of him. He can’t control it. He kills whenever he loses his temper, so tread lightly, Kagami cautions, the beast is always whispering to him, trying to trick him.*

Sakura beams.

She knows what to do.

“Sit with me!” She says, patting the stone bench. “I don’t have any friends in Suna, so I’d like to make one.”

Gaara’s pale eyes trace her face hungrily. He moves like a predator, starved of prey, jerky and over-eager as he takes a seat next to her. She can hear the hiss of sand around them, but it’s lost in the sweet glow of Gaara’s tentatively growing happiness.

“I’m Haruno Sakura.” She says, deciding to leave off the rest of the introduction for now. “What’s your name?”

“Gaara.” He says simply. His voice is hoarse, as though he is unused to speaking.

“Hi, Gaara-kun! Do you want to be my friend?”


“Friends are nice and they take care of you and just knowing you have them gives you a warm glow, like you’re sitting by a fire and everything’s alright. It’s okay if you don’t have any yet. I didn’t used to, either. The other kids didn’t really like me…” Sakura says, biting her lip. Even now, after everything that’s happened and all the friends she has made, Ami’s words are still like hooks in her heart.

“Because you’re a monster.” Gaara says, nodding as if this makes sense.

“Nope! I wasn’t a monster yet. They just thought I was ugly and weird.” Sakura makes herself laugh, a little self-conscious.

Gaara’s eyes narrow, “And so you killed them.”

“H-ha…haha… no. Nope. I was never any good at standing up for myself. But then there was this kid, a boy that no one liked. All the parents whispered that he was a monster and their kids weren’t allowed to play with him. But he acted like he didn’t care. He just played on his own, a big smile on his face like he was having the time of his life. I… envied him. I wished I could be like that. And then one day, I was in the park and some old guy spat in his face for no reason. I was shocked but more than that, I was furious. I’ve never been so cross in all my life! I charged over there and I told him off! When he kept badmouthing him, I punched him in the knee! He called Naruto a monster like it was a bad thing, so I told Naruto that I like monsters. And then he became my best friend.”

Gaara inhales sharply, “Why do you like monsters? We’re scary. People run away from us for a
good reason. I’ve killed a lot of people.”

“I’ve… I’ve only killed one,” Sakura admits, putting her hands on her knees to stop their shaking, “But it was bad. I punched a hole through him. There was a lot of blood. I… um…”

*Tell him why you like monsters, Sacchan,* Kagami suggests, her voice unusually kind, *it sounds like he needs to hear it.*

“I like monsters because everyone else hates them and despite that, they keep going. They keep trying. Naruto’s always smiling, you know? Even before anyone ever smiled back, he did it all the same. And you, Gaara-kun… you asked me why I was crying. You’ve been very nice to me. I think monsters are so often alone because they’re so special. They stand out. Like the tallest flower in a bunch, they get cut down first. But I think monsters have a lot of love in their hearts. When you go a long time without being able to give someone your love, your heart gets very full and heavy. It might even hurt sometimes. But that just means when you *do* find someone, you can give them as much love as they need, because you have so much of it to spare!” Sakura smiles, picturing Naruto and the rest of the Monsters, her quirky misfit circle of friends, each one fiercely loyal and loving in their own way.

Gaara frowns, looking away. He seems to be thinking hard, or listening to something Sakura can’t hear. Kagami did say his demon whispered to him. Sakura hopes Naruto doesn’t have anything like that. She probably can’t tell a demon off. Though she’d definitely try.

“I’m a monster because there’s someone else who lives inside me.” Sakura says breezily, enjoying the sun on her face. She’s looking forward to spring.

Kagami makes a strangled sound.

Sakura gives Gaara a cheeky grin, revelling in the shock in his eyes. Every time he shows emotion that isn’t anger, she feels like she’s slowly drawing him out. Pulling him free of the darkness his demon surrounds him with.

“You…” Gaara stares at her, utterly speechless.

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“Yep! There’s a girl in my head. She helps me, sometimes, but other times… she shows me horrible things. I have nightmares of my home being destroyed, my family and friends dying all around me, being worthless and helpless… At first, I couldn’t stand it. I didn’t know why it was happening, why I kept seeing such horrible things. It made me act weird and people started treating me differently. They interrogated me, trying to figure out what was going on. Why I wasn’t *normal* like I was supposed to be. If I didn’t have Naruto, I think I’d get sick of it. I’d act out so there’d be no doubt that I was strange. I’d be as monstrous as possible to make them leave me alone. But I have Naruto, my little brother. We can be monsters together, which means we don’t *have* to be mean or scary. We can just… be.”

Kagami has buried her face in her free hand. She’s mumbling nonsense, sounding utterly defeated. Dummy, dummy, dummy...

Gaara moves so quickly even Sakura’s newly-honed reflexes can’t save her. His hand snatches hers and clutches it desperately.

“I want that.” He says, eyes wide and beseeching. “I want to be monsters with you. There’s someone who talks to me too. They want me to kill. It makes them happy. With them, I’m not alone, so I like making them happy. But if I had you, I wouldn’t have to kill anyone at all.”
Sakura pauses, dumbstruck. She hadn’t thought he would react so strongly.

Yeah, it’s not like I warned you or anything, Kagami groans, ugh, it’s fine. You can swat away his sand with enhanced strength and break through his sand barrier with one punch. You just better hope you’re fast enough to run from his sand.

I’m not running away, Sakura replies, he needs me.

I can think of several psychopaths who need you, but you aren’t throwing yourself on their swords, are you?

…Which psychopaths need me?

Sakura, no.

“I should probably get back to my parents.” Sakura says, looking around. She can’t sense their chakra anymore, but she’s pretty sure she can track them down on her own. If Gaara ever lets go of her hand.

“You can’t leave.” Gaara says tonelessly. His face looks scary, but his chakra is just scared. “I bet your parents hate you. Why would you want to go back to them?”

Sakura chooses to ignore that remark about her parents, who are the greatest in the world, and instead just wrinkles her nose at him, like she’s seen Mikoto do to tease Sasuke. “Sure I can leave! I don’t want to leave you, but I have to. See, I live in Konoha. It’s got lots of trees. Can’t you just come with me? We can ask your parents – ”

“No.” He says sharply. The sand rustles. “My father is the Kazekage. He hates me. I am defective.”

“That’s mean, Gaara-kun! You shouldn’t be mean, especially not to yourself! Do you want me to go tell your dad off? I did it to Sasuke’s dad and now they’re both my friends.”

Gaara stares at her as if she is something special, awe in his pale green eyes. “You would… dare?”

“Sure!”

“Okay, I’ve heard enough.” An amused female voice says from behind.

Sakura squeaks, whirling around.

A wall of sand suddenly emerges, blocking her view of the newcomer.

“Go away.” Gaara growls.

A foot slams through the sand, sending it cascading everywhere.

Tsunade appears through the shower of sand, her hazel eyes sparkling with mirth. Her familiar chakra washes over Sakura. It feels like a homecoming, bottled warmth and the feeling that everything is going to be alright.

“Tsunade-shishou.” Kagami chokes out through Sakura’s mouth, overwhelmed.

The older woman quirks a brow at her. “Shishou? That’s a new one. Try sama, kid.”

Sakura mouths Tsunade-sama, utterly speechless.
I found you!

She yelps when sand wraps around her, as gentle as her mother’s hands, and slowly pulls her against Gaara’s side. He stands up, taking her with him.

“I’m keeping her.” He says in a low, deadly voice. “You can’t take her. She’s my friend. I’ll kill you.”

“Gaara-kun!” Sakura scolds, trying to put her hands on her hips and failing, since her arms are squarely pinned to her sides with sand.

Tsunade’s mirth is gone. Her chakra says she’s assessing the situation. She walks towards them, testing Gaara’s limits, and stops the moment Gaara goes to snap at her.

“You can’t take the Kazekage’s kid back to Konoha.” Tsunade says to Sakura. “You’d cause a war. Do you want to do that?”

Sakura gasps, “No!”

“Then she’ll stay here.” Gaara says firmly, his eyes daring Tsunade to say differently.

“Can you let me go, please?” Sakura asks, squirming. “It’s a bit itchy.”

Tsunade’s chakra flares in disbelief.

Gaara blinks at her, then the sand starts to loosen.

Itachi lands in front of Sakura, poised to strike.

Gaara flinches back, his grip on the sand tightening. Sakura swallows down a gasp, her mind flashing to the sand gauntlet, the tree, the crack of her ribs. Gaara’s crazed eyes, his panting breaths. The way he’d disposed of her as easily as swatting a fly.

“I’m okay! Itachi!” Sakura squeaks out in one breath, her chest uncomfortably tight.

She’s never seen Itachi look so serious before. He’s looking at Gaara like a hunter facing down a wild beast, thinking of all the ways he can put it down. He blinks and his eyes whirl dizzyingly, red and black warring with each other.

“No!” Sakura protests. “Gaara-kun is my friend, he just doesn’t want to be alone anymore! Please don’t hurt him!”

Gaara laughs.

Sakura gapes at him.

“Hurt me?” He says, his voice thickening, a chilling undertone layered beneath his words. As if two people were talking. His demon, Sakura realises. “Don’t worry, Sakura. They can’t hurt me. No one can.”

“I don’t know about that.” Tsunade drawls.

Gaara seethes, his hands trembling. Sakura can feel the rage he keeps bottled up inside him – most of it as dark as the demon, only some of it his. It must take a lot of willpower to keep it contained as much as he does.
Sakura sighs, then slowly pushes against the sand restraints. They fall with a hiss, her arms pulling free. Gaara’s head snaps round to look at her, his eyes so wide the whites surround his irises.

Sakura gestures for him to step closer. He looks disarmed by that, clearly unused to someone actually wanting him close. Sakura pushes away her sadness at the thought and offers him a little smile, as genuine as she can manage.

Gaara steps closer, ignoring Itachi’s raised hackles.

Sakura gradually raises her arms, making her intentions obvious. When he doesn’t push her away, though his chakra fills with panic and confusion, Sakura gently pulls him to her. She loops her arms around his middle and sinks to her knees. After a second, he follows suit. She can feel sharp particles of sand pressing against her skin, but she doesn’t mind.

Gaara’s hands raise to her neck.

"Enough." Itachi snarls.

Sakura looks up at him reprovingly, willing him to trust her. His dark eyes are near frantic, but he sets his jaw and gives a jerky nod.

Tsunade is standing close enough to intervene, if necessary. She’s looking down at them both with great interest, though her chakra says she’s actually worried.

Gaara’s fingernails dig into Sakura’s throat, ever so slightly.

"Please calm down, Gaara-kun," She whispers, “I’ll tell you a story. There was once a giant fox. He was very grumpy and didn’t like people messing with him, so he chased everyone away if they got too close. One day, a little boy snuck into the fox’s cave and fell asleep, curled up in his enormous tail. The fox got very angry and roared, thrashing his tail, but the boy just laughed and held on. The fox chased the boy for hours around the cave, snapping and biting the air, just barely missing him every time. The little boy had lots of energy after his nap, and was ready to keep playing all night. The big fox quickly got tired and had to flop back down, panting. The boy climbed up to his ears and told him his name. Naruto. The fox grumbled and rolled over, ignoring Naruto’s shriek as he fell off. The fox fell asleep and couldn’t be bothered to start the chase again the next day, so he just left the boy in the cave and let him grow up beside him.

One day, some humans found the cave and poked the fox’s side with swords and spears. The fox snarled and growled, but they wouldn’t leave. The fox chased them off, but when he returned he found that they had stolen Naruto away. Naruto had spent too long being raised by a fox, so when they made him live in their town, he didn’t fit in at all. The people there called him a monster and treated him horribly. Naruto didn’t understand why they hated him so much. What was wrong with monsters? His only friend was the biggest monster around, after all.

The fox burst through the town, looking for his boy, and crushed a lot of houses and made a big mess. The humans hated him even more, and blamed Naruto. They wouldn’t let the two monsters be together again. With all this going on, you would think Naruto would be cruel. Cold. Angry all the time. But he wasn’t. Naruto’s smile had the sun trapped in it and wherever he walked, flowers grew. These flowers were attracted by his sunshine smile, and one day he asked them to grow together into a tree for him. The flowers did their best, winding around each other and stretching up. Eventually, they became a beautiful tree, with their stems and vines all knotted together for the trunk and their petals became blossom for the leaves.

Naruto climbed this tree and escaped the town. He charged off to find his friend, the flowers
following him all the way. The fox smelled him and came to meet him, overjoyed to see him again. But the townspeople had followed the flowers and were right behind Naruto as he hugged the fox’s paw, smiling brighter than all the stars in the sky. For a moment, the fox saw the humans and almost attacked out of instinct to protect his friend, but he saw how they looked at Naruto, with wonder and amazement, and he realised that even though Naruto was a monster, he was so special that humans could love him too.

The people apologised to the fox and Naruto for keeping them apart, and forgave the fox for breaking their houses. Naruto came to live in the town again, but this time he brought his fox friend with him, and they lived together in the biggest house in the world, big enough for a monster fox and a little boy, and they had their beautiful flower tree in the garden, and when Naruto grew up he became the leader of the town and declared that all monsters were welcome. The end.”

Gaara is very quiet, his breathing so calm and even that Sakura thinks he is sleeping. She moves gently back, and his fingertips dig into her skin.

“Don’t leave,” He says, “Stay here, with me. I can make you a big tree with my sand, and a house and a fox. I – I’ll make you stay.”

“I have to go back to Konoha, because it needs me to protect it.” Sakura says firmly, thinking of the horrible dream of her village, turned to dust. “You should do the same with Suna! Think about it. You’re the strongest person in the village, right? Maybe the rest of the villagers are scared of you now, but if you showed them you want to keep them safe, that fear would turn to respect. Your father’s the Kazekage, so you might inherit the hat one day! And if you do, you’ll need to care about more than just one person. You’ll need to care about all of them. Even if they’re mean. That’s real strength, Gaara-kun. Being kind even when you aren’t given a reason to be. It’s easy to be nice to someone who’s nice to you… but to show kindness to the undeserving… you have to be truly strong to be able to do that. You can find meaning in your life… by taking care of others. I have.”

Gaara pulls back to gaze at her, his eyes searching. Sakura lets her true feelings shine – hope that he’ll see things her way, excitement at making a new friend, and sadness that she has to lose him so soon.

“Gaara!” A harried-looking man calls, his chakra a mass of terror and determination.

“Hello,” Sakura says, “Who are you?”

“I – I’m Yashamaru, Gaara’s uncle.” He says, looking puzzled at her calmness.

“Oh, good! We were just talking about how I wanted to take Gaara-kun home with me.”

“But… I’m afraid that isn’t a good idea. You aren’t from here, are you? Gaara is very important to Suna, he means a lot to us.”

“Then why don’t you treat him better?” Sakura asks, genuinely curious.

Yashamaru reacts as if she’s stabbed him, his eyes widening, clutching his chest.

“I would look after him. I know I can’t, that he has to stay here, but you should know, he’s my friend and I’m going to be writing to Suna for regular updates on how he is. He’s really nice, if you give him a chance.”

“I know that.” Yashamaru says defensively. “We’re family.”

Sakura wrinkles her nose at him, “Okay, I guess.”
“You think I should protect the people who hate me.” Gaara says flatly, still processing her words.

“I think you should protect the people who are scared of you,” Sakura corrects, “And eventually, they’ll realise that you care. That even monsters have love to give. Especially monsters. You know why. Because –”

“We have a lot of love to spare.” Gaara whispers, touching his chest.

“Exactly.” Sakura grins at him.

Gaara gives her a very small, hesitant smile.

Yashamaru’s chakra throbs in pain and hope.

“I’m in Suna on vacation, so I’m not leaving straightaway. I only just got here! So, let’s play later, Gaara-kun!” Sakura beams, finally standing up. Her legs are a bit achey from crouching for too long.

Gaara stands up, his hands almost reaching out for her, “You… you’ll still be here tomorrow?”

“Yep!”

“Okay. Then… tomorrow.” He says shyly. He darts a quick, pleased look at Yashamaru, as if saying look what I did!

Yashamaru smiles down at him, his aura swirling with bittersweet colours. He’s very happy, but there’s an untouchable core of grief inside him.

Sakura waves at Gaara as he leaves, Yashamaru placing a hand on his shoulder and leading him away. Gaara looks over his shoulder, waving back, still wearing his shy smile.

Sakura takes off a shoe and turns it upside down, watching as sand pours out. She grimaces, wriggling. Her skin is liberally coated, her pretty sundress besieged with itchy particles. She shakes like Misa and Momo after a bath.

Itachi kneels in front of her, his eyes back to normal. He grips her shoulders, “Sakura! Are you alright?”

“Yep. Just itchy.” She grins reassuringly.

He sags in relief, closing his eyes. He seemed to have been holding his breath the whole time Gaara was around.

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Tsunade says.

Sakura looks up at her, wide-eyed.

The older woman kneels down, hazel eyes assessing every inch of her. Her eyes narrow when Sakura moves back a little, uncommonly nervous in the face of someone she’s been waiting to meet for a long time.

Tsunade taps her ribs gently, hardly touching her. Sakura squeaks, more in surprise than pain, but Tsunade frowns. She reaches forward again.

Sacchan, the scar! Kagami says urgently.

Sakura abruptly remembers Itachi is right there, watching, as Tsunade pokes and prods and her dress
slips down a little at the neck and the scar –

“No!” Sakura jerks back, clutching her dress to flatten it down.

Itachi looks confused.

Tsunade looks suspicious. “Okay. Fine. But we’re going to find your parents, and then we’re all going to find somewhere quiet and private so I can examine your ribs. That kid could’ve seriously hurt you.”

Sakura trembles. What can she do? If she runs away, Tsunade will catch her – or Itachi – and she’ll have risked upsetting the person she needs to convince for no reason at all. But if she stays, Tsunade will find her scars, possibly even in front of her parents, who have only just started to come to terms with the fact that she’s not being hurt after all.

*Push the abusive parents angle, Kagami advises, say you don’t want to do it in front of them.***

Sakura swallows, hard. One day, she’s going to stand on a rooftop in Konoha and shout for the world to hear that she really does have the best parents ever. But not today.

*I don’t want Itachi to start suspecting my parents again.*

*So, ask him to go find them. Tell him they were by the village entrance.*

*But they were in the market…*

*Just do it, please.*

“Itachi, could you go get my parents, please? They’ve got Misa and Momo and I want to see them. They were by the village entrance.” Sakura says, not having to fake the shakiness in her voice.

Itachi gives Tsunade a sideways look, like he doesn’t quite trust her with Sakura.

>Please?” Sakura says, giving him a hopeful smile.

He sighs, then his face hardens and he turns to Tsunade, “Take care of Sakura. She is currently vulnerable to more than just… strange children. Understand?”

Tsunade eyes Sakura with renewed interest. “Sure.”

Itachi hesitates only for a moment, then vanishes in a flicker.

“Okay,” Sakura rounds on Tsunade, “Please please please don’t examine me in front of anyone! I don’t like getting changed in front of people!”

“But you’re fine with doing it in front of me?”

“You’re not giving me much of a choice.” Sakura grumbles.

Tsunade snickers, probably at Sakura’s pout. “Okay, kid. Back to my hotel. I’ll give you a quick check-up, then I’ll have you back with your parents before you know it.”

xxxxxxx

Tsunade’s hotel room is cleaner than Sakura would’ve expected, given Kagami’s internal musings on the state of her desk as Hokage. It might be Shizune’s touch, since there’s two beds in the room
and one of them is perfectly made. It’s not the one Tsunade bids her to sit on.

Sakura swings her legs over the edge of the bed, imagining them growing longer and longer until she could walk the distance between Konoha and Suna in no time. Then she could see Gaara whenever she wanted, maybe even bring him home for a visit before his mean Kazekage dad could notice.

Tsunade is performing a regular check-up. Sakura knows exactly what she’s going to do before she does it, which is why it surprises her when she breaks the routine and feels Sakura’s ribs again.

“Right, dress off.” Tsunade says briskly.

*She’s going to see the scars,* Sakura thinks nervously.

*Good, then she can heal them,* Kagami replies. She hasn’t picked up on the underlying cause of Sakura’s anxiety. She thinks she just doesn’t want to get undressed in front of her future mentor.

If Tsunade *did* heal her scars and they went right back to Kagami, what could Sakura do?

She pulls her dress off, fixing her ribbon when she knocks it loose.

Tsunade’s eyes go flat and cold.

She sees the fingertip bruises Kakashi left around her wrists like bracelets, too old for Gaara to be the culprit. She sees the faint marks blossoming across her throat, from when the Mask held her up. Worst of all, she sees the scabbing wound across her collarbones, stretching to her shoulders. There doesn’t even seem to be anything wrong with her ribs.

Tsunade doesn’t say anything. She just wipes away the fingertip bruises, the marks on her neck, and goes to remove the slash wound on her chest.

“Wait!” Sakura yells, covering herself, “Not that one. It has to stay.”

*What?* Kagami says, confused.

“It has to stay?” Tsunade repeats, her jaw clenched. Her chakra is very angry. “Why the hell should it? That wound is from a blade, it was deliberate! Meant to hurt, not kill! Someone wanted you to suffer.”

“Every scar is a lesson we had to learn.” Sakura says seriously.

“It looks like that one’s already sunk in just fine.” Tsunade snaps. “Is this why you didn’t want me to do this in front of your parents? Did they hurt you?”

“NO!” Sakura shouts, springing off the bed, trying to haul her dress back on.

A sharp inhale stops her.

Her back is to Tsunade.

Sakura covers her mouth, aghast.

Tsunade slowly touches the twisted, raised flesh.

“You’ve had this scar for at least six months.” She says dully. “How old were you when you got it?”

“Um… now I’m four, almost five.”
“And then…” Tsunade breaks off, a growl rising in her throat. “How could you possibly survive this? Who would do this? I – ”

“I was in an alley in Konoha.” Sakura begins, miserable. She doesn’t want to have to lie again, but it seems like if you do it once, you have to keep doing it more and more. “There was a man. He grabbed me. Another man in a mask stopped him. They were fighting and I got in the way by accident. There was a really loud crackling noise, and then… the worst pain I’ve ever felt. I almost fainted. But I’ve read a lot of books on healing and I – ”

“Ridiculous.” Tsunade tuts. “There’s no conceivable way you healed this on your own.”

_I did, Tsunade-shishou_, Kagami says quietly, _just like you taught me._

Sakura takes strength from her big sister and turns to face Tsunade, fists clenching in determination. “I did heal it all by myself. And I did without hand-seals. I couldn’t get rid of the scar, though.”

“Prove it.” Tsunade says, pointing to Sakura’s chest. “No hand-seals. Just chakra. If you can do that… well, I might believe you.”

Sakura bites her lip.

_You can do it, Sacchan_, Kagami says, _I know you can._

Sakura is grateful that Kagami didn’t just try to do it herself, but she can’t bear the thought of Kagami getting her scar back because of Sakura. Time doesn’t flow where Kagami is, so she can’t heal all of her injuries by herself. Sakura can do it for her, like a duck sitting on a chicken’s egg, helping it hatch.

_Oh, you dummy_, Kagami says, almost fondly. Sakura had been too lost in thought to notice Kagami’s attention was pointing her way. _I don’t care if I get the scars back. I’d prefer it, actually. It’s better than you being lumbered with my mistakes. Please, Sacchan. You can do this. For both of us._

Sakura nods.

She holds her hands palm-up, so Tsunade can see she’s not forming seals, then closes her eyes. She reaches down into her well of chakra, stoking the flames. She siphons some off, drawing it to her chest. She can feel the wound, how the flesh is torn and damaged. She seeps into it, spreading the chakra the length of the cut.

She’s not sure how long she’s under, but she snaps out of it when she hears Tsunade gasp. She opens her eyes, goes to touch the scar, and feels nothing but smooth, unblemished skin.

_Onee-chan?_ Sakura says urgently, checking in.

Kagami touches her collarbone with her free hand and smiles, radiating warmth. _Well done, little genius._

Tsunade is staring at her in utter astonishment.

“It really wasn’t my parents. So there.” Sakura can’t resist adding, shooting Tsunade a cheeky grin. “I’ve got go now, bye!”

She shoots out of the room, leaving Tsunade to her stunned silence.
She’s barely out the door before she remembers she’s half-naked, and she stumbles into a wall trying to yank her dress on.

She finds her parents at the village entrance with Itachi, all of them beside themselves. After she explains what happened in a highly-edited version of events, her parents calm down. Itachi, on the other hand, is refusing to speak to her. Probably because she sent him astray and then ran off.

After a while, her parents agree to her plan. She knows where Tsunade is staying now, so they decide to interrupt her mid-drinking session (when she’ll be nice and relaxed – Shizune got a lot of important paperwork signed that way), not during a gambling spree (when she’s obnoxious and tends to throw things) and hopefully catch her in a moment of charitable drunkenness.

Itachi is sulking – patrolling – with Usagi and Ryuu, so they didn’t have to explain why they were sneaking out of their hotel in the dead of night to go to another hotel.

The man at the desk in Tsunade’s hotel lobby really doesn’t care why they’re there, he just sends them up without question.

We could be murderers, Sakura thinks indignantly, we could be here to do murder and he doesn’t even care!

Murder’s not on the agenda, kiddo, Kagami drawls, unless you know something I don’t.

Of course not!

Shame.

Her parents stop in front of the room Sakura fled from a few hours ago, both of them smoothing their hair down nervously and fiddling with their clothes.

I hope Tsunade-sama still wants to adopt me even after I ran out of her room half-naked, Sakura thinks mournfully.

It’ll be fine. That sort of thing is great for a healer’s reputation. Fleeing children, running into walls.

Sakura’s mother knocks on the door, nerves trembling through her aura.

The door swings open.

Tsunade is sitting on the end of her bed, swigging from a bottle of whiskey. She glances at them, bleary-eyed. Her chakra says she’s more sober than she looks.

“We’re very sorry to interrupt, Tsunade-sama,” Sakura’s mother says, “But we really need your help.”

Tsunade’s eyes are sharp, despite the fog of drunkenness. “I don’t do anything that involves blood.”

“That’s a good policy.” Sakura’s father remarks.

“We don’t need healing, but we do need you. It’s Sakura, she’s – ”

Tsunade holds her hand up, sipping her whiskey again. She grimaces and squeezes her eyes shut. “You know, I had no idea Sarutobi-sensei would stoop so low to get me to come back to Konoha. The guilt trip from the baby medic is a stroke of genius.”
"I promise you, that is not why we’re here. We need you because, as you have witnessed, Sakura is a genius. We are not a clan, capable of protecting her from village politics and the machinations of Konoha’s secret corners. My parents were never promoted above chunin, it’s likely my husband and I will be the same. The Haruno name means nothing in this world. So, Sakura’s gifts are more of a curse. She stands out for all the wrong reasons. You know what happens to talented children who are left unprotected."

"So, petition a clan to take her on," Tsunade says impatiently, "I’m sure any number of Konoha’s clans would be happy to give her their name."

"We’d love to. But unfortunately, for some reason, Sakura wants you."

Tsunade reels back on the bed, astonished. "Excuse me?"

"Sakura has many of your talents, like the enhanced strength, the healing, everything, so if you were to claim her as your heir, her skills would not seem suspicious."

"We’re going to be friends, too." Sakura says earnestly, "I’ve seen it."

Sakura’s father sighs, "That’s her gift. I’m from a civilian family, there’s no records of my ancestors ever being shinobi, but… somehow, Sakura has inherited a new kekkei genkai. Something so valuable, anyone would kill for it. She has visions of the future, years in advance."

Tsunade scoffs, "Ridiculous. The world is old. If anyone had ever had such a gift, there’s no way there wouldn’t be extensive records about it. And there are no ‘new’ kekkei genkai."

"Yes, there are." Sakura says politely. "Would you like me to prove I can see the future?"

"Be my guest." Tsunade says mockingly, raising her glass as a salute.

Kagami has prepared her for this moment.

"You’re going to give Uzumaki Naruto your special necklace because he convinces you that he’s going to be Hokage. You say that he reminds you of your little brother, whose name I don’t know, and your friend Dan –"

"Fiancé." Tsunade corrects, looking stunned.

"No, I’m sure his name was Dan. Anyway, you’re very afraid of blood but you get over it to help Naruto because he takes a really bad hit for you and it makes you sad. But after that, you come home with him and become the Hokage, because I think Mister Hokage-sama is dead by then."

"What?"

"Yeah, I go to his funeral and we all put flowers down for him. It rains and everyone wears black. I was really, really sad. It makes me sad to think about it, so I try not to. I wasn’t there when you saved Naruto, so I only know what happens from the dreams I had where you told me about it. But I believe you. You’re very honest, you know."

Tsunade sags in her seat, looking thunderstruck. "I… this is ridiculous… I –"

"The seal on your forehead is the Strength of a Hundred Seal. You won’t let me learn it for ages because it takes years off your life, I think. Your apprentice before me – because I’m going to be your next apprentice – is Shizune, I think she’s Dan’s sister? Or cousin? I don’t know. She’s very nice. When you teach me to be a medic nin, you throw a lot of rocks at me and sometimes they hit
me and that’s bad.”

“I hope that never happens.” Sakura’s mother says sternly.

“You make me really strong, like you. I’ll show you! Okaa-san, is there something I’m allowed to break in here?” Sakura asks, tipping her head up to look at her mother.

Her mother sighs, “Sakura, no. You’ll give your poor father a heart attack.”

“Okay, well, I’ll just pretend to punch…” Sakura spins around and faces the wall. She swings at it, nowhere near connecting.

The momentum shatters the wall.

“Oh! Whoops!” Sakura squeaks, running back to hide behind her mother.

“They’re going to think that was me.” Tsunade says automatically, her eyes glazed over in shock.

After about an hour, the debris is cleared away and the hotel manager is appeased with more money than Sakura has ever seen in her life – with Tsunade grumbling about all the bets she’d planned to make with that – and Shizune has fetched three more bottles of sake.

“So, what’s my favourite phrase?” Tsunade points at Sakura, eyes narrowed.

“One grab, a thousand gold.” Sakura recites. Tsunade said that a lot in her dreams.

Tsunade lets out a disbelieving ha! and grabs another bottle, gulping down half the contents in one swing. “You want me to essentially adopt your kid, but let you raise her in Konoha, is that right?”

“Yes, you wouldn’t ever have to see us again, I swear. Just having your name would make certain forces less inclined to…” Sakura’s father looks down at her and cuts off, his mouth tightening.

“You really think her being the youngest Senju wouldn’t make her a target?”

“No more so than she already is. If you say no, we’ll have to ask the Uchiha, who are already interested in her wellbeing – ”

“Shisui-kun said not to, because nobody likes the Uchiha.” Sakura pipes up.

“– or perhaps the Inuzuka… or the Nara… a laidback clan with strong roots that won’t try to take her from us once they realise her potential…”

“So, not the Uchiha, then.” Tsunade says dryly.

“Well…”

“The whole point of having a clan name is that there is a clan. At the moment, it’s just me.”

“One third of the Sannin!” Sakura beams, “You’re really strong and cool.”

“That goes without saying. If I claimed you as my heir, that would make you a direct descendant of Hashirama. You’d be considered high-status in Konoha. That’s a pretty big deal, kid. Could you handle that?”

“Yep! Shisui-kun says I have the manners of an Uchiha, but I shouldn’t marry any of them.”
“Sounds like a sensible boy. If… If I told you about Nawaki and Dan, you must know… everyone around me dies. My entire family, everyone who’s ever put faith in me, shared their dreams with me… they die. Every time.” Tsunade says, her eyes glistening in the dim light of the cracked lamp.

“Everyone dies,” Sakura says, not unkindly, “But it’s okay. I’m not going to die for another ten years or so.”

Her parents gasp. Her father’s chakra feels like he’s been stabbed in the chest.

*Oh, Sacchan, you shouldn’t have said that…*

Tsunade closes her eyes.

“It’s okay!” Sakura says, looking around at them all. “I’m okay!”

“I – I’m not doing this – ” Tsunade goes to stand, her chakra quivering like she’s on the brink of tears.

Sakura takes her hand, speaking directly to Kagami’s beloved shishou, the woman she knows Tsunade will become one day.

“The first dream I ever had was of a man spitting in my friend Naruto’s face. In the dream, I did nothing, and Naruto just left on his own. When it really happened, I did something. I stood up for him. And now we’re best friends! In my dreams, I’m really mean to Naruto, but I’m never going to be like that, ever. So it’s okay. Maybe I will die when the dreams say I will. Maybe I won’t. But I’ve got a chance to change things and that’s more than most people get.”

Sakura’s mother tugs her into a hug, and her father wraps her in his arms.

“Even if you don’t want to be my family, Tsunade-shishou, please, please, *please* come home to heal a boy named Hayate-kun. He’s really nice and I know he’s going to die. That’s something I *can* change. You can save him. You really can. It’s okay to be scared. I’m scared of the dark, sometimes, and of the future. But I can always turn on the light, so it’s not so scary anymore. And when my dream of Naruto came true, I was scared, but I helped him anyway. So maybe the future isn’t so scary either!”

Tsunade takes a deep breath, “For starters… I am not your shishou. I am more than your teacher. I’m the head of your family, and you will learn more than shinobi arts from me. Clan traditions are very important, and I expect you to take it serious – oh! – ”

Sakura leaps at Tsunade, squeezing her in a too-tight hug, “Thank you thank you thank yooooooooou!!”

“Get used to idiots kissing your feet and calling you Sakura-hime,” Tsunade mutters darkly, adjusting Sakura’s grip so she’s no longer cutting off her air supply, “And you’re never meeting Jiraiya. Not ever.”

“He said I was as flat-chested as a boy.” Sakura says sadly.

Tsunade’s chakra flares in fury.

***

Hello, friends!
Does Tsunade believe Sakura’s story? (did Kakashi, for that matter) Does Tsunade think Sakura’s parents are abusive? Find out next time on Dragonball Z!!!

So, I posted a little story about Usagi/Tora, if anyone’s interested in the bunny boy :)

Sakura: Let’s be friends!

Gaara: Okay.

Sakura: :D

Gaara: Now you can never leave.

Sakura: :D… :O :o :o

The vacation’s not over, there’s still plenty of time for them to actually rest and have fun… maybe.

The doggies were with Usagi while the Harunos were off on their secret mission to recruit Tsunade, btw.

It’s nearly Sakura’s birthday!! (in real life, not the story. It’s… it’s still January there. Sigh) It’s also nearly my birthday, so I am almost twenty-five, aka, practically dead in internet years! :D

The first step to Sakura becoming an honorary Senju has begun! That means if she’s put on the same team, it’ll be a Senju, an Uchiha and an Uzumaki working together. I started planning the Retrieve Tsunade arc approximately a billion years ago, so I don’t know why it’s taken this long?? Anyways she’s here! One of my favourite girls!

~

ANBU: Okay, so we found evidence that Danzo is literally eating babies. Just… eating infants and small children. He is, quite frankly… pure evil, sir.


~

ANBU: So, it seems as though Danzo is a little shady, maybe?

Tsunade: Kill him until he is dead.

~

I am SO EXCITED to write what’s coming up. I’ve been plotting it for SO LONG. Just. CUTENESS.

Quick poll for fun: Can you tell me an interesting fact about yourself, please?

For example, when I was ten, I rode up an active volcano on a camel.

(Dogwatch update: Two Good Doggies play with a rabbit)
“It seems a little early in our acquaintance to be performing blood rituals,” Tsunade says dryly, offering her hand to Shizune, “But it’s an old Senju tradition. We used to accept people into the clan by mixing our blood together. I never thought I’d do it one day, but it seems appropriate to do it now.”

“You don’t have to do it, Sacchan.” Kizashi says, biting his lip. “It might hurt a little, but we’ll be right here. And don’t forget you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to!”

“I’ll be okay,” Sakura chirps, “I don’t mind one bit!”

In truth, she’s more worried about Tsunade. The older woman has been running on bravado and sake, but with every second that ticks by, she gets more and more on edge. She’s still afraid of blood, after all.

Sakura sits next to Tsunade, idly waiting her turn for the knife. She’s been stabbed, burned, cut and broken beyond repair. A little scratch won’t be so bad.

Shizune doesn’t look very happy. She’s been tolerating her master’s drunkenness, having strangers over at night, even when one of them broke a wall, but ever since she’s learned of the plan to make Sakura a Senju, she’s been tight-lipped with disapproval.

Shizune always worries about Tsunade. She’s had to take care of her for a long time. She was always getting swindled, so Shizune had to step up a lot to keep her out of trouble. She probably thinks you want Tsunade’s money, Kagami says pensively. Her memories of Shizune are a rare thing – coloured mostly with positive feelings, admiration, kinship, trust. Sakura only had a small dream upon seeing her for the first time. It was of a time in which Sakura was flagging, trying to save a small boy’s leg in an operation, and Shizune joined in without a word. There was no judgement or scorn on her face, only the determination to help.

Sakura takes Tsunade’s hand in hers. The older woman raises a pale eyebrow at her, unimpressed, but Sakura can feel the fine tremble running through her, so she just squeezes her hand. She might not want her help, but she needs it.

“Are you sure, Tsunade-sama?” Shizune asks. She’s wielding a thin blade, sharp and sterile. Tsunade had picked it out of her medical tools with a dim, far-off look in her eye, as if reliving old memories. Sakura wonders if she ever saw someone being inducted into her clan like this before.

Tsunade downs a shot and smacks her lips, clenching her free hand into a fist as if waiting to beat her fears into submission. She slowly relaxes her hand, palm upwards, and offers it to Shizune.

“It’s necessary.” She says shortly, eyes on the empty bottle of sake in her lap. She’s broken out into a sweat.

Shizune grimaces, reaching forward with the knife.

Every one of Tsunade’s muscles abruptly tenses.

“It’s okay, la la la,” Sakura whisper-sings, meeting Tsunade’s incredulous eyes with a smile, “Please don’t worry, la la la, it’s just a sharp ouch like a bee sting! Buzz buzz buzz, it only bites because you’re as pretty as a flower! Buzz buzz buzz, silly old bee! La la la, don’t worry, I’ve got you. It’s not scary, it’s like red wine, or juice, or one of those muddy puddles that looks kind of red. Have you
ever gone splashing in puddles? Let’s do it together sometime, okay?”

“Done!” Shizune says brightly.

Tsunade blinks, a red line across her palm. She very deliberately does not look down. She shudders, but manages to just about keep it together long enough for Shizune to walk around the bed and reach for Sakura’s hand.

Tsunade is a maelstrom of pain, horror and fear. Sakura weather the storm as best she can, resting her head against Tsunade’s arm and murmuring comforting words.

Sakura holds out her hand obediently, “It’s okay. We’re nearly done now, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade hisses through her teeth, holding onto Sakura’s right hand for dear life, “You shouldn’t call me sama, you know.”

Shizune draws the blade swiftly across Sakura’s palm without warning, probably assuming she’d be too scared if she knew it was coming. Sakura gazes in wonder at the fresh wound, blood rapidly pooling. She feels everyone else’s surprise as she bears the pain in silence.

Shizune takes Sakura and Tsunade’s bloody hands and joins them together. Tsunade’s eyes are closed and her lips are moving as if in prayer.

Tsunade’s hand glows with her overpowering chakra, like medicine or strong alcohol, unmistakably hers. Kagami closes her eyes, breathing it in.

Sakura timidly lets her own chakra out, letting it mingle with Tsunade’s. For all that Shisui touts her as a firefly, Sakura thinks her chakra is more like a spring brook, cool and refreshing.

Tsunade lets a different kind of chakra join the mix, something ancient and calm, soothing like the weight of an old book in your lap. Sakura feels their chakra mix, seeping into each other.

“What should I call you?” She asks.

Tsunade’s eyes are open now. She’s staring down at their shared glow with something like wonder.

“Oba-san, if you like.” Tsunade says. “I’m not here to replace anyone.”

Sakura’s mother gives her a small nod, radiating gratitude.

“That’s it, then.” Shizune says, wiping the blood from her hands. She’s wearing a satisfied smile, probably proud of her master’s swift recovery.

Tsunade isn’t doing very well on the inside. She’s still scared and grief is swelling within her like a wave about to crash.

“It’s okay,” Sakura whispers, letting chakra leak out and heal both their palms, “Do you have any pets? I have two puppies named Momo and Misa. They’re very good babies. They hardly ever poop in the house.”

Tsunade takes a deep breath, listing slightly against Sakura. She bears her weight easily, squeezing her hand.

“I had a cat named Himiko-chan when I was a child.” Tsunade admits quietly. “She was white and cross-eyed. She always walked into walls. She was a good cat.”
“She sounds nice.” Sakura says encouragingly. Tsunade’s chakra is beginning to lighten, the dark blue threads of grief dispersing.

“She was.” Tsunade says, her breathing starting to slow as she calms down.

“You can get another pet. I want to have lots and lots.”

“I live out of hotel rooms. I couldn’t subject an animal to that.” Tsunade says, releasing Sakura’s hand with a sigh.

“But you don’t mind subjecting me to it.” Shizune says, raising an eyebrow, though her smile says she’s just teasing.

Tsunade huffs out a strained laugh.

“Thank you for this, Tsunade-sama.” Sakura’s mother says earnestly. “Truly. Kizashi and I were beginning to fear that… well, thank you. We’ll make sure to send you the adoption papers, if you can let us know where you’ll be ahead of time.”

Tsunade simply nods, lacing her fingers together. Her brow is furrowed in a way that speaks of deep thoughts.

“Our little Sacchan, a Senju…” Her father says, an incredulous laugh bursting out, “She always strives to be exceptional in unique and surprising ways.”

“Surprising indeed,” Tsunade says, pushing herself off the bed, “To be so capable of healing at her age. Even with her advantage, that is still far beyond even what I was capable of at her age.”

Her father gives her a fond look, overflowing with pride. “She saved my life, all by herself.”

“I was referring to her ability to heal herself.” Tsunade says.

Sakura can’t help it, she shoots Tsunade a shocked look. She wouldn’t tell on her, would she?

Sakura’s parents exchange confused glances.

“Also, forgive me for overstepping, but since Sakura is technically my ward now, I have to know… has she ever been hurt? Only, I’ve seen signs…” Tsunade asks, outwardly apologetic but inwardly calculating. She’s probably examining every inch of her parents’ faces, looking for guilt.

Sakura pouts at her.

Tsunade’s a tattletale.

“Oh, I see.” Sakura’s mother swallows, looking at the floor. She reaches out for Sakura’s father’s hand without looking. “It makes sense that you would be able to notice. No, she hasn’t been hurt. She’s been checked out very thoroughly. It’s her kekkei genkai. It makes her see horrible things that may eventually come to pass, so sometimes she does exhibit symptoms of trauma. She’s… she’s been very brave.”

Tsunade is unimpressed. She’s seen the marks of Kagami’s death all over Sakura. She must think Sakura’s parents either failed to notice such scars for months, or they caused them. Either they’re idiots or evil. No wonder her chakra is so flat and unconvinced, a sour tang in her aura.

“I’m sure she has.” Tsunade says finally, a convincing smile fixed in place.
“Well, thank you so much. We won’t forget what you’ve done for our daughter.” Sakura’s father says, sounding a little choked up. “We won’t take up any more of your time. C’mon, Sacchan. It’s pretty late.”

Sakura looks up at Tsunade, giving Kagami a chance to say goodbye.

See you later, shishou, Kagami whispers, I’ll have made everything better by then, I swear.

“Good luck, kid.” Tsunade says, almost as if in reply.

Kagami swallows back a sob.

“Thank you, Oba-san.” Sakura says earnestly. Kagami’s tears shine in her eyes. Sakura wipes them carefully, Kagami’s sense of loss surging within her.

The colour has returned to Tsunade’s cheeks, healthier than the drunken flush from before. She looks sober, her gaze as sharp as a scalpel. It feels like it’s digging into Sakura’s soul, searching for lies.

“I hope this gets you what you need.” Tsunade says knowingly.

Sakura squirms.

xxxxxxx

Ryuu is standing guard outside their hotel room, though he’s just slouching against a wall looking bored. His chakra is ready and attentive, despite his relaxed posture.

Takumi is playing with the puppies when they get inside the room. He’s sitting on one of the beds, Momo on his head and Misa trying to catch his sleeve with her teeth as he waves his hands around, just a little too quick for her.

“Nearly!” He coos. “Who’s the fiercest warrior in the Land of Fire? Who is? It’s you! And you!” He declares, looking up at the snoozing Momo, perched on top of his head, “You’re the most precious angel baby I’ve ever seen!”

Sakura hears Ryuu snicker down the hall.

“It’s so lovely for Sacchan to have a friend on her wavelength.” Sakura’s father comments.

Takumi flails, keeping Momo attached with chakra, somehow not disturbing his sleep.

“Oh! Haruno-san! A-and Haruno-san! I’m sorry to – ”

“Sorry for what? We couldn’t have asked for a better dogsitter at such short notice.” Sakura’s mother grins, leading Sakura into the room by hand.

Takumi returns the smile sheepishly, taking Momo off his head.

Itachi shows up in the doorway, his chakra a frazzle of nerves until he catches sight of Sakura. Then he deflates. His face remains stoic.

“I wasn’t aware you were going somewhere tonight.” Itachi says, a slight reprimand in his voice.

“Well, we’re going somewhere tomorrow, too.” Sakura says breezily, ignoring the sulkiness weighing down his chakra. “Can you come shopping with me, please? I have to get Shisui-kun some nice sand, and maybe some other presents too!”
“As long as you don’t run out of the money your grandmother gave you, okay?” Sakura’s father says, ruffling her hair.

“Of course, I’ll go with you.” Itachi says, puffing up slightly now he’s being included. “We’ll go bright and early, in time for the market to open.”

“Nope, we’re sleeping in.” Sakura tells him brightly. “If you’re not still asleep by eight in the morning, the sun will burn your eyes!”

Everyone looks at Sakura’s father. He raises his hands defensively, “Hey, I didn’t tell her – okay, yeah. I did. My bad.”

Sakura frowns at him. “Telling lies makes your tongue turn black, Otou-san.”

He splutters out a laugh, embarrassment glowing in his aura, “D-did I say that?! Oh dear, I – ”

Sakura folds her arms and tosses her head.

“We can go early in the morning.” She tells Itachi. “And I bet we can swim right after eating, too. And we can make all the faces we want, and they won’t stick that way! Because Otou-san tells big fat lies!”

She throws herself down on her bed, face first.

“I… will come back in the morning.” Itachi says uncomfortably, sliding out of the doorway.

“Oh, Sacchan.” Her father says sadly.

There’s a smack sound that corresponds with a flare of pain in her father’s chakra, and a spike of annoyance in her mother’s.

“It’s alright, Sakura, your father was only joking…” Her mother says, touching her back gently. Sakura pushes her face into her pillow, hating the feeling of her dress being pressed into her scar.

“Hey, hey, Sakura-chan!” Takumi says cheerfully.

Sakura looks up a little bit, still pressing most of her face into her pillow. She peers up at him with one eye.

“I’ve heard you’re a great storyteller. Maybe you get that from your dad!” Takumi says, his grin utterly without guile.

Sakura sniffs, “Stories aren’t lies.”

“Maybe, maybe not! Are all of your stories true?”

Sakura freezes.

Oh dear, Kagami says.

Sakura’s face crumples, “I’m the big fat liar!”

“I don’t think so, Sakura-chan.” Takumi says softly. “How about this? I’m a giant pink cat with a great big tiara.”

Sakura’s frown wobbles in confusion.
“Is it true?” Takumi asks, tilting his head.

“No, of course n – ”

Takumi winks, then suddenly a huge baby pink cat with a sparkly tiara is sitting by her bed.

Sakura flails back, astonished.

“It’s true and it’s not true. That’s a story!” The big cat-Takumi says. Momo is staring at him, betrayal in his blue eyes. Misa is sniffing herself, not even a little bit interested.

“You look like you could be made of sugar.” Sakura tells him solemnly. “Your name is Amai-hime.”

“U-um, that wasn’t quite what I meant for you to take away from this…”

“I think it’s Sakura-chan’s bedtime.” Ryuu says, appearing in the doorway. His smirk is wicked and his chakra is glittering in amusement. “Come on, Amai-hime.”

The pink cat’s ears droop. “I’m never going to hear the end of this, am I?”

“Nope.” Ryuu grins, the sincerest look of joy Sakura has ever seen him wear.

Sakura doesn’t like getting up early, but now she knows her eyes will be safe, she’s less inclined to stay in bed when Itachi’s polite knock wakes her up.

“Are you tired, Sakura?” Itachi asks accommodatingly as they walk the streets of Suna.

“Nope!” Sakura says, swinging her arms. She left her puppies all snuggled up in her bed, not having the heart to wake them. “I’ve got lots of shopping to do before I find Gaara and we play together!”

Itachi’s chakra sours, “Sakura, that boy is dangerous.”

“So am I.” Sakura says with a pained grimace. Itachi was dangerous, as was Shisui. All of her friends would be too, one day.

Itachi frowns. He takes her hand without prompting, looking away when she glances up at him. “You are not ‘dangerous.’ You can protect yourself and others when needed. Being dangerous means you are willing to harm others for no real reason. That boy could have really hurt you, just for saying the wrong thing.”

“But he didn’t.” Sakura says proudly. He did very well. Much better than Kagami’s first meeting with him.

_In my defence, he was trying to murder my friends. And I don’t have your toddler wiles._

“And you befriended a boy who tried to kill you – ”

“If you mean Tenzo-kun, all he did was make a tree inside the hotel. It made it better. He’s a good boy, just like Gaara. Trust me, Itachi.” Sakura says solemnly.

Itachi stops walking. His jaw is clenched, though his grip on her hand remains loose and gentle.

“It’s not a matter of trust. I believe these people are a threat to your safety. I do not believe you fully comprehend what it means to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ in the first place. Both boys were in a position to
hurt you –”

“But neither did!”

“Because you promised them something they wanted.” Itachi says fiercely, eyes flashing. “You gave
Tenzo a way out of an oppressive group. You offered Gaara unconditional friendship and affection,
despite his constant displays of violence. I don’t believe not hurting someone is the basis of
goodness, but one of the requirements of basic human decency. You reward ordinary behaviour as if
it were extraordinary. They don’t deserve your kindness.”

I’m confused, Sakura admits.

He’s jealous, Kagami replies, sounding faintly horrified,
punch him in the gut and run.

No!

“It doesn’t matter if they deserve it or not, it’s my choice if I’m kind to someone.” Sakura says firmly.

Itachi sighs.

“Ooh!” Sakura says, perking up. She’s spotted the perfect gift for Kakashi – a navy blue scarf,
designed to cover your face in the event of a sandstorm. She ignores Itachi while she shops. He’s
clearly burning to say something, but he might clamp up if she asks him right out.

She finds Ino a beautiful silver ribbon, glittering and metallic. The seller says not even kunai can dent
it, but it’s pliable enough to wear in your hair. She comes across a sweets stall and immediately lays
waste to its sugared fruit section, grabbing a bundle for Chouji. Shikamaru is a little tougher to buy
for. Eventually she finds a puzzle box that takes over one hundred and twenty steps to open, and if
you get just one wrong, you have to start again. She knows it’s perfect for him because Kagami
grumbled about wasting hours of her life on something similar.

She decides on a soft toy for Sasuke, because his room is sad and doesn’t have anything friendly in
it. She buys him a tomato with a smiley face, big enough to need both arms to carry it. She gives it to
Itachi when he looks at her expectantly, arms already laden with her bags. It’s like he doesn’t even
know she has super strength.

She gets Naruto a toy from the same stall, a narutomaki that’s making a silly face. He loves to have
them in his ramen and it’s his name, so it’s perfect.

There’s a bookshop not far from the market that’s calling her name. She makes Itachi wait outside,
pretty sure she’ll find something for him. She sighs when she feels his chakra signal float inside after
her. He’s probably worried if he leaves her alone for a second she’ll make another friend for him to
disapprove of.

She can’t see him, but she can feel his presence. She keeps a judgmental expression on her face, just
in case he’s looking.

Then she sees a book called Mindfulness: The Beginning of a Happier Mind and she gasps,
wriggling in excitement. It’s perfect! Itachi likes to meditate and she wants him to be happier, and
this is both, probably! She grabs it off the shelf, looking over her shoulder suspiciously as she heads
to the counter. He’s nowhere in sight.

But then she spots a botanical section and she can’t stop herself from raiding it, grabbing a book on
the Land of Wind’s flora for her mother and a herbal tea recipe book for Kabuto. And then she can’t
help but grab a recipe book on sugar-free desserts for her dad.
The books have really started to pile up. She can’t see over them anymore, but she knows the counter is vaguely to her left, so she points herself in that direction and starts wobbling over. She must make for an odd sight, a little girl holding several massive tomes with barely any trouble.

She pays for the books with the money she got for her birthday from her grandmother last year. She frowns at the rapidly-shrinking coin pouch in her hand. It was probably a bad idea to buy lots of souvenirs for everyone right after the Rinne Festival.

“You missed out on some sale opportunities, you know.” Tsunade comments from behind.

Sakura drops her bag of books and finds herself automatically in a fighting stance, ready to go. She flushes, scrambling to recover the presents.

Tsunade bends down and picks up the bag with her little finger. Sakura stares as it swings back and forth on her perfectly-still digit, no effort required.

“If you’d bought a third recipe book, you would have got one of them half price.” Tsunade says sorrowfully. “Ah, what a waste.”

“But I didn’t need a third recipe book. I’d still be paying for half a book I didn’t want.” Sakura replies, her heart slowly returning to its normal rhythm, the terror of Tsunade’s nonchalant appearance fading away.

Tsunade shrugs. She’s wearing something Kagami isn’t familiar with, a grey shirt with a scoop neck and a short black skirt with matching heels. Her lips are red and her eyes are darkly lined.

Oh dear, Kagami says, she’s pulling out all the stops. She’s either about to make a huge bet she’s certain will pay off, or she’s figured something out and she’s feeling smug about it.

Tsunade bends down. The collar of her shirt cannot hold back the tide. Sakura politely averts her gaze.

“I’m a monster because there’s someone else who lives inside me.”” Tsunade quotes in a low voice, smirking at Sakura’s look of confusion. Tsunade hands her the bag back. Sakura uses two hands to grab it, because she doesn’t want to break her little fingers trying to look cool.

Oh, fuck, Kagami says.

Bad word, Sakura replies automatically, what’s wrong? Tsunade –

She knows, Kagami says slowly, she knows about me.

“What?” Sakura says out loud, looking up at Tsunade in horror.

“I was listening to your conversation with the sand brat. Y’know, just in case things got messy. I was betting against you, by the way. Imagine my surprise when you talk about having someone else inside your head, someone who shows you horrible things… and then later on you tell me you have ‘dreams.’ It didn’t take much work to figure it out.”

“How long were you eavesdropping?” Sakax demands.

“I felt the demon brat’s chakra and came looking for a mess to clean up. Got there around about the time when everyone else started running away after Sabaku latched onto you. Didn’t you notice?”

“There were other people there?”
“Okay, lesson one, spatial awareness.” Tsunade shakes her head pityingly. “Lesson two, don’t say anything important in public.”

“But… but that’s what you’re doing right now.” Sakura says, confused.

“It’s important to you. Not me. I’m just curious. You weren’t lying to the kid, not even once. He would’ve flattened you otherwise. That’s probably why you gained his trust so easily, because he could tell you really were the ‘same.’ By your definition, I guess.”

*Ask her what she wants,* Kagami says grimly.

“What do you need from me, Oba-san?” Sakura asks politely.

Tsunade’s eyes flicker in surprise. She must have forgotten the name she asked Sakura to use. For a moment they’re both silent, standing in the middle of a busy bookshop. Itachi is lurking a few shelves away, too far to hear. She can tell he’s not funneling chakra to his ears.

“Answers would be nice.” Tsunade says coolly.

“Well, I’m shopping with Itachi right now, and then I’m going to go find Gaara and we’re going to play. I might not have time to talk with you for the rest of the vacation, and I don’t think I’m going to be allowed to go on another one for a while. Not after… the attack.” She adds, pausing dramatically just as Kagami advised.

As expected, Tsunade’s ears perk up, “Attack?”

“No time to talk!” Sakura says breezily. “I’m so busy. Thank you very much for your help, by the way. Being a Senju might really make a difference. I guess we’ll see. Bye!”

She skirts around a crowd of lollygagging shoppers, all gathered around a display, and heads for the door.

Tsunade doesn’t chase her. Sakura sees her leaning against Fiction, section A-L, an unreadable look in her eye.

Itachi follows Sakura hastily, still clutching to her bags. He tries to take her new one, but she twirls it out of reach and hits him with a deadly serious look. He backs off, eyes wide.

“Are you sure you’re okay to carry that?” He asks worriedly, eyeing the large, bulging bag in her hands.

Sakura gives him a faint, distracted smile. She feels like she’s being stretched in several different directions. She’s told so many lies that she’s lost track, and she doesn’t ever want to forget who knows what. Right now, Tsunade and Kakashi both heard Kagami’s bogus Kumo story. Kakashi might have believed it, but since Tsunade definitely overheard her whole conversation with Gaara, she’s probably questioned everything Sakura’s ever told her.

She hopes Kagami’s bait works. She doesn’t want to have to worry about Tsunade, too. She’s a bit tired.

“Sakura? I can carry it, it’s no trouble. Sakura?”

Sakura catches sight of a small stall, half-hidden behind a wall of weaponry, gleaming in the sunlight. Her face is transformed by dawning joy as she realises what she’s looking at. She dashes over, ignoring Itachi’s protests.
Rows and rows of bottled sand, each one a different colour! She found some better sand for Shisui!

“So Shisui-kun’s favourite colour?” She asks Itachi.

He frowns, glancing at the display without much interest, “I suppose… blue? Red?”

“No.” Sakura says severely, disappointed. “It’s all of them. Shisui-kun likes all the colours.”

She points at an iridescent, rainbow-coloured bottle of sand.

“It’s perfect.” She says reverently, picking it up to examine it further.

A cleaver comes down on the ground beside the stall.

Sakura jumps back with a squeal of surprise.

Itachi leaps in front of her.

Tsunade’s chakra jolts in shock.

Wait, she was following me? Sakura thinks, turning back to look.

“You better pay for that.” The seller snarls, cleaver in hand.

“I – I was going to!” Sakura says timidly, hiding a little behind Itachi.

Itachi jams a kunai directly into the display, his chakra ice-cold. The seller opens his mouth to yell, but whatever expression Itachi is wearing is too frightening to talk back to.

Itachi tosses a few coins at the man, then scoops up several more bottles of sand.

“I hope that’s enough, sir.” He says scathingly, still somehow unbearably polite.

He turns around to hand Sakura the bottles, a gentle smile on his face, “There you go, Sakura. I hope you like the colours. We should leave the market now.”

Sakura stares at him, wide-eyed.

He went from being scary to nice in seconds…

“Wait, she was following me? Sakura thinks, turning back to look.

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Sakura stares at him, wide-eyed.

He went from being scary to nice in seconds…

That’s a great sign, Kagami says wryly, maybe he won’t even need that book. He’s clearly the picture of mental health.

Sakura slips the bottles into her bag of books and frowns down at the Mindfulness tome. Its cover is a little too cheery.

She peels around Itachi to make eye contact with the seller, who still looks frazzled.

“I’m sorry if you thought I was stealing, sir. And I’m sorry that there’s a kunai in your stall now. I hope you don’t mind it. Bye bye!”

Sakura only had to ask twelve different people before she found out where Gaara was. Nine of the people ran away from her the moment she mentioned his name. The next two pointed her to Yashamaru’s house. The last person told her that she was far too young to take such risks and refused to help. Sakura walked away from them backwards, wearing her best Fugaku-frown.
Tsunade stopped following her after a while. Or she simply hid her chakra. Sakura’s not sure which would be best.

“Oh, hello again.” Yashamaru says after opening his front door, sounding surprised to see her. He’s not, he saw her coming through the curtains. She’s not sure why he’s pretending. Adults do that sometimes.

“Hello.” Sakura says, a little frostily. Kagami had said some things about Gaara having a horrible childhood and how his uncle tried to kill him and some other things. Sakura’s not pleased about any of them.

“We’re here because Sakura wants to see your nephew, Gaara.” Itachi supplies, his chakra coated in resignation.

Yashamaru’s aura lights up with honest hope, a burst of sunlight on a grey day. His smile softens, the stress lines around his eyes disappearing. “Really? That’s – well, that’s great. He and his siblings are inside. His father is coming by to visit them soon, so you’ll all have to be on your best behaviour.”

Sakura nods seriously.

Itachi blinks at being included in the warning. His chakra bristles with offence.

As Yashamaru steps back to let them inside his house, Sakura slips her shoes off and hobbles inside, happily surrendering her bag to the floor.

“We’re from Konoha.” She tells him.

“How nice.” Yashamaru smiles. She can’t tell if he means it, but he looks younger when he smiles so she doesn’t mind either way. “I’ll take you both right through.”

Sakura is almost vibrating with excitement at the prospect of seeing Gaara again. Itachi’s jaw is set, his resentful dark eyes reminding her of the look on Sasuke’s face when Naruto saved her, not him. Probably a bad sign. She tilts her head at him, trying to get a good read on his aura to see what’s wrong.

Yashamaru waves them on with a gold-tinged aura, hope and joy mingling together.

They walk through the house, a comfy living room filled with bookshelves and a gleaming kitchen, and then they get to the back door, where Sakura could see Gaara sitting alone in the garden.

Someone else – Temari, Kagami supplies – was standing next to the fence, talking to – Kankuro – ignoring Gaara completely. Both of their auras were prickling with fear and frustration.

Sakura bursts into the garden, unwilling to let Gaara’s isolation continue. Kankuro and Temari both jump violently. Gaara’s eyes snap up to Sakura.

A fierce and savage kind of joy fills him at once. His mouth trembles, his eyes wet.

“Sakura.” He says.

She grins happily and runs to join him.

Instantly, she is blocked by a hand on her upper arm, and another gripping her wrist.

Kankuro and Temari stand in her way, their chakra a mix of horror and determination.
Fury seethes within Gaara, the beast inside him calling out. Sakura lets out a little *hmph* at being stopped.

“Excuse me.” She says politely, using a little enhanced strength and the element of surprise to break free of their grip. She runs to Gaara’s side, his arms opening at once. She skids on her knees, folding into the hug with a happy little sigh.

She’s struck by shock on all sides except her and Gaara, the calm in the eye of the storm. His siblings are both suffering from a horrified kind of fascination. Yashamaru is ready to leap in if needed, but he’s desperately hoping that he won’t be. Itachi is a complicated mess of emotions, but he won’t interfere just yet.

Sakura smiles, holding onto Gaara very carefully, not wanting to accidentally hurt him.

_You couldn’t_, Kagami comments, _his ultimate defence would stop you. Though I never actually fought Gaara at your level, so perhaps…_

_I’ll be careful?_ Sakura suggests.

*Yes, good. Do that.*

“Good afternoon, Sakura.” Gaara says, his face still buried in her neck, his hands desperately clutching her dress. She nervously adjusts herself, not wanting to bare her scar to Itachi. “How long do you have left of your vacation?”

“The weekend.” Sakura says.

Gaara holds her tighter.

“You garden’s made of sand.” Sakura comments. “Want to build sandcastles?”

A violent throb of hurt from Itachi’s chakra nearly has her spinning around to deal with the threat, before she realises it’s her. She promised to build sandcastles with *Itachi*, after all.

“And Itachi can join us!” She declares hurriedly.

Gaara moves back, his little face darkening like a storm cloud. “Is he your friend, too?”

Kankuro and Temari are looking on from a safe distance, still highly alert.

Itachi has folded his arms. He’s practically shouting his disapproval.

Sakura scowls, taking Gaara’s hand for no real reason other than to prove a point. Gaara’s not *dangerous*, he just doesn’t get enough love. Anyone would be cranky if no one ever hugged them.

“You’d have to ask him.” Sakura shrugs, her smile turning sheepish. “He’s nice, I promise. And he doesn’t have many friends. He could really do with another one.”
Gaara gives Itachi a suspicious look.

Itachi returns it with twice the venom.

“ITACHI!” Sakura calls, waving him over. “Come play sandcastles with me, like you promised you would!”

Itachi gives her a disbelieving look.

Sakura beams back.

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It turns out that Gaara is beyond the best at making sandcastles. The rest of them don’t even come close. Sakura’s little castle looks more like a shack next to Gaara’s spookily accurate rendition of the market. She’d described her encounter with the scary seller, and Gaara had put his fist through his sand stall.

After Gaara started landscaping the garden, Itachi hesitantly began making his own structures, recreating the Uchiha Compound from memory. His home had been built with a tender smile and a careful touch. Kagami had fallen completely silent during the building process.

Temari and Kankuro drift closer and closer over time, not quite joining in, but no longer standing separately anymore.

“It’s not a sandcastle.” Sakura says grimly, looking down at her crumbling creation. “It’s a sad castle.”

Yashamaru disappears for a few minutes, but Sakura just assumes he’s getting drinks for them. She is pretty thirsty. Suna is so hot.

When she looks up from her lopsided castle, Gaara is watching her. She gives him a sweet smile, watching pink bloom across his pale cheeks in response.

An imposing presence enters the house. Sakura doesn’t let herself visibly react, instead continuing to work on her castle until whoever it is draws closer.

“Gaara.” A cold voice says.

Itachi is the one who reacts the poorest, a jolt of anxiety zipping through him.

Gaara just looks up, aiming a baleful glare at his father.

The Kazekage is standing in Yashamaru’s garden. He’s wearing a green kimono, but no hat. He looks a lot like Kankuro, and nothing like Gaara or Temari.

“Hello.” Sakura pipes up. She’s not scared of Fugaku-types anymore. Fugaku is the scariest out of all of them, and he’s still her friend, so they can’t be that bad.

The Kazekage’s eyes dart from child to child, taking in the minimal distance between Gaara and the rest. His eyes come back to Sakura, narrowing at her.

“And who is this.” He says, directing his flat question to Yashamaru.

You’re not a Haruno right now. Don’t forget.
“I’m Senju Sakura.” She says, aching a little at not being able to use her traditional introduction.

The Kazekage’s face turns blank and his chakra disappears.

He looks to Yashamaru.

“The Slug Sage was admitted into the village recently.” Yashamaru says in a hushed voice. “Accompanied by a female ward.”

The Kazekage nods, then strides forward. “And from where do you hail, Sakura-san?”

“Konohagakure, Mister Kazekage-sama.”

The Kazekage’s eyebrows lift slightly at the address, but he doesn’t complain.

“I wanted to keep her, Otou-sama.” Gaara says solemnly. “But she said she wants to go home.”

Kankuro gives his little brother a horrified look, as if he’d just admitted to kidnapping.

“I’m on vacation until Monday, then I go home. But I said I’d play with Gaara-kun until then.”

“Why?” The Kazekage asks, his dark eyes searching for an angle.

“When does someone have to have an ulterior motive for wanting to play with Gaara-kun?” Sakura replies. “I think he’s nice and he’s got magic sand. And he likes cats, just like me. There’s nothing wrong with him.”

Gaara’s aura is trembling in shocked delight. He reaches out and takes her hand.

“He has a bad temper and he is a very strong shinobi already. It makes for a poor combination between friends.” The Kazekage says.

“I’ve got a bad temper, too! I don’t like bullies or people being treated badly just because they’re different. And I’m a strong shinobi, as well. I can defend myself and others, no problem. But it doesn’t matter, because I’m not scared of Gaara. He could squish the whole village and I’d still never be scared of Gaara, because he’s done nothing wrong but be born with bad luck!”

The Kazekage frowns at her.

Yashamaru bites his lip.

Itachi is casually readying himself for a fight.

“Gaara just wants friends. In the whole time I’ve known him, he’s not hurt me or anyone else once.” Sakura insists. “He’s good. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude, but I think he deserves a lot better. Someone should hug him every day. I don’t like the fact that I’m going home without him. Will you take care of him while I’m gone?”

The Kazekage stares at her. “Yashamaru is his primary caretaker.”

“But you’re his dad.”

“I am the Kazekage.”

“And both my parents are out of the village a lot, so my grandmother takes care of me while they’re away. I don’t mind if you have Yashamaru-san help you out when you’re really busy, but wouldn’t
it be nice if you saw Gaara more often? If you did, he wouldn’t be so lonely. I don’t think you want him to be alone.”

Gaara squeezes her hand.

*Don’t offer him a favour. Fugaku still hasn’t cashed his in and I’m beginning to worry that Shisui was right all along and he plans to embroil you in a child bride plot with one of his kids.*

**Shh, Onee-chan.**

“You have a vested interest in my son’s future.” The Kazekage says flatly.

“Of course!”

“After knowing him for how long?”

“Um, a day, I think?”

The Kazekage does not smile, but there is something vaguely triumphant in his chakra.

“Very well. I will make more of an effort to ensure Gaara’s needs are being met, both physical and emotional. Are you satisfied?”

“Yes, thank you!”

*But what does he want in return?*

“I hope you will mention this conversation and its positive resolution to your mother.” The Kazekage says.

*What? Why would –*

*Tsunade, not your actual mother. He’s hoping she, as the Hokage’s student, will put in a good word for him because he made her kid happy. He’s not going to lose out on this at all, no matter how it turns out.*

“Oh.” Sakura says out loud, frowning. “Okay. She’ll want to know.”

“Is your mother the woman who kicked my sand wall down?” Gaara asks sulkily.

Sakura doesn’t want to lie to him, not ever.

So Kagami nods her head for her.

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Sakura didn’t mean to get separated from Itachi this time.

They were walking back to the hotel, ready to pick her pups up for a walk, when a hand clamped around her collar and she suddenly soared through the air.

She lands on a dome-shaped roof, nearly sliding right off. She applies some chakra to her feet and sticks to the sand-blasted stone.

Tsunade stands before her, hair blowing in the wind. Her eyes are shaded, her expression inscrutable.
“Did you come here to bring me back to Konoha?” She asks. Sakura gets the feeling her answer is going to be very important.

“No, but I wouldn’t mind if you did.” Sakura says honestly. “You were a very good Hokage and I want to be your friend. And Hayate-kun needs you.”

“I’m never going back.” Tsunade says gravely. “Konoha took and took from me until I had nothing left to give. Except for myself. I didn’t want to die in some futile war that had already cost me my family. So, I left. And I can’t go back. Not even a war could drag me home.”

“It’s still home to you, even after all these years.” Sakura points out.

“It is what it is. And I’m done with it.”

*So why are you here, shishou?* Kagami wonders.

“Well, then why are you here, Oba-san?” Sakura asks.

“I gave you my name because I didn’t think it would mean anything. It would soothe your parents fears, maybe create some kind of bureaucratic nightmare back in Konoha. But it was not a sentimental choice. Not for me, or for you. You know more than your own parents do. You’re covered in scars – two of which should’ve killed you outright – and you mentioned a girl inside your head. You’re full of secrets, kid. I just want to know who I’ve brought into my family.”

“My name is Haruno Sakura.” She says sadly, spreading her arms out. “I’ve got the soul of my future self inside my mind. Her name is Kagami and you were her shishou and Hokage.”

***

Hello, friends!

I’m sorry for the late update :( I was busy aging and doing important Life Things, also my laptop is. The worst. It’s trying to kill me. Writing this chapter has been stupidly difficult.

By the way, my cat hates my new puppy, but I caught her slithering (yes, slithering, like a boneless creature, much like a snake) up to the dog while she slept, and then she sat on her and fell asleep too! The moment the dog woke up, the cat slunk on out of there.

So apparently Oba-san means aunt or middle-aged woman, but Obaa-san means grandmother. Is there just a slight difference in pronunciation there or has my google fu failed me once again?

Yes, Tsunade took Sakura to a rooftop purely for The Drama of it all.

Yashamaru’s place in Gaara’s backstory is such a strangely retconned thing. It really doesn’t make much sense that he tried to kill him to test his control over Shukaku… you would assume any jinchuuriki would defend themselves if attacked by an obvious assassin while alone in the middle of the night?? But no, surprise, you killed your only friend/family member who can stand looking at you, and for some reason he’s now going to monologue about how much he hates you and severely mislead you about your mother. What was the point of the test? Was Gaara supposed to sit back and allow an assassin to murder him?

In other news, Kishimoto writes backstories and then changes his mind later and I hate it. Gaara’s backstory, still Tragic, but now also Poorly Handled by Everyone Involved.

Sakura has learnt that her father. Tells. Lies.
The horror.

Itachi keeps watching Sakura make friends with Sad Boys and he is peeved.

Gaara makes exquisite sandcastles and Kankuro and Temari try to blend into the background of every scene they share with their beloved lil bro, ‘cause he’s a little murdery right now.

Usagi turned into Amai-hime to prove a point and only succeeded in distracting Sakura from the issue. Dumb bunny.

I… got so many comments last chapter that frankly, I was a little stunned. It was incredible. Thank you all so much <3

**Quick poll for fun:** What is your favourite memory?

The kind of memory you’d use to summon your patronus :)

If that’s too personal, what do you do for fun?

(Dogwatch Update: One doggo is the fiercest warrior in the Land of Fire. Another doggo is the most precious angel baby you’ve ever seen.)
Chapter 24

Tsunade stares at her for a long, breathless moment.

There’s nothing but the whisper of sand-coated wind between them. Sakura misses the constant sound of rustling leaves that pervades Konoha. There’s nowhere you can go in the village that is drab or devoid of colour, not even in winter. For Suna, the beauty is a little harder to find.

The heat has sent a flush to Tsunade’s cheeks, a glitter of sweat at her brow. Her fists clench briefly, then relax.

“My future self.” She says slowly, taking a step forward. “Why is she called Kagami, if she is you?”

“Because she’s my big sister and she kept calling me Sacchan. I didn’t think it was fair if only I got a nickname, so I called her Kagami. That’s what our parents would have called us if we hadn’t been born with pink hair.” Sakura explains, tugging at her dress awkwardly.

“We. ‘Us.’ It’s strange that you felt the need to separate yourself from… well, yourself.”

What was strange was how calm Tsunade seemed. Shisui had freaked out. Tsunade had seemed more troubled by the lies Sakura had told, by her scars and tales of kidnappers. Now, she appeared to only want answers.

“She’s very different from me.” Sakura says edgily. Kagami hasn’t said a word since Sakura revealed her. Sakura is starting to feel very alone, up on the rooftop with Tsunade.

“How far into the future is she from?”

“Um…” Sakura frowns. Kagami isn’t responding to her thoughts, she’s giving Sakura the mental equivalent of a turned back. “I think, maybe… twelve years? She’s sixteen. I know that because in one of the dreams, she thinks about how she’s dying at sixteen, nearly seventeen.”

Tsunade’s face pales.

“Oh!” Sakura perks up, “You can talk to her if you like! She can use my mouth sometimes!”

Kagami turns a little, interest piqued.

Tsunade narrows her eyes. She idly plays with strands of her hair, smoothing them down. She looks completely relaxed, her posture slouching and casual, but her eyes are sharp. They miss nothing.

“That’s very… troubling. If you think it’ll help, I suppose.”

Well, Onee-chan?

I… I guess… if it’s okay with you, Kagami responds.

Sakura knew telling Tsunade was the right choice. She reaches out to meet Kagami, to help her draw closer, despite her chains. They almost touch hands, and –

“Tsunade-shishou.” Kagami says hoarsely. “I’m Kagami. I was Sakura, in my time. You were my Hokage, like this Sakura said.”

Tsunade seems to notice Kagami’s emotions are running high, because she simply offers a smirk and
a defusing, “Oh? Was I any good?”

“You were the best.” Kagami returns, a little too quickly. Tsunade’s eyebrows leap up. “You were the best because you didn’t take the hat out of ambition or desire, you did it out of duty and obligation. You took on the burden of an entire village on your back without resentment and carried them through peace, prosperity and war. And if we do this right, you’ll never be forced into the hat. If you ever take it up, it’ll be your own choice. No matter what you choose, just know you will always be my Hokage, and my shishou. You gave me purpose and you saved my life. Thank you.”

Kagami gives her a deep bow.

Tsunade coughs. “You’re expecting me to believe a lot. I’m a sucker when it comes to bets, not implausible stories.”

“You already believe us, Tsunade-shishou.” Kagami says knowingly.

“How confident.”

“I came to know you quite well, so I know that if you didn’t believe us, you’d have left long ago.”

“Unless I was concerned for the safety of a four-year-old who may or may not suffer from delusions and hallucinations.”

“If you truly were concerned about Sacchan, you would have thrown Shizune at her and stayed as far away as possible. I know you. You think of yourself as a curse. You and Kakashi are similar, in that respect. You both leave because you think staying would be worse. You’ve not left yet. What’s keeping you here?”

Tsunade’s lips quirk up, “Insightful. Or a lucky guess. I’m still here because a little girl came to me, bearing wounds I’ve seen mostly on corpses, with moronic parents who happily spouted that yes, she does appear to be abused, but she’s not really. Why? Oh, because she told us she’s not. Obviously, they aren’t to blame, because I assume based on what I’ve seen that they aren’t capable of meaningful deception of any kind. Which means someone else is responsible. There’s a story here, and I want to know what it is.”

“I can’t say much. I don’t know why, but I’m not free to say whatever I want, especially not regarding the future.”

“How convenient.”

“Not for me, actually. I’ll tell you what I can – I died, then woke up inside my own mind. I could see what was going on through my four-year-old self’s eyes, and I remembered what was about to happen. I tried to warn myself as best I could, and I managed to thrust a memory up for her to see. That’s what Sacchan means when she refers to her ‘dreams.’ They’re my memories.”

“Tell me what happens to the Sandaime, then.” Tsunade says instantly.

Kagami twitches, chains tightening across her chest. “I can’t.”

“Can you tell me anything of use?” Tsunade asks, disdain in her eyes. Kagami knows it’s a front, she knows Tsunade wants to confirm her suspicions and nothing more. It still hurts, to see her mentor looking at her without recognition.

“S-slug eats snake.” Kagami blurts out, her lungs burning with the effort it took to speak.
Tsunade looks away for a moment, touching her necklace.

Will she get it? That Orochimaru is her enemy, that he –

“So, in your future, I kill Orochimaru?” Tsunade asks curtly.

Kagami can’t stop her eyebrows lifting in surprise.

Tsunade tuts, a strange little smile playing at her lips. “That’s a no. I should watch out for Orochimaru?”

Kagami manages a grimace, hoping it’ll be enough.

“I already was, but I won’t ignore an honestly-given warning. Orochimaru is an immediate threat. And since you most likely spent your entire life in Konoha, if you encountered him as an enemy, that means he is definitely against Konoha by that point.” Tsunade mutters, seemingly talking to herself.

“You didn’t know he was an enemy before?”

Tsunade gives a one-shouldered shrug, “He was my teammate. He still is, since the Sannin have not disbanded.”

“You will.” Kagami says with quiet confidence.

Tsunade regards her, biting her lip. That was a tell, she was craving alcohol. Kagami hopes she ends up too distracted to sate her needs, this time.

Kagami feels the chains creeping up to her neck, sending goosebumps across her skin. It’s time. “I have to go now, Tsunade-shishou. Thank you for talking with me. And… in my last moments, your teachings were invaluable. I believe I made you proud, in the end.”

Tsunade’s eyes warm up in a genuine smile. “Of course you did. However you got here, you have achieved something utterly unheard of. Something incredible. How could any student of mine do any less?”

Kagami tears up, just a little. Her shishou accepted her. It felt like the first time all over again, back when she was Sakura, feeling bitter and useless and the Hokage herself had looked at her and seen something inside her that made her worthy of acknowledgment.

“Thank you.” Kagami whispers, then she is gone.

Sakura blinks foreign tears from her eyes.

Kagami is calm, her pain temporarily held at bay.

Sakura gives Tsunade a bright smile.

“The difference between the two of you is so obvious.” Tsunade muses.

Sakura jumps up, beaming, “You believe us?”

“Kagami was right. I knew you weren’t lying, I just had to make sure you weren’t simply delusional. I know that you honestly believe everything you’re saying, and unless you have created another identity for yourself without realising it, there certainly are two of you. And you believe I will be Hokage. If I ever needed more reasons to avoid Konoha, that’s more than enough.”
“But Onee-chan said you were the best one!”

Tsunade’s chakra gives a flicker of discomfort. “It isn’t in the cards. Don’t waste your time hoping for it. Be happy with the Sandaime, for now.”

“Well, I’m not!” Sakura pouts, just barely managing to hold back her foot from stomping. If they plunged through the roof of this building, the Kazekage might get mad at her and not let her see Gaara. “Mister Hokage-sama won’t let me adopt Naruto, even though he’s my little brother and he’s all alone in a horrible orphanage and no one will adopt him because they think he’s a monster even though he’s so nice!”

Tsunade’s lips part, but no sound comes out. Her aura is suffused with sudden sadness. Sakura spots a sympathetic ear and pounces, “He’s always kind to me and he hates bullies. He’s really good at climbing trees but he doesn’t mind being a pretty princess when he loses. He should have a family. He deserves a really good one.”

Tsunade presses the heel of her hand against her forehead, as if staving off a headache. “He’ll get adopted one day. When it’s his time.”

“No, he won’t.” Sakura says stubbornly. “No one in the village besides me and the Monsters like him. Grown-ups spit at him and call him names on the street. Shop people won’t sell him anything. He has to get second-hand clothes most of the time. He’s all alone for no reason, Oba-san. And I don’t care what the Sandaime says, I’m going to give Naruto a home.”

“…You really have so little faith in the Sandaime?” Tsunade says. “You don’t think he must have a plan for this Naruto boy, if he won’t let you help?”

“Nuh-uh! Onee-chan says he never gets adopted, the orphanage just kicks him out when he gets too big and then he has to live all by himself even though he doesn’t know how.”

Tsunade frowns, instantly looking a good decade older. “The Sandaime… he must have a better plan for the boy… an Uzumaki, and a – never mind that. More importantly, you said you know when and how you will die?”

“Yep. My friend Sasuke stabs me a lot and after a while I die, but because I learned how to heal without seals and I saved up a lot of chakra, it takes a long time for me to stop healing my wounds.” Sakura says matter-of-factly. Disbelief surges inside Tsunade’s aura. It only takes a second for it to turn into horror. The way she stares at her hands speaks of self-recremation. Neither Sakura nor Kagami are willing to let that slide.

“If you hadn’t taught me to survive, I would have died for good.” Sakura says frankly. “I should have died a thousand times over, but I managed to hang on, and now I can change things for the better. That’s a good thing, Oba-san.”

Tsunade’s brow is tightly pinched, her mouth set in a hard line. She doesn’t want to talk right now. Sakura doesn’t mind.

Anyway, she senses a copper-on-steel aura drifting by, far below their feet. Itachi is walking the streets, searching for her. Stress and fear are entwined in his aura, creeping up his throat and choking him.

He needs her.
“I’ve got to go, Oba-san! Thank you for everything. If you don’t want to come home, I really do understand. You’ve got to do what’s right for you. Bye bye!”

“Wait, Sakura – ”

Sakura jumps down, using Itachi’s signal as a guide.

She lands right in front of him with a big smile, arms out wide. Hopefully he won’t be mad at her for leaving. Again.

Itachi’s eyes go wide and he reaches out, almost grabbing her shoulders, before he collects himself and puts on a stern look. It looks a bit silly on his nine-year-old face.

“Sakura, you can’t keep doing this. You were attacked in Konoha, you were attacked on the way to Suna, who’s to say you won’t be attacked here too? It’s imperative that you stay with me, no matter what. Okay?”

Kagami sighs, but maybe her talk with Tsunade has put her in a good mood, because she doesn’t mutter darkly under her breath at the sight of Itachi. He’s so serious, she comments, a boy his age should be having fun.

“If I should stay with you all the time, then you’ll have to come with me when I go play.” Sakura says hopefully.

Itachi shakes his head, “Sakura, no. We should get you back to the hotel room. Your parents are probably worried.”

“They won’t be, because they know I’m with you!” Sakura points out.

Itachi deflates, his stern façade vanishing at once. “I’m not so sure they would have so much faith in me. After all, I…”

“Hmm? What? You… ate all the sweets in Suna? You… got lost on the road of life? You…”

“It’s not that.” Itachi says sharply, almost snapping. “Please, be serious for once. I failed you. I failed to protect you.”

Sakura pauses, confused. “Um, when?”

What does he mean, Onee-chan?

Who knows. Perhaps he means from you being snatched by Tsunade? Though he seems to believe you just ran off…

“It’s my fault you had to kill someone.” Itachi mumbles, eyes on the ground.

Whatever remains of a smile Sakura had left over from teasing him disappears. She knows her hand is clean, Tenzo did it himself. But for some reason, it itches, as if it is coated in something.

She wonders what Ryuu and Takumi did with the ROOT’s body. She hopes it’s somewhere nice.

She takes a deep breath, focusing on Itachi’s pallor, the slight tremor in his hands, and steps forward.

They’re almost nose to nose at this point. Itachi starts, trying to move away, but Sakura grabs his sleeves in a loose grip he could easily break if he tried. All the fight leaves him at once. He slumps, looking off to the side. His chakra is burning with discomfort.
“Why is it your fault?” Sakura asks.

“I should have been there to protect you.”

“Itachi, where are we?” Sakura asks. She’s beginning to get a bit cross.

“In Sunagakure.” He replies promptly, looking concerned.

“No! We’re on vacation. This isn’t a mission! How were you supposed to know we’d be attacked in the night? And you were with Kakashi-sensei, so do you think you should have abandoned him to fight alone and left to find me? It’s not your fault if something bad happens to me.”

“Yes, it is.” Itachi insists, grabbing her upper arms. “I never wanted you to go through something like that, and it happened right across the hall from me. I don’t care if it doesn’t make sense. I’ll always feel responsible if something bad happens to you, because it’s my responsibility to look after you.”

“No, it’s not!” Sakura yells. “You’re my friend. I’m not your responsibility! If I get hurt, then I get hurt. If you feel bad about it, that just makes it worse! Please don’t be upset by this, please.”

“How can I not? If you can tell me some way I can stop – tch.” He cuts himself off, making a noise she remembers Sasuke making in her dreams. His chakra is tense, frustrated. “Just promise me you’ll be more careful. You won’t wander off on your own. You’ll stay with someone, even if it’s not me. Can you do that?”

Sakura feels her face screwing up, a refusal at the tip of her tongue. But even Kagami had picked up on how serious Itachi was being. He really meant this. She guessed that if you didn’t know what was going on, having your friend constantly disappear on you might be pretty worrying.

She sighs, “Oh-kaaaaay.”

Itachi’s chakra brightens. A tiny smile graces his face, and he releases her arms. “That’s good. Thank you, Sakura.”

“Everything alright?” A girl asks.

Sakura peers over Itachi’s shoulder – no mean feat, considering his height – and sees Temari and Kankuro, both dressed as if training.

“Hello!” Sakura says cheerfully. “Temari-san, Kankuro-san! It’s nice to see you again!”

“It’s only been an hour.” Temari says flatly.

“Eh, maybe an hour and a half.” Kankuro says, grinning. “Still, we didn’t expect to run into you again. Thought you might’ve been tucked under some bodyguard’s arm, dashing back to Konoha.”

Sakura tilts her head, “Hm? I don’t have a – ”

“Why would she return so soon?” Itachi interjects smoothly. “We still have another day in Suna.”

“Yeah, but she’s a clan heir, right? A bit too valuable to be hanging around Gaara – ow!” Kankuro yelps, glaring at Temari. She glares right back.

“I am also a clan heir. Neither of us considered playtime with your little brother a considerable risk.” Itachi says, dripping with disdain.
Big talk from a kid who was just blubbering about keeping you safe from, what was it again? Everything?

Shush, Onee-chan.

“Then you’ve clearly not seen him in action.” Kankuro says, abruptly sobering up.

“Yes, we have. Sakura made friends with him, then he tried to kidnap her when she had to leave.” Itachi says, remarkably casual considering the dark pulse of anger in his aura.

Temari and Kankuro glance at each other, sharing a wordless exchange.

“I like Gaara-kun.” Sakura pipes up. She grins mischievously at their stunned looks. “I really do. I don’t care if he could squish me. I know he won’t. So we’re friends!”

You’d be friends with a rabid squirrel if it looked sad enough, Kagami drawls.

I would make it all better, Sakura agrees.

“Listen, Sakura-hime – ” Temari begins.

Sakura wrinkles her nose, ignoring the surge of amusement in Itachi’s chakra. “Oh, just call me Sakura, please. After all, aren’t you the Kazekage’s daughter? That’s much more important than me!”

“Uh… sure. Sakura. You don’t know Gaara. Maybe he’s a good kid, I don’t know… But I do know that he’s dangerous. He could kill you without even trying. Maybe without even wanting to. If you’ve only got one day left in Suna, spend it somewhere he can’t find you.”

Sakura crosses her arms. “Nope. If you tried talking to Gaara-kun, you might find that he’s nicer than you think. He got really upset when we first met, but he still calmed himself down and he didn’t hurt me. Can’t you just try talking to him?”

Temari looks uncomfortable, but longing curls in her chakra. Kankuro is just worried.

“You’ve known him for a day and you think you know him better than us? You got lucky. It won’t happen again. Stay away from Gaara.” Temari says firmly, even as her chakra cries out in indecision, split in two.

“Is that a threat?” Itachi bristles.

“Just a warning.” Temari shakes her head. Sakura can’t help but think she’s found another kid who shouldn’t look so serious all the time.

Onee-chan, what does Gaara-kun like?

How should I know? I hardly knew him, in my time. I know he cared very deeply for his village, eventually. He wanted family, closeness –

“Gaara-kun said he was lonely. He said he wished he had someone to take care of him.” Sakura says.

Temari freezes.

Kankuro shifts on the spot, his chakra a mixture of guilt and fear.
“Just talk to him, please.” Sakura smiles at them both.

Itachi puts his hand on her shoulder and offers the other two a nod, starting to steer Sakura away. She waves at the siblings, hoping her words and feelings got to them in some way.

Itachi’s hand finds hers and doesn’t let go for a long time.

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Sakura had expected she’d get to spend her last day in Suna with Gaara, but her parents veto the idea immediately after listening to Itachi’s account of her first meeting with him. Sakura tries not to be angry, but it’s hard. She might not see Gaara until the Chuunin Exam, which is an eternity away.

Instead, she spends it in sullen silence, bitterly disappointed.

It’s the morning of their departure and they’re walking through the streets of Suna. Takumi and Ryuu have disappeared somewhere, so it’s just Sakura, her parents, and Itachi.

Sakura has put Momo and Misa in their little bag, the rest of her belongings sealed up by Takumi. Her puppies are being carried by her mother.

I’m not mad, Sakura thinks, her mouth stuck in a pout, I’m not mad at all.

It’s okay to be angry, sometimes, Kagami says, it’s not healthy to always put on a smile. Didn’t you say as much to Shisui?

At this, Sakura brightens all at once.

Itachi notices, “What happened?”

“I just remembered we’re going to see Shisui soon!” Sakura says happily. The sooner they leave, the sooner they’ll get home and she’ll see Shisui and the Monsters. Even though she has to say goodbye to Gaara, she won’t be alone. And hopefully his siblings will make sure he isn’t either.

Itachi frowns at her, but says nothing.

Sakura gets excited, imagining Shisui waiting for her at the gate, and tears off in a run.

Something curls around her ankle and pulls, knocking her flat on her face.

Sakura pushes herself up, her palms stinging from the impact. For a moment she’s shocked, then she senses a fast-approaching signal, a desert storm of fear, grief and longing. Gaara.

Laughter bursts out of her, unbidden. She was falling before she even realised it!

“Sakura!” Her parents call.

Itachi is a buzz of frantic energy.

Sakura turns to face Gaara’s signal. He’s not far away, his brow creased in concern. Sand hisses, falling away from her ankle. He must have reached out after seeing her run, not wanting her to go, and his sand reacted automatically, pulling her back.

She rubs her sore nose and giggles. She feels Gaara’s relief like the first sprinkle of rain after a drought.
She waves him over, beaming at him to let him know for sure that she wasn’t angry.

Itachi is there in an instant, touching her back, scanning her for injury.

“Are you alright?” He asks, his gaze falling on her bright-pink nose.

“Uh-huh.” Sakura says distractedly, eyes on the slowly-approaching Gaara.

Itachi’s chakra seethes.

She reaches out absentmindedly and pats him on the arm.

His chakra quiets down.

Sakura’s parents are close, but they’re giving her some space.

“I’m sorry.” Gaara says quietly when he’s close enough to hear. She sees his lips moving silently, shaping apologies over and over.

Sakura stands up, brushing off her dress, and holds out her hands.

Gaara looks at them, puzzled.

Sakura pats her hands together and raises her eyebrows invitingly.

Gaara hesitantly touches her hands with his.

_Onee-chan, how did Tenzo-kun make the tree?_

_Hm? A combination of water and earth chakra, I suppose. Mokuton, the Shodaime’s technique._

Sakura thinks about it. Water chakra, like the kind Tenzo used to clean her hand. It had felt cool to the touch, slicker than normal chakra. And earth chakra must be that fresh soil scent his tree emanated.

She imagines it, water lapping at a tree’s roots. The tree drinking it in, and pretty blossoms forming under the soft spring sunlight…

She opens her eyes.

There’s something in her palm that wasn’t there before.

Gaara is staring down at their joined hands. He must have felt it too. He slowly lifts his hands up, gazing intently at her revealed palms.

A single sprig of cherry blossom sits in the palm of her right hand. She’d hoped to make a whole bunch, but this was enough for now.

_Sacchan… how?_ Kagami splutters.

_Water and earth chakra_, Sakura replies.

“I have to go home now, Gaara-kun. But you can keep this. It’s a part of me. It’ll keep you safe while I’m gone, okay?” Sakura says.

Gaara takes the blossom from her hand and holds it up, looking awed.
“Like Naruto’s flower tree.” He whispers, tucking it against his chest.

Sakura can feel Temari and Kankuro lurking in the shadows, watching from afar. They’re both holding their breath.

Gaara struggles to tear his eyes away from the pale pink flowers, tiny and fragile even in his small hands.

“Thank you.” He says, then chokes on a sob. Something dark rears up in his chakra. Sakura automatically reaches out with her own to soothe it.

Gaara leans forward, resting his head against hers. He clutches her shoulder with one hand, the other carefully holding his flowers.

Sakura feels her face heat up. She angles it away from Gaara’s, but gently pats him on the back.

Gaara touches her hand. Her skin tickles in response.

A little sand fox sits in the palm of her hand.

She laughs in surprised delight, “Wow!”

Gaara smiles shyly, then twitches his fingers. The fox stands up and shakes particles of sand off its back.

Sakura coos over its cuteness, not noticing the dark flush creeping up the back of Gaara’s neck. She tucks the little sand fox in her pocket, making sure it isn’t squashed.

“I’ll miss you, Gaara-kun. But that’s okay, because that just means we’ll have to meet again really soon!”

Gaara’s eyes sparkle with unshed tears, “We’ll build sandcastles again. I’ll be good, I promise.”

“I know you will.” Sakura says, with the utmost certainty.

Temari and Kankuro both feel the same tentative hope that filled Yashamaru at the sight of a happy Gaara – the hope that there’s more in his future than bloodshed and loneliness. Hopeful chakra feels like a baby bird poking its beak out of its nest for the first time.

As Sakura waves on her way out, she thinks that hope will be safely nurtured over the years until they all realise what she already knows.

Gaara’s the best kind of monster there is.

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They don’t stop at an inn this time.

They stay at the base of an old oak tree, eating ration bars. They don’t set a fire. Ryuu and Takumi stay in the trees, watching the scenery with sharp, unblinking eyes. Sakura spends the night cold and uncomfortable, a root digging into her back. She curls around Momo and Misa, feeling their little bodies squirm against hers, a touch of warmth in the dark.

When they retrieve the wagon from the undergrowth they’d hid it in, and the horse is reattached, they set off again.
The sky is steel blue with a few, scant clouds drifting overhead. There’s a fresh bite of winter in the air and Sakura welcomes it, stretching her hands up to touch the clouds. She imagines poking a hole in one of them and snow falling out.

She keeps checking on her little sand fox, but no matter how far they get from Suna, it seems fine, happily napping in her pocket.

Takumi and Ryu are walking alongside the wagon. Itachi is firmly pressed against Sakura, but he stopped scanning for danger a few miles back when Sakura asked him to play a word game with her.

“Pillows.” Sakura says, looking longingly up at the sky. Clouds must make the softest pillows ever. You could throw a rope into the sky and pull them down to earth. Sleeping at night would be like floating amongst the stars.

“Practical.” Itachi replies.

He has the same problem as Tenzo.

“Quixotic!” Sakura says, poking Misa in the nose. She licks her hand.

Itachi gives her a brief, impressed look. She ignores it. She’s not dumb, after all. She knows lots of big words. Plus, Takumi just whispered it to her when she couldn’t think of a nice ‘Q’ word in time.

“Quirky.” Itachi says, after a moment’s pause. He smiles at her, his eyes crinkling like Kakashi’s when he’s in a really good mood.

“Reborn.” Sakura says, scratching behind Sakumo’s ears.

Itachi’s shoulder is digging into hers.

It doesn’t hurt, so she keeps still.

After a few more hours, Sakura is almost bouncing off the sides of the wagon.

“Nearly home!” She sings, jumping on and off her seat, “Nearly – nearly – really – really – we’re nearly hoooooome!”

“Sacchan,” Her father begins with great dignity, “What will the little madam accept as a bribe for some peace and quiet?”

Sakura pauses, one foot on the seat. She blushes sheepishly. She hadn’t realised she was being too noisy.

“One hug!” She says, rushing over to squeeze him as carefully as possible.

Her mother gives her a warm hug, tugging at her ribbon, then pats her on the back and sends her to the other side of the wagon, where Itachi waits nervously.

“I don’t mind if you’re loud, Sakura.” He says at once, raising his hands in a defensive posture.

“You don’t have to hug me.”

Sakura puts her hands on her hips, “You mean you don’t want to hug me?”

Itachi stammers, mouth opening and closing uselessly for a moment, before he drags both dogs onto
his lap and holds them in front of his face as a shield.

Sakura giggles at him, “Silly-billy. Can I have your little finger, please?”

Itachi looks very alarmed indeed, “Is this the price of refusing a hug?”

“Just stick it out.” She demonstrates, wiggling her pinky at him.

He copies her, suspicion forming on his face.

She gently hooks her finger around his and squeezes.

“That’s the littlest hug.” She tells him. “If you don’t like big hugs, you can just do this instead. Is that okay?”

Itachi looks at their joined fingers with far more intensity than she believes the situation calls for. Then, he solemnly squeezes back. His finger dwarfs hers.

The moment he lets go, Sakura jumps onto her seat and reaches out to Takumi, arms outstretched invitingly.

Takumi gives Ryu a pleading look.

The older man rolls his eyes, which Takumi seems to take as permission, since he steps closes to the wagon and leans close enough for Sakura to throw her arms around his neck. Itachi has an iron grip on the back of her shirt, just in case she tumbles headfirst out of the wagon. She lets go of Takumi and Itachi hauls her back in.

She moves to the other side of the wagon, heading for Ryu. He raises an eyebrow at her. She veers off, seizing her dogs in a joint hug. Her heartbeat is rabbiting away in terror, but Kagami calms her down by telling her all the things she can do when she gets home.

She sits on the floor of the wagon, looking up at the gathering clouds. She hugged almost everyone in the wagon. It’ll have to do for now.

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Shisui isn’t waiting at Konoha’s gates when they get home, but there’s two pretty chuunin who flag them down as they pass by. The wagon stops abruptly, almost sending Sakura to the floor, if not for Itachi’s death-grip on her sleeve.

“Is this the Haruno family vacation?” A pretty red-eyed girl asks, clipboard in hand.

Kurenai, Kagami supplies, young jounin sensei in my time. Genjutsu expert. Not to be underestimated.

The second girl loops an arm around Kurenai’s neck, leering into the wagon, “How’d it go? Cause any incidents with the upper crust?”

Anko. Terrifying. She’s – ugh – she’s definitely not be underestimated.

“Um, no?” Sakura’s father replies, looking bewildered. “Should we have?”

“Not at all, sir.” Kurenai replies, flicking Anko’s hand away from her face. She’s having no difficulty maintaining her air of composure, even while the younger girl hangs all over her. “Hokage-sama has requested that your daughter attend a meeting with him as soon as she arrived back in
Konoha, so if you could – ”

Sakura gives her parents a panicked look. What did she do? Did someone find out about Kagami? Did she leave her secret code somewhere outside her room? Is Shisui okay?

“That shouldn’t be a problem. I’ll go with her. I am, after all, her guardian.” Tsunade says.

Sakura jerks back in shock, looking up.

Tsunade is standing on a tree branch above them, staring into the village. She is radiant in the weak winter sunlight, her hair streaming behind her like pale gold. She’s looking at the Hokage Monument, at the faces staring back with stone-cut eyes.

Sakura’s not the only one shocked by Tsunade’s sudden appearance. Her parents are both one loud noise away from a heart attack. Itachi is practically gawping, his mouth slightly agape. Takumi is gawping. Ryuu is frowning, arms folded.

Kurenai’s professional manner is somewhat dented, eyes wide in astonishment.

Anko just looks impressed. Sakura follows her gaze right to Tsunade’s chest, then she covers her eyes.

“Her guardian?” Kurenai repeats hesitantly.

Tsunade hops down in front of them, a little smirk on her painted lips. “That’s right. You’ll have to do a little more paperwork when you mark Sakura down as a Senju. The youngest in far too long.”

Shizune is on the horizon, still walking down the path to Konoha’s main gate. She appears to be laden with bags.

“Does this mean you’ve returned to Konoha?” Kurenai asks, faint traces of hope stirring within her.

Tsunade huffs a laugh, turning her grin on Sakura. Her hazel eyes look warm in the sunlight. “I guess it does.”

She offers her hand.

Sakura takes it, allowing herself to be pulled out of the wagon.

They head through the village together, an odd little group of undercover ANBU, a babysitter Uchiha, the Harunos, and one third of the Sannin.

They part with Itachi outside of the Hokage’s office after he regretfully says he really must go see his father.

Sakura expects Takumi and Ryuu to leave too, but they follow her parents and Tsunade into the office without a word of discussion among them.

The Hokage isn’t floored by the sight of Tsunade, but it’s a near thing. He must have been warned about her presence in the village ahead of time, because there’s aftershocks of an earlier blow still rippling through his system.

“Tsunade-chan.” He says hoarsely, somehow making the cutesy suffix sound grave.

“Hello, Sarutobi-sensei.” Tsunade says, bowing just deep enough for her necklace to spill from her chest, glinting in the light.
“Back for good?” He asks, his chakra bracing itself for a disappointment.

Tsunade shrugs, “I got bored losing money. I figured Konoha’s bound to need me back by now, so…”

Despite Tsunade’s breeziness, Sakura can tell this is not the casual reunion it’s playing out as. The Hokage clearly thought they’d never meet again, and according to Kagami, they weren’t meant to.

_This is a big change, she thinks, and I never even meant to do it!_

_It’ll be a good thing in the long-run. Tsunade-shishou was right. Konoha needs her_, Kagami says seriously.

The Hokage’s eyes fall on Sakura, and for some reason, his chakra gets sad.

“Sakura-chan. Would you take a seat, please?” He asks, gesturing to the front of his desk.

Sakura does so, kneeling on the seat to see over the desk.

She looks behind her, sensing something new.

Mariko is standing by the window, a nervous smile on her face. Her chakra is unused, barely there, so she’s easy to overlook.

_Why is she here?_ Sakura wonders, giving her an uncertain wave.

“Now, Sakura-chan. I’ve been told your vacation wasn’t as fun as it should have been.” The Hokage says gravely. “Something very frightening happened when you were in the hotel, didn’t it?”

_Oh._

Sakura fidgets on the seat, trying to ignore the way Tsunade is looming over her.

“Yes. There were lots of Masks. More than when I was in hospital. They tried to hurt Kakashi-sensei. They _did_ hurt Okaa-san. So, I… I…”


Sakura grips the edge of the desk. Is she in trouble? It feels right, in a way, if she is. That man isn’t going to wake up ever again because of her. That’s important. She doesn’t want to pretend it never happened.

“I hit him really hard.” Sakura says, in a little mouse voice. She sounds meek and silly. The back of her neck burns, Tsunade’s stare tangible.

The Hokage looks between Tsunade and Sakura, his chakra slotting together like puzzle pieces joining up. “I see. And you know what happened to the man?”

“Of course she does, she – ” Her mother bursts out.

Sakura turns in her chair and gives her mother a watery smile, “It’s okay, Okaa-san.”

Her mother quietens down.

“He died.” Sakura says, her voice cracking.
“I know.” The Hokage says, his voice so comforting, like he’s the jii-chan Naruto always talked about so fondly, the cheerful old man Sakura had expected to meet when she first saw the Sandaime.

“He didn’t get up.” Sakura says, her bottom lip quivering. She’s holding back the tears as best she can, not wanting to cry in front of all the grown-ups.

“I know. But your mother did.”

Sakura blinks, rubbing her knuckles against her cheek to stem the flow of tears.

“You saved your mother. And from what I hear, you saved Kakashi too. You were braver than most adults would be in your place. I know you had to do something very serious and it must have been painful to deal with. But you did it for the right reasons, Sakura-chan. I am very proud of you and I have no doubt that your family is, too.”

Sakura’s parents are reaching out to her with all their love, their auras stretching to encompass her. Even though they’re standing a few feet away, she can feel their arms around her. She can feel their unconditional acceptance.

Sakura nods, a hard lump in her throat.

“Now, if I could just have a quick word with Sakura on her own – ” The Hokage starts to say.

“Nope.” Tsunade says. Her chakra had flitted from one emotion to the next during Sakura’s conversation with the Hokage, from confusion to understanding, sadness to pride. Now, she’s wary.

“Tsunade-chan, that isn’t really your call.” The Hokage says wearily, but with a touch of fondness.

Tsunade smirks, “Oh, I think it is. Do you guys mind clearing out? This won’t take long.” She asks, addressing the room at large.

Sakura’s parents are the most reluctant to leave, lingering to wrap her in hugs and press kisses on her face. But even they eventually go, leaving Sakura alone with the Hokage and Tsunade.

The Sandaime touches his desk, chakra flaring, and Sakura feels it fill grooves in the wood, forming the shape of a seal. At once, another chakra signal appears. Sakura sits up in her chair, her mood lifting.

*Kakashi!*

He appears in the window, stepping into the room. He doesn’t look at Tsunade, or the Hokage. He only looks at Sakura.

She beams at him, but her smile falters at Kagami’s whisper.

*His chakra…*

He is filled with shame and regret, just from the sight of her. What’s wrong? The last time she saw him, he was –

“Where is he?” Sakura asks, going cold all over. Horror is beginning to dawn on her.

Kakashi says nothing.

“Where’s Tenzo-kun?” She stands, her tone pleading. Tsunade’s heavy hand falls on her shoulder.
“Sakura-chan, I had an extensive talk with Tenzo-kun and determined – ” The Hokage begins.

Sakura whirls back around. She can’t see over the desk now she’s standing up, so she walks right up the side of it, effortlessly gluing her feet to the wood.


The Hokage looks away, his aura uncomfortable.

“You gave him up.” Sakura whispers. “You gave him to the mean people, the ones who tried to make him hurt me. He didn’t want to go back, he wanted to be with me. He’s a boy and he likes flowers and I promised him he wouldn’t have to go back with them! I promised!”

“Sakura…” Kakashi says quietly.

“You promised me! You said you’d take care of him!” Sakura shouts.

“Whoever this Tenzo is…” Tsunade says dangerously. “Bring him here, now.”

“Tsunade-chan, I couldn’t possibly – ”

“As a favour to me, you will.”

The Hokage gives a long, rattling sigh. He makes an abrupt hand gesture and Kakashi vanishes at once, leaving behind traces of relief.

Sakura sits back down, practicing her Mariko-approved breathing, while Tsunade examines her nails.

“Where is Shizune-chan?” The Hokage asks, a little strained.

“Finding accommodations.” Tsunade says idly, more interested in her chipped polish than her old sensei’s weak attempts at conversation.

“You’ll need a more permanent residence than a hotel if you’re staying for good.”

“I know. That’s why I sent Shizune to find an appropriate place instead of just doing it myself.”

“Will you get a pet?” Sakura pipes up, giving Tsunade a dim, unenthused smile. Stress is burning through her.

It’ll be alright, Kagami swears, if not now, then later. We’ll make it right.

“Perhaps.” Tsunade smiles down at her.

“I am curious as to what brought this on.” The Sandaime says, gesturing between them both. “Did you already know Sakura-chan, before she came to Suna?”

“Who can say?” Tsunade yawns, stretching her arms above her head. “It’s such a small world.”

The Hokage is clearly unsatisfied by that non-answer, because he straightens up in his chair to say something else. An incoming chakra signal cuts him off.

Kakashi and a smaller figure in a mask appear in the middle of the room.

Sakura reaches out with her chakra at once, feeling Tenzo’s fresh soil and rain chakra soak through
her with a single touch.

It's really him!

Sakura barrels off her chair and grabs Tenzo around the middle, tackling him with a hug. She closes her eyes, holding onto him tightly. She feels him reach up and take his mask off, his bare forehead pressing against her hair.

“Hello, Sakura.” He says.

“I found you!” Sakura cries.

***

Hello, friends!

I’m writing this on such a broken computer I cannot EVEN BEGIN TO – ahem. I’m fine.

IMPORTANT NEWS.

I’m thinking of making this a series.

Time Flies Like An Arrow is mostly cute stuff, but it’s VERY long and we all know some not-so-cute stuff is loitering on the horizon, so, would you guys prefer it if I made this a 25 chapter fic (or more, depending on how it goes) and then marked it as complete, and continued it in a new story?

God, did I explain that well? I’m so tired my brain is melting. I just figured if we keep all the cute bits in one fic, it wouldn’t be so jarring when things like the Uchiha Massacre (or at least, my rendition of it) happen later on. I like the idea of you guys being able to use this as a comfort read.

Hi guys, please don't leave comments regarding how OP you think Sakura will be with Mokuton. She won't. I promise. I'm had so many comments about this and it's beginning to get me down. I have a solid plan for this story and I know exactly why Sakura has Mokuton, and it's not to make her super special and all-powerful, I promise.

Surprise! Tsunade hasn’t lost her flair for the dramatic. She appears in a tree, gazing meaningfully at the Hokage Monument. All while Shizune is panting, clawing her way over the horizon, hauling a hundred bags at once.

I have an important appointment tomorrow and it’s currently silly o’clock in the morning, soooo… poop. Sleep is for the weak!

(but please get plenty of rest you guys, okay)

Sakura made a flower in her hand but that’s totally normal. No worries.

The Sandaime: Oh, I couldn’t possibly pull a young boy out of ROOT even with evidence that he was working on Danzo’s orders to kidnap and kill Konoha’s own people.

Tsunade: Get me the fucking Flower Boy, or I will break your village in two with my little finger.

I’d like to believe that if Sarutobi was presented with Tenzo and a bunch of evidence against Danzo in canon, that he would do something about it, but… eh. It’s Sarutobi. I’m assuming him referring to Tsunade as Tsunade-chan would be a little patronising, considering her age. That’s what I’m going for, anyway.
Anko and Kurenai are currently teen chuunin and I assume not important enough to do much besides some fair-to-middling missions and errands, so… I picked them for this and so far, no regrets.

Sakura and Itachi now have a little finger hug.

**Quick poll for fun:** Who is your biggest inspiration?

It can be someone you know, a celebrity, a historical figure, a fictional character… whoever!

(Dogwatch Update: A Sad Boy hugged two Good Dogs. It was a Very Good Hug. 10/10 dog approved, would hug again.)
“So, explanations now.” Tsunade says, clicking her fingers, “Who’s Tenzo and who are the ‘mean people’ who hurt you?”

Sakura looks up at Tenzo. His face is bare, his smile unpractised but somehow all the sweeter for it.

“Tenzō-kun is my friend. There are some mean Mask people. They tried to get me in the hospital after I healed my dad, then they attacked us all in the hotel room on the way to the vacation. And Tenzō-kun was one of them, but he’s not now and we’re friends. He’s really nice! He can make flowers.” Sakura says, nodding at him encouragingly.

The Hokage’s chakra gives a slight twinge of displeasure, but his face is set in a vaguely amiable expression.

Tenzō holds his hand out and several white roses bloom.

Shock cripples Tsunade’s aura.

Sakura begins to hold her hand up to copy Tenzō, but Kagami seizes it at once.

No, Kagami says sternly, if you really can use Mokuton – and I don’t see how you can – you cannot show it off. Do you want ROOT to come for you? They already are!

Sakura protests. Why give them more reasons to keep at it? If you avoid them long enough, they should eventually stop wasting resources on you. And if they don’t, you want to keep a trick under your belt.

“How remarkable.” Tsunade says coolly, having recovered from her shock.

“You won’t give Tenzō-kun back to the mean Masks, will you?” Sakura asks the Hokage, gazing up at him.

The Hokage gives her a sincere smile. “I suppose that is up to Tenzō.”

“Nope.” Tsunade says flatly. “You and I both know he’s been conditioned to behave as his master wills it.”

“Forgive me, Tsunade-chan, but what is your concern in this matter? You know I will – ”

“I don’t know much of anything, as this kid’s already proved.” Tsunade says, jabbing a thumb at Sakura. “And my concern is Mokuton. The boy’s got my grandfather’s abilities and my old teammate’s fingerprints all over him.”

Tenzō inches closer to Sakura. She wraps her hand in his shirt, holding on tightly just in case someone tries to rip him away.

“Tsunade-chan – ”

“As the head of the Senju clan, I am humbly requesting that you relinquish your rights over this child, and allow me to give him my name.” Tsunade glances at Tenzō, whose chakra is a wash of icy shock. “Provided you want that, Tenzō.”
Overcome, Tenzo only nods. He’s trembling. Sakura tries to soothe him with a touch of her chakra, but he’s so on edge that he skitters away, almost bumping into the Hokage’s desk. Sakura sends him an apologetic look.

“I do want that.” Tenzo says finally. “To – to be a Senju? Is that –”

“To be family.” Tsunade gives him a crooked grin. “I don’t care if you ever pick up a kunai again. I’m not doing this for your ability. You could be a gardener for all I care. But you and share something, and I’m happy to make it official if you are.”

Tenzo smiles, then folds himself up into a deep bow. “Thank you, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade catches Sakura’s eye and huffs, “Might as well call me Oba-san. Only a Senju could get away with that.”

Tenzo’s smile is unrestrained, his face shining with joy.

Even the Hokage seems a little happy, though his aura is mostly storm clouds.

Tsunade carefully unstraps the mask from Tenzo’s face, then holds it in the palm of her hand, facing up. Revulsion squirms in her aura.

She crushes the mask without a word, fine dust raining from her grip.

Tenzo and Sakura stare at her, open-mouthed.

“Okay, the Hatake kid’ll take you two somewhere quiet while the Hokage and I have a chat.” Tsunade says briskly, gesturing to Sakura and Tenzo. “We’ve a few things to talk about and it might take a while.”

Kakashi steps a little further in the room, his chakra a mass of relief and anxiety, the latter of which is pointed squarely at Sakura. He looks to the Hokage for the final word.

The Sandaime taps his pipe against his desk and gives the slightest of nods.

Sakura gives him a warning look, then pats Tsunade on the arm.

“You’ll be okay.” Sakura says.

“Thank you?” Tsunade replies, her head tilting in question.

Sakura gives her a subtle thumbs up and links arms with Tenzo, ignoring Kakashi’s attempts to grab her attention as they leave the room.

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Tsunade regards her former teacher with a renewed interest. He looks sunken, old. Tired. Not much like the vibrant sensei she remembers, or even the world-weary Hokage she left behind. His spark has dimmed.

“I’ve adopted Haruno Sakura.” Tsunade says right out, uninterested in beating about the bush.

“Oh.” Sarutobi says in his chair, a puppet with cut strings.

He kneads his forehead with his fingertips. Tsunade, remembering the terrible migraines he used to suffer, gently touches his face. She can feel the tension burning under his skin. She removes it with a
“Ah, thank you.” He says, touching his temples as if noting the difference. He gives her a smile, and even though it’s housed in this weatherworn face, it’s the same old smile she remembers from her youth.

“No problem. I can guarantee I’m going to be the cause for at least sixty percent of those headaches.”

“Is that a bet?” Sarutobi asks slyly.

“Not today.”

“Well, just don’t make any more jokes and I should survive the night.” Sarutobi says, fanning himself in jest. “I already know you have the maternal instincts of a hammer, Tsunade-chan, so all this talk of adoption doesn’t fool me for a moment.”

“I already signed the paperwork for Sakura. And do you honestly think I’d tell Tenzo I was adopting him to his face and not mean it?”

“I think you made a snap decision you may regret. You aren’t planning to stay at home and care for a child, are you?”

“At least two.” Tsunade says vaguely. “And no, of course not. That’s what Shizune is for. She’s looking forward to it, she bent my ear about interior decorating the whole journey here. And obviously I’m going to take over as Head of Konoha Hospital.”

He brightens at that, “An excellent idea. I can believe that you might want to take on Tenzo-kun, considering his origins, but you mentioned Sakura-chan…?”

“I met her in Suna. She was talking down the Ichibi brat. He reeked of Chiyo’s sloppy sealwork. She befriended him, despite his… everything.”

Sarutobi pales, “She didn’t get hurt, did she?”

“No, I made sure of that. After I dragged her off the demon and he slunk off to some sand crag, I checked her over. She insisted that her parents weren’t in the same room while she got a check-up. Can you guess why?”

Sarutobi closes his eyes.

“She was covered in wounds. Some old ones, sure, but mostly fresh. Cuts and bruises, nothing serious, but she was obviously hiding them from her parents. I assume she got them in the attack on the way to Suna. That isn’t what caught my attention, though. She managed to heal a few of her own wounds, including a severe scar, and she mentioned saving her father’s life. I haven’t come across raw talent like that since Shizune, and her skill is derived more from her ability to excel at whatever she puts her mind to. Sakura is a natural healer. After realising that, I got curious enough to tag along to Konoha when they left.”

“So, she’s a mere curiosity to you?” Sarutobi asks.

“You always ask dumb questions just to talk around a subject. If you want to know if I care about her, just ask straight out?”

“Do you?” He asks, his eyes piercing.
For a moment she’s caught in his gaze, a genin once more, and he’s rumbled one of the few schemes she’d deigned to work on with Jiraiya. Then she blinks, and he is an old man in robes, and she is his heir apparent, not that he knows it.

Sakura had had plenty of faith in Tsunade’s ability to be Hokage, just based on her future self’s opinion. Tsunade guessed Kagami wasn’t the type to sugar-coat things, and if Tsunade was truly a terrible Hokage, she wouldn’t have minced her words. She would’ve done everything she could to avoid Tsunade ever taking the hat.

“I care. I wish I could avoid it, but I do. It’d be easier to spend my time in gambling dens, happily squandering the family fortune, but it seems like I do have a conscience, after all.” She says, her mouth twisting into a grimace.

Tsunade had been so proud to be a Senju, once upon a time. She had loved her grandfather – and still did, with all her heart – considering him to be the best man in the world. She had loved her village. She looked forward to protecting it, no matter what. Then she graduated from the Academy in only a year, and was thrust into war.

She spent some of her formative years on the battlefield, watching men die all around her until she learned how to do something about it. She saw how her family’s wealth had been accumulated – through endless death and bloodshed, territories being crushed and assimilated, treaties being brokered and offerings brought forth.

Hashirama had hated it all. The day she realised her goofy, gentle grandfather had hidden his sadness from her was the day she heard he was dead. The spoiled, pampered life she had led had taken place behind a smokescreen, shielding her from the truth. The reason why she could afford to have such a childhood was because Hashirama didn’t.

Then one by one, the Senju fell, like rotting trees in a dying forest. Still, she had her little brother. The future, burning bright in one young boy.

But then, her necklace was soaked in blood, still wrapped around Nawaki’s neck.

So, she was the last Senju, the last of Hashirama’s direct line of descendants. She still had Dan, the love of her life. Perhaps their child would be the future, the next bright spark to keep the will of fire from going out.

And then she was a little girl again, surrounded by death and feeling life being snuffed out all around her, beneath her fingertips as she failed to save another dying comrade.

But this time, it was Dan, and his blood stained her hands and it would never, ever come off.

She was the last of the Senju. And now, she was truly and completely alone.

She took the family fortune, the one Hashirama so despised, and threw it away whenever she could. Blood money could only be cursed, just as she was.

“Well, I have to say, I’m very happy for you.” Sarutobi says warmly.

Tsunade, who had expected more vehement rejections and less congratulations, found herself slightly off guard.

“Well… thanks.” She says slowly. She brightens, remembering something he’s sure to be displeased by, “I’m adopting Uzumaki Naruto, too.”
Sarutobi boggles at her, his pipe almost snapping in his hand. He takes a moment to compose himself, all the colour draining from his face.

When he finally speaks, his voice is hoarse, “That is… not a wise decision, Tsunade-chan. You know certain parties would be displeased –”

“Well, Danzo can shove a rock in his craw and chew it. The kid is all alone. Shizune will be happy to take care of him. We’ve already discussed it. She doesn’t know about Tenzo, but if you have one kid, you may as well have another, right?”

“We are trying to keep Naruto’s parent’s enemies from discovering who he truly is –”

“He’s got his father’s looks and the Uzumaki name. It’s not a stretch to assume the reason why is because his parents were an Uzumaki and someone who looks an awful lot like the last Hokage. The secret’s already out. He’s an Uzumaki, I am a Senju. Our families are linked. No one will question my choice to take him on. Sure, some will assume it’s because of the Kyuubi, but what can they do? I’m taking on a ward of the state, so I’ll need some paperwork, a meeting with the Council, and since he’s a charity case the village can cover the costs of the house he’ll need to live in.”

“The village is not going to pay for your terrible idea, Tsunade-chan.”

“Why not? It’s already paying for all of yours. How is Danzo, by the way? Still skulking in the shadows? Abducting children from their beds?”

“Tsunade-chan, you know the situation is fraught with tension and peril, I cannot be as cavalier as you would like. I must move delicately –”

“With the grace of a drunken Maito Gai, I know. In the meantime, children are dying.”

“Tsunade-chan…”

“He tried to take Sakura twice because she has similar abilities to myself. How many times did someone try to take me, as a child? Every time, the Hokage personally intervened and eventually it just stopped happening. I’m not saying you should have done something yourself, but you should have made sure something was done. Sakura was forced to kill to protect herself and her mother. That should never have happened. The blood is on your hands, Sarutobi-sensei. Not hers.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” Sarutobi says. He looks so much older than she remembers. A withered old oak, trapped behind a desk. “About Sakura-chan… I am surprised at you. I’m happy you moved on, after Dan, but I never expected –”

“What are you talking about?” Tsunade asks, heart pounding. He can’t mean what she thinks he does.

He gives her a look, as if she’s being particularly obtuse. “Haruno Sakura was born outside Konoha. Mebuki spent the later months of her pregnancy in Arashi. She never started to show while in Konoha. She simply returned home with a child that had supposedly been born on the journey home. A child with curious colouring, pink hair and green eyes. Colouring that almost, but not quite, matches her father. She looks nothing like Mebuki. That’s normal, of course. It happens often. It’s not as though she looks much like you, either. But she takes after you in other ways. She cracked a wooden floor during a tantrum. She saved her father’s life when he was in a diabetic coma, curing his kidney disease in one sitting, the first reported incident of Sakura ever healing anyone at all. I was astounded. I hadn’t seen such a medical prodigy since… well, since you. And then reports began to surface of Sakura’s parents possibly abusing her –”
“They did what –” Tsunade starts angrily, then cuts herself off, aware that she has shown her hand.

The Hokage gives her a sardonic smile, “Come now, Tsunade-chan. Sakura’s parents take her to Suna on vacation, where she – quite by chance – bumps into you, and you, for reasons you will not discuss, decide to give her your name and take her into your clan?”

“She’s my ward –”

“Much like Shizune-chan, who you didn’t feel the need to adopt, despite her familial ties to your fiancé. Not only that, but upon meeting Sakura, you decided to end your self-imposed exile and finally return home after years of being away. I had thought I would never see you again, Tsunade-chan. I know how serious you were when you left. I cannot tell you how overjoyed I am to have you back with us. I just wish you felt you could be honest with me.”

Tsunade levels him with a flat, unimpressed stare.

He returns it, and she abruptly remembers where she learned the look from in the first place.

“According to Mebuki’s medical reports, since ‘giving birth,’ she has failed to conceive. It has only been four years, of course, but there are signs that she may have difficulty ever having children again. It is not a stretch to assume she has never been capable of bearing children at all, and that she left Konoha with her husband to adopt your child.”

“How would they have even known I was pregnant?” Tsunade hisses.

“I know you receive regular updates from Konoha Hospital. I know if you had a child, you would want it brought up in Konoha, your home. I know it would not be difficult for you to covertly request the files of couples with issues of infertility, and the hospital staff would simply assume you were trying to find methods of aiding such issues. You would have had your pick of potential parents to choose from, with their physical traits marked down for you to peruse. It would have been easier to find which had suitable colouring to match you and Sakura-chan’s father. You could have contacted them and offered them the chance to adopt your future child, if you considered them appropriate, hence the months they spent outside of Konoha, ‘staying with family.’”

“If any of that was true – which it obviously isn’t – why would I do all of that, then come home to adopt my own child anyway?”

“Because of the rumours she was being abused and because her hereditary talents had made her a target. You would want to be close to her, to keep her safe and ensure she was not being threatened by her adoptive parents or an outside force.”

“Listen to me, Sarutobi-sensei. I am not Sakura’s mother. I have not forgotten Dan, I will never forget him, and –” Tsunade jabs a finger at him when she runs out of words, feeling strangely off-balanced. This was the last thing she ever expected to talk about with Sarutobi.

He reaches forward, laying a hand on her arm. She hadn’t even realised she’d slammed her hands down on his desk. His eyes are warm with understanding.

“Moving on has nothing to do with those we lost, it’s something we do for our own sake. For our sanity, if nothing else. It has no bearing on how much you did or do love that person. They won’t return to you simply because you wish it, so you cannot waste your life wishing for death to undo itself. Moving on does not mean forgetting, Tsunade-chan. It means you believe you deserve a future, not just a past. If I am correct, you have a chance. A child of your own. Sakura is very special. When I told her she could not adopt another child, she climbed onto my desk, looked me
right in the eye, and said, ‘You’ll see.’ She reminded me of you, so headstrong and firmly convinced that you were always right. Even if she isn’t your child, she might as well be. This is your chance to have a new family, Tsunade-chan. The life you have always deserved.”

Tsunade is not close to tears.

“She’s not my daughter.” Tsunade says plaintively.

“She is now,” Sarutobi replies gently, “She and Tenzo-kun are Senju. As for Naruto, well. You only have to sign on the dotted line and he’s yours, too. Are you prepared for that, Tsunade-chan? Three young lives, depending on you?”

Tsunade has a flash of her first day as a genin, faced with her new team. A creepy-looking boy, prettier than she was, and a white-haired prankster, the same kid who always said she’d die an old maid. She remembers meeting her teacher for the first time, seeing a strange look in his eye. Years later, she’d identified it as fear.

Fear of making a mistake, messing up three vulnerable children. And that fear proved to be justified when Orochimaru went off the rails, Tsunade lost herself in drink and Jiraiya became rootless, a wandering hermit.

“I’ll do everything I can.” Tsunade says, swallowing down her fear. Sakura believes she will die a horrible death one day. Tenzo was another faceless soldier in Danzo’s army of dolls, just a pawn to be positioned as he liked. Naruto is currently one of many orphans, but the only one sure to never leave with a family.

There’s no time for fear.

Her grandfather always said: You plant a forest from one tree. It only takes a single seed to shape a nation.

She has three, and she’ll plant them well.

Sarutobi sits back in his chair, a pleased twinkle in his eye like he knew all along this was how things would turn out.

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After Shizune arrives outside the Hokage’s office, still panting, Tsunade bursts out with a triumphant grin and announces that Tenzo was to come with them immediately.

Tenzo looks delighted.

Shizune looks distraught.

“Tsunade-sama.” Shizune gasps, big red patches on her cheeks. “I’ve only just got here!”

“Well, there’s little point in us waiting around for nothing, now. We’ve got to get Tenzo settled into his new home!” Tsunade says, the wicked flash of amusement in her chakra telling Sakura that she knew exactly why Shizune was annoyed.

“Be that as it may – Tenzo?” Shizune frowns, momentarily diverted.

Tsunade nods at the teenage boy, still clutching Sakura’s hand. He gives Shizune a meek smile.

Shizune studies him, then pins Tsunade with a look that says we will talk about this later.
“You’re really going to take care of Tenzo-kun?” Sakura asks, feeling almost faint with relief.

Tsunade tosses her head, “Oh, why not. We’ve got room in the house and a hideous, overgrown garden that needs tackling.”

Tenzo lights up, a jolt of eagerness running through him. He likes the idea very much.

“You haven’t even seen the garden. You don’t know what it’s like.” Shizune grumbles.

“I know you. You love a good project.” Tsunade winks at her. “Does the house you picked have a roof?”

Shizune bristles in indignation, “Of course it has a –”

“I’m going home now.” Sakura announces. “My parents have to unpack and I have to give everyone their presents! I would’ve got you something but I didn’t know you at the time.” She says directly to Tsunade and Shizune, then she turns apologetic eyes on Tenzo. “And I forgot you might want something. I’ll use what’s left of the money my grandmother gave me to get you something nice.”

“By, ‘the money my grandmother gave me,’” Ryuu repeats, putting on a girlish, high-pitched voice, “‘Do you mean ‘money my parents keep giving me?’”

“Huh?” Sakura says, baffled.

Her parents look hunted, eyes flickering over everything and everyone – except her. Why are they feeling guilty?

“You spent a hell of a lot of money at Suna’s market. I know, because the Uchiha drew up a budget and spent an hour revising it in the hotel. It seems more likely to me that your parents just give you money whenever you ask for it, rather than your grandmother gave you a small fortune.”

Sakura stares at her parents.

“More lies?” She demands. “More stories, like if you make a face and the wind changes, it’ll stick like that?”

Her father squirms, “Well, you were so pleased with yourself for taking care of your birthday money from last year. It seemed a shame to ruin your fun…”

“When did it really run out?”

“Halfway through April.” Her mother says mournfully. “We’ve been topping it up ever since.”

Sakura claps her hands to her face in horror, “I’ve been spending your money? I bought so much dango! And the puppy treats!”

Her mother looks pained, glancing up at the dog-stick she’s holding. The puppies are both snoring very loudly, swaying gently in her grip.

“We thought it was sweet, how you tried to keep track of it all…” Her father says.

Sakura droops. She isn’t good with money at all.

“I better give everyone their presents.” She says gloomily. “They’re going to get homemade things from now on.”
Takumi unfolds himself from where he had been leaning against the wall, “We’ll escort you, Sakura-chan! You can unseal your bags, right?” He asks her parents.

Her mother looks vaguely insulted, only nodding in return.

“I’ll come too – ” Kakashi begins.

“No, Mister Hokage-sama might need you to put boys in bad places.” Sakura says severely, arms crossed.

Kakashi winces.

Tsunade sparkles in delight, looking between them as if watching a sparring match, “Everything alright, kiddo?”

Sakura wrestles with her frown, managing a half-smile, “Yes, Oba-san.”

“Oba-san?” Kakashi stares at them both, then at her parents. “Oba-san?”

“You didn’t know? Sakura is a Senju, now.” Tsunade says sweetly. “She’s my heir. Though I suppose we may have a succession crisis, what with Tenzo…”

Tenzo smiles shyly, shaking his head.

Kakashi looks like a hastily-carved statue, standing stock still in the middle of the room. His single eye is bulging in shock.

Sakura digs into her bag and pulls out the scarf she bought for Kakashi in Suna’s market.

“I got this for you.” She says, holding it aloft. He unfreezes abruptly, bending to examine it. “It’s to cover your face. I still haven’t seen it, you know. Will it blow away in the wind if it isn’t covered up?”

Kakashi’s hands dig into the soft material, not pulling it out of her grip. She hears him exhale, a quick, shaky breath. “It hasn’t yet. Thanks for this, Sakura. I wasn’t expecting anything.”

“No one ever does after the Rinne Festival. That’s why it’s the best time to give presents.” Sakura informs him. “Everyone’s always like – oh!” She makes a shocked face.

“Oh. Oh! Wait. Oba-san?” Kakashi says again, pointing at Tsunade’s smirking face.

“Yes. Spread the word. The Senju clan has returned.” Tsunade says, throwing an arm around Tenzo. “With a goddamn vengeance.”

Sakura consults her mental list of gifts to give.

She’s already taken InoShikaCho their presents. Ino adored her silver ribbon, especially when Sakura told her it can be used to deflect kunai. Shikamaru feigned disinterest in his set of puzzle boxes, but Sakura felt his flash of curiosity at the sight of them. Chouji accepted the bag of sugared fruit with a reverent sigh, thanking her fervently.

She swung by the Uchiha Compound and dropped off Fugaku’s fancy sun cream and Mikoto’s healthy cookbook, Itachi’s tome on meditation and Sasuke’s soft toy tomato. Everyone had seemed happy with their presents.
But none of the Uchiha could tell her where Shisui was.

She isn’t really worried. She’d know if something had happened to him.

Ryu and Takumi had chosen to walk with her in the open throughout the Compound, not watch from the shadows. Kagami whispered that it was to stop the Uchiha from being suspicious of them, but she couldn’t answer why they’d be suspicious of their fellow Konoha nin.

Now, they slink through alleys and hop across rooftops, following her as she hands out presents. She’s thankful they aren’t looming over her, but figures it’ll be harder to give them the slip if she can’t actually see them.

She can’t let them know where she’s going.

She isn’t going inside the shrine. She hasn’t been in there on her own since meeting Izanagi. But she needs to find Shisui. Not just to give him his present, but to make sure he’s okay. It’s been too long.

She can feel Takumi’s confusion and Ryu’s suspicion as she heads further into Konoha. The shrine is in a far-out corner of the village, away from the hustle and bustle of the market. You can’t see it unless you’re looking for it, so she’s not worried about them spotting her destination before she does.

When she gets close enough, she bends down to fiddle with her shoe, and sinks into meditation. She can feel her chakra’s fire, leaping and flickering with every breath she takes. She pushes her senses out, pointing her focus at the shrine.

One chakra signal.

Shisui’s flashfire aura.

*He’s here!* Sakura’s heart leaps.

She sends out a cautious pulse of chakra, hoping her shadows won’t pick it up.

She feels a subtle fluctuation in Shisui’s chakra, a dim response to her touch.

Now she just has to mask Shisui’s exit from the shrine.

She throws caution to the wind and runs in the opposite direction from the shrine. Takumi and Ryu follow her at once. She stops as soon as they’ve gone a fair distance.

Sakura feels Shisui’s signal move slightly. He’s leaving the shrine. And she won’t be there to meet him.

She pivots, crying out, “Shisui-kun!”

A *jolt* in his aura, like an arrhythmic heartbeat.

Then, the crackle of ozone right in front of her.

Shisui appears, his face lighting up at the sight of her. In a flash, her head’s digging into his stomach after he drags her into a hug. She can feel the livewire of tension of his aura.

“Welcome home, Firefly.” Shisui murmurs.

“I got you the best sand, Shisui-kun.” Sakura tells him, her voice a little watery.
She can feel his chuckle reverberate through his chest, “What? I was kidding!”

She fishes out the little bottles of iridescent sand, blinking up at him hopefully.

He sighs, cuffing her on the head gently. His chakra is light and affectionate, but she can feel something dark lurking just beyond the joy of seeing her.

“What’s wrong?” She asks, biting her lip.

His smile twitches and dies abruptly. He promised her no more fake smiles, so she tries not to mind the sight of his pale, stressed frown.

“Sakura, I…” He stumbles to a halt, closing his eyes. He kneels down, drawing level with her face. When he opens his eyes, they are very dark and serious, intent on her. “I’ve been reinstated. Not that you know what that means. Haha… Uh, remember when I said I was on a break?”

Sakura nods. He’d said as much when they first met, months ago. She hadn’t given it much thought.

“Well. Break’s over. I’m back on missions. I’m not gonna have time to play anymore.” He says, a sad twinge in his aura.

“No more playing shinobi?” Sakura asks.

“Nope. And I never really taught you much besides running, huh? Doesn’t that just say it all. About me and what I’m good for. Running. The coward’s way out. You’d never run from a fight, would you?” He asks her absently, his mind clearly elsewhere.

She wants to bring him back to here and now, because she can’t help him elsewhere.

“Do you want to know what happened in Suna?” She asks.

His eyes snap back to her face. “Why does that sound like something happened in Suna? What did you do? Overthrow the Kazekage? Start a revolt? Steal a diamond?”

“No.” Sakura pouts. “I just… um. Well, on our first night at the inn – ”

“Something happened on your first night in Suna?” Shisui interrupts, incredulous.

Sakura winces, “Well, no. Our first night on the way to Suna. We stopped at an inn and lots of Masks attacked us.”

Shisui lets out a dramatic death-rattle, clutching his chest, “I can’t take it! Spare me the details, please.”

“Um, one of them tried to get me but my mum got him. And then another one hit her in the head and she fell down. And then Takumi-kun burst through the wall! Like, whoa! And he got the Mask on the floor. And – ”

“Back up.” Shisui says, screwing up his face. “Don’t spare me all the details. Give me some details. ‘Like, whoa’ is not a detail.”

“I, um… I… One of the Masks tried to get Kakashi-sensei’s eye so I punched him really hard and he died.” Sakura says quietly.

Shisui stares at her.
Then he sweeps her up into a hug, clutching her to his chest. Her feet are dangling, high off the ground.

“The first time you left the fucking village.” He says, choked, holding her like a lifeline.

“Bad word.” Sakura replies, blinking back tears.

He lets out a high-pitched laugh, a little hysterical, “Sorry, sorry. What the fuck was Kakashi even doing there if he was just gonna let that happen?”

“Bad word, *bad word*.” Sakura repeats sternly. “You said it twice, that’s not nice. Now you’ve got to wash your mouth out or your tongue will fall off.”

“At this rate, let it happen.” Shisui mutters. “May my tongue be struck from my mouth if I fuck up one more time. Who would miss it? Well, I guess I would. Ice cream just isn’t the same without a tongue.”

“Kakashi-sensei got his secret eye from the store.” Sakura tells him. “You could probably get another tongue there.”

“There’s a ring of truth in that statement that scares me. Why do you even believe that? Ugh, whatever. Listen, Firefly,” He places her back on the ground, not seeming even slightly affected by her weight, “You did a bad thing for a good reason. I’m sorry you had to do it. But you did. And it’s done. So all that’s left is what’s yet to happen. That, you can control. Do you want to fight? Or are you done?”

Sakura thinks about it. Killing the Mask was the worst thing that’s ever happened to her. But if her mother had died, it would have been the worst thing in her entire life for years to come. She knows that. She remembers feeling her mother die, buried under the house she helped build.

But she also remembers breaking her mother’s fall, protecting her from a Mask who’d see her dead without a trace of regret. She remembers how it felt, facing him down and knowing she was the only thing standing between her family and death.

It had been terrifying.

But what was worse was the thought of her *not* being there. What could have happened.

“I want to protect people.” Sakura says firmly.

Shisui sighs, but a flicker of a smile lights up his face, transforming it. “Brave Firefly. I know you’ll work wonders.”

“I already have.” She says, a cheeky grin beginning to emerge.

Shisui cocks his head, raising an eyebrow. “Am I… looking at Senju Sakura right now?”

“Uh-huh!” Sakura nods, beaming.

Shisui’s chakra glitters with joy and pride, “Wonder child. Miracle worker! I knew you could do it!”

Mindful of Takumi and Ryu, both close-ish but neither trying hard to listen in, Sakura whispers, “And I can do Mokuton now, too.”

Shisui trips over nothing, face-planting.
He doesn’t move, but she hears a pained groan that sounds like, “Noooooo.”

“Shisui-kun?”

_Drama queen_, Kagami says sagely.

“You can’t. Keep. DOING this to me!” Shisui wails, writhing as if in agony.

"You can’t play on the floor, Shisui-kun."

“Leave me here to dry out in the sun.”

“Like a lizard?”

Shisui takes in a rattling breath, presumably inhaling dirt from his position, “More like a twelve-year-old with a burgeoning heart condition.”

Silence.

“From all this stress!” He adds.

“Are you alright, Shisui-kun?”

“Go away. I’m in mourning.”

“For what?”

“For a time in which life was _simple_.”

Naruto is the tallest in the whole orphanage. The old lady says that’s just ‘cause he’s the one of the oldest, and he’s actually kind of short for his age, but it still counts.

He stands on his tiptoes, stretching up as much as possible. He got to have a shower all by himself today, ‘cause the plumbing had gone wonky and the water was too cold. None of the other kids wanted to use it, but Naruto didn’t care. He has to be as clean as possible if he wants to get picked.

There’s two ladies in to see everyone today. One’s kinda young, with black hair and eyes. She’s pretty. She doesn’t look anything like him, but that doesn’t stop him imagining sitting at the dinner table with her, maybe even calling her kaa-san…

The other lady is tall, with sand-blonde hair and a purple mark on her head. She’s got a _huge_ chest. Some of the kids around Naruto are giggling at her, but Naruto’s too busy comparing her hair colour with his, wondering if maybe she’s from the same place as him. Everyone comes from _somewhere_, and everyone hates Naruto here, so he must be from somewhere else. And he’s never seen this lady before. He imagines a whole big family is out there, waiting for him to come home. Maybe the lady has been looking for him?

He sighs when the women start talking to Kaede. That means they’ve already picked the kid they want, without even having to talk to any of them. They barely looked at him, either, so today must be another dud. _Still_, he thinks, straightening up, _if not today, maybe tomorrow!_

“Naruto, can you come over here, please?” Kaede says, opening The Picking Place’s door and gesturing towards him.
Naruto’s heart nearly stops.

He’s *never* been taken to The Picking Place! That’s where they take all the kids who the maybe-parents want to talk to, to see if they like them or not. No one’s ever asked for him before.

He stares at the two ladies, mouth wide open, and walks over to them on shaking legs.

Kaede grimaces, “Close your mouth, Naruto. Remember your manners.”

Naruto covers his mouth with his hands, horrified. How dumb can he be? Maybe-parents don’t want stupid kids or ones without manners. And he’s both. He has to trick these ones into thinking he’s good.

He makes himself smile, holding his hands behind his back, and follows Kaede into The Picking Room.

As he enters, Kaede grabs his arm and whispers, “Don’t blow it, boy. This is your chance.”

Naruto trembles all over, but nods with grim determination. He has to do this.

Kaede tries to help Naruto up onto the chair, but he wants to show he’s a big boy and he can do it all by himself, scrambling up on his own. The two ladies sit opposite him, a big wooden table stretching between them. Naruto has never sat here before, he’s only ever glimpsed the inside of the room through the crack in the door. He can see where kids like him have sat, scratching their names into the table leg with their nails. Naruto wants to do the same, since he can spell his whole name, but what if the ladies notice?

Kaede slips out of the room, muttering something about ‘leaving you all to get acquainted.’

“Hello, Naruto.” The blonde woman says. She’s smiling at him. Whatever he’s doing, it must be working! “I’m Tsunade, and this is Shizune.”

Shizune is the black-haired lady. She’s smiling too, even though her eyes look kind of sad. “Hello, Naruto-kun.” She says gently.

“Can you tell us about yourself?” Tsunade asks.

Naruto freezes. He can’t tell them about his pranks, or how he loves ramen, or how he’s a Monster. Oh! He lights up, “I have a big sister named Sakura! She’s got pink hair and she likes ramen, just like me! When we’re big, we’re gonna have a house and a tree and a pond with fish – and a dog, but she’s already got two, can you believe it?”

“Sakura, you say?” Tsunade repeats, her eyes glittering in amusement, “I just adopted a girl named Sakura. What a coincidence.”

“Well, it’s not my Sakura, ‘cause she’s already got parents. *Both* of them.” He says proudly.

“I wish I could offer you the same,” Tsunade says, her smile dimming slightly, “I’m about to take on a full-time job at the hospital and I’m not married, so if you lived with me, you wouldn’t have a mother and a father. Shizune would be the one taking care of you, since she’ll only work part-time. Would that be enough, Naruto?”

Naruto stares at them both, something sharp pricking behind his eyes. Something loosening in his chest. He squeezes his hands into fists and bursts out, “I can cook and clean and I shower every day if the bathroom’s free, and I would eat all my vegetables, even the yucky ones, and I… I… I’d be so
good. I promise. If you picked me, you wouldn’t regret it. You wouldn’t take me back. I’m gonna be Hokage one day!”

He’s shaking so hard his teeth are rattling together. Please, please, please, he prays, tears spilling down his cheeks, please pick me!

“Oh,” Tsunade says, a pleased curl to her lips, “What a coincidence. So am I.”

Naruto’s eyes widen. He takes a deep breath, ready to shout, then she cuts him off.

“My grandfather was the Shodaime,” She says, eyes crinkling as her smile widens, “My uncle was the Niidaime. And my teacher is the Sandaime. It must be fate, meeting you. If you want to stay with us, I can teach you all about being Hokage, though I can already tell… you’ll be a great one, someday.”

Naruto lets out a sob, clapping his hand over his mouth to muffle the sound. She’s gonna be Hokage, just like him! He was right! Her whole family were Kage, that means he does come from somewhere, he does belong! He always knew he was gonna be Hokage and this must be why, it’s in his family!

“And Naruto-kun,” Shizune begins, “If you did pick us, we have a little house we’ve recently purchased. You could live there, with us. You’d have your own room – ”

Naruto leaps across the table, throwing his arms around them both, “Yes! Please ‘dopt me, you won’t regret it, I swear! A whole room just for me? I… I want that. Please…” He’s sobbing, hooking his arms around their necks in case they change their minds. He’ll fight to stay with them, no one could drag him away.

“Then you pick us,” Tsunade begins, laying a hand on his back, “And we pick you.”

Kaede is beaming at him through the window, tears in her eyes. He’d always thought she hated him. But her wrinkled face is lit up with joy.

“One more thing.” Tsunade says.

Naruto tenses. What is it? This must be the bad side, there’s no way this could be as good as it seems.

“You ever wanted a big brother?” She asks.

Naruto bursts into tears, overjoyed.

***

Hello, friends!

So, this story IS going to be split into sections. But not yet! Probably at chapter thirty or so. I’ll end our current arcs and then the next story will start with a timeskip. But if you want the full story in one go, it’ll be posted like that on FFNet.

Naruto hasn’t quite worked out the difference between an adopted family and a biological one. But he’s going to love it all the same.

Tsunade planned to sign some paperwork, give one brat her name, then bugger off into the great unknown, gambling away her fortune. Now she’s got three kids. #prayfortsunade.
Shisui definitely inherited the Drama Queen gene that most Uchiha have.

Sarutobi put two and two together and came up: Tsunade had sex with a pink-haired man and had a little miracle baby, then gave it to the Harunos because reasons.

~

Tsunade exits the Hokage’s office with two kids under one arm and a Starbucks in her hand: Bye, bitch.

~

Tsunade picks up the whole orphanage and shakes it. Orphans spill out. “I’ll have that one and this one and… hmm… ah, fuck it, I’ll just take as many as I can carry.”

Tsunade leaves with a mountain of children.

~

Tsunade regards her Child Haul with a frown.

“Hmm… how do you carry kids? Well, whatever.”

Tenzo ends up under Tsunade’s arm, Sakura’s flung over her shoulder, and she’s got Naruto by the scruff of his neck.

Tsunade nods at the neighbours, “Just walking the kids! As you do! When… you have kids. I think.”

~

Tenzo and Naruto as brothers! Who would’ve thought! (Naruto’s keeping his Uzumaki name, btw. But Tenzo didn’t have a surname. And now he does)

If you think Tsunade regards having kids like buying a goldfish, you’d be absolutely right. You get it, you make sure it has food and water and then you just kind of leave it to it. Right? Right??

(I know goldfish care is more complex than this. I know)

Quick poll for fun: What is your ideal pet?

You can get a little crazy with this. If you want a bear that wears pyjamas, you got it. I would have a Shiba Inu named Honey.

(Dogwatch Update: Two Good Dogs really need a wee. They’re still in the dog-bag. And they would like a wee, please.)
Chapter 26

After Shisui calms down, they sit together on the ground and think.

Shisui told her she can think about whatever she wants, but he needs time to process everything.

Sakura passes the time by probing the auras of the two hidden men nearby, Takumi and Ryuu. They’re both waiting patiently. As far as she can tell, they’re not suspicious. Ryuu is a little too-prepared for a fight, but he always is, so she doesn’t worry too much about that. Takumi is obviously spacing out a little because he’s too relaxed to truly be on the look out for danger.

“Explain what you meant by Mokuton.” Shisui says finally, in a low voice.

“I made a flower in my hand and gave it to Gaara.” Sakura explains.

Shisui lets out a hiss, clutching his chest, but then he very deliberately takes a breath before saying, “How did you make it?”

“My new friend Tenzo-kun can make trees and flowers with water and earth chakra. I thought about it and it felt right. It came a lot easier than Katon did.”

Katon felt like it was fighting her all the way, flames threatening to burst forth of their own accord, not because she’d willed it.

“New friend ‘Tenzo-kun.'” Shisui repeats, closing his eyes. He snaps his fingers, “Who is that?”

“He was one of the Masks that attacked us, but I could tell he was good and I made friends with him.”


Sakura makes a face, but delicately splats her hand against his chin, not quite managing to cover his mouth.

“Smother.” She says.

Shisui regards her with flat, disappointed eyes, “Have I taught you this? Did I teach you to sass me?”

“Yep.”

“Huh. Well, curse past-me, I guess. So, you can make flowers. No big deal. That’s… totally okay and normal.”

“Would you like a flower?” Sakura asks, because he seems really stuck on this whole Mokuton thing.

“No!” Shisui yelps, then rakes his hands through his curly hair. “No flowers in public, Firefly! In fact, no flowers, ever!”

Sakura pouts. Magic Mask had once said he could show her how to make flowers and he never did, and now she’d figured it out on her own, nobody wanted her to do it!

“Wait.” Shisui pinches the bridge of his nose. “I forgot, because my mind was melting, but you said
“No.” Sakura says indignantly. “They’re called Misa and Momo! Gaara-kun is my friend. I met him in Suna. He’s a… um…”

*Jinchuuriki,* Kagami supplies.

*Thanks, Onee-chan.*

“Jin-chew… uh, jinch-ooh… I can say it. I know I can say it.” Sakura frowns, not noticing Shisui’s growing meltdown beside her.

“Jinchuuriki.” He says flatly.

“Yes! Jinchuuriki.”

Sakura pokes his side. He squirms, wriggling away.

She presses against him. “Does this count as squashing? Because I don’t want you to get squished, Shisui-kun. You’re my friend.”

Shisui lets out a long sigh, “Thanks. Right back at you. Just don’t forget that jinchuuriki are dangerous, and yes I know you think they’re nice, but that doesn’t mean they won’t bite your face off, okay?”

“Itachi said something similar.” Sakura says grumpily. “But there’s nothing wrong with Naruto or Gaara-kun -”

“Room of Doom.” Shisui says promptly, his chakra waking up, alert and searching for signs of trouble. “We’ve obviously got a lot to talk about. First, I need you to tell me Usagi-chan’s real name. I want you to really focus on his aura the next time you meet him, then scan for it wherever you go. Hopefully you’ll be able to track down his civilian identity that way.”

Sakura opens her mouth, but Kagami holds her tongue.

*Not your secret to tell, Sacchan, Kagami says solemnly, you do not just tell people things like that.*

*It’s not people, it’s Shisui-kun!*

*Why does he need to know? It’s not something he should ask. He’s trying to take advantage of you.*

*No, he just needs my help. And Takumi-kun wouldn’t mind -*

*Of course he would. It’s his life you’re risking.*

“Sakura? Are you alright?” Shisui asks.

“Why do you want to know his name?” Sakura asks.
She can feel Shisui’s internal struggle. His face flashes through several expressions before settling on blank. “I need to talk with him about something. It’s easier to talk to him as a civilian, not when he’s on duty.”

She wants to ask what he wants to talk with Usagi about, but she doesn’t want to put him in the position of having to choose between always being honest with her and forcing himself to lie. Because she can feel how difficult it is for him not to just say what he’s thinking. He *hates* lying. It’s funny that he does it so often.

“I’ll look for him.” Sakura says, the lie tasting bad in her mouth. Takumi isn’t far, after all, crouching atop a roof with Ryuu. She knows they’re not listening because their auras haven’t changed much throughout the whole conversation. She thinks Ryuu at least would have reacted to Shisui’s request.

Shisui relaxes. He gives her a grateful smile, “Good. I really do just need a chat with him. You’re a lifesaver.”

The word falls between them, the atmosphere puncturing at once. Any trace of good humour is gone in an instant, Shisui’s mouth tightening in response.

“Well,” He says quietly, eyes on the ground, “We’ll see, won’t we?”

xxxxxxx

“So, what do I call you?” Naruto asks, looking up at the women on either side of him.

He’s walking down the street with two grown-ups willingly holding his hands, not dragging him back to the orphanage or scolding him after some prank. He can see people staring at them. Some look surprised, others disgusted. He doesn’t care. The hands holding his are warm and they’re not going anywhere.

Tsunade and Shizune look at each other, eyebrows raised.

“Whatver you like, Naruto.” Shizune says softly.

Naruto squirms awkwardly. Tsunade is really cool – she’s gonna be Hokage! – but she’s not much like the mother he’d always pictured. Soft, warm, kind. Looks at him like he’s special and good. Shizune’s got a nice smile.

“Kaa-san?” He tries out hopefully, looking up at Shizune with big eyes.

Shizune’s eyes well up. She sniffs, looking away, “Haha… I’m a little young for it, but it sounds good. I don’t mind.”

“How about ‘Oba-san’ for me?” Tsunade asks, giving Shizune a teasing wink.

Naruto beams, “Okay!”

*I’ve got a family!* He thinks, swinging their hands in his.

“There’s your big brother.” Tsunade says, pointing over to two guys standing outside a stall, looking kind of awkward together. One’s tall with grey hair like an old man. He’s wearing a weird mask. The other one is smaller, with brown hair and no mask.

Naruto almost bursts with excitement, bouncing up and down, “Which one? Is it the old guy or the short one?”
Tsunade laughs for some reason, and the shorter one looks up.

He smiles and waves, “Oba-san, Shizune-san. Kakashi-senpai kept me safe as promised.”

Naruto dashes right up to him, “What’s your name?”


“Can I call you Nii-chan?” Naruto demands, “Oba-san ‘dopted me too! But she said I can keep my name ‘cause I’m Uzumaki Naruto, and I’m gonna be Hokage!”

Tenzo’s eyes are as warm as Shizune’s, “That’s great. I’d love to be your big brother, Naruto. If you’ll have me, that is.”

Naruto grins up at him, “Sure! I’ve got a big brother like Sasuke now! He’s gonna be soooo jealous that my big brother is better. Are you a ninja?”

Tenzo looks hesitant, “Um…”

Tsunade cuts in, “Tenzo is very strong, but at the moment he’s thinking of going to the Academy to get even stronger.”

Tenzo smiles gratefully, nodding, “Yes, I would like that. To be with people close to my age…”

The old guy gives Tenzo a gentle punch to the arm, “It’d do you some good. You need to learn how to talk to girls, after all.”

Tenzo makes a noise of mild protest.

“Kaa-san and Oba-san are both girls,” Naruto informs the old guy, “Oba-san’s blonde like me and Kaa-san and Nii-chan have the same hair, almost. And Oba-san’s family is full of Hokages, and that’s why I’m gonna be Hokage. Isn’t that awesome?”

“Yep.” The old guy says, popping the ‘p’ sarcastically.

Naruto bristles, but when the guy laughs, it just sounds amused, not mean. Naruto gapes at him, recognition sparking in his mind, “You’re that guy that always hangs around Sakura-nee!”

“That’s what I’m known for, yes.” The man says wryly. “Though most people call me Kakashi.”

“Well done for keeping my kid in one piece.” Tsunade says, ruffling Tenzo’s hair.

“We’re going to get some things for the boys,” Shizune says, “You’re welcome to come along, Kakashi-san.”

“Just Kakashi. Well, if no one else objects…”

Tsunade shrugs, not caring, then looks to Naruto. Naruto looks around at them all, eyes wide. They care what he thinks? He gets a say?

“The old guy can come!” Naruto cheers.

This morning, he’d only had Sakura.

Now he’s got a mother, an aunt and a big brother. And some old guy, too! None of them look at him like he’s a freak, like he’s going to suddenly sprout claws and eat them. People have been doing that
since before he became a Monster with Sakura and the rest of them. But these people look at him like he’s something special.

He sniffs, wiping his eyes.

In an instant, he’s in the air. He squawks in shock, arms flailing around. Tsunade picked him up with one hand and put him on her shoulders! He clutches handholds of pale blonde hair, stunned.

“You want a ride around the shops, kid?” Tsunade asks, holding his legs to keep him sitting safe and stable on her shoulders.

“Yes, please, Oba-san!” Naruto crows, throwing his hands up in the air and whooping as Tsunade takes off, the world becoming a blur all around them.

xxxxxxxxx

The first place they went was a big clothes store, one Naruto had never dared enter. The bigger places usually had lots of people, so there was more chance he’d get chased out.

This time he entered the building on Tsunade’s shoulders, beaming down at everyone. They drew a lot of stares, but for some reason, nobody said a word to them.

Shizune found him a couple of shirts and shorts, brand-new and his size! He didn’t have to wear some other kid’s clothes anymore, he had everything all to himself! He got to pick out his favourites, too.

He chose a yellow shirt with a frog on it and tried it on, jumping around the store yelling, “Ribbit! Ribbit!”

Shizune gave him a thick, light-blue sweater that didn’t itch at all when he wore it. The sleeves slipped over his shoulders and the hem came down past his waist, but he wouldn’t let her take it back. She said she was just going to find one in his size, but he snuggled into his shirt’s collar and shook his head. He liked this one.

Shizune just smiles, brushing Naruto’s hair out of his eyes. “Okay, little one. It’s all yours. Oba-san’s paying, after all.”

Tsunade huffs, pretending to be mad. Naruto’s not worried, though. He can see her smile.

Tenzo is wearing a new shirt, too. His is green with caterpillars on the sleeves. He keeps fiddling with them and smiling to himself. Naruto can’t stop sneaking glances at his new family. None of them are exactly what he’d thought they would be, but they’re all better than he’d hoped.

Kakashi hasn’t said much, just stuck to them like glue. Every time someone walks near them, Kakashi looks up from his book and doesn’t glance away until they’re gone. He’s weird, but Sakura likes him so he must be good.

Tsunade’s been getting some girly clothes, too. They’re all in little kid sizes, so they’re not for her or Shizune. Naruto kind of hopes they’re not for him. He doesn’t really mind, because Ino shoved his face into some mud the last time he said being girly was bad, but there’s too much pink for his liking.

Still, he’d wear glittery pink from head to toe if it meant staying with them.

“Is that enough, do you think?” Tsunade asks Shizune at one point, dumping all the clothes on the counter. Shizune sighs, sorting them all into piles, but nods.
Tsunade picks up all of the bags with one hand. Naruto stares at her in awe. She is so strong! He wants to be just like her when he grows up.

Shizune gives Naruto a funny look when they leave the store. He buries his face in his sleeves, just his eyes poking out to look back at her. He hopes he’s not made her mad already.

But she just hesitantly extends her arms out, like Sakura does sometimes when she wants a hug. Naruto’s breath catches.

He looks up at Tenzo, who nudges him and smiles.

Slowly, Naruto opens his arms and allows Shizune to pick him up around the middle, slinging him onto her hip. She’s not super strong like Tsunade, but her arms are soft and warm and she presses a feather-light kiss against his hair and he feels tears come to his eyes. This is it. This is everything.

Tenzo gravitates towards Tsunade, silently holding out his hand. She accepts it with her free hand without a moment of hesitation and starts to walk with him. Kakashi follows on behind, still reading his funny little book.

Naruto just breathes in the feeling of being carried, how it feels to be weightless and free but totally safe from harm at the same time. He rests his head against Shizune. He can hear her heartbeat, slow and steady. He breathes in time with it, her steps rhythmically rocking him to sleep.

Before he closes his eyes, he thinks, as he often does, my name is Uzumaki Naruto. I’m four years old and I’m going to be Hokage one day. But this time, he added: I’ve got a family of my own and it’s the best one ever.

Sakura is only home for an hour when Kakashi arrives.

He’s alone, his hair sagging under an unexpected fall of rain. Sakura can’t sense anyone beyond him, so Takumi and Ryuu really must have gone home like they said they would.

Kakashi has a quick word with Sakura’s parents while she’s in the other room. She passes the time analysing their emotions and trying to figure out what’s going on. Disbelief – confusion – happiness. A good but unexpected surprise?

“You haven’t unpacked yet, have you?” Sakura’s mother asks, poking her head round the doorframe.

Sakura tries not to look sheepish.

To her surprise, her mother’s aura pulses with relief, “Great! Can you come out here, please?”

Sakura follows her mother into the hall, where her father is hauling some of her bags down the stairs, and Kakashi is patiently dripping onto the rug.

“Hello, Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura says, deigning to speak to him since he looks so dejected.

His hair perks up a little, his head raising to look at her, “Sakura. I’ve been sent to pick you up.”

“I don’t want to be picked up, thank you.” Sakura says politely, backing away a little.

Kakashi gives her flat look, his single eye conveying not a thing and yet so much at the same time.
“You’re going to have a surprise sleepover.” Sakura’s father says, wiggling her bags at her. “Isn’t that exciting?”

Momo and Misa are sitting at Sakura’s feet. She scoops them up, eyeing the adults suspiciously. “What’s a surprise sleepover?”

“It’s a slumber party no one prepared for or wants to go to.” Kakashi says.

What do you think, Onee-chan?

It’s weird. But I trust you know what you’re doing. Maybe you’ll have some fun.

We’ll have the same fun, Onee-chan.

Not quite how that works, Sacchan, Kagami says, amused, but melancholy stains her tone. Sakura wonders how Kagami used to have fun, in her time.

“Okay,” Sakura says bravely, “I’ll go to the thing.”

Kakashi ends up carrying the bags.

She tries to explain that she’s really very strong and can do it all herself, even while carrying two puppies, but Kakashi does that thing where he pretends he can’t hear her and just sets off at a light jog. She huffs, but follows along, her puppies’ ears flopping in the wind as she runs to catch up.

They walk in silence for a while. Sakura had thought they were going to the Uchiha Compound, but this isn’t the way. She regards her surroundings with suspicion. The rain stopped before they left, which was sad. She had wanted to use her new umbrella, which has pretty lace and frills on it.

“I’m sorry.” Kakashi says all of a sudden, his voice low and barely there.

Sakura blinks up at him, “Huh?”

“I’m sorry that I couldn’t protect Tenzo. I thought I could. I brought him back to Konoha, took him to the Hokage’s office, and explained to the Sandaime what had happened. He asked me to leave them for a while so they could speak in private. Tenzo didn’t mind and… well… it was an order. What could I do? I left. When I was called back in, Tenzo was gone and the Hokage just said the matter was settled. I… I’m sorry, Sakura. It’s my fault.” Kakashi says.

He’s stopped walking, his chakra glum and bruise-black like a watercolour picture of a storm. He’s sad. Sakura hates how his sad always seems to stick to him. It takes him so long to shift it.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Sakura says matter-of-factly. “It was the Hokage’s. He’s a big meanie, I know that now. Tenzo-kun is just fine with Oba-san. She’ll take good care of him. And don’t you forget we’re pack and that means everything will be okay if we always talk to each other and make sure we’re not sad or scared. Don’t just think ‘I’m bad! It’s my fault!’ Tell me if you feel like that, and I’ll tell you you’re wrong and you’ll feel better. Is that okay?”

Kakashi just shakes his head, amusement sparking in his chakra. “I don’t know if it’s that simple. Grown-ups just make it more complicated.”

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Kakashi has taken her to a very nice bit of Konoha, with huge old oaks lining the streets and
traditional-looking houses with wooden porches and sliding doors, dark roofs and matching doors.

They stop in front of a huge house, made of white and dark brown wood, its garden huge and overgrown. Bushes and plants peeped over the fence, brightly-coloured flowers painted in big splotches amongst the great bits of green.

There are paving stones leading up to the front door, white blocks that are almost completely hidden by tangles of weeds. Sakura hops from one to the next, carefully holding onto her puppies as she jumps.

“We’re having the surprise sleepover here, Kakashi-sensei?” Sakura asks, raising her eyebrows. She doesn’t know anyone who lives around here, though she knows Ino’s parents were thinking of moving to the area.

“You are, I’m just the delivery boy. Here to drop you off and then get back to reading my po – books. My books.”

Kakashi clears his throat, reaching forward to knock on the door without another word. Sakura eyes him while they wait for someone to answer, confused by the embarrassment in his aura. Kagami refuses to explain why he’s feeling like that.

Tsunade opens the door.

Sakura stares at her blankly.

“What’s with the dogs?” Tsunade says.

“What’s with the…” Sakura says lamely, pointing at everything.

Tsunade is wearing a stained apron. It’s inside-out, but she doesn’t seem to have noticed. She’s holding a freshly-potted plant, her hands speckled with dirt.

“I’ll leave you to it.” Kakashi says, sounding amused. He drops Sakura’s bags on the welcome mat and disappears in a flash of leaves.

Tsunade picks the bags up, carelessly slinging them over one shoulder, “Coming in or sleeping outside?”

Sakura looks down. The welcome mat looks new. It says WELCOME. I hope you brought sake.

Tsunade dumps the bags two feet away from the front door.

“Coming in?” Sakura replies uncertainly, clutching her dogs.

Tsunade simply shrugs, takes the dogs, and disappears inside the house.

Sakura gapes at her retreating back, hands suddenly empty of puppies.

Tsunade-sama isn’t going to kill you, dummy, Kagami says, go in. If even I think it’s okay, it must be.

Sakura enters the house with a great sense of trepidation, taking off her shoes and lining them up neatly on the rack provided by the door. There’s a few other shoes already in residence. A bright orange pair catches her eye. They look like they might fit her.

“SAKURA-NEE!” Naruto bellows, throwing himself down the stairs.
Sakura catches him without thinking, squeezing him tightly. Her heart is racing. What’s going on? Why is Naruto here?

Tsunade and Shizune are there, smiling at them both. Tsunade is holding Momo and Misa, both dogs asleep in her arms. A smell of freshly-cut grass wafts in, and Tenzo appears at Shizune’s shoulder, wiping his grubby hands.

“Naruto!” Sakura says in surprise. “Are you here for the surprise sleepover?”

Naruto laughs delightedly, swinging his legs so much she has to fight to keep him from tumbling out of her arms. “Nope! I live here now. Oba-san and Kaa-san ’dopted me just like Tenzo-nii!”

Sakura’s breath falters. She catches Tsunade’s eye, shocked. The older woman winks at her. Was this her plan all along?

“Eh, why have one kid when you can have three?” Tsunade says, smirking.

“Especially when you have live-in help.” Shizune quips dryly.

“You really got adopted, Naruto?” Sakura asks, hardly daring to believe it.

“Uh-huh,” Naruto says, with a trembling, watery smile, “I did. An’ Oba-san’s whole family were Kages and that’s why I’m gonna be one!”

“Naruto,” Sakura says, a lump forming in her throat, “Oba-san said she adopted three kids, right?”

Naruto nods, then pauses, “Sakura-nee, you call her Oba-san too? Sakura-nee – ” His face freezes as realisation hits him, then tears instantly begin to well up, “You got ’dopted too? You’re really my sister now?”

“I always was. And now it’s official.” Sakura says, sniffing. Naruto buries his face in her shoulder.

“I’ve got a brother and a sister,” He says, his voice marvelling, “And my own room!”

“Oh!” Sakura says, remembering something. She gently puts Naruto down, pouncing upon her bags and rifling through them. She finds Naruto’s present, the giant soft toy narutomaki, and lifts it out. “I got you a present!”

Naruto accepts the narutomaki with a delighted giggle, hugging it to his chest, “Thanks, Sakura-nee!”

“So, Sakura, since you’re here and your parents didn’t come to rain fire upon the house, I’m guessing they got Kakashi’s message about you stopping here on the weekends.” Tsunade says. “So, it’s only fair if you get your own room for that time, don’t you think?”

“Can I have a tree and a pond with some fish instead, please?” Sakura asks. She can sleep in the garden, she doesn’t mind. If she can make Naruto’s dream a reality, that’d be more than good enough for her.

Tsunade laughs, “Why not? Tenzo’s in charge of the garden, though, so you’ll have to ask him.”

Sakura and Naruto turn pleading eyes on Tenzo. He smiles, scratching his head.

“What kind of tree?” He asks, and Sakura and Naruto barrel into him, yelling their gratitude.

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Shisui hasn’t been on a mission in months.

That doesn’t change anything. He’s always been nervous before missions, so this time just feels like the stress of about five missions squished into one. Nothing new there.

He’s expecting to be called up any day now. He can only assume his probation ended because a need for his services arose, not because they’d had any particular time in mind. He didn’t feel any different from how he did before the probation started, so he guessed it hadn’t worked.

“He is going to be furious.” Itachi says, his teeth worrying his bottom lip.

“It’ll be fine.” Shisui says blandly. He loves his little cousins more than anything, but talking to them – to anyone – has gotten harder and harder over the years. He’s pretty sure he’s not successful at hiding his apathy when it comes to the family. It all feels so static and endless. Something minor happens. Itachi worries Fugaku will be displeased. Fugaku is displeased. No one does anything. The cycle continues.

“Otou-san?” Itachi calls, knocking on the door to his father’s study.

The only reply is a sharp flare of chakra. Shisui wonders what it would feel like to Sakura. She went home with two guys, Ryu and Takumi, who she said were good. He has to trust that she knows what she’s talking about, since she can literally sense bad intentions.

Itachi opens the door.

Fugaku is writing at his desk, hunched over. He looks stressed. Shisui would feel bad for him if he could afford to spare feelings on someone who treats his family so badly.

“Otou-san?” Itachi says gently, clearly under the impression that he is about to break some Very Bad News to his father. “There is something I didn’t mention, when I debriefed you about the mission.”

Fugaku stops writing, “Then tell me now.”

“We bumped into Tsunade. She, for some reason, decided to adopt Sakura. She’s legally a Senju now, I believe, since Tsunade-sama took the matter to the Hokage.” Itachi says nervously.

Silence falls between them like heavy snow, blanketing the floor.

Fugaku stands up calmly, “This has laid months of plans to waste. Please excuse me.”

He walks to the Room of Doom, his face stoic and unmoved.

“Why is he going in there alone? Ooh, maybe he’s gonna yell at himself!” Shisui says gleefully. The idea of Fugaku scolding himself in the Room of Doom is probably the best thing Shisui’s come up with since Firefly.

“I hope he doesn’t.” Itachi says glumly. “I can’t believe I didn’t know why we went to Suna in the first place. I should have anticipated it.”

“How?” Shisui asks, ignoring the fact that it was his plan in the first place. “It was a totally random on the spot kind of thing. Not much you can do to anticipate that.”

Itachi gives him a pitying look, “Upon reflection, it is clear that Sakura’s parents deliberately sought out Tsunade in order to have her adopt their daughter. It is far too extreme a coincidence to have happened naturally. They must believe she needs to be a Senju for some reason… I wonder.”
Shisui frowns at his cousin, “Why are you so smart? You couldn’t leave some brains for the rest of us?”

Itachi flushes, “I’m sorry.”

Shisui ruffles his hair, grinning, “Don’t be. We can’t all be geniuses. Just like you can’t be as handsome as me. No one can. It’s my burden to bear. My curse to suffer. My bane to – ”

Fugaku enters the room with the exact same expression he wore when he left it.

Shisui and Itachi blink at him, waiting for the explosion.

“I have to invite Senju Tsunade to our New Years Festival celebration. We will ply her with alcohol and perhaps earn her goodwill.” He pauses, raising his eyebrows at them. “The elders… can never know.”

Shisui and Itachi exchange looks.

Itachi is more intelligent than your average nine-year-old, but when it comes to emotions, he never seems to quite get it. So he clearly doesn’t get why Fugaku cares about Sakura being a Senju, or why he wants to earn her new adoptive mother’s goodwill in the first place.

Shisui hopes the revelations of Fugaku’s dastardly plans aren’t too earthshattering for him. The kid’s too young to be thinking of marriage, anyway.

“That sounds like a good idea, Otou-san.” Itachi says earnestly. Shisui double-takes at him. “You have already made inroads with Sakura’s biological parents and made a gift of the kimono for the Rinne Festival. Tsunade will undoubtedly be pleased by this.”

Shisui stares at his cousin, aghast. He’s in on it!

Itachi refuses to look him in the eye.

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Tsunade shows Sakura her room. She’s getting one anyway, even though Tenzo said she could have a cherry tree and a big pond with fish, too.

Sakura’s room is right across the hall from Naruto’s. If they keep their doors open, they can see each other all the time. Sakura’s room is still white and mostly undecorated, since they weren’t sure what she’d want. She’s happy she gets to pick. She’s going to have all the colours.

There’s a white chest of drawers with pink blossoms painted along the sides, and inside it is a whole bunch of clothes, just for her. There’s mounds and mounds of dresses, shirts and tights. Sakura grabs fistfuls of fabric and squeals at each discovery.

Some pyjamas have been laid on her bed. They’re pale green, the colour of Gaara’s eyes, and they’ve got pretty white lace at the front of the top. Tenzo and Naruto have already wandered by in matching pyjamas, Naruto’s is blue with clouds and Tenzo’s is black with stars.

Sakura regards her bed with a frown. Right now, it is plain white cotton and boring, only saved by the addition of two sleeping dogs. She’ll pick a really pretty pattern later, and Miss Magnolia and Pakkun can go right on the pillows. Then it’ll be perfect no matter what.

She can’t believe how well things have worked out. Kagami is getting twitchy over it. She says
when something seems to good to be true, it generally is. Sakura refuses to believe that. This feels right, like it was meant to happen. It doesn’t matter that it wasn’t. It happened anyway, and now Naruto has a family. They all fit so well together that it feels like they were made that way.

_The world isn’t kind enough to deliver good things whole, _Kagami says, _you have to make them yourself with whatever life gives you. Somehow, you made this happen. I’m proud of you._

Sakura smiles, tugging at her lace collar.

“Sakura?” Tenzo says, knocking on her open door.

She jumps, turning around a little too quickly. It feels like if there’s no chakra around, then she must be alone. It’s unsettling to have someone show up out of the blue.

“Tenzo-kun!” She says, then stops. A little smile bursts forth, she can’t help it. “Tenzo-**nii**.” She corrects herself. She has _two_ brothers. One big, one small.

“I just…” Tenzo looks at his feet. He’s wearing slippers shaped like leaves. “I have to thank you. You did this, Sakura. This is a life I never even thought to dream of, and now it’s mine. I… don’t know what to say.”

Sakura shifts awkwardly. She doesn’t feel like she did much. Tsunade is the one who swept into the village, changing lives left and right.

_Who sent Tsunade here?_ Kagami reminds her.

_You did, _Sakura says, _don’t forget that._

Kagami wasn’t expecting that answer.

“Do you want to see my dogs?” Sakura blurts out.

Tenzo blinks, then smiles. “Of course.”

Momo is asleep, but Misa is just awake enough to roll over for Tenzo, baring her tummy for rubs. Tenzo obliges, his chakra a happy hum.

“They picked me,” Sakura tells him, “I was scared none of them would, but _two_ dogs wanted me! I felt so lucky.”

Tenzo’s smile turns melancholy as he sinks into thought, “Yes… I can see why. They’re lovely. I always thought I would have a dog, if I could…”

“Now you can!” Sakura points out.

Tenzo looks surprised, then sits down abruptly on the bed. He looks a little overwhelmed. “I can, can’t I?” He mumbles, smoothing his hands down his starry pyjamas. “Oba-san said I can go to the Academy if I want. I’m too old, but she said she could get me in for a year or so. She said I can do whatever I like with the garden, but only if I want to. There’s… so much choice, suddenly, when before there was none. And I keep thinking… what if I had followed orders, that day in the hotel? What if I had killed Kakashi and taken his eye? Taken you back to… that place? How different life would be… There would be no choices. No family. Just more orders. I’m never taking a single order I don’t agree with again. Not ever. Thanks to you.”

Sakura sits next to him. Misa wriggles onto her lap, collapsing with a groan. Tenzo puts his hand on
the bed. Sakura takes it wordlessly, and together they stare out the window into the overgrown
garden, the untamed wild waiting for Tenzo to come make it his own.


Tiny white blossoms fill her palm, more than she had intended.

Tenzo’s breath hitches. He closes his hand around hers quickly, eyes moving to the open door. Then
he seems to remember where he is, and his shoulder slump. He releases her hand slowly, petals
 tumbling to the floor.

“Be careful with that,” He says gravely, “Never out of the house, okay? Not once.”

“What about the garden? Can I help make pretty flowers with you, please?”

Tenzo considers it, “We can trust Oba-san. Let’s ask what she thinks and we’ll go from there.”

“Okay.” Sakura agrees easily, pushing Misa’s face away from the blossoms. She tries to eat
everything.

“KIDS!” Tsunade yells up the stairs. “DINNER’S GONE BLACK WHICH MEANS IT MUST
BE READY!”

Shisui watches the lord return to his manor.

He’s perched up on a rooftop overlooking the building, the blueprint fresh in his mind. He knows
why he’s here and what he must do. There’s a man who must die, and a scroll that must be replaced.
He cannot be seen. If an alarm is raised, he will have failed his mission. If he fails this mission, the
elders will abandon him and he will be thrown to the dogs. In this case, that probably means Danzo.

He’d prefer wild, ravenous mutts, personally.

It didn’t take him long to find the place and stake it out. This is an A-rank solo mission, so there must
be some degree of difficulty involved. He’s yet to encounter it, though.

He’s been having trouble looking Sakura in the eye since she returned from her vacation. While she
had been off changing the world and fighting off would-be kidnappers, Shisui had been
contemplating the easiest method of saving himself. Sakura’s kekkei genkai was unheard of, which
meant it was unstudied. He had no idea how it worked, and neither did she. So, if he tapped into her
mind with his Sharingan, perhaps he could figure out exactly what was going on inside her head.

And maybe even see some way of saving himself, or just the manner in which he might die?
Because it’s the not-knowing that is killing him. Not knowing how or if he dies at all means every
day comes with a healthy dose of dread, wondering if this was it, if today might be the day.

There’s a slight shimmer in the air, a presence that was not here a moment ago, and Shisui turns to
meet the threat, kunai between his fingertips before he has chance to think.

A man in a mask is sitting on the roof next to him, his stance placid and unconcerned by the
weaponry bristling in his face. Shisui lowers his hand, but not his guard. Whoever this guy is, Shisui
can’t risk the household being tipped off about his presence.

“Do you think people change?” The man asks, his voice low and ponderous. Shisui doesn’t
recognise the timbre.
“Yes.” Shisui says. He’s changed. He met a little girl who told him what would happen to the world, and now he’s trying to bend the world to stop it breaking. How could anyone go through such an experience and come out exactly the same on the other end?

“For good or for ill?”

“Both.” Shisui says. Fugaku is better. He’s less… Fugaku about everything. Itachi is both better and worse. He’s more open, more social, but also more paranoid and jealous.

“Interesting.”

Shisui shifts on the rooftop, keeping the man carefully in his line of sight while watching the entrance of the house.

“You got a name, creepy?” Shisui asks casually. He’s almost hoping this man will attack. Then he can escape and run home, crying interference to the higher ups. It wouldn’t be his fault. And he wouldn’t have to kill anyone.

“Izanagi.” The man replies.

Shisui gives him a side glance. Does he think Shisui’s some little kid or something? Izanagi is a man from mythos, local folklore. It’s also a technique of the Sharingan. This man must know who Shisui is, and he’s taunting him with his knowledge. Lone Uchiha are often picked off outside the village, by people who want their eyes.

Shisui stares blankly down at the manor, wondering if his death has taken the form of a masked man with a name from a story.

_Do something_, he urges himself, _attack first, catch him off-guard!_

But he doesn’t. He just sits there, waiting for night to fall and the household to fall asleep.

“No you think the Uchiha will ever have a place in Konoha?” Izanagi asks, sounding honestly curious.

Shisui whips round to look at him, not caring that he might miss activity in the manor below. Izanagi says nothing more.

“Why do you want to know?” Shisui asks.

“Call it a personal interest.” Izanagi replies. His tone hasn’t changed once during the entire conversation. He’s presumably modulating it to avoid Shisui recognising it. Add that to the name and the question about the family, and he’s looking more like an Uchiha with every passing minute.

“Then my answer is yes.” Shisui says honestly. “It’ll take time and endless reform and it’ll be boring as hell, but it’ll happen eventually. We won’t just keep repeating our ancestors’ mistakes until it becomes tradition to fail. We’ll stop seeing ourselves as separate from Konoha. We’ll be a part of the village, just as much as any other clan. It’ll happen.”

“How?”

Shisui thinks to himself. Well, either he’ll brainwash Fugaku into having common sense – a very tempting thought – or Itachi will fix the clan from within when he takes over as Clan Head.

“Time,” Shisui replies, “Eventually the old ways will become too ancient to recall, the dismal present
will be the distant past, and the Uchiha will merge with Konoha. It’s the way of the world. Something to look forward to, if we see it happen."

“Just one more question.” Izanagi says, sitting forward. “Why do you call her Firefly?”

Shisui lunges for his head, but he’s gone before the strike can connect. A clone, or a more advanced technique cloaking his escape. Shisui stands for a moment, looking around, the setting sun blocking out his figure against the horizon.

Why do you call her Firefly?

Shisui is left shaken, wondering if he’s just met his end, or hers.

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Hello friends!

Sorry for the late, slightly short update! I’m a poop. I know I’m a poop. There’s no excuse.

Shizune is a Comically Young Mother now. She’s nineteen and her eldest is fourteen. I don’t make the rules! I just enforce them. Naruto has a wine mom and a vodka aunt, plus a Flower Boy brother and a danger-magnet big sis, not to mention a weird old guy who sometimes shows up and he always smells of dog for some reason?

Izanagi is Dramatic. Secret meetings at sunset in which only one half of the party knows they’re meeting. Drama ~~~

Shisui is back on missions! Yay! Oh wait. That’s not good. Boo!

Tenzo and Naruto are both just so happy to be in the Senju family and it was super fun to write, so I hope it was fun to read :D

Fugaku is briefly devastated that Sakura is a Senju and all his plans for her are now irrelevant, as she is an important person, but then he gives himself a pep talk in the Room of Doom and it’s all good.

Naruto sees his friend at the bottom of some stairs and does when any sane, logical person would do. Throws himself at said friend, with zero plan except FRIEND!!! in his mind. It worked out. Somehow.

Quick poll for fun: If you’re into Harry Potter, what’s your Hogwarts House and why do you think you’re in it?

If you’re not into Harry Potter, then just tell me something about yourself, please.

I’m a Hufflepuff, because I spend hours in the middle of the night writing thousands of words so I can post fanfiction in time for the next day.

(Dogwatch Update: Two Good Dogs were taken by Big-Breasted Woman. The Good Dogs failed to respond in time and were torn away from their master. The Good Dogs are ashamed. *puts paw over nose in shame*)
Chapter 27

Tsunade has made old friends of her regrets. She nurses them in her drink and thinks of them so often that they have become a constant presence in her life. The what-ifs never leave her. And yet, when she thinks about her decision to take on these children, regret is not what she feels at all.

Shizune is upstairs, tucking Naruto into bed. She’s better at all of the sentimental, tender parts of parenting. Tsunade thinks she might be better imparting wisdom and keeping the kids safe. They may not love her, but they need her.

Tsunade is sitting at the dinner table, swirling a glass of whiskey around and watching the light glint amber and gold. It would be so easy to drink it all down – seconds, tops – and feel that burn slide down her throat. Never mind Shizune’s disapproving looks, how she pointedly washes up the glasses Tsunade leaves behind, her silence speaking volumes.

What if something were to happen to the kids, and she was busy getting drunk and maudlin? Tenzo has Mokuton, he’s very clearly the result of Orochimaru’s unethical experiments for Danzo. For as long as he lives, he will never stop being a target. Sakura is being hunted for possessing the very things Tsunade taught her in another life. And Naruto is the Kyuubi jinchuuriki – they couldn’t keep that little detail from her – there’s no chance of him having a peaceful, easy life.

She made the decision to take care of the children. That means she must be capable of it at all times. There cannot be a moment in which she slips, or else they may fall with her.

Tsunade sighs. She’s already had three glasses. Everything in moderation is Shizune’s favourite saying, and she starts to get twitchy after Tsunade hits five glasses. She could have another. No one would even know, and her own conscience would be clear knowing she can tolerate four glasses – and much more, besides.

I could, she thinks, the amber light dancing across the table, but I won’t.

She tips the glass up, watching the contents pour onto the floor.

“You made a mess, Oba-san.” Sakura says, slightly reproving.

Tsunade laughs, barely audible, just an exhale of mirth. What a funny little kid Sakura is. Is it something to do with her older self, this strange blend of maturity and innocence? Or is it something wholly unique to Sakura?

“I’ll clean it up.” Tsunade heaves herself off the chair, feeling the weight of her age pressing against her. Her mouth twists wryly. Only a day of motherhood and already she’s aching.

“It smells bad.” Sakura says.

Tenzo shushes her.

“What? It does!”

Tsunade turns to face her oldest children, standing up.

They’re both in their pyjamas. Tenzo looks young and sweet in his starry black nightclothes. Sakura’s green PJs match her eyes. Delicate lace covers the collar and sleeves. They both look nervous. Oh, boy, Tsunade thinks, what now?
Tenzo takes Sakura’s hand and squeezes it, seemingly as support. Sakura nods, expression firming into determination.

“Oba-san,” She says, clearing her throat, “I don’t know how, but I can do this.”

A white spray of flowers forms in the palm of her hand.

Shock steals Tsunade’s breath, leaving her gaping down at them both, examining Sakura’s faintly guilty face and Tenzo’s worried look.

The smell of alcohol permeates the air. *Another regret for the pile,* Tsunade thinks sardonically, *what a time not to have a drink at hand.*

*How could Sakura have Mokuton?* She was too young to be another one of Orochimaru’s victims. Right?

She sits back down, rubbing her temples.

“She’s already promised she won’t do it outside the house,” Tenzo says hurriedly, as if sensing the oncoming storm, “And not even in the garden if you don’t think it’s safe.”

“I’m sorry.” Sakura says in a small voice, eyes downcast.

Tsunade drums her fingers against the table. Her mind is flashing a thousand different possibilities at once. She gazes at nothing in particular, assessing the information she has regarding her family history and techniques. Tenzo is only capable of Mokuton because Hashirama’s cells were used in the experiments he was a part of. But why was Hashirama capable of Mokuton? It was his own special technique, developed by him and used by him alone. What could Kagami have encountered in the future that might have altered Sakura’s body? She said Orochimaru was an enemy. Perhaps he used her in some way? It might have even been Tsunade’s tutelage that drew his attention in the first place.

“I didn’t mean to, Oba-san.” Sakura says sadly.

Tsunade looks up, frowning at the watery sound of her voice. *Oh dear.* Sakura’s eyes are swimming with unshed tears. She’s heroically holding them back, face contorted with the effort. Tenzo has his arm around her shoulders.

“Not your fault.” Tsunade says firmly, pointing directly at Sakura’s face. “It’ll be okay. No matter how you developed this ability, you have it now, and it’s not going to go away. I’ll help you and Tenzo control it. Mokuton is immensely valuable to the worst kinds of people, but don’t worry. I will keep you safe, whatever it takes.”

She means it. She doesn’t take on burdens lightly or make promises just to break them. She’s in this for the long haul.

Finding out Sarutobi truly didn’t have a plan for Naruto had been hard to swallow. Her teacher had always seemed all-knowing, the student of a Hokage that went on to surpass his master, but now he seemed… conflicted. Torn in too many directions to be firm on any subject, he couldn’t seem to make a decision or take a strong stance on anything. Why? Fear of causing offense or conflict? She guessed war had made a pacifist of him, or at least a man desperate to never see another battlefield in his lifetime.

But what if his soft, spineless politics left Konoha weak in the process? He probably wouldn’t live to see his work play out, but she would. If Kagami was right, Tsunade would take the hat and have to
clean up her teacher’s messes. She would not be so wavering, so indecisive. If it had been her choice, the jinchuuriki of Konoha would have been treated with respect and gratitude.

And now she’d *made* it her choice, so Naruto was happily listening to a bedtime story, safe and warm in his brand-new bed, instead of locked away in an orphanage, destined to spend the rest of his childhood pining for a family that would never come.

Things would be different now she was home.

Sakura still looks worried, “I really don’t know why I’ve got it, Oba-san. Tenzo-nii isn’t my *real* brother, so it’s not like it’s in my family. Is it?”

“First, Tenzo absolutely is your real brother. Family you choose can be even closer than family you’re born into. Second, you don’t need to worry about the hows and whys of it all. Leave that to me. As long as you don’t show off your Mokuton in public, you will be just fine. Okay?”

Sakura nods, a little smile forming on her face. Tsunade feels warmth at the sight of it – is this parenting?

“I’ll teach you how to use it, Sakura.” Tenzo says earnestly.

“Good. Tenzo, can you go check on Naruto and Shizune? He might need his big brother to tuck him into bed.” Tsunade says.

Tenzo brightens, “Yes, Oba-san.”

Tsunade watches him go with a faint smile. The kid’s already come out of his shell. Not completely, but enough for genuine emotion to start showing on his face. It’s unsettling, seeing ANBU-level repression in a child. She’s going to have to work hard to coax him out of his indoctrination.

Then she’s alone with Sakura, whose big eyes belie the enormous mystery contained in such a small package. She looks like any other kid, really. Except for her odd flashes of wisdom, insight and empathy, which mark her out as special. She’s befriended adults in a way that children are not normally capable of – they don’t flock to her because she’s cute or precocious, they genuinely enjoy her company.

The kid’s weird. Even after finding out all her secrets, she’s still full of mysteries and contradictions. Tsunade thinks she’ll have an interesting time over the years, figuring her out.

“Mokuton, huh?” Tsunade says, quirking a brow at the girl.

Sakura flushes, “I just saw Tenzo-nii do it and I wanted to try… so I did… and it worked.”

“Well, it’ll be good for you to have a secret weapon. There’s certain things a shinobi must hold back, if they want to survive. You will eventually have to use it, there’s no question of that, but if you delay it for as long as possible until after you’ve gained mastery of it… you’ll take the village by storm.” Tsunade says, rubbing her chin pensively. She remembers being spoiled and cooed over and generally treated like a very expensive, life-size doll. She remembers how that changed the first time she smashed through solid rock with a finger.

Tsunade smirks, “I don’t care if it takes years, I want to see the Council’s faces after you create a forest out of nowhere.”

Sakura blinks, looking down at her hands in awe. Tsunade gets the feeling Sakura had thought Mokuton meant ‘making flowers,’ not ‘shaping landscapes.’
If Sarutobi had known about Sakura’s power, his little speech in his office might have even convinced Tsunade. She’s half-convinced even now, knowing what she knows.

*What if she truly is mine?* She thinks wistfully, looking down at Sakura’s small form, *mine and Dan’s child, delivered to me out of time. The child that rightfully should have been born, if fate had been kind.*

There’s a skittering of claws, and two puppies round the corner. Sakura’s face lights up at the sight of them, and they head straight for her.

*No,* Tsunade thinks fondly, *she isn’t mine. But somehow, she’s in my care. Perhaps this time, fate will be kinder.*

She senses a presence lingering outside the house and rolls her eyes. While Sakura isn’t looking, Tsunade aims a one-fingered salute at the window nearest the presence. The ANBU rapidly moves away. They’ve been watching Naruto his whole life, and from what she’s heard, they’ve done a pretty shitty job.

Now it’s her turn.

“Bedtime.” Tsunade says.

Sakura and her puppies look up at her beseechingly, “Already?”

*Aw. How cute.*

“Yep,” Tsunade says breezily, “If you’re not in bed by the count of five, I’m going to have to eat you all up.”

Sakura lets out a delighted shriek, scooping up her dogs and running up the stairs.

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Naruto is trying not to yawn.

If he looks too tired, Shizune might just say goodnight and leave the room. He widens his eyes, ignoring how the lids keep drooping shut.

His room is the *best.* It’s not been painted yet but Tsunade said he can have orange for one wall and blue for the rest because too much orange will melt his eyes. He’s got a *huge* bed all to himself and it’s soft and comfy and his whole body fits into it perfectly. He can turn over as much as he wants and he’ll never fall out. Tsunade suggested he get a little bookcase. He admitted he couldn’t read, expecting her to get mad. She just shrugged and said all things happen in their own time. Naruto thought that sounded nice. Like reading wasn’t something he was gonna be bad at forever. It just might take him a bit longer than Sakura to start reading books.

He’s got his narutomaki toy in his arms. It’s making a funny face, which makes him laugh whenever he looks at it. Tsunade got him a huge slug toy. It’s white and pink and sitting in the corner of his room. She says it’ll guard him when she’s not there. Naruto told her slugs are too slow for that, but she just gave him a mysterious smile. Not like a grown-up person smile, which usually means *you’ll understand when you’re older.* Tsunade’s so cool.

Shizune is sitting next to his bed, reading a story out loud in a soft voice, lulling him to sleep.

He allows himself to close his eyes for just a moment, just to let it all sink in. This is his life now. He
has a real family, not just one that lives in his head, waiting for him to dream about them. He has a room all to himself in a big house with a wild garden that he can’t wait to tear through, with the promise of a tree, a pond and some fish.

“Are you tired, Naruto?” Shizune asks gently.

He hears the whisper of a page turning and scrunches his nose up, “No! I’m awake.”

“You don’t look very awake.” Shizune teases.

“I am!” Naruto whines, forcing his eyes open.

Shizune laughs quietly, closing the book. Naruto feels his face droop in disappointment. Shizune reaches out, stroking his hair.

“Now, now,” She says softly, “Go to sleep, and in the morning you’ll have breakfast with your brother and sister, and you’ll get to help out with the garden. And after the day is done, I promise you, we will read another story together. Does that sound okay?”

Naruto nods, savouring the feeling of her warm hand on his face.

“Kaa-san?” He whispers, his eyes closing once more.

“Yes?”

“Is it going to be like this forever? This… warm and nice?”

Shizune laughs again, but it sounds a little wet this time.

She sniffs, “Tsunade-sama and I are going to work very hard to make sure it is, Naruto.”

“Okay. I’m gonna wake up really early and help with breakfast.” Naruto promises.

Shizune’s hand combs through his hair, “You can pick the face for your pancake. Do you want it to smile, or – ”

“The same as my narutomaki,” Naruto says sleepily, clutching his toy, “A silly face like mine.”

Shizune pats his head, “Tsunade-sama knows a Hokage pancake recipe. You’re going to love it.”

Naruto smiles.

When he dreams, it’s of smiling faces made of syrup and warm hands, stroking his hair. There’s no monsters gnashing their teeth, or prison bars blocking his way. Just Tsunade’s strong hands, and Shizune’s soft voice.

Sakura is still sleepy by the time she walks into the kitchen.

Naruto is washing up at the sink, but instead of using a stool to reach, Tsunade is simply holding him aloft by his shirt.

Shizune is happily flipping a pancake. There’s a stack next to her, all perfectly formed and golden.

Tenzo is sitting at the table. He’s dressed in a light blue shirt and brown shorts. There’s an ease in his
aura that she’s never sensed before. He gives her an awkward little wave when he notices her.

Sakura waves back, then ushers her puppies into the garden for their morning wee. They like weeing indoors, but her parents really don’t like it, so Sakura’s been trying to negotiate with them.

Momo sits on the grass, willing enough, but doesn’t seem to understand what Sakura wants from him.

Misa immediately tears off, barking at the birds in the trees.

“Please wee.” Sakura says.

Momo’s head tilts in question.

Sakura points at the grass, “It’s okay for you to wee here. Nobody will mind. I mean, maybe the bugs will mind. But you’ve got to do it anyway. Please?”

Misa flings herself at a tree, gambolling back onto the grass.

“What are you doing?” Tenzo asks, coming to stand next to Sakura.

“I’m trying to make my puppies go to the toilet.” Sakura says, frustrated.

“Oh.” Tenzo says, hiding a smile behind his hand.

“I’m not supposed to wet the bed, so they can’t either.”

“That’s very reasonable.”

Momo yawns, stretching out to go to sleep.

Sakura puts her hands on her hips, glaring at both puppies.

Tenzo’s quiet chuckle startles her out of her huff.

“They’ll learn soon enough. In the meantime, Oba-san said we can decide what to have in the garden. I… can’t wait.” He says, eyes gleaming as they pass over the uncontained wilderness before them.

There are trees fighting each other for space, branches stretching over the broken and battered fences, weeds tangled up in the grass, breaking through old slabs of paving. The whole space is a writhing mass of green.

“I think we can hang a swing from that tree… I can push you and Naruto on it. And perhaps a slide in that corner. And a row of flowers along the fence here. Something bright and cheerful. Maybe orange, since Naruto likes it so much. And I’m going to grow you and Naruto a cherry tree, right at the bottom of the garden. You and I can make a treehouse for it, and Naruto can choose what it looks like. I’d like some wisteria… I’ve always wanted…” Tenzo blinks back tears, a smile breaking through the sadness. “It’s going to be the perfect garden.”

Sakura hums a little song, dancing in the long grass.

It already feels perfect.
Naruto and Sakura want to go the park. They’re both very surprised when Tsunade flatly tells them that they’re never going anywhere without supervision ever again.

So they end up playing together as Kakashi pretends to read a book in the background.

Sakura chases Naruto around a tree, hands out like claws. He’s giggling helplessly, ducking around low-hanging branches and hopping over rocks. He’s already very fast and nimble. Sakura swells with pride. Her future Hokage is doing just fine.

“Hey!”

Sakura looks up automatically, but the word isn’t directed at her.

She sees three older boys converging on one girl, small with dark hair and big lavender eyes. She looks lost.

Naruto is instantly on guard, his mouth forming a belligerent pout.

“What kind of freaky eyes are those?” The tallest one sneers.

The girl’s face crumples, her head ducking down, “U-um…”

“Are you some kind of monster?” Another one of the boys asks, laughing at the wounded look on her face. “I bet you are! I bet you’re some kind of freaky Byakugan monster!”

Naruto’s heard enough.

Sakura follows as he charges over to the group. She can feel their Mask friends following on the sidelines, observing from afar.

“Oi!” Naruto yells. “I’m Uzumaki Naruto and I’m gonna be Hokage! You better say you’re sorry to her or I’m gonna pummel you into the dirt!”

Sakura stands by his side, not liking the feel of these boys’ chakra.

I don’t remember them, which means they’re dead by my time if they ever became shinobi, Kagami says dispassionately.

Not necessarily, Sakura chides.

Kagami grumbles but doesn’t argue. The girl’s Hyuuga Hinata. She’s very kind, but far too shy. She’ll be strong one day, though.

Sakura looks at the other girl’s teary eyes, feels the faint sense of her aura drifting around her in a lilac haze of fear and resignation. She’s used to being bullied.

Will she really be strong? Sakura asks.

(Sakura is standing back from the fight, ignoring every instinct that’s screaming at her to get in there and help Naruto. He’s alone against Pain, who’s already proven to be strong enough to level villages, but she cannot violate her oath – to not fight on the front line, but to hold back and save as many as she can. As she is wrestling with herself, a blur shoots past her and lands in front of Naruto, arms spread out wide in protection. Timid little Hinata is facing down the leader of Akatsuki.)

In every sense that matters, Kagami replies simply.
Sakura stares at Hinata in awe.

“What can you do?” The tallest boy snarls at Naruto. “You’re just some little punk. I bet you don’t even know any jutsu.”

Naruto growls, immediately forming seals to make a clone.

Sakura gently covers his hands.

“I guess picking on smaller kids makes you feel bigger, but you just look kind of sad to me. Maybe you should find something better to do?” Sakura suggests.

The boys bristle as one, the tallest spitting, “What are you, another freak?”

“Yep!” Sakura declares with a big grin, hands on her hips, “So you better leave her alone, or all of us freaks’ll come get you! You said she was a monster, right? Well, so are we! And we eat up all the bad guys, and you seem pretty bad to me! So, go away or you’ll get eaten up.”

The boy steps forward angrily, but then pales, backpedalling furiously.

Sakura looks behind her.

Kakashi is reading his book, expressionless. He is suddenly standing right behind her. She wonders what he did to make the boys look so scared.

Naruto jeers, raising his fist, “You better run! When I’m Hokage I’m gonna make you illegal!”

Sakura feels Kakashi vanish but is somehow still surprised when she turns back around and he’s gone.

She stares suspiciously at some nearby bushes.

“Th-thank you.” Hinata says.

Her chakra is trembling with relief and gratitude, little starbursts of colour.

“No problem!” Naruto says, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly. “Those guys were jerks. Your eyes are pretty weird. I – I mean! Yeah, they’re weird, but in a pretty way. They’re…”

Sakura gives him a bewildered look. Has Naruto always been so bad at talking to girls? He seems fine with Ino, but that might be because she’s so scary. Hinata just keeps staring at them with her big eyes, her chakra caught between confusion and hurt.

(Hinata is standing strong, assured, hair flowing in the wind, one hand outstretched towards Pain. Naruto shouts at her to leave, she’s no match for him, but she just smiles and Sakura realises she knows. She’s not being foolish, rushing into a fight she has no hope of winning. She’s making a sacrifice to buy Naruto some time.)

“You’re gonna be really beautiful some day!” Sakura blurts out.

Naruto blinks at her.

Kagami gives a startled laugh, caught off-guard.

Hinata’s face turns scarlet.
“You’ll have really pretty long hair.” Sakura promises. “And you’re gonna be really strong and cool.”

Hinata gapes at her, cheeks burning, “I – I – ”

She dashes off, hands covering her cheeks.

Sakura stares after her, aghast.

“Sakura-nee,” Naruto says reprovingly, “I was gonna ask her to be a Monster. Ino said we’re s’posed to ‘increase our ranks,’ remember? You embarrassed her away!”

“I messed it up.” Sakura says sadly.

Naruto blinks, an anxious flutter going through him. He grabs her hand, giving her a big grin, “Nah, it’s okay, Sakura-nee!”

Is it, Onee-chan?

I don’t think I know your future anymore, Sacchan. I couldn’t say for sure.

Sakura crosses her arms and says firmly, “We’re gonna make friends with her for sure, Naruto!”

“Yeah!” Naruto cheers.

They both spend the afternoon roaring in the park, not caring who stares at them. Kakashi is never far away, and he hesitantly pats Naruto on the head after he gets close enough. Naruto gives him a wide smile, then roars right at him.

Kakashi sighs, his chakra fond and tentatively happy, then he forms seals and a whole gang of dogs emerges from a huge puff of smoke.

Sakura gives every single dog a big hug and Naruto rides on the back of the largest one, his laughter loud enough to be heard from streets away.

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“No.” Sakura’s mother says, her tone brooking no argument.

Sakura isn’t sure how to respond. She’s not supposed to keep asking for something after her parents say no, but she really does need to do this.

“I want to be a shinobi, like you.” Sakura says, her bottom lip wobbling.

“And you will be, if that’s what you really want. But you can wait a year to start that process. There’s no reason at all for you to give up a year of your childhood.” Her mother replies.

Sakura looks to her father for support, but he just smiles at her, “Sorry, Sacchan. I agree with your mother. I don’t think you realise just how valuable your time with your friends is right now. If you started at the Academy, you wouldn’t have time to play with any of them. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

Sakura pouts.

It doesn’t have its usual effect. Her parents seem unmoveable.
If only your parents weren’t your legal guardians, Kagami says, if only it was someone else entirely…

Sakura’s face brightens.

Her parents look at her suspiciously.

She tries to look sad and imploring again, “But Ino-chan wants to start at the Academy now so we can be in the same class and it’d be really fun and – ”

“Sacchan.” Her father says, raising his eyebrows.

Sakura deflates. She hopes she looks suitably defeated.

“Never mind, sweetheart,” Her mother says, patting her head, “You’ll go next year. You can spend this year having fun with your new brothers!”

Sakura smiles guiltily.

Her parents have been really great about her second family. They don’t seem to mind at all, but Sakura still feels flashes of sadness from them at times, when she mentions Tsunade or just before she leaves to stay with them. Sakura doesn’t feel like a Senju, like her family’s been replaced with another. She feels like her family’s got bigger, but it’s so big that they have to live in different houses, and she has to split her time between them.

She hopes her parents grow to love Naruto and Tenzo, too. She remembers Naruto in the kitchen during the Rinne Festival, staring at her parents with awe and fascination. Her mother and father had talked to him so gently. She knows they felt bad for him when he was an orphan.

They were happy now that he had a family, but they weren’t quite so happy that Sakura was a part of it.

But they hadn’t let that show at all. If Sakura couldn’t read their auras, she’d never know that they were having trouble sharing her.

“It’s time to go to the Senju House!” Sakura’s mother declares, beaming.

Sakura gives her a long hug, trying to show how much she loves her and still needs her. The way her mother clings to her for a few seconds borders on desperate, and tears glint in her eyes when she stands up.

“I love my Okaa-san.” Sakura says solemnly. “And I love my Otou-san. I love you more than anything in the world. More than ramen, more than sake, and even more than dumplings.”

Her mother sniffs, giving a helpless burst of laughter. “You’ve never had sake and you know it.”

Sakura almost says that Tsunade likes sake, but Kagami frantically shakes her head.

“Well, I love you more than Mr Minty.” Sakura says bravely, ignoring the twinge of disloyalty in her chest.

“You gave him away,” Her mother teases, “He can’t be that important to you.”

“He is! He’s my favourite toy, but Itachi needed him more.”

Sakura’s mother quietens for a moment, her chakra settling into a pensive calm. “You know, I do
believe your father and I have raised you very well indeed. All of your dreams have changed you quite a bit, but you’re still our sweet baby girl. I don’t think anything could change that. I’m proud of you.”

Sakura beams, rushing forward to hug her mother’s legs.

For a moment she forgets what she’s planning to do, and her guilt dissipates.

Tsunade says yes.

Sakura ends up sitting with Ino in a room full of kids who are all roughly her age. Sakura is so nervous she can’t even keep still. She ends up sitting on her hands to stop them from restlessly tapping on her desk.

She’s taking the entrance exam for the Academy, without her parents’ consent.

She feels like any moment someone will say, “Aha! You’re not supposed to be here!” and then she’ll be dragged out of the room in front of everyone and Ino won’t like her anymore.

_You’re overthinking this, Kagami says, how many times have you lied to people before? You can do it again._

_I’m a big fat liar, _Sakura thinks mournfully.

_You’re a shinobi. And a storyteller. Bending the truth is a vital part of both. Remember what Shisui always says about lying for your own good?_

_Shisui-kun doesn’t know about this either…_

_That’s only because he’s on a mission. Everything will be fine, Sacchan. You’ll pass the test and tell our parents, they’ll be upset for a little while but then they’ll have to get over it, and then you’ll be enrolled and well on your way to becoming a shinobi for real._

Sakura looks up from her desk. Ino is beaming at her, a few rows of desks away. She gives her a weak smile in return.

Shikamaru and Chouji are also taking the test. Ino sullenly explained that it was the only way her parents let her take the test early. Shikamaru is half-asleep already, his head resting on his arm, and Chouji is munching away on something that smells delicious. Sakura feels a little calmer around her Monsters.

A man enters the room and starts passing around papers. At first, Sakura thinks it’s at random, but then when her tests lands on her desk, she notices that it’s a great deal thicker than the kid’s next to her.

She frowns at it, confused. She flips through it covertly. The last section is stapled on, with ADVANCED stamped in the top right corner in red ink.

She shuts the test, eyes wide.

_They don’t know about the Mokuton, quit panicking, Kagami says, this’ll be because they think you’re a prodigious Senju baby._

Sakura checks the front of her test. Sure enough, there it is: SENJU SAKURA.
She glares down at her name. She takes her pen and adds: SENJU SAKURA (HARUNO).

*That’ll show them,* Kagami says.

Sakura gives a firm nod.

“You have one hour.” The man at the front of the room says.

There’s a loud rustle of paper as the kids open their tests as one.

Sakura takes a deep breath.

She goes through the questions as slowly as possible, making sure to take it all in and absorb all the information accurately.

After a while, she says, *Onee-chan?*

*Yeah? Need some help?*

*No thank you. I was just wondering… Is it meant to be so easy?*

Kagami laughs, *not at all. But I don’t remember struggling, either.*

Sakura still feels like she’s waiting for the other shoe to drop. She remembers the ADVANCED section and gulps.

She skips ahead and sees two leaves outlined on the page. There are words at the top, simply saying: *imbue with chakra if capable*. Sakura carefully touches the paper and sends the tiniest spark. The leaves slowly fill with colour, one blue, one green. The blue shimmers silver, the green turns gold.

One of the next questions is: *What makes a shinobi a good shinobi?*

Sakura thinks about it. For Kagami, a good shinobi is someone who is prepared to sacrifice everything for someone else. Images of a masked boy jumping in front of a man, of Sakura herself taking a blade for an old woman, and of Sasuke leaping in front of her fill her mind.

Grief pierces Kagami for a moment and –

*Sakura kneels down next to her daddy. He won’t move. She shakes his shoulder. He’s sleeping. She’s scared now, she doesn’t like how he’s not talking. “Otou-san! Wake up! Please. Okaa-san’s not here. Otou-san? Are we playing The Quiet Game? It’s not funny anymore…” She pushes with all her might, and he flops over. She can see his face now. His eyes are open, so he’s not sleeping. Why won’t he talk to her?*

*She sits with him for three hours before her mother comes home and screams and screams and screams and screams - *)

Sakura comes back to herself.

Blood is running down her chin.

She must have bitten through her lip.

She takes a deep breath, breathing in and out shakily, touching her mouth. She heals the cut and closes her eyes, the coppery scent of blood surrounding her.
The man who handed out the tests is looking at her, his chakra filled with concern.

She wipes her mouth and forces a smile, then gets right back into the test. A **good shinobi is someone who always defends the weaker person. A good shinobi keeps fighting even when it seems hopeless and they just want to give up. A good shinobi knows right from wrong and never allows anyone to lead them astray. A good shinobi loves their village no matter what, but always helps to improve it whenever possible. A good shinobi puts other people’s lives above their own.**

Kagami is unreachable, wrapped up in her own grief.

Sakura shakes her head, flinching at the memory of her father’s corpse, and continues writing. A **good shinobi is someone who’s been hurt and wants to stop others from being hurt too.**

When the test is over, Sakura walks home with Ino holding her hand, merrily chatting about the questions. She had answered: **a good shinobi knows a lot of techniques and can fight really well, but also is good at blending in with crowds and pretending to be normal.**

Ino’s answer sounds right. Sakura doesn’t think she answered it properly. She can’t ask Kagami for help, because she’s still reeling from seeing their father die again.

Sakura is quiet at dinner, and Tsunade notices. She gives her a wink and a concerned flare of chakra, but Sakura says nothing. She gets up to let her dogs out for a wee, hoping they’ll do it this time. She stands in the garden, the sky blending from muddy red into indigo, stars already flickering up above.

She closes her eyes and wishes that bad feelings would just slide off her. That she could always be the happy, smiling Sakura that people seem to need. They’re more cheerful around her. She keeps their bad feelings away. She can’t do it for herself.

Momo starts growling.

Sakura’s eyes fly open.

Izanagi is standing next to her, leaning against the fence. He looks strangely at home in the wild garden, as if he sprang up from the dirt one day and never left.

“Hello, Sakura-chan.” He says.

Sakura’s heart starts beating faster.

Kagami is still tucked away in the back of her mind. She can’t hear Sakura’s attempts to reach her.

The last time she saw Izanagi, he made her see horrible things. Corpses piled on top of each other. People she loved, dead and gone. She remembers her father’s blank, staring eyes, and shudders.

“What happened?” He asks, sounding concerned. She can’t tell if he really is.

“I want to save everyone.” Sakura says, her face crumpling up. “But I can’t, can I? When you grow up, you have to accept that you can’t fix everything. Your best isn’t always going to be good enough. People die. But… I don’t think I can bear it, Izanagi-san. It feels like I’ve lost everyone so many times…” She takes a deep, shuddering breath, reminding herself not to tell him too much. “I can’t do it anymore.”
“Who did you lose, Sakura-chan?”

“No one. Yet. But that’s the scary part. I don’t know if I can handle it because it’s never happened. And everything’s been going so well recently that I’m scared it’ll get bad and then it’ll feel worse because it used to be so good.”

Momo is still growling. Sakura edges over to him, not taking her eyes off Izanagi, then picks Momo up, clutching him to her chest.

“Do you think everyone deserves to be saved?” Izanagi asks.

Sakura blinks, but the answer spills out of her at once, “Yes.”

Izanagi pauses, then laughs. “No hesitation at all. I don’t know why I’m surprised. Sakura-chan, when a baby is first born, everything is new to them. They cry when they turn over in their cot because they can’t see what they could see a second ago. They cry when they’re hungry, because it feels like pain. They’re creatures of instinct, afraid of everything and understanding nothing. In a way, grief is similar. You go through life feeling emotional pain, heartache, disappointments, minor losses. None of it prepares you for grief. It is like believing you could withstand losing an arm because you once had your nails trimmed. When you lose someone you love for the first time, they tear a piece of you with them, leaving you bloody and incomplete. The wound scabs over in time, then scars. You lose another, the wound rips open. It hurts just as much as the first time. The scar is thicker this time. Tougher. You lose someone else, and it nearly tears through you, but you manage to bear it. You bend with the wind and you do not break. Grief never gets easier, but you become stronger. You can’t live your life afraid of pain, Sakura-chan. One day the pain you fear will become nothing to you. A gentle breeze you can ignore, a storm you can withstand. They’re your feelings. You own them. They don’t own you. Do you understand?”

Sakura nods, wiping her eyes, “Did you lose someone, Izanagi-san?”

He doesn’t outwardly react, but she feels faint echoes of a deep, wrenching sorrow.

“I lost everyone, Sakura-chan.”

“Does that mean there’s no one to take care of you?”

Izanagi looks away, his mask angled towards the rising moon.

“I’ll take care of you.” Sakura promises, taking a step forward. Momo grumbles, wriggling in her arms.

“Be careful what you promise, Sakura-chan. You have a big heart, but it cannot be torn in so many ways. Save your affection for those who deserve it.”

Sakura plucks up all her courage and jumps forward, seizing his hand. “The people who deserve affection are the ones who need it the most,” She says fiercely, looking up at his mask, “You sound very sad. I think you’re a Magic Mask and you deserve nice things. Like pancakes with your favourite Hokage drawn on them with syrup. And dogs to pet whenever you want. But if you can’t have that, at least you can have a friend. I don’t care if you’re mean. Everybody can get better if they really try. Say you’ll be my friend, please!”

Izanagi says nothing, his gloved hand limp in her grasp. Momo is tucked under her arm, his fur standing on end. All the signs say this is bad. Kagami is unavailable. Shisui isn’t here this time. But Sakura doesn’t care. Izanagi is hurting. Maybe she’s not a good shinobi. But she can be a good friend.
Izanagi gently extricates his hand from hers, then stares at his palm.

“This world,” He says, with slow, deliberate enunciation, “will chew you up and spit you out. There are so many bad things that hurt people for no reason. Wouldn’t you like to change that? To make things better?”

“Of course!” Sakura says eagerly.

“One day, Petal.” He says quietly. “I’ll come back for you.”

Sakura blinks, and Izanagi is gone.

She looks around, confused.

Misa is sniffing a tree, oblivious. Momo’s stopped growling, but he’s still upset.

The door to the garden opens and Tsunade pops her head out.

“Oi,” She says with a crooked grin, “Bathtime. Naruto’s insisting on sharing with Tenzo, because he wants to see him turn into a tree in the bath. I don’t think he’s quite got how Mokuton works. You wanna come in and show him?”

Sakura looks around the garden again. Izanagi is gone. She can’t sense any trace of him left behind, either. His aura feels like midnight blue with broken glass. It’s all gone.

She made a new friend.

He might be bad, but she doesn’t mind.

“Oh!” She says happily, running over to Misa to gather her up.

She gasps.

Misa is doing a wee in the grass.

Sakura lets Momo down and points at Misa emphatically.

Momo stares at her, confused.

Sakura pouts.

xxxxxxxxx

Izanagi watches the odd, makeshift family perform their nightly rituals before bed. Sakura and Naruto splash each other, shrieking, and the Mokuton boy dries them both with towels. Tsunade’s assistant frets over the mess, but scrubs a fond hand across the children’s sodden heads.

He hadn’t expected any of this.

In truth, he’d expected Sakura to die.

On the end of his blade, if necessary. Such things were often necessary.

He hadn’t expected Tsunade to return to Konoha. Or for Fugaku to start making vague rumblings about clan relations. It seemed that this little petal had caused massive ripples in the water. It was only a question of if the ripples would reach the shore, or if they would die out on their own.
He’d searched for what made her different in her mind. He’d found endless images of death and horror, Sakura’s fears come to life. Trauma couldn’t be what gave her influence. Itachi had been through worse, and yet lived quietly without a fuss.

Sakura demanded the world stop and turn at her will, believing she could shout down any injustice and right every wrong.

She believed she could cure a monster by befriendning it.

Izanagi flexes his hand, still feeling the warmth of a little palm against his.

If only monsters could be so easily tamed.

***

Hello, friends.

Did any of you see Eurovision? I can’t be the only European in the room. Hello? *cries in British*

Just so you know, my dears, you don’t have to beg for Shisui’s life. I’ve already decided what’s going to happen with him, whether he lives or not. I know how it’ll all turn out. Just wait and see :) 

Tsunade has possibly given up drinking? At least while the kids are at home. It’s a hard habit to kick.

Tenzo is so excited to make a nice garden for everyone.

Sakura and Naruto chased away mean boys and tried to recruit a very little, very shy Hinata. The insults the bullies throw at her were lifted from an actual scene (I believe when Naruto and Hinata met for the first time) in which they really do call her a monster. My Sakura senses started tingling. Now Naruto wants to recruit possibly the politest Monster since Itachi.

Sakura took the entrance exam for the Academy! And saw her father’s corpse! (wait, that’s not good)

Sakura’s desire to befriend the world is both cute and troubling. She has earned another nickname! Yay!

Btw, for those of you who were confused TSUNADE IS NOT SAKURA’S REAL MOTHER. The Hokage just presented a theory. He did the thing Sherlock Holmes always says not to do, twists facts to suit theory rather than theories to suit facts.

~

Izanagi: The world is a TERRIBLE evil HORRIBLE twisted VILE aberration of a STINKING cesspool of FILTH and it will CONSUME your SOUL and leave you HOLLOWED OUT and EMPTY of all JOY

Sakura: Wanna be friends? :D *eager puppy face*

Izanagi: What the fuck is wrong with you

~

Quick poll for fun: Who is your favourite minor character from Naruto? (AKA, the one you wish got more love in the series)
I think Kishi is very very good at creating characters. So good, in fact, that he makes a billion and only uses about four regularly. I really adore Sai, Lee, Kiba and Tenten. I would LOVE to see more of them.

(Dogwatch Update: Two Good Dogs had a wee in the garden. Well. One of them did. The other was busy being. A Very! Good! Boy!)
Chapter 28

Tsunade hasn’t stopped smirking since she answered the door.

“Who was it, Oba-san?” Sakura asks, petting Momo on the sofa.

“That was a messenger, here to inform us that we are all cordially invited to the annual New Year’s Festival at the Uchiha Compound,” Tsunade says with malevolent glee, “That’s a first. They didn’t mention you kids by name, but they said ‘all members of the Senju clan,’ and that’s us.”

“We’re not actually going, are we?” Shizune asks nervously.

“When did I adopt you?” Tsunade asks, though she relents at Shizune’s glare. “Of course we’re going. Why wouldn’t we? For them to invite us, they must have a pretty good reason. I can’t wait to hear it. We’ll need to get new outfits, since I imagine this’ll be a grand event. The Uchiha don’t understand the concept of understated.”

“Fugaku-san and Mikoto-san already bought me a kimono for the festival.” Sakura pipes up.

Tsunade freezes, then slowly wheels around to face her, “Did they? And why would they do that?”

“They’re Sasuke and Itachi’s parents.” Sakura says.

“Itachi is the one who was in Suna… Sasuke is… the little brat with the scowl?” Tsunade checks, clicking her fingers, “So that’s their game. Short-sighted to the last, I see. Sakura, you’re gonna get all dolled up, looking as cute as possible, okay? And then you’re gonna spend the evening talking to everyone but your little pals.”

Sakura opens her mouth, outraged, but Tsunade winks at her.

“Just for the night. By the way, kids, I’ve got news. Gather round.” Tsunade says, gesturing grandly, standing in the middle of the living room.

Naruto perks up, wriggling off the sofa and dashing to Tsunade’s side. Tenzo and Shizune move away from the window, floating towards Tsunade. Sakura stays in her little armchair, her brow creasing in apprehension.

Kagami still hasn’t come back.

It’s been two weeks since the exam, two weeks since Sakura has heard her sister muttering advice and reciting shinobi rules, two weeks since she’s dreamed anything at all. Sakura has found herself lost in a sea of confusing chakra, unable to parse why one person is feeling guilty when another is feeling happy. Every time she sees a stranger, she wonders if she would have dreamed about their face if Kagami was still around.

After months of reading chakra and relying on Kagami’s insight, Sakura is blind. She can’t read faces or body language. She doesn’t know who to trust or not. Izanagi hasn’t come back since that night, and she doesn’t know if she’s dreading or looking forward to his inevitable return. I’ll come back for you, he said. What did it mean? He’d come back to see her? Or to take her?

Kagami would know.

“Sakura? Come over here.” Tsunade waves, her chakra spilling out green waves of concern. Sakura
flinches, tapping her fingers against the arms of her chair, then pushes up to stand.

“Alright,” Tsunade says once they’ve all clustered sufficiently close, “I’ve been working to get you guys a little something ever since I arrived in Konoha. It’s taken some time to get them processed through Konoha’s bull –”

“Ahem.” Shizune glares daggers at the side of Tsunade’s head. The older woman deliberately turns a little more away, raising her hands in surrender.

“Don’t get excited,” Tsunade warns, continuing as if she hadn’t been interrupted, “You’re probably not gonna like it. But I don’t care. This is important. Okay, Tenzo first.”

A puff of smoke emerges in the middle of the room.

Sakura clutches Tsunade’s leg, wide-eyed.

A woman emerges from the smoke, smiling with her hands on her hips. She’s got long, auburn hair and sea-green eyes. Her chakra feels like a fresh breeze.

“Hello there,” She says, her eyes squarely on Tenzo, who looks a little dubious, “My name is Airi. I’m your new bodyguard, if you’ll have me.”

Tenzo stares at her, shock reverberating through him, “Really? Why?”

“Silly question,” Tsunade tuts, “You’re a diamond in a village of coal, kid. You think I’m gonna let anything happen to you?”

Tenzo says nothing, but his shock dims and a tiny smile crosses his face.

“I’ll protect you with my life, Tenzo-sama.” Airi says solemnly, giving a deep bow.

“That’s what I like to hear.” Tsunade says. Shizune elbows her. “What? It’s the mark of a good bodyguard. Anyway, Sakura, your bodyguard hasn’t arrived yet, which doesn’t really speak well for their character. But rest assured, they’ll get here soon and you’ll be able to go off to the park and do kid things even when Hatake is on a mission. Sound good?”

Sakura nods, even though she doesn’t really know how it sounds. Takumi and Ryuu have been watching over her in Kakashi’s absence, and she’s pretty sure they’re not getting paid for it. Other than the one meeting with Shisui, she’s not been able to escape them yet. How will she evade a single person who is dedicated to watching over her?

“So, lastly, Naruto.” Tsunade says, pointing at a corner of the room.

Smoke pours out of a different corner. Tsunade turns to point at it, muttering darkly under her breath.

The man that appears from the smoke has no eyebrows. He has pale blond hair styled in spikes and black jagged tattoos on his face. He’s wearing a too-small shirt and a chain around his neck.

“Yo.” The man says, tapping his fingers against his skull, “which one of you is my kid?”

“None,” Tsunade says, bristling, “but your charge is Naruto. He’s a great kid. Treat him as if he’s made of priceless crystal, okay?”

The man’s dark eyes swivel around the room and land on Naruto, who flinches back.

“Crystal clear, boss.” The man says, grinning. His teeth are pointed and sharp. “Naruto, huh? You
like fire, kid?"

Naruto brightens at once.

Shizune is sending Tsunade the fiercest death glare imaginable.

“I was told they were the best.” Tsunade mumbles. She gestures at Airi, “So they were half right, at least.”

“Naruto does not like fire,” Shizune snaps at the bodyguard, “You’re supposed to keep him safe, not endanger him further.”

The man shrugs, “The safety and wellbeing of my client is my concern. Wellbeing includes happiness. If he likes fire, then I’ve got a few tricks he might enjoy. But he’s not gonna have a second of danger in my care, sweetheart.”

Shizune seethes, fists clenching at once.

Tsunade casually picks Naruto up and balances him on one hand, a trick they perform as often as possible. He stands on her palm, beaming.

“Is he in danger now?” Tsunade asks, her gaze assessing.

The bodyguard’s head tilts. Finally, he grins, “Nah. You’d never drop him – you’re too skilled and you care about him too much. And even if I’m wrong on that, I’d get to him before he could hit the ground.”

“And if the enemy you faced was as strong as me?” Tsunade asks calmly.

“I’d grab him and go,” The man says, a grim edge to his voice, “I find you only live as long as you’re willing to run.”

Sakura gazes up at him. There’s loss at his core. She wants to talk to him, to comfort him, but without Kagami, she’s not sure if she’d be welcome.

Tsunade puts Naruto down.

He bounces up to the bodyguard, “Hi! I’m Uzumaki Naruto and I’m gonna be Hokage someday after my Oba-san! Who’re you?”

“Kai,” The man says, stretching his neck until it cracks, “I’ll be your bodyguard.”

“Nuh-uh!” Naruto says, mutinous, “Shisui said he would first!”

“Shisui…” Tsunade clicks her fingers, frowning.

“Sasuke and Itachi’s cousin.” Sakura supplies. And my friend, she thinks.

“Well, I’m not paying this ‘Shisui’ to look after you, am I? Maybe he can help out later, if he’s free.” Tsunade says.

Naruto beams, “Okay! Hey mister, what kind of fire tricks do you know? ‘cause I really like pranks, but Kaa-san and Oba-san don’t like them at all.”
Tsunade buys Tenzo and Naruto yukatas, her mouth twisting in amusement at the price. Sakura watches the shopping go on, clutching her sand fox in her lap. She’s already got her kimono, so she doesn’t need to buy anything else.

She’s named her little fox Sayaka. Maybe the fox is a boy, but she can’t tell, so she hopes it’s a girl. She strokes Sayaka’s grainy head with her littlest finger. She hopes somehow that Gaara knows she’s thinking of him.

Tenzo picks out a green yukata with silver thread, his chakra plucked towards it in longing. Naruto suffers through many measurements and adjustments, and only really kicks up a fuss when he learns that his sleeves aren’t going to be floor-length once it’s all done. He’d been enjoying swinging his cuffs around until then. Now he’s pouting underneath mounds of fabric, Shizune holding up swatches to his face to match his colouring. Sakura can feel the muffled happiness Naruto is feeling, despite his sulky face.

Tenzo tries on his yukata and walks into view, his gait still stiff and his head tucked down. He always looks hunted when they’re in public.

Tsunade sees him and smiles, “That’s great. You look just like your grandfather, Naw – ”

She freezes, grief choking her.

Tenzo frowns, confused.

Sakura tucks Sayaka into her pocket and stands, already prepared for the pinpricks of pain in Tsunade’s aura.

“Just like my grandfather.” Tsunade finishes, forcing a little smile.

Sakura hugs her leg, looking up at her pretty, pained face, “Do I look like your grandfather?” She asks, hoping to distract her.

Tsunade laughs, “Not a bit!”

“Do I?” Naruto asks, beaming from underneath piles of fabric.

Tsunade reaches over and pokes his nose, “You look like Uzumaki Naruto.”

“Good! I like being me!” Naruto grins.

Tenzo’s smile is faintly sympathetic when he looks at Tsunade, “I am honoured to think I might bear a resemblance to the Shodaime, Oba-san.”

“Well, don’t be,” Tsunade snorts, “He was a goof.”

Kai is standing pointedly next to Naruto, his massive arms folded. He dwarfs Naruto’s little figure, towering over him.

Airi has taken a subtler approach, pretending to be a civilian shopping in the same store. She never leaves Tenzo’s immediate vicinity, but somehow manages to look completely natural every time she moves to follow him.

Sakura wonders what her bodyguard will do when she meets them. Will they be bold and out in the open, glowering at passers-by like Kai? Or will they pretend not to know her, like Airi? She can’t help thinking that she might not have a bodyguard at all, and Tsunade just said she did so she
wouldn’t feel left out.

Tsunade takes Tenzo into the back. Airi drifts after them.

Shizune is keeping a close eye on both Sakura and Naruto. Kai is staring directly at a customer who is approaching Shizune, who for the moment seems oblivious.

Sakura funnels chakra to her ears, just like Itachi showed her.

She hears the moment the man speaks to Shizune.

“You’re new to the village, aren’t you?” He asks.

Naruto is playing with the fabric, oblivious to the conversation his mother is having with a stranger.

Kai steps closer to Naruto.

“Yes, but I actually grew up here.” Shizune replies.

“I’m sorry to bother you like this, but when I heard, I just had to warn you. They’ve tricked you. Forced you to take on that kid without knowing what he truly is. He’s a monster.” The man says quietly, his eyes grave.

Sakura covers her mouth, eyes wide. Naruto is still oblivious, thankfully, but Kai is on edge.

Shizune stares back at the man, affronted, “Excuse me?”

“It’s very kind of you to adopt a kid that nobody wants, but nobody wanted him for a very good reason. He’s a freak, a danger to the village, and if you don’t get rid of him, sooner or later he’ll hurt your other children.”

Shizune’s nostrils flare. She gives Kai a sharp look. He steps forward, his leg almost brushing against Naruto’s back.

Shizune advances on the stranger, “Monster? Freak? He’s a four-year-old boy who would never, ever do anything hurt anyone, let alone his siblings. He is the sweetest, gentlest child I have ever met. I adopted him with the full knowledge of who he is. He is Uzumaki Naruto, with all the legacies that name suggests, and he has inherited the best of both his parents. He’s just a lonely boy who was abandoned by the world for something he did not choose and cannot change. If you ever say such horrible things about my son again, I will not restrain myself. Consider yourself lucky that I would never strike someone in front of my kids.”

The stranger’s mouth opens and closes uselessly. He looks from Shizune to Naruto to the deadly smirk on Kai’s face, and he backpedals out the door.

“You shouldn’t have warned him off. I was gonna put him on a spike and spin him around ‘til he stopped spewing shit and starting spewing something else.” Kai complains, dark eyes following the man’s journey down the street.

Shizune ignores him, crouching down to check on Naruto, “Are you alright? Have you picked a fabric yet?”

“Uh-huh!” Naruto says, holding a sky-blue piece aloft, “I want this one with a ramen pattern!”

“There aren’t any ramen patterns.” Shizune says fondly.
“Aww…”

There aren’t that many people at the New Year’s party.

Sakura had been picturing masses of dark-haired, dark-eyed people, just like Sasuke, all having fun in a very restrained way.

Instead, Tsunade leads the Senju clan directly to Sasuke’s house and when they get inside, there’s only about ten pairs of shoes at the door. Sakura brushes down her kimono, a little disappointed. So it’s going to be closer to a grown-up dinner party than a real celebration.

Kai is glued to Naruto’s side, as per usual, and Airi is mingling with the crowd near Tenzo, her auburn hair turned black for the evening.

Sakura sees Sasuke early on, sitting nicely next to his mother, looking exceptionally bored. He perks up at the sight of Sakura, but she remembers Tsunade’s orders and just gives him a weak smile, following the older woman out of the room. She feels his confusion float after her.

“Senju-sama.” Fugaku says, emerging from the shadows.

Sakura lets out a little eep of surprise.

Tsunade’s smirk turns cockeyed and she puts a hand on Sakura’s shoulder.

“Please, call me Tsunade,” She says, “your invitation was a pleasant surprise.”

“It is not every day a member of the Sannin returns to the village,” Fugaku says, with real respect in his tone and aura, “nor is it common to see a clan revived. I thought it best to mark the occasion, and since the festival was coming up, it seemed only prudent to extend an invitation.”

He turns to Sakura, his severe expression softening somewhat, “Sakura-hime. It is good to see you here tonight.”

“My friends call me Sakura.” She says, smiling.

Fugaku’s gaze warms. He looks back at Tsunade, the lines around his mouth deepening, “Tsunade-san, would you mind if I had a private word with Sakura?”

“Yes, I would.” Tsunade says pleasantly, her aura growing spikes.

“Oba-san.” Sakura whines.

Tsunade considers it, tapping her chin. Airi and Kai are both busy with their charges, and Sakura guesses if Tsunade or Shizune were caught snooping in the Uchiha Manor, they’d get in big trouble. But Tsunade would never get caught.

“You can have a quick audience with our little princess, sure.” Tsunade says magnanimously, patting Sakura on the back.

Fugaku takes Sakura to a small, brightly-lit room. He sits down at a wooden table, indicating Sakura sit across from him. She does so, clambering up onto the tall chair.

“You have been a puzzle from the moment we first met, Sakura.” Fugaku says, his fingers forming a steeple. “I had heard of your situation, that there was talk of your parents abusing you. Mikoto spoke
up in their defence, and I value my wife’s opinion very highly. And yet, when we met, you did show clear signs of abuse. This concerned me. I tested you by remarking on your parents punishing you too severely. You reacted with anger on their behalf, no guilt, shame or fear – not the reaction of an abused child. So, I determined the threat was most likely not from your parents. But if not them, who? I am rarely confused, Sakura, but I must admit to being at a loss with your situation. And then Itachi suggested something so simple, it had not even occurred to me. Why not ask you? So, that is what I am doing. Are you being hurt by someone?"

*Of all the times not to have Kagami with me!* Sakura bites her lip, her nails digging into her palms. She should never have agreed to speak with him, but it didn’t even occur to her that it might be an issue.

“I… was hurt by someone, once.” Sakura says carefully. She doesn’t dream, but she remembers Sasuke’s blank eyes, the hand piercing through her flesh. She fails to suppress a shudder.

Fugaku felt her scar through her dress, that much was clear.

Sakura gets off her chair, slowly turning to show her back. She pulls the collar of her kimono down as far as she can manage, though the material fights her every inch of the way.

“I see.” Fugaku says coldly. He stands up, facing away from her exposed scar. “And the culprit?”

“I don’t know where he is.” Sakura says honestly. Her Sasuke could be anywhere in the house, and Kagami’s Sasuke… is dead.

Fugaku’s chakra is always tightly-restrained, but Sakura still catches glimpses of fury seething deep within.

“But he is not a threat to you?”

“No.” Sakura says firmly.

“You healed yourself without anyone even realising you had been hurt in the first place.” Fugaku remarks softly, shaking his head.

“I didn’t want anyone to know.” Sakura says sadly.

“Medics are among our most valued members, Sakura. You must learn to prize your health above all else. Konoha will need you dearly, one day. Perhaps… sooner rather than later. Do you remember the favour I wanted from you, after you agreed to take on my family?”

Sakura nods. Her father thought he wanted to borrow her dolls.

“You’ll never be able to keep your word if you don’t look after yourself.” Fugaku says, a very faint smile on his face. “So, you must work hard and stay healthy, if you want to help this family. Though, I must admit… you already have.”

Sakura smiles.

xxxxxxx

Shisui makes it home just in time for the festival. He had hurried through his mission, severely unnerved by Izanagi and the invisible threat he posed.

He sees Sakura enter the main hall with Fugaku of all people. She’s wearing a pink and white
kimono and her hair is curled and pinned up. Shisui knows the moment Sakura spots him, because her whole being radiates with excitement.

Shisui wrestles down another batch of self-loathing at what he is about to do.

“Good evening, Sakura.” Shisui says, not allowing himself even the slightest flicker of expression. Not even when her face falls.

Itachi narrows his eyes, standing nearby.

“Shisui-kun?” Sakura says, looking up at him with big, confused eyes.

They are surrounded by Uchiha. Any one of them could be Izanagi, reporting back to the elders, or the Hokage, or even Danzo. He tried to hide their fledgling friendship at first, downplaying it to Itachi and Kakashi, but time and time again he failed. He thought he was being so clever, keeping Sakura’s world-changing secret and helping this naïve four-year-old avoid a terrible fate, but what has he really done but draw even more attention to her?

And he made her a Senju. The Uchiha’s natural opponent, attracting the ire of every traditionalist clansmen in the village. She went from being harmless Haruno Sakura, shy and sweet, to Senju Sakura, clan heir and political pawn. What was he thinking?

“Glad you could make it.” Shisui says woodenly, shutting down the part of him that aches at her hurt expression, the wounded look in her eyes.

He brushes past her, unable to take any more, and goes looking for an empty room. He slips inside the first one he comes across, snorting a laugh when he realises he’s unintentionally taken himself to the Room of Doom. The perfect place to castigate himself in private.

Then the door slides open, and a short, angry figure stands before him.

“What was that?” Itachi asks, cold fury in his voice.

“What was what?” Shisui replies, shrugging nonchalantly. *What was that? That was me, saving Sakura from my own stupidity.*

“You just hurt Sakura.” Itachi says flatly.

“Oh, c’mon, she’s just – ”

“Young, kind, vulnerable and unused to turmoil?” Itachi raises his eyebrows. “How was she supposed to deal with what you just did?”

*“Unused to turmoil?”* Shisui repeats incredulously, unable to help himself. “She nearly died saving her father, was nearly kidnapped twice, and has seen more violence and death than a kid in peacetime should ever see!”

“If you know that, then why would you treat her so poorly? She looks up to you and, despite what you are trying to portray tonight, I *know* you care about her. When you came to say goodbye before we left for Suna, I thought you came for *me*. You didn’t even look my way. You call her ‘Firefly.’ I’m not a fool. You’re purposefully distancing yourself from her in public, which must mean you think being friendly with her will have some negative effect – presumably on the clan’s relations with Konoha. Am I wrong?”

Shisui steps forward, aghast. Itachi is trying to look coolly unaffected, but colour has risen in his
cheeks. He’s upset.

“Itachi, I… I didn’t mean to neglect you, you know you’re my best friend – “

“Am I wrong?” Itachi snaps.

Shisui sighs, looking down at his feet. “You’re not wrong. I… I was approached by someone. I believe he’s an Uchiha, judging by the way he talked. He called himself Izanagi. He asked me about the Uchiha’s place in Konoha, and whether or not people can change. And then… he asked me, ‘why do you call her Firefly?’”

Itachi’s eyes widen.

“My friendship with her hasn’t gone unnoticed. This guy came to me while I was on a mission, he knew exactly where I would be and what to say to put me on guard. It must have been a warning. I can’t be the reason I lose another friend, Itachi. Not Sakura to this conspiracy, or you to neglect. I’m an idiot. Just hit me next time, okay?”

“No,” Itachi sniffs, tossing his head, “If I hit you every time you did something stupid, you would suffer irreparable brain damage in a matter of hours.”

Shisui flicks his forehead, lightning-fast, enjoying the pout he receives, “What is it with you kids and sassing me all of a sudden, hm? And speaking of something stupid, why are you going along with Fugaku’s child bride plans?”

Itachi’s face goes red, “I – I am not!”

“Oh, Otou-sama, what a wonderful idea!” Shisui says dramatically. “She shall marry me on the morrow!”

“I never said any of that.” Itachi glares.

“You might as well have. You’re creating a monster by encouraging that man’s ridiculous schemes, you know.”

“Tsunade will never give her permission for any kind of match for Sakura.” Itachi mumbles, his cheeks still burning red. “I know that. But as long as he is focusing on a doomed union, he cannot attend to a more likely match and I… am not ready to think of such things. But as the Clan Head, I understand that he must.”

Shisui pinches Itachi’s red cheek, “You are too cute. But Fugaku is wily and he’ll probably start an uprising to sway Tsunade if she refuses him.”

“I have a hard time seeing that woman being swayed by anything.” Itachi says dryly.

Tsunade had proved to be a little unpredictable thus far. Shisui’s contacts – old friends from the Academy – had told him that evidence suggested Tsunade was misanthropic, uninterested in sticking around anywhere or putting down roots. He had fully expected Sakura to convince her, but he certainly hadn’t expected her to return to Konoha. Not to mention how she had immediately adopted not just Sakura, but her little friend from ROOT and Sunshine, the Kyuubi container. Shisui didn’t like unpredictable people. Including himself.

“Back to the matter at hand, I think it’s pointless to avoid Sakura. Your friendship is already public and withdrawing from her will do nothing but prove to this ‘Izanagi’ that she is a weak point.” Itachi says, frustratingly reasonable.
“I can’t just do nothing. If I carry on as normal and act like nothing happened, then Izanagi does something… I can’t be responsible for that.”

“You can’t be responsible for anything.” Itachi says sharply.

Shisui pauses.

“Whenever it seems as though you will have to take the blame for something, or accept a burden as your own, you run.” Itachi says, his tone cooling into faint disdain.

Shisui grips the sliding door, nails digging into the wooden frame. He can’t leave without proving Itachi’s point. But he really, really does not want to get a lecture from his baby cousin.

“I don’t think you know what you’re talking about.” Shisui says lightly, a warning audible in his voice.

“What happened to your friend, Shisui? The one that gave you – ”

Shisui turns around, leaning against the door. His eyes spin, blood and black. “What?” He says coldly, when Itachi’s mouth shuts abruptly. “What did they give me, Itachi?”

Itachi says nothing, but even just the painful sympathy in his gaze is too much to bear.

“How long am I supposed to pay for what I did?” Shisui asks, his voice steady through sheer willpower.

“Until you stop hating yourself for it,” Itachi replies, his big eyes dark with knowledge a kid his age should never be burdened with, “until you forgive yourself.”

Shisui laughs, loud and caustic, “I don’t know if I can afford to keep paying forever.”

“You made a mistake, Shisui.”

“No, I made a choice. I let my personal feelings override my judgment and a good friend died because of it. I’m not going to do that again. You can make her happy, Itachi.” Shisui says. He closes his eyes, dismissing his Sharingan. He remembers Sakura’s weak, trembling voice saying _he scares me, Shisui-kun._ And Shisui, so desperate to save his only friend, pushed her towards him anyway. Told her to do it for him. And Sakura, with her big heart, did it.

Itachi will join Akatsuki, hunting kids like Sunshine, and Sasuke will kill Sakura.

In his weakest moments, he has imagined doing horrific things to prevent it all from happening. Taking little Sasuke’s eyes, hunting down Akatsuki, or framing Itachi to get him locked away. Most of all, he thinks about using his own eyes to change the world.

Is he a coward for hesitating or for even considering it in the first place?

He imagines digging through Sakura’s mind, looking for answers. If he asked, maybe she would give him permission - though the way she refused to look at him when he brainwashed Kabuto, and the terror she suffered when he first activated his Sharingan in her presence, just trying to make her laugh… he couldn’t imagine she’d say yes.

_Why are your eyes red, Shisui-kun?_

She saw a crying person with red eyes. They told her to live. Was that her only dream of him?
If he dies, he’ll leave Sakura all alone. He’s the only one who knows the truth. He can’t protect her in the open. It’s too much of a risk for both of them.

“Have you considered asking Sakura what she wants?” Itachi asks. “She might agree with your plan to be careful. She would at least know that you haven’t truly abandoned her.”

If she knew, then all chances of subterfuge would be lost. She was terrible at keeping secrets. Her dreams had caused an investigation of abuse, and he himself had noticed her odd behaviour. If he is going to distance himself from Sakura, he can’t tell her the truth.

“I’m glad you’ve made friends, kid.” Shisui says finally, giving Itachi a small, genuine smile.

Itachi frowns, “I wish I could say the same for you. I wish your attempts to punish yourself didn’t have to end your friendships.”

Shisui rips open the sliding door, ignoring the startled Uchiha milling about in the hallway.

“You can’t run forever, Shisui.” Itachi says quietly, but his voice carries through the space and into Shisui’s head, refusing to leave.

Sakura sits in the corner, hugging her knees.

She spent a long time hiding from everyone, ducking away whenever she felt a chakra signal getting close. Every time it happened, she waited for Kagami to comment. She never did. What if she was gone for good? And Shisui stopped being her friend?

I can do this. Sakura breathes in and out, hands trembling. I can. I’m nearly five and Kagami said I’m too big to cry, so I won’t. I’ve got to look after us both, because Kagami can’t. I’m not alone, even if I can’t hear her. I’m not alone. I’m…

If only she’d brought her sand fox with her. She couldn’t find a way to keep it in her kimono without squashing it or getting sand all over herself, so she’d left it at home on her pillow. She always felt like Gaara was with her when she held it.

She can’t stop thinking about the look on Shisui’s face when he greeted her. Blank, as if looking down at a stranger. It reminded her of Sasuke’s expression when he killed her. She clutches her chest, struggling to keep her breathing even. She’s keeping the tears in. It feels like everything is surging up inside her, trying to burst out.

“Can you do a handstand?”

Sakura gasps, lurching away from the sudden voice that emerged from the darkness.

A man is standing next to her, leaning against the wall. Sakura’s heart pounds. How long has he been standing there?

“Well, can you?” He asks again.

He’s very tall. His hair looks black, but it glints blue where it catches the dim light. He’s wearing it in a short, stubby ponytail. His brows are arched as if in question, his dark eyes focused on her face. Both his ears are pierced.

If Kagami was awake, she’d be frantically telling her how to kill this man.
Sakura is very tired of hearing how to hurt people.

“Yes, I can. I’m not very good at it, though. And I’m not going to do it in my kimono because it’ll get creased.” She answers, settling into a crouch. If she has to run, she knows how. Shisui taught her.

“That’s fair. You don’t mind if I do it in my kimono, right?” The man asks.

Sakura squints at him through the gloom.

“You’re not wearing a kimono. That was a lie.” She says severely.

He’s dressed in a vest and shorts. He’s got bandages around his arms and legs.

“Are you hurt?” Sakura asks worriedly, standing up.

He laughs, shaking his head, then flips over abruptly.

He’s standing on one finger.

Sakura stares in awe, “Mister, you’re just as tall that way up as you were before.”

“Thanks for letting me know.” He replies, not sounding strained at all.

“Are you a shinobi?” She asks.

He hums, switching fingers. His legs curl over and he gets back to his feet. He shakes his hand and a puff of smoke plumes out of his palm.

The smoke dissipates, and he’s holding a sword.

A jolt of fear runs through Sakura.

She’s all alone.

“Wanna see me stand on this?” The man asks, so lightly that her terror abates just a bit.

“You’d get the pointy bit in the floor and Fugaku-san would be upset.” She replies.

“Would he?” The man asks, sounding as if he doesn’t care very much at all.

The sword glows blue and starts to levitate out of his hand. He leaps up, becoming a blur, and lands perfectly on the sword’s hilt, not even causing it to wobble.

“It’s cool, right?” He calls. The blue light makes his face look eerie.

“Uh-huh.”

“Wrong!” The man jumps down, the sword disappearing with a flick of his wrist and another puff of smoke. “Let’s take a look at your mistakes, shall we? One, you ran away from your guardians and hid on your own. Two, you didn’t run or scream for help the moment a strange man appeared out of nowhere. Three, you didn’t even try to escape when I pulled the sword out. And four, you didn’t take the opportunity to run when I was performing a handstand, or even when I was standing on the sword. If I was anyone else, what do you think would happen?”

“Oba-san would beat you up.” Sakura says, irritation sparking inside her now that she understands what’s going on here. He’s not like Magic Mask. He’s just going to lecture her now she fell for his
grown-up tricks.

“Wrong again! She’s not here to defend you. She can’t always be around, which is why you need to learn some self-preservation. Do you know what that means?”

“It means some people are mean and will trick you into thinking they’re really cool and good at handstands when really they’re grumpy and mean.” Sakura says sulkily.

“You said mean twice. And I am cool and good at handstands, but I also happen to be employed to keep you alive, which seems like a challenge now.”

“You’re my bodyguard?” Sakura says, eyes wide. “I didn’t think you were real. I don’t need one, thank you.”

“I think recent events would beg to differ.” The man replies dryly. “I’m Kitagawa. Your mother hired me to stop you from talking to strangers and getting in trouble.”

Sakura stares at him in horror, “But I like getting in trouble. I’m a Monster.”

“I don’t doubt that. But would you like to see your fourth birthday?”

“I already have.” Sakura glares. She’s clearly more grown-up than an almost four-year-old, honestly.

“And wouldn’t it be nice to keep on having birthdays? And not being dead?”

“Everyone dies.” Sakura tells him, a touch of weariness in her voice.

He frowns at her, crouching down to meet her eyes, “Sure they do. If nobody died, nobody would get born. There’d be no kids, just endless old people, complaining about their bad backs. That doesn’t sound fun, does it?”

Sakura shakes her head, a ghost of a smile crossing her face.

“Everyone dies. You, me, everyone. But don’t make the mistake of dwelling on the inevitable. You know what that means? It’s when you only ever think about one thing that you know is going to happen, so you miss out on all the cool stuff that might happen. Yeah, we’re all gonna die. But there’s a million things to do first.”

Sakura wipes her face. She didn’t cry, but her cheeks itch as if she did. She still feels tired and numb, but when Kitagawa extends a hand, she takes it and stands up.

“The first thing you should do,” Kitagawa says, holding her hand as gingerly as a newborn baby, “is come with me to find your mother. Okay?”

“She’s not my mother.” Sakura sniffs, stepping a little closer to Kitagawa’s leg.

“At the rebellious phase already, huh.” He remarks.

Sakura wrinkles her nose at him.

“So, what do you do if a strange man approaches you?” Kitagawa asks, leading her to the door.

“Take his hand.” Sakura replies.

“No! Well, take his hand and beat him to death with it. You can do that, for sure.”
“You don’t meet a lot of people, do you?”

Kitagawa makes a wounded sound.

Sakura gets a letter to say she’ll be attending the next semester of the Academy.

She is ecstatic, showing her Tsunade and Shizune. I did it! She thinks, but Kagami does not reply. The silence seems to echo.

Sakura rushes to Ino’s house, Kitagawa ghosting her every step of the way.

Shikamaru is just leaving as she arrives. She halts, grabbing the Yamanakas’ fence for support.

“Shikamaru-kun!” She pants.

“Hey, Sakura. Did you get into the Academy too?”

“Yeah! That means we’ll all be in the same year! Well,” She falters, thinking of Naruto and Sasuke, “not all of us, I guess.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Shikamaru yawns, “You don’t have to be assigned to a genin team straight after graduation, you can just wait a year or more until your teammates catch up. There’s no guarantee you’ll get the ones you want – unless it’s part of a clan tradition. Then you’re stuck with them for life.”

“So… I can just wait a year after graduating and I can be on a team with Naruto and Sasuke?” Sakura says, hardly daring to believe it. “Really? That’s amazing!”

She’s so happy that she lifts him off his feet and spins him around, “You’re so clever, Shikamaru-kun!”

His face is bright red when she puts him back down, “Uh… whatever. I… I’ve gotta go. Bye.”

She waves him off, beaming, then skips down Ino’s path.

She knocks on the door, pointedly ignoring Kitagawa. He’s balancing on the fence using only the side of one foot, his arms outstretched like a crane.

Ino opens the door, immediately slipping out of the house and into Sakura’s personal space. Her eyes are a little red.

“You got in, too, didn’t you?” Ino asks, her voice strangely flat.

Sakura feels her smile wipe away, “Um. Y-yes. Just like you said – ”

“Just like I said, yeah, except I didn’t get in,” Ino says bitterly, “There’s no way we’ll be on a team together now. And we won’t even be in the same class…”

Sakura’s chest tightens, “Oh no. Ino-chan, I’m so sorry!”

“And I heard you with Shikamaru,” Ino says abruptly, pale eyes narrowing accusingly, “You were so happy that you could still be on a team with Naruto and Sasuke. I bet even though you know I’ll be in the same year as them now, you still won’t try to be on my team instead.”
“B-but, your clans always team up –”

“You wouldn’t even try to fight for me, would you?” Ino says, tears welling up in her eyes, “Why are they so special when I’m not? I was your friend first. Is it because they’re boys? Do you like them more than me? We were going to go to the Academy and be amazing kunoichi together… and then we’d live in a big house and go on missions… That’s what I wanted. I thought you wanted that too.”

Sakura clutches her chest, struggling to breathe, “I-Ino-chan, you are my friend, you’re my best friend –”

“You missed my birthday.” Ino says, her voice wavering. “It was ages ago. I kept waiting for you to say sorry, it was a mistake, but you never did.”

Sakura covers her mouth in shock.

“I’ll miss you when you’re at the Academy,” Ino says, tears spilling down her cheeks, “but I guess it’s not like I see you much now, anyway. Maybe neither of us will notice.”

“Ino-chan!”

Ino opens her front door and slams it behind her.

Sakura feels Kagami’s return like a knife slicing through her mind.

(Ino’s eyes are clouded over. She used to love Sasuke just like Sakura did. And look what he did to her. Sakura touches her friend’s face, wishing they had had more time, knowing they’d had all the time in the world, but had wasted it on stupid quarrels and fights over him. If she could go back – if she could just go back – she could fix everything, she was sure of it. She could have Ino back in her life. She’d never have to lose her again.)

Sakura wakes up in Kitagawa’s arms, confused. Her mouth is bleeding. She’s bitten completely through her lower lip.

“Ino-chan –” Sakura says urgently.

“Is an entitled little madam,” Kitagawa says, “but she’ll come around in the end. More importantly, I think it’s time for you to go home and get that mouth looked at.”

Sakura sags in his arms. They’re sitting on the roof of the house across from Ino’s. She can feel Kagami’s grief in her gut. It feels like Sasuke just ripped Ino away from her again, but it was Sakura’s own doing this time.

She wanted the comfort of her own home, with her parents fussing over her and telling everything was going to be okay, because they’d love her no matter what. She knew that was true. But to explain why she was so upset, she would have to admit she went behind their backs and applied to the Academy.

“Can we go see Shisui-kun, please?” Sakura asks, wincing with every word.

Kitagawa hums, then hops to his feet, holding her up with one arm. “Anything for you, kid.”

They make it through the Uchiha Compound with minimal stares, probably because Sakura is here so often, and she’s hiding her blood-stained face in Kitagawa’s cloak.
Itachi answers the door with a slight smile that fades the moment he sees her face.

“Hello, Itachi,” Sakura says wearily, “can I see Shisui-kun, please?”

Sadness and pity seep through his aura.

She knows his answer before he says it.

“I’m sorry, Sakura. He’s not in right now. You can – ”

“Sakura!” Sasuke shouts, running across the hall, sliding a little on the wooden floor.

Sakura wriggles in Kitagawa’s arms, demanding to be let down, then runs straight for Sasuke. Despite everything she’s dreamed about him, everything he took away from Kagami… Sasuke is still one of the people she knows will be happy to see her no matter what.

They collide in a tight hug, Sakura bursting into tears at once.

Sasuke’s little arms are warm and secure.

“What happened, Sakura?” He murmurs in her ear, “The Monsters will take care of it.”

***

Hello friends,

It’s two in the morning right now and for me, time has become a mere concept.

Little baby Saku has been coping remarkably well with stress throughout the story, but everyone has a breaking point.

Kagami isn’t doing so well, huh.


Shisui continues to make Bad Choices for Good Reasons that benefit Absolutely No One.

Izanagi probably spent the New Year’s Festival being creepy in a dark corner. Brooding. Lurking. Waiting. Reciting dramatic monologues.

Tsunade is looooving Fugaku’s paper-thin machinations.

And Fugaku is actually concerned about Sakura. If only she could adopt him for real!

Ino is four and bitterly disappointed.

Kitagawa likes balancing on swords and lecturing kids for listening to creepers… while acting like a creeper.

Shizune is going to punch all the mean people in Konoha and Tsunade will laugh. So hard.

Re: Shizune’s response to the mean dude – it’s actually a lot more effective to remain calm against people like that. Shouting at them might make them shut up, but shaming them might make them think.

If you think Tsunade hired the top mercenaries in the Land of Fire to be her kids’ babysitters and then had to wait weeks for them to pass T&I’s inspection and interrogation processes… you’d be
absolutely right.

Is it only Inuzuka who can understand their dogs, or can anyone? I’m imagining Kiba having conversations with Misa and Momo and translating for Sakura.

~

Tsunade: What the heck? Sakura’s only received twelve thinly-veiled marriage proposals so far! I’ve never been so insulted in my life!

Shizune: You’ll never say yes to any of them, so why do you care?

Tsunade: It’s the PRINCIPLE, Shizune. The PRINCIPLE.

~

(A fun fact about me: when I was a kid I once sat in a video shop watching Lord of the Rings on one of the display TVs, right at the moment where Gandalf was all YOOOOOU. SHALL NOT!!! PAAAAAAAAASS! And what I failed to notice was also right at that moment, the shop was being robbed.)

Quick poll for fun: What’s your hidden talent?

For example, I can coo like a pigeon. I have caused much confusion with this particular party trick.

(Only one Good Boy appeared this chapter. The Good Girl was in the garden, fiercely poised to pounce! On a butterfly, which got away. The Good Girl has successfully defended the garden again!)
Chapter 29

It all comes out when Sakura is sat on the Uchiha’s sofa. Mikoto is sat next to her, holding her hand. Sasuke sits on her other side, prickling with anxiety. Fugaku and Itachi are both standing on the other side of the room, unintentionally mirroring each other’s stiff posture.

Sakura tells them how one of her friends isn’t talking to her anymore and she doesn’t know why, and how her other friend is upset that she’s going to the Academy without her and that she wants to be on a team with Naruto and Sasuke instead of her.

Sasuke perks up when she says this, as does Fugaku, for some reason.

“And how did this happen, sweetheart?” Mikoto says gently, gesturing at her bloodied mouth.

“I think I bit my lip when I fell down.” Sakura says. It isn’t a lie. It’s just not the full truth. She fell down because her dream made her faint. But she thinks Mikoto would be looking at her with a great deal more confusion if she admitted that.

“When did you fall?”

“After Ino-chan got really upset with me. She hates me.” Sakura says quietly, a painful lump forming in her throat. She fiddles with the hem of her dress, blinking rapidly to stop the tears.

“I’m sure she doesn’t – ” Mikoto begins.

“Ino’s a big, stupid idiot.” Sasuke says firmly, crossing his arms.

“Sasuke!” Mikoto chides.

“What? She is! It’s her own fault she couldn’t get into the Academy. It’s not Sakura’s fault that she’s so smart.”

Kitagawa snickers.

“And you are?” Fugaku says, speaking up for the first time.

It takes Sakura a moment to realise who he’s talking to.

Kitagawa tosses his head, his silver earrings chiming with the movement. “I’m no one, Uchiha-sama, he says cheerily, “just a little piece in a big part.”

“If you are to be in my house, with my children present, I expect you to be forthcoming and specific about your identity and intentions. Specifics, please.” Fugaku says, having none of it.

“Pardon me, Uchiha-sama, but I believe I am already in your house. And those are your children, yes? There’s a very strong resemblance. They have your eyes. Adorable. So, why is it necessary for me to be forthcoming and specific now, after I have already been in your house and your children’s presence for several minutes?”

There is a resounding silence.

“I believe there has been a misunderstanding,” Fugaku says icily, “when I ask you a question in my own home, I expect an answer. If I do not receive a satisfying one, I will not hesitate to remove you.”
“From your house or your children’s presence?” Kitagawa asks, his eyes wide and guileless, “Specifics, please?”

There is a spark of chakra flaring behind Fugaku’s eyes, matching the swell of rage in his aura.

Sakura sighs, lowering the glass she had been clutching in front of her mouth, “Kitagawa-san is my new bodyguard. He’s very new, and he is often late, which Oba-san said does not speak well for his character.”

Kitagawa makes an exaggerated look of dismay, “Sakura-hime, please don’t call me Kitagawa-san. I am but a mere worm to a princess, after all.”

“Worms are quieter.” Sakura tells him.

“Be that as it may,” Fugaku says, still seething, “How did you even get in here? Mikoto, did you let him inside with Sakura?”

“I answered the door, Otou-san,” Itachi says warily, “and Kitagawa-san was carrying Sakura. He let her go, she ran in to see Sasuke, and when I looked up… he was gone.”

“I got lost.” Kitagawa says, beaming.

“Inside my house.” Fugaku says flatly.

Kitagawa spreads his hands wide, “Fortunately, I found my way to this room. I get lost very often, but I have an excellent sense of direction to make up for it.”

“Who hired you?”

“Tsunade-sama.”

“I cannot imagine why.”

“I’ve yet to lose a client.”

“How many have you had?”

Kitagawa, still smiling, motions towards Sakura.

Fugaku’s stony silence speaks volumes.

“I’m still alive.” Sakura says, feeling compelled to speak up in her new bodyguard’s defence.

“See! And she’s hardly bleeding at all.”

Fugaku glowers at the bodyguard, whose grin remains unrepentant and unashamed.

“Back to Sakura,” Mikoto says pointedly, “Darling, I’m sure your friends don’t hate you. They just need a little time. That’s all you can do. Give them some space. If you wait a little, they may come to you in their own time, but if they don’t, when you do see them again, they are sure to be calmer and more likely to listen to you. Now, let’s see what we can do about your poor mouth – ”

Sakura, almost as an afterthought, lifts her hand to her mouth and heals it. The skin itches and her mouth still tastes metallic and gross, but the pain is gone. She’s grown so used to being hurt that she barely noticed the wound was still there.
Kagami has been silent since the last dream.

Did she really even return? When she went quiet like that, was she missing or just mute?

Mikoto takes Sakura’s glass of water from her and sprinkles its contents onto a handkerchief, then carefully wipes the dried blood from Sakura’s chin.

She still feels a little numb, like everything happening around her is something she’s witnessing, not experiencing. Her limbs feel heavy, almost unresponsive.

“Was that everything, Sakura-chan?” Mikoto asks, “Or was there something else that’s been bothering you?”

Konoha will be crushed into a giant crater. Mikoto’s oldest son will try to kill Kakashi, and her youngest will kill Sakura. Shisui is missing from her dreams and she doesn’t know if that’s because he’s supposed to die or if they simply were not meant to meet. Shisui hurt Kabuto and he didn’t feel guilty until Sakura got upset. Shisui stopped talking to her and she doesn’t know why.

Shisui.

“I know I should be happy because really good things have been happening lately,” Sakura begins slowly, “but I’ve been so scared… so scared that it’s all going to go away. That I’ll lose everything. Kakashi-sensei got hurt protecting me. So did Takumi-kun. All the Masks… They’re going to keep coming for me and it’s because I can heal. So, I shouldn’t heal, so everyone will be safe. But I want to heal, to make people better. I don’t know if that’s wrong or not. I don’t know anything anymore.”

Mikoto tilts her head, her long hair falling like a curtain over one eye. Her smile is halved by shadow, “Sakura-chan, you’re a very grown-up girl. That means you’re smart enough to care about issues that you’re not supposed to deal with yet. All of the things you’re worried about are beyond your reach to solve. That’s not a bad thing. It’s like when you can’t reach something high up – I bet your mother puts sharp things too high for you to reach, right?”

Sakura nods.

“That’s because they’re not for you. If you manage to get to them, you might hurt yourself. So, with all these issues that you shouldn’t be able to reach, trying to solve them will only cause you worry and pain. That’s why you’re stressed, Sakura-chan. Because you are worrying about things you can’t change. I know it must seem very difficult and very frightening, having bad people come after you. It must feel worse because it’s other people who get hurt, stopping them. But that’s what we do, Sakura-chan. Shinobi put themselves in danger every day to protect people who can’t protect themselves. Civilians, the elderly, children… We do this willingly and with pride. And one day, I know you will grow up and do the same. But you mustn’t try do so until you are ready. You can’t safely hold a knife if your hands are too small, right? You have to let bigger hands do the work. Sit back, Sakura-chan.”

Sakura blinks, surprised, and realises she’s sitting forward, tense and ready to go. She forces herself to slump back against the chair.

“Take a deep breath.”

Sakura does.

“And let all your fears go.”

Sakura breathes out, and bursts into tears.
Mikoto rubs her back, murmuring words of comfort.

“I killed one of the Masks,” Sakura sobs, the jolts of shock in the auras around her only making her cry harder, “they hurt my – my… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to!”

Mikoto pulls her into her arms, rocking her back and forth, “It’s alright, darling. Sometimes the sharp things get to us before we are ready. That doesn’t mean you were wrong. It’s sad and unfortunate, but it happened, and it’s done. You’re here, you’re safe, and sometimes that is the best you can ask for.”

Sakura knows why she wanted to see Shisui when she got hurt. He makes her feel safe. But now, in Mikoto’s warm, firm grip, she feels as far away from harm as possible. She’s got her parents, and now the Senju, the borrowed family she made by mistake. But maybe she’s also got this family, the Uchiha. And they’re a little broken, but they’re very kind. Maybe getting hurt makes you better at helping people.

“It was my fault, Okaa-san,” Itachi says sombrely, “I failed to protect Sakura in time, and she had to do it herself.”

Fugaku tuts.

Just as Sakura is about to push away from Mikoto and shout, Fugaku puts a hand on Itachi’s shoulder.

“Is it your fault when the wind blows and a tree falls down?” He asks.

Itachi looks confused.

“Only take responsibility for the things that are truly caused by your hand. Do not shoulder the blame of everything that happens when you are around. I know you, and I know you would have done your utmost to protect Sakura, because that is the kind of shinobi you are.” Fugaku says.

Itachi’s chakra is alight with surprise and a small amount of happiness, but it dims slightly when he says, “But Sakura is my responsibility.”

Sasuke makes a face.

Kitagawa lets out a loud guffaw, ignoring the two adults glaring at him.

“Your only responsibility is to your own integrity.” Fugaku says.

“But… but I thought…”

“You don’t always have to be strong.” Mikoto adds, stroking Sakura’s hair.

“And Sakura insisted on helping us, didn’t she? So in a way, aren’t you her responsibility?” Fugaku asks, a rare flash of mirth in his aura.

Itachi looks blank.

“Don’t worry,” Sakura says, a weak smile beginning to grow, “I’ll take care of you.”

“What about me?” Sasuke demands.

“I’ll take care of you too, Sasuke!” Sakura grins.
“But what about Fugaku?” Kitagawa asks with mock-concern.

Fugaku glares, “What happened to ‘Uchiha-sama?’”

“That’s what I’m asking.”

“Get out of my house.”

Kitagawa is smirking, despite their unceremonious exit.

Sakura looks up at him suspiciously.

He catches her looking and winks, opening his cloak. He’s holding several things, most notably a scroll.

“Where did you get that?” Sakura asks curiously.

Kitagawa chuckles, “They fell into my hands.”

Kagami murmurs something, her voice muffled as if behind a wall.

“You stole them?!” Sakura whisper-shouts, aghast.

Kitagawa stops walking, balancing the scroll on the tip of his finger. His indigo hair is tied back into a tiny braid with silver thread. His thin lips are permanently-cursed up, so he is perpetually smirking. He’s wrestled his face into something approaching hurt at her words.

“I thought you’d be cool with this.” He says, looking at her dubiously.

“Why?”

He shrugs, his cloak rustling with the movement. She sees more shiny things tucked within its confines and huffs in annoyance.

“Stealing is wrong.”

“Only if you get caught.”

“Put it back.” Sakura demands.

Kitagawa puts on a tragic face, “But if I take it all back, they’ll kill me. I’ll be dead, Sakura-hime. What will my poor mother do?”

“You have a mother?”

“Most people do.”

“Is she really poor?”

“Not anymore.” Kitagawa twirls a beaded necklace around his finger.

Sakura puts her hands on her hips, “If I told Oba-san – ”

“Then I’d have to tell her about your weird little…” Kitagawa makes a face, waving his hand in front of his eyes, “Vision thing. Y’know, when your eyes went all glassy and you face-planted into the
ground. That was either some kind of technique or you’ve got, like. A problem. With your brain.”

Sakura freezes, wide-eyed in alarm.

Kitagawa raises a narrow eyebrow, “Can’t hide from me, kid. Something’s up with you. My best
guess is it’s some kind of weird Senju thing. Your ma said you were gifted, which I took to mean
you were smart but had zero social skills, but maybe she meant something else, huh.”

Sakura glares at him.

He beams back.

Stalemate.

He crouches in front of her, flicking his hand in front of her face. A beautiful paper fan appears from
his sleeve, delicately painted with watercolour lilies.

“‘It’s a shame you don’t like stealing, ‘cause I got this for you. So if you ever feel like you’re gonna
faint again, you can just use this to cool you down. And make sure you sit down, too, and put your
head between your legs. You’ll look hilarious, and it’ll keep you from passing out. Win, win.’”

Sakura frowns. The fan is very pretty, but she wouldn’t feel right using it, knowing it belonged to
someone else. It was probably Mikoto’s.

“No, thank you.” She says, scrunching up her face in distaste.

Kitagawa pretends to gasp, fanning himself, “I can’t believe I went to all the trouble of sneaking into
the Uchiha Manor and looking through all the rooms just to find you a lovely gift and you turn it
down, I mean, really. I am… flabbergasted.”

“Good! Your gast deserves to be flabbered!”

Kitagawa howls with laughter, which just annoys Sakura even more.

“Fugaku-san would be so mad at you!”

Kitagawa gives her a smile, his eyes curved shut, “I may not look it, Sakura-hime, but I’m actually
quite weak. If it comes to a real fight, you might find yourself protecting me. So, please don’t tell on
me to the scary Clan Head. I’m just a lowly bodyguard, after all.”

“Kitagawa-san – ”

Kitagawa visibly shudders, making a yuck face, “Don’t call me that. It makes me sound so
respectable.”

Sakura puffs out her cheeks. Talking to Kitagawa is so hard. It’s like trying to discipline one of her
puppies.

“Well, if you don’t like Kitagawa-san… Kit-kun?” She suggests.

She’s not prepared for him to look scandalised, “Sakura-hime! I didn’t mean – you shouldn’t – ”

Sakura’s lips curl up in a wicked smile, mirroring Kitagawa’s usual expression, “Kit-kun it is, then.”

xxxxxxxxx
Despite his casual threat, Kitagawa doesn’t say a word to Tsunade about Sakura’s accident when they get home.

Sakura sits with Tenzo in the garden, marvelling at the rapid change.

It used to be a wild jungle of thorns and weeds, trees choking on vines and rot. Now, Tenzo has restored the garden to its former beauty. Revived trees straighten out their branches, shaking apple blossom into the breeze. He carved a bench himself, long enough for most of the Senju clan to pile onto, and paced it on the newly-cleared patio.

The garden is bordered by enormous rose bushes, each one unnaturally tall to shield the garden from outside view. The gentle perfume of the roses is always in the air. It’s not just normal roses, either. Tenzo has branched out, creating grey, jade and black flowers, randomly dotting the hedges like unexpected little treasures.

For Naruto, Tenzo grew a row of orange flowers, including marigolds and a honeysuckle bush. Sakura likes to look at through squinted eyes, turning the brightly-coloured bunch into a blaze of golden fire.

Tenzo has purposefully left a space for the pond and Sakura’s cherry tree, which he says they’ll grow together on her birthday. She hopes he doesn’t forget.

He made a swing, carving the wood with delicate little flowers and slugs, and hung it from the sturdiest tree in the garden. It’s quickly become one of Naruto’s favourite places to sit. More often than not, Sakura will find Naruto in the garden, whooping as Tenzo pushes him on the swing.

“So, if you close your eyes and concentrate, you should be able to feel a connection to the nature around you.” Tenzo instructs, settling himself down on the bench.

Sakura closes her eyes, unbearably aware of Kitagawa, who is perched on a nearby branch staring directly at them.

She tries to reach out with her senses, as she can feel Tenzo doing, but there’s nothing. She can smell the flowers and hear the warning chirps of the birds in Kitagawa’s tree, but she can’t feel anything beyond the breeze against her cheek.

“I can’t do it.” She says, sitting on her hands.

“Give it some time.”

She tries.

_Do you ever – nk – hat – we’re doing here –_

Kagami’s voice fades in and out, hastily-bitten off syllables breaking Sakura’s concentration.

When she tries to summon the place her flowers come from, she feels nothing at all. She knows if she opened her hand and thought about it, she could make some pretty blossoms. But she doesn’t know how or why.

(“No! Ino! Don’t you dare, you stupid Ino-pig! Ino, please!” A spill of platinum blonde hair, a streak of scarlet, and Sakura hopes with every breath that something will change, that those eyes will open once more –

And it’s your fault)
Sakura inhales sharply, clenching her fists. Crushed petals spill between her fingers. Is this all she can do?

A hand touches her arm. She starts, eyes flashing open. Tenzo gives her a patient smile, squeezing her shoulder.

“Good things take time. This garden didn’t grow overnight. It had to start small. Let’s do the same, okay?”

Sakura sighs, leaning over to rest her head against Tenzo’s arm. They touched palms, and roses formed together, linked by a circle of stems. Tenzo laughed at the result, and gently placed the rose garland on Sakura’s head.

“Keep working hard. That’s all you can do.”

Sakura looks up. Kitagawa is still sat in his tree, a flock of birds settled on his back. He salutes her with a lopsided grin.

Kagami breathes out – id he see he – did he –

Sakura closes her eyes, searching for the connection to nature she was supposed to have. There is nothing but a dark well of sorrow.

xxxxxxx

Tsunade gets home from the hospital late in the day, smelling of sour sickness and radiating exhaustion. She still scoops up Naruto when he runs to her, planting him on her shoulders with a big grin.

Sakura is still a little shy, clutching Tenzo’s sleeve. She needs to talk to Tsunade, but it’s hard to break the domestic atmosphere with her concerns.

Kitagawa is casually leaning against the wall. Sakura hasn’t been able to shake him once in the weeks he’s been around. He’s wearing tiny silver bells in his hair and he still doesn’t make a sound when he moves.

“Oba-san?” Sakura says.

Tsunade lets Naruto slip down her arm to the floor, patting him on the head as he runs off, giggling madly. Momo and Misa tear after him. They’ve gotten very fond of Naruto.

Tsunade opens her arms, raising a brow in question.

Sakura flushes, “I’m too big to be carried, Oba-san.”

Tsunade makes an offended noise, “First of all, you’re puny. Second of all, you could be the size of a house and I could still carry you. C’mon. Let’s have a chat.”

Sakura compromises, taking Tsunade’s hand in hers. She’s still wearing the white rose garland Tenzo placed on her head. It looks pretty against her pink locks. Tsunade tweaks the petals with an amused look, then walks into the living room.

Kitagawa follows them in.

Tsunade pins him with a look, “Out.”
“Nope.” He says cheerfully.

“I pay you. Get. Out.”

“You pay me to keep the kid safe. Letting her out of my sight isn’t the way to do that.”

“I pay you to keep her safe while I’m not around. There’s not a single soul that could get to my kids through me. You go where I tell you to, or I’ll find another degenerate to – ”

“I like Kit-kun! Please don’t replace him!” Sakura blurts out.

Tsunade blinks slowly.

Kitagawa’s chakra slips, showing itself for the first time. Sakura catches a faint taste of embarrassment, then he tucks it away behind an innocent smile.

“Kit-kun.” Tsunade repeats flatly.

“In my defence – ”

“Out.”

“That’s fair.” Kitagawa slinks out of the room.

Tsunade pinches the bridge of her nose, “I’ll deal with that later… somehow. So, you looked like you had something to talk about. What’s up?”

Sakura holds up the letter she’d been given that morning, creased and smudged by her nervous grip.

“I got into the Academy.” She says.

Tsunade grins, pride sparking in her aura.

Sakura winces, “Ino-chan didn’t.”

Tsunade frowns, snapping her fingers, “Ino… one of your little friends, right? I take it she wasn’t very happy.”

“No. Can I not go in the Academy, Oba-san?”

Tsunade grimaces, flopping down on the sofa, “Technically, yes, but it would look pretty bad on your record. And the Council would make a big stink about it. They’d leap on a chance to discipline me and you kids are a pretty good way of doing that. You don’t take the test for the Academy lightly. That’s the whole point. It’s supposed to be a sign of commitment, saying you’re prepared to work hard and stay on the path of a shinobi for as long as life takes you. I wouldn’t have given you my permission to go for it if I didn’t think you were ready.”

“I just wanted… I wanted to make Ino-chan happy.” Sakura’s fingers curl around the letter, crumpling it. There’s a dull lead weight in her stomach.

“You do that just by being her friend. You can’t please everyone, kiddo. There’s gonna be times that you do something that upsets someone. That’s a fact of life. The important thing is making sure you own your mistakes and learn from them.”

“Was this a mistake?” Sakura bites her lip. She can almost feel the white-hot agony from when she tore her lip in two, the ghost of pain still lingering.
“Sure.” Tsunade says easily. Sakura flinches. Tsunade huffs, then reaches forward, the sofa creaking beneath her weight, and takes the letter off her. “My mistake and yours. And now you can choose what to do next. Might be another mistake. Might not. That’s the beauty of life. It never takes more than you can handle. There’s always another choice to make.”

“But, Nawa – ” Sakura starts to say thoughtlessly.

Tsunade’s smile tightens, “I could have chosen differently. I could have given up after I lost him. I didn’t, and I lost Dan. But if I could go back, do you think Dan would live if I stopped fighting?”

Sakura shakes her head, not trusting herself to speak.

“There’s no way to tell. The past is beyond us. The future is ours. You taught me that, you know. So, are you going to quit? Give up now and hope it sorts things out for you and Ino? Because if I know that little kid, she wouldn’t want you to lose an opportunity like this. Good friends help friends up, they don’t drag them down.” Tsunade says, holding the letter aloft. “What does Kagami think?”

_Onee-chan?_ Sakura asks, all too aware of the thousands of choices that lay before her. To become Kagami, she will have to do everything the same. It might already be impossible based on the choices she has already made. What does that mean for Kagami?

_Ino, _Kagami gasps, the sound wrenched from her, _Ino would – sh – say – o it –upid Forehead._

_Onee-chan, _Sakura repeats, nearly in tears, _please come back. I can’t do this without you._

_Dummy, _Kagami says, _ther – nothi – you can’t do._

“I think she’s dying.” Sakura sobs out loud, sinking to the floor. She presses her fists into her eyes, knuckling away the tears.

Tsunade crosses the room before Sakura can blink, hauling her up off the floor and onto her hip, a classic move she must have learned from Shizune.

“Tell me what’s been happening.” Tsunade says, holding Sakura close. Sakura breathes in her chemical scent, the hospital clinging to every inch of her.

She tells her everything. Her troubles with Mokuton, Kagami’s broken state, her meltdown at the Uchiha’s, fainting in front of Kitagawa…

Tsunade listens without a word for a long time, absently rocking Sakura back and forth to comfort her while she spills her story with shaky words.

“Okay,” She says finally when Sakura is finished, her voice hoarse from speaking for so long, “We can fix this together, kid. You and me, yeah?”

Sakura blinks up at her in awe. Somehow, to have someone listen to all her troubles and then dismiss them as fixable just fills her with warmth. Things have been piling up on her without pause lately, and it feels good to have room to breathe.

“Can I come in yet?” Kitagawa calls through the door.

_Tsunade personally goes to the Haruno household with Sakura and explains what happened to her parents. They are furious, just as Sakura expected, but not with her._
“How could you go behind our backs like that?” Sakura’s mother demands, glaring at Tsunade.

“I didn’t know that you didn’t know.” Tsunade replies, almost bored.

“You decided a massive choice like this was yours to make?”

“It was Sakura’s choice, I just signed the paperwork.”

“She is four years old. She’s not ready!”

“Shé’s more than ready!” Tsunade snaps, finally losing her cool.

“And that’s the problem,” Sakura’s father says, trembling in anger, “she’s already been through so much. Her childhood has been eaten up by stress and trauma and she deserved one more year. Just one more year, at the very least, to be a normal child.”

“I’m not normal.” Sakura says quietly.

All eyes turn on her.

She strokes Sayaka, her sand fox, gaining courage from the feeling of her rough texture.

“I know what I want to do with my life. I’m going to help people. I don’t need a year to think about it, or to play with my friends. I know I’m not normal like they are. They don’t get scared of shadows. I want to be brave. Even if I can’t see my friends as much as before, and I have to learn scary things, it’s still going to be okay, I think. Because I’m going to be a good shinobi, even if I can’t be a good friend.”

“Sakura…” Her mother says, aghast.

“I can’t pretend to be normal anymore. I’m sorry, I tried. Please don’t be mad.”

Sakura’s father crouches next to her, pulling her head against his chest, “Mad at you? How could that ever happen? You’re our favourite child.”

“I’m your only child.” Sakura grumbles.

“Really? I heard you have two brothers,” Sakura’s mother says, smiling down at her, “and maybe you don’t have a normal family, or a normal life. Maybe you’re not normal yourself. Who cares? There is nothing you could do that ever stop us from loving you, Sakura. And we should have embraced what makes you different sooner. I don’t want you to feel like you have to hide who you are, even if you’re scared or sad. Especially if you’re hurt or lonely. We’re family, and like it or not, you’ll never be rid of us.”

Sakura remembers the dream of her mother lying crumpled in the ruins of their house, her father’s corpse lying before her as if napping into eternity.

“There’s nowhere you could go that we wouldn’t be with you.” Sakura’s father says, wrapping his arms around her.

“So, maybe the Senju side of the family could come around for dinner some time.” Her mother says, sending Tsunade a tentative smile. A white flag.

Tsunade shrugs, playing coy, “Well, that’s probably for the best. My cooking is still in the experimental stage. Naruto loves it, but there’s no accounting for taste.”
“There’s still a month until the new term at the Academy starts,” Sakura’s mother says, “at what point does Sakura have to say whether or not she’ll be attending?”

“She could pull out on the first day of term if she really wanted to. But I wouldn’t recommend that. It’s a last resort at best.”

“That’s plenty of time to decide, right?” Her father asks, tickling under her chin.

Sakura giggles, squirming away.

“It’s going to be okay.” Her mother says firmly.

Even with the shreds of Kagami in her mind, Sakura still believes her mother whenever she says those magic words.

xxxxxxxx

Yamaguchi Takumi opens the door, and Shisui has to fight back the urge to smirk in triumph.

*I knew it,* he thinks, examining the man’s white hair and round face.

“Hello?” Takumi says, confused, “can I help you?”

“Sure. I’m gonna need to come in, though.” Shisui says.

Takumi still looks perplexed, but not suspicious. Not yet, anyway. The older man opens the door a little wider and steps back to accommodate him.

Shisui slips past and leans against a wall, waiting for Takumi to close the door.

“Are we alone?” Shisui asks.

Takumi’s pale red eyes narrow. He places a hand on his front door and waits a few seconds, then nods. He must be very confident that he could stop Shisui, if this was an ambush. Or he truly is as naïve as he seems.

“I need your help with something. More to the point, I need Usagi’s help with something.” Shisui says.

Takumi stops moving, planting his palm against the door. His pale face doesn’t even twitch.

“Usagi who?” He asks, raising a silvery eyebrow.

“Spare me.” Shisui says, fixing a toothy grin on his face. He’d asked one of his old friends to check some files for him at the hospital. He told him he needed to find someone who had white hair. After discarding all of the elderly, the deceased, and the Hatake, he found Yamaguchi Takumi. Young, average. Nothing remarkable about him. A little too bland, all things considered.

The Usagi he met at the hospital seemed fairly similar in appearance to the man at Sakura’s Rinne Festival party, who Shisui glimpsed briefly while dropping off her dogs. The same man who, for some reason, was also with Sakura as she left for Suna. It stood to reason that this man was a shinobi who was currently employed with protecting Sakura. The last person Shisui knew who did that was Usagi, the ANBU who was knocked out by the ROOT agent. Both men had white hair and, based on the little he had seen of the man’s jaw around his mask, a soft, round face.

Takumi bites his lip, glancing back into his house as if looking for help. But he’d already confirmed
that they were alone.

“I know you’re the ANBU who warned me about ROOT. I need your help again.” Shisui asks, almost beseeching. He doesn’t think he can do it all alone.

Takumi sighs, then gestures for him to follow.

Shisui does, walking down a hallway filled with framed pictures of Takumi and the other guy who went to Suna with Sakura, the tall man.

Shisui walks into the living room, and a knife.

He freezes, his stomach muscles clenching against the cold steel. It’s only lightly pressing against his flesh, a warning, not an attack.

Takumi looks at him with real pity, “The easiest way to trap someone is while they think they’re trapping you. I knew you were looking for me. You told Kakashi. Did you think he’d keep that a secret? For some reason, he worries about me.”

“I can’t think why.” Shisui manages to quip, trying to breathe around the knife that’s gently pressing into his abdomen.

Takumi laughs, then jerks his head. Shisui’s eyes follow the movement. His breath catches in his throat.

Yamaguchi Takumi is lying on the floor in the middle of a large seal. His eyes are closed. He looks peaceful.

“Don’t worry. He’s alive,” Not-Takumi says, “I wouldn’t hurt him. His identity is useful, but I have no intentions of replacing him completely. I only pretend to be him when I need to.”

“Izanagi.” Shisui spits.

Izanagi smiles. It looks wrong on Takumi’s harmless face, “It’s one name, I guess. I’d be more impressed if you knew the other. I take it you haven’t figured it out yet.”

“Figured out what?”

“It doesn’t matter. What does matter, is what you want. What help did you need from a second-rate fool like Yamaguchi?”

“Sealing.” Shisui says, seeing no reason to lie with a knife at his gut.

“Hmm… I can help you with that. If you can help me with something else.”

“Who the hell are you?” Shisui snarls, hands curling into fists.

“Who cares? I thought you’d be more concerned with your family.”

“Why – why would I – ”

“You already know about Danzo, because I was kind enough to warn you.”

Usagi in the hospital. Just happening to trust Shisui enough to warn him about ROOT. All the while Shisui was insulting him, rolling his eyes and thinking of how stupid he was.
“That was you?” Shisui says blankly, thinking hard.

“It’s always fun, impersonating fools.” Izanagi says cheerfully.

“Then it was you who let Sakura get attacked in the hospital —”

“I was curious. Danzo moved quicker than I thought he would. He must be desperate for healers. If the nurse’s assistant hadn’t intervened, I would’ve eventually. I have no intention of allowing ROOT to get to her. Not yet, anyway.”

“Not yet?!”

“No. I’m allowing Sakura some freedom, for now. When the time comes, I’m going to give her a choice. She will take my offer. But until then, I’m interested to see what she will do. I warned you about Danzo, because he wants to destroy your clan. You already know that, of course. But, if you do me a small favour, I can help you protect your family.”

“What’s the favour?” Shisui asks, Izanagi’s words rattling around his head. She will take my offer. He wants to destroy your clan.

“I need you to look into Sakura’s mind. She has a strong mental block in place. I could not access her memories. I need you to do it for me. Use your eyes to convince her to open up to you.”

“I would never do that!” Shisui says hotly.

“Well, we both know that’s not true. You play the fool, Shisui, but you’re ruthless. I’ve seen it. You watched as your friend died, didn’t you? Did you do it to get your eyes?”

“No!” Shisui yells.

“Then you had a different reason. I doubt it was nobler. From what I’ve observed in Sakura’s mind, she appears to have two souls. I’ve never encountered anyone like it. It’s the key to her mental defence. All I want you to do is open the door in her mind, and let me in.”

“I could never do that to her.”

“Not even for your family? For Itachi and Sasuke? Wouldn’t Sakura want to help them, if she had a choice? I can help them. All of them. And all you have to do is unlock her mind.”

“So you can use her? I don’t think so.”

“What will you do instead? Go to the Hokage? And say what – you have a feeling Danzo has it out for your family? You can’t honestly believe the Sandaime will do anything. He doesn’t care anymore. He’s an old man long past retirement. So if you can’t go to him, will you go to your clan? Just try it. With the reputation you have earned for yourself lately… weak. Coward. A fool who cannot take anything seriously. I wonder, will they even listen to your warnings?”

Shisui shakes, the blade in serious danger of slicing through him with his violent tremors.

“What are you going to do? A harmless little act that Sakura will not even have to remember? Or will you risk your family on a gamble you have no hope of winning?”

“Tell me what you want with Sakura.” Shisui demands.

“I thought you called her Firefly?”
“Tell me!”

“It’s obvious. She’s talented. I use talent where I find it, and I found it right under your nose. She’s a sweet girl, if a little dim. She wants to save the world. She’s seen its true horrors. It won’t take much to convince her to help me fix it.”

“You’re an Uchiha, aren’t you? Why are you doing this? If you know what Danzo is planning, tell me!”

“What I am is impatient. And I’m tired of waiting for your answer. I can give you the chance to be kind, and ease the information out of her head, or I can do it my way.”

He glances over at the prone Takumi, deathly still.

“I don’t want to do it my way, because I could damage her mind and render her useless. But if I see no other alternative…”

Shisui lunges at Izanagi, allowing the knife to cut into his stomach. His sacrifice gains him nothing. He ends up plastered against the wall, the knife now digging into his spine.

“Tell me, Shisui. If you had to choose between someone you cared about and your village… who would win?”

Shisui seethes, his jaw aching against the wall, “Go to hell!”

“I’ll save you a seat. Tell me.”

The knife bites into his flesh.

Shisui says nothing.

“Tell me.”

“Figure it out yourself.”

“Fine. I’ll ask our little Firefly, shall I?”

“I’d save the person I cared about, okay?! If it’s a choice between them and the village… there’s no competition.”

Izanagi says nothing for a long moment.

Then a snarl in his ear, “Disappointing.”

The knife moves away. Shisui whirls around, flashing a good distance away. He crouches over the real Takumi, noting his chest moving up and down. He’s breathing. Good.

“He’ll sleep until I wake him. Then I will fill the gaps in his memories. He never notices.” Izanagi says blithely, leaning against the wall. He tosses his bloody knife in the air and catches it by the blade.

Shisui feels powerless. He doesn’t even know if he’s met the real Takumi, but that doesn’t stop him from regretting the poor guy’s fate. Being hijacked by a madman every now and then and living on, oblivious…

“I was so sure you would pick the village,” Izanagi muses, head tilting, “I thought you were ruthless
enough for it. But I suppose you aren’t blindly loyal. Admirable. It doesn’t matter. Get into Sakura’s head and unlock the door. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“If you know it, why can’t you unlock it yourself?” Shisui asks, feeling cold all over. Izanagi must have already tried. He’s been close to Sakura. He’s been inside her head. Shisui has never wanted to gut someone more.

“I can suppress one soul very easily, but the other rises as a sort of automatic defence. I wasn’t prepared for it and it forced me out. I lost the element of surprise. She has never quite relaxed around me since, though,” he looks down at his hand, smirking, “that did not stop her from begging to be friends with me.”

Shisui sees red, but Izanagi holds up a warning hand before he can flash over to him.

“Do this one task for me, and I will save your family from themselves.”

“Our family.” Shisui spits. He’s right. He knows he is. Izanagi is some Uchiha ROOT agent who got cold feet, or simply wants to capitalise on the information he is privy to.

Izanagi flicks a disdainful glance at him, pale red eyes cutting into his, “Think what you like, little boy. Just get me into her head.”

Shisui clenches his fists, “I… I can’t. I won’t.”

Izanagi’s eyebrows raise a fraction, “You said you would choose someone you cared about over the village. What about over your clan? Because that’s what you’re doing. You are trying to spare the feelings of a child, rather than the lives of your family. Do you understand how foolish that is?”

It’s more than her feelings. Sakura’s mind contains secrets even she doesn’t know. She has access to the future on tap, and he is not going to help Izanagi obtain it.

His mind is made up. He grits his teeth and glares at the older man, “Foolish would be bowing to your will just because you say so. Revive Takumi and leave. Get out of Konoha.”

“Oh what?” Izanagi says slowly. Shisui gets the feeling he is curious.

Shisui allows his eyes to swell with power, flashing on Izanagi’s stolen form, but –

He’s gone.

Shisui gapes.

He looks around wildly, but he’s alone. Except for the unconscious Takumi.

Shisui stares down at him, conflicted. He wants to help, but what can he do? He can’t take Takumi out of the seal without knowing what it’s for – it might be keeping him alive.

Izanagi’s voice emerges from behind him, “Leave him, and I won’t hurt your family. Or the little petal. Interfere, and I will tear everything you hold dear from this world.”

“I’ll kill you one day.” Shisui says flatly.

“You couldn’t even kill that boy,” Izanagi laughs, “you could stand back and watch your friend die, but you couldn’t kill an enemy soldier. What was the difference? What must someone do to earn your mercy?”
“You’ll never know,” Shisui says coldly, “I don’t care how or when, I’m going to be the reason you stop breathing.”

“What would Firefly say?” Izanagi says mockingly.

Silence.

Shisui hangs his head.

Izanagi gives an amused little huff, “She promised to take care of me. And you promised to kill me. We’ll see which of you keeps your word.”

Shisui leaves Takumi’s house without looking back, knowing he would see a man lying down in the middle of a seal, with his imposter standing over him, wearing his face like a mask.

***

Hello friends!

Poor Takumi. To clarify his situation, occasionally Izanagi wants to walk through the village without a mask. So, he knocks Takumi out in his house and pretends to be him. Then, he returns to Takumi and fills the gaps in his memory, so Takumi believes he experienced what Izanagi experienced (so Ryuu won’t ever say something like, ‘remember when we pissed off that roof that one time’ and then Takumi’s like whaaaaa?)

For example, Usagi in the hospital was Izanagi. Usagi in Suna was Takumi. Enjoy the paranoia about which is which from now on :D

The bunny boy is NOT evil ~~

Shisui has literally been looking for Usagi’s civilian identity since chapter nineteen. That boy better give back his shinobi card.

Kitagawa is a shameless thief. Did you check your pockets after reading this chapter? He’d steal your heart if he could.

We’ve got ourselves an Itachi playlist! https://open.spotify.com/user/t96t4kj8pz9n1xbl03wiloq2/playlist/34CY1AcVipVdoDn7sUJILn

SO I wanted TFLA to split into the next phase of the story by the next chapter but by the look of my plan document (which is over 5000 words long)... that’s not gonna happen, by jove. So we’ll have to wait a little bit longer on that one.

Tenzo and Sakura made a flower crown!

Tsunade’s doing it! She’s parenting! I’m so proud.

~

Kitagawa shakes Kai’s hand, then somehow steals his clothes.

Kai chases Kitagawa around the village until dawn, buck-naked.

~

Quick poll for fun: What’s your best and worst quality?
I’m a perfectionist, but I also procrastinate like crazy. This means I can never finish anything because I’ll never work on it, thinking it’ll never meet my impossible standards.

(Dogwatch update: Two dogs chase a small Yellow Boy. He is fast. Much tail wagging. The dogs are tired. The boy is not. He keeps pulling on their ears. Someone help the dogs)
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

My official Time Flies Like An Arrow playlist!
https://open.spotify.com/user/t964t4kj8pz9nlxb103wiloq2/playlist/60NW8LHVDuKgFOEm0BSf

Shisui stands in the middle of his living room and waits for a sign.

He still lives in the house he grew up in. He’s been alone since his parents died. He spends as much
time at Itachi’s as possible, but it’s never enough. Every moment he spends here weighs heavily on
him. He wasn’t built for solitude.

Sakura has two souls. That must be the basis for her kekkei genkai. For whatever reason, Izanagi
wanted – no, needed – access to Sakura’s mind. He must know about her knowledge of the future.
It’s not as if she, as a normal four-year-old, would have any information worth knowing. He knew
about the nickname and their meeting place, which meant he had to have been listening on that
fateful day when Sakura told Shisui the truth.

But clearly, she didn’t tell him everything. She had met Izanagi. Begged to be his friend. Told him
she’d take care of him. Shisui wanted to believe Izanagi was lying, but it was too true to what he
knew of Sakura. Consistently kind, to her own detriment.

Danzo was planning something that would hurt the Uchiha. But what? The tensions between the
clan and the village have been steadily increasing ever since the Kyuubi attack, but relations could
still be salvaged. Shisui has to believe that. But what if Danzo does something to turn the village
against the clan? The Uchiha would leave eventually, unable to stand insults to their name. They
would lose their citizenship in Konoha. They would be vulnerable to other villages, unless they
joined one and faced the same risk as before, that they would be ousted or mistreated.

Just because of a name.

Shisui sits down on his dusty sofa, head in his hands.

Would it be cowardly of him to risk Sakura on the off-chance of saving his clan? Or was he a
coward for even considering not doing it?

He’s been playing the fool for so long. The clan wouldn’t listen to his warnings. Neither would the
Hokage – he didn’t listen to Sakura’s family when they asked to adopt Naruto. If he didn’t bend for a
small matter like that, why would he deign to help Shisui, the outcast of a shamed clan?

Tears prickle at his eyes. He knuckles them away, exhaling a short burst of frustration. If only he had
time.

Shisui lets out a guttural noise and scrubs at his face.

There’s a knock at his front door.

He sits bolt upright.
“Shisui?” Itachi calls through the door. “Are you there?”

Shisui sighs, getting up. He can already feel his happy-go-lucky face falling into place.

“Yo,” He says after opening the door, “something wrong, little cousin?”

Itachi regards him with suspicion.

Shisui, aware of his red eyes and tousled hair, just gives Itachi an unconvincing grimace of a smile.

“Sakura came to my house with blood on her face today,” Itachi says, apropos of nothing. Shisui’s heart clenches. “She was devastated. Apparently, not only has one of her friends stopped talking to her for no reason, another one of her friends is upset she is going to the Academy without her.”

“She’s going to the Academy?” Shisui frowns. They’d never talked about that – well. Of course they hadn’t. He was too busy being an idiot.

“A year early,” Itachi says with pride, “but she is going to wait a year after graduating to make sure she is on a team with Sasuke. But never mind that – didn’t you hear me? She had blood on her face.” Shisui had heard, but he was too occupied trying not to hear.

“Did she say why?”

“She ‘fell,’” Itachi says with a faint, unconvinced sneer, “she bit through her lip and still tried to convince us it was just a normal accident.”

Shisui closes his eyes. He’d told her once to bite her tongue if she was dreaming.

“Why are you here.” Shisui says flatly, leaning against the doorframe. He’s exhausted.

Anger flashes over Itachi’s face, “Why do you think? She needs you.”

“We’ve talked about this.”

“No, you talked a load of nonsense and ignored everything I had to say. You aren’t doing anyone any good like this.”

Shisui looks down at his solemn-faced cousin, his favourite person in the whole world, and has to clench his jaw to stop the well of emotion from overflowing to his mouth. It surges forth anyway, pushing him to spill the truth he has swallowed down.

“I’ve never done anyone any good.” Shisui grins. Itachi makes a noise of protest, but Shisui lifts his hand. “I let my best friend die because I was jealous of him.”

Itachi, stilted genius Itachi, reaches out to take Shisui’s hand. He pulls it away. He doesn’t deserve Itachi’s rare displays of affection, especially not when he knows who helped Itachi show them.

Shisui remembers a blood-splattered hospital bed, the form within covered by a white sheet. The swarms of medics in the tent were bustling around other beds, ignoring the one Shisui was standing next to. Shisui remembers almost holding the pale hand that dangled over the side of the bed, but nausea had overcome him and instead he ran outside to throw up.

“All I had to do was reach out.” Shisui says dully. He bites his lip, hard. His mouth fills with copper. “I just watched. It was so quick. One minute I had a friend, the next he was ripped away from me. And it was my fault. My choice. Just a split-second decision that I will regret for the rest of my life.
And then the fighting was over and I could finally come home, and I met you.”

He leans forward, resting his hands on Itachi’s shaking shoulders, “My baby cousin. Wide-eyed and innocent, but so clearly talented… I knew you’d end up just like me if I wasn’t careful. I didn’t want to see that. I wanted you to always be happy.”

*You should always be smiling. But only when you really want to.*

“Hey, Itachi… If the choice is to do something or do nothing… which is better?”

Itachi watches him carefully, confusion in his dark eyes, “It depends. But I suppose you regret the things you *don’t* do more.”

Shisui laughs, just a little.

Would he regret not hurting Sakura?

If it meant losing his family…

He doesn’t have time for regret.

xxxxxxx

When Shizune heard about Sakura’s little spat with Ino, she immediately set about fixing it. Sakura watched in awe as the older woman prodded Tsunade into arranging a playdate, her chakra refreshingly no-nonsense and unruffled.

Ino has officially been invited to the Senju-Haruno party, and Sakura has never felt more nervous in her life.

“Fidget a bit more,” Kitagawa advises, “that’s sure to help. Maybe you could roll in the mud, really mess up that dress.”

Sakura ignores him. She’s not annoyed that Momo has chosen to sleep in Kitagawa’s arms instead of hers. It’s totally fine.

Sakura is sitting in the living room, more nervous than she’d thought she’d be. The last time she spoke with Ino, it had gone horribly, and Kagami had seemed to suffer for it. If it went badly again, who could say what would happen to her big sister this time?

Kitagawa is sitting on one of the shelves, contorted to fit in the small space. He seems unbothered by the uncomfortable position. Momo is contentedly draped around Kitagawa’s neck like a scarf, snuffling the silver rings in his ear.

“If she makes you cry, I’ll pull her hair.” He says cheerfully.

Sakura ignores him. He wouldn’t *dare*. She doesn’t know what Tsunade did to punish him for talking back to her, but she does know that he came out of the encounter with horror surging through his aura.

“Kit-kun,” Sakura speaks up, gently brushing Misa’s fur, “do you have any friends?”

Kitagawa looks surprised, then contemplative, “Hmm… you do cut straight to the heart, Sakura-hime. I guess my answer is… I don’t believe in friends.”

“That’s silly.” Sakura says. Misa is curled up in her lap, blissed out.
“Not for me.” Kitagawa says simply.

“I’ll be your – ” Sakura begins without thinking.

Kitagawa holds up a hand, his face unexpectedly grim, “You’re too free with your friendship, kiddo. It’s what stretches you so thin that you can’t maintain the bonds you already have. Your little friend, Ino, she was upset because she felt neglected. It’ll be hard for you to keep up with all your friends, considering how many you have. Maybe focus on them for now, and add to them later, yeah?”

Sakura stops brushing Misa, ignoring the little whine she makes in protest.

Sakura points her brush very firmly at Kitagawa, who holds his hands up in defence, “You’re going to be my friend. Even if you do bad things and you don’t feel sorry about it, you still deserve someone to care about you.”

Kitagawa gives her a lopsided smirk, “Kiddo, I deserve a lot worse than that. Not everyone is worth your concern, Hime-sama.”

“That doesn’t mean I won’t give it.” Sakura responds, brushing behind Misa’s ears.

Kitagawa unfolds himself from the shelf, slipping to the floor without making a sound, “That’s what worries me.” He says cryptically, slouching against the wall. He’s wearing his big cloak, a dark, faded blue material with dozens of tiny nicks and tears, as if it had been the victim of a kunai volley. He reaches up to scratch Momo’s head absently.

“You said you had a poor mother,” Sakura begins hesitantly, unsure of the mood, “was that true?”

“At some point, yes,” Kitagawa agrees, “I had a mother, like most, and she was all the poorer for the experience.”

Sakura scrunches her face up. What does that mean? Why couldn’t he just speak plainly?

Kitagawa just gives her a wink, ignoring her obvious confusion.

Sakura sits back on the sofa, smoothing her dress down. It’s white with purple and green flowers, and it has poufy sleeves and a full skirt, just they way she likes it. Tsunade bought it for her without a moment’s consideration, ignoring the eyewatering price. Sakura’s parents hadn’t been pleased. They’d raised her to appreciate the occasional treat, and she knew they were worried the Senju would spoil her.

She likes the dress very much, but it won’t ruin her. She’s going to the Academy in less than a month. Though her parents have talked about ways of getting her out of it, she doesn’t believe it’s possible. So she has to be grown-up and ready to learn all the important things she needs to know. At least Shikamaru got in as well, and he was going to wait a year after graduating, just like she was. Both Chouji and Ino failed. Sakura hopes they can find solace in each other’s company, but she doubts it. Ino enjoys needling Chouji about his weight, and Chouji seems to try to tune her out, for the most part.

She eyes Kitagawa, who is distractedly petting Momo while standing on one leg, staring into the middle distance. Momo growled at Izanagi, but not Kitagawa. Could that mean something? Sakura’s known the older man for weeks now and has yet to learn anything of significance about him. She can observe the differences between him and the other bodyguards, though. Kai is fiercely protective of Naruto. Since meeting him, Naruto hasn’t had a single encounter with a mean civilian. Airi avoids Tenzo in public, keeping a discreet but watchful eye on him, but treats him like a friend behind closed doors. Sakura has spotted them in the garden together on more than one occasion, Tenzo
quietly talking, Airi listening in silence and nodding every now and then.

Kitagawa isn’t quite as in-your-face as Kai, but he isn’t as subtle as Airi, either. He won’t let Sakura out of his sight. He doesn’t even seem to completely trust Tsunade or Shizune, judging by his reluctance to leave Sakura with them. He checks the bathroom before allowing Sakura inside, he tests her food, and he avoids the other bodyguards like the plague, leading Sakura elsewhere if he spots one of them while they are out and about.

He sits on the roof outside her window while she sleeps, always ready and waiting for danger to fall upon them.

She’s not sure when he actually sleeps.

He had made a comment about her dreaming in public, almost-but-not-quite threatening to tell Tsunade if she reported his thefts. That wasn’t something a nice man would do. He didn’t know that Tsunade already knew about Sakura’s fainting fits. Sakura should have told Tsunade what he’d done.

“Why do you steal, Kit-kun?” Sakura asks.

“Why do you breathe, Sakura-hime?” He replies, his smile not fading at all, despite the tremble in his chakra.

“Because…” I have to, Sakura thinks, sadness dawning on her at once.

Kitagawa lets out a strained chuckle, “Ahh, kiddo… you’ve got to learn to stop showing your emotions so obviously. Anyone ever taught you how to lie?” He carefully puts Momo down on the floor.

Sakura reaches for Kagami, but she can’t hear her.

“No…” Sakura says slowly.

“Well, that’s a crying shame. I can help you with that. Specially since you’ve got more secrets than T&I, as far as I can tell.”

Sakura covers her mouth automatically.

“That’s the first thing we’ll work on.” Kitagawa comments.

The door clicks open and Sakura sits bolt upright, eyes wide.

Shizune enters the room, Naruto attached to her hip like a limpet, and Kai hulking behind.

“Right, Sakura-chan,” Shizune says in her business-voice, “the party starts in twenty minutes. The Uchiha will probably be here in five. Tenzo-kun is decorating the house with roses, and Tsunade is arranging the garden furniture. I need you to stay clean and keep your dress nice and neat in the meantime, okay? No playing outside for now. Where’s – ”

She turns smartly, looking for Kitagawa, and comes face to face with him.

He’s standing on the ceiling, his head hanging down at Shizune’s height. She inhales sharply, then sighs. Naruto laughs, trying to grab Kitagawa’s shiny earrings as they dangle above him.

“Present and accounted for, Shizune-san.” Kitagawa says, offering her a jaunty, upside-down salute.
Kai glares at him suspiciously, edging closer to Naruto.

Shizune rubs her temples, “You are a mistake.” She says caustically, uncharacteristically sharp in stress, “and you will behave yourself in front of our guests, or Kai-san will have free reign to deal with you as he pleases. Do I make myself clear?”

Kitagawa smiles prettily down at her, “Hard to miss your meaning at such close quarters.”

“My aim is excellent in all areas.” Shizune says sourly, fingers twitching as if reaching for a weapon.

“Really? Kaa-san, can you teach me how to throw things?” Naruto asks, beaming up at his mother.

“Of course, Naruto,” Shizune says gently, tone changing at once, “We’ll start with blunted implements and work our way up to senbon, okay? They are very difficult to use. It takes the most precise and careful aim to hit your target with such a tiny, slim weapon. With a lot of hard work, there’ll be nothing you can’t hit.”

Naruto’s face had turned mulish at the words ‘precise’ and ‘careful,’ but the reference to hard work had grinning again, “I can do it, Kaa-san!” He shouts, clutching Shizune’s dress in his excitement.

“Indoor voice, little one.” Shizune smiles down at him, rocking him a little in her arms, “and of course you can do it. There’s nothing you can’t do.”

Naruto’s aura explodes with joy, fireworks in his soul.

Sakura watches in silence, aware of Kitagawa appearing at the arm of her sofa, laying a heavy-ringed finger on his lips as she meets his eyes.

Shizune and Naruto share a moment, foreheads pressed together. Kai steps back a little, giving them some space.

Kitagawa’s head tilts as he watches the maternal display. His face is carefully blank, but his chakra leaks out a little wistfulness and sorrow. Sakura picks Misa up and gently touches her wet nose to Kitagawa’s cheek, watching him jolt ever so slightly.

He casts her a wry glance, patting Misa’s head.

His cloak slips for a second. Sakura spots a faint mark on his collarbone, the tiny outline of a circle. She blinks and it’s gone, the cloak hauled back into place. She looks up, startled, and meets his eye again. He winks, but there’s something weary in his chakra that weighs the gesture with unintended meaning. He taps his finger against his lips once more.

Sakura frowns, tracing a circle on her knee. Did it mean anything?

Shizune hauls Naruto up, turning around to face Sakura again. She narrows her eyes at Kitagawa, obviously having missed him moving across the room.

“When Ino-chan gets here, we’re going to give you some time in the garden to chat,” Shizune says, sympathy swirling in her chakra, “you come back in on your own time, okay? We won’t interrupt. If anything happens – ”

“It won’t,” Kitagawa says casually, sitting on the arm of the sofa, “I’m gonna be there.”

“I was referring to things outside of your jurisdiction,” Shisui replies, nostrils flaring, “I still don’t believe it’s necessary for you to be with Sakura during a private moment.”
“It’s two four-year-olds having a chat, not a proposal of marriage. I’ll be discreet, though I don’t see why I have to be.”

“Kit-kun,” Sakura says beseechingly, “can’t I just have five minutes with Ino-chan?”

“Nah,” He replies, unaffected, “save the puppy dog eyes for someone who’s not rendered themselves immune. Bodyguarding isn’t something you do ninety percent of the time, shaving ten percent off for private things.”

“How do you know? You said I was your first client!”

“I implied that. I mean it’s true, but it’s important to note that I never verbally confirmed that fact until now. We need to work on your grasp of subtlety, Hime-sama.”

Sakura glares, “You know, Kit-kun, Shizune thinks you’re a rapscallion.”

Shizune is a shinobi, and so she doesn’t blush in response to the incredulous delight on Kitagawa’s face, but her chakra tells another story.

“Sa-Sakura-chan!” Shizune protests.

“Me?” Kitagawa says, thrilled.

“I… I – never mind! The Uchiha will be here any minute and Tsunade-sama wanted to be the first to greet them, so I have to go fetch her. Please stay nice and neat, okay?” Shizune says, flustered.

“Okay.” Sakura and Kitagawa chorus as one.

Shizune gives Kitagawa a flat, unimpressed look, then marches out the door. Kai, as if magnetised, swivels and follows after his charge, ignoring the little wave Kitagawa gives him.

There’s a polite rap at the front door.

Sakura feels Shizune’s spike of panic.

Kitagawa fiddles with his cloak, the little circle appearing once more.

xxxxxxx

When Shizune appears in the living room, concern and relief warring in her aura, Sakura’s knows something’s up.

“Ino-chan’s here.” Shizune announces. Her smile gives Sakura a dose of comfort, which strangely only increases when Kitagawa sweeps his cloak around her, bending down to look her in the eye.

“You don’t have to talk to her, kiddo.” Kit says quietly, his eyes dark and filled with an uncharacteristic solemnity.

“Of course I do. She came all the way here.” Sakura says, hoping he can’t hear the tremor in her voice.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to. I can hide you in the garden until she goes away, or disguise you as my little rapscallion friend, or – ”

“I’ll be okay.” Sakura says gently, unsure of who she is reassuring.
Kit’s mouth twists, then he stands, his cloak unfurling from Sakura’s face. She gives in to her instincts for a second and bats at his cloak, enjoying how it swings back around her.

“Sakura-chan?” Ino says, and Sakura freezes.

It seems Kit reacts to any kind of threat to Sakura, because he gives Ino his nastiest smirk, the one he usually saves for rude cashiers and Tsunade’s back.

“Hello, Ino-chan.” Sakura says, her voice mouse-meek. She coughs, then tries again, “Do you want to see my garden?”

Ino’s face is sullen, her eyes red. Her mouth screws up for a moment, but she sighs, and nods, moving away from the door to let Sakura through.

Kitagawa scoops Sakura up, carrying her with one arm. She squeaks in surprise, wrapping her hand in his cloak.

Ino’s pale eyes narrow up at the thief.

He offers her a gallant smile, the kind Ino would normally coo over. In this case, Ino frowns deeply, bearing a startling resemblance to Fugaku.

Kit leads Ino to the garden, waving off Shizune when she approaches, chakra bright with concern.

Ino takes a moment to examine the flowers, her brow furrowing in confusion at Naruto’s mess of orange blooms. She manages a slight smile for the rosebushes, though her chakra registers a little bewilderment when she spots the odd-coloured roses Tenzo added for fun.

Despite his earlier comments, Kitagawa wastes no time leaving them alone, lowering Sakura onto the bench and quietly disappearing in a blur of indigo.

She can still feel him on the roof, but she appreciates the illusion of privacy.

Ino sits on the other end of the bench. She might as well be miles away, Sakura thinks unhappily. It feels as though they are separated by more than physical distance. As mature as Ino is, she’s still a four-year-old. Sakura’s not been four for a while now, not since Kagami came into her life.

“I’m sorry – ” Sakura bursts out, squeezing her eyes shut.

“I’m sorry!” Ino says at the same time.

“I’m sorry!” Ino says at the same time.

“I was upset and mean and I shouldn’t have shut the door in your face.” Ino says miserably.

“No, you should have!” Sakura wails, “I forgot your birthday!”

“It was ages ago,” Ino protests, big fat tears starting to roll down her cheeks, “I was just trying to make you feel bad! It’s just… you have so many friends now, Sakura-chan, and that’s great, and you’re really brave and cool now, and that’s amazing, but I was your friend first, back when you were shy and you needed me for everything and now… and now…”

“I still need you, Ino-chan!” Sakura insists, also tearing up.

“No, you don’t,” Ino sniffs, looking down at her feet, “you’ve got brothers and the rest of the Monsters and all the Uchiha and dogs and I… I’ve just got you.”
“You’ve got the Monsters –”

“They’re your friends,” Ino corrects, “Shikamaru and Chouji have to hang out with me, but they don’t really like me. It’s just ‘cause of our dads. And Naru-baka’s your brother, and Sasuke doesn’t even look at me and… it was my stupid idea to apply for the Academy and then I was too stupid to get in!”

Ino bursts into loud sobs, her little shoulders shuddering. Sakura forgets her nerves and her own tears and moves to Ino’s side of the bench at once, pulling her into a hug.

Ino stiffens in surprise, then lets out a watery laugh, “You see? You would never have hugged me before. You were too shy. Look at how much you’ve changed for the better, without me…”

Sakura puffs out her cheeks, squeezing Ino until she lets out a squeak of protest.

“The only reason I was brave enough to talk to Naruto in the first place is because of you, Ino-chan! Because you were there, because you make me feel brave!” Sakura says fiercely, closing her eyes and burying herself in their embrace.

Ino makes a soft noise of surprise, “Sakura-chan –”

“No, it’s true! You were my very first friend, Ino-chan! That’s never going to change! I like you so much!”

“Sakura-chan!” Ino insists.

Sakura opens her eyes.

Oh.

Roses cover them, entwining around their bodies. They are pale pink and perfect, without thorns, winding around their arms, middles and legs, tying them to each other.

Sakura draws back carefully, stems breaking free with the movement, a few of the roses drifting to the ground.

“How did…” Ino says, giggling in amazement. Her face is glowing.

This is it. This is what she can give Ino.

“It’s a secret, okay?” Sakura says, gazing into Ino’s sparkling eyes, “hardly anyone knows. I trust you, though.”

“You can make flowers?” Ino asks, dazed.

Sakura closes her eyes and tries as hard as she can, picturing her connection to nature, just like Tenzo said. When she opens her eyes, nothing has changed.

She lets go of Ino, but the other girl quickly catches her hands, beaming at her.

Sakura can’t help but smile back, and then, just like that, the roses bloom all around them.

xxxxxxxx

Sakura spends the rest of the party holding Ino’s hand. They’re wearing matching flower crowns, which Tsunade eyes with amusement.
The Uchiha barely react to seeing Kitagawa again. He says nothing to them, ignoring Fugaku’s irritated look. Kit’s been unusually silent all evening. Touching his aura does nothing, Sakura still can’t feel what’s left him so pensive.

Then he escorts her upstairs to the bathroom, waits outside, and immediately hits her with a question when she leaves the room.

“How else knows about your Mokuton?” He asks, grimness pulling his features taut. It’s only then that Sakura realises how young he actually is. His smooth skin barely forms lines even when he frowns, probably because he hardly ever does it.

Sakura closes the bathroom door.

He saw. He saw her making flowers for Ino.

*And – *ith Tenzo – *in the tree – sn’t he?* Kagami says.

“You, Obaa-san, Ino and maybe Shizune-san. I’m not sure. That’s it.” Sakura says carefully.

Kitagawa shakes his head, earrings chiming with the movement, “Hmm, that’s a hard no. There’s someone else. I haven’t taught you to lie just yet, have I?”

Sakura clamps her mouth shut.

“The silent treatment is effective in some areas. But not now. Not to me, and certainly not in an interrogation room.” Kitagawa says.

“Why would they –”

“Why *wouldn’t* they? Don’t you get it? They don’t need a reason, they just need power. And this is exactly why your ma hired me in the first place, not that she admitted it, for obvious reasons. Because you’ve *got* power. And they’re gonna want it. As soon as they know about you, they’ll try to use you. Which is why you have to be more careful. And why I’m gonna teach you how to be just as… *careful* as me.” Kitagawa says, his characteristic smirk returning to him.

“I’m not going to steal things.” Sakura says firmly.

“That’s fair. But you *are* going to lie. And better yet, you’ll do it well. You’re going to learn to lie like you breathe, kiddo. Just like me.” Kitagawa says, spreading his arms out in invitation.

“What’s that circle?” Sakura asks, pointing at his exposed collarbone. She wanted to catch him off-guard.

Instead, he snickers, “Oh this? It’s the mark the demons left on me when I was born. Or maybe it’s the tattoo I got when my true love broke my heart. No, wait! It’s a super special seal that grants me invisibility.”

Sakura regards him with a disappointed look, crossing her arms.

“One day, you’ll learn to lie just like that.” Kitagawa says.

To her shame, Sakura feels a thrill of excitement.

xxxxxxxxx

The Monsters have claimed an entire section of the park to themselves.
Shikamaru and Chouji are lying in the grass, talking in quiet voices and passing each other chips every so often. Ino is happily lacing stems into a bracelet, giving Sakura conspiratorial looks every time she makes a new one.

Sasuke and Itachi are sitting together. Sasuke is showing Itachi his drawing of the park, basking in his big brother’s praise.

Naruto is running around with Kai, laughing his head off. He’s wearing a flower crown Sakura made, his hair gold against the deep blue petals.

Sasuke follows Sakura’s gaze and frowns, “Boys shouldn’t like girl things like flowers.”

Naruto stops in his tracks, hackles raising at once, “Hey! I can like whatever I want! Stupid Sasuke-teme!”

Kai jogs over to his charge, his scary face creased in concern, “Everything okay, boss?”

Naruto’s chest swells with pride. He loves that nickname. “No! Sasuke-teme says I shouldn’t like girl things like flowers, but I do and so there!”

Itachi is staring into the distance, looking very uncomfortable.

Sasuke’s little face reddens in anger, “It’s dumb and so are you!”

Kai halts Naruto’s charge with one massive hand on his shoulder, whispering something in his ear. Naruto deflates at once, calm seeping through him.

“You don’t like flowers, Sasuke?” Sakura asks, drooping in disappointment.

He looks panicked at her tone, “Uh, I didn’t…”

Sakura pulls another flower crown out of her bag. It’s a bunch of violets tightly laced together with baby’s breath.

“I made one for you, too,” Sakura says mournfully, “but if you don’t want it…”

Sasuke stares at her. One hand shoots out, “I want it.”

Sakura very happily places the crown atop his spiky hair, carefully arranging the flowers to sit nicely on his head.

Itachi smiles down at him.

“I got you one too, Itachi,” Sakura says earnestly, watching his eyes widen in alarm, “It’s red like your eyes go when you’re mad.”

Itachi manages a smile, holding out his hand. Sasuke smirks at him, tossing his head proudly. His flower crown only just stays on.

Sakura lowers the red rose garland onto Itachi’s head, mindful of his silky hair getting caught in the stems.

“Thank you very much, Sakura.” Itachi says warmly.

Just as Sakura is smiling in response, she catches sight of a small, dark figure standing behind a nearby tree.
Hinata is watching them with wide eyes, longing singing through her skin. Sakura stands up straight, reaching out to wave her over, but Hinata looks startled and simply bolts.

Sakura sighs heavily, aggrieved. She’s determined to make that girl a Monster if it’s the last thing she does.

Kitagawa’s hand drops on her head, “I can catch her for you, if you like.” He offers carelessly.

“No, thank you.” Sakura says, rolling her eyes.

“That’s a one-time offer, you know. Never again shall I offer to retrieve fleeing children for you.” Kitagawa says, with a mournful sigh.

“Whatever will she do.” Itachi says flatly, making Sakura jump. She’d forgotten the Uchiha brothers were sitting in front of her.

Kitagawa sends a painfully obvious fake laugh in Itachi’s general direction. The younger boy’s lips tighten in annoyance.

“Kit-kun, could you please stand somewhere else for a moment?” Sakura asks courteously.

Kit makes a face, then raises his eyebrows at Kai. The other man nods, though he doesn’t look happy.

Kitagawa vanishes.

Sakura doesn’t look at the tree she knows he’s perched in like an overgrown crow.

She takes a piece of paper out of her bag and hands it to Itachi, “Could you please give this letter to Shisui-kun?” She asks, biting her lip.

Itachi’s aura sinks. He gives her a kind smile and folds the letter up carefully, as though it was a priceless artefact.

“He’s on a mission at the moment, so I’m not sure when he’ll get it.” He says quietly, sympathy saturating his aura.

“Is that why he wasn’t at the party?” Sakura asks, covering her mouth when her bottom lip start to quiver.

Itachi nods, but guilt splits his chakra and she knows.

She looks up.

Kitagawa is draped across a branch, lazily batting at Naruto, who Kai is holding up obligingly. Sakura smiles to herself. Shisui is running away from her, and that hurts so badly it feels like her ribs have splintered and every breath hurts, but… she still has the Monsters.

Sakura darts forward and drags both Uchiha into a big hug.

Itachi becomes immoveable, shock turning him to stone, but Sasuke flails, embarrassed.

“It’s okay.” Sakura says, willing it to be so.

The letter she gave Itachi is mostly normal, just asking if Shisui is okay and if he’s enjoying the weather. It’s the last line that matters. She wrote it in her special code, since he once said he could
It says: *I’ll always be your friend, even if you’re not mine.*

“If I’d known there’d be hugs, I wouldn’t have come.” Kakashi says sourly.

Sakura gasps, leaping up.

Kakashi is here!

She barrels into him, but is smoothly intercepted by Kitagawa, who slings her onto his back and gives Kakashi a once-over.

“Hey,” Kit says, sounding a little cautious, “who’re you?”

Kakashi tucks his little book away.

“Oh no, Sakura thinks, clinging to Kitagawa’s neck.

“Hatake Kakashi,” He drawls in response, “and you?”

“Kitagawa. Sakura’s bodyguard. Here to vet her friends and keep away… undesirables.” Kit says.

“Great!” Kakashi says cheerfully, “I’ll help.”

“Umm…. Nah. Anyone who wears a mask while off-duty goes into the no-no category, thanks. Especially ones who read those kinds of books.” Kitagawa smiles angelically.

Kakashi is getting very annoyed indeed.

“Yeah, I’ve heard about you. Something tells me you’re not exactly the perfect role model yourself.” He says, nonchalantly slumping a little further into Kitagawa’s personal space.

“Kakashi’s my friend!” Sakura tells Kit, trying to get his attention by lightly tugging on his earrings.

“Tsunade-sama told me to keep creeps away from you. This guy’s wearing a scary mask. Who knows what he could be hiding under there? Clearly not a man you can trust.”

Kakashi is unimpressed. “Compared to a man who fights for whoever has the most coin, I guess?”

“Ah, ah, ah! I take all my payments in food. Money is meaningless to me. Now if it were a chef giving me orders, then how could I say no?”

“Oh. My mistake. You’re clearly the pinnacle of trustworthy, given any baker could gain your loyalty with a single lemon tart.” Kakashi says, his voice heavy with irony.


Kakashi looks around, searching for an ally.

Itachi shrugs.

Kai grips Naruto a little tighter when Kakashi’s single eye falls on him.

Kakashi looks up at the sky, “And this is where I give up. I’ll see you later, Sakura. You owe Pakkun a head-scratch.”
“Okay, Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura chirps.

Kitagawa chokes, “Sensei?”

xxxxxxx

Shisui answers Sakura’s letter much quicker than she thought.

He shows up on her windowsill late at night, a sheepish smile on his face, “Hey, Firefly.”

Sakura rubs the sleep out of her eyes and beams, hopping out of bed at once, “Shisui-kun! Did the letter work? Are you my friend again?�

“Wh – I never stopped being your friend,” Shisui stammers, reaching out for her, “I just – I needed some time.”

Sakura tries not to let all of her feelings burst out. Why did he need time? Why did he ignore her? Didn’t he realise how much it’d hurt her to be ignored by him?

His eyes are darting around her room. Why does he look so nervous?

“I have to tell you something important, okay? Can we go to our super-secret hideout?” He asks, a flicker of a smile crossing his face.

Sakura giggles, trying to keep quiet. She doesn’t want to wake anyone up.

Her puppies are asleep, curled up on her bed.

“Okay. But you know, I have a bodyguard now. His name is Kitagawa, and he really doesn’t like it when I’m not near him.”

“Well, he can’t exactly come.” Shisui points out. He did say the Uchiha shrine was just for the clan and honoured guests, after all. Sakura can’t imagine Kitagawa ever being honourably invited anywhere.

“He’ll be terrible if he finds out.” Sakura grumbles.

Shisui leans against the window frame, holding a hand out. His smile is sweet, with a mischievous edge, “He won’t find out. C’mon. Let’s go on an adventure.”

Sakura takes his hand. He picks her up, waiting a moment to cross his eyes at her to make her laugh.

Then they jump out her window and into the night sky, stars blurring across Sakura’s eyes.

Shisui lands on a rooftop noiselessly, keeping Sakura safe and steady in his arms.

She takes the time to press a little kiss against his temple, “Thank you, Shisui-kun. I’ve really missed you.”

Shisui holds still, then a sliver of his chakra reveals itself to her, like sunlight pouring through a gap in the curtains.

Sakura stops breathing.

Shisui’s chakra always feels like the crackle of lightning, ozone lingering after a strike.
This chakra feels like midnight blue and broken glass.

_Izanagi._

Sakura takes a deep breath, flattening her nightgown with suddenly-damp palms.

_The trick to lying is to sprinkle it with truth_, Kitagawa had said, _maybe you’re not even lying, per se. You’re just... embellishing the truth. So be calm, be casual. It’s no big deal. Just like breathing. You can do it without thinking._

_Just like breathing_, Sakura thinks, clenching her fists.

Then, she smiles just as she would for Shisui if he’d really come back for her.

She loops her arms around his neck and gently hugs him, pouring every ounce of affection she has inside her into the embrace, knowing he needs it more than most, but will never accept it for himself. Since he’s pretending to be Shisui, he doesn’t have a choice but to silently bear it.

Then she’s gasping, flying through the air.

Izanagi crouches on the roof, using Shisui’s shortness to his advantage as a sword slices through the air where his head used to be.

Sakura clings to a familiar, warm cloak, breathing in the scent of smoke. She sees a flash of tan skin and the black outline of a circle.

_Kitagawa._

He ripped her out of Izanagi’s arms.

“Run, Kit-kun! I’ll be okay!” Sakura says desperately.

Kitagawa snorts, spinning his sword to point directly at Izanagi’s stolen face, “Don’t think so, Hime-sama. Y’know, I’m almost impressed, kid. It really does take a lot to get under my guard. If I didn’t routinely check on Sakura-hime, you could’ve been long gone with her. And then where would we be?”

“Trapped on a roof, having an asinine conversation with a soon-to-be-dead fool?” Izanagi replies.

Sakura feels Kitagawa’s chuckle reverberate through him, “Nah. We’d find ourselves in the position of hunter and the hunted. I’d come after you. I’d follow you to the ends of the earth, and I’d slice you in half for my trouble.”

Izanagi slowly stands up, “You are welcome to try.”

“Hmm, _nope_. See, my highest priority is ensuring the safety of this little princess. So, I’d never jeopardise that by fighting with her in my arms.” Kitagawa says.

Izanagi ignores Kitagawa, instead locking eyes with Sakura. “You already knew, didn’t you?” He says, his voice sharp, “How?”

Sakura can’t speak. Instead, she mouths, _I know you._

Izanagi draws back, plainly startled.

Kitagawa holds Sakura a little higher in his arms, “Don’t talk to the nasty boy, Sakura-hime. You
might catch something.”

Izanagi flashes in front of them, almost as quick as the real Shisui. If he was as quick, his strike might’ve connected.

As it was, Kitagawa fluidly twisted out of the way, bending almost flat to the ground to avoid Izanagi’s kunai. Kit swivels, boneless, and leaps to the next rooftop.

Then a bang resounds, hurting Sakura’s ears.

Kai stands on the roof, his knuckles wreathed in flame.

Izanagi jumps back, avoiding Kai’s fists.

Airi dips, nearly slicing through Izanagi’s calf.

The bodyguards are all here. Sakura can’t feel a shred of fear from any of them, just grim determination.

“I’d never compromise Sakura-hime’s safety by fighting while holding her,” Kitagawa says cheerily, “but I absolutely would stall for time until help arrived while holding her. That, I can do. And now, if you want my kid... you’re gonna have to go through all of us.”

“And my attacks are noisy,” Kai growls, “so if you wanna maintain your cover, you’re gonna wanna run the fuck away.”

Kitagawa covers Sakura’s ears, a little late.

“I’d also recommend you flee,” Airi says calmly, holding two curved daggers up, “your odds are somewhat slim.”

Izanagi straightens up, jamming his hands in his pockets. He looks so like Shisui that Sakura’s breath catches. She really did think he’d forgiven her for whatever it was that she’d done wrong. Realising her mistake hurt almost as badly as the first time his eyes skimmed over her as if she wasn’t there.

Izanagi removes one hand from his pockets. Kitagawa tenses, plainly expecting a weapon.

Instead, Izanagi has a handful of paper petals. The same kind that come with Sakura’s cherry bombs, the ones that Shisui gave her. Her heart hurts.

The first time she saw Izanagi, he was scooping paper petals off the shrine floor.

“It seems as though it is not yet time, Petal,” He says tonelessly, “I’ll see you later.”

“I’ll see your insides, first.” Kitagawa says sweetly.

Then Izanagi moves, too quick to see, and both Airi and Kai strike as one.

They barely manage to miss each other.

Izanagi is gone.

Kitagawa clutches Sakura, then relaxes slightly, realising the threat is gone.

“Well, would you look at that?” He drawls, “Seems like I’m wise, not paranoid. You owe me a thousand ryo, Kai.”
“I owe you a punch in the face.” Kai snarls.

“Sure, I’ll take that too.”

***

Hello, friends!

It’s not paranoia if they really are out to kidnap your charge!

Shisui is conflicted… for now. #prayforShisui

Sakura makes flowers for everyone! You get a flower, and you get a flower!

If Naruto’s big sister gives him a flower crown, you can bet your bottom dollar that he will wear it constantly, no matter where he is.

Izo and Sakura made up! It turns out that four-year-olds arguing and apologising looks pretty similar – lots of tears. And now Ino’s entered the super exclusive We-Know-About-The-Plant-Thing, Sakura club!

Oh, wait. So’s Kitagawa. Who not only saw Sakura making flowers for Ino in this chapter, but stared, astounded, as Sakura made flower crowns with Tenzo in the last chapter. This is what happens when you mostly hang out in trees. You see things. Kagami tried to warn Sakura that he saw, but sadly… *sigh*

Kai has a technique in which his punches are literally explosive. As in, if he punches you in the face, your head go boom. When he asked Naruto if he liked fire… dear God, they should not have been put together.

Izanagi disguised himself as Shisui, just like he occasionally does with Takumi. Oh, the paranoia! What he didn’t realise, is that Sakura can recognise chakra signals. And she knows Shisui’s chakra as well as her own.

(btw guys, I know some of you have asked me to put these enormous A/N in the actual author’s notes section, but I can’t use any formatting in there and frankly I need the ability to italicise every other word. I’m sorry!)

So, I’m writing a Tenten-centric time travel fix-it fic! It won’t interfere with TFLA, but I had plenty of ideas that wouldn’t leave me alone, and frankly there is a shocking lack of Tenten in fanfiction! I had to rectify that.

So, I Knew a Girl With Copper Veins’s first chapter is up! I hope you guys like it! :)

We’ve nearly hit fifty thousand views and honestly… it’s overwhelming. Thank you guys so much! For all the fanart, the shares, the comments… you’re all the best.

**Quick poll for fun:** If you could live in a sci-fi, fantasy or western film, which would you pick?

A) Science fiction

B) Fantasy

C) Western
I would pick fantasy, because it’s my favourite genre ever. And if you have a particular favourite subgenre, like urban fantasy, you can pick that too!

(Dogwatch Update: The Good Dogs are sleeping happily in their master’s warm bed. She’s nearby, so they’re Very Happy)
Kai never actually ends up punching Kitagawa, though he gets very close.

Airi is scanning the horizon. She’s wearing a new wig, a pretty blonde one that makes her look like a younger Tsunade. She seems to like dressing up.

“I’m gonna take the little princess home. You two okay to see if you can pick up his trail, maybe find out where he went?” Kitagawa asks, tucking his cloak around Sakura to keep her warm.

Kai folds his arms, biceps bulging, and heaves a great sigh, “I’ll take the west gate, Airi will take the east. If we don’t track this son of a –”

Kitagawa covers Sakura’s ears and leaps off the building. Kai’s laughter floats after them. Kitagawa heads home, then takes a sharp left and ducks into a shadowy alcove between two buildings.

“Oh, Hime-sama,” He starts, resting his head against the brick wall, “we’ve got as long as it’ll take those two to cover Konoha. Airi will be thorough, but Kai will be noisy, and he’ll draw ANBU to him like flies to honey. We should have enough time for you to tell me everything.”

“What?” Sakura asks, eyes wide.

“Save it. You knew that kid. He wasn’t some mercenary just fulfilling a contract, out to ransom you off for the highest price. There’s more than one kind of kidnapping, you know. There’s fiscally-motivated, and then there’s emotionally-motivated. That kid wanted to keep you, and he was willing and able to sneak past three highly-trained degenerates on a very good wage. The only reason this whole thing was as bloodless as it was is because he didn’t want to risk you getting hurt. That’s why he left the moment it started getting physical. Now, I can protect you from random thugs and fiends working for shadowy organizations, that’s piss-easy – I mean, uh – easy as pie. But if there’s someone in this very village who wants to abduct you –”

“He’s not,” Sakura says very softly, hanging her head, “he’s not from this village. At least, I don’t think he is.”

“You think I can’t recognise an Uchiha after spending weeks playing third-wheel to your parlour games at the manor? Same pale face, same sour disposition. Even took the same, inexplicable dislike to me.”

“He’s not really an Uchiha. He was pretending to be my friend Shisui-kun, but he’s not. He’s Izanagi.”

Kitagawa looks blank. He twirls an indigo lock of hair around his finger and hums thoughtfully. “Mmkay. That’s not a name I know. I don’t like that. Why do you know his name?”

“He’s my friend,” Sakura says earnestly, “well, he says he’s not, but I’m trying –”
Kitagawa very gently lets her down, waiting until her feet have found purchase on the slippery cobbles, then he flings his cloak over his face and starts mumbling swear words in a high-pitched, agonised voice.

“Kit-kun?”

“Take the middle one, she said. The only girl. All she does is play with flowers and make friends. Sure, she’s a little too friendly with strangers, but she’s very smart,” Kitagawa says, pained, “that’s what Tsunade-sama said when she assigned us to you kids. Oh you like blowing things up and playing pranks, Kai? Well, you get the little loudmouth with the whiskers. Heart of gold. And you like subterfuge and evading the authorities, Airi? Have the teen I’m rehabilitating, you’ll get on like a house on fire!”

“Are you okay?”

“No! No, I am not okay! You befriended a psychopath?”

“He’s not a sigh-cone-paff! He got really sad once, when I told him I wanted to be a medic.”

Kitagawa starts sliding down the brick wall, looking as if his soul had fled his body.

“How long have you known the impostor Uchiha.” He asks flatly.

“Oh, I’m not sure. A while. He said he’d teach me genjutsu when we first met, and then he said I had to learn about bad stuff and he made me see… horrible things, worse than I could have ever imagined. Everybody was dead…”

Kitagawa groans loudly, “A psychopath! A random freak with no obvious loyalty or ties! You know, my mother warned me about strangers. Did your mother tell you they always have pudding?!”

“No, she did not!” Sakura says indignantly. “She said strangers aren’t friends and you shouldn’t –”

She trails off, frowning to herself.

Kitagawa makes a vindicated noise, “So, Mama Haruno has shared some wisdom, it just hasn’t sunken into that fluff-brain of yours. I can work with that.”

“I told Izanagi-san that I’d take care of him –”

Kitagawa smothers his anguished shriek with his cloak.

“ – and he told me to be careful what I promise, because I have a big heart but it can’t be torn a lot of different ways, and that I should save my affection for people who deserve it.”

Kitagawa drags the cloak down his face, expressionless, “Odd. Good advice, from the maniac. Then what happened? I assume you gave him your home address and told him the best time to come over.”

“No. Then he said the world is going to eat me, and that bad things happen all the time, and wouldn’t I like to change that? And when I said yes, he said that he’d come back for me one day.”

Kitagawa mimes committing seppuku.

“What does he look like when he’s not wearing the Uchiha brat?”

“Tall. Cloaked. And he’s got a mask with blue and gold markings on it.”
"Tall and cloaked, eh?" Kitagawa says ruefully. "Well, we’ve got one suspect we can eliminate immediately. Me. I’d never wear such a tacky-sounding mask."

"Do you really think he’s someone in the village?"

"We can only hope. If he’s not, that means he’s capable of regularly sneaking in and out of Konoha without being caught – all to see you. Unless he has another motive. He could be spying on Konoha for another village, and then became fond of you during his surveillance."

"If he’s spying on Konoha, are you going to tell someone?" Sakura asks, concerned. She shivers a little as a night breeze seeps through her pyjamas.

Kitagawa immediately drapes a section of his cloak around her shoulders.

"I’m not gonna tell them a thing," he says, "I can’t prove he’s a spy – not yet – and the good folk of Konoha have no reason to believe me. The only reason my involvement tonight won’t earn me a trip to T&I is because of your ma. Also, I have one priority in life, and it isn’t Konoha."

"What is it?" Sakura asks, looking up at him. He’s very warm, so she huddles close.

He points squarely at her face, "You. I used to be jack of all trades, doing a bit of this and that for everybody, but now I’ve just got the one job, and I intend to do it well. Better than Airi and Kai, anyway. I bet ‘em I can keep you alive longer than their kids."

"Hey!" Sakura thumps him on the leg. "Making bets on people’s lives is mean!"

"How are you still so surprised when I’m mean? And you can’t disapprove of the only joy in my life," he says melodramatically, "betting keeps me warm at night."

"Get a better blanket."

Kitagawa laughs quietly, then scoops her up onto his shoulders, "Time to go back now. If Airi and Kai get there before us, they’ll know I didn’t just take you straight home. That’d lead to questions neither of us would like."

"We’re being sneaky, then?" Sakura asks, holding onto his neck to keep steady.

"The sneakiest."

xxxxxxxx

Tsunade is waiting in her bedroom when they climb back in the window.

She crosses the room in a few strides, firmly tugging Sakura out of Kitagawa’s arms, and embraces her tightly.

"Don’t do that to me ever again." She says, her voice strained.

Sakura pats Tsunade on the back, "I’m sorry, Oba-san."

"What happened? Kai and Airi handed Naruto and Tenzo to Shizune and said they had to help retrieve you."

"You know my friend Shisui-kun?" Sakura asks.

Tsunade’s face is blank.
“He’s Sasuke and Itachi’s cousin.”

“Sure, okay.” Tsunade shrugs.

“He came to see me in my room tonight.”

Tsunade releases a bolt of killing intent that has Kitagawa squirming away from the window, sidling over to lean against the wall.

“He wanted to talk, and since he hasn’t spoken to me for so long I was just so happy to see him… so I went with him. I know it was wrong, but I thought… I thought we could be friends again.”

Tsunade’s lips thin, but she doesn’t interrupt.

“But then when we nearly left our neighbourhood, he told me he wasn’t Shisui-kun after all.” Sakura says, lying calmly, not altering her guilty expression one bit. Kitagawa said purposefully blank or neutral faces are more suspicious than a frown. “So I got scared, and then Kit-kun grabbed me and ran off. Kai-san and Airi-san attacked the man but he vanished. Then Kit-kun took me home.”

Tsunade takes a deep breath, “Kitagawa. Stay with Sakura.”

“What are you – ”

“I’m gonna go hunting.” Tsunade says, tossing her head.

“You’re not gonna alert the – ”

“Nope.” Tsunade hands Sakura back to Kitagawa and hops onto the windowsill. “I expect you to keep the kids safe in my absence, or I’ll take my displeasure out of your hide.”

“Yes, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade gives Sakura a reassuring wink, then disappears out the window.

Misa and Momo jump off the bed, following Kitagawa as he leaves the room, heading downstairs. Sakura can feel concerned chakra buzzing in the living room. She burrows deeper into Kitagawa’s arms.

Shizune is sitting on the sofa. Naruto and Tenzo are on either side of her, tucked under her arms. Shizune nearly dislodges both boys when she bolts upright, relief swirling with concern in her aura.

“Sakura!” She bursts out, tears welling up, “you’re okay!”

Naruto leaps off the sofa and charges over to Sakura, throwing himself at her and Kitagawa. Kit catches him with an oof, holding both kids together.

Misa barks, trying to catch Naruto’s swaying feet.

“Sakura-nee! Kai said he had to go get you and to wait here. I waited and I didn’t fall asleep, not even once!” Naruto says, pressing his cheek against hers.

“Naruto… Thank you for waiting. I’m sorry I worried you. Kit-kun and the others found me, so everything will be alright.” Sakura promises, squeezing him tight.

Kitagawa hauls them both up with some difficulty, his lithe form nearly buckling, and deposits them back on the sofa.
Tenzo touches Sakura’s shoulder, his face pale in the dim lamplight of the room. She can feel his earthy chakra curl around her in welcome, like a cat.

“Tsunade-sama’s gone hunting.” Kitagawa says, dumping Misa and Momo on the sofa with the kids.

Shizune nods grimly.

They settle down on the sofa, Shizune gripping Sakura and Naruto tightly, Tenzo petting the agitated puppies, and Kitagawa stands at the opposite wall, his chakra awake and aware.

Sakura’s not sure how long they sit together in silence, but it’s enough that they all jump when there’s a knock at the front door.

Kitagawa makes a face, then rips his cloak off.

Sakura blinks in surprise, taking in the sight of Kitagawa without his usual cloak. He’s wearing a tight black shirt and loose shorts, his arms and legs bandaged. That little circle peaks out from under his collar. She can see more tattoos spread across his skin like daubs of paint.

He tosses his cloak over the children on the sofa, and Sakura instantly feels their chakra dampen as if hidden behind a wall.

He yanks his sword out of its sheath and slowly approaches the door.

Shizune pulls them all to the side, half-hidden behind the wall. Naruto’s afraid, clutching Shizune’s legs. Tenzo makes sure they’re all covered by the cloak.

Just as the person knocks again, Kitagawa pulls the door open, hiding behind it. Sakura sees a shock of white hair, then a great big man strides into the house.

Kitagawa has his sword at his throat before he can make it two steps, but the man casually stops it with two fingers resting against the blade.

“You’re not Tsunade.” The man says wryly, pushing the sword away from his face.

“Jiraiya-sama!” Shizune gasps.

The cloak falls as she stands up, revealing the children.

Jiraiya examines them all, sharp eyes catching on Naruto for a long moment – chakra flaring joy, grief and regret simultaneously – then settling on Sakura.

“Hey-ho, no,” Kitagawa says as Jiraiya steps forward, “Sannin or not, I will chase you out of here if I have to. Those kids are under my protection.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Tsunade says from the doorway, smirking at the way Jiraiya flails back in shock, “but I can personally vouch for this guy. Stand down.”

“Tsunade-hime, I – ” Jiraiya begins, voice wet with emotion, but Tsunade’s hazel eyes fall on Sakura and narrow.

Sakura abruptly remembers what she told Tsunade so long ago:

_He said I was as flat-chested as a boy._

Tsunade punches Jiraiya across the room.
He **thunk**s into a wall, his skull cracking on impact.

“Tsunade-hime!” He protests, seemingly unharmed.

“Okay, that memory’s going in the scrapbook.” Kitagawa says gleefully.

“Agh, dammit, oof,” Jiraiya slowly pushes himself up, making all kinds of noises, “Tsunade-hime, I came here for a reason. Can you at least hear me out before you break all my bones just for fun?”

Tsunade raises an eyebrow, closing the front door behind her without looking with a well-placed kick.

“I’d never break all your bones just for fun, Jiraiya. The fun is an added bonus.”

Jiraiya sighs, then grins, showing off sparkling teeth. He spreads his arms wide in welcome, “Tsunade-hime, I heard the news. You can count on me, despite my work. I’ll help you raise the kids.” He says magnanimously.

Tsunade punches him in the gut without hesitation.

He howls, knees buckling, and face-plants onto the floor.

Sakura wriggles out of Shizune’s arms and rushes over. She stares down at the felled man, awed by his appearance.

She kneels down next to him, ignoring Tsunade’s warning look and Kitagawa’s muttered warnings. Jiraiya squints up at her.

She places a hand on his forehead and lets her healing chakra flow.

His eyes widen.

“Hello,” she says, once he stops squinting in pain, “I’m Haruno Sakura. You’ve got the most hair I’ve ever seen. It’s the mostest, even more than the most!”

Jiraiya sits up, touching his head. His eyes soften, “Thank you, Sakura-hime. You’re too kind. Not at all like your…” He glances up at Tsunade pointedly.

“Oba-san.” Sakura supplies.

“…I see.” Jiraiya says dubiously.

Sakura takes his hand and tugs, trying to pull him up. He yelps in surprise, his arm making a strange popping sound. He waves his other arm at her when she tries to help.

“No, no! I’m… I’m perfectly fine!”

“It went pop, though,” Sakura says reasonably, “arms shouldn’t go pop. At least, I don’t think they should.”

“No, they shouldn’t,” Tsunade smiles down at her, hauling Jiraiya up by his hair, “unless the arm in question deserves it.”

“What did I do?” Jiraiya demands.

“Let me make something perfectly clear,” Tsunade says, releasing her grip on his hair and stalking
towards him, “If you so much as breathe a perverted word in my kids’ presence then I will break your arms and legs and leave you on your back, unable to move, in an onsen occupied solely by male wrestlers. How does that sound?”

Jiraiya backs up, nearly falling over the coffee table, “It sounds great, haha! There won’t be a problem here, no sir! I mean ma’am."

“Do you like male wrestlers, Jiraiya-san?” Sakura asks curiously.

Jiraiya pales, “N-no. It’s more like… they don’t like me.”

“Hey, hey, Oba-san!” Naruto yells, suddenly getting over his fear. “Who’s the old geezer?”

Jiraiya fumes, turning on Naruto with his fists raised, mouth wide open in outrage, but Tsunade moves him aside as if he weighs nothing and bends down to Naruto’s level.

“He’s an old friend of mine. He was my genin teammate. You know the Hokage?”

Naruto nods so hard his head flops about worryingly.

“Well, that old geezer taught me and this old geezer when we were kids.”

Naruto thinks about it, his big blue eyes drifting from Tsunade to Jiraiya and back.

“But he’s all old and you’re not, Oba-san!” He insists.

Tsunade colours in pleasure, smiling, and elbows Jiraiya when he tries to speak.

“Oho, well… Anyway, this guy’s an idiot and a perv, but he’s my friend. You can trust him.” She says, sending a slight smile Jiraiya’s way.

Jiraiya looks a little sheepish when he kneels down in front of Naruto, offering him a little frog toy, “Hey, kid. Nice to meet you.”

Naruto takes the frog and shakes it, giggling at how its limbs flap around, “Thanks, mister!”

“If you call her Oba-san, why not call me Oji-san?” Jiraiya suggests, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Naruto makes a face, looking up at Tsunade for permission. She shrugs, smirking.

“It’s polite to call someone what they ask to be called, Naruto.” Shizune says, though her chakra thrums with disapproval.

Jiraiya regards her with interest, as if he just noticed her, “Ooh… and who is this?”

Shizune scowls, affronted by the leer on his face.

Tsunade raises her fist to bring it down on his head, but Naruto gets there first.

He kicks Jiraiya in the knee, “Don’t look at my Okaa-san like that!”

Jiraiya wobbles on one leg, clutching the injured knee, “N-Naruto! Wait, Okaa-san? But…”

“We adopted Naruto,” Shizune says defiantly, “I’m his mother, and Tsunade-sama is his aunt.”

Jiraiya looks mystified, “And the other boy?”
Tenzo gives a shy wave at being addressed, bowing slightly, “Hello, Jiraiya-san. My name is Tenzo.”

“I’m – well – we haven’t discussed that yet.” Shizune struggles, flushing slightly, “I’m happy to be whatever Tenzo wants me to be, and Tsunade-sama is his aunt, too.”

Tenzo gives Shizune a gentle smile, “Thank you, Shizune-san.”

“Just Shizune, please.” The older woman returns the smile, patting him on the shoulder.

Kitagawa has slipped into the shadows by the door, his sword at the ready. His cloak’s on the floor. Sakura feels bad, so she scoops it up. It’s so long that it trails across the floor, no matter how high she lifts it.

“So, it’s true,” Jiraiya says, amazed, “you really did adopt three kids. But I heard… the girl in particular…”

“She’s my kid, but she’s not my daughter,” Tsunade shrugs, “you should already know that. Guess you really can’t teach an old dog new tricks – you and Sarutobi-sensei are too stuck in the past to see the future. These kids all needed a guardian, and the Senju needed a revival.”

“We all did a blood ritual!” Sakura says cheerfully.

“And… you’re heading up the clan in the Civilian District?” Jiraiya turns to Tsunade, incredulity written in the lines of his face.

Tsunade flips her hair over her shoulder, offering only a careless, “it’s amazing what you can get away with when your grandfather is the Shodaime. I really haven’t milked that enough, so I thought it best to start now. The Senju aren’t going to lock themselves away in a Compound, separating themselves from the rest of the village. The Senju are the village. We were here for the start, and we’ll be here for the end. With the people, not above them.”

Jiraiya’s surprised look fades away, replaced by contemplation.

A squeaking noise catches everyone’s attention.

Naruto is jumping up and down on his toy frog’s stomach, making it squeak for mercy every time.

Jiraiya pales.

Tsunade looks proud.

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When Airi and Kai come back empty-handed, everyone decides to huddle up in the living room for a surprise sleepover.

The floor and sofas are covered with blankets and the squishiest of cushions. Naruto takes great joy in bouncing on everything and everyone. Misa and Momo follow his example.

Once everyone’s settled down, Naruto ends up in Shizune’s arms, covered in a patchwork quilt on the sofa. Tsunade took the floor and Tenzo insisted on doing the same, curling up behind her, back to back. Jiraiya sleeps in a sitting position, his back against the sofa, his hands behind his head. Sakura gets the other sofa, cuddling Misa and Momo.

Airi is hiding somewhere, guarding the house from the shadows, but Kai and Kitagawa are plainly
Kitagawa is leaning against the wall, his hand resting on his sword’s hilt, and Kai is opposite him, arms crossed, eyes constantly scanning the room.

Sakura can’t sleep. She can see Naruto’s sleeping face, his frog squashed under his chin. He’d insisted on having his huge slug toy brought down so it could help protect everyone. Sakura watches it, hoping to catch it moving in secret, but its stitched face stays still in the dark.

Sakura rolls onto her back, missing the glow-in-the-dark stars her bedroom ceiling has back home.

**Home.**

Before the mission to Suna, everything had felt simple. She’d been keeping secrets, of course, but nothing on this level. Her life itself wasn’t very complicated at all. Now she’s a part of a family and a clan, and there are expectations for her. She’ll be starting the Academy after her birthday, and there wasn’t long left to prepare for it.

She hopes Izanagi doesn’t come for her again. What does he want?

Sakura hears a slight cough and looks up.

Kitagawa catches her eye, winks, and starts to juggle kunai. Kai is staring at him, deeply annoyed.

Kitagawa drops one, kicks it with his foot, catches it and throws it up –

It’s gone!

Sakura gapes at him. Magic!

Kitagawa bows deeply, as if expecting applause.

Kai grits his teeth, jamming his clenched fists against his sides.

Sakura claps silently, her puppies flopping against her chest with the movement.

Kitagawa gives an excessively elaborate bow, his head nearly touching the floor, and pretends to overbalance, his leg flailing in the air.

Sakura giggles, then buries her face in her cushion, all thoughts of the night and its scary events gone from her mind.

She feels Kitagawa’s satisfaction and Kai’s quiet, reluctant amusement drift into her dreams, giving her visions of warmth and laughter.

xxxxxxx

Uchiha Miho is the first to be found.

Shisui sits in a room full of angry old men, staring out the window, wishing he was anywhere but here.

“Something must be done!” A young man erupts, slamming his hand down on the table. Some of the less seasoned members of the clan jump. Shisui is as still as calm waters, untouchable as the stars.

“What can be done?” An older man reasons. “We are not trusted in the village. Miho was found in the Compound itself, so naturally the village will determine we are the ones at fault. What proof do we have otherwise?”
“Miho was on a mission!” The same young man says, a suspicious glint in his eyes. Shisui looks away. The clan will see his tears as a sign of weakness, Shisui takes them as a sign that the boy’s not yet dead inside. “She had no reason to be in Konoha at all, let alone the Compound! Someone killed her while she was alone on a C-rank mission, and then dumped her here to sow dissent among our ranks!”

“Obviously,” An elderly woman replies, “and yet in this case, the obvious answer is the most unreasonable. We will not be believed, most likely because the perpetrator intended to cast doubt upon us. Konoha will say that Miho had abandoned her mission, and was up to mischief in Konoha. The civilians will believe she met her end at the hands of the authorities, the authorities will believe it was the clan.”

“And who do we believe it was?” The young man demands, his voice trembling.

Silence fills the room.

Fugaku is looking his sternest. His face is cast in shadow, the lines drawn in harsh, bold strokes. Mikoto looks equally grim, sat beside him. Itachi was not permitted to attend the meeting, as he is still only a genin.

“We don’t believe a thing,” The old woman replies, her mouth tight with agitation, “we can only make assumptions and guesses, casting doubt of our own. It will do nothing but muddy the waters, making it harder to see the truth.”

“Miho didn’t deserve to die,” The young man says, slumping back in his seat, “it was a simple courier mission. She was due home in two days. To find her like that… I just don’t understand why.”

Miho was found hanging from a balcony, foul play clearly involved. She’d been killed elsewhere, and then staged in the Compound. A message.

Shisui stares past the people in front of him, through the window, across the village, searching for the answer. A civilian couldn’t have done it. ROOT might have done it, but Danzo would have wanted her eyes, since Miho had fully activated her Sharingan. Miho’s face had been untouched, frozen in death. ANBU might have done it, but if Danzo truly had no involvement, then the Hokage would have had to be involved. He had no motive at all to murder an Uchiha chuunin and then display her body as a warning for the rest of them.

Shisui presses his fingertips into his cheek a little too hard, feeling blood vessels burst beneath his harsh touch.

He knows who did this.

Izanagi.

Shisui has only just come back from his own mission, just in time to see Miho being cut down from the balcony, surrounded by coldly furious clansmen. He’d known Miho. She was his age. Almost as close a relation as Itachi.

Izanagi had told Shisui to choose between Sakura and his clan.

Shisui had thought he’d abstained, refused to make any choice at all, but if Izanagi had assumed he’d pick Sakura over his family… this could be the end result. His punishment for refusing to go along with the madman’s plan.

If it was true… who was next?
Shisui looks at the empty seat beside Mikoto, and imagines it never being filled again.

No.

He cannot let that happen.

He feels his eyes activate, the world sharpening all around him. He sees his fellow clansmen startle, some even avert their eyes.

“IT doesn’t matter why. It only matters what we do next.” He says flatly, uncaring when the faces around him look slightly disconcerted. They’re not used to him being serious. Uchiha like tradition, even when it’s annoying, after all.

More topics are brought up after that, briefly discussed and discarded just as quickly. Shisui listens to it all with a growing sense of impatience and frustration, a well of guilt deepening within him with every word.

He shakes off attempts to talk to him as they’re all leaving, ignoring Fugaku’s determined approach and Mikoto’s soft greeting.

Shisui had never been on a genin team. He graduated at five years old, leaving all his peers behind. After the war, he was sent on a mission with the only friend he’d ever had. He was six, his friend slightly older. They’d argued before the fight, leaving Shisui fuming, a child’s temper trapped inside a shinobi’s body.

When the time came, he let Makoto die. He let jealousy and resentment overtake him for just a second, and it was enough to lose him forever.

It nearly destroyed Shisui.

Meeting Itachi was the only thing that brought him back to life, that restored his sense of humour and purpose. He knew why he’d survived the attack that killed Makoto – he was meant to protect Itachi. Their family, too, though they didn’t think him capable of it.

Shisui walks down the street, head down, deep in thought.

“Ah, Shisui-san!” A light voice calls out.

He comes to a sharp halt, eyes snapping up to the speaker.

Takumi stands in front of him, a kind smile on his face.

Shisui is chilled to the bone.

Is it... is he...

Izanagi?

Ryuu is standing next to the smaller man, seemingly unbothered.

“I heard your probation is over,” Takumi says brightly, “that’s great! Are you happy to be back on missions?”

Shisui struggles to respond.

He’d been a fool to think he could hide from Izanagi, or just wait for him to go away. He could be
anyone at any time!

Shisui breaks out into a cold sweat.

“Idiot,” Ryuu grunts, nudging Takumi, “he’s been back on missions for ages. Where do you get your news?”

Takumi laughs sheepishly. “Oh, really? Sorry, Shisui-san! Still, I’m happy for you. There’s nothing worse than feeling useless, you know.”

Shisui can only nod, intensely aware of Takumi’s pale red eyes on his face.

Useless.

Sakura is walking Misa and Momo. It takes a while every time, because people always want to stop them to say how cute they are. Kitagawa always takes the compliment like it was meant for him, revelling in the polite confusion he causes.

They’re leaving the Civilian District today, going as far as the market. Sakura wants to get some doggy treats. Kitagawa says he wants to get some ribbons for his sleeves. Sakura thinks it’s nice that he wants to be pretty. He has a soft, youthful face. It looks like he used to be a sweet boy. He probably uses piercings and his big cloak to hide that.

Misa keeps pulling ahead. Sakura has to be careful to only use a little bit of her strength to hold her back. Momo trots at her side, the very picture of a good boy.

The crowds always get more colourful outside of the Civilian District. Shinobi seem to be more noticeable than civilians, both in appearance and chakra. Sakura lets the heightened energy wash over her.

Kitagawa is strolling behind her, hands deep in his cloak’s pockets. Sakura tips her head back to check on him. He crosses his eyes at her.

She scrunches up her nose back at him and looks forward, pulling gently to stop Misa’s determined charge towards a fat, ginger cat, dozing on a doorstep.

The two chuunin who greeted them at the gate after the mission to Suna are standing at a stall, holding clothes up against each other.

Kurenai and Anko.

“Hello!” Sakura stops to greet them, ignoring Misa’s crazed attempts to get to the cat.

Kurenai looks around, a dress slipping out of her hands and back onto the pile of clothes. She finally looks down, spotting Sakura.

Anko shoves her face into view, grinning, “Hey, kid! I remember you! The littlest Senju, right?”

“No,” Sakura shakes her head, “Naruto’s littler than me. I’m getting big.”

“Yes, you’re enormous.” Kitagawa tells her, patting her head.

Kurenai stoops down, letting the puppies sniff her hand. Momo licks it tentatively.
“That means you’re good.” Sakura says seriously.

“If they poop on you, you’re evil beyond redemption.” Kitagawa says knowledgably.

“That’s not true!” Sakura protests, even though she hasn’t been pooped on. Never.

Anko laughs, rifling through the pile of clothes and picking out something made of lace. Kitagawa’s hand immediately comes down to cover Sakura’s eyes.

She swats him away, annoyed.

“So, what’re their names?” Anko asks, turning to examine Misa, who’s still fiercely growling at the oblivious kitty.

Sakura looks up at her, the names on the tip of her tongue, but her words die before they can leave her throat.

Her eyes catch on a black mark on Anko’s neck, a –

(Orochimaru’s teeth sink into Sasuke’s neck. He screams in agony. The hairs on the back of Sakura’s neck stand up. She’s never heard Sasuke make a sound like that, half-mad in terror and pain. Orochimaru withdraws, and a mark starts to form over the wound. It sits stark against the white column of his throat. Sasuke sobs, falling against her, and Sakura has never felt so utterly helpless in her life.)

Sakura is lying against Kitagawa’s chest, her puppies licking her face. They’re all sitting on a roof, the sun shining directly on their faces.

She can’t breathe.

Kitagawa is holding her lightly, and the pressure of her dogs’ paws is not enough to restrict her breathing, but she can’t. The air won’t come.

Kitagawa flips her around, hugging her gently and stroking her back, “You’re gonna be just fine. We’re going to get your stinky dog treats, and then maybe we’ll stop by that fancy dress shop you like so much. You’d enjoy that, I know. You can get a couple dresses, the kind that have got sticky-out skirts, and your ma’ll punish me for spoiling you. Sound good, kiddo?”

Anko and Kurenai are perched on the roof alongside them, their chakra burning bright in concern.

Sakura clings to Kitagawa, squeezing her eyes shut. She can’t look at that hateful mark on Anko’s neck.

“C-can’t… can’t brea – ” Sakura sobs into Kit’s shoulder, heart seized by terror. What’s wrong with her?

“You can,” He says calmly, rubbing her back, “You’ve been doing it your whole life. You can keep doing it, no problem.”

Sakura claws at his arms, frightened of the invisible enemy in her lungs, squeezing the breath out of her.

“I – I can’t!” She insists, her breath coming rapidly now. Her head feels light, full of the air her chest can’t find.

Kitagawa’s arms tighten.
Then, a crackle of ozone and flashfire hits her.

“Firefly!” Shisui cries out.

He leaps for her, trying to snatch her from Kitagawa’s arms. Misa snarls, latching onto his shoe. He looks down, hurt and confused.

Sakura reaches out for him, great big tears splashing down her front as she shudders, trying to draw in breath.

Kitagawa holds her back, staring at the face of the boy who snatched her not long ago.

Sakura sends a soothing touch of chakra, unable to bear it any longer, and jumps from his arms as they slacken in surprise.

Shisui catches her.

Kitagawa starts forward, fear in his aura, pointed towards Sakura, but Kurenai steps in his way.

“This is Uchiha Shisui,” She tells him, “You don’t have to worry about him. He’s friends with Sakura, isn’t he?”

Shisui’s face tightens.

“Shisui-kun,” Sakura breathes out shakily, “I can’t – I –”

Shisui grits his teeth, wrestling with himself over something.

Then he opens his eyes, the same colour as the dawn over a blood-soaked battlefield, and says, “You can.”

Just like that, her lungs open.

She stops gasping for air, and sucks in a deep lungful.

Unbearably grateful, she gives Shisui her best smile, “Thank you so much, Shisui-kun. That was –”

She stops in surprise as he puts her down, stepping back.

“Happy to help,” He says stiffly, glancing at Kurenai and Anko, “I’ve got to go. Take care, Sakura.”

Kitagawa puts a hand on her shoulder.

She touches it, drawing strength from the gesture, and yells at Shisui’s retreating back.

“I thought I was Firefly!” She shouts, fists clenched.

Shisui stops.

“Be my friend or don’t,” Sakura says desperately, “I can’t bear this. Please stop pretending. Please.”

Shisui’s aura trembles, ever so slightly, but he stands firm, and leaps off the building without hesitation.

“Shisui-kun,” Sakura says, despair coating the words, then she squeezes her eyes shut and yells after him, “Shisui!”
Momo and Misa are supposed to be having their nightly wee. Instead, they’re chasing each other around the garden.

Sakura waits for them, leaning against the wall. She can feel the house’s occupants as they move about the house. Shizune, Naruto and Tenzo are all upstairs. Kai and Airi are on the roof. Tsunade and Kitagawa are downstairs. Something’s caught Kit’s attention, he’s pulled away from her slightly.

“Sakura,” Her name comes as a faint whisper on the wind.

Sakura freezes, pressing herself against the wall, “Izanagi-san?”

A bitter laugh floats towards her.

“I’d hoped he was lying,” Shisui says, appearing before her at once, “but then again, I’ve hoped for a lot of things recently. None of which have come true.”

“Shisui… is it really you?” Sakura asks, fear still gluing her to the spot, “can you show me your chakra, so I know for sure?”

Shisui’s expression shifts, a subtle turn from melancholy to rueful, “You really can’t tell on your own? I thought… I thought we knew each other better than most, Firefly.”

Sakura takes the name as a good sign, holds it inside her heart to keep her warm. Misa and Momo have fallen silent, watching them from across the garden.

“We do, Shisui,” She says firmly, “You’re one of my best friends.”

Shisui says nothing for a while, his eyes hooded with some unreadable emotion.

“One of,” he comments, shifting on the spot, “not the best. It’s the same for me. I’ve got Itachi, you’ve got Naruto. I was a fool to think I could have something outside of the clan, you know? I lost myself along the way. I thought I could keep us a secret, stop you from being used against me, or the other way around. I didn’t think what would happen if I failed. Your dreams have gotten worse, haven’t they? Maybe it would be for the best if I… if I helped.”

“Shisui, you’re scaring me.” Sakura says quietly, clutching her chest.

Pain pierces through him, actually making him stagger back a step. He breathes out raggedly, dismay writ in his features, then his frown firms and he moves closer once more.

“I’m so sorry, Sakura. I do love you, you know. If I’d been better at hiding our friendship… I wouldn’t have to do this, now.”

Kagami throws up an image, quick as a flash – Kabuto sagging against the wall, face blank – and Sakura realises at once what Shisui means to do.

But she’s not quick enough to stop him, just like when he flicked her forehead and she saw it coming and there was nothing she could do.

Shisui’s eyes flash red, shining with tears.

Sakura sees nothing more for a long time.
Shisui is falling.

Sakura looks at least ten years older and weary, beaten-down by life and loss, but it’s still her. It’s still Firefly.

She looks at him with nothing in her eyes and he thinks, oh. Because that’s it, then. This is the future, and it doesn’t recognise him.

Sakura lets out an awful gasp when Sasuke’s hand plunges through her back, a wheeze that sounds as if the air was forced from her lungs.

Sakura weeps over her father’s corpse.

Sasuke thanks Sakura and it hits her like a knife to the heart.

Sakura is biting down on a boy’s arm, being punched again and again, bearing the pain in silence and steely determination.

Sakura is lying down on the ground, muscles torn to shreds, unable to move as a man wearing Sasuke’s face stabs her again and again as Shisui howls in agony on her behalf, uselessly reaching out to thin air.

“Firefly!”

“That’s her, not me.” Sakura says dispassionately.

Shisui whirls around.

Sakura is chained to the wall, beaten bloody and exhausted, but there’s a hard glint in her eye that says she’s not given up just yet.

Shisui darts over to her, hands hovering over her face, not quite daring to touch, “Sa-Sakura? What’s going on?”

She looks back at him with flat, dead eyes, giving him an unimpressed sneer, “You’re in my mind. What, you thought it be a fun little trip? Knowing what you know about Sakura?”

“But… you are Sakura?” He says, head tilting in question.

She rolls her eyes in response, “What do you think?”

Just as he’s about to answer, he sees where she’s looking.

Sakura, little four-year-old Sakura, is crumpled on the ground.

He goes to flash over to her, horror-struck, when a surprisingly strong grip closes over his hand.

“Oh no, I don’t think so,” The older Sakura snarls, “that’s what you wanted, and that’s what you got. You thought this would be painless? Her mind’s splintered to pieces, and you’ve invaded it by force. Look at her.”

Shisui stares, feeling a hot flush of shame.

Sakura has two souls, he remembers Izanagi saying. Was this the second?

He stares into her eyes, feeling his whir dizzyingly.
She meets his gaze without a shred of fear.

Shisui spends endless hours extracting every single piece of information he can find within this strange, displaced soul, this not-quite-Sakura.

He sees Itachi in a black cloak with red clouds, hears Sakura’s voice snarl Akatsuki in explanation, then sees half a dozen others in the same attire, a handful of names attached to unfamiliar faces. Deidara, Sasori, Hidan.

He sees Naruto erupt in rage, turning into a blood-black beast.

He blinks, and Sakura is sawing through her own hair, blood and sweat curling the locks at her temple.

Sakura is sobbing over Sasuke, his body riddled with senbon, as cold as the grave.

Sakura is crying out, “I love you more than anything in the world!”

Shisui pushes away, wrenching his hand free.

“That was my life,” Sakura says calmly, “a short journey, wasn’t it? Was that what you came for?”

Shisui shakes his head, wiping his face. He’s not really sweating, he knows, but meddling in other minds always feels like a hyper-realistic dream.

Kabuto’s mind had been full of thorns, ready to prick the unsuspecting walker.

“To simplify things, I’m Kagami,” She says, using her free hand to gesture to herself, “I died aged sixteen, at the hands of your baby cousin.”

“Why?” Shisui asks helplessly, wringing his hands.

A seal flickers over Kagami’s mouth. Shisui narrows his eyes.

Kagami blows out an angry breath, “None of your business, that’s why. Tell me why you came, and I might tell you more.”

She can’t, he realises, she’s bound by more than just chains. Bluffing, then.

He glances over at the younger Sakura, lying far too still for his liking.

“I’m here to help,” He says smoothly, “Sakura’s been having trouble with her dreams, lately. I assume you send them to her?”

Kagami makes a face, waving her hand in a so-so gesture, “I do what I can. I can’t control most of it.”

It was more than that. He could sense an odd distortion in the air, warping the connection between Kagami and Sakura. It felt almost as if the two were blending together. Becoming one.

Shisui imagines Firefly becoming more like this bitter, angry woman.

No.

“I’ll help,” He decides, pinning Kagami with his gaze once more, “just trust me.”
“Trust is far too costly, little Uchiha,” she responds, a strange smile flickering over her face.

Shisui’s eyes whirl once more, and he switches to control.

Kagami and Sakura are slowly melding together. The process is leaving them distorted, muffling their connection as they join.

Shisui pulls them apart, carving out neat spaces for each of them.

He leaves Kagami in her chains, assuming she would take over Sakura’s mind if she were completely free.

When he’s done separating the two, he blinks hard, rubbing his eyes, and turns away.

Kagami stares at her hand, astonished.

She looks more solid, somehow. Her colour is less washed out, brought into focus.

“Impressive.” She says finally. He gets the feeling it’s high praise from her.

“Oh, it was nothing.” He says shakily, hopping from one foot to the other to get rid of some of the excess energy welling up inside him. “More importantly, you should know – Sakura’s in danger. There’s a guy who wants to get in her head – get to you, I think. His name’s Izanagi and – ”

“How do you know.” Kagami says flatly, looking at him with eyes so narrow that he can barely glimpse green between her lashes.

“E-Excuse me?” Shisui stammers. He wonders if erasing her memories of this event would be too cruel.

Kagami smirks, rueful and unsurprised, “Trust is far too costly, little Uchiha,” she repeats, drawing her chained fist back, “to waste on someone like you!”

She snaps her arm forward, throwing her full weight with the blow, and the chain breaks with an almighty crash.

The momentum carries her forward, determination sparking in her eyes, and she aims a punch straight at him, “Get out of her mind, you bastard!”

Shisui feels her fist connect with his cheek with the force of a hundred blows, and he flies back.

He wakes at once, pain hissing through his teeth. He doubles over, gasping in agony. His cheek is on fire, his head splitting apart.

He sees a little flash of pink out of the corner of his eye. Sakura, picking herself up off the ground, shaky and confused.

Shisui opens his mouth to explain, pain lancing his cheekbone. To his horror, nothing comes out. The whole affair with Izanagi, the entire reason why he just forced his way into her mind – he can’t talk about any of it.

*Izanagi did something*, he realises, *something to stop me from being able to expose him.*

He choking, trying to speak.

There’s a rustle, two little feet limping his way, and then Sakura kneels in front of him. He can’t lift
his head to look at her.

He waits for angry words, or worse, anguished sobs.

There’s nothing for the longest time.

Then, a cool hand at his temple, healing chakra seeping through his skin. Sakura wipes away his pain, and his tears, without a single word escaping her lips.

By the time he struggles to his feet, all he can see is her back as she walks back into the house, her dogs at her heels.

She looks back for just a second, and says very quietly, “Goodbye, Shisui.”

Shisui lies back in the grass, feeling a hole bore through his chest.

***

Hello, friends!

Sorry for the surplus of sad face. It’s going to get happier very soon, I promise.

We all knew it was coming, except Sakura. It’s lucky she’s got more forgiveness in her pinky than most people have in their hearts.

Hmmm... someone's a'murderin' Uchiha. Oh dearie me.

Have an extra-long chapter as an apology for 1) it being late and 2) it being UNBEARABLY sad.

I’ve had several comments apologising for rambling or for being too long and guys… I’m telling you. Please ramble. I ADORE long comments. They make my day every time!

(hopefully the next chapter’s author’s note will be in the right place. Please bear with me for now)

Throughout the fic I’ve had various people comment who are concerned that Sakura is or will be a Mary Sue because of her abilities. Barring the Mokuton and the sensor abilities, which she has for a reason and it isn’t to make her uber special and amazing, everything she can do is a watered-down version of what sixteen-year-old Sakura can do. Basically, how many time travel fics have you read in which the character goes back in time and has the full range of their abilities available to them immediately? Pretty much most of them, and there’s nothing wrong with that, right?

I said it in the first chapter and nothing’s changed since then, this is a wish fulfilment fic. This is something I write to destress and have fun with. I hope you guys can feel the same while reading, and not get too caught up in whether it’s realistic or not. We’re here for fun and puppies! :)

^^^^ none of this is meant to upset anyone. Just something I wanted to get off my chest <3

I have a fic rec for you all! You Have Shed A Thousand Skins by Authorship is a Hanabi-centric time travel fic with political intrigue and girls being awesome!! Please read ;D There’s only one chapter so far, but I’m already desperate to see what happens next.

Thanks to everyone who’s stuck with me this far, by the way! It's not been the smoothest of rides, but we’re well on our way!

**Quick poll for fun:** You now live in the world of whatever video game/film/book or TV show you last played/watched or read. How doomed are you?
I last watched an episode of MY Love Story!! So I’m gonna be just fine. Probably gonna romance a
gentle giant.

(Two Good Dogs face down a Bad Not-Dog! It is orange and fat and it looks wrong! Not dog-like at
all! They shout BAD BAD BAD at it, but it stays asleep somehow. The Good Dogs have failed.)
I thought you’d be crying, Kagami comments, sounding almost concerned.

Sakura sits on the edge of her bed, hands neatly placed in her lap.

I’m glad you’re back, Onee-chan, Sakura says dully, it’s been hard, without you. Not knowing who to trust.

Kagami frowns, smoothing her hair down. Another change – when Sakura awoke, she felt the difference at once. Kagami is free, and could probably take over Sakura’s mind if she wanted to, but something is stopping her. Sakura wants to believe it’s her conscience, Kagami’s own morality acting as her new chains, but maybe the things Sakura wants to believe are too far away from the truth to rely on.

You did well. I wouldn’t have expected you to suspect Shisui, after all.

“You did.” Sakura replies.

When she first met Kagami, she asked if Shisui could be trusted. She’d said her best bet was no.

Oh, come on, Kagami sounds frustrated, gesturing into the nothingness of Sakura’s mindscape, when you suspect everyone, the chances of you being right on occasion go up exponentially. Whatever’s going on with Shisui is something you couldn’t anticipate, something outside of my memories and your experience. You couldn’t have seen this coming, Sacchan.

It’s been a while since Sakura’s heard that name from someone other than her father.

Why did he do it, Onee-chan? She asks, the crack in her voice belying her dry eyes.

I don’t know.

Sakura hangs her head.

When she left the garden, she overheard snippets of Kitagawa’s and Tsunade’s conversation.

“– some kind punishment,” Kitagawa had said in atypically flat tone, “c’mon. He got her right out of her room. Something has to be done.”

Tsunade had replied, “not yet. If things had been worse – if he’d taken her out of the village, or harmed her in any way, then we’d be talking punishment. It’d be a little premature to jump straight to the most permanent deterrent, don’t you think?”

“Nothing permanent,” Kit had mumbled, “just a little maiming, maybe.”

Tsunade had laughed, then there was a sound like a pat on the shoulder or back.

Sakura had slipped past the room they were in and up to her bedroom.

Her encounter with Shisui must have only been seconds long, since Kitagawa didn’t come check on her. If he’d seen her caught in Shisui’s gaze… she wasn’t sure what he would do. What was the ‘permanent deterrent,’ they’d been talking about?

How are you feeling?
Sakura shrugs, stroking Momo’s silky ears.

Tired, she replies, just… tired. I was expecting something like this from Izanagi, not Shisui. I thought… I thought friends didn’t hurt friends.

Anyone can hurt anyone, Kagami corrects, and in a way, it’s easier for friends to hurt you than strangers. Friends know you well enough to know how to get to you. If a stranger or an enemy hurts you, it’s an attack. If a friend does it, it’s a betrayal.

Sakura gazes down at her palm. There used to be a faint scar from the Senju ritual she performed with Tsunade. She left it because it felt important, and then, later, because she matched Naruto, Tenzo and Tsunade.

Now her palm is smooth and clear.

Kagami examines her own, a frown puckering her brow. A shiny new scar has sliced through her skin, identical to the one Sakura used to have.

Sakura reaches up to her back, then deflates at the rough texture under her fingers. The mark from Sasuke’s chidori remains.

Heal it, then, Kagami urges, why wait?

Kakashi saw it, and so did Tsunade. She would understand that I could heal it, but Kakashi wouldn’t.

You saved our dad’s life, Kakashi knows that –

Why would I keep my scar if I was capable of healing it in the first place? Kakashi would think I healed it because he saw it, which would make him suspicious. The entire story of the Kumo shinobi is already tenuous, so I can’t jeopardise it, Sakura thinks solemnly.

Sacchan… you didn’t used to be so…

Sakura squeezes her eyes shut, unwittingly blinding Kagami’s view of the outside world. When she remembers, she hurriedly opens her eyes.

Friends can hurt friends, Sakura replies, and if that’s true, then I have to be more careful. I can’t just… I can’t just hope everyone will be nice and kind and not want to hurt me. That’s good, right? That’s what you wanted me to learn.

Kagami sags, sitting down heavily, no, Sacchan. I didn’t want you to learn it. I just thought you’d need to. To survive. But I can’t help wishing you could have stayed…

A dummy?

No. Happy.

Sakura sighs, retrieving her sand fox, Sayaka, from on top of the dresser. The little fox yawns, showing off her glittering gold fangs. Sakura puts her on the bed, beside her dogs.

I am happy, she says measuredly, I have a lot of good things. A big, big family. Naruto got ‘adopted, just like he always wanted. And I got Tenzo back from the bad place. I have my Monsters, and I’m going to start the Academy soon.

And Shisui? Kagami says hesitantly, as if unsure of the response she’d get.
How did they become so different? What made Sakura turn into Kagami in the first place? Was it really that final fight, the horrific death she endured? Or a series of heartbreaks and setbacks along the way?

I told him I’d always be his friend, even if he wasn’t mine. I wrote it in a letter, in my own special code. If he’s bothered to learn it, like he said he would, then he’ll know what I promised.

You are not beholden to promises made out of love, Sacchan, Kagami says softly.

“Love.” Sakura says quietly, hugging her knees.

“Should I be worried?” Kitagawa asks, leaning against the doorway.

Sakura doesn’t even jump in surprise. She just raises her gaze to meet his, her big, wet eyes peaking over her knees.

Kitagawa’s face flickers. His chakra hardens to a protective diamond, immediately on guard.

“What happened?” He asks.

Sakura wipes her eyes.

Misa lays her head on Sakura’s foot, letting out a whine. Sayaka’s sand tail has stopped swishing, and now she’s just sitting still, looking like a miniature sand sculpture.

“I got hurt, Kit-kun,” Sakura says, the tears starting to fall in earnest, now, “did you know friends can do that? Even friends?”

Kitagawa crosses the room slowly, hands raised nonthreateningly.

“Didn’t I tell you?” He says, chucking her under the chin, “I don’t believe in friends.”

Sakura rests her head on Kitagawa’s shoulder, wrapping her arms around him. She can’t even come close to hugging all of him, even though he’s so skinny.

“I do,” Sakura says quietly, “it’s better to let people close enough to hurt you than never let anyone in at all. If you do that, you’ll never get hugs, Kit-kun. So, even though it hurts… we’ve still got this.”

Kit breathes out, giving her a quick pat on the back, “Yeah, yeah. I know. Don’t try to comfort me when I’m comforting you, okay? There can only be one comforter here, and it’s me. I can juggle and everything.”

“But I can make flowers.” Sakura whispers conspiratorially, holding out her hand. But nothing happens. She stares down at her empty palm in dismay.

Kit raises his eyebrows, then shakes the sleeve of his cloak. A multi-coloured ribbon shoots out, a rainbow of silk pooling into his hand.

He twists it, his hands a blur, and reveals a tiny, knotted flower.

“Boom,” He murmurs, “I can juggle and make flowers. Aren’t I the coolest?”

“Yes.” Sakura nods.

Kitagawa’s eyes widen a fraction and he flaps his hand at her, “Ugh, sincere compliments give me
Sakura blows a raspberry at him, but obediently sits back and thinks about the new topic. Ami’s mean words hadn’t bothered Sakura half as much as Ino’s anger and pain. Izanagi using genjutsu on her had been scary, but not half as bad as the moment she realised what Shisui meant to do.

“Friends can always comfort you better than anyone, but they can hurt you worse, too.” Sakura says slowly.

Kitagawa drops the ribbon flower in her hands.

“How’s that for comfort, eh?” He says with a lopsided smirk. His chakra says he’s actually feeling angry, but it’s pointed elsewhere, not at her.

Sakura carefully threads the flower into her own ribbon.

“Very nice, thank you. I feel better already.” She says politely.

“Good. So. What happened, kiddo? I left you for about a minute, maybe?”

Sakura strokes Sayaka with a single finger, finding her grainy texture pleasant to touch.

“Sakura-hime?”

*Are you going to tell him?* Kagami asks.

Kagami’s changed too. Before, she would’ve simply demanded Sakura do this, or do that, punch him and run, or jump out the window. Now, she doesn’t seem to have any ideas about being in charge.

“If I give you an order,” Sakura begins gravely, “do you have to do it?”

Kitagawa wiggles his hand noncommittally, “Ehhh… depends on the order. If you were ordering me to set the house on fire, that’d be a big fat no-no. If you wanted me to get you a glass of water, I’d have to either take you with me or get someone else to do it. But if you wanted me to shut up, or get out of your space, then I’d do it, no problem.”

“Okay, here’s my order. I’m going to tell you who hurt me and what happened, and you can’t tell anyone or do anything about it.”

Kitagawa freezes, staring at her for several seconds. Then he shoves part of his cloak in his mouth and slowly raises his hand in a thumbs up.

“Hit me with it. I’m gonna be quiet now so you can talk,” He says, muffled by cloth.

“Shisui came by the garden –”

“Izanagi!” Kitagawa says furiously, the cloak falling out of his mouth.

“No. It really was Shisui –”

“Let’s throw a *san* on that name, just for propriety’s sake, hm?”

“Shisuuuuu.” Sakura draws out deliberately, annoyed. Kitagawa looks vexed, but also somewhat proud.
“He came by the garden, and I was a little nervous, because he seemed weird. And then he said he
was sorry, and that he loved me – ”

Kitagawa lets out a high-pitched noise, then thrashes around a little.

Sakura glares at him.

He quickly sobers, gesturing for her to continue.

“And then he – ” Sakura falters.

Momo climbs up her knees, huffing with the effort, then settles on top of them. He’s almost too big
to fit there anymore, but he seems to like being close to her face. Sakura gives him a watery smile,
and strokes the scarf that covers his back. Shisui’s scarf, donated without much thought or hesitation.

Kitagawa says nothing, patiently waiting for her to continue.

“He used his eyes on me.” Sakura says. She cups Sayaka in her hand and brings her close to her
heart.

Kitagawa’s face falls, “Kid, if that’s true… we need to tell your ma, he could’ve left any kind of
suggestion in your head, or messed with something, or – ”

“He didn’t,” Sakura interrupts, as serene as a moonlit lake, “I know, because I have two souls, and
the other me would never let that happen.”

Kitagawa slithers to the floor, covering his eyes with one hand. He raises the other sharply, gesturing
for her to go on.

“Are you okay, Kit-kun?” Sakura asks, reminded all too well of how Shisui had reacted to
revelations she dropped on him.

Kitagawa waves his hand emphatically, “Yep. Don’t mind me. Two souls, huh? What a story to tell
at parties. Whoo-hoo, that’s a… that’s a big one.”

“Wait.” Kitagawa says, standing abruptly and brushing down his cloak. His face looks serious, for
once. “This is something you should be telling your ma. Not a guy like me. Don’t trust me with all
your secrets, kiddo. Believe me, I’m not worth it.”

“You tell lies, Kit-kun. That’s just another one of them.” Sakura says severely.

Kitagawa laughs, “Ehhh… not quite. I already know too much, and that gives me a lot of power
over you. I could do anything with it, I could blackmail you or your ma, I could sell your secrets, I
could use ‘em against you in a fight, I could – ”

“You could, but you won’t.” Sakura says.

Kitagawa looks floored. Then he abruptly turns, suddenly infused with energy that sends him pacing
up and down the room.

“You don’t know me. I’m not kidding when I say I’m not worth it, okay? I know what I’m worth, I
know it vividly, in ryo and broken promises. You don’t – ”

“So tell me one of your secrets as payment.” Sakura says reasonably.
Kit stops pacing, giving her a wry look, “Look at you, being all sneaky. Taking advantage of my loss of composure to gain info, hm?”

Sakura beams.

“Pfft. Fine. My first name is Seiji. Is that enough?”

Sakura shakes her head.

“Okay. My father was a walrus, and my mother was a duck. Please don’t ask how I was born, the story is… quite tragic.”

“Kit-kun.” Sakura chides.

“Now, if that was true it’d probably be a better story than your two souls. Okay… my ma sold me. My brother was a daimyo. I was born in a nest of vipers. My cloak is made from the souls of my enemies. My – ”

“The first one was true,” Sakura says slowly, sadness creeping into her voice, “your mother sold you.”

Kitagawa freezes, his smirk falling.

“Why would she do that?” Sakura asks, horrified.

Kitagawa’s mouth twitches into a grimace, “Why does anyone sell anything?”

“You’re not a thing.”

“Doesn’t matter now. Old news. It’s a boring story anyway. Is it enough to buy your secret, though?”

“If you tell me your story, I’ll tell you mine.” Sakura says, popping Momo back onto the bed so she can see Kitagawa more clearly.

He closes his eyes, scratching his collarbone, then sits on the floor in a rush. His cloak flows around him, pooling onto the carpet like smoke unfurling from a flame.

“Another time, Sakura-hime.” He says quietly.

Sakura bites her lip, but nods. Once, Shisui grabbed her and took her to a far-off place, and sat her down and made her spill her secrets. She could have said no, but she would’ve felt bad, refusing him. She doesn’t want Kitagawa to feel he has to share his story.

“If I ever meet your mother, I’m going to tell her off.” Sakura says firmly.

Kitagawa rubs his chin, grimacing, “Ehh… not a good idea. My ma… doesn’t matter. Now, I’m gonna punch that Shisui kid for messing with your head.”

“I kind of already did,” Sakura says sheepishly.

Kitagawa lights up, crossing the room to ruffle her hair in delight, “Really? Way to go, kid!”

“Then I healed his face,” She admits.

Kitagawa slumps back down, “The dream is dead. Still, I guess dealing with him isn’t your problem.
Kids shouldn’t be responsible for stuff like that. They should be protected from things like violence, swearing and hatred, because they’re fragile, not yet fully-formed, and if they witness bad things like that, they can absorb them. It doesn’t make them bad, necessarily, it just makes them feel bad.”

Sakura fights tears, “How could you tell how I was feeling?”

Kit is silent, then he grins, tweaking her nose, “Lucky for you and me, we’re not how we feel. Feelings are temporary, but who you are is eternal. And you’re a sickeningly sweet, kind-hearted kid who happens to feel bad sometimes.”

“What about you, Kit-kun? Did someone protect you from all the bad things?” Sakura asks.

Kitagawa wipes his mouth, staring at the wall. Sakura frowns, starting to say something to comfort him.

He gets there first, grinning widely, “You don’t need to be protected when you’re the bad guy.”

Sakura gives him a deeply disgusted look.

He just chuckles goofily in response, unbothered.

“How could you tell how I was feeling?”

Momo yips.

xxxxxxxx

Kitagawa tells her where Tsunade is, and promises to hang back while they talk privately.

Tsunade is sitting at the dining table, nudging an empty glass with a single finger, plainly bored. There are dark circles below her eyes.

“Is it my favourite child, or one of my other favourite children?” Tsunade calls up.

Sakura stills, gripping the bannister in surprise. She smiles ruefully to herself. She should’ve known Tsunade would see her coming.

“It’s one of your favourite children,” Sakura calls back, clearing the rest of the stairs with a little hop. She lands with a wobble.

Tsunade gives her a round of applause, her mouth curving up ever so slightly. Her face is bare of makeup, and her hair is down, a silky curtain of pale gold cascading down her back.

“So it is,” She says, eyes crinkling with mirth, “did the dogs do their business outside? Or in Shizune’s bed again?”

“They didn’t do anything at all, Oba-san. They didn’t get chance. I… can I tell you something bad?” Sakura asks, approaching the table with slow, hesitant steps.

Tsunade gives the empty glass a rueful smirk, then beckons her forward, “Sit, sit. I’ll make you some warm milk. That’s what kids like, right?”

“My parents make Hot Kitty Cocoa.” Sakura says proudly.

Tsunade pauses, then laughs, “well, I’m not sure I know that particular recipe. Thankfully, I’m well-versed in the arts of heating up dairy products, so I can sure as anything make you a Bland Hot Milk,
if you like.”

“Yes, please!”

*What are you going to tell her?* Kagami asks.

Sakura sits at the table, watching Tsunade pouring milk, a look of intense concentration on her face.

*The truth. Kind of.*

*Ouch. Bye-bye Shisui.*

*No. He must have had a reason, even if it was a bad one. He wouldn’t hurt me for fun.*

*That doesn’t make it better, Sacchan. He waited for the one time of day that you were alone for at least thirty seconds, which shows he planned it. He planned to hurt you.*

Sakura swings her feet. She thinks they’ve gotten a little bigger since the last time she checked. She always thought that maybe once her feet could reach the floor, she could be as fast as Shisui. It feels like that will take a long time.

“Oh here you go,” Tsunade says, sliding a steaming mug in front of her and taking the seat opposite, “so, what’s going on?”

Sakura sips her milk. It’s sweet. Tsunade must have added sugar. So much for *Bland* Hot Milk. She covers her smile with the mug.

Then, she tells Tsunade much the same story she had told Kitagawa, of a Magic Mask who claimed to come from hell, of the attempt he made to take her from her bedroom, the face that he wore to do it.

And then, just as Kitagawa once counselled, she mixed a little lie inside the big truth.

*“He did it again tonight,”* She says steadily, gazing into Tsunade’s eyes, *“Izanagi-san came to me while I was in the garden with the dogs, and Kit-kun wasn’t there. It was only for a few seconds, but he came as Shisui, so I didn’t call out the moment I saw him. And then it was too late.”*

Sakura’s hit by a wave of grief, so unexpected and so fresh that she nearly buckles, tears spilling when she squeezes her eyes shut, clapping a hand over her mouth. She shakes, the mug nearly slipping from her grasp, and then there’s an arm around her and she’s being lifted up, up and –

Tsunade holds her in her arms, rubbing her back, “I’m here. I’m right here. Nothing will ever hurt you, not while I’m around. Do you understand?”

Sakura tries to stop crying, shuddering too hard to speak. She sends a silent plea to Kagami, asking for her control.

Kagami just shakes her head, *No, Sacchan. You need to get this out. Feeling too much is a problem, yes, but not allowing yourself to feel anything is worse. Cry, just this once.*

Sakura gasps for air in between sobs, crying so hard her head aches. Her hands clutch at Tsunade desperately, hearing herself crying and *hating* herself for it. She’s not a child anymore. But it hurts, somewhere deep inside her chest, where she’d only ever felt the echoes of Kagami’s pain. This agony is all hers, bone-deep and splintering within.

She hears a murmur and opens her eyes, vision blurry.
The kitchen shimmers before her, transformed by her tears. For a moment she forgets her pain, transfixed by this new magic.

Then the tears fall and her vision clears, and she sees Jiraiya peering at her in concern.

“You okay, Hime-sama?” He asks.

“I’m doing fine,” Tsunade replies irritably, rocking Sakura.

“I was referring to the smaller princess,” Jiraiya laughs, “I know you’ve got this. Keep your chin up, kid. Got it?”

Kagami whispers, *his own friend did the same, once…*

Sakura listens.

“What do you do if your friend hurts you?” She asks.

Jiraiya’s voice is just a little hoarse when he finally responds, “You chase your friend down, and you make them tell you why they did it. You beat some sense into them, and make sure they apologise for everything, and mean it. And then you bring him home.”

“I say you cut them off and find better friends,” Tsunade says sharply, swinging Sakura around so that Jiraiya falls out of view, *they should come to you to apologise. If you ever have to track someone down and make them say sorry… they’re not worth the effort.*

Sakura wipes her face, cold from half-dried tears.

She’s not sure what to think. Everyone is telling her to take a different path, but she doesn’t even know which she’d take of her own accord.

*They should come to you to apologise.* Shisui had been so upset before he did it, and he felt *so much* worse afterwards. If he comes to her to say sorry, she’ll listen. She won’t forgive him right away, like she’s always done. But… even through the wrenching pain, she can’t help but assume she will forgive him. Someday.

*Time will tell,* Kagami says.

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After Jiraiya has wandered back upstairs, Sakura regales Tsunade with the rest of her tale, stitched together with truth and lies.

She tells her Izanagi got inside her mind, just like he did when she saw everyone dead the first time they met. She says Izanagi tried to get to Kagami, but they were blurring together, so he pulled them apart. He unwittingly freed Kagami, who then forced him out of Sakura’s mind.

Tsunade drums her fingers on the table, frowning at the ceiling as if searching for stains. A quick scan shows she’s deep in thought, worry chewing at her aura.

“So,” She says finally, levelling a finger at the empty chair next to Sakura’s, “Kagami is more than just a collection of memories. She was capable of repelling advanced genjutsu. That gives her a presence. A power. I think… I think more than just her mind travelled back to you. I think she’s the soul of your future self. Kagami, I’m asking you. Did you have any kind of ability? Some kind of… soul transference?”
“I wasn’t capable of anything like that,” Kagami starts to say, but Tsunade gives her a sour look.

“No false modesty at the dinner table.”

“It’s not false, Tsunade-sama. I couldn’t… well. I did… there was something. It’s embarrassing, but when I was younger, I pretended a lot. I tried not to show my anger, because I have such a bad temper and I wanted to be ladylike. And all that anger and frustration just… built up, I guess. So whenever I pretended not to care about something… there was this voice. Another me. She was always furious. I called her Inner Sakura.”

Tsunade tilts her head, “And you, Sakura. Any little versions of you in your head? No? Any since Kagami joined you? No… interesting. Kagami, did your Inner come back in time with you?”

“No, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade stretches, cracking her back with a groan. She can’t hold back a smirk, eminently pleased with herself.

“Two souls,” She says, “but something happened to turn two into one. Turning Sakura into Kagami, and sending you back in time. A soul that’s used to being part of a pair might seek another half, the next compatible one being itself… but earlier, back when the soul was too young to form another. Leaving space for Kagami.”

“My – my Inner once pushed Ino out of my head when she used her Shintenshin on me,” Kagami says, “I didn’t understand it, but no one said anything, so…”

Tsunade regards her flatly, “Then you were associating with idiots. Or, more likely, people who were unfamiliar with Yamanaka clan techniques. Too unfamiliar to know that what you achieved is impossible, unless you had a secret weapon.”

“Inner Sakura…”

“The one and only. Until you returned to your younger self, and became her Inner Sakura.”

Sakura and Kagami stare at each other, one confused, the other astonished.

“Soul transference. You did it before, you can do it again. If Kagami is what Izanagi is after, Sakura will be in danger every second she remains part of a pair. So, we just need to find a way to separate you two safely, with a vessel for Kagami.” Tsunade says, sounding as though she’s musing aloud rather than conversing, tapping a purple nail against her chin.

Kagami shudders, flashes of mad gold eyes and black markings trailing across pale skin. Vessel.

“Would it be better or worse for Onee-chan?” Sakura asks, “because I’m not doing it if it hurts her.”

“Tsh, it’ll hurt her more if Izanagi gets his hands on her. But this isn’t going to happen overnight. It’s going to take years of research to figure it out. I won’t do anything until I know I’ve developed the best technique.”

Sakura gives Kagami a nervous look, squeezing her own hand for comfort.

“Luckily for us, we’ve got our very own resident idiot genius to recruit for the task.” Tsunade’s smirk sharpens to a shark-like grin.

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A week after Shisui’s midnight visit, Sakura comes to the Senju House, laden with the usual bags of essentials and ‘just-in-cases’ her dad always makes her take.

The kitchen table is covered in papers, crayon squiggles and doodles. Naruto is happily drawing swirls in every colour imaginable, sitting next to Jiraiya, who dwarfs him by a mile. Jiraiya points to Naruto’s paper and mumbles something. Naruto nods, crossing something out and quickly changing it.

“What’s going on?” Sakura asks. Misa and Momo immediately rush into the kitchen, running around sniffing everything.

Jiraiya and Naruto barely look up, too engrossed in their work.

“Seals.” Jiraiya says shortly, painting with intricate brushstrokes, thick ink spelling out something incomprehensible but complicated.

“Seals!” Naruto agrees. Sakura peeks at his paper. What she’d previously taken for a simple doodle of a flower is anything but – Naruto is drawing a very precise pattern of concentric swirls, with hardly any mistakes crossed out.

“Wow.” Sakura says, impressed.

“Oh,” Naruto looks up, a big grin flashing across his face, “HI, SAKURA-NEE!”

Jiraiya winces, “What have we talked about, Naru-tan? Shinobi have – ”

“Super delicate ears!”

“Which means they’re – ”

“Really good at hearing!”

“And they – ”

“Hear loud noises too mu – oh, sorry, ji-san. Quiet voices at the table,” Naruto tells Sakura seriously, “because seals are really hard to make. I’m gonna be a sealmaster! Ji-san said so!”

Sakura claps in glee, “That’s amazing, Naruto!”

“Oh, by the way, you’ve got a letter… somewhere.” Jiraiya says, waving vaguely at a stack of papers.

Sakura heads over to the pile, curious to see who would send her a letter to this address instead of the Haruno Home.

Maybe our uncle? Kagami suggests.

Sakura unearths a likely-looking piece of paper, already unsealed and opened.

“I may have used it to show Naruto how to check for traps.” Jiraiya says absently, passing Naruto a pink crayon.

There’s stains on the page that smell suspiciously like ramen.

Sakura scans the letter, then screams.
Jiraiya’s up in an instant, Naruto in his arms, tucked between him and the cause of his alarm.

“It’s from Gaara-kun!” Sakura cheers.

Jiraiya’s tense face slackens and he sags back against the counter, letting out a great huff.

Misa is slowly stalking the tip of Jiraiya’s hair as it sways, just brushing the ground. Misa’s hackles are raised. She tenses, about to pounce, then Momo nips her ear and they both explode out of the room, yapping and pretending to bite each other.

Jiraiya watches, looking faint, “Monsters.”

“Yep,” Sakura says proudly, “they’ve gotten a lot better at playing. Misa used to fall down a lot more.”

Jiraiya releases Naruto, careful to let him down gently. He bounces back onto his chair, already focused on his task again even after the interruption.

Sakura takes her letter and rushes up to her bedroom, jumping onto her bed and getting comfy, arranging her pillows just right. She lies back, heart racing, and begins to read.

Sakura,

They have told me I cannot go to you, you must come to me. The road to Konoha is dangerous, apparently, but I don’t think there is anything that could stop me from getting there if I really wanted. And I do.

I’ve written a thousand letters in my head. Every day something happens and I wish I could tell you about it. It’s strange. It’s not like before, where I could just talk to Okaa-san and I would feel better. I’m hungry. And I’m itching to do something, to take something out of the world for good. Whenever I do that, it reminds me that I’m here for a reason, and for every life I take, my own life gains more meaning.

But somehow, I imagine you reading this with a frown. I don’t want that. I remember every word you said about monsters, and Naruto. I want to meet him, too. And his giant fox. So I’m being good as much as possible. It seems to be working, for now. I haven’t killed anyone, at least.

Temari and Kankuro remain frightened of me, but they are thawing, slightly. Kankuro laughed in my presence the other day. Of course, he spoiled it by leaking terror when he realised I was there. But still, I have heard my brother’s laugh. I know what it sounds like now. That is good. That is mine. When someone dies, they take everything with them. There’s so much inside a person that it takes years to ever know them properly. So if you just kill them right away, you’ll know next to nothing about them. And I don’t want that. People are interesting, sometimes.

None as interesting as you, though. When are you coming back? Kankuro says you are the daughter of an important Clan Heir. That is useful, I suppose. You can demand to visit and they will have to say yes. So, please. Demand.

I’ve been told you have to end letters with your name, even though you must already know who this is from. If you didn’t, I will be disappointed.

It is Gaara.

Wait, I am not done writing. Please come visit or write to me. I wanted to send you a large battleaxe I have acquired, but the man who is writing this for me said that would be ‘inappropriate,’ so I will
send it with the next letter, assuming he is not here.

Again, this is Gaara.

P.S. The flower you gave me is still alive, and from time to time it either wilts or blooms. If it is connected to your mood, do not tell me. I will want to go to Konoha every time it shrivels and turns brown, as it has done today. I am done writing now.

Sakura laughs harder than she has in weeks.

She pulls a sheet of paper from her chest, one with stars and hearts drawn along the top. It’s also perfumed with the scent of vanilla and cherry blossom.

When she writes her reply, she makes sure to tell him how much she smiled while reading his letter.

Sayaka stretches on top of her dresser, spiky tail flicking around.

Sakura is woken by soft toys bouncing off her head.

She looks up blearily, confused.

Kitagawa is sitting across the room, poised to throw Miss Magnolia.

Sakura leaps out of bed to yell indignantly, but Kitagawa raises a finger to his lips and gestures frantically.

“Shhhhhshshshshsh!” He hisses, “I’m sorry, but I had to figure out a time to talk to you in which we wouldn’t be interrupted by one of the two Sannin that now live here – which is just great, by the way – or the rest of the overly-friendly Senju clan. The early hours of the morning were my best bet.”

“Talk to me?” Sakura repeats, still groggy from sleep.

“It’s about your birthday present.” Kitagawa explains.

“My birthday’s tomorrow.” Sakura points out. She has to pause to do a little dance in excitement at the thought of it.

“Yep, and you may need time to recover, which you wouldn’t get when everyone’s throwing presents at you every five minutes.”

“Recover from what?” Sakura says warily, beginning to draw back.

Kitagawa snaps his fingers enthusiastically, “I’m loving the suspicion. Keep it up, kiddo. That’ll keep you alive one day. Recover from the present I got for you so thoughtfully, so long ago!”

He unfurls a scroll from his cloak, laying it across the carpet.

“Recognise this?” He asks.

Sakura stares down at it, bare toes squidding against carpet, and shrugs.

“What about this?” He pulls a pretty paper fan out from his sleeve, opening it up to dramatically wave in his face.
“That’s the Uchiha fan!” Sakura says, “the one you stole!”

“Temporarily released from its shackles of wealth,” Kitagawa corrects, “and it’s one half of your present. I checked, and it’s never been used. It was still in the box it was bought in, coated in dust. But I’m sure they’re devastated over it.”

Sakura pins him with a glare. He pretends to have been shot by an arrow and flails in response.

Sakura heroically wrestles her mouth into submission, refusing to smile.

“It’s yours now, like it or not. It’ll help when you feel faint and need to cool down. And this is the better half of your gift. A summoning scroll.” He says, waving his hands with a showman’s flair.

_Ooh_, Kagami says excitedly.

_Not ooh, boo!_ Sakura responds.

“Before you get yourself all in a tizzy over it, this was definitely not the Uchiha clan’s. They didn’t buy it, either. It originates from Kusa, I believe. It was one of many that they had just lying around. Do you know why they’d do that? Hoard a bunch of useful scrolls without using them? To make sure no one else could use them either. The Uchiha have got their own summons, but why risk leaving this in the hands of an enemy, right? Or someone who would actually, you know, _use_ it? Because they _need_ it? Ugh, rich people.”

“What does it summon?” Sakura asks reluctantly, having been relentlessly prodded by an uncharacteristically enthused Kagami the whole time Kit was speaking.

Kitagawa shrugs fluidly, his cloak rippling around him, “With your luck, butterflies. It’s designed to summon the user, rather than allow the user to summon. You sign your name, give up a little blood, and the summons that best suit you just go right ahead and _yank_ you into their homeworld. You do a little task, prove yourself worthy… you get yourself some bada – awesome animals.”

“What if I’m not worthy?” Sakura asks.

“Well, you are, so that’s a dumb question. You’re worthy of every single one of ‘em. There’s not a chance in hell that they won’t take you on. And if they don’t, just pick up some really big rocks as a sign of dominance.”

Sakura sighs, shaking her head, and drops down to the floor to examine the scroll more closely.

Kitagawa is radiating gentle trust and assurance, quietly confident in Sakura’s chances. She’s not quite so sure.

Still, when he points her to place her bloody thumbprint, she takes one deep breath, and pushes down hard.

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When she opens her eyes, all she sees is green.

Then she focuses, and the green sharpens into hundreds of trees surrounding her, each one with a tall, straight trunk, pale bark, and glossy dark green leaves. Encircling each trunk is a hedge with wildflowers strewn about in bright clumps.

Sakura looks up to check the position of the sun, but it’s not there. The sky is missing, too. All that is
above her are gigantic tree branches, both long and wide enough to form a sky above her.

Instead of a sun or a moon, there are two large lanterns, each swinging from a branch on opposite sides of the wooden sky. The brightest lantern is casting a pale yellow glow, like the morning sun. The dimmest lantern emits an eerie green light, like the moon over a stormy sea.

Sakura looks back down, and sees something she must have missed somehow when she first opened her eyes.

An enormous wooden gate stands before her, bridging the gap between the dirt she stands on, and the roughly-cut stone steps it blocks with its girth. To get up the steps, she will have to walk through the gate. There’s more than enough room, but it feels… strange, somehow.

Sakura gives herself a moment to breathe.

She did it.

She made it into whatever world this is, and whatever animal resides her is her destined summons. She can do this.

Right, Onee-chan? She asks, hoping for one last word of encouragement to bolster her.

Instead, she hears nothing. She feels nothing.

Kagami is gone.

“No!” Sakura cries out.

In an instant, the leaves around her all begin to rustle.

The breeze picks up, ruffling her hair and clothes, and a great big gust of wind sends her stumbling through the gate and up the stairs.

She walks of her own accord after a while, the wind abandoning her about halfway up. There’s no bannister or rail, nothing between her and a dizzying fall onto a blanket of treetops.

The dimmest lantern sways ever so slightly, and the green wash over the world is briefly replaced by sunshine yellow.

Sakura rubs her eyes, undeterred, and keeps heading up.

She reaches the top of the stairs after what seems like hours. She’s never walked so long in her whole life, but her legs feel fine. She’s not even breathing hard.

There is a shrine before her, made of black wood and paper doors.

Red lanterns light the way to the front door, which is shielded by a porch of offerings.

Sakura walks closer, head tilting curiously. There are shiny dishes covered in coins, and sacks of unspoiled food. She even spies a table with a plate of dumplings and a mug of something steaming, but it’s not hers, so she keeps walking.

Before she can make it down the path, she is cut off by the sound of wings.

Doves settle in front of her, peering up at her with bright, curious eyes.
“So young!” One coos, its feathers puffing up, “a hatchling, still moulting! What would make an infant try for the honour of becoming our summoner?”

For a brief moment, Izanagi’s mask comes to mind, soon replaced by Shisui’s regretful eyes.

Then she shakes her head, and the ones she lost in another life appear in her thoughts. The ones she wants so badly to protect.

But they’re all selfish reasons, really. Fear, or the desire to keep something she loved.

Sakura crouches down, hugging her knees, “Are you lonely? Do you need a summoner at all? Or would you prefer it if I left? I don’t want to make you fight for me.”

Doves, she learns, laugh melodically, like Kitagawa’s bells chiming in unison.

“It is our nature to fight for a worthy one. We’ve seen many cycles without anyone even challenging for the contract. We are patient, but all wells run dry eventually. If you prove worthy, then you are worthy to bond with us and join the nest. It is that simple.” Another dove says, its eyes unnaturally blue and knowing.

“So, please,” The third dove says, fluttering over to her shoulder and pressing its beak to her ear, “begin the tasks, and we will learn if you are worthy.”

The doors to the shrine swing open with a sound like the whispering wind.

Sakura stares into the darkened hall inside, and strokes the dove on her shoulder.

_I can only do my best_, she decides.

xxxxxxx

Shisui waits outside Takumi’s door without much hope.

He wants to report back to Izanagi, to get to him just long enough to use Kotoamatsukami. Then they’d see who had the advantage, who messed with whose mind.

He’d assumed Izanagi was an Uchiha, because the evidence certainly seemed to suggest it. But that meant he had caught Shisui in his Sharingan, implanted suggestions, and then erased his memories of the encounter. If he was capable of that, why had he bothered to go to the trouble of ‘persuading’ him to look inside Sakura’s mind? He could have simply ordered him to, and he would never know.

An Uchiha with eyes strong enough to beat Shisui’s… He didn’t think he was bragging to say it would be a short list. He was glad to narrow down the search even by that much. Izanagi was becoming less of a blurry, shadowy figure and more of a presence, a clan member gone rogue, or a folklore hero transported into this world with methods that drove him to darkness. He might have been reaching, with the last one.

Sakura’s face, that moment where she realised what he was going to do, is etched in his mind. The Sharingan seems more like a curse the more he uses it. The fear in her eyes was more than he could bear. He just shut himself off, treated it like a mission.

If it were one, he surely would have failed.

“Oh, Shisui-kun,” Takumi says, startled, coming down the path to his house, “have you been waiting long?”
Shisui leans against Takumi’s front door and meets his eyes with a wide smile.

“Only forever… Takumi-chan.”

***

Hello friends!

Kitagawa may or may not have a Tragic Past. Who saw that coming? Hands, everyone!

If even Kagami is concerned, you may have a problem, Sacchan. It’s okay to cry, guys, it’s scientifically proven to have health benefits! So you go ahead and cry if that’s what you need!

Sakura told a fib. Now Tsunade thinks Izanagi tried to get into Sakura’s head, not Shisui… sneaky Sacchan. Yes, she did it to protect him, but also his family, since she has the vague sense that they’re not very well-liked, after listening to Fugaku too much.

Tsunade has come up with a theory about Kagami. Is it correct? Who knows! (apart from me, that is. Hmmm… three people)

Jiraiya is teaching Naruto seals!! Naruto is trying to replicate Jiraiya’s designs in crayon, for extra cute points.

A little-known fact about me: I have ADHD. I headcanon Naruto as having it too. Hence his unusual level of focus when he found something he liked, i.e. scrolls.

Gaara’s letter was so much fun to write and I don’t know why. Just the image of this tiny, murderous child glaring at the guy he’s dictating his letter to is hilarious to me.

Kitagawa stole a summoning scroll specifically for Sakura’s birthday like five chapters ago. That guy plans ahead.

Now, there’s so little summoning lore out there that I decided to just. Make it up. So Sakura going alone at four, unarmed, and in pyjamas, becomes a lot more plausible when you know I headcanon that no one’s ever been killed during an attempt to get a summons, because that would make people less likely to want to try, which the summons definitely don’t want.

Drum roll, please!

Sakura’s summons (if she succeeds in the next chapter!) are DOVES!! And pigeons. But mostly doves. Doves are symbolic of peace, native to Konoha so they can blend in well, and in some cultures it’s believed that their coos are the voices of the dead, whispering through worlds. Pretty much what Sakura hears whenever she dreams.

Quick poll for fun: What hated character do you actually like?

This can be from any fandom. By ‘hated,’ I mean that they get a lot of criticism and hate from fans, like Sakura and Karin from Naruto, Sansa from Game of Thrones, or Shinji from Neon Genesis Evangelion.

If you don’t like any hated characters, then what character do you hate that everyone else likes?

(Dogwatch Pupdate: One brave warrior dog almost catches the weird spiky thing, but is intercepted by a Good Boy! Playfights ensue!! Everyone’s a winner!)
Kagami doesn’t know where she is.

It’s not her mindscape, at least. In the mind she shares with Sakura, every thought and feeling is intrinsically hers, even the innocence she has long since lost, that still spreads throughout Sakura’s mind. The little girl’s kindness is cloyingly sweet, like a sugary film stuck to your tongue, and despite barely recognising the taste, Kagami feels it as her own.

Kagami looks around the foreign world. She’s in a boneyard, an endless expanse of great skeletons, stretching up to the sky. She ducks under the fractured ribcage of some titanic beast, its entire midsection decimated by a single blow. Kagami assesses the damage with narrowed eyes. I could hit harder, she thinks.

“Self-confidence is a virtue,” A plummy, unctuous voice says to her left. She turns sharply, fists raised in warning. “Vanity is a sin.”

The speaker is a vulture, its feathers mottled with salmon-pink and rust-red. It is gazing at her without much interest, as a cat might watch a fly. Mildly diverting to watch it spin around, but not worth watching for long. Not even close to a threat.

“False modesty is neither,” Kagami replies flatly, not dropping her fists, “and yet I think it’s worse.”

The vulture lets out an eerie screech of laughter, “A creature half-comprised of bitterness and hatred would think as much. At any rate, in this case, you are correct. You are capable of hitting harder than whatever felled that beast, and to believe otherwise would be pure delusion. And you are not in the habit of deluding yourself, are you?”

Kagami gets the feeling this overgrown turkey is attempting to mock her.

“Myself,” Kagami says carefully, “is up for debate. It’s hard to delude yourself when you don’t know who that is.”

The vulture flicks its feathers disdainfully, “Stuff and nonsense. It is useless to spend all your time gazing at your navel, lest you walk into a wall. Who am I is a fool’s question. It is more important to ask, who can I be?”

Kagami frowns. She feels more clear-headed here than she has ever done in Sakura’s mind, even after Shisui separated the two. She can finally think. Before, when she was caught up in Sakura’s thoughts and feelings, the only thing that kept her from feeling like an extraneous limb were her memories. Kagami’s memories, of things that would never happen to Sakura, aches and pains that cut through her to remember, but still made her feel more like herself.

“Spend time stuck in someone else’s mind and see how long it takes for you to develop an identity crisis.” Kagami responds.

The vulture tosses its head. It is perched on a tibia, which sits as tall as Kagami stands. The bird scratches at the bone beneath its feet, “Identity crises are for other people. Self-actualisation is a useful tool that some of us are lucky to be born with. For example, I am Rokurou, the sixth son. I know who I am, and am content with what I know.”

Kagami regards him with a long, lingering look, then finally inclines her head, “I am Kagami – “
“I think not.” Rokurou drawls.

Kagami scowls, “Listen, chicken, if who I am isn’t important then you can hardly get caught up in
the semantics of my name.”

“Chicken.” Rokurou replies tonelessly. “I could pluck your heart out and eat it whole, you wretched,
malformed infant.”

Kagami startles, feeling a rare flicker of fear in her stomach.

“Tell me your name, O Imbecilic One.” Rokurou says, his voice low. He had the air of one who is
used to being obeyed.

“Whatever my name was before,” Kagami says stubbornly, “It is Kagami now.”

“Useless,” Rokurou says in conversational tones, “utterly useless. One for the pyre, I believe. Don’t
you think so, Saburou?”

Kagami doesn’t give in to her instincts, she doesn’t leap away to look for an exit, or round on the
newcomer with a spinning kick.

She merely tenses as a wing brushes her cheek, and a heavy presence lands on her shoulder. The
bird is enormous, judging by its weight and the shadow of the wingspan that fell across her as it
landed.

“Useless?” The second vulture repeats, snapping his beak against her neck, “We are not burdened
with so many potential summoners that we may throw them away as we like.”

Kagami politely tugs some of her hair from beneath its talons, fighting the urge to rip the creature off
her back. If she was a civilian, she’d buckle beneath it.

“I can’t summon you. I’m trapped inside my younger self’s mind. I’d have to summon you through
her, and I think she’s getting her own summons right about now…”

Saburou exhales noisily, lifting Kagami’s hair off her face. She shudders, fighting the urge to move
away.

“If the little one summons, there is a chance we may answer,” Rokurou replies, “providing you
change my mind about you, very swiftly, and very dramatically. And, naturally, should you come
into the possession of your own body, that is the one we would come to when called.”

“And… how might I do that? I lost my own body about eleven years into the future.”

“You were sixteen, weren’t you?” Rokurou asks, eyeing her, “I suppose you may class your
younger self’s next birthday as your seventeenth. An auspicious occasion. Though I doubt you will
be gifted with a suitable corpse to use as a vessel. At any rate, the answer to your question lies in
your memories. You have already witnessed the methods we would suggest.”

“And you can’t just tell me what to do.” Kagami sighs.

“It is irritating when others dissemble and prevaricate, is it not?” Rokurou laughs. “And no. We
cannot simply give you what you must earn.”

Kagami grits her teeth.

She looks back at Rokurou, with his eyes like scarlet and milk stones, and says, “My name is Haruno
“A name you gave away so easily,” Saburou says, hopping off her shoulder, “so eager to shuck off
the burdens of the past, to ignore the never-ending war drums in the future.”

“A name such as this cannot be worth much at all,” Rokurou agrees, “I suggest we throw it onto the
pyre.”

“That is your answer for everything, dear brother.”

“It is a well-rounded solution to all problems, respected elder.”

“Respected!” Saburou squawks in amusement.

“By some, certainly. I did not specify that it was myself in particular, who respected you.”

“Naturally.”

“Hey, I – ” Kagami interrupts, then makes herself start again in contrite tones, “Excuse me, but what
did you mean about throwing my name onto the pyre?”

“Sacrifices are pure. Cleansing, holy. They burn away the old to leave room for the new.
Occasionally they burn away the new to save room for the old. Your name is a curse to you now,
only a reminder of a life gone horribly wrong, a life that is no longer yours to live.” Rokurou says,
raking his feet through the black dirt on the ground. Kagami starts, realising it’s actually ash.

“Eat your trauma,” Rokurou advises, “swallow your insecurities whole. Your body is but a vessel for
your mind, and there is nothing that can reach you beyond it. Take the pain, the old scars, the shame,
the longing, and the fear, and break it open between your jaws. Drink down your losses, let them
feed your fire. If you are to give up your name, give everything that is attached to it as well. Become
Kagami.”

“Hmm,” Saburou makes a gentle noise of disagreement, “I think she’s lost a tad too much to start
throwing things away with wild abandon. I suggest a trip to the pool before the pyre.” He winks at
Kagami’s confused face, “Water is soothing. Enlightening. A balm to the soul, and a remedy for the
spirit. What do you think, brother?”

Rokurou pecks at his own wing with muted ferocity.

“Catharsis is important, dear brother,” Saburou says fondly, “but it is always best after a waiting
period.”

“The only waiting period I adhere to is digestion. But of course, you are the elder, and have had
many, many years to attain wisdom that I have yet to reach,” Rokurou says casually, the heavy
emphasis on his brother’s advanced age making him twitch in response, “Fine. First, the blighted
pool of reflection. Then, the pyre of restoration.”

“If she survives, brother dear.” Saburou reminds him, in a tone as mild as milk.

“Ah, yes. Of course. If,” Rokurou replies, equally unruffled.

Kagami’s knuckles creak, her hands curling into automatic fists. Her hands, weathered by age and
hard work, long, delicate fingers belying the toughness of the palms. Not the hands Sakura used,
baby-soft and untried.
“If.” She echoes.

Sakura walks through the temple entrance, tugging at her nightgown, feeling woefully underdressed.

She blinks.

When she passed through the double doors, the air shimmered, rippling around her like water, and she felt something cool seep through her.

Her eyes open wide, refusing to process what they are seeing.

She *knows* they just walked into the temple, a relatively small building.

But it *looks* like they walked into an open clearing, the sky overhead the colour of spring grass and buttercups.

She looks behind her.

The doors are gone. It is nothing but meadows and endless trees dotting about the horizon. There’s nothing uniform or convenient about their growth, they twist into each other and grow out of each other, creating a wild, untamed mass of branches and acorn-bright bark.

In front of her is the biggest tree of them all.

It’s a pear tree, with a golden trunk that stretches up to the sky. Its blossoms spread so far out that they seem to form a cloud, giving the illusion that the tree is floating in the sky.

A cosy-looking door is carved into the base of the trunk. A path of sandstone leads to the entrance, with blocks of quartz placed haphazardly along the way, glinting in the light.

As Sakura steps forward, eyes as round as coins in her shock, she hears a faint scream on the wind.

There is a forest to the east, a collection of thickly-knit trees nestled together. The scream came from there, carried by the breeze, once so reminiscent of her home, now faintly sinister.

She knows the wind can sound like a voice, especially at night. But the scream sounded so *real*, earthly, tethered to someone, not just the ghostly breath of the world playing tricks on her.

She looks back at the golden pear tree, the round door invitingly ajar.

To the west, there is a river, spilling silver and gold out of its banks. She watches the waters ebb and flow like a tide, and knows instinctively that drinking it would soothe her every ache. The skin of her back feels tight, pulled taut by the knotted scar tissue. She thinks about dipping her hand into the river, finally feeling the stain of the Mask’s murder lift and float away peacefully, her burdens drifting with it…

The scream resounds in her ears, and she pulls her hand back.

*No*, she thinks.

She runs away from the river, past the golden tree, and hurries on to the great forest stretching before her.

She’s grown up with trees, spent endless afternoons picnicking in forests, climbed a dozen with
Naruto scrambling just behind her. She’s such a child of the woods that she may as well have moss in her veins and bark instead of skin.

And yet, she’s never seen a forest quite like this.

From afar, the trees had been as green and leafy as the Nara Forest. Up close, it was transformed. Every tree was withered and blackened, charcoal and ash littering the ground. Soot floats gently from the sky, like tainted snow. The blue hills around the forest give the impression that it’s all floating underwater, ruined bark and plumes of smoke drifting by.

Sakura’s never seen a burned-down forest before. It’s like walking through a graveyard, the only sound her bare feet crunching through sticks and ash, a great hush fallen all around her.

The scream starts up again; ragged and desperate. Sakura runs as fast as she can, ducking spiky branches as she goes. Twigs and sticks bite into her feet, sending sharp flashes of pain up her legs. She slips a little on tree sap but manages to right herself just in time by grabbing a broken tree, its trunk split in two.

She nearly stumbles over the source of the scream.

A woman dressed in a white cloak is hunched over, terrified face barely visible beneath her hood. Sakura looks around wildly for the source of her fear.

A low growl echoes.

She peers through the fog that’s suddenly risen, black trees standing stark amidst the white veil enshrouding their trunks.

The growl splits, and reforms all around her. *There’s more than one*, she realises, putting her back against a tree. *Whatever they are, there’s a lot of them.*

She clenches her fists, automatically feeding them chakra. She flinches, a thin reed of chakra barely extending past her forearms. Her brow furrows as she automatically checks her reserves, sinking into her centre. The once-roaring flame of chakra is now a flickering candle. A single breath could extinguish it.

*What’s happened to me?* Sakura thinks, horrified, *where’s all my chakra gone?*

The woman cowers, covering her head.

Sakura spots a path out of the woods, free of fog or vegetation. It’s a straight shot to freedom.

An enormous wolf steps into view, snarling mouth inches from the terrified woman’s leg.

Sakura yells something, deaf to everything but her own thudding heartbeat, and hurls herself at the wolf. She has nothing but her hands, which seem so much smaller without Kagami’s immense strength.

She pushes the woman down, sheltering her with her body, like Takumi once did for her. Like she once did for Kakashi. She waits for the inevitable bite, muscles quivering in terror, the back of her neck prickling with awareness of the predator behind her.

Instead, the woman beneath her collapses, the cloak pooling onto the ground. Empty. Sakura stares in horrified confusion as feathers pour out of the hood, forming two pure white doves.
She falls back, sitting down hard. Her feet sting, grit and twigs coating the soles.

The wolf shimmers, turning into a single pigeon. It coos at her, brushing itself down with the tips of its wings like a fussy gentleman fixing his coat.

“Reckless,” One of the doves says sadly, “No forethought or caution at all.”

The other dove delicately extricates its foot from the confines of the cloak, replying in a light, fluting voice, “Brave, though. She’s very brave. Small and soft, at risk of predators. And still willing to protect another.”

“At the expense of her life, without hesitation,” The first dove argues, “self-sacrifice should never come from a dearth of self-preservation.”

The pigeon flaps its tawny wings, buffeting the doves. They puff up in indignation, but the pigeon just takes to the air, landing on Sakura’s knee.

“She’ll learn caution,” The pigeon says, “Life is a never-ending series of lessons, after all. We can’t judge the little hatchling just yet.”

“You tricked me.” Sakura says, peeved.

The pigeon laughs, its sandy wings fluttering with the movement, “For good reason. I’m Manami. I’ll be your first summons – and your best, naturally. I can create illusions and travel great distances, so I’ll work as a scout and a distraction, whatever you need.”

“I’m Asuka,” The second dove says, “Yuuto and I can work together to create illusions and we can aid you in battle. Please take care of us.”

“Of course!” Sakura says automatically.

“Asuka took my part of the introductions,” The first dove says wryly, “So I’ll simply reiterate – my name is Yuuto, and if you take care of us, we’ll take care of you.”

“I – I’m sorry, but do you mean – are you my summons now?” Sakura asks, baffled.

“We are.” Asuka and Yuuto chorus.

“If you can manage to summon us.” Manami says.

“But I thought… I thought I’d have to fight something. Or lift really big rocks.”

“If you think it was too easy, we can always start over. I have some ideas about a flaming obstacle course across the treetops.” Manami says slyly.

Sakura thinks about it. “I can’t jump very high without chakra, but I’m good at climbing trees. Why don’t I have any chakra, by the way?”

“You have your regular supply,” Yuuto explains, “although your body is equipped to hold much more chakra than the average four-year-old, that doesn’t mean it’s naturally capable of producing more than average.”

“So, it can hold your older self’s chakra as well as your own, but it doesn’t make you any better at making it. Your natural state is what you see here – a normal child.” Asuka says.

“You need to work on increasing your own reserves and abilities, not just mirroring what your future
self can do, or you may end up in a bad situation,” Manami says, morphing into a wolf once more, her eyes gleaming yellow, “with no one to help you. Not even yourself.”

Yuuto and Asuka shuffle closer, brushing wings, and the two doves become the hooded woman from before.

“What does this expression mean?” They ask, pointing at the illusory face, “what emotion is she feeling?”

Sakura blinks, watching the woman’s face shift. She automatically feels for her aura, but there’s nothing to reach out for.

“You’ve lost your ability to instinctively read body language,” The woman says, her voice a curious blend of Asuka and Yuuto’s, “You’ve become too reliant on your ability to interpret the fluctuations of chakra. If a person’s aura is cut off, you won’t be able to read them at all.”

Asuka and Yuuto shimmer, splitting back into their dove forms.

“It’s fine to work with someone else.” Asuka says kindly.

“But relying on them too much will turn them into a crutch, not an ally,” Yuuto says, “You will cripple your own development if you shackle yourself to another. You leave yourself no room to grow.”

“How do you know about Kagami?” Sakura asks.

“We know our summoner.” Manami replies, her voice warm.

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“The pool of reflection,” Rokurou says, in the tones of a beleaguered tour guide, “where the harsh face of reality can be glimpsed, to the benefit of precisely no one.”

“Brother dear, do I detect a hint of bias?”

“I can’t predict what you might detect, dear brother.”

“And the pool of reflection is…?” Kagami says, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

The two vultures jump, as if forgetting she was there.

“Over there,” Rokurou extends the tip of one wing, “you truly cannot miss it. Whatever you do, don’t fall in.”

Kagami swallows.

“You might splash me, and I detest the water.” Rokurou continues, giving a little shudder.

“An almost catlike quality.” Saburou comments.

Rokurou puffs up like an offended hen, “I beg your pardon?”

“Cats,” Saburou begins to explain, “are universally known to dislike water. Much like yourself. Add that to the worrying habit of midmorning naps, and – ”

Kagami strides off towards the blighted pool, ignoring the way the vultures’ voices rapidly increase
in volume as she goes.

Rokurou was right.

It was impossible to miss the pool, as it was the only body of water to be seen for miles. It is bracketed by an enormous ribcage, extending through the earth as if its owner lay just beneath the surface.

The water’s surface is painted with silver ripples, but its depths were deep black.

Kagami steps up to the edge of the pool.

When she peers down, her heart gives a startled, arrhythmic thump.

Her reflection shows only half her face. The left side is fine, her sixteen-year-old self blinking up at her from the water, but the right side is a mass of shadows and nothingness.

“You did not come back whole, Kagami. You left part of you behind, torn messily from your soul.” Rokurou says quietly from behind her.

“The truths we find reflected within ourselves are rarely welcome,” Saburou adds, one great wing extending to curve around Kagami’s legs in an awkward embrace, “But they are always necessary to know. It is the first step towards developing as a person.”

“This is why you are so different from your younger self. This is why you feel incomplete. You have lost part of yourself, and there is no retrieving it. But if you allow yourself to grow, then you may cover your missing parts with something new. Then you might be an even better version of yourself than before.” Rokurou says.

Kagami stares down at her face, so jarringly wrong and alien, and yet… so clearly her.

For the first time in far too long, she feels tears well up in her eyes.

“This is your truth, Kagami.” Saburou says.

“Now for the pyre of restoration,”” Rokurou says kindly, “as beginnings can only start with an ending, and the death of the old leads to the birth of the new.”

Kagami follows the birds blindly, deeply shaken by the sight of herself ripped asunder. Something primal within her revolted at the truth – that she was broken. Jagged. Imperfect.

She feels the heat hit her before she even sees the pyre, sickly yellow flames roaring up to impossible heights, trapped in a large stone basin big enough to fit several people. The fire crackles, deepening into red.

“Give up the worst parts of you.” Rokurou says.

Naruto’s eyes filling with despair. His body slackening in death, giving up, all because of her. My fault. My fault. My –

“Give it up,” Saburou says emphatically, “Let it burn.”

Kagami stares deep into the blood-red flames and remembers.

_Ino_.
I loved her.” Kagami says quietly. “I loved her and I was too late.”

Rokurou makes a soft noise, nudging her leg with his beak, “Useless. Let it burn.”

Kagami stares down at her hands, still covered in Ino’s blood. She can barely see the scar she stole from Sakura’s ritual with Tsunade, bisecting her palm.

She plunges her hands into the fire, unbidden, waiting for agony to sear through her bones.

Nothing happens.

She withdraws her hands, confused. There was no pain, and her skin is unblistered, uncharred. The blood is gone.

“It usually helps,” Rokurou says sardonically, “if one climbs into the pyre entirely, if they wish to cleanse the entirety of themselves. As I suggested earlier.”

Kagami clutches the edge of the stone basin, breathing hard.

Ino’s pale eyes, looking up at her without seeing. The scarlet stain at her temple, the awkward, ungainly sprawl her body had been left in. The knowledge that she had died so close to home, while Sakura was too busy running errands to help.

The way Ino’s blood had clung to Sakura’s hands, forever sticky and wet. It had lent her no warmth.

The black-rot guilt that leeched into every corner of Sakura’s soul.

But she is not Sakura. Not anymore.

She is Kagami.

She leaps into the fire.

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Sakura wakes up to the sight of Kit’s worried face hovering over her.

“Hey there,” He says, his face creasing into a smile, “you okay? All your limbs intact?”

Sakura pauses, giving herself a moment to absorb the brand new information she received from Kagami. The vultures, the skeletons, the pool and the pyre. And Ino.

I loved her, Kagami had said.

Useless, the vulture had replied. Let it burn.

Onnee-chan, Sakura thinks, aghast, you can’t just forget about love.

Kagami wipes her face, a rare smile brightening her eyes, it’s not love I need to forget, Sacchan. It’s regret. You too, okay? We’re working towards the future, after all. The past is gone and it’s not coming back. We don’t need to die with it.

“Kiddo? Answer me, please. Before I start questioning my decision to throw you in at the deep end and oh my god I’ve killed you, I know it – ”

“Kit-kun, can you teach me about how to make chakra, please?” Sakura interrupts, sitting upright.
Kit frowns, “Not. Not really. I didn’t exactly learn the traditional methods. Or any methods. I’m glad you’re alive, by the way. Tsunade-sama would crush me if I got you killed.”

“My summons are doves. Manami-chan is a pigeon, though, and she doesn’t like people saying otherwise. She pretended to be a wolf to see if I’d let her eat a woman in the woods and I didn’t and now they’re all my summons but I can’t summon them with my own chakra because I’m still only little and if I don’t have Kagami I’m basically even worse than your average – ”

“Take a breath! Take several breaths! Doves, really? I was hoping for something a little… toothier. Something that could eat your enemies.”

Sakura pretends to chomp at his arm, raising her hands like claws.

He fends her off by throwing his cloak over her head and attaching himself to the ceiling, enjoying her inability to reach.

Misa and Momo launch themselves off the bed, joining in with happy little growls and yips.

“Kit-kun?” Sakura says, panting a little after their playfight. “I’m ready to tell you about my other soul. If you’re ready to tell me about your mother.”

Kitagawa makes a face.

“You’ll hate it. It’s long and boring. I’ve made up a thousand more interesting pasts for myself, if you’re interesting in hearing about them.”

Sakura shakes her head, “I want to hear about you.”

Kit sighs, then lies back down on the floor, using Miss Magnolia as a pillow. Misa promptly sits on his head, and he splutters, shoving her off.

“I’ll make it quick. I grew up in a tiny, no-name village in the Land of Fire. No shinobi. No village head or official leader. Just a bunch of old busybodies spreading gossip instead of taking charge. Then, a gang started besieging us. They destroyed our fields and attacked our supply wagons, cutting off our food sources. We sent messengers to other villages to ask for help from the shinobi. They were all picked off by the gang. Finally, the old folk managed to arrange a meeting between them and the gang leader, to ask what they wanted. They demanded food, money, and whatever else we could spare. Things got lean. It was hard to feed yourselves, let alone your kids. Then, the gang made an offer. Any family that sold at least one of their kids wouldn’t have to give up their food anymore. My ma had five kids. I was the eldest. She never really cared for me – who would, you know – so she took the offer. I was sent with a handful of other lucky kids to meet with the gang. They took us in and trained us up, but they made it very clear that since they had bought us, they owned us. We owed them for every scrap of food they gave us, for all the knowledge they passed on. Each of us had a price on our heads that we could pay back through work.

So, I worked. Did a lot for the gang, made a name for myself. Prince of Rags, they called me, since I always wore this tatty old thing. Pretty soon I was helping them target other villages, just like they targeted mine. I burned fields, I attacked supply wagons. I killed messengers. But no matter what I did, it was never enough. I knew the gang had left my village alone, finally, so they might have recovered. But I didn’t know for sure if they were doing well or not. So I sent half my money to my mother every week. Had four brothers to look after, even if I couldn’t see ‘em. I was earning money at half the rate of every other kid. I watched ‘em pay their debts and move on. At least, some of them did. They couldn’t go home to the parents that sold them, and the only skills they had in life were to cheat, swindle and betray. So they either stayed with the gang, or struck out on their own. That
wasn’t the life for me, I decided. I was gonna make something of myself. Be the prince of more than just rags. So, I met with a rival gang. Told them how to find my boys when they were most vulnerable.

And when I was off on a job with some of my colleagues, the rival gang… they… got rid of most of my boys. I came home and found them. Dead. Some of ’em tortured, either for info or fun, I don’t know. All the valuables were gone. The guys that were with me at the time knew I’d sold them out. They turned on me, and drove me away. Put a price on my head I couldn’t shake – a bounty. Something anyone could collect if they had half a mind to. I could’ve bought my own head, saved myself. But first, I tried… I tried to go home. To my family. Met my mother again. She asked me where the last couple weeks’ worth of money had gone, why hadn’t I kept up with my payments? Didn’t I know she had mouths to feed? I asked if I could come back, maybe earn my keep with an honest wage, give her all my money, not just half. She said she couldn’t afford to keep me as well as my brothers. If I wanted to come back, one of them would have to go.”

Sakura makes a soft noise, covering her mouth. She stares at him with wide eyes.

Kitagawa gives a bitter, dark smile, “One of my brothers. That was the price of my homecoming, the thing I’d wanted since I was six years old. I’d already betrayed one set of brothers, why not the original? But… I couldn’t. Still too soft, after all that. I told her I’d leave, get even more money, enough to buy her a big house. I didn’t stay to see my brothers. They wouldn’t even remember me. But I’m gonna go back, someday. After this job, with the money Tsunade-sama’s paying me, I’ll give them all a real home. Somewhere big, with guards and protection for civilians. I’ll give them everything… and maybe then it’ll be enough.”

Sakura piles on top of him, knocking him over. Momo and Misa join in, snuffling at his face and trying to dig through his cloak. Kitagawa chuckles and throws his cloak over all of them.

“I told you it was boring!” He says playfully.

“Where did you get this?” Sakura asks curiously, draping the cloak around her head.

Kitagawa closes his eyes.

“It was my dad’s. He was a travelling merchant, wore it to protect himself from bad weather while he was out and about, selling his wares. He came home just in time to die, killed in a fight with the gang. Idiot thought he could make a difference, save the day. I knew he wouldn’t need his cloak anymore, so I took it with me when I left home.”

“That was sad, Kit-kun. I’m glad you don’t have to be in a gang anymore. You like it here, right?”

Kitagawa stares at the wall, sadness seeping through him, “Yeah. Yeah, sure. It’s better.”

Sakura pats him on the shoulder, then she tells him everything she’s been holding back.

The dreams, Kagami. Everything.

When she’s finished, throat scratchy from overuse, Kit takes her hand.

“Your secrets are my secrets,” He says solemnly, “on my life, I will protect them. And you.”

xxxxxxx

When morning comes, it’s the day before her birthday and she’s still vibrating with excitement.
“We’re not getting more dogs.” Tsunade says as they walk into the Inuzuka Compound.

“Pleeeeaaaaassseee!!” Naruto whines, clutching Tsunade’s ankle. She drags him across the ground with every step, apparently indifferent to the horrified looks from passers-by.

“More dogs!” Sakura cheers. She’s up on Kitagawa’s shoulders, too high up for Tsunade to reach.

“No!” Tsunade snaps, “Misa ate three pairs of shoes and then threw them back up over another pair of shoes. Why would I invite more chaos into my house? I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again – we’re just going for a check-up. We’re in and then we’re out, and if I count more dogs going out than we had going in, I’m going to leave them all behind. Okay?”

Naruto grumbles into the dirt, slowly being dragged along behind Tsunade, face-first.

“I’d like more dogs.” Sakura says conversationally.

Tsunade sighs.

“Do you know what a crazy cat lady is, Sakura-hime?” Kit asks. “It’s you, but with cats instead of dogs.”

“It doesn’t matter how many dogs you have, there’s always room for more.” Sakura says stubbornly.

“Spoken like a true crazy dog lady.”

“I like dogs.” Tenzo speaks up, a tentative smile on his face.

“Y’see, I can’t mock you,” Kit says sourly, “partly because you’ve got that sweet-as-pie kind of face, and partly because Airi scares the cra – uh, stuff out of me.”

“You can mock me, Kit-kun.” Sakura says brightly.

“Thanks, kiddo.”

Tsume takes them further into the Compound, instructing Tsunade on the proper methods of disciplining dogs. Tsunade looks a little lost, trying to keep up.

They go into the house they entered last time, Misa and Momo desperately sniffing everything in sight, and walk past gated enclosures of puppies of every shape and size. Sakura stares, overwhelmed, dragging her gaze longingly across all of the dogs as Kitagawa relentlessly soldiers on, refusing to stop for her petting needs.

A puppy whimpers as they walk past a room. Tsume stops dead, turning to quirk a brow at the gathered party. The puppy yelps, scratching at the gate. Sakura peers over it. The pup is much, much bigger than Misa and Momo. It’s a giant ball of red fluff, though its side is matted and covered in some kind of medicinal cream.

“Why’ve we stopped?” Tsunade frowns. They’re cramped in the narrow corridor, and she’d have to knock a wall down to turn around completely, thanks to her prodigious chest.

Naruto kneels down, pressing his hands against the glass gate. His face is level with the puppy’s. He grins as the dog licks the glass, tail wagging furiously.

“It’s so cute!” Naruto enthuses.

“Oh no.” Tsunade moans.
“Sorry, hime-sama,” Tsume says with a wicked grin, “Clan rules. Once a pup chooses, it makes an ironclad bond.”

“No. No.” Tsunade says, aghast. “No more dogs! I can’t handle having two on the weekends, let alone one every day!”

“Did it choose me, Oba-san?” Naruto asks, eyes wide.

“Let’s see!” Tsume says cheerfully, seizing Naruto by the back of his shirt – Kai twitches violently – and lifting him over the gate.

Naruto’s feet have barely touched the ground when the puppy leaps at him, licking his face and yelping. Naruto shouts with laughter.

“It likes me!” He declares, giggling helplessly as the puppy jumps on his chest.

Tsume turns her smirk on Tsunade, “It certainly looks that way. Let’s talk money, shall we?”

Tsunade grumbles.

Naruto is the happiest Sakura’s ever seen him. He hauls his puppy into his arms, refusing to let anyone else hold him.

“His name is Tamotsu,” He tells them all, his face very serious, “Tamocchi for short. He’s my best friend and he’s going to live in my treehouse when Tenzo-nii builds it.”

“How big is he going to get?” Tsunade asks Tsume, giving her an askance look.

“There’s no way to tell,” Tsume says gleefully, “he’s a mutt. His mother’s medium-sized, but we don’t know what his father looked like. He might never get bigger than he is now, or he might end up the size of a bear.”

Tsunade looks faint.

Tamotsu is almost as big as Naruto, who’s barely managing to hold him, his paws almost touching the floor. Sakura gently lends a hand, lifting him up into Naruto’s arms. Tamotsu is a beautiful auburn colour all over, with dark brown eyes and a big, drooling mouth.

Momo and Misa are very interested in their new friend, but Kai is holding them carefully.

“What’s wrong with his fur?” Tsunade asks, a little pinch of concern furrowing her brow.

“He was in a bad way when we found him,” Tsume says, her amusement quickly fading at the memory, “riddles with parasites and infection. He’s healthy now. It’s just cosmetic. We stopped quarantining him a few weeks ago and he’s doing a lot better with the cream for his skin. If you’d prefer a… prettier dog, I guess we can – ”

“No!” Naruto yells, outraged. “He picked me! And I pick him! He’s my friend! I don’t care if he’s got patchy fur, he’s a good boy and he’s gonna live in my treehouse and sleep under my desk when I’m Hokage!”

Tsume blinks.

Tsunade smiles, kneeling down to ruffle Naruto’s hair. He pouts, his bottom lip jutting forward and quivering ominously. A tantrum is on the horizon.
“You’re responsible for applying his cream as many times a day as he needs it. You take him on walks with Kai, you make sure he’s got enough food and water, and you teach him as many tricks as you can. Okay? If he’s your dog, you should take good care of him.” Tsunade says, patting Tamotsu on his patchy head.

Naruto nods, burying his face in Tamocchi’s fur.

“Look, Tenzo-nii!” He says, squeezing his puppy.

Tenzo looks a little wistful, but he manages an answering smile when Naruto beams up at him, “That’s great, Naruto. I’ll help you groom him.”

“Yay!”

“So, where’s the Uchiha kid?” Tsume asks.

Sakura stiffens.

Kitagawa scoops her up, tossing her back onto his shoulders. She giggles, clutching at his indigo ponytail.

“He paid for Sakura-chan’s pups, after all.” Tsume continues.

“Paid for them?” Sakura repeats slowly. Momo pokes his head over Kai’s shoulder, his pale blue eyes focusing on her face. He’s still wearing Shisui’s scarf. He’s getting bigger every day, and the scarf can’t keep up.

“Of course. We sell the pups to the folk who manage to bond with one and take care of all the rest until they can be rehomed. We’re normally pretty selective over who gets to meet the prospective puppies, but Shisui was… insistent. And loud.”

Sakura lets her chin rest on top of Kit’s head, staring off into space.

Shisui bought Misa and Momo. She doesn’t know why this comes as a surprise, but for some reason it hadn’t occurred to her that he must’ve bought her Rinne Festival presents himself.

If not for Shisui, she wouldn’t have her dogs.

Misa and Momo get their check-ups, along with Tamotsu’s, and Sakura grabs an armful of dog toys and refuses to put them back. Kagami makes her drop a few of the more impractical choices. Tenzo carefully peered over every gate and into every room, clearly hoping to meet a dog that would choose him, but his shoulder slumped further each time nothing happened.

“Never mind,” Tsunade says, clapping him on the back, “you’ll get a pet. Something perfect for you.”

Airi slips past Tenzo, Inuzuka clan markings expertly applied to her face, blending in seamlessly with the rest of the clan. Sakura is only able to pick her out because of her gentle seafoam chakra.

As she passes him, she slips him a packet of seeds without a backwards glance, and whispers something in his ear. His face lights up with joy in response.

“Oba-san,” He begins carefully, his bright smile overtaking his whole face, “could I get a guinea pig, please?”

“Kid, you can get a hundred. But not literally, because that would be terrible. You can get five.
Maybe ten.”

Takumi is different.

Shisui could sense it early on, but only has a concrete reason why when he sees the living room, and the absence of the real Takumi on the floor, trapped in a seal.

Shisui looks at the older man, smiling guilelessly back at him, and doesn’t know whether he should be relieved that he’s not actually trapped in a house with Izanagi again, as he had thought, or frustrated that his dealings with the man will have to be more drawn out.

“So, what brought this on?” Takumi asks.

He’d thought he could report back to Izanagi, but the other man is clearly off ruining lives elsewhere. Inconvenient.

And he was looking forward to the moment he could pretend he’d done as Izanagi asked, leaving a door in Sakura’s mind for him to use.

Instead, he’d separated Sakura’s souls and given her more control over her mind. Kagami was a terrifying glimpse into what might be, a distorted reflection of Sakura’s future. There was no way Shisui would allow that to come to pass.

The things he saw in Kagami’s mind… Sasuke, eyes blank and glacial, driving his hand through Sakura’s back… Akatsuki and everything they stood for… He has a lot of work to do.

“I need help with sealing, and you’re one of the last experts in the village.” Shisui says honestly. It was what he’d originally wanted from Takumi after all, back before Izanagi got in the way of things.

Takumi blushes, “I… I wouldn’t say expert. But of course I’ll help! What do you need?”

Shisui opens his mouth, then pauses.

He’ll sleep until I wake him. Then I will fill the gaps in his memories. He never notices, Izanagi had said. Fill the gaps in his memories.

That means Izanagi had access to Takumi’s mind, and there’s a good chance he’d be able to see everything Shisui told him.

Shisui sighs.

Takumi meets his eyes without a trace of concern or hesitation. It’s rare for an outsider to blindly trust an Uchiha, even a washed-up outcast like Shisui.

And he has to destroy that trust.

His eyes flicker.

Takumi’s caught in a split-second, not even enough time for his smile to fade.

“Agree to help me with whatever I need,” Shisui tells him, heart heavy with regret, “and forget this conversation ever happened.”

“Of course, Shisui-kun.” Takumi says brightly, not even the subtle layers of Shisui’s genjutsu
Sakura,

I’ve been informed that your birthday is coming up. I’ve arranged it so this letter will be delivered on the day. If it isn’t, please let me know. You are five years old today, the same age as me. By your next birthday, I won’t have killed anyone in over a year. That’s a promise.

It is getting a little easier. My siblings are still afraid, but that is only to be expected. They are related to me, but they are not yet my family. How do you make someone love you? I haven’t worked it out yet, but when I will, I’ll write again. My uncle says love is painful, and that feelings hurt you on the inside like physical wounds hurt the outside. I am not eager to feel pain, but if it means I can love, I will do anything.

But this is your birthday, not mine, so I should talk about you. The reason I know your birthday is because my father requested your basic information. The only legal reason he would have for this is if he wished to arrange a marriage between us – because I am I’m the heir. Not Kankuro. So you’d be marrying me. Not Kankuro – but I believe he did it simply because I asked. I wouldn’t have asked before, but I did, because of you.

I am grateful.

I have been five for two months longer than you. It’s much the same as being four, in my opinion. If you experience something different, please let me know. I know you are going to attend the Academy soon. I have private tutors. Some of them still live. I want you to tell me everything about your school. What is it like? Are you the strongest in your class? It is boring, learning about Suna’s history all on my own. What is Konoha’s history?

How is Naruto? I have not met him yet, but you said I will and I believe you. Have your dogs got bigger? Can you ride them yet?

I have enclosed some pictures that I drew for you. I wanted to send you a battleaxe, as before, but it is the same man writing this letter, and he is still disagreeable. He just told me to enquire as to your mother’s health, but I don’t care.

Happy birthday.

I’m glad you were born.

It is Gaara, writing another letter to you.

P.S. I learned a new word today. Serendipity. It means good fortune. I hope you have a lot of serendipity today, as you are one of my precious people. The first picture I’m sending is of you and the sand fox I made you. I had to borrow the pink crayon from Kankuro, because that is the colour of your hair. The second picture is of your dogs, Misa and Momo, but it doesn’t look like them because I’m not very good at drawing. I think Momo looks like a sheep. I hope you don’t mind. I’ll get better.

Okay, this is the end of the letter.

***

Hello, friends!!
I’m so sorry for the massive gap between updates!

I’ve actually not been very well at all. I’m getting better, but I’m scattered and bleurgh, to use the technical medical terms. I’ll be just fine soon enough, but for a while I was just… phew. Not great.

So. Kagami gets vulture summons, Sakura gets doves! (and pigeons).

Manami is a Lahore pigeon, btw, which means she is beautiful and knows it all too well.

Kagami’s vultures were my absolute favourite thing to write. Ridiculous things. They’re Bearded Vultures and they eat people they don’t like.

Kagami got a contract alongside Sakura because Sakura signed her name on a blank contract designed to summon the user to their most suited summons, and there happened to be two people with her name, blood and chakra, but vastly different souls and personalities, so they were both sent to the summons that suited them the most.

NARUTO GOT A DOG

THIS IS NOT A DRILL

NEW DOG ALERT!

Tamotsu is a Tibetan Mastiff. If you don’t know what that is… please google it, and imagine Tsunade’s face when Tamocchi grows up into… that

#prayforTsunade

There’s so many dogs.

Airi is the most Extra assassin ever. She literally disguised herself as an Inuzuka to blend in with the clan because her client was going to be in the Compound for a few hours and she wanted to provide an incognito backup. And what does she do? Hands him a packet of sunflower seeds to cheer him up and advises him to get a guinea pig. Airi, do you even assassin??

Shisui mind-whammied Takumi. How much can one mind whammy? Scientists can’t tell.

Gaara is still… pretty damn Gaara when it comes to writing letters. Please picture him reciting what he wants the letter to say, utterly toneless, staring the terrified man right in the eyes as he writes it all down (he writes everything Gaara wants while he’s watching to avoid getting smooshed, then censors the relevant parts later on before sending).

Quick poll for fun: Where did you always want to live when you were a kid?

I either wanted to live in Hogwarts or Olympus from the Disney movie Hercules. Olympus always looked so pretty and colourful!

(Dogwatch Pupdate: NEW DOG!!! THERE’S A NEW DOG, PEOPLE! HE’S RED AND BEAUTIFUL! A BIG BOY! A BIG DROOLY BOY WITH PATCHES OF FUR MISSING, LIKE A WELL-LOVED TEDDY BEAR!)
Chapter 34

Sakura wakes up with the innate certainty that it is the twenty-eight of March, and as such, it is her birthday.

She squeals loudly enough that her dogs leap off her bed.

“I’m five!” She tells them, slapping her cheeks in shock. Momo landed on his back, and for one helpless moment just wiggles on the carpet, feet swimming through thin air. Misa nudges him with her nose, helping him back up.

_Happy birthday, Sacchan,_ Kagami says.

_Happy birthday, Onee-chan!_ Sakura responds eagerly, _you’re seventeen today! Wow! That’s so much older than me._

_Okay, no need to phrase it like that._

_It’s not a bad thing, Onee-chan. Aren’t you happy to be seventeen?_

_(Haruno Sakura dies in a quiet little copse, completely and utterly alone, aged sixteen, almost seventeen.)_

Kagami closes her eyes, breathing in and out, deliberately slow.

Sakura’s face crumples in guilt, feeling awful for reminding her of the terrible end she once met.

Then, to her surprise, Kagami sits down at the edge of a pool, dipping her hand into its silver waters.

_Where did that pool come from?_ Sakura asks.

Kagami smiles, something hopeful and sweet unfurling within her.

_Don’t forget, _she says quietly, _this is my mind, too. It’s only a prison if I want it to be. And I… I think I want more. For now._

Sakura beams, tears stinging her eyes, _good! That’s good, Onee-chan. Maybe you can make a whole garden!_

_Only if you help,_ Kagami replies.

The door bursts open.

“It’s your birthday!” Sakura’s father shouts.

“Happy birthday!” Her mother says.

Sakura’s father lifts her out of bed and starts tossing her up again and again, “How many birthday bounces is that?” He says teasingly as she shrieks with laughter. “How old is the birthday girl?”

“Five! I’m _five_!” Sakura squeals.

“So you are!” Her father says, tossing her up once more, then holding her to his chest, “Happy birthday, sweetheart!”
“Thank you, Otou-san,” Sakura says cheerfully, “Am I taller now?”

Her father puts a hand over his head, frowning in thought, then moves the hand to the top of her head.

“Wow!” He says, “Look at you! You’re getting so big!”

Sakura is delighted.

“What does the birthday girl want for breakfast?” Her mother asks, tweaking her nose.

Sakura giggles, rubbing her face, “Um… maybe some pancakes? With the sweet sauce on top, pretty please?”

“Syrupy pancakes it is!” Sakura’s father says, “And of course, I shall be making them!”

“No!” Sakura groans, laughing, “Not you, Otou-san!”

“Well, I never!” He replies, mock-hurt, “I’m a fantastic cook, aren’t I, Mebuki?”

“Nope.” Sakura’s mother replies, smiling.

Sakura’s father gasps, bending over backwards abruptly as if struck in the face. Sakura giggles, clutching his chest to stay in his grip.

“I am betrayed.” He says solemnly. “What of my dreams to be a chef, hmm? Am I to just throw them aside? In fact… I feel weighed down… by this… terrible betrayal!”

With every word, Sakura’s father starts to sink down to the carpet, lowering himself chest-first, so Sakura is in danger of being very slowly and gently crushed.

“No!” Sakura shrieks, playfully batting at her father’s chest. “I’m gonna be squished! Don’t squish me!”

“I’ve no choice. The betrayal is pushing me down!” Her father declares, gently cradling Sakura to his chest and pretending to push her onto the carpet beneath him.

All of a sudden, Misa tears into view, barking her head off. She jumps up at Sakura’s father’s face, furiously yipping at him.

Sakura’s father blinks, “Oh no. I’ve antagonised the beast.”

Misa gives a high-pitched growl, every inch of her tiny body filled with rage.

“Haruno Kagami, you stop that right this instant!” Sakura scolds, hanging off her father’s chest like a disappointed monkey mother.

Misa whines, turning big, sad eyes on Sakura.

Sakura has used the same method herself so much that she is now immune to it, like a poison-tester, so she simply frowns back.

“Kagami?” Sakura’s father says.

“Haruno?” Sakura’s mother says. “Not Senju?”
Kagami bit her lip when their father said her name.

Sakura’s father lowers her to the carpet.

“Kagami…” Sakura says slowly, the name tasting taboo in her mouth. “That’s what I was going to be called, right? That what Misa’s short for. And of course she’s a Haruno! She’s mine, so she’s your grandbaby.”

“No. We’re far too young to be grandparents.” Sakura’s mother says firmly, though the corner of her mouth twitches.

“A-and Momo… his name’s short for Sakumo, like Kakashi-sensei’s dad. I wanted to give him a good name.”

Sakura’s parents are silent for a moment, their chakra turning grey and mournful.

Then sunlight breaks through with her father’s grin, “What excellent names! I think they deserve some big birthday treats, don’t you?”

Misa’s ears perk at the magic word.

Sakura opens her presents while sitting in the big armchair, slippers dangling over the edge. She has a mug of Hot Kitty Cocoa by her side as she methodically tears wrapping paper off in neat strips, exposing a gradually-increasing pile of presents.

She gets bunch of plush toys from her parents, including a brand-new favourite fat cat with a blobby tail, promptly named Enkei. She squeals over the school supplies, pastel pens with cute bunny faces on top, a pencil case in the shape of a fuzzy cat, and a pink bento box with her name in sparkly letters. Kabuto’s sent her a book on natural remedies, and Genma dropped off a box of puppy dango.

Before she has the chance to get dressed for the day, her mother opens the living room door, revealing Itachi and Sasuke, both clutching gift bags.

Sakura is thrilled to see them, even while she’s in her white dressing gown with bunny ears, “Good morning, Itachi, Sasuke! What are you doing here?”

“I thought you might need a special outfit for your birthday.” Itachi smiles, holding his bag up for her to see.

Sakura takes it from him gingerly, making sure their fingers don’t unduly brush. Itachi still doesn’t like being casually touched.

Inside the bag is a dress, folded neatly and tied together with ribbon. Sakura pulls it free, a look of awe on her face.

The dress is the perfect shade of sakura pink, with ribbons lacing the back and skirts sewn in the shape of roses with ruching fabric. It looks as though it’s long enough to hang just at her ankles.

“It’s so pretty.” Sakura breathes out. Itachi hums in agreement, his eyes on her hands as they bunch up the fabric, marvelling at its softness. “Did Mikoto-san pick it?”

Sasuke giggles.

Itachi shoots him a look.
“What?” Sasuke says defensively, “You picked it!”

Sakura looks at Itachi, dazzled, “You like dresses, Itachi?”

“No!” Itachi burst out, his face turning sallow, “I – I mean, I don’t hate dresses, and I like your – um, I just wouldn’t personally wish to – I – ”

“And Sasu-chan got you a present too, right?” Sakura’s father cuts in tactfully, throwing Itachi an obvious wink when he sags in relief.

Sasuke’s face brightens and he proudly presents his bag, “I picked everything myself too,” He says unashamedly, “because girl stuff isn’t bad, just like you always say, Sakura.”

Sakura agrees profusely, missing the smug look Sasuke gives his older brother, or the affronted way Itachi’s eyebrows shoot up in response.

There are several presents wrapped in velvety fabric in Sasuke’s bag. Sakura sits down, taking her time to excavate its contents, carefully retrieving the pouches of presents one by one. The first pouch contains a copper-coloured ring, the metal twisted in a filigree shape to look like leaves surrounding a rose. At the very centre of the rose, a tiny jewel is sparkling.

Sakura’s mother pales.

“Pretty!” Sakura coos, sliding it on right away. It fits snugly on the finger next to her pinkie.

Sakura’s father pales.

“Itachi-nii picked that one,” Sasuke admits, “I thought the jet ring with a dragon face was cooler.”

“That does sound cool,” Sakura says tactfully, “Maybe next time?”

“No, no,” Sakura’s father groans, “There will be no next time. No more rings, thank you very much.”

The next present is a pink pearl bracelet with tiny silver butterfly charms. They make a pretty sound when she shakes it. She puts it on over her rabbit sleeve, ignoring the distressed noise her mother makes when the pearls ominously stretch over the fabric.

The final present is obviously the one Sasuke is excited for, because he steps forward eagerly the moment she touches the pouch.

A brassy locket spills out into her palm. It has a pale pink rose pattern on the front, delicate whorls spreading out like perfect petals.

“Open it!” Sasuke says.

Sakura blinks, then squints at the necklace. She hadn’t noticed the subtle catch before. It springs open with the slightest touch, revealing a tiny picture of Sakura, Sasuke, Itachi, Fugaku and Mikoto. Sakura gazes at the photo, grinning stupidly at the sight of Sasuke’s flushed cheeks, Itachi’s tiny smile, Fugaku’s forced solemnity, and Mikoto’s gentle arms around all three children.

She looks up at the two boys, sniffing hard, “Thank you!”

She dives off her chair and seizes Sasuke in a great big hug.

Sasuke huffs, trying to drag Itachi into the embrace. His brother stiffens, edging away. Sakura wipes
her eyes, laughing, and holds out her hand.

Itachi’s eyes soften. He takes her hand gently, just the slightest touch, then lets go. The tips of his ears are pink.

Sakura’s father looks down at the chair of discarded presents, heaving a long sigh. “Now, what could these possibly mean?”

“Who can say?” Sakura’s mother replies glumly. “It’s surely just an ordinary set of expensive gifts any parent would give their child’s friend for their fifth birthday.”

The two adults briefly commiserate in silence, patting each other’s backs.

“How does everyone feel about syrupy pancakes?” Sakura’s mother asks loudly.

Sasuke and Sakura cheer.

Itachi nods politely, brushing his hair over his ears, “Yes please, Haruno-san.”

“Tacchan, not this again…”

xxxxxxx

After eating through a stack of pancakes, Sakura heads upstairs to get dressed.

She teams her dress and accessories with some baby pink shoes. They’re patent and they have big floppy bows on the top. She carefully places a plastic tiara on top of her head, and she’s all ready for the day. Her hair’s really grown out, now. It’s down to her shoulders, falling in loose waves.

Kit is perched on top of her wardrobe, stretched out flat. His long legs dangle over the side, occasionally kicking in boredom. He’s covering his eyes with one big hand.

“Done yet, hime-sama?” He calls, idly playing with the bells in his hair.

“What do you think?” Sakura asks, turning around to present her outfit for his critical eye.

He slithers off the wardrobe, landing with a thump on her bed. He holds his hands up to his eyes like he’s framing her for a photo.

“Perfect. The head-to-toe pink is a bold choice, and I especially like the tiara. Never let anyone criticise your sartorial choices, kiddo.”

Sakura gives a shy smile, playing with her skirt. It’s much longer than she’s used to. She feels like a real lady.

They both go downstairs together, Sakura giving everyone a little twirl when prompted, and then they all head to the Senju House, the Uchiha trailing behind.

Momo and Misa’s tails start wagging the moment they turn the corner that leads to the Senju House. Sakura wonders if they can smell Tamotsu.

Tsunade answers the door with an incredulous whistle at the sight of Sakura’s new outfit. Her parents quickly outline everything the Uchiha gave her.

Tsunade cackles, “Subtle!”
She ushers them in, Momo and Misa racing inside as if they owned the place, Sakura’s parents and the Uchiha boys following at a more sedate pace.

Tsunade gathers them all in the living room, Naruto and Kai on the sofa, Tenzo sitting on the window seat, Airi standing on the other side of the glass, leaning against the house with her arms folded.

Tsunade seems unusually solemn. She sits Sakura down, then pulls something that smells dusty out of her satchel.

“For your fifth birthday, I wanted to give you something meaningful. I earned this scroll on my own, through bitter work and bloodshed. I never thought it would go beyond me, unless it was an enemy plucking it off my – ”

Sakura’s mother coughs delicately, and Tsunade winces, mouthing an apology.

“To cut a long story short, I’m happy to finally have the chance to create a legacy, to pass on the good things I’ve made for myself. So, if you will add your name, we can share the slug summons together. How does that sound?”

“No!” Sakura blurts out.

Everyone stares.

Kitagawa is twiddling his thumbs innocently in the background. He’ll be no help.

She can’t sign the slug summons. She already has the dove summons. She doesn’t know what would happen if she had two, or if it’s even possible to have more than one. Regardless, it wouldn’t feel right. Manami, Asuka and Yuuto were so happy to have a summoner. And Kagami remembers her journey as Tsunade’s apprentice, the pride she felt when she was finally permitted to sign her name on the scroll.

Tsunade’s face has gone blank, but she’s clearly hurt.

Sakura casts about frantically for an excuse. Her eyes fall on Tenzo, looking confused in the corner of the room.

Her heartbeat slows down to a flutter. She knows what she has to do.

“It’s not fair for me to have the slug summons instead of Tenzo-nii,” Sakura says firmly, meaning every word, “He’s the oldest. He should inherit things like that. I don’t know when his birthday is, but I think he should get the scroll then, because he deserves it. He can feed the slugs lots of cabbage with his Mokuton, so that’s why.”

Tenzo looks up at them all, clutching at the front of his shirt, “Do you really… I don’t mind, Sakura-chan. I don’t need… I’m not…”

Tsunade looks between Tenzo and Sakura, then at Sakura’s parents.

A little smile forms on her face.

“Senju Tenzo, will you take up my burden after I am gone, and become Head of the Senju clan in
my place?” Tsunade kneels in front of him, taking his hands. Sakura sees they’re shaking. Tsunade gently rubs them between her palms, as if trying to warm them up.

Tenzo’s dark eyes are wide, pupils blown in panic, “I – I - ”

“You don’t have to decide right away,” Tsunade takes pity on him, giving a warm smile, “I’m planning on sticking around for a long, long time. But Sakura’s right. You’re my oldest, and you’re responsible, balanced and fair. You’re still young and I want you to have a proper childhood, but in the meantime, will you consider my offer?”

Tenzo’s cheeks flush dark. He tries to talk, his words just coming out breathless and inaudible. Tsunade waits patiently.

“W-will I have to get married and have children?” He finally asks, eyes on the floor.

Tsunade ruffles his hair with a big grin, “Do you see my husband? I sure don’t. Being the Head of a clan doesn’t necessarily mean maintaining the numbers at any cost. It means attending to the needs of the family, putting your clan’s needs above all else. You don’t have to get married or have children. You don’t need to be a shinobi or a noble. You just need to have a big heart, with room for every Senju that might come along in the years to come. How does that sound?”

Tenzo’s mouth flickers, a tiny, hopeful smile emerging. “It sounds… nice, Oba-san. I – I don’t need time. I can be the Clan Heir. I want to look after everyone as best I can.”

“Yay!” Naruto explodes from the floor, fists in the air. It’s plain he has no idea what’s going on. “Tenzo-nii’s gonna be the heir! Like Sasuke’s big brother! My big brother’s way better, though!”

Sasuke glowers, but Itachi’s hand on his shoulder keeps him from jumping to his defence.

Sakura’s parents are very relieved.

“But then…” Tsunade looks back at Sakura, forehead creased, “I don’t have a present for you.”

Sakura pushes down the guilt of lying once again, reminding herself that it’s for the best.

“That’s fine,” Sakura says hastily, “I don’t need anything!”

“You get ten presents next year.” Tsunade points at her, face deadpan.

“That’s not necessary, Tsunade-sama…” Sakura’s mother says, looking pained.

“If you give your kids too many things, they get all spoiled, like milk that goes off because it goes too long without being drunk!” Sakura declares. Then she stares into the distance, realising something. “I’ll be six next year!”

“Yes, that is how time works.” Kit supplies helpfully.

Sakura’s eyes go round as she dwells on the possibilities. She was four yesterday and now she’s thinking about being six, which used to be impossibly far into the future.

She gasps, “Do you think I’ll be tall enough to reach the sink?”

Sakura’s parents and the Uchiha boys disappear to do something in secret, and Sakura ends up with a blindfold around her eyes. The familiar feeling almost makes her smile, remembering Shisui, but
then she remembers Shisui and her smile drops right away.

Tsunade and Jiraiya lead her into the garden, their chakra a pleasant buzz, like happy bees hovering over a flowerbed.

“Okay, hime-sama… three, two, one!” Jiraiya says, then pulls the blindfold off with a flourish.

Sakura blinks, the weak spring sunlight still enough to sting her eyes after a few minutes of confused darkness.

Then her vision sharpens and crystallises, the garden falling into place in front of her.

There’s a pond!

It’s enormous, a sea of twinkling water shaded by lily pads and bordered by white rocks. Big fish swirl around each other, bright orange and white swimming as one.

Naruto is beaming at her, clearly having known about the new addition before her.

“A pond with some fish,” Sakura says faintly, “Naruto, we… we did it.”

“You didn’t forget, did you?” Tenzo asks, smiling, “We promised we’d grow your cherry tree on your birthday. We had to have a pond to go with it.”

“G-grow!” Sakura stammers, looking up at Tsunade.

“You can do it.” She promises, “With Tenzo’s help, and Naruto’s chakra, you can create whatever you want. There’s plenty of space and I don’t care what the neighbours think. Go nuts, my little brats.”

“You remember how to channel your chakra, right?” Jiraiya asks Naruto. His expression clears when Naruto nods, beaming, and he gives him a big thumbs up, “Great! You do your best. We’ll be right here.”

“Okay!” Naruto chirps. He catches Sakura’s eye and his grin stretches, almost blindingly radiant, “I’m gonna be Hokage and a sealmaster. Isn’t that awesome?”

“Yes!” Sakura beams, excitement bursting through her, matching the starbursts going through Naruto and Tenzo’s auras.

Sakura and Tenzo stand together, hands forming seals as one. Naruto stands behind them, a hand on each of their backs. Sakura takes more than just energy from him, she takes solace, comfort, and determination – they can do this!

Sakura breathes out with Tenzo, and feels nature’s tether connect with her chakra, linking them together.

They both raise a hand, and from a single seed spills forth an enormous trunk, reaching up out of the ground. Dirt goes flying as the tree shoots up. Naruto lets out a shout of laughter, wild and overjoyed. The tree thickens, branches spinning out and filling with pink petals. Tenzo keeps pushing long after Sakura would’ve stopped, but Naruto’s sunshine-bright chakra floods steadily into them, so Sakura keeps going on.

By the time they’re finished, the tree is unbelievably enormous, epic in stature, its branches spreading over the top of the house.
“We’re not done yet, Sakura-chan!” Tenzo says brightly, an uncharacteristic thrill of excitement in his voice.

Wood warps into being in the centre of the tree’s mass, settling in the nest of branches and forming a rectangle shape.

“Tenzo-nii?” Sakura says, confused.

Tenzo narrows his eyes, focusing, and the wood sharpens, the edges becoming clearer, and Sakura begins to see what he’s making.

“A treehouse!” Sakura gasps.

Naruto jumps up and down, yelling enthusiastically.

Tenzo wilts a little at the loss of chakra, so Sakura puts a hand on his arm and asks Kagami for help.

Kagami wordlessly sends her own energy, allowing it to flow to Tenzo, and he takes it and shapes it into a cute, fat little house sitting squat in the middle of the trunk, surrounded by branches. He covers the roof in grass and flowers, and creates a set of steps going from the house to the base of the tree.

He droops, exhausted but happy, “That’s the most I can do for now, Sakura-chan. If we keep at it over time, it’ll get better and better.”

Sakura tackles him, squeezing him tightly around the middle. He laughs in surprise, then lets out an oof when Naruto joins the pile.

Misa and Momo jump on top, yapping. Tamotsu slowly crawls up, his paws slipping and sliding on Naruto’s clothes. He eventually settles his fuzzy bulk on Naruto’s face.

Once they escape the puppy pile, they scurry up the tree’s steps, heading up to the unfurnished treehouse in the centre.

Misa, Momo and Tamotsu whine at the tree’s base, plainly worried about their owners being so high up without them. Kai swoops in, grabbing an armful of dogs, and deposits them inside the treehouse. He tosses a grinning Naruto a salute, then flickers away.

Naruto and Sakura stare out at the garden, just barely able to make out the fish swimming in the pond below, sitting in the treehouse they’d been dreaming of for months and months. Misa nudges Sakura’s face, snuggling as close to her as possible. Momo’s head is resting on Tenzo’s knee. Tamotsu is sitting on Naruto’s lap, panting adoringly in his owner’s face.

“We did it.” Sakura says in amazement, wonder thrumming through her body.

She takes Tenzo’s hand in hers.

Naruto meets her eyes, tears glistening in his, and they all sit in peaceful silence, contemplating where they have been and where they are now.

Sakura’s parents and the Uchiha boys return with armfuls of food, plates of sandwiches and dumplings galore.

Her parents don’t seem too concerned by Sakura being in the treehouse, so she settles for waving in greeting rather than climbing all the way down. She can’t help thinking Tsunade might have sent
them away on an errand so they wouldn’t witness the treehouse’s construction.

Keeping secrets from them feels depressingly normal now. She’s not sure how they’d react to finding out she has Mokuton, but it would probably involve more worrying for them. She’s tired of bringing so much stress just by existing.

Misa and Momo are napping on Tenzo, who is almost dropping off himself, the hand he’s using to stroke the dogs starting to slow down. He yawns, stretching, and rests his head on the carved wood floor. Naruto and Tamotsu snuggle up beside him.

Kit is sunbathing on the treehouse roof, radiating bliss. By contrast, Kai is perched in the tree itself, on the alert as always, staring down at each and every partygoer. Airi is dressed in nondescript clothing, blending into the crowd of guests.

The Naras stroll in, their posture so stooped it almost looks painful. They’re quickly joined by the Akimichi, who brought entire boxes of food with them. Kagami whispers who’s sure to arrive next, and sure enough, after only a few minutes, Ino appears, wearing a demure, baby blue dress with a lace collar and silver pumps.

Sakura scurries down the tree and bounds up to Ino, grinning madly in excitement.

Ino greets Sakura with a big hug. Her short hair has been scraped back into a tiny bun, secured by dozens of shiny hairpins, so she glitters in the sunlight whenever she turns her head.

“Happy birthday, Sakura-chan!” Ino says. She’s holding a little box very carefully, but once Sakura’s close enough, Ino immediately thrusts it at her, apparently too excited to wait.

Sakura rubs the back of her neck, feeling a little awkward. She likes getting attention sometimes but having so much in such a short space of time leaves her overwhelmed.

She pulls the pale green ribbon off the box, carefully tucking it into her dress’s pockets. Ino is thrumming with energy, a kaleidoscope of colour. Sakura opens the box, then covers her mouth, looking up at Ino with surprised pleasure.

“It’s a friendship bracelet,” Ino says, uncharacteristically shy, “It means we’re going to be friends forever, as long as you take care of it. It’s like your ribbon. Y-you don’t have to wear it all the time, and if you don’t like the colour, m-maybe I can make you a better one – ”

“You made this?” Sakura breathes, holding the woven bracelet up to her face. It’s in pastel shades of the rainbow, pretty and complex. Just like Ino.

Ino’s face burns red. Her pale gaze drops to her toes, which are squirming in her kiddy high heel sandals.

She mumbles, “Yeah. It’s just something I like doing sometimes. A-and I wanted to share something I like. With you. ‘cause it’s your special day. And I wanted you to have something special. Something you can’t buy. Do you… like it?”

Sakura throws her arms around Ino’s neck.

“Yes! I really, really like it, Ino-chan! Thanks so much! In fact… um, c’mon, let’s go upstairs.” Sakura grabs Ino’s hand, unbothered by its damp warmth. Ino must have been really nervous.

They weave around the adults, ignoring their looks of fond indulgence, and head upstairs to Sakura’s room. She feels Kit follow, keeping a discreet distance for once. Sakura lets Ino into her room,
watching her face light up at the décor. She seems to particularly like the white fuzzy rug, the fairy lights across the wall, and the giant slug plush in the corner. The cherry blossom soft toy Naruto got her for her birthday is already sitting next to it.

They both sit on Sakura’s bed, and she takes Ino’s hand in hers. She closes her eyes and concentrates, trying to feel that connection to nature she felt when she made the tree with Tenzo. It’s harder without him, but eventually she finds it. It’s like hitting the right note in a song.

She pours all her gratitude and love out into her hands, hoping it’ll be enough to match what Ino made with hers.

Ino breathes in sharply, and her chakra reverberates in shock.

Sakura opens her eyes. She beams – she did it!

Ino is now wearing a friendship bracelet made of tiny flowers. There’s some white daisies linking gardenias together, pink peonies next to lavender roses, and white carnations. All the flowers are the same size, miniature to fit Ino’s wrist.

“What do you think?” Sakura asks.

Ino’s face is rapidly turning red. She can’t seem to tear her eyes away from the bracelet. Sakura is about to ask if she’s okay when Ino suddenly leans forward and clumsily brushes a kiss against Sakura’s cheek.

“O-oh!” Sakura blinks.

Ino looks mortified, shooting out of the room quicker than Sakura can bounce off the bed to follow. She frowns. She really does need to get faster. She was going to learn from Shisui one day, but… she’ll have to do it herself. And soon.

When Sakura gets downstairs and heads back into the garden, more guests have arrived. It’s fun to see everyone in their party clothes. Some look like slightly more formal versions of themselves, like the Hyuuga and the Uchiha. Others have gone all out with their outfits, like the Inuzuka, who seem fond of not wearing too many clothes. Sakura wonders if they get hot too easily.

She spots Hinata sitting up straight next to a taller Hyuuga boy, who has the same sort of air of vigilance as Kai and Airi. Not Kit, though, who is currently juggling in the middle of the garden and drawing quite the crowd, because he’s using his knees to juggle knives. Tsunade is twitching while she watches from afar.

Sakura grins, bounding over to speak with Hinata, but the other girl squeaks in fear and jumps up – very gracefully – and fast-walks away, gathering the long hem of her dress in her hands. Her bodyguard gives Sakura a distrustful look, following his charge.

Sakura deflates. Why is everyone running away from her all of a sudden?

Shikamaru is lying down a little away from the rest of the party, snoring lightly while Chouji eats chips next to him, both boys pleasantly buzzing with contentment. Sakura heads over, always happy to cloud-watch with the two.

She sits down in the grass, carefully avoiding getting her dress dirty.

Shikamaru opens one eye, then snorts, “Oh. It’s you.”
Sakura’s head tilts in mute confusion at the low-grade annoyance in his voice.

Shikamaru huffs, shifting to get more comfortable on his back. He stares up at the sky, sharp eyes categorising the clouds, and says, “You’re the reason I have to start at the Academy a year early. Tch, troublesome.”

“It’s nice that you’ll be together,” Chouji says mildly, though his chakra dims sadly when he looks at his friend, “And you could have said no to Ino when she insisted on taking the test early.”

“I could’ve,” Shikamaru agrees, “But when my ma joined in, I had to just do it. Otherwise I’d spend the rest of my life hearing them nag me.”

“You’re going to anyway.” Chouji points out.

“There’s a difference between choosing something inevitable and just enduring it against your will.” Shikamaru says darkly.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you would be –” Sakura begins meekly.

Shikamaru cuts her off, “Why are you sorry? It was Ino’s idea. It’s not like you can say no to her.”

After everything that’s happened recently, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say no to Ino, Sakura muses. She glances around the garden, spotting Ino standing at her father’s side. She’s got her hands on her hips, talking to a group of grown-ups. A few of them laugh at something she said.

“I’m glad I’ll have a friend in the class, though,” Sakura says tentatively, “I probably couldn’t do it by myself.”

“Idiot,” Shikamaru mutters, closing his eyes again, “Of course you could. Don’t think I’m gonna do much, anyway.”

Sakura smiles, feeling the thin threads of concern in Shikamaru’s aura.

Something dangles in Sakura’s face. She jolts, scooting back abruptly.

It’s a backpack, shaped like a pug. It’s got a grumpy face and its ears and paws stick out. Sakura gasps, immediately clutching the bag to her chest.

“Thought you’d like that.” Kakashi says, faintly amused.

“Thank you, Kakashi-sensei!” Sakura says, stroking the pug’s cloth ears.

“Sensei?” Shikamaru mumbles. “Already? Tch. Wake me up when class is over.”

“Okay, Shika.” Chouji says agreeably, munching his chips.

“Can’t go to school without the right equipment. And now you’ve got a place to put it.” Kakashi says mildly.

Pakkun is nestled inside Kakashi’s jacket. He looks down at Sakura with his big, droopy eyes, and slowly extends one paw.

“There you go,” He says magnanimously, “You can stroke my paw, since it’s your birthday and everything.”

Sakura bounces up to her feet, glee propelling her forward. She touches the soft pink pads in awe,
aware of Pakkun’s smug chakra.

“I’ve five now, Pakkun-san!” Sakura tells him, gently tickling his paw. He kicks feebly, then seems to decide he doesn’t care, submitting to her overeager exploration.

“Great job, pup.” Pakkun says.

“Why do you never congratulate me for getting older?” Kakashi asks.

“Because every year you live, you put another grey hair in my fur. You’re ageing me before my time.”

“But Pakkun-san, there’s no grey in your fur at all!” Sakura protests.

Pakkun preens.

“He dyes it.” Kakashi informs her.

Pakkun chomps Kakashi’s hand when it drifts by his face.

“Do you see how he assaults me?” Kakashi asks.

“That’s not very nice, Pakkun-san.” Sakura says reproachfully.

Kakashi’s hand falls out of Pakkun’s mouth when he says, “Gotta show him who the boss is, pup.”

“That’s me. I am the boss.”

Pakkun gives a rough bark, almost like a laugh.

Sakura finds the bird dying behind a bush. It looks like a cat or a bigger bird hurt it, then left it to die all by itself.

Sakura crouches down next to it, a lump in her throat at the way its beak opens wide in warning. It’s so, so scared. She must look like a big scary monster looming over it.

“It’s okay,” Sakura soothes, mindful of the Inuzuka just around the bush. She doesn’t want any of their dogs to sniff out the poor baby bird. “You fell out of your nest, didn’t you? And some big mean thing tried to make a meal of you. I’m sorry.”

She goes to cup the bird gently in her hands, but it thrashes in alarm, trying its best to get away.

“W-wait, hold on,” Sakura says, panic rising as the bird falls onto its side, wings flapping impotently, “I can help if you just keep still.”

_It’s only a blackbird, Kagami says, if you heal it, something else will eat it later. That’s just the way of the world, Sacchan._

_Only if you let it be, _Sakura says fiercely.

“Come on. Come on!” She whispers urgently, hands darting to secure the poor bird. She just can’t bear to grab hold of it in case she jostles its wounds, makes it hurt even more.

Someone pats her head.
She looks up, tears dripping down her cheeks, expecting to see Kitagawa.

Instead, Tsunade is there.

“Oba-san!” Sakura says, relieved, “There’s a baby bird here and it’s all hurt, th-there’s blood on its wing and its leg looks bad too, so you have to – ”

“You can do it.” Tsunade says mildly.

Sakura’s mouth drops open, “B-but – I tried and I couldn’t, and it’s scared and in pain. Oba-san, please.”

“Try again.” Tsunade says, unmoved.

Sakura draws back, startled, then turns to the bird once more. She wipes her face and reaches out, hands glowing with chakra. The bird flips over, but this time she makes walls with her hands, blocking its way. It lies on its back, chest rising and falling rapidly.

I can do it, Sakura says to herself.

Of course you can, Kagami says, unconcerned.

Sakura tries to force her breathing to become even, but it remains jagged and panicked even as she sinks into the bird’s system, feeling for the damage.

She finds it instantly. It’s too much. Far too much.

She holds her breath, scrambling to pour chakra in to seal the wounds. She pushes as much as she can, determined to finally ease the poor bird’s pain.

In a way, she does.

She only notices when its beak stops opening and closing rapidly. She frowns, peering closer to its face. Its eyes are open, but it isn’t looking at anything.

(Ino’s face is still, and – )

Enough, Kagami says.

“Oba-san,” Sakura says, her voice thin and watery, “I – I – ”

“Too much chakra,” Tsunade says dispassionately, “You overloaded its system and it couldn’t handle it.”

Sakura’s hands drop.

Tsunade squeezes her shoulder.

“This is a part of healing – the worst part. As you get better and better, the bad moments will become rarer, until the good outweighs the bad.” She says.

She reaches over, touching the bird’s little head. Her hand lights up.

After a while, the bird twitches, then shakes its wings. It hops up, then flies away.

“This is the best part,” Tsunade says, smiling down at Sakura’s overwhelming joy, “You can do it,
but it’ll take time and constant work. And moments like before, where you might not succeed. Every early failure feeds a future success. Never forget that.”

Sakura watches the bird land on a tree branch. It starts cleaning its wing, seemingly unbothered by the horror it had just endured.

“Now, let’s wash our hands before they turn into birds, okay?” Tsunade says, pretending to peck at Sakura’s cheek.

She giggles, wiping her face clean of tears.

The sun is close to setting by the time the party winds down.

Everyone is happy and well-fed, thanks to the Akimichi, who seem to take hunger as a personal insult.

Sakura is watching the pink light of the setting sun mix with the blue sky. If she had her crayons, she’d try to recreate the scene. But she’s not good at drawing. Once something goes through her head, it always comes out strange on the page. She watches the sun’s journey, and wishes she could do more.

Momo snuffles in his sleep, wriggling in her lap. Sakura strokes his back, enjoying how soft his fur is against her skin. Misa is down on the ground, chasing Tamocchi, who is chasing Naruto.

Itachi’s face appears, blocking out the sun. Sakura covers her mouth, muffling her surprised yelp. Momo doesn’t move, still deeply asleep.

Itachi climbs into the treehouse when Sakura waves him in, something sheepish in his aura.

“I have something for you, Sakura,” He says, hand reaching for his pocket, “I couldn’t give it to you in front of everyone, but…”

“You already gave me this!” Sakura protests, plucking at the front of her dress.

“I did. This isn’t from me. I’m just the messenger.” Itachi says.

Sakura takes the paper he offers, her hand shaking.

She scans the letter, her face falling at once. It’s from Shisui, but it doesn’t say anything about being friends again or any explanations.

_Dear Sakura,_

_I got your letter. Clearly, otherwise I wouldn’t be replying. To that letter. Okay, I’m bad at this. Surprise, surprise. I told Itachi if he reads this once I’m done writing it, I’ll send him to another dimension. I guess I better hope he listens. So, you asked about the weather, my family, and how I’m doing, in that order. So that’s how I’ll answer._

_The weather’s okay. You know. Sun’s still spinning around. Doing its thing. I saw a cloud that looked a bit like a deformed dog, and I thought of you. I could do with some more rain. Do you like the rain? I bet you like splashing through puddles, you little rebel. I like rain because it washes all the dirt away and makes the world clean. I like seeing puddles full of gross stuff like rotting leaves and all the various icky stuff you find on the street. Feels like nature’s cleaning up after itself. My_
hair is impossible when it’s wet, though, so maybe I don’t like rain that much.

My family is Sasuke and Itachi. And their parents, I guess? Mikoto is the coolest person I know, excluding me, and Fugaku certainly exists. You’ve gotta give that to him – he’s very much present. At all times. Brooding in dark corners. Do you know how many times I’ve walked into an empty room and then had a heart attack after a dark corner says my name? Five. Five times. He must be stopped. My parents don’t have Fugaku’s skill of existing. They packed it in a while ago. It’s okay, though. I can see them in the faces of my clan, and my own, sometimes. If I’ve combed my hair, I look like a young, undersized version of my mother. The scarf I gave Momo was hers. So, your dog is carrying on her legacy of excellent fashion choices. It’s what she would’ve wanted.

I’m doing... what I can. Which has turned out to be: not much. I know I’ve been awful to you. I know. I can’t ask for patience, because I can’t promise that anything will ever change. I might keep on being the world’s worst friend, or I could fix things and everything could go back to how it was. Ha. As if, right? I can’t undo what I’ve done. I broke your trust in the worst way possible. I will never stop hating myself for that. Now, I don’t know if you’re thinking ‘No, Shisui-kun, you shouldn’t hate yourself’ because you’re just that unstoppably sweet, or if you’re relishing in my pain. I hope it’s the latter. It’s easier to hate than to forgive. And hating me isn’t so bad, right? It’s easy to do. I should cut this off right here – I’m covering the letter in self-pity. God, I’m such a whiner.

I’ll just say this:

And then, incredibly, the last line is in Sakura’s code. The one she made right before meeting Shisui for the first time.

What I said before I hurt you was true. No matter what, that will never change. But you should never forgive me, Firefly. Just like I’ll never forget you.

Shisui

P.S. Don’t let anyone but Itachi touch this letter.

Sakura sits back, resting her head against the treehouse wall. She can’t cry. Her lip trembles, so she bites it.

“Sakura.” Itachi says simply, her name a comfort in itself.

“What do you do if a friend hurts you?” Sakura asks dully, all of her energy sapped from her.

Itachi glances at the letter, then back at her face. His jaw tightens. “It depends on the friend,” He says cautiously, inching closer, “And the hurt. Which matters more?”

Sakura blinks rapidly, fighting back against the ache of tears she can feel rising.

She remembers Itachi in a black and red cloak, with eyes like Sasuke’s as he stabbed her in the back, eyes like Shisui’s as he broke into her mind. She thinks of the warning she gave him once: be good.

And then the advice she had tried to pass on: you can be better than great, you can be good.

Right now Itachi is good, but that might change one day.

Right now Shisui... Shisui is still good. Maybe that won’t change.

“I don’t think it’s that simple, Itachi.” Sakura says.

“Can you tell me what happened?” Itachi asks, a great well of fear within him. He’s afraid of
knowing, but he still wants to.

Sakura leans forward, not disturbing Momo on her lap, and pats Itachi on the hand as lightly as possible.

“You’re very kind. That’s the best part of you.”

Itachi doesn’t blush or rip his hand away. He just looks down, a little flinch crossing his face at her words.

“If you tell me what happened… I don’t think I can be kind.” Itachi admits.

He knows she has been hurt, most likely by Shisui. If she told him the truth, all it would do is force him to pick a side. She hates the idea that she and Shisui are on separate sides at all.

“We can just sit here,” Sakura says, indicating the sunset, “And wait ‘til my birthday’s all done. I was born at thirty-two minutes past eight in the evening. I’ll be five for real, then. Will you stay? Until I’m properly five?”

“I can stay even after that.” Itachi says softly.

And he does, sitting side by side as Momo slept through the sunset. Itachi and Sakura rest their hands next to each other on the floor, almost but not quite touching.

***

Hello, friends!

So, if I’ve planned this right (and we all know how great I am at planning…), the next chapter should be the last one before the sequel. I’ll mark Time Flies Like An Arrow as complete on archiveofourown and post the sequel as a separate story, but TFLA will stay one story on ffnet because the formatting isn’t super great when it comes to finding stories.

Follow me on tumblr! I’m also katlou303 there, because I have zero creativity in my soul.

THINGS! ARE GONNA GET! BETTER!!

I promise. It’s not gonna keep being sad. Glad times are just around the corner. Shisui replied to the letter Sakura sent him three billion years ago!!! Ha. That boy would be late to his own funeral.

You know, in my original plan, this chapter was going to come out on Sakura’s birthday. On the TWENTY-EIGHT OF MARCH.

You can see. How great my planning. TRULY is.

I still remember when I started this story. I literally just thought, huh, what if there as a time travel fic where they just had visions of the future? And I just wrote the first chapter straightaway, super quick, nice and easy. So simple. No agonising moral dilemmas. Zero OCs to keep track of. No puppies to keep stealing the show.

And then I thought, hm, what if I planned my fun little wish fulfilment story out a little more? Just to see where I might take it? The answer is too far.

I’ve had to temporarily come off my ADHD meds (if you couldn’t tell from this frankly stellar author’s note which is just. The pinnacle of conciseness) so my motivation and concentration are on vacation. Let me tell you… my brain’s seen better days.
I think I’m going to make a list of recommendations for things that are similar to TFLA in feel, so when I’m writing the sequel you guys can have something else to read/watch/absorb. So, are there any anime/films/books/etc. that you think have a similar atmosphere or plot to TFLA? It’d be really helpful to know, thank you!

**Quick poll for fun:** What would you like to see happen in the next chapter?

There’s no guarantees your suggestion will happen. But there’s no guarantees it won’t happen, either :)

(Dogwatch Pupdate: A man was going to crush owner!!! A Very Good Girl stood up to him, and beat him!! The Good Girl is victorious.)
Sakura is sitting at a desk with twenty other children in a room in the Academy, and she is buzzing with excitement. She is practically vibrating, sitting on her hands to stop herself from bouncing up and down in her seat. Everyone here is at least a year older than her, but there’s no real difference between them physically, so Sakura got away with slipping in the room and not drawing any attention.

Kagami had laughed when Sakura sat at her assigned seat. When asked why, Kagami had said: The boy sitting next to you… he was put on our team to spy on us. His name is Sai. He didn’t go to the Academy in my time, which must mean he’s here for you. His superior must know your weakness for orphans.

Unluckily for Sai’s superiors, the other seat next to Sakura was soon filled by a different orphan. One who made Kagami sound winded when she said his name.

Lee.

He’s a chubby-cheeked, earnest boy with a thick, black plait and bruised hands. He’s sitting up straight in his chair, round eyes fixed on the teacher as he slowly ambles into the room.

You asked me to be nice to Lee, once, Sakura comments, carefully examining the cuts and scrapes on Lee’s hands. They look like the result of hitting something over and over again. The skin of his hands looks tough.

And to be wary of Gaara, Kagami points out, but of course you’d focus more on the niceties. I asked you to be kind to Lee, because I always regretted how I treated him when we first met.

Sakura rests her head on her hands, glancing up at Lee’s face. Their eyes meet, his cheeks instantly turning red, and –

(“Let’s go out together!” The weird-looking boy says, his grin sparkling and wide, “I’ll protect you ‘til I die!” Sakura can feel herself blanch, the hairs on the back of her neck rising. She risks a glance at Sasuke. Even he looks confused. The weird boy gives her a hopeful thumbs up. Sakura grimaces, “No way… you’re lame.” She doesn’t feel guilty at the way he slumps, disappointed.)

Sakura gives him a big smile.

His entire face burns bright red. He looks away abruptly, fidgeting in his seat.

“Alright, class,” The old man at the front of the room says, clapping his hands to get their attention, “It’s time for introductions. Please stand up one at a time when I call your name, and introduce yourselves to the class with a fact about yourselves. I’m going to start on this side of the room.”

There’s a collective noise of annoyance from the class that’s quickly muted by the teacher’s gimlet eye sweeping over them all.

Lee immediately begins muttering under his breath, “My name is Rock Lee and I wish to be a splendid ninja. No – my name is Rock Lee and I will be a splendid ninja! I will prove my worth and –”

The ROOT plant, Sai, taps Sakura on the arm.
She looks him full in the face for the first time, and falls into a dream.

 (“Traitor!” Sakura snarls, grabbing Sai by his collar and hauling him towards her, “What are you up to? I knew you were planning something – ”

 “Ah, is that Sakura?”

 Sakura abruptly lets go, fingers feeling weak and useless at the sound of that familiar dark drawl, her name once again in the mouth she used to crave.

 She looks up slowly, eyes wide, hardly daring to believe it, and then –

 There he is.)

 Sakura blinks, aware that Sai is waving a hand in front of her face.

 “Absent seizures are a serious symptom of epilepsy,” He informs her, his tone utterly bare and matter-of-fact, “You should seek medical attention.”

 Sakura gently pushes his hand aside, “No, I’m alright. Sorry. Did you need something?”

 Sai quite clearly attempts to look friendly, but his facial muscles don’t want to respond, so he ends up just looking sleepy, “I wanted to ask your name.”

 ROOT plant, Kagami says, almost amused, I called it. Danzo must know about your inability to overlook an orphan.

 Sakura draws in a breath to give her traditional introduction, but Kagami stops her.

 Haruno isn’t the name he wants to hear, Sacchan. Give him something harmless to report back to his superiors.

 “Senju Sakura,” She mutters in reply, feeling like the world’s worst daughter.

 But then at the same time, Tsunade would probably be quite pleased to hear her say it. And she’d used the name for her own benefit with the Kazekage. She should get used to doing it.

 Sai gives her a big, fake smile. It looks unsettling with his dead eyes, no expression at all within their depths, “I’m Sai. Did you say Senju? Aren’t they one of the old clans?”

 Yes they are, as you well know, Kagami replies cheerily, it’s almost sweet, seeing him in his element. And not a single di – ahem. Not a single joke.

 The name Senju has lit a small wildfire of gossip all around them, as Sai must have known it would.

 She hears someone whisper behind her, “Tsunade gave the couple her child to raise, but they were so terrible to her that she had to come back to finish the job herself!”

 “I heard she was hospitalised and her parents didn’t even visit her.”

 “That’s because they’re not her parents, obviously. Everyone knows that.”

 Ignore them, Kagami advises, they’re spewing nonsense because it’s the only way to entertain tiny minds.

 Sakura forces her hands into her lap, trembling.
Ignore them, Kagami’s voice rattles around her mind.

Senju Sakura.

Images of her parents’ faces every time they thought she wasn’t looking, the grey tinge of grief to their auras, the weary whispers they shared together.

Their relief when Tsunade made Tenzo the Clan Heir.

Their surprise when Sakura named her dogs Haruno, not Senju.

Tsunade’s knowing face during the adoption, saying she’s not trying to replace anyone. Her mother’s gratitude.

They’re not her parents, obviously.

Sakura faintly hears Lee’s exuberant introduction, all the promises he makes about a future he doesn’t know a thing about, certainty heavy in his voice despite having every reason to doubt.

And then, finally, the teacher’s gaze falls on her, “And you, miss? Your name and a fact about yourself.”

Sakura stands up, slamming her hands down on the desk. Every eye is on her, and she’s angrier than she’s been in a long time.

“My name is Haruno Sakura and my parents are Mebuki and Kizashi and they’re the best people in the world!” She declares hotly, glaring around the classroom. Cracks form on the desk under her hands.

The teacher looks taken aback.

Furious whispers fill the room at once.

Sakura flops back down in her seat, still fuming.

She can feel Sai’s assessing gaze. There’s a faint scratch of a pen against paper – is he taking notes about her? She can’t bring herself to care. Let all those horrible Masks know exactly who she is. She’s growing up Haruno Sakura with her Senju family, and that’s the end of it.

“Wow!” Lee whispers. When she turns to face him, he’s beaming, his chubby cheeks bright red. “You are very passionate about your family, Sakura-san!”

Sakura smiles to herself.

Kagami draws her attention back to Sai with a mental tug. Sakura glances over, and sees him crouched over a sheet of paper, carefully drawing a side profile of her face, righteous in anger. He’s inked a little halo around her head.

Sakura’s eyes snap back to the front, afraid to get caught peeping.

“Oh, well. That’s – next! You, boy!” The teacher harrumphs, pointing at Sai, whose ink-black head is down, focused solely on his drawing.

Sakura gives him a gentle poke.

His head snaps up, eyes wary, though his guard lowers a little when he sees who touched him.
Sakura indicates the teacher with a barely-perceptible nod.

Sai’s lips thin. He stands up and bows shortly. Sakura flushes, she forgot that step.

“My name is Sai. I like to draw,” He says, then sits right back down, pen already in hand to continue.

The teacher frowns, but moves on without complaint.

“You. Boy. Excuse me, are we boring you?” The sensei says, his voice hardening with every word.

Sakura looks at the unlucky child to have caught his attention. It’s Shikamaru, and he’s fast asleep.

“BOY!” The old man thunders.

Shikamaru stretches. He opens one eye and yawns, “What?”

“Name. One fact about yourself. Now,” The sensei snaps.

Shikamaru slowly pushes himself to his feet, taking an age to stand upright. He yawns again, stretching his arms over his head. A vein in the sensei’s temple throbs ominously.

“I’m Nara Shikamaru. I like cloud-watching and monsters,” He says drowsily, then slithers back down. It looks as though he’s fallen right back asleep again. The teacher has a complex look on his face as if he’s not sure whether he should be angry or impressed at his gall.

Shikamaru lets out a loud snore.

The teacher hurls a pen at his head with unerring precision.

The day is spent mostly getting to know each other.

Sakura ignores all the whispering children who stare at her with wide eyes, doing her best not to let it get to her. She talks to Lee, listening to his passionate tales of youth and how important it is to protect the people you love. She watches Sai carefully for signs of growing malice, but he seems to be exactly as he appears – a blank-faced child who occasionally forgets to blink. Sakura can forgive him for that. Kagami can’t forgive herself for not putting it together that Sai was ROOT before meeting him again as a child. She’d instinctively known Tenzo had a seal on his tongue because she’d seen it before. She just hadn’t been able to remember where. She doesn’t think that Sai would have a tongue seal already, but concedes that they don’t know enough about Danzo to speculate.

At one point Sakura glances across the room and meets the eye of a pale boy with long, soft-looking hair, and is thrown into a dream.

(Hinata coughs, a wet, fractured sound. Sakura winces. Neji is still poised, a predator ready to collect its kill. Hinata pushes herself off the ground as Naruto roars in approval. It doesn’t take long for Neji to put her back down again.)

Sai pokes her out of the dream, his pen lightly jabbing her arm. Sakura waves him off, trying to smile reassuringly. It’s impossible to tell if he is convinced, since his face hardly ever moves at all. Lee doesn’t seem to have noticed anything. He’s happily scribbling something down.

Sakura narrows her eyes at the boy who will one day hurt Hinata.
Give him a break. He gets better, I promise. Naruto punches the privilege right out of him. And it turned out that he’d had a terrible childhood – which doesn’t excuse anything, I know, but it really messed him up, Kagami says, sounding far away, as she often did while thinking deeply.

*Naruto had a terrible childhood in your time and he was still the best,* Sakura retorts.

*Naruto is an impossible ideal to achieve and an unfair measuring stick to use against the average child,* Kagami says wryly.

*I don’t see why,* Sakura replies, watching Neji notice her glare, his own eyes narrowing in turn.

“Hi!” A girl suddenly bounces into view, right in front of Sakura’s desk.

Sakura jumps in a little in her seat. This girl is a fizzing firework of excitement.

“…Hello,” Sakura replies, her shyness returning to her all at once. She hasn’t missed this feeling.

The girl beams. She has brown hair in two buns and a round, pleasant face.

“I’m Tenten! I heard you live with Tsunade-sama. Is that true? It can’t be true! Is it?”

“Sometimes.” Sakura says, blinking a little at the onslaught of words.

Tenten’s head tilts cutely, “Sometimes?”

“It’s a word meaning: not always,” Sai interjects, giving Tenten a wide, insincere smile.

“On the weekends,” Sakura clarifies after Kagami gives her the okay.

Tenten’s smile becomes impossibly wide, “Really? Oh, wow! Tsunade-sama is my hero! I’m gonna be a medic, just like her!”

Kagami makes a strange noise, *U-um. No. No you won’t.*

Sakura’s face falls, *she doesn’t? But she wants to so badly…*

*Today’s lesson,* Kagami begins, not unkindly, *you can work harder than anyone to achieve your dream and still not succeed.*

Sakura opens her mouth to deliver the sad news, but then Lee bounces up off his seat and declares: “YES! Confidence is everything! There are no boundaries to success if you just believe!”

Sakura sees Neji’s face twist bitterly.

“You think so too?” Tenten says eagerly. “That’s great! Tsunade-sama is one of the greatest shinobi of all time – you don’t think it’s too big a goal for me to go for?”

Lee shakes his head emphatically, “There is no such thing! As long as your motivation matches your goal, you cannot fail!”

Tenten and Lee both start talking rapidly, clenching their fists and jumping up and down.

*Well, we’ve just witnessed the start of a revolution,* Kagami says, amused.

“You’re wrong.” A quiet voice says. Sakura starts violently, for a moment thinking someone just replied to Kagami, but then she looks up and sees Neji glaring daggers at Lee. “It’s unrealistic to
think you can do something just because you want to.”

Lee’s face immediately goes red. His voice shakes when he speaks up, “W-who cares about that? If you want something badly enough and you just do your best, it does not matter if it is not realistic. You can do it.”

Neji looks almost pitying, “It’s not enough. If fate calls you a loser, that’s all you’ll ever be. You’ve started off nowhere near the finish line. Other people from high birth and position started further up, and they’ll reach their goal before you even get started.”

“I-it does not matter if other people achieve their dreams before me, or if it is easier for them!” Lee insists, his eyes growing wet with emotion. “It is not about them! I am going to do this for me.”

“Pointless.” Neji comments, detaching his gaze from Lee and looking around the room as if searching for something more interesting.

Tears tremble on Lee’s long lashes, his face screwed up in anger. Tenten pats him on the shoulder, worriedly looking between him and the other boy.

“You’re the one who’s wrong.” Sakura says, digging her nails into the desk to stop herself from striking it. Neji turns slowly, raising an eyebrow. Sai’s pen hovers over his paper. “There’s no such thing as fate. I know that for a fact.”

Neji rolls his eyes, starting to speak, but she cuts him off.

“I’m a Haruno. I don’t have a special kekkei genkai and I don’t come from a powerful clan – ”

“You have the same prodigious healing abilities as your mother – ”

“She’s not my mother,” Sakura says simply, “Not really. And she wasn’t born with the ability to heal either. She had to work hard for it. She’s not the only healer in the world, she’s just the best. Hundreds of people worked hard to do the same thing she can – people from big families and no families, people with lots of money and no money. Oba-san might be a Senju, but her ward is almost as good as she is, and she’s not from any big family at all.”

“But she’s not as good as Tsunade is,” Neji points out, “Because she does not have the benefits of Senju blood.”

“No, it’s because she has less experience! Shizune’s got decades to go before she can match the time Tsunade’s spent training and practising healing. But she can do it! Who are you to say what’s realistic? You don’t even know what Lee-kun can do and you’re saying he can’t ever be a splendid ninja. I think you’re just mean!”

Sakura slams her hands down for emphasis. The desk cracks, splintering to the floor in pieces. The whole class stares at her, Neji included.

Sakura’s cheeks are hot, but she presses on. Kagami proves that Sakura could achieve her dreams even without the Senju name, without extra chakra or dreams. Kagami had nothing but the belief that she could get better, and she did. It doesn’t matter that Sakura had so many things handed to her. It doesn’t.

“Being mean to other people won’t make you feel better,” She says, trying to keep her bottom lip from quivering, “And saying fate’s the reason you can’t achieve your dreams is just an excuse to keep you from trying at all.”
Shikamaru sighs loudly. He had been sleeping with his head on the desk when it broke, and he looks very grumpy.

“She’s right. Kind of,” He says, shrugging when Neji switches his glare to him, “If a random person aspires to have the Sharingan when they don’t have Uchiha blood, you’d say it’s impossible, right?”

Neji nods, looking glad to be on firmer ground.

“But they could take someone else’s and use it,” Shikamaru says casually, as if discussing a particularly fluffy cloud, “Sure, some people are born lower than others and it’s harder for them to get further than the people with all the advantages. But if they can take something from those who have more… they can make it a fair game. Put them on even ground.”

Neji frowns, looking at the broken desk.

“It’s pointless to whine about fate if you don’t even try to change it,” Shikamaru shrugs, leaning back in his chair. His head lolls as he sinks back into sleep without warning, effectively cutting off Neji’s retort.

“If you’re all quite finished discussing very basic philosophy,” The teacher says dryly, “We can discuss the best ways to fix a cheap desk. See me after class, Haruno.”

Sakura winces.

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“I’m very sorry about your table, sensei.” Sakura says, unable to raise her eyes from the floor. She feels really bad. She promised her parents that she’d be good at school and this probably wasn’t very good at all. “I’d buy you a new one but I ran out of the money my grandmother gave me.”

“No, no,” The old man waves it off, “That’s not your problem. I can easily drag in a desk from another room, or fill in a few forms to requisition a new one. I simply wished to reassure you, since it is your first day here. I had only just started teaching when your mother attended the Academy, and she did the very same thing as you on her first day here.”

Sakura’s mouth opens in a little ‘o’ of surprise, “Really?” She can’t imagine her mother breaking furniture. She doesn’t even like when you put cups on tables without a coaster.

“Yes, she had quite the temper, and the same natural strength as yourself.” The teacher smiles, reminiscing. Sakura’s face falls. Oh. He’s talking about Tsunade. “She smashed many a table, and many a fellow student, unfortunately! But do you know the truly special thing about Tsunade-sama’s time at the Academy?”

“No, sir.”

“She was only here for a year,” The old man raised his impressively bushy brows, “She became a genin at six years old. I wonder… can you do the same, Sakura-chan?”

Sakura blinks.

Can I? She asks.

I mean, I can do it in a day, because I’m essentially a jounin, Kagami says reasonably, but you? It all depends on how hard you work.
“I’ll try,” Sakura says resolutely.

“Excellent,” The teacher’s eyes crinkle upwards, “Now, you have the dubious honour of pairing up with Nara Shikamaru for this week’s assignment. I would like the two of you to examine a part of Konoha that you consider very important for the village at whole. You will receive bonus points for extra creativity!”

“We get to pick the part of Konoha to look at?” Sakura asks, thinking of the park. It’s very important, because that’s where she met Naruto.

“If it benefits the entire village, it’s worth examining for your assignment.” He clarifies.

You have a fifty/fifty chance of Shikamaru sleeping through this entire project, Kagami says fondly. Sakura remembers Shikamaru was one of the people Kagami lost just before she died. She remembers Team 10 with bittersweet affection.

“Can I draw a picture of the place?” Sakura asks.

The teacher’s aura sparkles with mirth, “Of course.”

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Naruto still plays in the park on his own sometimes, but not because he has to.

Today, Sakura is at school, so she’s busy writing and figuring out sums, all the boring things Naruto hates doing. He doesn’t mind not going with her, because Jiraiya’s been showing him all these cool seals, which are basically doodles with chakra and they can make things go BANG. Naruto’s going to be the best seal user in the whole village. He’s already made plans for a seal that makes ramen, though Jiraiya said it would take a miracle to work. That’s okay. He can work with miracles.

Tenzo is picking out guinea pigs with Shizune and his bodyguard lady. Naruto’s not sure what a guinea pig is, but he’s looking forward to finding out. He hopes they’re huge.

Tamotsu is currently running around the park, a streak of crimson brushing through the green grass. He’s the best. He’s too heavy for Naruto to carry all the time, but he likes to snuggle in his lap and lick his face. Naruto’s never had someone who likes him best out of everyone. Tamotsu doesn’t want anyone else to walk him or bath him and he whines if Naruto leaves a room without him. Naruto is his favourite.

Tsunade is working at the hospital. She said she had a surgery scheduled with some guy called Hayate today. Naruto’s not sure if she can do it, since she really doesn’t like blood, and people are all full of it. If you open them up like a juice box, all the blood comes out. He hopes Tsunade doesn’t get splashed. She seemed confident this morning, though, when she patted him on the head and said she’d see him tonight. She liked his crayon seals, especially the glittery snail one. It’s really a slug, but Naruto didn’t correct her.

Jiraiya said he had to talk to the Hokage and this time Naruto couldn’t come with him. Naruto thought that was dumb and proved it by putting glitter in Jiraiya’s hair. He has too much of it, so he never notices when there’s stuff trapped inside or covering it. Naruto once made half of it red like Tamotsu, and it took Jiraiya a whole hour to notice.

Naruto doesn’t mind being in the park on his own, because it’s so rare these days. He’s not used to how it feels anymore, and that feels really great, on top of the not-good feelings. He’s got the Monsters most days, and a big sister and big brother, plus a mother and an auntie, and two weird old guys, and best of all, Kai.
Kai is probably one of Naruto’s most favourite people. He can make fire dance in his hands, and his hair is almost like Naruto’s but paler and shorter. He doesn’t have any eyebrows and his teeth are like a shark’s. He picks Naruto up whenever he wants and gives him piggybacks like Shisui did once. Kai once snapped his teeth at a mean old lady who called Naruto a freak and she looked like she was gonna pee her pants. Naruto laughed like it was funny, but he still cried a bit because it was so nice that someone cared when villagers were mean to him. Before it just felt normal, like they all had a good reason to say horrible things, because he was bad just like they said. Kai says that’s wrong, that Naruto’s the good one and they’re all bad. Naruto likes holding Kai’s hand when they walk down the street, because it’s like having a dad, and everyone can see how much Kai likes him.

So, Naruto’s not really alone at the park. Kai is standing close by, watching all the kids run around their parents. He looks scary with his arms folded and his invisible eyebrows all angry, so Naruto sticks his tongue out at him to make him laugh. He doesn’t, but he does smile a little, which counts as a win for Naruto.

He can see the girl who got picked on before, Hinata. She’s so small. She’s standing behind an older guy who’s talking with a bunch of other old guys. Naruto watches her slowly drift away. It doesn’t look like any of the old guys notice her leave.

She approaches a group of kids, holding her hands up to her mouth and just peering at them with her big eyes. She’s got such long sleeves, they’re covering half of her body as she holds them up. She’s standing a few feet away from the kids, not trying to talk to them or anything. Just watching them play. It reminds Naruto uncomfortably of how he used to be.

Kai doesn’t say anything when Naruto edges towards the girl, but he can see him in the corner of his eye, slowly keeping pace with him.

Hinata’s face flushes and she visibly shrinks back – the kids have noticed her staring at them, and they’re shouting something.

Naruto speeds up.

“Oi!” He yells, barrelling in front of Hinata. “Get lost!”

He shakes his head at Kai when he moves to follow, like he’s going to take on a bunch of ten year olds just because Naruto’s involved.

The kids sneer back at Naruto. They’re a lot bigger than him, “You get lost, freak!”

“Na-Naruto-kun,” Hinata mumbles behind him, sounding faint.

“I’m gonna give you to the count of ten to buzz off!” Naruto warns them, using Tsunade’s countdown tactic. It never fails to get them all downstairs in time for dinner.

The kids laugh like Naruto’s told a really funny joke.

Naruto’s jaw tightens, “Ten! Nine!”

Hinata is shaking behind him, deathly white. It makes Naruto even angrier. Yeah it’s super weird to stare at people you don’t know, but it doesn’t mean you deserve to be yelled at.

The kids seem unbothered by Tsunade’s countdown tactic, but Naruto never falters.

“Two! Okay… you asked for it! One!”
The kids stare blankly at him when nothing happens.

Naruto draws in a long breath, raising his head up high, then –

"ROAR!" He screams, right in their faces. They stagger back, startled, so he does it again and again until they run.

Naruto looks around to check if Kai was behind him and he was the one who scared them off. But no, there’s nobody there but Hinata, who’s looking up at him with big, watery eyes. Naruto beams at her. He really scared them all off on his own.

He’s so happy that he keeps roaring, tipping his head up until he’s roaring at the sky, then he flops back on the ground, laughing so hard he can barely breathe.

Kai gives him a thumbs up.

Hinata sits next to him gingerly, careful to keep her dress out of the dirt.

She doesn’t say anything, just gives him a teeny-tiny smile in gratitude that makes his stomach flop.

Naruto looks up at her.

“Why didn’t you wanna play with us before?” He asks, wondering if maybe she thought she was too good for them.

“E-everyone would have more fun without me,” Hinata says, her voice small, “I don’t want to ruin your games.”

Naruto goggles at her, “That’s so dumb, Hinata-chan!”

She turns purple, covering her face with her sleeves again.

“I already like you a lot!” Naruto decides. “You wouldn’t ruin anything. And anyway, you need lots of friends ‘cause you’re always getting in trouble. Just like me!”

Hinata lowers her sleeves. Naruto’s alarmed to see tears glittering in her eyes.

“R-really?” She says, her smile widening just a bit.

“Yeah! You’re a troublemaker. You keep running away from that guy, right? Is he your dad?”

Hinata blinks, glancing over at the group of men in confusion, “Kou-san? No, he’s… he’s my bodyguard. I know it’s weird,” She adds in a quick mumble.

“No it’s not! Look, I’ve got one too! Kai!” Naruto waves at his bodyguard, who immediately appears standing over him. “He’s great because he can make fire and he never gets tired of carrying me.”

Hinata smiles, but it looks wobbly, “I… I never see my father. He is always very busy and… I don’t think he likes me.”

Naruto sits up, already furious, “Then he stinks! Who needs a stinky guy like that, right? And you’re a Monster now, which means you get to share all our parents. That’s a rule we made. That means you get Sakura-nee’s parents and they’re awesome, and my Oba-san and Okaa-san, and even Sasuke’s parents. They’re not much fun though. They never have sweets.”
Hinata’s cheeks are a very pale pink, not like her usual alarmingly scarlet blush. She just looks kind of pretty.

“S-Sakura-san said I would be… really strong and cool someday,” Hinata says hesitantly, “I don’t want her to be disappointed if she finds out she’s wrong…”

“If Sakura-nee said it, it must be true,” Naruto shrugs, “She’s never wrong. Once she said we’d get a dog, a treehouse and a *real* house, and we got all of that and more!”

Hinata gives a shy smile, daring to edge a little closer, “I liked your treehouse.”

“Then you’ve gotta come over to play!” Naruto cheers.

“I… I don’t want to be a burden. I don’t want to get in the way of all your friends. I saw how alone you were, and it always made me feel very sad. I thought you deserved a lot of friends because you’re always so cheerful and nice. I would be happy with just this, Naruto-kun. I… I don’t have to be by your side to support you.”

“Eh?! But I *want* you to be my friend. It’s a good thing!”

Hinata hugs her knees, looking away from Naruto’s confused face.

“F-for me… you are everything,” She says absently, deep in thought.

Naruto flushes, face hot.

Hinata hurries to correct herself, “E-everything I want to be! I want to be strong like you!”

Naruto preens, “Hee hee! I’m gonna be the strongest in the whole village soon!”

Hinata shakes her head impatiently, “No, I mean I want to be able to smile no matter what. Even when people are mean and make fun of me, I want to be able to laugh and say it doesn’t matter if they don’t like me, because I like me. Just like you always say. I think you are the strongest person I know because of that. And you don’t even have to be my friend. I’m happy just to be near you, Naruto-kun.”

Naruto stares at her, astonished.

Tamotsu finally stops running around the park, coming back to flop down next to Naruto.

Hinata looks about five seconds from bolting, her whole body visibly shaking.

Naruto takes a deep breath and, not looking, seizes her hand.

Hinata squeaks.

“Even if you don’t wanna play with all of us right now, I want you to,” Naruto begins, very serious, “When you’re ready, you can come over to my house whenever you want. We can eat ramen or play with the dogs. I don’t want you to just watch from far away. M-maybe you don’t need to be by my side to be happy, but I ne – um, I’d like you to be there. Sometimes. When you want to hang out. Okay?”

Kai gives him a discreet thumbs up.

Hinata’s eyes well up with tears. She nods, her little hand finally squeezing Naruto’s in return.
Naruto is also a bit teary. They don’t look at each other, they just sit and hold hands until Hinata’s bodyguard notices she’s gone and freaks out.

xxxxxxx

Sakura holds Tsunade’s hand in the hospital. The same nice lady who gave her sweets is at the desk, and she waves shyly at her. Sakura’s not holding Tsunade’s hand for her own benefit. She can feel the faint tremble going through the older woman. They’re going to work on Hayate today – or at least, Tsunade is, and Sakura’s allowed to observe. Tsunade said she saw lots of examinations and surgeries when she was Sakura’s age.

Sakura spots Kabuto down the corridor and gives him a slow, suspicious wave. She’s fond of him, but it’s hard to break the habit of assuming he’s up to no good. The guileless smile he gives her in return helps.

Hayate is sitting on the bed when they enter the room. There’s a purple-haired girl standing by the door, her chakra crackling with anxiety. She straightens up when Tsunade comes into view, but gives Sakura a bemused look.

“Good afternoon,” Tsunade says, leading Sakura around the bed, “I’m Tsunade. I’m here to examine your lungs, and possibly schedule a surgery if necessary.”

“Good afternoon, Tsunade-sama,” Hayate says hoarsely. He wheezes thickly, “This is my partner, Yugao.”

Yugao bows deeply, “Thank you very much for your time, Tsunade-sama.”

Tsunade waves her gratitude away like an annoying gnat, “It’s no trouble. This is my kid, Sakura. She’s gonna take over from me one day – if she works hard enough, of course – so she needs experience. Do you mind her being here?”

“I can wait outside,” Sakura pipes up.

“No, of course not,” Hayate smiles, the dark circles under his eyes and his sweaty pallor somehow not detracting from his air of warmth.

“Alright then!” Tsunade claps her hands together. “I just need you to keep still and breathe when I tell you to. It shouldn’t take too long to determine if any work needs doing.”

“T-the doctors all said I’d need too much done, that my ability to breathe would be severely hindered,” Hayate says, cautious hope sparking in his aura, “But, if you think…”

“Can’t think much ’til I’ve examined you,” Tsunade shrugs, “Sakura, observe the position of my hands and the amount of chakra I use.”

Sakura nods, moving closer to the bed to peer up at Hayate. She’s squirming with delight. This is something she’d wanted to happen for so long, she can’t quite believe it’s happening at all.

Tsunade places her hands on Hayate’s back. They start to glow, very gently. Yugao shifts uneasily on the spot.

Tsunade closes her eyes.

Hayate is trembling.

Hayate coughs, spluttering into a handkerchief, “I-I’m sorry, Tsunade-sama.”

“For what, doing as I asked?” Tsunade says, amused. “Do you feel any pain?”

“A little.”

“Hmm,” Tsunade takes his wrist gingerly, feeling his pulse, “Does it hurt when you cough or when you breathe? Or both?”

“When I cough, Tsunade-sama.”

The examination goes on for so long, even Sakura’s concentration wanes. She’s sure Tsunade’s doing a lot of things more than once.

Finally she asks Hayate to lie on his front, his back exposed. Yugao comes closer to the bed, looking very worried.

Tsunade places a hand on either side of his shoulder blades, then slowly starts pushing healing chakra into his skin.

Sakura stands next to Yugao, smiling up at her when she looks down. Yugao manages a tiny smile in response.

Tsunade’s chakra is beautiful. It’s like sunshine on sand, glittering gold.

It seeps into Hayate’s chest, filling his ribcage and washing through his lungs.

Sakura stands by Yugao for a very long time, radiating calm and peace to keep her from crying.

Finally, Tsunade unfolds from her bent-over position, a tiny smile on her face.

Hayate remains lying down, taking a few, disbelieving breaths.

“No surgery needed,” Tsunade says triumphantly, “I removed the blockages and the scarred tissue. I destroyed the excess with my chakra, and I found no sign that the illness will return. I’d like you to keep coming by for check-ups biweekly until you’re fully signed off.”

Hayate turns over, his expression painfully confused, “But…it’s a chronic illness, it…it will never go away. It can’t just be healed.”

“With respect,” Tsunade says lightly, “It can’t be healed… by anyone else.”

Hayate’s face crumples, “It’s gone? For good?”

Tsunade smiles brightly, “All gone. I doubt it will make a comeback, but if it does, I’ll simply remove it again.”

Tears spill down Hayate’s face.

Yugao throws her arms around him, “Oh, thank you! Thank you so much, Tsunade-sama!”

“Thank you,” Hayate cries, clutching Yugao, “You’ve given me back my life.”

Tsunade shakes her head, still smiling, “Yeah, well. Just don’t throw it away doing something
foolish on a mission, okay? Because I’m sure you’re about to be bumped up to full-time status on the mission roster.”

Hayate laughs, sniffing.

Yugao insists on hugging Tsunade twice, and throws Sakura up in the air, laughing in joy.

When they leave, Tsunade’s hand steady in Sakura’s, she looks up at the older woman and says, very seriously, “I want to do this for the rest of my life, Oba-san.”

Tsunade ruffles her hair, “Then work hard, kiddo.”

Tsunade’s good mood lasts as long as it takes for them to walk home, just in time to see Airi unload a dozen guinea pigs into a Mokuton-built hutch.

“How many?” Tsunade splutters.

Airi just smiles innocently at Tsunade’s frothing indignation.

xxxxxxxx

To Sakura’s surprise, Shikamaru is the one to suggest their topic for the assignment. He insisted that the Nara Forest is very important to Konoha because it’s where all the deer live, and their antlers have healing properties that are used in a lot of Konoha’s medicine. Then he spoiled it by saying it was also really close to his house and that way, he wouldn’t have to walk that far.

Sakura brought all her best crayons and a little art pad. She’s been drawing trees all afternoon, but they’ve yet to see a deer. She’s excited.

“Your hair’s growing flowers.” Shikamaru comments absently.

“Wh-what – no it’s not!” Sakura says, aghast, trying to cover her hair with her hands.

“Yeah, it is. It’s not a big deal. Chouji’s got red swirls on his cheeks, Naruto’s got those whiskers… and you’ve got flowers. So what?” Shikamaru yawns, his chakra as unbothered as he looks, a still river without ripples.

Sakura slowly takes her hand away. There’s petals in her palm. Oh dear.

Kitagawa is high in the trees, following overhead.

“What do you have, Shikamaru-kun?” She inquires.

Shikamaru thinks about it. “A big head,” He says finally, “it has to be big, otherwise it couldn’t fit my brain.”

“Oh,” Sakura nods. That makes sense.

Shikamaru promised he knew exactly where the deer would be, but time passes by and no deer emerge from the trees, and Shikamaru’s aura gets an edge of tension.

“Something’s not right,” He says eventually, stopping to peer at the ground, “The deer ran away from something.”

Sakura blinks, bending down to examine the dirt path. She sees a lot of scrapes and grooves on the
ground, but she doesn’t know what they mean.

She stands up, turning to reply to Shikamaru.

But he’s gone.

The world around her is hazily beautiful, perfect birdsong trilling from above, jewel-bright grass dotted with flowers at her feet. There’s a sense of peace resting over the forest. It settles her nerves even as she looks around for her friend.

“Shikamaru-kun?” She calls.

There’s no reply, but the glimpses of fluffy white clouds over her head seem to form an answer. Of course. Shikamaru must be cloud-watching somewhere. There’s nothing to worry about.

For the first time in a while, Sakura’s mind is quiet. There are no images of destruction or death, no burdens weighing down her shoulders, or bitter words biting into her heart. She feels light as a feather, as if she could drift on the wind without a care.

It’s nice.

She wants to jump and sing nonsense words. She wants to splash in puddles and read brand-new books she knows she’ll love. She wants to sit back and let the world move without worrying what might happen if she’s not paying attention.

She wants to be five.

Sakura tucks her hair behind her ears. Petals come off in her hand. She looks at them, white and perfect in the centre of her palm. She can’t feel Kitagawa’s chakra. Kagami is gone.

“This isn’t real,” She says very quietly, and gently closes her fist around the petals.

“It could be, if you want. If you come with me,” Izanagi replies.

He’s standing in front of her.

Sakura takes one, deliberate step back.

“No thank you,” She says, fighting to keep her voice steady, “Where’s my friend? And where’s Kit-kun?”

“Safe. Out of harm’s way.”

“Not... not like me. Right? When I’m with you, I’m not safe.”

“Not like you’re safe with Uchiha Shisui, I suppose,” Izanagi says, a touch of dryness in his voice.

Sakura narrows her eyes. Something clicks in her mind and she takes a step forward, raising her fists.

“It was you.” She says, anger suffusing her words. Izanagi’s head tilts, his eerie festival mask swivelling with the movement. “You made Shisui hurt me.”

Shisui would never have done it on his own.

Izanagi says nothing. Sakura gets a strong sense that she’s surprised him. His limbs loosen up, his figure losing its stiffness. He moves forward with the rolling gait of a predator.
“Made?” He says, his voice soft. “No, not made. I never made him do anything. I gave him a choice with many options, but told him only two. I asked if he would pick you or his clan. You already know what his decision was.”

“Ha!” Sakura huffs out. “Is that supposed to make me feel sad? I’d never ask Shisui to pick between me and his family! You can’t compare the people you care about, love is not a competition!”

“If it was… you lost. He broke through your mind at my request. I imagine it hurt very much. The invasion and the betrayal.”

“I’ve had worse.” Sakura says defiantly.

Izanagi draws back. Then he laughs quietly, setting the hairs on the back of her neck on end. “Yes, I suppose you have.”

Izanagi crouches down in front of her, leaves crunching beneath his weight. It’s somehow a surprise that he has a physical presence at all. She’s always thought of him as like a ghost, a shadow, or one of the monsters under her bed. Intangible, just barely passing through the world.

“There’s something in your head, Sakura-chan.” Izanagi says, touching her forehead gently. He slowly begins to apply pressure, as if trying to bore through her skull. “We both know it. But the last time I was in here…”

Izanagi leans in closer, moving his hand away so the blank holes of his mask can meet her eyes, “All I heard was screaming.”

Sakura tries to jerk her head away, but his hand shoots forward, curling around the back of her neck. Her head locks in place.

“And then I was forced out of your mind. It confirmed a theory I had about you. Somehow, you’re the same as the last time I killed you,” Izanagi says, something stirring in his otherwise monotone voice.

Sakura can’t take her eyes off his mask, certain that if she does, he’ll lunge at her.

“B-but…” She can’t finish her sentence, let alone the thought. The last time I killed you. It’s not possible.

Izanagi hums contemplatively, “But you’re still different. I listened while you confessed to Uchiha Shisui, I heard all about your dreams and your ability to sense emotion from chakra. Before that, I thought you were an ordinary child – the same as before. Shy, quiet. Easily led. You only turned out to be one of those things. You told a boy you barely knew your biggest secret. I wondered what you might tell me.”

“Y-you showed me your hell magic,” Sakura says, hesitant, “And you were going to teach me genjutsu.”

“That’s all it took to lower your defences.” Izanagi shakes his head, leaning back on his haunches. Sakura breathes out shakily, grateful to get some space between them. “Genjutsu would be useless against Shisui. Why would I teach you that? I only wanted an excuse to get into your head.”

“Why… why would I fight Shisui?”

“Why did he take you away from the person looking after you, physically carry you to an obscure location only he and his family knew of, blindfold you and then take you into a place you could not
leave without his aid?” Izanagi asks in return.

Sakura blinks rapidly, digging her nails into her palms, “He wanted to talk to me.”

“He wanted to force you to tell him your secrets. You wouldn’t have told him if you felt safe, secure, if you could leave at any moment. Don’t feel betrayed. He’s a shinobi. It’s what we do. Since you obviously didn’t care what his agenda was, I decided to test him on your behalf. I suppose that makes me sound benevolent… it’s more likely I was curious. So, I transformed into Shisui and entered your bedroom. I wanted to see how difficult it would be for Uchiha Shisui to spirit you away into the night.”

Sakura tugs at her sleeves, shifting on the spot. She knows the answer, and she’s ashamed of it.

“I wasn’t surprised by how easy it was,” Izanagi says, taking a breath to continue speaking.

“You… you were surprised!” Sakura interjects. “I made you stop. I recognised you!”

“Hmm, my mistake. You felt my chakra, I assume? But what would have happened if your bodyguard hadn’t interrupted? Would you have tried to fight? Screamed? Done everything you could to escape? Or would you have allowed me to take you?”

“If you’d come as yourself, I would have gone with you anyway,” Sakura tells him quietly, “I wouldn’t do that anymore.”

A silence, a tinge of regret in his aura. “Good.”

Sakura swallows, a single question aching to emerge from her throat. She’s so scared of what might happen if she lets it.

“Are you going to kill me?”

Izanagi breathes out harshly, a sigh escaping all at once. He releases the back of her neck and stands up in a single, jerking motion.

“No. Not yet,” He says tonelessly.

Sakura can’t help the whimper she makes, but she covers her mouth all the same, eyes wide.

Izanagi stands still, regarding her in silence.

Then he chuckles, mirth colouring his voice when he says, “I just want to see what you’ll do next.”

“Why do you want me to go with you?” Sakura asks, finding the strength from somewhere to glare up at him.

“Hmm… as it happens, I’d prefer it if you came along later in life. I’ve no interest in caring for a child. But as long as you come willingly, I won’t have to deal with a captive. It’s easier if I know you won’t run away.”

“I… I’m not going!” Sakura says.

“I could force you to travel with me by your own volition. Do you remember what you said to me when we first met? I know everyone you care about. Your parents, your grandmother, your two best friends, Naruto and Ino, and the rest of your friends, Shikamaru, Chouji, Sasuke, Kakashi, Genma, Itachi… and Shisui.”
Sakura lets out a tiny gasp without meaning to, eyes wide.

“I imagine I would only have to hurt one of them before you changed your mind,” Izanagi says.

Sakura shrinks back.

“Please don’t,” She says quietly.

“I won’t if I find what I’m looking for today,” Izanagi says.

He grabs her arms, lifting her up into the air.

*Onee-chan!* Sakura thinks desperately, but the world around her is still hazy and her mind is clouded. She can’t even sense her sister, let alone contact her.

Izanagi makes eye contact, but her brain won’t register what his eyes look like. She stares back, helpless.

“You can thank your friend Shisui for giving me this backdoor into your mind,” Izanagi whispers.

There’s a flash of midnight blue chakra and the sound of shattering glass, then Izanagi lets go.

He staggers back, clutching his head.

Sakura gasps. She didn’t hit the ground when she fell.

*Onee-chan – what –*

Kagami reappears in her mind, radiating confusion, *I didn’t get the chance to do anything.*

Sakura looks up.

Shisui is holding her tightly, gripping her against his chest.

“Shisui!” Sakura cries out.

Izanagi stares, one hand over his mask.

Shisui grins down at Sakura, “Hey, Firefly. I’m not too late, am I?”

***

Hello, friends!

Remember when I said this was the last chapter? Remember how I’m a BIG DUMB DUMMY and I’m TERRIBLE at estimating chapter lengths??? Let’s just say this was going to be about 15,000 words long before I cut it off, deciding to make this the penultimate chapter rather than the last. I’M SO DUMB.

Someone break into my house and staple a cushion to my face the next time I say ‘the next chapter is definitely the last.’

That being said. The next chapter is definitely the last. No takebacks!

(thank you so much to all of you who comment on every single chapter, it really makes my day!)

I didn’t update TFLA for about two months, I think, and I actually got withdrawals. Whoops. Have
I’ve been super busy this month with Nanowrimo (National Novel Writing Month, look it up!). I’ve written about 25,000 words in the past ten days, somebody stop me. I’m working on a novel about gay witches. Because why not, right?

TFLA’s sequel is tentatively titled The More it Takes Away, but if you guys have any suggestions, I’m all up for hearing them! :D

Btw guys, I have no idea why so many of you assumed my joke about rickrolling meant that I was going to replace the Dogwatch Pupdates with lyrics from the song Never Gonna Give You Up. I actually had to delete the joke because I was tired of getting comments asking me not to do something I never even joked about doing??

Here’s a few of my other fics you can read while you wait for the last chapter (and the sequel!)

**Of Rabbits and Tigers** is a sidefic that’s based off of TFLA, it’s Usagi-centric and it’s about his life before being recruited by Tora. The only pairings are Usagi/Tora and unrequited Usagi/Kakashi.

**I Knew A Girl With Copper Veins** is a Tenten-centric fix-it fic in which Tenten finds a scrying scroll that does far more than it’s supposed to, including showing her visions of the future. The one she finds the most compelling is the tragic Hyuuga who dies with a smile on his face – can she change his fate, even without knowing who he is? (The main pairing is NejiTen, but there’s also SaiIno, KarinSaku, NaruHina, GaaLee, ShikaTema, KakaGai, and possibly more… like ShinoSasu)

**These Bitter Weeds** is a Sakura-centric fic in which she manages to persuade Sasuke to let her come with him when he leaves Konoha. It’s an Oto-based story in which Sakura does her best to get stronger and keep Sasuke on the path of light, but also learns her value isn’t based on Sasuke’s approval. (Main pairing is SasuSaku, but a healthier, more equal dynamic version of SasuSaku)

**A Lost Corner of a Once Young Forest** is a Minato-centric time travel fic in which Team Minato end up in Naruto’s time, and they all learn exactly what happened after their deaths (except Kakashi, who finds out who he became without the team he’s only recently learned to value). Team Minato and Team Seven develop together. (The main pairing is Minato/Zabuza, and the side pairings are: SakuRin, adult!Kakashi/Gai, young!Kakashi/Obito, and possibly more as the story goes on)

Quick poll for fun: Can you tell me an interesting fact about yourself? (Or uninteresting. I don’t mind. And yeah, I’ve asked this before but tbh I loved hearing it all and I want to know more!)

(Dogwatch Pupdate: One Big Red Boy dominated the park today! He ran so much! He sniffed so many butts! He nearly peed on a big tree but was too intimidated! But still! A Good Boy!)
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

This is it! The last chapter of Time Flies Like An Arrow before the sequel! I hope you like it <3

I'm also Katlou303 on tumblr, if any of you want to follow me there or send me a message :) 

Here's my Sakura playlist: https://tinyurl.com/y784n7mq

My Kagami playlist: https://tinyurl.com/yctfb85h

And my Time Flies Like An Arrow playlist: https://tinyurl.com/y9lsjt8f

The night after Tsunade healed Hayate, Sakura sits on her bed and spreads her summoning scroll across her lap. She’s home with her parents, both deep asleep in the room next door.

Do you think this will convince Shisui? Sakura asks, nervously smoothing out the note in her hand, he replied to my last letter, so maybe he wants to be friends again.

Do you want to be friends again? Kagami replies, folding her arms.

Sakura looks down at the note, carefully written in her own special code. The one Shisui learned just so they could talk in secret. She was creating it when they first met, and her failed Katon jutsu nearly blew up in her face.

I want to know why he did it. I want to be able to talk to him like before. I felt safe with him. He knew so much about me – more than anyone but you – and he only ever wanted to help. The Shisui I know wouldn’t hurt me for no reason, Sakura says quietly.

Kagami hums, sounding thoughtful, He did help separate us. I feel a lot more alive now I’m not drowning in our mind. If he truly was your enemy, he could have done much worse than what he did – as far as I know, he just looked through our memories.

I thought you would tell me to avoid him forever, Sakura replies, a note of uncertainty ringing through her thoughts. Kagami sends back a calming pulse.

This is your life, Sacchan, not mine. You need to make your own choices. Don’t worry about what I think, Kagami says lightly.

But I’ll always worry about that! Sakura thinks back, puffing her cheeks out, I care about your opinions just as much as mine. They almost are mine!

Kagami just laughs.

Sakura scrunches up her nose, then finishes her note with a flourish. Her mother always twirls her pen when she’s done writing, so Sakura does the same. She’s getting better at writing neatly, even
though letters are just tiny pictures, and she’s not very good at drawing at all.

The letter to Shisui is a direct response to his own letter, and it says:

Dear Shisui,

I’m glad you like the weather. I wish I’d seen the doggy cloud. I do like rain, how did you know? I only splash in puddles if I’m wearing my special puddle boots. I’m short, so sometimes I sink in deep puddles. That’s fun at first, but then it gets very cold and often muddy. I hope I get tall soon. As tall as my mother. She’s taller than you, but not as tall as Genma. I think I would like to be as tall as Genma, so I could see the trees better, but I’m not sure if my dresses would still fit. Genma never wears dresses, and I think that’s a shame.

I’m sorry your parents aren’t here anymore. I didn’t know that. I thought you had dinner with them every night and had someone with you when you were sick, like I do. Is there anyone like that for you? You should have someone with you all the time, but especially when you’re sick. I don’t like being sick, because my nose stops working and I get wheezy at night when I want to sleep. But it’s okay, because my parents make me soup and pat my back. If you don’t have parents to do that for you, I will.

Because I’m still your friend, Shisui. You did a very bad thing and it hurt my feelings a lot. I won’t say it didn’t, because that would be a lie, and I don’t like lying to my friends. Thank you very much for Momo’s scarf. I didn’t know it was your mother’s. You can have it back if you want. I don’t think Momo knows it’s very special. He drools on it when he sleeps.

You shouldn’t hate yourself. I’ll fight anyone who hates my friends, even if they’re my friends too! I’m not going to say that I’ve forgiven you just yet, because I don’t know why you did it. You probably had a very good reason I just can’t understand because I’m not very big, but I want to try. Can you please tell me, so I can find out if I forgive you? I think I will. Even if I don’t forgive you, I miss you too much to hate you.

Ino says she’s my best girl friend. Naruto is my brother.

I think that makes you my best friend, Shisui.

I love you lots and lots. More than ramen, more than sake, and even more than dumplings! (I’m not allowed sake, but I’m still allowed to say it)

Please don’t forget me,

Your best friend for forever, and even more than that,

Firefly

Sakura smooths the paper out, putting beside her on the bed. She places a hand on the summoning scroll across her lap, taking a moment to visualise the birds’ temple home.

She takes a pin out of her hair, curly locks spilling around her face, and presses the sharp tip into her thumb. It stings, but only for a moment, and she delicately smears a ribbon of blood across the scroll. She pushes chakra into the seal, a moment of copper and spring water blending in the air, and whispers the technique’s name.

A puff of smoke blows her hair out of her face. She coughs in response, wafting it away.

She concentrates on her parents’ mingling aura. There’s no sense of disturbance or awareness,
they’re both wrapped in contentment as they sleep down the hall in their room.

Manami flutters her wings pointedly, the smoke instantly vanishing in the wake of her annoyance.

“Sakura-chi,” She coos, “I wasn’t sure if you would ever get around to summoning one of us! But never mind, you did a beautiful job. What do you need, hatchling?”


Manami puffs up, feathers bristling, “You don’t know where this Shisui lives and you want me to deliver a letter directly to him?”

“Oh, well, I suppose I could ask one of Kakashi-sensei’s dogs to – ”

“Ask a dog?” Manami repeats, aghast, “As if some common mutt could do my job better than me? Have you ever seen a pigeon of such rare and exquisite breeding as myself?”

“No, most pigeons aren’t nearly as fluffy as you are,” Sakura says earnestly.

Manami coos, turning around in a circle to show off her gleaming sand-coloured feathers and white throat, “Quite right! Very well, I’ll take your letter to this Shisui person. I just have to find him. What does he look like?”

“Curly hair and big eyes,” Sakura says promptly.

“How tall?”

“Tall.”

Manami sighs.

xxxxxxx

Itachi rarely finds himself with an hour to spare in his day, but today has been unusually slow and uneventful. Sasuke is playing at the Senju house with Naruto, and Fugaku is busy with clan matters he still deems Itachi too young for, so Itachi has ended up walking the streets of Konoha with the vague aim of heading to the training grounds and sharpening his skills alone.

He only sees Shisui because he was looking for birds, head angled up towards the tallest branches of Konoha.

Shisui is sat alone in a tree, his legs dangling off the branch, his expression distant and his posture listless.

Itachi frowns. Ever since their cousin Miho was murdered and displayed in the Compound, Shisui has been strangely cold. Itachi remembers seeing the two cousins laughing together once, Shisui’s face bright with mirth, Miho struggling to contain her giggles. They were friends. Itachi never used to bother Itachi that Shisui had so few people close to him – he was the same, after all – but now Itachi is always surrounded by the Monsters and clansmen, he can’t help but regard Shisui with an odd kind of frustrated pity. Shisui is amicable, friendly, and easy to talk to, so he shouldn’t be so alone. It must be some kind of self-inflicted solitude, because despite Shisui’s recently-worsening reputation, he is a very popular figure amongst shinobi.

Itachi makes his mind up quickly, walking up Shisui’s tree with just the right amount of chakra.
Shisui greets him with a strained smile, which fades almost at once, “Itachi… when was the last time you climbed a tree like a kid? You know, just by pulling yourself up branch by branch, not caring how much slower it might be to do it that way?”

Itachi hesitates, confused by the non-sequitur. “I… can’t remember ever climbing a tree without using chakra.”

He is strangely anxious about how Shisui will react to his answer, but all he does is nod, unsurprised.

“You have been smiling a lot less lately.” Itachi ventures, setting himself on a branch next to Shisui’s. “Is something wrong?”

“I’ve been faking smiles a lot less lately,” Shisui corrects, “I thought it wasn’t good for me to always pretend to be happy. Maybe I wouldn’t know what it felt like when I actually was happy, if I was always faking it. But now, I guess I’m just worrying people more.”

Itachi fights the urge to fidget, not wanting to display his concern and prove Shisui right. It was difficult, since his cousin changed so suddenly, without warning turning cold and quiet. It might be Miho’s death alone that had done this to him, but Itachi had an inkling that there was more to it. He remembers Sakura’s melancholy after reading Shisui’s letter on her birthday.

“Shisui… what happened with Sakura?” Itachi asks, watching the lines around his cousin’s eyes tighten in response. “I didn’t read the letter I delivered for you, but I saw her face when she read it. I just want to know the truth.”

Shisui tips his head back against the tree, his headband reflecting the dappled light from the leaves above. He sighs, a tiny curl to his lips – almost a smile, but not quite. “…You used to call me Shi-Shi, you know. When we first met. I thought you were so cute. Such a good kid. So kind, so polite. I wanted you to have a better life than I did. I failed.”

Itachi opens his mouth to protest, the words coming to him automatically – you never failed me, you were the best thing that happened to me back then. The only good thing before Sasuke – but Shisui shakes his head before he can say anything.

“I failed you, Itachi. I watched the world twist you until you felt you couldn’t be a kid anymore. You had to be an adult in a child’s body – and not just that, but perfect, too. In every way. I failed to protect you from the worst of our profession. So, when I met Sakura, another child genius… so kind, so polite… I thought, ‘Here’s my second chance. I can get it right this time.’ I tried so much harder. I trained her in secret, kept her from the more dangerous techniques, tried to encourage her to keep playing like the child she still was… I gave her dogs to keep her happy… I thought it would be enough. But it wasn’t.” Shisui’s body language is bare, unmoving, giving nothing away at all. He looks down, his curls falling across his eyes, veiling his gaze.

Itachi cautiously interjects, “Sakura has mentioned in the past that there were people who hurt her. But she said they were all dead. Do you know – ” He cuts himself off this time, unsure of where he was going with the inquiry. He just doesn’t want to think about the guilt in Shisui’s voice.

Shisui gives him a long, measuring look, “They’re long gone. Don’t worry. That’s not what this is about. It’s – ” He winces, gritting his teeth against the words struggling to emerge. Itachi narrows his eyes. It’s not like Shisui to hold his tongue, especially not with such a pained look. Shisui rolls his eyes, changing the subject, “Don’t think I gave up on you, by the way. Sakura was never a replacement for you. You’re not twisted, despite everything you’ve been through. I… I’m never serious, so when I really mean something, no one ever takes me seriously. But I mean this. I’m proud of you.”
Itachi’s throat aches like an invisible grip has closed around it. He swallows painfully, eyes pricking, “Shisui… I appreciate…”

Shisui gives him a wry smile, “You know, for someone who gets so many compliments so often, you’re pretty terrible at handling them.”

Itachi’s shoulders jerk in a poor approximation of a shrug, still feeling awkward and raw, an exposed nerve, “I… It’s different when the compliment comes from someone you look up to.”

It’s Shisui’s turn to look awkward, “You’ve got terrible taste in role models.”

“I don’t think so.” Itachi replies.

Shisui just closes his eyes, leaning back against the trunk. His expression is closed off again, unreadable.

“I’ll be going, then,” Itachi says quietly.

Shisui’s eyes flicker beneath his closed lids, but he doesn’t otherwise react.

Itachi sighs.

As he jumps out of the tree, a pigeon settles on the branch next to Shisui’s head, a little scrap of paper tied to its foot. Mission orders, Itachi guesses glumly.

He hangs back for a second, watching Shisui read the letter.

Shisui’s face flickers through a hundred different microexpressions. He reads the letter three times, then holds it to his heart. He closes his eyes and bites down on his knuckle.

Itachi frowns, then slowly approaches his cousin once more.

Shisui flickers next to him, his face set in determination. Itachi steps back, startled. Shisui puts his hands on Itachi’s shoulders and draws him close.

“There’s someone I need you to meet.”

The last time Shisui saw Yamaguchi Takumi, he was blinking rapidly in confusion, the effects of Shisui’s sharingan still burning his retinas.

He’d gone to Takumi’s house, fully expecting to find Izanagi there, determined to fix things for good. Instead, he’d met the real Takumi.

His eyes flicker.

Takumi’s caught in a split-second, not even enough time for his smile to fade.

“Agree to help me with whatever I need,” Shisui tells him, heart heavy with regret, “and forget this conversation ever happened.”

“Of course, Shisui-kun.” Takumi says brightly, not even the subtle layers of Shisui’s genjutsu enough to dim his smile.

Shisui hadn’t stopped there.
Itachi follows him obediently enough down the path to Takumi’s house, not stopping to question what Shisui wants with the man.

Shisui knocks, feeling the seal on the door flare in response.

Itachi hangs back, a little awkward.

Takumi answers the door a little too quickly. Shisui suspects he sensed their approach before they even reached the fence.

“Hey, Takumi-chan,” Shisui says, a faint note of apology in his voice, “Can we come in?”

Takumi glances between them, a polite smile automatically lighting up his face, “Of course!”

The moment the door shuts behind them, Shisui signs need privacy to Takumi, who responds with a surge of chakra at once, blanketing the entire house.

“He knows about the guy,” Shisui explains, gesturing to Itachi. He grimaces. He still can’t say Izanagi’s name, thanks to the man meddling in his head. He guesses it would be hypocritical to complain.

Takumi makes a noise of understanding, “You want his help? I thought you were worried about dragging him into all this?”

Itachi is looking very confused and annoyed at his own confusion.

“He’s already involved. I told him about the guy when I first encountered him. Well. A little after that.”

“You are referring to the man who calls himself Izanagi,” Itachi says, frustration evident in his voice, “I sensed the privacy seals activating. Why are you avoiding the use of his name?”

Shisui flails impotently.

“Izanagi used a technique to prevent Shisui ever mentioning his name or explaining what he did,” Takumi says helpfully.

Itachi’s head jerks up, his gaze sharp, “Then how do you know about it?”

“Shisui communicated it through another method. He used his eyes on me to remove Izanagi’s orders, allowing me to remember all the times I encountered him in the past,” Takumi explains.

“He said he fills the gaps in Takumi’s memories,” Shisui mumbles, “So I figured maybe I could unfill them.”

“At first, I assumed Shisui was the man in the mask I suddenly remembered attacking me,” Takumi says, a little sheepish, “It took some time to convince me he was innocent. But after that, we formed a plan.”

“It’s not that great. My teacher always said I was the worst at strategy,” Shisui shrugs, “We’ve got Takumi-chan’s captain to follow Sakura wherever she goes, since he’s the only one confident he could do it without her bodyguard noticing. All we really know about that guy whose name I can’t say is that he wants to get inside Sakura’s head, and that she’s repelled at least one of his attacks. She’s his target, so we’re going to wait for him to try it again, and Tora will summon us as soon as possible once he does.”
Shisui rolls down his sleeve and reveals a seal inked in blue on his wrist. Takumi flashes a matching one on his forearm.

“I designed the seals. Tora has the master seal, which summons the bearers of the secondary seal – myself and Shisui-kun. We’ll be ready for a fight at all times until Izanagi attacks, so we won’t be caught unprepared when Tora activates the seal,” Takumi explains.

Itachi gives them both a dubious look, “It seems… needlessly complicated. Takumi-san, why don’t you just go to the Hokage with what you know, as you can communicate it and Shisui cannot?”

“I don’t trust the Hokage,” Takumi says casually.

Itachi stares, aghast.

“I have my reasons. But it’s not just that – we don’t know who Izanagi is, where he came from, or what he truly wants. The only thing we have is the element of surprise. The more people know, the more chance we have of losing that surprise, especially as Izanagi has a habit of stealing other people’s identities,” He says, grimacing, “He’s pretended to be me for months at the very least. Who can say he hasn’t done the same to others? The very people we might go to for assistance against him? We took a risk going to Tora in the first place, and now you.”

“Why did you tell me?” Itachi asks.

“I was hoping you could do for me what I did for Takumi,” Shisui gestures helplessly to his eyes, “Get rid of you know what. I want to be able to talk about that damn bastard, explain myself to… Anyway, I wasn’t going to ask you – or anyone else from the clan – because I didn’t want to drag any of you into this mess, so… if you don’t want to risk – ”

“Don’t insult me,” Itachi says flatly, “Your plan is ridiculous, but there is no force in this world that could prevent me from helping you.”

“Wow!” Takumi says, impressed. “Your cousin is so cool, Shisui-kun!”

“I know,” Shisui says smugly.

“Your plan is still ridiculous,” Itachi emphasises, “And it relies on Sakura being placed in danger. Why not attack Izanagi the next time he tries to use Takumi-san’s identity?”

“Tora can’t watch Sakura-chan and me at the same time, and I can at least defend myself if Izanagi attacks. I’ve set up some new defences that should give him a headache. Sakura-chan is only a child, and we know he’s repeatedly attacked her and shows no signs of giving up. I’d rather he hijack my life once again because Tora was watching Sakura-chan rather than something bad happen to her because he was watching me.”

Itachi sighs, “Ridiculous. But… I suppose I can see some attempts at logic, here. I’ll do my best to undo his orders, Shisui. Do you want me to begin now?”

Shisui nods, almost vibrating in anticipation. He’s so eager to be free of Izanagi’s insidious mental touch. He’s tired of questioning his own mind, tired of wondering if his thoughts and actions are his own or the result of Izanagi’s meddling. And most importantly, he’s eager to tell Sakura everything, just like she asked him to. There’s no guarantee she will forgive him, but she’ll know the truth. It’s the least he owes her.

“Just one thing first,” Itachi says, drawing short of reaching for his cousin, “Promise me you aren’t deliberately endangering Sakura so you can appear the hero and save her just in time.”
Shisui’s eyes widen in shock, “I – *what?* I would *never* –”

“Bear in mind that after I undo Izanagi’s orders, you will be able to tell me exactly what happened between you and Sakura,” Itachi warns, his voice low and uncompromising, “And I want the truth.”

Shisui blinks, faltering, then looks down at his feet. He coughs, voice coming out hoarse and one harsh word away from cracking, “That’s not why I’m doing this. If I thought going to the Hokage would help Sakura, I would. If I trusted her bodyguard, I’d tell him. If I thought Tsunade-sama would believe me, I’d tell her. I… I always *want* to trust people with precious things, Itachi, but I always end up losing them. I can’t keep losing, Itachi.”

Itachi regards him with a long, searching look, then his face softens, “I understand. I’m here for you, as always.”

Shisui gives him a smile, unpractised and much dimmer than the kind he used to give out all too freely.

Takumi looks pleased with the two of them. He doesn’t seem to have noticed how much trouble Shisui has looking him in the eye. He didn’t just remove Izanagi’s orders, after all.

“Agree to help me with whatever I need,” Shisui tells him, heart heavy with regret, “and forget this conversation ever happened.”

As Itachi’s eyes flicker red and meet Shisui’s, he thinks about how if you stop placing worth in trust, you become untrustworthy yourself.

xxxxxxx

When Tora finally summons Shisui, it feels like activating his Shunshin just at the right moment – a sudden rush of adrenaline, a flinch, and a perfect landing.

He opens his eyes and sees Sakura dangling in Izanagi’s grip, his mask inches from her face. In a flash, he hurls a kunai at Izanagi’s head, and speeds to Sakura’s side, catching her before she can even begin to fall.

Whatever genjutsu Izanagi had wreathed around the two of them snaps.

Sakura looks up at him with astonished eyes, “Shisui!”

It tugs at his chest, just like always.

He gives her her best grin, sincere and bright, “Hey, Firefly. I’m not too late, am I?”

Sakura’s shock fades to caution, her eyes flickering between his face and Izanagi. Her smile, when it comes, is faint, “No. What are you doing here, Shisui?”

“A good question.” Izanagi says, lowering his hand from where he’d been clutching his mask. To Shisui’s immense satisfaction, there’s now a deep crack across the porcelain face. “How did you know I would be here?”

Shisui grins, as sharp as a mouthful of glass. He spreads his arms, indicating the figures all around him, “I had help.”

Takumi and Tora stand in close formation, both armed to the teeth. Takumi even managed to grab a huge scroll, which is tied to his back. Tora is in full ANBU garb, with twin brass knuckles gleaming
wickedly on each hand.

Itachi isn’t far behind Shisui, looking coolly analytical, taking in the situation. Shisui hadn’t wanted Takumi to mark him with the seal, but after Itachi undid Izanagi’s orders and gave Shisui the assurance that his mind was his own again, he couldn’t exactly leave him behind. Especially not after Shisui told him the truth of what happened with Sakura.

“You disobeyed my orders,” Izanagi says flatly, “I warned you what would happen if you interfered with my plans for Yamaguchi.”

Tora bristles, stepping forward, but Takumi shakes his head ever so slightly, instantly quelling his approach.

“You broke your word when you killed Miho,” Shisui accuses, his voice low. Sakura straightens up in his arms, her face creased in worry.

Izanagi pauses, then laughs, “Is that what caused this little rebellion? One chuunin hardly seems worth all this fuss.”

“It isn’t just Miho. You’ve been using Takumi for far too long. You manipulated me into hurting Sakura. You’ve been threatening her for months. It’s going to end here and now. I warned you, didn’t I? I said I’m going to be the reason you stop breathing.” Shisui says.

He gently places Sakura onto her feet, giving her a reassuring pat on the back. Then he stands up straight, eyes flashing red, hands poised to form seals.

“You’re not getting away this time,” He says, his voice hard and uncompromising.

“Are you going to let him kill me, Petal?” Izanagi asks, head tilting towards Sakura, an eerily slow movement.

Sakura bites her lip, brow furrowing deeply.

“Don’t worry, Sakura,” Itachi says kindly, “This isn’t your fight.”

For some reason, this only makes her face darken even more.

“I’m surprised you would bring your favourite cousin with you. I thought for sure he’s what convinced you to attack Sakura on my order,” Izanagi says, his tone light yet every word enunciated and deliberately chosen.

Sakura’s eyes widen. Shisui feels a sickening swoop in his stomach. Not like this, he thinks helplessly, I wanted to explain it all to her later, when she was safe!

But Sakura’s cheeks puff out crossly and she jabs a finger in Izanagi’s direction, “I knew it was your fault! All this time Shisui’s been avoiding me and he hurt me and it was all because you’re so mean all the time! I – I hate you!”

Itachi’s eyebrows shoot upwards in surprise. Shisui can’t blame him. It’s the first time he’s ever heard Sakura say a harsh word to anyone.

Izanagi is silent for a long, unnerving moment.

“I already told you,” He says slowly, “I didn’t make him do anything. I gave him a choice with many options. And he…” Izanagi’s mask turns in Shisui’s direction, glinting in the sunlight, “He chose
poorly. He was free to warn anyone of my plans whenever he wanted – my order to keep quiet was designed to only work if he followed out my request to invade your mind. He could have gone straight to the Hokage, freed Takumi, and spared you. He chose the easy option, Petal. He chose to hurt you.”

Sakura trembles, holding her hands up to protect herself from the words.

“I didn’t want to!” Shisui shouts, making her jump. He forces himself to calm down, self-hatred curling in his gut. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I thought if I pretended to follow his order, to invade your mind and then not leave a backdoor like he asked – I thought just the appearance of obedience would be enough. I could explain to you why I did it and keep my family safe. I thought I could explain.”

Sakura rubs her eyes with her sleeve, looking away.

“So you see?” Izanagi begins, triumph in his voice.

But then Sakura shakes her head, lilies spilling from her curls. “No. I don’t know why you tricked Shisui into doing that, and I still don’t know why Shisui did it. But I know I should have told Shisui about you the first time we met, and you hurt me,” She says steadily, looking up at him with dry eyes, “When you broke into my mind and made me see horrible things. I didn’t tell Shisui because I thought I could make you good, and that if he knew he would only worry and try to fight you. I thought we could be friends, Izanagi-san. I should have known from the moment you hurt me. I know now.”

Izanagi steps forward, ignoring Shisui’s glare.

“Friends can hurt you worse than enemies,” Sakura says calmly, “But friends feel bad when they hurt you, and they say sorry. You’re not sorry at all, are you? Shisui feels so bad it’s like he’s bleeding. You don’t feel anything.”

“Petal – ”

“You’re not my friend and you never will be,” Sakura takes a deep breath, as if steeling herself, “That makes you my enemy. I’m not going to go with you, and I’m never going to let you in my head again. You should just go, Izanagi-san.”

Flowers unfurl from Sakura’s palms. Shisui abruptly remembers no one is supposed to see that, and flashes over, closing her hands with his, but it’s too late.

“Mokuton,” Izanagi says with detached interest, “Now where did you get that?”

Tora and Takumi shift uneasily.

Itachi gapes at Sakura.

Sakura grimaces, her little hands trembling in Shisui’s, “I’m not very good at it. And I don’t know why I can do it at all.”

Itachi’s stance firms, his gaze hard. His resolve to protect Sakura has clearly only strengthened from the revelation.

“The orders you left Shisui were far too complex to be anything but the work of the Sharingan,” Itachi surmises, a snarl on his face, “You are either an Uchiha, and therefore a traitor, or a thief.”

To Shisui’s surprise, Izanagi laughs.
“I’m the traitor?” He says, his voice turning lethally sweet. “Why don’t you tell them what I saw in your mind, Sakura-chan? Then we can all see who the traitor really is.”

Sakura looks as confused as the rest of them, “I don’t…” She winces sharply, a hand coming up to press against her forehead. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Shisui works it out, quick as a flash. Sakura’s kekkei genkai had shown her Itachi in Akatsuki’s colours. Izanagi must have seen that in her mind and known what it meant.

He sees the bewilderment on Itachi’s face, and vows that he can never, ever know the truth.

“Anyway, I meant what I said,” He interjects smoothly, dropping Sakura’s hands, “You’re not leaving this place alive.”

“You’re very pleased with yourself,” Izanagi says slowly, “I suppose you think you have me trapped?”

“You finally woke up, huh?” Tora says wryly. “I found you hanging in a tree. I figured it was this freak’s handiwork and cut you down, but I couldn’t rouse you.”

“Thanks for leaving me to die alone, I guess,” Kitagawa says grumpily. There are livid purple marks around his throat. Sakura’s hands twitch forward, clearly wanting to heal him.

“You survived, didn’t you?” Tora shrugs.

“And this is the extent of the cavalry?” Izanagi raises his arms, gesturing to the group at large, “A boy, a chuunin and two jounin?”

“I’m here too, you know.” Kitagawa grumbles.

“Where are the ANBU squads?” Izanagi continues. “The specialised forces sent by the Hokage to deal with internal threats? You knew enough to plan for this… and you still neglected to tell anyone important. What will you do if you are not enough to stop me?”

Shisui steps closer to Sakura.

“What if I told you… none of you are enough?” Izanagi asks, his voice barely above a whisper.

“I’d tell you to think again,” Tora says coldly, hands flashing through seals. Everyone else tenses for battle, but Izanagi does not react.

Enormous lizards emerge from the smoke, each one slate grey with pale, forked tongues.

Izanagi tuts, “Hm. Not enough.”

Takumi uses the hand that was in his hair to seize the scroll on his back, unfurling it with a splash of blood across the ink. A short sword appears in his hand, crackling with blue chakra.

Itachi readies his shuriken, eyes flashing.

Izanagi sighs, seals forming quicker than Sakura can see. A puff of smoke later, and another Yamaguchi Takumi emerges from where Izanagi once stood.
Tora tenses.

Takumi clutches his sword, looking stricken.

“Have it your way, then,” Izanagi shrugs, wearing an unsettlingly nonchalant look on Takumi’s face, then flies at Shisui and Sakura.

Shisui lets go of Sakura, his hands flashing seals. He completes them before Sakura can fall, catching her just as a mass of crackling green chakra swarms them. They are now surrounded by an enormous, glowing warrior, brandishing a curved sword.

“Susanoo,” Shisui intones.

Izanagi stops short, just as Kitagawa’s sword glows blue.

Kitagawa doesn’t move, but his blade zips through the air, heading straight for Izanagi. He parries it with a single kunai, ducking under its hilt to rush at Kitagawa.

The blade returns with a whistle and Kitagawa leaps on it, floating over Izanagi’s attack.

The lizards burrow underground.

Tora forms seals, golden fire billowing from his fingertips, outstretched towards Izanagi.

“Taichou?” Izanagi says in Takumi’s voice.

Tora halts, the fire trembling in the air.

Takumi leaps through it, his sword slashing straight at the impostor’s face.

Izanagi jumps back, right as the lizards emerge from underground, latching onto his back with sharp fangs.

“Nice one, Takumi!” Tora yells.

Kitagawa flies up, bringing his sword down onto Izanagi’s unprotected head.

Izanagi flickers, then Kitagawa goes flying, breaking through a tree. His sword warps away, spinning into the dirt.

Sakura gasps, trying to wriggle out of Shisui’s arms, but he stays rigidly unyielding. He is not going to fail. Not this time.

“Maybe you were right, Uchiha!” Izanagi shouts, his voice sounding well and truly alive for the first time Shisui can remember. “Maybe I do have a Sharingan. Do you want to know where I got it?”

Shisui is trembling with unspent rage. He stays silent.

Kitagawa is crumpled on the ground, deathly still.

“Did anyone ever check Uchiha Miho’s eyes?” Izanagi asks. “After the funeral?”

Shisui bites back a gasp, horror shuddering through him.

“She won’t be the last to die, I promise you that!” Izanagi swears.

Then he half-stumbles drunkenly, confused, a blade in his back.
“No,” Itachi says coldly, “You will die next, as recompense for your sins.”

Izanagi reaches up to touch the tanto jutting out of his shoulder. He gives a ragged laugh, “You? You lecture me about sins?”

“What did I see in your head, Sakura?” He shouts. Sakura clutches Shisui’s shirt, eyes wide. “Tell me about Uchiha Itachi’s sins!”

Itachi is staring at Sakura, wide-eyed in confusion.

Shisui shakes his head, then slowly lowers Sakura to the ground.

He glares right at Izanagi, then the green warrior around them moves, its mighty arm crashing down.

Itachi leaps away nimbly, but Izanagi stands still.

Dirt flies up under the great blow.

Izanagi emerges, unscathed. His Takumi disguise is gone.

Shisui growls, then Susanoo’s ribcage opens, firing a thousand chakra needles at Izanagi.

*Nothing.*

Izanagi stands still, his head tilted slightly in mock-pity, “I really did think you had more to offer, Shisui. Perhaps you could do more if you were not stuck behind that shield, cowering with the child. Don’t you want to fight with the grown-ups? Or are you happy to play the coward forevermore? Or… is that your true self, Shisui? A coward?”

Shisui trembles.

“No, he’s not!” Sakura yells. “Shisui is so much braver than you know!”

“It’s okay, Firefly,” Shisui says, giving her a faint, painful smile, “I know what I am. I know what I’ve done.”

“You were the youngest member of the clan to ever manifest Susanoo,” Itachi says urgently, “And you are still the only person in living memory to perfect it! You kept me alive through ANBU even without being with me, because I had someone to aspire to, a friend to return to! You are not a coward, Shisui!”

Shisui hangs his head. *I’m so tired,* he thinks. It’s times like this where he wonders if he’s just a little bit broken.

Sakura stands up, reaching a hand out for Shisui to hold.

Tora circles around Izanagi, giving him a wide berth. Takumi mirrors him on the other side, looking for an opening. Tora’s brass knuckles are glowing, chakra extended like claws.

“What will you do?” Izanagi says, delight lighting up his voice. “Will you fight with your family? Or shelter your friend?”

Shisui takes a step forward, head still low. Another step. One more.

“I think,” He says, raising his head to reveal a smirk, “I’ll do both. *Kage bunshin no jutsu!*"
Over twenty clones emerge, leaping from the trees to surround Izanagi.

Sakura gasps.

Itachi smiles, gripping his shuriken.

“Remarkable,” Izanagi says, despite his tone sounding anything but impressed, “It is very difficult to manage the constant chakra drain of clones and Susanoo at the same time.”

Takumi touches a hand to his chest and a seal flares to life.

The ground beneath Izanagi’s feet shifts. Tora throws golden fire in his path before he can steady himself, then Itachi snaps his tanto out once more, aiming for Izanagi’s chest.

Izanagi vanishes, reappearing a few feet behind Takumi. He slams the hilt of his kunai against the other man’s head. Takumi crashes to the ground.

Tora yells out something indistinct yet clearly desperate.

Shisui’s clones pile on Izanagi, each one as fast as Shisui himself. They attack in blurs, Izanagi just barely dodging their blows by a hair, staggering back under the force of the onslaught.

Izanagi grabs Kitagawa’s abandoned sword, slicing through a group of clones.

Tora charges, landing a spinning kick on Izanagi’s chest, sending him back a few feet. Izanagi whirls around, gripping Tora’s head and dragging it down to face-level. Tora slackens at once, hitting the ground soundlessly.

“Katon: Hōsenka Tsumabeni!” Itachi shouts, hurling his shuriken along with a blast of fire with unerring precision.

Each shuriken meets their target: one clips Izanagi’s wrist, forcing him to drop the sword before he could stab the unconscious Tora, one ripping through his shoulder, the rest peppering his side in a blaze of flame.

Izanagi’s head jerks up and then he rips through the clones between him and Itachi, appearing behind the smaller boy. Itachi’s fast enough to whirl around to meet him, but not fast enough to dodge the heavy blow he deals to his face.

Itachi smacks into a tree and sinks to the ground.

Sakura cries out, “No!”

Takumi, Ryuu, Itachi and Kitagawa are all motionless on the ground.

“We’re not done yet, you son of a bitch.” Shisui growls.

The clones all pull out swords, then dart around Izanagi, too fast to be seen. Invisible slices cut through Izanagi on all sides, sending him reeling in all directions.

Izanagi ducks, kicking Kitagawa’s blade into his hand, then shoots over to Sakura and Shisui.

Izanagi brings the sword down –

And *shatters* Susanoo.
Shisui grips Sakura tight and leaps into the trees, his chakra a mess of panic and fury.

Sakura pulls her hands free, bites her lip and smears the blood across her thumb. Kagami helps her twist out of Shisui’s arms, then she slams her hand down on the branch of the tree they’re in.

“Kuchiyose no Jutsu!” She yells. Kagami’s chakra surges forth.

Rokurou and Saburou emerge, neither looking pleased to see her.

“Ah,” Rokurou says distastefully, “The small pink one.”

Shisui stares in shock.

Izanagi is watching them. A strange mixture of amusement and anger mingles in his aura.

“One get help, one stay to fight, please!” Sakura orders.

“Well… I am the eldest,” Rokurou says unctuously, though he glares at Sakura, “I ought to fight. The smallest should choose flight.”

Saburou sighs, clicking his beak, “I suppose that is I.”

He flaps his powerful wings, nearly sending Sakura off the branch, and takes off, flying well out of Izanagi’s range, though the man doesn’t spare him a glance.

“Pestilence and plague,” Rokurou curses, “I ought to fulfil my half, I suppose. Very well. And the target is? One of these plentiful soon-to-be corpses, I hope?”

“No!” Sakura glares. “The masked man!”

Izanagi turns, his arms open in welcome.

Rokurou tuts, then turns his gaze on Izanagi. Chakra wells up in his stomach, then he opens his beak and purple mist emerges at a surprising rate, billowing towards Izanagi. The mist strips away the bark of the trees it touches, and they are left to rapidly decay.

Izanagi replaces himself with his cloak, leaping up into the tree opposite Sakura’s.

“Not enough,” He taunts again, sounding almost as if he was enjoying himself, “Call it off or watch it die.”

Rokurou flies overhead.

Shisui leaps, snatching a kunai out of the air as it sails towards the vulture.

“Leave! Leave, Rokurou-san!” Sakura yelps in alarm.

“Always a pleasure,” Rokurou says with heavy irony, then he disappears into a puff of smoke.

Wretched chicken, Kagami snarls.

“We have to delay him until the other bird brings help,” Shisui says quietly, facing away from Izanagi. “Do you think you could help me distract him?”

Sakura nods, not wanting to risk speaking in case Izanagi sees her lips move.
Shisui goes to jump off the branch, but Sakura catches his sleeve. She hides her face behind him to stop Izanagi seeing.

“I forgive you, Shisui,” She mouths, then gives him her best smile.

He blinks down at her, then breaks into a dazzling grin, “Thanks, Firefly.”

Before she can react, he’s already down on the ground and exchanging blows with Izanagi.

“Are you going to stay up there, where it’s safe? You always were so weak, Sakura,” Izanagi says.

Sakura does not flinch.

She reaches out, and Kagami answers.

“I’ve not been weak for a very long time,” Kagami replies, then chakra shoots through her legs and she springs high into the air.

Izanagi leaps back.

Kagami crashes back to earth with an almighty bang, her leg caving the forest floor in and ripping trees out of the ground.

She jumps out of the crater just as Izanagi flies at her, and she hurls a punch at him – she misses, but the force of the hit is enough to knock him sideways.

Shisui is a blur, never quite in the way but always hovering on the sidelines.

He’s fast enough to dodge her heavy blows as she rains them down with impunity, free to hit without needing to aim. As a result, Izanagi is immediately on the defensive, contorting and whirling around to avoid getting decimated.

Shisui is giving her a wide berth, clearly intimidated by the wind whistling around her fists as she punches again and again.

Kagami doesn’t care.

It’s been far too long since she’s let loose.

“Is that you?” Izanagi asks suddenly, nimbly dodging her kick. “The other soul in Sakura’s mind?”

Kagami grits her teeth and says nothing. She’s had to listen to his manipulative monotone for far too long. She has no interest in encouraging him.

“Are the things I saw true?” Izanagi presses.

Kagami spins, splaying her hands on the ground and kicking out with both legs. There’s still a disappointing lack of impact as Izanagi dances away, and she gets back up with a burning desire to see him broken beneath her feet.

“Was Naruto really dead? Or did you abandon him in his hour of need?” Izanagi asks, his voice an insidious whisper.

Kagami falters.

(The blade goes deep, and Naruto sags beneath it. His eyes are flat and dead, just like Ino’s, and
Sakura waits for him to move, for the Kyuubi’s chakra to unfurl with a monstrous roar, but nothing happens and she waits and waits and dies along with him –

A hard shove knocks her out of it, Shisui dragging her out of the way as Izanagi flicks kunai in their direction.

“It’s not real, Sakura!” Shisui says, eyes wide and panicked.

“Yes, it is!” Kagami snarls.

That’s the problem. The dreams are reality. The life she leads now, bitter and twisted and trapped as nothing more than a warped reflection of a better version of herself… it’s no life at all. Her world may be on fire, but at least she is real when she’s there. Burning is agony but at least it’s something.

(“Die,” Sasuke says with absolutely no emotion or investment at all. He’s killing her and he doesn’t care. He yanks the sword up and then swings it down once more. The pain hasn’t lessened, it hasn’t numbed, it’s a constant wildfire ripping through her and she’s reduced to begging, pleading for it to end, but Tsunade’s training was intensive and Sakura’s automatic healing is relentless.)

Kagami kicks off the ground and just barely brushes the edge of Izanagi’s sleeve, sending him flying.

(Sakura manages to look up, blinking blood out of her eyes, and sees Ino’s beautiful face. She’s sprawled out next to Sakura, almost close enough to touch. That’s the problem with almost, Sakura thinks as Sasuke’s hand draws back for another blow, it’s worse than never. I loved Sasuke and never stood a chance, I loved Ino and we almost, almost – )

“It was all true!” Kagami roars. “Everything I went through, everything I suffered, it was all real and it is never going to happen again!”

She draws her fist back just as Izanagi rushes her, and finally, finally hits.

His mask smashes, Kagami’s knuckles grazing the fabric underneath for just a split second, and then Izanagi soars backwards with the force of the blow.

He crashes through branches and tree trunks, leaving grooves in the earth as his body ploughs to a sudden, painful stop. He manages to catch himself, gloved fingers dragging through the dirt. He doesn’t bother to cover his face, as it’s already wrapped tightly in bandages. His eyes are cast in shadow.

He laughs raggedly, “I’ve seen your death, little girl. He drives his hand right through your back, doesn’t he? Do you think he was aiming for your heart? It is such an easy target, after all.”

Kagami snarls, shoving her fist through a nearby tree and flinging it in his direction.

Izanagi dodges it, still laughing, “Touched a nerve there, didn’t I? He carved your heart out – no scraped it, and left pieces behind. Enough that you still believe you’re human, but you’re not. You’re nothing but a broken shell, a corpse dragging behind a child. That’s right! I’ve seen what you are, Kagami. That’s what you call yourself now, isn’t it? You’re a lodestone, an anchor around her neck, a leech desperately clinging to life. And for what? Vengeance? You’ve had plenty of chances for that, and done nothing. You’re no use to the world locked up inside her head. I can set you free, and use your knowledge and strength to change the world. She can’t do it. Look at the allies she’s surrounded herself with! Ten times her strength, and still so very weak. I am not weak. I can break your shackles and help you make a difference – cut the head off the snake before it bites. You owe it to yourself to do something with the chance you’ve been given. Or are you content to live it all over again through the eyes of a helpless child? Watch them die once again? Ino is so small and harmless
right now, isn’t she? How would it feel to see her second chance be snuffed out before it can really begin?”

Kagami looks down at her hands. So small. Unscarred, without the thick skin she once worked so hard to develop.

“What would you have me do?” She asks, clenching her fists.

“Sakura, no!” Shisui says, alarmed. His eyes spin, so she grits her teeth and looks away.

She can almost feel Izanagi’s smile widen.

“I only need to access Sakura’s mind, and then transfer your consciousness into my own. It wouldn’t harm her, or you. You would be free to tell me everything, and point me in the right direction to finally enact your vengeance. You would not be chained in my mind.”

Kagami smiles back at him, “That’s the trouble. I’m not chained in Sakura’s mind anymore. Shisui freed me first.”

Izanagi’s smile slips.

Shisui stares.

“And you’re right. I could have had my vengeance over and over. Sasuke is only a little boy right now, and he trusts this version of myself more than he ever trusted me. I could kill him. I would kill him. But somehow, through all the endless visions… dreams… nightmares of things to come, Sakura brought me back to life. She saved me by reminding me of who I once was. And who I can be again. I don’t need your help to change the world. We’ve already done it.”

Izanagi shakes his head, the bandages around his mouth set in shadow, a dark slash of an angry frown, “Fine. I tried to do this the easy way, because if I break your mind by accident then there’s no retrieving it. But it seems as though the easy way is no longer an option.”

“I don’t – ” Shisui begins, his voice low in warning.

Izanagi flickers in front of him, Kitagawa’s sword back in hand and already swinging.

Sakura sees Sasuke’s pitiless eyes.

She witnesses Naruto lose hope.

She watches Ino fall to the ground.

Kagami moves.

When the sword goes through Sakura’s little chest, Kagami takes every ounce of pain for herself, leaving nothing to spare.

“No!” Shisui screams.

Even Izanagi’s eyes, dark and obscured, seem to widen.

Kagami can do this. She has died a thousand times. She can live just this once. For Sakura.

She seizes Izanagi’s hands around the blade’s hilt, refusing to let him move away. The sword has ripped through everything inside her, but it’s not enough. The pain is familiar, every bit as agonising
as it was before.

Izanagi tries to pull free, but Kagami is stone.

Shisui is weeping next to her, his hand uselessly pressed against her side.

“I’ve got him, Shisui,” Kagami says, words slightly garbled by the blood in her mouth, “Finish this.”

Shisui is wretchedly sobbing her name over and over, but it’s not her name anymore. He’s crying for the infant who is peacefully sleeping inside their mind. No one has cried for Kagami besides herself in a very long time. She doesn’t know if anyone mourned for her when she died, if Kakashi found Team Seven lying broken, entwined with Team Ten.

Saburou cries out overhead.

Kagami falls asleep gratefully, oblivion a welcome respite from the never-ending agony of living.

Sakura wakes up with her hands gripping Izanagi’s, Shisui’s arms wrapped around her, and Kitagawa’s sword stabbed through her chest.

She can’t feel any pain, just a very sluggish flow of blood barely escaping around the blade.

“Izanagi-san,” She rasps, “I’m going to let you go, and you’re not going to come back. Okay?”

Izanagi’s hands twitch beneath hers.

“You can’t come back, because if you do, I’ll fight you again… and I’ll win,” Sakura says seriously.

Izanagi nods, his veiled gaze heavy on her face, “Perhaps. But, if you survive this, please bear in mind… If life in Konoha should prove unbearable, I will always be an option.”

Shisui’s arms tighten around her.

“Bye bye, Izanagi-san,” Sakura says.

She lets go, expecting him to disappear at once, but instead he supports the blade and allows Shisui to prop her up in his arms, keeping the sword from doing any more damage to her.

“Why did you do all this?” Shisui says, his voice hoarse from tears.

Izanagi pauses. “To you? Because you remind me of someone I used to know. To her? Because I need her help to return to someone I dearly miss.”

Sakura stares up at him. If she had known that from the start, she would have done everything she could to help.

But Izanagi must know that.

He ignores her questioning look, and finally flickers away.

Shisui cradles her, his chakra a maelstrom of panic, terror and heart-wrenching grief.

Sakura tries to pull the sword out herself, but Shisui immediately clutches her hands, terror spiking in his aura.
“No! You have to leave it in, or all…” Shisui’s voice fades, the reality of the situation clearly dawning on him again. “Firefly…”

“I can’t heal myself while there’s a sword in my chest,” Sakura tries to tell him.

He can’t seem to hear her, “I’m so sorry, I can’t believe I ever – ”

Sakura uses his distraction to rip the blade out, ignoring his howl of horror.

She falls back, hair spilling across the grass, and it’s almost like cloud-watching with Shikamaru might have been, if this day had gone as planned.

Instead, Shisui’s eyes are wild and his hands are pressing too hard on her wound, violent tremors rushing through him.

Sakura calms herself, closing her eyes to Shisui’s terror, and places her hands on her chest.

Kagami wakes just enough to help out, pouring chakra into the wound.

“Sakura!” Tsunade shouts.

Shisui flings himself to the side, looking up at the older woman with almost painful eagerness.

Tsunade takes over at once, her hands shaking hard at the blood, her chakra rippling as panic thrashes inside her.

Saburou is sitting in a nearby tree. Oh, Sakura smiles to herself, he must have gone to get help at the Senju House. I guess he wouldn’t know many safe places in Konoha.

Shizune reaches in to lend a hand, eyes dark with determination.

Tenzo kneels at Sakura’s side, next to Shisui, his chakra a wash of fearhorrorpain, crashing against each other over and over. He distracts Sakura with a daisy chain between his fingers, eyes wet with unshed tears.

“I’m not going to die,” Sakura whispers. Not this time, Kagami agrees.

“Never.” Shisui promises, his voice hard.

Thank you for saving Shisui, Onee-chan, Sakura says.

You’re welcome, Sacchan.

Sakura doesn’t remember everything from that day in the Nara Forest.

She knows that after her condition was stabilised and she was whisked away to hospital, the other members of the group had been healed and had all refused to seek further treatment, keeping their involvement a secret. She knows Shikamaru was found sleeping safely in the grass, still wreathed in Izanagi’s heavy genjutsu. He knew it was there, he just couldn’t be bothered to break it. When he was told what happened was a training exercise gone wrong, he told them he didn’t care if they didn’t want to tell the truth, but he didn’t want to have to sit through them lying. That was time he could spend sleeping.

Tsunade tells Sakura that as far as the Hokage and the Council are concerned, what happened in the
forest was another attack by ROOT. Kitagawa hasn’t been punished for failing to protect her, but he’s been beating himself up enough on his own. There hasn’t been any sign of Izanagi since the fight. Sakura hasn’t even sensed a faint note of midnight blue and broken glass.

Sakura woke up the day after the battle in the woods with two dogs on her chest and her parents sitting at her bedside. She apologised to them for always being in hospital, and they scolded her through tears for being silly. Her brothers had burst into the room along with the rest of the Monsters, Itachi hanging back and looking guilty. She soon put a stop to that by opening her arms out and pitifully calling his name. He was powerless to resist, and he gave her a long, gentle hug, even after she offered him her little finger instead if he still didn’t like hugs.

Naruto had bounced on the bed and told her he’d protect her from all the bad guys, because she’d promised to be there when he became Hokage, so she had to get better quick, and he’d make sure no one ever hurt her again.

Sakura had pulled him into a hug, slow and tender, tears pricking at her eyes. Naruto was the reason all of this started, and she would never forget that. The first dream had been an omen of what was to come, but she was getting very good at changing things for the better.

“Don’t get hurt again, Sakura-nee,” Naruto had whispered in her ear, sounding choked.

“I’ll try, Naruto,” Sakura had promised, hugging him tight.

Finally, on a warm morning when she was due to come home, Shisui came to see her.

“Hey, Firefly,” He says, his smile warm and gentle, “Did you miss me?”

“Of course,” Sakura replies at once.

Shisui sits down on the bed, patting Momo with a fond look. He strokes his mother’s scarf, a little rough around the edges, but still the same blue fabric as before.

“I said it before, but it’s worth repeating.” Shisui says, his voice very serious. He takes a deep breath, messing with his curls, and says, “I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry for being a coward and ignoring you when I first encountered Izanagi. I’m sorry for betraying your trust and hurting you. I’m sorry for prioritising everything else above you. I’m sorry for believing for one single second that causing you pain was even an option, let alone the best one.”

Sakura scrunches up her nose, trying to think of the best way to make him feel better.

She lights up, remembering something.

She slowly moves her hands through the seals he’s sure to recognise, stopping just short of completing them.

“Katon,” He says, smiling, “That’s how we met.”

“You hurt me that day, too, but I knew you were nice because you said sorry and I could feel that you meant it. Nothing’s changed. You’re my best friend, Shisui.”

Shisui ducks his head, suddenly bashful, “You said as much in your letter… I… It’s the same for me, too. Whether I beat the odds and we stay friends forever, or there ends up being a very good reason you’ve never dreamt of me… I’m glad we met.”

“Me too.”
“And… could you thank your big sister for saving me, please?” Shisui says sheepishly. “At least… I’m pretty sure it wasn’t you, since you were all scary, throwing trees with one hand and roaring.”

“It was Kagami,” Sakura confirms, smiling, “She didn’t mind saving you.”

Shisui laughs, “The weird never stops coming with you, does it? As much as I want a peaceful life, I’d probably miss hearing all your bizarre revelations.”

“Like Mokuton,” Sakura says, very quietly.

They both fall silent for a moment, remembering.

“Izanagi, Itachi, Takumi and Tora all know now… possibly Kitagawa, too – ” Shisui sees her guilty face and rolls his eyes, “ – okay, definitely Kitagawa. We can still keep this under wraps for the most part, but… I’m worried about Izanagi.”

“You shouldn’t be,” Sakura says serenely, “He won’t come back. I felt his chakra. He was very upset that he accidentally stabbed me.”

“As he should be!” Shisui snorts. “If I ever see him again… I’m gonna run the other way, because I’ve had enough with the weird mind games.”

Sakura nods in solemn agreement, then gasps as she remembers something.

She pulls a little book out from beneath her pillow, putting it in her lap and stroking the cover. “I asked Okaa-san to get my dream diary from my room. She thinks it’s just a diary about boys in my secret code, but it’s not. I wrote down all of the dreams I’ve had so far, and only you can read it. I’ve filled this one up, so I thought you could have it.”

“You would… you trust me with this?” Shisui says, taken aback.

“With everything, Shisui,” Sakura says firmly.

Shisui smiles. It matches his chakra, bubbly with happiness and contentment. “Thanks, Firefly.”

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Sakura isn’t supposed to know about the cake, but Kitagawa may have let a few details spill with a wink and a pat on the head.

She’s thrilled and not bothering to hide it when Tenzo leads her down the path to the Senju House, knowing everyone is following behind and all of her loved ones are safe and nearby. Tamotsu greets her with desperate barks, his bum wiggling with excitement at the sight of her. Momo and Misa bark right back, tails wagging furiously.

It’s the first time Sakura’s left the hospital since Izanagi’s attack. She’s bracketed by her parents, her mother holding one hand, her father holding the other.

Shizune is carrying Naruto, moving to avoid being tripped by Tamotsu as he dances at her heels, trying to reach his owner. Kai shadows her, his face for once free of a scowl, instead faintly amused. Airi is for some reason dressed as Tsunade, which had given Sakura a shock when she saw what appeared to be a slightly deflated Tsunade with completely the wrong chakra. Kitagawa is on the roof, which Tsunade hasn’t noticed yet, because if she had she would be yelling a lot about expensive tiles and clumsy burglars.
Shisui was going to be here in time for dessert. Kakashi was supposed to already be here, but they’d guessed he’d be late and gave him the wrong time to trick him into punctuality. Genma and Kabuto promised to swing by after they finished their work for the day.

The Uchiha are a slow, dignified procession behind the more chaotic Senju clan. They’re all dressed for a funeral, or maybe a nice, fancy afternoon tea. Mikoto is wearing sparkly earrings, Fugaku doesn’t look quite as angry as usual, Sasuke’s in sky blue, and Itachi is walking carefully with a very large green rabbit in his arms. He and Sakura have scheduled a playdate between Mr Minty and Miss Magnolia.

Ino and the rest of the Monsters will be here soon.

Sakura can’t wait to see them all again.

A messenger waylays Tsunade at the door, but Sakura rushes past and dances into the house, thrilled to be back. Her parents follow her example, twirling down the hall, always happy to dance at any opportunity. Her dad’s been able to dance a lot more since Kagami healed him.

Sakura rushes into the garden to see Tenzo’s guinea pigs. They squeak at different times, almost making a little song out of their noises, and Sakura loves hearing them sing. There seems to be more than there was last time.

The tree she grew with Tenzo is growing even bigger, cherry blossom just starting to bud. Tenzo’s garden is in full bloom most of the time, but occasionally he likes to go back to the start and watch them all blossom once more.

Misa runs in a circle under the tree, then abruptly squats.

Sakura gasps, “Good girl! You good girl!”

Momo cocks his head, listening to the praise, and swiftly follows suit.

Sakura gasps again, “Both of you! Weeing in the garden like good dogs! Well done!”

“Why are we cheering?” Sakura’s mother asks, poking her head out of the door.

“Misa and Momo are weeing!” Sakura announces.

“Great.” Sakura’s mother says, not quite managing to match Sakura’s enthusiasm.

“Great.” Sakura’s mother says, not quite managing to match Sakura’s enthusiasm.

“Always knew they had it in ‘em!” Sakura’s father yells.

Sakura beams at them both, “I knew you’d be happy, too.”

Sakura’s mother’s face softens. She steps out into the garden, opening her arms out for a hug, “With you, honey, how could we be anything less than happy?”

All three of them hug for a long time, until Misa launches herself at Sakura’s father’s knees, sending him toppling over.

They all laugh, her dad the loudest, and sit in the grass together.

Sakura looks up at the treehouse.

Everyone she loves is either here or on their way.
It’s such a bright, happy thought. It fizzles in her mind like a firework.

*I’m so glad you gave me my dreams, Onee-chan,* she says cheerfully, *I wouldn’t have so many lovely days without you here.*

Kagami smiles, the terrible drip-drip of blood long gone, the twisted chains absent from her arms, now free to hold her up as she sits and watches the world through Sakura’s eyes, *thank you for only ever taking my advice when it was actually good. If you’d listened to me every time… I don’t think you’d be anywhere near as happy as you are. I’m glad things turned out this way.*

For a long, peaceful moment, they all sit in companionable silence as bees buzz by and butterflies hover over the flowers.

Then –

“Sakura!” Tsunade hollers. “Why does the messenger from Suna have a battleaxe with your name on it?!”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, friends!


I wrote a lot of this while tired out of my mind, but quite frankly that's when I get most of my writing done, so that isn't saying much. Regardless, if it's terrible or just doesn't make any sense, it's the sleep deprivation that's the problem. Not ME. Ha ha ha...

I have LOVED writing TFLA. I'm loving plotting the sequel. Please follow me for updates so you don't miss the very first chapter of The More it Takes Away!

I made a discord for this fic, which I rarely use because I am terrible, but it's a fairly reliable method of contacting me. If you want to join, please send me an ask on tumblr.

Ryuu/Tora has komodo dragon summons. Is it realistic that so many characters in my fics have summons? No! Do I care? DOUBLE NO

It's nearly 4AM and my mind is unravelling with every minute. I feel like if I stay awake any longer, I'll uncover the secrets of the universe.

If you want to read something that reminds me of TFLA/inspired TFLA, I have some book recs for you!

(All of the following book recs should be read in the super cute Puffin in Bloom editions if possible!)

*Heidi* by Johanna Spyri
*A Little Princess* by Frances Hodgson Burnett
*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott
*Anne of Green Gables* by L.M Montgomery
All of the above books feature spunky, optimistic heroines, often in less than ideal circumstances, with compassion and character growth always the central focus. I hope if you read them/have already read them that you love them as much as I do!

Anime recs: ( Ones that remind me of Time Flies Like an Arrow)

Cardcaptor Sakura – One of the most precious shows in existence.
Chi’s Sweet Home – CATS!
K-ON! – A very sweet, cheerful slice of life anime about cute girls forming a band.
Yotsuba!
Polar Bear Cafe
MY Love STORY!! (Okay, it's not about kids or overly cute stuff, but it's still adorable and unbelievably optimistic)

Sakura will be about eight years old in the sequel, by the way. So many of you were worried I’d skip straight to her being an adult and there’d be no more cute kid stuff at all! There will, but it'll be tempered by emotional maturity and more complex friendship rituals :D

I'm so sorry for how long this took to write, but in my defence, I am an idiot.

I love you guys a lot, so thank you for being so patient with me when I was slow to post or made a million mistakes per chapter.

(Btw, in case any of you were wondering... I beat NanoWriMo with three days to spare. Somehow)

Quick poll because it's the last one, but not in bold because I can't HTML when I've got a bad case of the sleepytimes:

What was your favourite part of Time Flies Like An Arrow?

Mine was the comments, which made my day every time. Thanks, you guys! <3

(Dogwatch Pupdate: Three very good dogs are very happy in two homes that they get to spend lots of time in getting belly rubs, head scratches, and best of all, they're fed far too often, because they're all very good at looking desperately hungry when they've actually just stolen Tsunade’s burnt roast ham)

Works inspired by this one: sephia toned by polyxena chatoyant, Iditarod by opheliashook, Pinpoint by countesscee, You've Grown... A Lot by Cattlix

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!