Summary

When Sakura walks home after sending Naruto and the Sasuke Retrieval Squad off, the last thing she expects is to be attacked. What she could have never anticipated is that evening changing...everything.

In which: Sakura's Inner is far more diabolical than anyone ever expected, crows demonstrate themselves to be cruel mentors, the complications of selfdom in ANBU are realized, and Sakura learns exactly how much she hates Kakashi (and how alike they are in the most terrible of ways)
Chapter Summary

A Quick Preface

Man, this has been brewing in my head for years...and now I've finally found the temerity to actually start writing it.

Maybe canon Sakura is one of the best medic nins in the world; but I've always needed her (or, honestly, any female character in the series) to be comparable to Naruto, Sasuke, Kakashi, Itachi, etc., meaning: pushed and broken and challenged in the same exact way. Kishimoto's depiction of female shinobi-life is a transparently gendered experience: when it comes to the critical combat, men are the ones predominantly relied upon, women instead relegated to the role of healers or back-up. Which is...really, fucking annoying.

So, yeah. This story is going to be gritty and at times gory—but it's also going to have its counterpart moments. This is after all—or at least, I intend it to be—ultimately a romance.

Hope you enjoy!

The sun set on the horizon, casting the path and the buildings into brazen shades of gold. Despite the beauty of the scene before her, however, Sakura was otherwise occupied.

Hours had passed since the retrieval squad had departed. And though she had long wiped away those tears and had even managed to finish the grocery errands her mother had rudely barked at her on her way out (didn’t she care that Sakura was absolutely miserable?), she could no longer ignore the sinking feeling in her stomach that had been present all afternoon.

Since the events of a few hours earlier, the Voice—that insidious force that had helped Sakura shove Ino out during the Chunin exams—had become unusually active. And while she was no stranger to it whispering outrageous things, it had never been this vocal.

Weak, the Voice snarled. Weak, weak, weak!

Righteous indignation alone kept her back straight as she continued her trip back home. Sakura had done absolutely nothing wrong; she had tried convincing Sasuke with her deep love for him, and when that failed, she had had no options left. She couldn’t hurt the boy she liked. That was someone else’s job.

As a child, Sakura had never had any conscious preoccupations with shinobi or fighting. But, faithfully following Ino, Sakura had learned to become a kunoichi nevertheless. She had risen to the top in her academics and placed below the boys in taijutsu and other physical activities. Sakura couldn’t let her muscles get too big, after all—couldn’t let her body get scarred, because that’s not what a lady was supposed to look like. Incidentally, her mother had made her peace with Sakura’s lifestyle with compromises like these, and her father--a civilian merchant--had yet to say anything otherwise.
And Sakura was good at being a kunoichi. Her Academy teachers told her so. She had about an average amount of chakra, they said, but she also had excellent chakra control, which would make her a good medic-nin if she ever chose it—

_Why don’t you make your precious Sasuke-kun bleed yourself? Pretty, pretty blood, I bet he has._

Sakura paled in revulsion at the Voice’s words. “You are violent and crazy!” For as far as she could see, the road was abandoned. Still, she lowered her voice. “I would never do that to Sasuke-kun—or anybody!”

_You’re not going to be able to keep me locked away forever._

Oh, yes she was, Sakura thought vehemently to herself.

Her toes stubbed against a rock in her path, and she heard a tearing sound below her. Scowling downwards, she saw that her sandal had gotten caught and torn. She bent to her knees to try and fix the sandal. If she could grab that loose end and make a make-shift knot over here…

The milk bottle lay forgotten at her side, attention devoted to the sandal she was attempting to salvage. The sooner she fixed it, the sooner she could make the rest of the trip home and spend the rest of the evening crying into her pillow. Biting her lip, she grabbed both ends and stretched them toward each other to tie.

She paused when she heard footsteps.

“What’s that?” Sakura whispered, heart pulsing rapidly in her chest. Fingers shaking, she stood up from her kneeling position.

_Years later, Sakura would think back to that night. She would think, mainly, about how quickly it all happened—how protracted build ups and suspense were attributes of stories and artfully written novels, not real life._

_Because in real life, Sakura encountered none of those things._

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“Look what we have here.”

From the park’s bushes on either side of her stepped three grown men. Civilians; they wore no hitai-ate. But they were lean and muscled, with a look in their eyes that made her hand go straight for her pouch. Her stomach churned when she realized that she had left it at home.

“Pink hair,” one of them rasped, inching closer. “That’s rare, isn’t it?”

“What do you want?” Sakura demanded. Her mind fumbled to understand what was happening before her. She had walked this path so many times without a problem. _Why now?_

The third man stepped forward. By the way the other two gave way for them, it appeared that he was the leader. He was the biggest of the three, with black hair and wide, dark eyes.

“I’m a ninja,” Sakura warned. “Don’t come any closer.”

“Really?” the third man drawled, white teeth flashing. “Don’t look it.”
Sakura’s heart plunged into her stomach. No Kunai or shuriken. If they stepped closer, she would—she would have to fight them hand-to-hand.

When the first man laughed nastily and made a grab for her waist, Sakura darted back. She saw the second man move from behind her, but wasn’t fast enough to avoid it. He fisted her hair, thick, calloused hands scraping and drawing blood from her scalp to restrain her.

Sakura twisted—ignoring the sharp pain of hair being ripped from her scalp—to send one leg flying high. Her foot landed squarely on his face, but her strength must have been nothing compared to his mass, and he only staggered back.

“You little bitch,” he snarled. Lunging forward, he punched her right in the stomach. Sakura’s mind went blank with the pain. Thick, cloying liquid dribbled from her mouth.

“Don’t damage the organs,” the third man hissed. She felt his hands wrap around her arms.

Organ traffickers, she processed in terror. Beginning to cry now, she scrabbled wildly against him, nails flying like claws as she searched for his face. She heard him curse behind her when her nails raked against his cheek. Another hand reached his eyes, and he dropped her reflexively.

When the next came at her, she was more prepared. She feinted to the side like she had been trained at the academy and lashed out with one hand, pushing fingers through his eyeballs and into his head. He released a scream and crumpled to his knees.

One down, the Voice growled in her head, Two more.

But unlike the first, the second man managed to catch her arms. The third man grabbed her legs, neutralizing their maneuverability as easily as the man holding her arms.

“Get off!” Sakura screamed.

“You’ve been more trouble than I anticipated,” the third man chuckled darkly.

“Help! Help!”

She felt the man behind her bend down, sniffing her hair and grunting at the scent of her shampoo. “Hey, she smells good… What do you think?”

“I think it’s only fair compensation, given what she’s done to our friend over there.”

Sakura’s eyes flew open in primal panic at the implication laden in their tone. Wilder than ever, she raged against their hold on her. She could no longer see through the tears in her eyes, the world a blur. Why couldn’t she fight them? Why wouldn’t Sasuke-kun help her?

She felt hands begin tearing at her clothes, and she screamed, loud and high. “No, no, no… let go! Please, please, help! Sasuke-kun!”

He’s not here, the Voice roared.

“Help—help me,” Sakura choked out, limbs twisting, “Kakashi-sensei! Kakashi-sensei!”

They’re not here, Sakura-chan, the Voice told her remorselessly, mockingly. Sakura stilled at the Voice, suddenly numb to the hands at the Voice’s unbelievable coldness. Without warning, it was like her consciousness had been transported to another plane, where it was only her and the Voice. A colder, monstrous version of herself with sharp teeth and terrifying eyes gazed back at her in her
mind’s eye, smiling slightly. The creature’s mouth opened:

*If you want this to stop*—

Sakura’s jaw tightened, breath heaving.

—*LET ME OUT*

It was a deafening, primal roar, so guttural that she could feel its force vibrate through her bones.

After that, Sakura knew only darkness.

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**Author’s Note: Please leave kudos and comments!**
Sedation

She woke to find herself staring without comprehension at two dead bodies.

*Milk...she could smell its sweet sourness in the air...*

*Liquid, coating her hands. Not milk.*

A groan sounded to her left. Nerves frayed, her head snapped painfully to its origin. The first man, the one who had attacked first, stirred. Blood streamed from his closed eyes as he fought to get himself to his knees. He whimpered, hands searching around him for the other men. When he encountered dead weight, he let out a horrified groan.

A loud choking noise emerged from Sakura’s throat, her eyes bugging in terror and revulsion as she understood what had happened. Her hands snapped to her neck and left inadvertent, morbid handprints. She couldn’t breathe. She abandoned the destroyed milk and fled, sprinting as hard as she could.

She stopped only when her stomach could no longer keep down its contents. When she straightened, despite what she had expended, the thick, cloying scent of copper clogged her nostrils. She could feel it, the slickness on her face, dripping down her chin.

When she had reached up to wipe her mouth, she had coated her face in blood. *Their blood.*

Sakura sobbed, wanting the stickiness to vanish from her fingers.

*Had she killed them? No, not her. She couldn’t have. But—but if not her, then who? Who else could have done it?*

Her heart pounded in her chest.

Oh god—oh god, she had done it. It had to have been her. Couldn’t have been anyone else.

She gasped for breath. She sank to her knees and wiped her hands furiously in the ground. What had she done what had she done what she done—

Salty tears mixed into mud in the first below her. Eventually, some still-rational part of her realizing she needed to get home before her parents noticed anything amiss. Because if anyone found out—

*No one could ever find out. Not her mother, not her father. Not Ino. Not Sasuke-kun.*

Somehow, she mustered the strength to pick herself up, to force her limbs into motion before the first rays of dawn. She stumbled home and scrubbed and scrubbed until her fingers were bleeding.

When she woke up the next morning, she remembered something vaguely about cold water and bleach and a painful throbbing in her hands. Her father read the newspaper and her mother sipped her coffee and complaining about the milk she had forgotten to pick up again and Sakura…

Sakura was a convulsing, bleeding mess—oozing red and puss and tissue and bone. An open wound.
Sakura was no stranger to death. She had been there when Gato and Zabuza and Haku had died—she’d smelled the stench of burning, rotting bodies before. But she had never killed anyone.

She could hardly have imagined until that point what a marked change that distinction would make.

Unsurprisingly, as she had resorted to in the past to cope with more mundane sources of stress (her mother’s nagging, Sasuke not liking her, etc.) she developed a routine to ward off insanity. She dragged herself home. She took a cold shower to wash off again the blood from her skin and hands long after its visible disappearance (she knew it was still there, in the lines of her hands and skin). Then, she grabbed a bottle of sleeping pills and went to bed.

Two weeks later, the retrieval squad returned. A day later, Naruto announced that he was going to leave Konoha to travel with and learn from the legendary sannin Jiraiya.

The announcement weighed heavily on Sakura’s chest as she exited Shikamaru’s hospital room, leaving Ino alone with her teammate. Without the weight of the flowers she had been carrying, her hands began to tremble uncontrollably.

They stilled momentarily when she caught sight of a tall figure leaning nonchalantly against the corridor outside of Naruto’s hospital room.

“Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura burst out in dazed shock. She tried to cover it. “H-how are you?”

“Neither especially good nor especially bad,” Kakashi returned evenly. The book remained in front of his face.

“Oh.” The following words tumbled out in a rush, chinks in her tenuous calm. “I was wondering when we were going to start training again.” Was her voice higher than usual?

And why did his smile look so… fake? She felt unsettled, uncomfortably aware that she had never had anything resembling a rapport with Kakashi, which even Naruto had been able to boast.

The tall, wirily muscled man lowered his book. With ostensible reluctance, he fixated one, half-lidded grey eye on her instead of the open page. “I believe the Hokage has for the moment disbanded Team Seven, as two thirds of our team has left or will be leaving Konoha.”

Sakura blinked uncomprehendingly. “Are—are you saying you won’t be teaching me anymore?”

“Godaime has decided that I return to my…ANBU duties full-time.”

She would have missed it if she hadn’t been looking at him so closely. Just for an instant—there was the minutest change in his demeanor, prompted by the mention of the organization. If questioned, she would have never been able to explain what had changed in that moment, except that the hair on her arms rose.

(And, perhaps, that she had the sudden sense that the man before her wasn’t the one she thought she’d known all along).

Her voice was small when she found it. “Who’s training me from now, then?”

Kakashi’s gaze landed somewhere above her head, seamlessly performing the lazy, inattentive jounin. He gave another fake, little smile, eyes crinkling above his mask. “I’m sure you’ll find
someone good. Gai is always eager to take on another student.”

Sakura felt her fingers begin to tremble again. She shoved them under her armpits in a futile attempt to still them. She had killed—She—she needed to be taught how to—

“Wait,” Sakura tried desperately, “I’m sure you could train me when you’re not on missions. I don’t mind waiting around. I can practice when you’re gone—”

His expression didn’t shift. “To be honest, Sakura-chan, given your skillset and temperament, I would advise you to pursue becoming a medic-nin. I would bother the Hokage about that—they say she’s the best.”

With a nonchalant wave, he vanished, leaving Sakura by herself.

A medic-nin waits for the injury and then tries to fix it, the Voice snarled. If you had waited for the injury in the park that night, you know what would have happened. I want other people’s pretty, pretty blood—I can’t get it if you’re dead.

Sakura flinched as the Voice echoed in her head.

When the dark-haired woman at the front desk saw her a week later, she didn’t look surprised. She smiled at Sakura. “If you’re here to see Tsunade-sama, she’s on the door to the right.”

Sakura moved to the instructed door. Pushing it open, she reached a circular room with a panoramic view of Konoha. Sitting in front of the large window was the Godaime. Tsunade looked up from a thick stack of papers with a menacing scowl on her face.

“Haruno Sakura,” the woman noted coolly. “How may I help you?”

Sakura paused unsurely, suddenly overwhelmed by the intense mid-afternoon heat. She could feel, with uncomfortable extremeness of sensitivity, the tendrils of hair plastered to her neck.

“I…suppose I want you to take me on as your apprentice.”

“Suppose?”

“I want it,” Sakura returned immediately, desperation seeping into her voice and rendering it sharp.

The Hokage planted both hands on her desk and stood up with sudden force. “Even if I were inclined, it would be far from easy. What I have achieved in medical ninjutsu has taken me what has been a lifetime for most shinobi. To be my successor in the hospital—”

“I don’t want that.”

Shock registered on Tsunade’s face, eyes widening. Then, her gaze narrowed. “Then what do you want from me?”


Tsunade examined her harshly and demanded, “Why not accept the title?”

“I—I don’t think I have the right…temperament.” Letting herself into a hospital room with civilians, into surgery when she had killed like—like that…It made Sakura want to vomit, the very
idea of her being some child’s doctor.

The Hokage’s jaw tightened, and she leaned back, crossing her arms. “On the contrary,” the woman told her, “I’ve been told you have the perfect temperament. Excellent chakra control, academically strong, non-confrontational tendencies. You prefer to avoid fighting, isn’t that right? And frankly, your taijutsu and other ninjutsu have not developed much beyond your Academy days.”

Sakura didn’t know what else to say. So she said nothing.

“The other old fools on the council would have been thrown out of this office for sheer impertinence.” Tsunade gazed at her in silence for a moment. Then, unexpectedly, she smirked.

“All right, I’ll take you on.”

Before she could even blink in disbelief, Sakura was unceremoniously booted out of the office and told to return at five the next morning.

To her surprise, the hokage kept her word. Tsunade drew up an official contract stating that she had taken Sakura on as her apprentice. In the same scroll, she declared Hinata—an optimal choice because of her dojutsu’s abilities—her successor for the hospital.

Thus, the Hokage started both Sakura and Hinata with first-step medical ninjutsu.

Sakura had difficulty adapting to the Godaime’s teaching style. Perhaps, because it had been a long time since someone else had catered their lessons specifically toward her. Or—she was forced to acknowledge—perhaps because Sakura had never truly been interested in being a shinobi before.

“Place your hands above the fish,” she was instructed.

“Okay,” Sakura responded.

“Apply chakra.”

“I am.”

“Direct it through its pathways.”

“…I don’t follow.” She offered it hesitantly, half-expecting the older woman to walk away from her, to move onto another, more talented student.

“What specifically do you not get?” was returned instead.

“How do I locate the pathways?”

“Do you remember the diagrams?”

“N-no. I—I’m sorry—”

“No point apologizing. Pull them out again. Look at them.”

“Okay.” A pause as she reached down to pull them from her satchel. The whispery rustle of scrolls being unrolled sounded through the air.
“What is the most standardized chakra point on any antigonia?”

“What vessel beneath its eye,” she responded immediately.

“Enter the chakra system through there and then feel the rest out.”

“…Ah.”

Outside of her medical training, Tsunade also took her out to the training fields three times a week to learn her infamous monstrous strength.

The first time she saw her mentor shatter a boulder with her muscled, human arm, Sakura’s jaw dropped. She didn’t even feel the slivers of rock as they sliced her skin.

For weeks, she worked hard, training for hours outside of her scheduled time with Tsunade. And though her mentor was shocked at her resulting progress, the Voice was derisive about what it perceived to be insufficient diligence.

Lazy bitch.

Sakura clenched her teeth until blood flooded her mouth, moving through katas in her backyard even despite the pain. It was well past midnight.

If you can concentrate chakra in your fists to make your punches stronger, what else do you think can do?

The Voice was a satanic presence, whispering dangerous, insidious things to her when she was exhausted, weak, and desperate to be more. And though she had promised herself to never, ever listen to it again, promised to convince herself so strongly of its non-existence that she would forget it was there entirely, it had driven her nearly mad.

With sweat and tears and a migraine that threatened to split her head from its insistent raging, Sakura had given in.

She ended up in the hospital the next day, waiting for Hinata to attend to her.

“How can I help you today, Sakura-san?” the Hyuuga heir asked quietly, veins protruding around her eyes as she scanned Sakura.

“I was…experimenting with concentrating chakra in other parts of my body. Before I perfected the technique, I injected too much concentrated chakra several times in too small a space. I found mild damage to the pathways when I scanned them, here and here.”

Hinata’s eyes widened. “As your attending physician, Sakura-san, and because Tsunade-sama wants me to handle all your injuries for my training, I must warn you that what you are doing is extremely d-dangerous. Even one instant of distraction and you could risk permanently injuring yourself.”

Sakura nodded evasively at that. She knew that the chakra paths were thickest in the hands and feet, making it easiest for concentrating chakra there, while other locations were narrower and therefore riskier. It hadn’t been rationality that had led her here. She tilted her head back as the cool sensation of Hinata’s chakra began working on her legs.

In the middle of her work, Hinata paused and asked with slight hesitance, “H-how is Naruto-kun?”
Sakura opened her eyes and spotted the slightly pink tinge to the other girl’s face. It reminded her of Sasuke (the-way-he-left), which reminded her of—

“He writes to Iruka-sensei regularly,” she answered stiltedly, “Iruka-sensei fills me in whenever we run into each other. You should visit him.”

“Oh,” Hinata murmured, gaze falling shyly. “I couldn’t do that.”

“From what I’ve heard, he’s doing fine.”

Hinata nodded and then pulled away to lift her clipboard. She marked some things down and then looked back. “That’s all, Sakura-san. No more training for today, but you should be fine by tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Sakura said, sliding off the hospital bed. She left the room and made her way to the hospital entrance.

As she stepped outside, the hot summer sun beat down on her. Her old short-sleeved qipao dress, unfortunately, would have fared better in the hot weather than what she was wearing. But Sakura had turned fourteen and grown several inches over the summer, also outgrowing the dress. Keeping in mind what was sustainable for the amount of money she was currently making, she now wore the standard issue black pants and black short-sleeved shirt common among shinobi along with a grey flak jacket.

Without the recourse of training to occupy her mind, she decided to make her way to the archive library. As a genin still, most of the library’s contents remained inaccessible to Sakura. But she was still able to peruse some of the medical jutsu scrolls from other villages.

Sakura entered the Konoha library of archives and flashed her ID to the chunin stationed at the desk. She paused halfway to her destination while going up the stairs. The desk stationed in the front of the third landing was conspicuously empty. She wondered if that had anything to do with the curvaceous redhead Sakura had seen around the jounin on previous visits.

Spurred by a burst of curiosity for the first time in months, Sakura left the stairs and moved quietly into the long lines of scrolls. She found kanji indicating the categorization of shelves for the floor. Her gaze paused at the sign erected near the back-right corner.

‘SUMMONING SCROLLS’

Sakura mouthed the words. Tsunade had a slug summon. She had mentioned it during a training session.

The shelf of scrolls towered above her. How tall, she could not say. The scrolls themselves had been shrunken down in order to all fit within the racks. Unlike other sections of the floor, the library hadn’t bothered to place special barrier jutsus here. Strange.

Hesitantly, Sakura reached out a hand to hold one of the scrolls. With an immediate hiss, she dropped it as a burning sensation coursed through her hand. So the scrolls themselves prevented unwanted users. Scowling, Sakura passed her hand over more scrolls.

In minutes, she finished scanning all the racks she could reach from the floor. Her gaze moved upward. With a quick glance to make sure the desk was still empty, she directed chakra toward her legs and began walking up the tall shelf to access the higher levels.

At each new level, Sakura crouched and passed her hands over the scrolls. Welts, red and raised,
lined her hands now from the thousands of scrolls she must have touched. Just as she began to contemplate leaving, her hand passed over one scroll without any pain. Blinking, she touched it again to make sure she had not imagined it. Her hand felt exactly the same as it had before.

Without thinking much of it, Sakura grabbed the scroll. She slipped it into her flak jacket and flipped off the shelf, landing silently on the granite floor once again. She made her way down the staircase and then out the entrance. Back outside, Sakura sprinted to the edge of the village to a lone training ground she knew teams rarely visited. While the Voice’s chilling laughter echoed triumphantly in her head, she pulled out the scroll silently and tilted it to read the etching on the end of the wooden roller: 鳥

Crow, Sakura mouthed to herself with slight surprise.

Rolling it out, she found out that the scroll was far longer than she had initially thought. Following the instructions of the contract, she bit into her thumb, signed her name, impressed her bloodied finger prints into the paper, and made the hand signs: boar, dog, bird, monkey, and ram.

She slammed her hand down into the ground.

For a moment, nothing happened—then smoke burst forth from the scroll and blocked her vision. When the smoke dissipated, she saw the profile of a lone, normal-sized crow, sitting right where her hand had made contact with the ground.

Author's Note: Please leave kudos and a comment!
Karasu

Its feathers were an inky, seamless black that gleamed under the sunlight. It was a fine-looking crow, she supposed, as far as crows went. Then the crow turned. And the eye that met her was not black, like the one that she had seen before, but a terribly, familiar red.

*Sharingan*, the Voice snarled.

Strangely, her mind went immediately not to the obvious suspect, but to Kakashi.

“H-how,” Sakura stammered, taking a step back. A second later, she was in a world of red, blood dripping at the corners of the landscape, the crow in front of her.

“You summoned me,” she heard in her head. The crow gazed placidly at her, but did not open its beak once.

“You’ve placed me in a genjutsu,” she accused haltingly. When she reached for her kunai, she found that her pouch had disappeared.

“This is how I am able to communicate with you,” the crow answered tonelessly, “You should be able to break out of it any time—a mild genjutsu like this is nothing for a genjutsu user.”

Sakura stiffened. “I’m not a genjutsu user.”

The crow’s wings flashed out at that and the landscape seemed to explode in a flurry of black feathers. Their heavy, soft brush spilled around her, suffocating her in its sheer volume.

A second later, she could breathe again.

She stood at the exact training field she had been on minutes before. But the colors of the sky and the grass and the trees had become horribly distorted.

“You are a genjutsu user,” the crow corrected coolly. “And your perfect chakra control enables you to excel in the field, on par with those possessing dojutsus. I am extremely picky—I would not have allowed the contract otherwise.”

*Genjutsu?* She had been successfully placed her under a genjutsu almost five minutes into the bell test. Admittedly, she remembered an off-the-cuff remark about her possibly being well-suited for genjutsu, but had never been told anything about it beyond that.

“What have you learned?”

“What?”

The crow’s sharingan seemed to grow redder. “Has no one taught you anything?”
Sakura’s mouth opened and then closed soundlessly.

The crow flapped its wings and took brief flight, before landing on her shoulder. Sakura turned her head to meet its gaze. Somehow, the crow’s voice was louder now.

“Your body does not seem the type to put on significant muscle mass,” the creature noted clinically, “But, like my other human, this does not mean you cannot gain strength.”

“Other human?” Sakura caught immediately. “Do you have several other contractors?”

The crow cocked its head to the side. It seemed amused.

“One other,” it answered. “For how much longer, I do not know.”

*This bird kills its contractors*, the Voice growled. In the genjutsu, however, the Voice’s words echoed around Sakura and the crow instead of remaining in her head.

The crow turned on her shoulder. “Interesting. And not true. The contract does not allow it. Do you know what you are?” the crow questioned lightly, seemingly at the Voice. Enraged silence responded to the question.

“No, then,” the crow murmured. It met her gaze evenly. “I have carried multiple names. My other human calls me Shisui. If it suits, take it. Or—don’t.”

Not even a minute of reflection led Sakura to the conclusion that the crow seemed more trouble than it was worth. Tsunade had spoken of the slug as a kind, almost maternal creature—the crow, Shisui, or whatever it was called, was decidedly not that. Perhaps naively, Sakura assumed that could be the end of it. Unless she summoned it, she hardly imagined they would ever meet again; and after this, she decided she was never making those hand signs again.

“Nice meeting you,” Sakura muttered, eyeing the space around the crow shiftily. *Not.* “It’s been a rather long day, so I think I’ll be heading home now.”

The crow gazed back placidly.

“Are you going to dispel the genjutsu?” she asked sharply.

“No,” it returned calmly. And the world dripped like melting paint all around her again. Faceless shinobi, dark shadowy forms spilling from the summons’s wings, materialized in front of her.

Sakura sprung back in confusion, eyes round as she sought the crow. “What—?”

Even as her body moved, she didn’t truly believe what was clearly imminent until it happened. The next thing Sakura knew was a rushing sound in her ears as she went flying back into a boulder. The shattering, mind-numbing pain hit her a second later.

She coughed, blood spilling from her mouth. When she saw the shinobi who had dealt the blow to her solar plexus rushing forward, however, she scrambled into a crouch, arms poised in front of her defensively.

What transpired was less of a battle and more of a glorified beat-up session. Each time Sakura thought she found an opening, an opportunity to move from the crouch into a more offensive stance, another shinobi stepped in and beat her back down. Within minutes, every bone in her body felt like it had shattered. With the last bit of her strength, her arms locked tightly around her rib cage and her head. When the shinobi stopped, it took her a long dazed moment to realize they had,
so terrible was the pain. On the brink of consciousness, she looked blearily out. The crow was perched above her.

“Training,” the crow said coldly, head cocked to the side. “Learn the water release technique properly by next time.”

Next time?

When Sakura blinked, she found herself back on the training ground, somehow physically unharmed but aching, still feeling the echo of every one of the injuries.

The next day, Tsunade had scarcely left the training field before it made its appearance. It was more instinct than reason that led Sakura to dart in the opposite direction (though she was sure that reason would have led her to the same course of action as well). But it was too late. By the next blink, she found herself in the same oddly real yet undeniably distorted imitation of reality, the crow perched on a lone boulder before her.

“Did you do what I asked?”

Sakura bristled, unwilling to admit that, yes, she had. In the twenty four hours or so since had last seen the diabolical thing, she had been terrified of being caught like this again and beaten within an inch of her life. She was surprised to find, however, that despite her former fear, anger now dominated.

“I asked you a question,” it said coldly.

It seemed anger also granted her a kind of temerity that made her former concerns of self-preservation concerningly null and void. She bared her teeth, ignoring the part of herself—some remnant of her old self—that was mollified by the behavior.

The crow shifted with transparent mockery. “For your sake later, I hope that is a ‘yes.’ But for now: katas. Yesterday, you demonstrated you knew none.”

In the face of this ludicrous charge, Sakura said curtly, “I learned the academy katas.”

If the crow had eyebrows, she had the sense that it would be raising one.

One wing lifted nonchalantly and two faceless shinobi misted into corporality in front of her. Throat drying, Sakura took a shaky step back, bravado shaken.

“Go on,” Shisui said genially, “demonstrate your mastery.”

Break them! The Voice crooned. Kill them, crush—

Not at all correlated to the Voice’s goading, she convinced herself, she somehow mustered something considerably like courage but not quite the genuine article. Grounding her heels into the dirt, she launched forward.

Remarkably, the shinobi remained motionless. That is, until the moment her foot was a centimeter from the first’s face. Then, a hand lashed out with punishing force and grasped her ankle.

“What do you call this?” the crow called from above her.
Sakura winced at the pressure of the shinobi’s grip on her. Gritting her teeth, she bit out, “Mae tobi geri.”

“I don’t think so,” Shisui murmured indifferently. It flapped its wings. At this apparent command, the shinobi yanked her ankle up. Agony burst through Sakura’s pelvis, black spots flashing through her vision.

“That,” the crow murmured, “is mae tobi geri.”

When the shinobi still didn’t let her ankle go, Sakura turned a vicious glare on the summon. “Alright. I get it.”

“Do you?” Shisui remarked. “Excellent.”

With another flap of wings, the shinobi let go. As she brought her leg down, however, it spoke again.

“Hold the position.”

She froze.

The crow tutted. “No, no, you let your leg drop. Put it back where it was.”

“That’s impossible,” Sakura grinded out. “I’m not that flexible—”

“And yet your leg was there before,” Shisui said unfeelingly. “Move it back.”

Aware of the lethal shinobi beside her who could attack at the crow’s slightest indication, she released a pained grunt as she strained and stretched her foot a few inches higher. Each inch was a slow, gruesome struggle.

She managed for two minutes. “I can’t hold it up anymore. I just can’t.”

“I understand. You’re still weak,” Shisui condemned with false kindness. “Why don’t you have your friend help you, then?”

“My friend?”

“I believe you refer to it as the Voice.”

YES! Let me out! LET ME OUT—

“No.” Sakura said with dangerous calm.

“No?”

“No.”

The crow gazed at her for a long moment, gaze unreadable. Finally, it tilted its head. “Very well. Let’s move onto something else then.”

Faster than her eyes could keep track of, one of the shinobi left its partner to shunshin behind her. Its hands took possession of her arms and locked them behind her. Sakura let out an enraged cry, struggling to break free.

The other shinobi strode forward almost lazily. An arm’s length away from her, it came to a stop
and lifted its hand with deliberation. Then, it punched her in the face.

Her entire body recoiled from the blow and a low, guttural whine escaped her lips. When she opened her eyes, she felt disoriented and had to blink several times. The shinobi drew its fist back and planted it in the same exact place, in the same exact way.

*Thud.*

And that felt like a broken nose—the thought rose above the cloud of pain. Fury set in. “What’s the point of this? Are you just going to have that thing punch me until I pass out?”

The crow gazed back without malice. “If that’s what it takes for you to learn to take a punch.”

*Thud.*

“Why don’t you trying planting your feet.”

*Thud.*

“Lean into the punch.”

*Thud.*

“Can’t even stand your ground then, can you?”

*Thud.*

“You lack a muscled frame to stabilize yourself—”

*Thud.*

“—your shoulders and arms are too soft now—”

*Thud.*

“—your legs too thin—”

*Thud.*

That was the last thing Sakura heard.

When she did return to the land of the conscious, it was with a loud, ugly choked noise. Then, she scrabbled to sit up, angling her head down so as not to choke on the blood pooling behind her nose and into her throat.

“Back?” Shisui greeted her, “Let’s review the water release technique.”

Sakura kept her head down, but darted slitted eyes up at the crow. “This is how you’re going to play this? *Every single time?*”

“If I need to break you, I will break you. Every single time.”

Author's Note: Please leave kudos and a comment!
Unsuited

Over time, Sakura grew accustomed to returning to consciousness abruptly and with little warning. True to the crow’s word, each session’s end was prefaced by a gruesome beat-down, followed by a lecture or comparatively more benign lesson—every single time.

Fortunately, it was a fact of human nature that one could adapt to and, importantly, could maintain sanity in the face of, any routine, no matter how terrible. No different from the rest of her species, Sakura had grown accustomed to the periods of unconsciousness—had even disturbingly grown to like the brief, mindless rest they provided.

She was greatly unsettled, therefore, when it came to the point that her unconsciousness was no longer greeted by the typical condescending lecture and instead by a kick to the stomach.

After the first unexpected act of violence, Sakura shifted uselessly, trying to recover her stolen breath. Following a second, she managed a strangled: “I…passed…out…what…are…you doing, you….stupid crow?”

The faceless shinobi drove a kunai into her abdomen. Pain paralyzed her so that she could barely even breathe.

Sakura looked up at it, uncomprehending.

“Stop,” she choked out, blood bubbling through her lips, “…Did you hear me!? I’m done…I’m done…”

It didn’t stop.

She passed out.

When she woke up again, punches rained down on her face until her eyes were swollen shut. There were two figures above her—she could sense their chakra, despite her lack of vision. In moments, she passed out again. Funny. Had she ever thought she was doing a lot of that these days? Because she was. She really was.

When she woke up again with five faceless shinobi mauling her, Sakura wondered—in all seriousness—how it was possible she wasn’t dead yet.

_I’m still here_, the Voice whispered, almost sibilant.

Despite how wrecked her body felt, Sakura’s body made a spasm—ever so slightly—at the sound. Strangely, the Voice had remained utterly silent until now. She wondered if it had only been biding its time.

_I’ll kill them_, the Voice crooned, excitement rendering its voice higher than normal, _I’ll kill them all!_ 

And Sakura—Sakura couldn’t hold it back anymore. She screamed until the only breath left in her was a gasp.
The blood of five faceless shinobi soaked the ground beneath her—her own body, in turn, battered and torn, generously deposited its own funds.

Five shinobi. When she hadn’t even defeated one before.

And, like before, she remembered nothing.

Without warning, the pain vanished from her body, and Sakura could see again. She looked down to see her body as clean and unharmed as it had been when she had entered the genjutsu.

The line between the Voice and her must have been blurring because when Sakura moved, it was with a mindless need to hurt that she had only ever associated with the other entity. Making rapid hand motions, Sakura screamed and released a gale of fire right where the crow stood. But, it was the crow’s genjutsu and, with a flap of its wings, Shisui generated a gust of wind so strong it blew the fire into non-existence.

The crow’s mismatched eyes dissected her ruthlessly. “You would use a jutsu that I taught you against me?”

Sakura released an inhuman, ugly noise, chest heaving.

But Shisui was stoic in the face of it. “That thing, what you call the Voice—it represents the splitting of yourself. You are stronger, more ruthless, when you let it possess you. Rejoin the two parts permanently.”

“No!” Sakura snarled. “I—I know I’m not a hopeless martyr. I’ll make use of it when I need to—but I control it. It does not control me!”

“That is killing intent, you ignorant child,” the crow responded, derision now apparent. “Like most foolish shinobi, you have suppressed it more often than you embrace it, to the extent that you’ve split your consciousness.”

“You—”

“Don’t be naïve,” the crow cut off coldly, “You’re in the wrong occupation if you want to stay a child. Every human being, in their deepest self, relishes violence. As a shinobi, by nature of your cause, you must embody that violence.”

“I won’t.”

“Then you are a coward,” Shisui condemned remorselessly, “you are a pathetic, groveling kunoichi, despite the time and effort I have afforded you when no one else would deign to look your way, who shies away from your calling—”

“I won’t,” she hissed. Bizarrely, Naruto appeared in her mind’s eye.

The sharingan in the crow’s eye spun wildly. Despite her stony expression, fear pulsed through Sakura as she was certain she would be thrown back into the torture from before.

“You’re very different from him,” it charged bitterly, finally. “But in other ways—unerringly similar.”

It took a second for her to catch on, her eyes narrowing slightly when she did. “You’re talking about your other human.”
The crow didn’t acknowledge this identification. Instead, it cocked its head to the side, appearing disgusted. “Only a fool believes a shinobi’s violence can be driven by an adherence to peace.”

The crow gave her one last disparaging glance. In the next breath, the genjutsu fractured and she sat alone in the training field Team Seven had used to practice in.

When Sakura’s gaze found the boulder next to her, she drove her first into it.

“You can’t attack me tomorrow,” Sakura told Shisui tonelessly a week later, scrubbing blood from her hands into her clothes. Not real blood, she reminded herself. Her stomach remained steady.

The crow cocked its head coldly. “Oh? Why is that?”

“I need money,” she responded. “I need to take a mission.”

“Both of your parents are alive.”

Sakura’s expression tightened, wondering when Shisui had gathered that information. She had never mentioned her living situation to him. “They’ve refused to fund my shinobi career since the Chunin Exams.”

“You can’t attack me tomorrow,” it concluded at last, eyes glinting. “I will see you after.”

That night, after picking up new kunai with the last of her monetary reserves, Sakura returned home with Ichiraku Ramen takeout in hand. After slurping the noodles, she scrubbed her clothes of any remaining dirt / blood (her own) and folded them neatly by her bed.

At six the next morning, Sakura stood at the front of a long line of shinobi to receive her next assignment from the Mission Assignment Desk.

A chunin Sakura had been handed missions by several times before waved his hand, urging her to step forward. She blinked for a moment at the unexpectedly familiar smile he sent her way.

“I have the perfect mission for you,” he confided in her. He reached to the side and seemed to unearth a specific scroll from underneath a pile of similar looking scrolls. “Here you go.”

Sakura bowed politely and left the room. Turning a corner, she found a nook and opened the scroll to scan its contents. C Rank escort mission from the Hidden Grass Village to the Land of Wind. Four-man squad. Meeting place at the gate.

Reaching outside, Sakura shunshined to the roof and proceeded to the gate via rooftops to avoid unnecessary traffic. When she reached the gate, she saw three figures—all a few years older than herself—waiting.

The girl was the first to notice her presence. She smiled, sharp features shifting to accommodate the expression with seeming natural ease. Her hair—red—was shorn almost to her scalp on one side and jagged and chin length on the other. She wore bulky, unisex ninja-wear.

“Hey,” she greeted, stepping aside to reveal the two figures behind her. The boy to her left was tall and lanky with mop-like brown hair. The boy to her right was shorter, bulkier, with dark brows,
and viewed her with an unreadable expression.

Sakura bowed. “I am Haruno Sakura. I will be a part of the four-man squad for this mission.”

The girl flashed her a dazzling smile. “Nice to meet you, Sakura-san. I’m Noriko. This here is Reizo—” she pointed to the lanky boy—“and the other one is Torio.”

“Oh.” Sakura said, a strange feeling sprouting in her chest at the apparent familiarity they shared. “Were you all on the same genin team?”

The C ranks she had sparingly been on had mostly been with other chunin or genin whose teams had not all made the transition from genin rank to above. No one on the missions had known any of the other members.

“Something like that,” the shorter boy said. Torio, Sakura recalled.

“We should leave,” Reizo announced indifferently. A look passed between him and Noriko and she nodded with a wide smile.

“Ready, Sakura-san?” Noriko asked her, nudging her playfully. Sakura stared.

As they raced through the trees, she felt her stride slowing slightly to match Noriko’s, who had chosen to hang at the back.

“Are you all chunin?” Sakura asked.

The other girl hummed back in affirmation. “You?”

Sakura’s lips turned down slightly. “Genin. I’m planning to take the next exam, though.”

“You’ll get there,” Noriko shrugged, smiling. “How about the rest of your team?”

Sakura felt her pace falter, but she quickly recovered. “Genin too. They found other teachers, though, so our team has…disbanded.”

Noriko didn’t react immediately, which took Sakura by some surprise—genin teams disbanding before members had reached chunin level was highly unusual. The other girl must have noticed something in her expression, because she asked, “Do you miss it?”

Sakura stiffened slightly at the question. In the past year, she had come to face the obvious truth that their team had been dysfunctional. At its best moments, Sakura had been on the sidelines watching her teammates push past their resentment to work together; at its worst, none of them had been on the same page, pursuing vastly different goals. And Kakashi—

Her jaw tightened. Tsunade had used her to clean up some file work a few months ago—genin team file work submitted for the Hokage’s perusal, specifically—and she had learned exactly what her former teacher thought of her.

*Haruno Sakura is unsuited to become a shinobi,* she had found written in short, lazy strokes. *She lacks the means to either succeed or survive in this field. I have seen some skill in chakra control—perhaps a career as a low-ranking medic-nin, if at all.*

Cold, condescending words, hidden all along under a mask of indifference.

Each word had been an unexpected blow to Sakura. She had known her sensei hadn’t thought much of her, but she hadn’t known he had thought so little. Had he thought of her as an *idiot* the
entire time?

“I don’t know,” Sakura answered at last, features strained. She and Noriko fell into silence. Her mind continued to brood over the derogatory notes. Naruto and Sasuke had each warranted four pages. She had been given three sentences.

It didn’t matter, she found herself reflecting coldly. With blood on her hands, it was too late for her turn back. Whether she wanted it or not, Sakura knew she would be shinobi for life.

Author's Note: Please leave kudos and a comment!
That night, they made camp about half way between Konoha and the Hidden Grass Village. Torio and Reizo pitched a tent that they would share, while Noriko and Sakura shared their own tent. Torio had first watch, but before that, they sat around a modest fire chewing some meat they had cooked after hunting down a wild boar.

“Nice weather, eh?” Noriko chirped, smiling widely as she bit into her meat with enthusiasm. The dark sky above them was ominously thick with clouds, cloaking the moon almost entirely.

Reizo’s eyes flicked upwards boredly. “It looks like it’s about to pour.”

“Right,” she agreed easily. “But it’s not raining yet.”

She beamed at all of them. Sakura watched on in silence, chewing her meat.

Torio got up suddenly. “I’m off to watch.”

“Better you than me!” Noriko called mischievously.

He sent her a glare. “Fucking trees…give me knots in my neck…” He disappeared from view.

Sakura’s head tilted strangely at that. “He still gets knots in his neck?” Most genin were used to that by her age.

“Neck problems,” Reizo explained casually.

“I could take a look, if he wanted,” Sakura offered after a second. “I have some medical training.”

“He’s had it checked out,” Noriko answered after a moment, with an apologetic smile. “Kind of a chronic thing.”

Sakura nodded.

“Hey!” Noriko cried suddenly, grabbing her hand. “Let’s head to our tent!”

Sakura allowed the other girl to tug her, a little bemused by her actions. The Sakura of a year ago, the one with stick thin legs and arms, the one who had complained about lacking breasts on a regular basis to Ino, would have giggled happily along with her. A self-admittedly gloomier, more cynical Sakura was now struggling to figure out how to not act like a socially inept fool.

They sat down on their respective pallets and immediately Noriko began speaking again.

“So,” she said, grinning aggressively, “what’s got you down?”

“Nothing,” Sakura answered immediately. But after a moment, she revealed stiffly (and how couldn’t she, when Noriko had been so nice and earnest the entire time, and when a huge part of her longed for what had been commonplace to her before—the idle chit chat, the confiding of inane complaints and worries): “I guess it’s my team situation.”

Once again, Noriko looked a little blank but hummed sympathetically nevertheless. “Hm…well, tell me about them!”

At the other’s urging, Sakura felt a wealth of emotions she had been bottling down for more than a
year rush forth.

“Well, one of them,” she started hesitantly, “he used to annoy me. *A lot.*”

Noriko nodded encouragingly.

“The other genin,” Sakura began swallowing hard. “I liked him—” the words felt *sour* now, made her lips twist—“But he left to be with his…new teacher.”

“You said ‘liked,’” the other girl noted, reaching over to sharpen some of her kunai. “Do you not like him anymore?”

Sakura didn’t answer.

“And your team leader?” Noriko asked, easily changing tacks.

Sakura’s mouth flattened. “Right. Well Kakashi—”

She broke off when the other girl stiffened almost violently beside her. The kunai in her hands trembled before she swung her head around with an amazed expression. “Your jounin sensei was the *Copy-nin*?”

“…Yes.”

“Da-amm,” she sighed, dragging the word out with wide, shining eyes. “Do you have any idea what his kill count is?”

“His—”

“His kill count,” Noriko repeated, face hidden now by her hair. “I know ANBU members are supposed to be anonymous, but everyone *knows* he’s an ANBU captain. They talk about him in the chunin locker rooms all the time—in all the gory detail. Still don’t know what ANBU mask he wears, though.”

“What…kinds of stories?” Sakura asked before she could stop herself. The impending, unexpected dump of information had called forth a dark, uncomfortable tightness in her chest.

“They’re horrible, if they’re true,” the girl murmured. “He’s killed a lot of people in a lot of horrible ways. But—” she laughed coolly—“in ANBU, being a monster means you’re an ANBU legend. I suppose.”

Sakura flinched slightly at her words, but quickly hid the reaction. “He’s…that good?” She had always known he wasn’t the ‘average’ shinobi, but…nothing to this extent.

Noriko’s voice was oddly thick. “People talk about the kages with respect, but the way they talk about him…the way I’ve heard it, no one measures up at killing. Not even that Uchiha who murdered his entire clan.”

“And he’s only twenty-two,” she ended with a loud huff. She shook her hair back and a playful expression danced across her face.

He *was*? In her defense, it was impossible to tell with the mask. Strangely, she had always received the impression he was older. Must have been the magnitude of his condescension.

“How old are you, Noriko-san?” she asked softly.
“Me?” Noriko straightened slightly, “Eighteen.”

“Do you want to be a jounin?” Sakura asked, hoping she wasn’t being too nosy. But she was also trying to subtly change the topic of the conversation. She… didn’t want to talk about him.

The other girl shrugged. “I’m not interested in titles—only in serving my village as fully as I can.”

For the first time since she had met her, Sakura found Noriko’s demeanor to be entirely serious.

“Well,” Noriko coughed, strange expression vanishing to reveal another, bright smile, “I bet the copy-nin taught you so many things.”

“Not at all.”

“Why not?”

“Apparently,” Sakura said stoically, “I didn’t look like I could take it.”

Despite the rain, they somehow managed to make better pace the next day. Or, perhaps, it was because they were less concerned about leaving obvious tracks and were able to forgo doubling back maneuvers that they made better pace.

It wasn’t until they were close to the pick-up location that Sakura noticed her temporary teammates begin to act strangely. Reizo, who had been slumped over and lackadaisical until then, suddenly became alert. Noriko as well—whose smile seemed a permanent fixture on her face—grew grim, palming the handle of her chokuto almost anxiously. Only Torio remained just as he had before.

Sakura straightened as well as they neared the small palace. She hadn’t expected them to be the type of team that took an escort mission so seriously, but it was a good model to follow by principle, she supposed.

“This is the plan,” Torio announced. They were shadowed by trees next to the entrance of the palace. The palace seemed to tower in the foreground, a white and red architectural masterpiece that glistened under the pelting of the rain.

Sakura returned her attention back to Torio as he continued. “Noriko, you enter through the third level, Reizo, the second, and I’ll take the ground level. Haruno, you wait at the entrance in case we need to make a quick escape with the princess—keep watch and make sure to misdirect anyone entering.”

Sakura frowned. “You’re infiltrating? I thought this was supposed to be a simple pick-up and drop-off.”

“We received new intel,” Reizo said curtly.

“What did it say?”

She felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to find Noriko grinning at her. “Don’t worry about it, Sakura-chan. We got this. Just stay here and everything will be fine.”

The taller girl nodded at her and then shunshined away, followed shortly by the other two shinobi. Sakura sighed heavily and slumped against the tree, a dark scowl on her face. The water had turned the ground into slushy mud, the thick scent prominent of it nullifying everything else. The scent of
dirt in Konoha was much sweeter, she thought arrogantly to herself.

Minutes passed. As she saw civilians near the entrance of the palace, she cast a simple, quick genjutsu that led them astray.

*I smell blood,* the Voice crooned.

Sakura continued flipping her kunai, gritting her teeth. “You're imagining it.”

*Maybe.* The Voice laughed nastily in her head. *It's been so long since I've smelled real blood other than our own.*

A crow cawed somewhere behind her and Sakura flinched, gaze darting through the thick nesting of trees. Suddenly, the slight uncomfortable feeling she had been ignoring had ballooned, and she grabbed her kunai tightly.

Something *was* wrong. When she thought about it—the way Torio, Noriko, and Reizo had acted had not only been unusual; it had also been against protocol. If they had received new information, why had she not been made aware of it? And pointedly, she had been with them the entire time. She would have noticed a messenger hawk.

Torio, Noriko, and Reizo had decided that this mission would require infiltration when the assignment itself had said nothing of it.

That didn’t bode well. With this acknowledgment, other odd facts she had previously dismissed began to stick out glaringly. Noriko’s lack of shock at her genin team status—as though she was unaware of Konoha’s shinobi system. Torio’s inexplicable neck pains, though he should have been well-acclimated to perching on trees in Konoha.

Sakura gritted her teeth.

In a flash, she disappeared from the tree and reappeared at the palace entrance. The large protruding roof sheltered her from the rain, allowing the smells from within to permeate the air around her. Pushing the door open slightly, kunai clenched in hand, she entered the grand entrance of the building and stiffened. Dead bodies—guards, she catalogued—lined the double staircase leading up to the second floor.

Bending, she checked the pulse of the first guard. Nothing. All of the guards had been stabbed at vital points—savagely and deeply.

*There’s more,* the Voice chanted, *There’s more! Go up! There’s more!*

For a seemingly eternal moment, Sakura was overwhelmed by the mindless panic flooding through her veins. Terror pulsed through her bloodstream and rendered her limbs stiff and immobile. She was an infinitesimal step away from succumbing to her fear—the magnitude of what had happened in the park, of what was happening again, threatening to bury her under an intangible weight.

For a moment, it was almost as though she had. But then, a strange sense of unreality washed over her. And she straightened almost robotically and made her way up the staircase with her chakra suppressed.

As she approached the landing, she could hear the fighting grow increasingly more defined—short, sharp metallic clangs, gasps and cries, abrupt silences.

At the second level, she found Reizo and Torio cutting down both armed guards along with what
were clearly civilian servants and maids.

A hand grasped her foot, and Sakura looked down to see a maid with a gaping wound in her stomach. “Please,” she gasped, pretty features contorted in pain. She spluttered some blood and passed away.

Sakura’s mind was blank—preternaturally cool and calm. And the Voice breathed heavily in her mind, otherwise oddly silent.

She closed the gap between her and the foreign shinobi with lightning quickness. Reizo’s head snapped up just as she lunged with her kunai, slashing neatly through the tendon in his arm with medical accuracy, rendering it useless. As she did so, she met Torio’s gaze and made rapid hand signs with her other hand, casting him under a genjutsu.

Reizo swung at her with his one working arm, hand adorned by bladed knuckles that were charged with chakra. She evaded his blows with ease, body moving instinctively from hours of sweat and blood. Sakura had been trained by a crow with a sharingan whose shadow shinobi moved a lot quicker than these nin.

“Who are you?” Sakura interrogated lifelessly, kunai flashing through the air. When they met flesh, it was at strategic locations designed to cause heavy bleeding that would weaken him but not kill him—she still needed him to speak.

Reizo gazed back at her coolly. “You were supposed to wait outside.”

“So that you could kill me at the end,” she interpreted.

“You’re not the only one who has been lying, Haruno,” Reizo accused, lips peeling back to reveal bared teeth. “You’re no genin, are you? Was the Hokage onto us from the beginning?”

He made rapid hand signs and barbed, metal chains exploded from him. One rammed into Sakura’s side, causing pain to lance through her. With fierce concentration, she maintained the genjutsu on Torio and wove her way through the chains with ruthless efficiency. In seconds, Sakura stood a foot from him and her kunai sank into the older boy’s throat.

*Like a knife through butter,* the Voice moaned, orgasmic pleasure laced through its voice.

The dying shinobi choked out a curse and blood. It landed on her face.

Blood. Real blood.

Sakura reached up to wipe it away with a trembling hand, gaze unseeing.

But she snapped to attention when her head collided into the wall beside her with brutish force. Sakura’s eyes flashed open, regretting the moment of carelessness as she found Torio’s livid form in front of her.

He was a block of muscle as he came at her with powerful jabs and kicks. If one of them landed as intended, the muscle and bone underneath her skin could easily crumble. But Torio didn’t know what Sakura’s seemingly insignificant muscle definition belied.

Blocking both arms with a raised forearm, she concentrated chakra into her left hand and planted it in the other boy’s chest, right between his ribs, right in front of his heart. She felt the flesh and bone *bend* beneath her knuckles, felt bone crush into his heart, felt the squelch of blood exploding from the rapidly beating muscle.
Like an oversized rag doll, he crumpled on himself and slid to the ground.

The remaining alive on the floor whispered their fervent gratitude to her, watching fearfully all the while in case her mission was to attack them too. But Sakura paid them no attention. There was one more left—on the third floor.

Closing her eyes and channeling chakra into her ears, she heard panicked cries in the northwest corner of the third floor and set off. Dead bodies lining the hall of the third level blurred past her, a gory landscape, and she reached at last a large pair of brass doors—the entrance, she guessed, to the princess’s living quarters.

There was no time for subterfuge or a covert entrance. She slammed the doors open and attached herself to the ceiling, knowing that a shinobi’s first instinct would be to send shuriken and send them low.

As she gazed down, she found a scene that matched the level below in brutality. Ladies in waiting were strewn all along the grandiose room, their blood painting the walls in an uncaring pattern. The only living civilian left was a dark haired, beautiful woman with tearing blue eyes. Poised at the smooth, unblemished arch of the princess’s throat was the razor-sharp edge of Noriko’s chokuto.

“Sakura-chan,” the redheaded shinobi greeted almost pleasantly.

“Noriko-san.” After a moment, Sakura dropped from the ceiling and landed in a crouch, straightening quickly.

The grinning girl looked at her with curiosity. “If you had waited outside, there was a chance you could have survived this. Now, I have no choice.”

Sakura’s lips tightened. “If you’re going to kill me, can’t you at least tell me why?”

Just kill her, the Voice raged, prowling restlessly in her mind.

Noriko tilted her head, eyes flashing. “Because I hate Konoha. And when the Mizukage offered me this mission, I took it gladly.”

Noriko’s chokuto flashed through the air as she raced forward. Sakura ducked, missing the first swipe just barely. Twirling the kunai in her hands, she maneuvered them to block the sharp blade of the thin sword.

“What has Konoha done to you?” Sakura asked, steeling herself for the next swing of the blade. Anger and—no, no, it wasn’t there—anguish bled into her tone; against her will, her numbness was beginning to fade.

Noriko was strong. Much stronger than the other two shinobi had been. And she had thought—Sakura had thought they had been friends. Unbidden, an irrational, childish hurt stung in her chest.

“You should ask your Copy-nin,” Noriko hissed, lashing out with her foot. Sakura felt her pulse spike at the moniker and forcibly cloaked herself in impersonal detachment once more.

That would explain why she had been oddly knowledgeable of Kakashi alone.

Sakura’s kunai crossed under Noriko’s blade, locking it in place. “And how exactly did he hurt you?”

Noriko yanked herself back with a dark laugh. “I’ve never met him before.”
Sakura’s lack of comprehension flashed across her face. At the back of her mind, she considered how to end the fight quickly without putting the princess at risk—ninjutsu was useless here. And Noriko had yet to make eye contact, unfortunately wary of genjutsu. She was forced to step back again, side stepping the other girl’s deadly swipes.

“I fail to see why we’re here, then,” Sakura snapped, “if he did nothing.”

Noriko’s face contorted into something almost inhuman with the force of her immense anger. She gave a dark, tortured laugh. “Nothing?”

Sakura’s smooth rhythm of feint then lunge faltered at the sight of the other girl’s face. Her eyes were wet, shining with rigidly kept back tears, lips twisted in a vicious snarl.

“He murdered her!”

Following this confession, the savagery of Noriko’s kenjutsu increased tenfold. “He left her body there…to be eaten by the vultures…a hole in her chest…they couldn’t touch her…I couldn’t touch her…because her body was so charged with electricity…”

Sakura’s body was on autopilot now, avoiding the weapon mindlessly while her mind processed the words confessed to her. A year ago, she would have bent over with nausea at this revelation.

“Her face was charred off,” Noriko whispered, tears streaming now openly. “She was an ANBU captain, and he mowed her down, one out of a hundred, as though she were nothing.”

“I’m sorry,” Sakura said softly. She feinted again and lashed out with her kunai. In the other girl’s grief, she managed to sever a vein in her leg. She would lose all feeling in it soon.

“You’re apology means nothing,” Noriko raged, speed decreasing as her body succumbed to the wound. She mustered a garish, sad smile. “I liked you, you know? I was going to tell them to let you live. But then you told me you were his student.”

“I can’t let you live, Sakura-chan,” she continued, “You understand, don’t you? I have to kill you—for her.”

The Voice was spitting fury in her mind, bemoaning how long it was taking, how little blood there was, but Sakura ignored it. Turmoil broiled within her. Organ traffickers and faceless genjutsu shinobi and—Noriko. It—it wasn’t a matched set.

Noriko released a war cry that sounded more like a wail of grief, driving her blade to the left and then switching midway to slash it diagonally to the right.

Eyes stinging, Sakura felt the edge of the chokuto to bite into her shoulder. If Noriko had been uninjured and calm, this would have been suicide for Sakura. But with one leg numb, Noriko was slow to muster the force to pull it back.

Sakura grasped the blade and used the wall to kick off, wrapping her legs around the other girl’s neck. Hanging upside down—finish it, finish it, the Voice urged—she dragged her kunai upward from stomach to chest. Deep; dangerously deep.

With a thick squelch, Sakura pulled the metal weapons out and pushed off of her. She tied the other girl’s hands together to prevent her from forming any hand signs and then stepped back. Noriko buckled to her knees, looking down at her wounds in seeming shock.

“Here,” Sakura commanded the princess urgently. “Gather your necessary valuables in that”—she
pointed to an embroidered messenger bag sitting on the bed, half-filled probably from previous packing—“We will depart shortly.”

Nodding shakily, the princess ran to her dresser to gather a few small objects, a pouch of money, and a change of clothes, and placed them in the sack. Sakura bent to lift the princess so that they could jump through the window, thus avoiding the carnage decorating the levels below, but they were stopped by a sharp command.

“Finish it!” Noriko demanded.

*Finish it,* the Voice echoed remorselessly.

Sakura paused, then straightened. “You’ll survive,” she clarified, in case the other girl thought she had been left to suffer a slow death. “As soon as you work out that knot and get to the nearest healer, you’ll be fine. But I can’t promise you won’t have breathing problems from now on.”

Yet, her words only seemed to enrage Noriko more. The anger quickly fractured. “I can’t live like this,” Noriko panted, breath hitching with hysteria, “I couldn’t even kill you—how will I be able to kill him, when she couldn’t? Just finish it. Let me see her again.”

Sakura’s face was numb. Her hands no longer felt like her own as she gazed at them—in consideration? She couldn’t. No. She bent down again to pick up the princess.

She made it to the window this time.

“If you have any respect for me,” Noriko hissed, forcing her to stop, “if anything I said to you or was for you in the last twenty-four hours meant anything to you, you will do it. You owe me that much.”

*Let me out,* the Voice breathed. *Let me do it! I’ll do it for you!*

Sakura wished she had left without listening. Her fingers trembled around the princess’s slim legs.

“Don’t make me beg,” Noriko choked out.

Sakura let out a low, almost inaudible whimper. Then, slowly, she put the princess back down and turned. Noriko looked back at her, brown eyes wide and agonized. The other girl’s features relaxed as she read Sakura’s decision on her face. Had she thought the smile natural on Noriko’s face? Sakura could see now that it had been forced the entire time.

It was Sakura, not the Voice, who stepped forward, angling her kunai to slash across the other girl’s throat. She stopped when Noriko spoke with soft urgency.

“Not like that,” the Mist nin rasped, “With the chokuto. It was hers.”

Sakura picked up the fallen sword and held it directly above her heart.

“She also had green—” were Noriko’s last words.

Sakura plunged the sword down with chakra-induced strength to make the blow quick. The marble floor below her cracked. Noriko was dead immediately. The princess let out a soft cry from her position at the window. Sakura spared her a short glance, before pulling the chokuto out from the body beneath it.

She held it in her hand for a long moment. Sakura didn’t pause to consider her actions. She pulled
the scabbard from girl’s waist and sheathed the sword, before swinging it over her shoulder.

She picked up the princess and then leapt through the window.

Sakura carried the princess—Mako, she was reminded—a considerable distance with the sunlight that was left. When nightfall halted their journey, with the princess’s monetary resources, a henge on herself, and a change in clothing for the princess (purchased from a vendor several villages back), they stopped to spend the night in an inn.

“Take a bath,” Sakura told Mako stiffly. “I’ll go down and get some food for the both of us. I’ll leave a bunshin here to watch over you.”

The young woman nodded at her, face still pale from what had happened earlier in the day. Understandable—in less than ten minutes, she had probably seen her closest companions get mercilessly killed.

Sakura made her way down the wooden staircase to the ground floor: a functional pub that served both alcohol and food. Her footsteps landed heavier than usual to suit the henge of the stocky, brown-haired man she donned (two civilian women traveling alone drew unwanted attention). When she reached the pub, she found it decently populated. She walked to the wooden counter and ordered two bowls of white rice and vegetables.

As she waited, a woman with grey lines in her hair sat down on the platform at the front of the pub, koto in her lap. She seemed unaffected by the jeers of the inebriated in the pub and began strumming the strings of the koto. The voice that emerged was older than the woman looked—thick and cracked. “In search of new lands, I build a new house. I thatch the house with reed stalks, gathered neatly in bundles.”

Sakura’s brows furrowed.

“I wish to dress my children and loved ones… in the one kimono that I own. As for me, I will wear vines… that I plucked deep in the mountains.”

Without warning, Noriko’s dying face flashed through her mind. Sakura turned away from the singer immediately. She pointed at the premium sake the pub owner advertised and swallowed it in one go. She coughed violently afterward, but even that wasn’t enough to drown out the next words.

“The light of the full moon shines down, illuminating the world with its divine light,” the singer crooned, “When my lover sneaks in to visit me, I wish that the clouds would hide that light just a little.”

“It’s a folk song called Obokuri Eeumi,” the woman beside her sighed, gaze fixed on the singer. “She sings it every week.”

Sakura’s expression was blank. She gathered the bowls that had just been placed in front of her and left the counter to go back upstairs.

She had thought, foolishly, that the crow had beat the tears out of her.
As though ignorant of how it had started, the rest of the mission passed without a single hitch. Sakura delivered the shaken princess to her betrothed in the Land of Wind the next day and immediately began travelling back to Konoha. Without the princess’s finances, she spent the nights in trees and left a bunshin to keep watch. It was the sort of isolation she needed, though, to pretend that what she had done would sit right with her one day. One day—when Noriko’s face would be but a blur in her memory.

Her isolation was disturbed half way back by the crow’s appearance.

(One moment, it was endless green before her; the next, she was in the ever-familiar world of red and black feathers that Shisui most often chose for its genjutsus.)

“You should have noticed they were foreign earlier.”

Sakura’s shoulders tensed at the implication in those words.

“Were they even shinobi from the Mist?” she asked tonelessly, a storm brewing unseen. “What a story: an eighteen year-old girl’s lover killed by my former jounin captain. A resulting, mad quest for vengeance, only to end in failure and tragedy.”

“Oh, she was real. They all were.” The crow flapped its wings. “The only genjutsu I applied was to keep that infiltration team from discovery by the ANBU and getting you on the mission.”

Sakura’s chest burned. “Why—why did you?”

“To teach you a lesson,” Shisui returned indifferently. “As always.”

Sakura stared down at the crow. Could it kill her if it wanted? No, she remembered, the contract prevented that. Everything the crow did was in the name of teaching her to survive, well within the limits of the contract. A terrible, humorless joke.

She yanked her gaze away, face tight.

“Bring the chokuto with you tomorrow,” it commanded.

Author's Note: Please leave kudos and a comment!
A Year Later

Chapter Summary

Time Skip: A Year Later

Sakura was in desperate need of a shower.

"I've got blood all over me," the ANBU in front of her sighed.

"Same," the woman behind her muttered, "I don't know how I'm ever going to wash this out."

The leader of their squad, a short, stocky man, glanced back at Sakura. "I think Crow is going to have the most trouble tonight."

As the squad of ten ANBUs laughed around her, Sakura's gaze flicked down to survey her blood splattered form with forced stoicism. Almost there, she reminded herself. Three hours and they would be back in Konoha. Then, she could burn the clothes. And sleep. And get up for another session with the crow. And then probably be maneuvered into another soul-crushing ANBU mission.

She scowled beneath her mask.

"You've got to tell me what gets you so revved up," the ANBU with the rat mask said, swinging his arm over her shoulder. "Fucked up childhood? Abusive relationship?"

Sakura removed herself from the hold in her next leap through the thick cluster of trees.

"Well, you don't kill like that unless there's something," someone else said, voice low and knowing.

Sakura never thought she would have wished for the newcomer ANBUs from her first mission a month ago again, who were so indoctrinated with protocol that they scarcely said a word to each other the entire mission. Unfortunately, this squad consisted of mostly well-experienced ANBU. And apparently, experienced ANBU were obnoxious.

"Leave her alone," a softer, quieter voice interrupted. Sakura turned and saw blue eyes staring at her though a coyote mask.

"Yeah, yeah," rat mask scoffed. For a brief period of time, the conversation lapsed into blissful silence. But then his gaze shifted to the coyote ANBU—the shinobi who had stopped the previous discussion. "You're another newbie, aren't you?"

"Yes, senpai."

"How old are you?"

Coyote didn't answer immediately. After a moment: "I believe disclosing my age is against protocol."
"Seventeen, I'd guess," Snake cut in, a smug tone to her voice. "His voice's broken but not fully
deepened yet. Look at him—what a bean pole."

"Looks like all the new recruits are," another ANBU observed. "Crow isn't much better."

"I thought she was a man at first," the rat ANBU snickered, "Not quite sure she doesn't actually
have a dick, if I'm honest."

At any other time, Sakura would have simply sneered. But there was blood from more people than
she could count on her clothes, she hadn't slept in over thirty hours, all she really wanted to do was
go home and knock herself into unconsciousness, and this idiot wouldn't shut up about her.

"If I did, senpai, you can be sure it's bigger than yours."

The ANBU stiffened beside her abruptly. The rest of the ANBU paused in reaction, a well-oiled
machine, positioned at various odd points among the trees.

But Sakura was beyond being concerned. Of course, it wasn't really Rat that was the source of the
fury broiling inside her (she knew that). Rat was simply: the vent. One she would gladly use.

She straightened to her henge's full height—the same as her own height, but the henge had a
slightly wirier build—a few centimeters above him. When Sakura saw the ANBU’s eyes narrow,
she began to move to her chokuto in a slow, warning movement.

"Calm down, Rat, Crow," their leader muttered. "We don't have time—"

He was cut off by a kunai to the throat.

The ANBU stared at each other for a fraction of a second, before shunshining to different positions
just as a rain of shuriken landed in their former positions.

"Coyote, hang back!" Snake shouted, taking charge as second-in-command. She made hand signals
that directed the rest of the team into strategic positions cloaked by foliage.

Sakura crouched behind Tiger in the lower branches of a giant Japanese maple. She couldn't sense
any chakra in the vicinity—either of those on her squad or of enemy-nin. Clearly testing the waters,
Snake leapt from her hidden position to another and then immediately shunshined again. The
branch she had last placed her feet on was severed by a huge, invisible ax an instant after she left.

"They're invisible?" Tiger whispered incredulously.

Rat and another ANBU leapt out, now, but they weren't as quick as Snake. The invisible shinobi—
there was no telling how many of them—swiped at the two shinobi, their actions only observable
through the blood leaking from the ANBUs and the rush of air as they maneuvered their weapons.

"Genjutsu," Sakura breathed with abrupt certainty. It had to be. They had cast a complex genjutsu
that made them indistinguishable from their surroundings—hence why none of them were using
ninjutsu or it would disrupt the flow of chakra maintaining the delicate illusion.

"The rest need to know," Tiger muttered. "But we can't use hand signs if they can't see us."

Sakura made a split-second decision, ignoring the way Tiger's eyes widened at her and seemed to
scream 'don't.' She shunshined away from her position and landed in the middle of a clearing where
she was certain everyone would be able to see her.
She barely had time to make the hand signals for 'genjutsu,' before Sakura felt movement in the air beside her. Paying attention to the sounds, she moved instinctively to avoid the swipes of blades. A blade soon glanced her midsection, however, and she realized that evasion wouldn't be enough, not with more and more invisible shinobi congregating around her.

She dug her fingers into the wound on her stomach, but her efforts did not amount to anything. Gritting her teeth, Sakura sent a surge of chakra to the pain receptors in her body instead. The result was a jolt of the most mind-numbing pain she had ever felt in her life—even for a fraction of a second, it was almost impossible not to pass out.

When she blearily opened her eyes again, she could see just barely the outlines—a sort of shimmery mirage—of figures racing silently through the trees, many with projections that looked like blades. The genjutsu must have been incredibly layered, that she hadn't broken through all of it even with that.

But it was enough.

Let me do it, the Voice whispered to her, words thick with excitement. Counting the number of figures and the brutality it would require, Sakura's lips tightened. She hadn't allowed the Voice out, but it had proven somewhat more manageable after being given some tightly-reined freedom. And Sakura would take it out for walks, like a domesticated canine, if that's what it took to keep it relatively compliant within a leash.

After brief consideration, and she wasn't entirely sure if it was hers or the Voice's, Sakura felt herself fade from the present—

— and was stunned when she returned to consciousness shortly later with enemy bodies strewn across the forest floor, but significantly more still alive around her.

Had the Voice given up?

Sakura exhaled sharply, hand tightening on her chokuto as her surroundings filtered in once more.

What had happened? She had thought she had—

A deafening, high-pitched noise pierced the air, and with a roar of enraged betrayal, the Voice felt itself being dragged back and back and back and back—

She knew that sound. Like birds, but louder. Crouching low on her branch, her eyes widened as she saw an ANBU not part of her squad blur toward them with unbelievable speed, a bolt of lightning crackling in his hand.

Just as he passed her, time seemed to lose any meaning, slowing to a sluggish pace. And Sakura’s heart stopped in her chest, because she could have sworn that for an instant, the pair of black and red eyes met hers.

Then, he was a blur once more, his hand plunging through chest after chest. Sakura's breath froze; even the Voice was silent, carefully watching the massacre occurring before them. That was exactly what it was: a massacre. At the speed he was moving, the shinobi had no chance of surviving. They didn't even have a chance to react before the blood burst from them.

A minute later, the twisted pile of bodies the Voice had assembled was double in size. Silence rang around them.

He killed her— monster! For the first time in a long while, she heard Noriko's voice echo through
her head, clear like a bell.

Sakura swallowed, the action producing a sharp pain in her dry throat.

Four more ANBU, two brown-haired men, a blonde woman, and a black-haired woman, flashed into existence beside the man's now lazily slouched form, flanking him.

The former second-in-command, now leader, of Sakura's squad stepped forward, shoulders stiff. He bowed sharply. "Taichou."

The other ANBU on her squad fell into line beside him. Belatedly, Sakura joined them at the very end. She postponed an incredulous consideration of her luck—of all the squads, after two years of no contact, now hers was the one to run into him?—to scan her teammates, noting some severe but largely manageable injuries. Coyote, the squad's designated medic-nin, would be able to handle them.

"We expected more fatalities," the dark-haired woman of the newly arrived squad spoke, voice a monotone.

"We were attacked approximately ten minutes ago—"

"Your mid-level squad accomplished this in ten minutes?" the brown-haired man wearing a bear mask pressed harshly.

It took a moment for Sakura to realize that all her teammates' gazes were now accusingly on her. Her face formed a snarl beneath her mask; they were going to shatter any hopes of anonymity she would have hoped to have maintained in front of this particular audience.

"Crow did it, taichou," Rat spoke up, his voice a nasally rasp from what was undoubtedly a mild chest injury. "She killed every single one of those shinobi before you arrived."

Fucking rat. Her muscles tightened as her former captain's gaze fell on her. She didn't know how she could have ever been blind to it before. How had she ever thought him a lackadaisical, unobservant shinobi? She could sense his presently obvious lethality on a cellular level. Aggression and killing intent permeated from him, fully unleashed. Sakura's eyes widened before she forced herself to calm down instead of darting away and trying her luck with fleeing.

A second later, he was directly in front of her. She kept her head bowed, using the pretense of rank and formality to avoid his gaze.

"Remove your mask."

Sakura stiffened. "That's against protocol, taichou."

Without warning, she felt a gloved hand yank her head up until she was looking directly into his eyes. Daring her to resist, he raised his other hand and pulled her mask off, revealing the nondescript features of her henge: tanned skin, thin brown hair, and dark eyes.

"How did someone inconsequential like you kill so many?" Kakashi questioned with feral interest, the metallic scent of blood wafting off of him as he leaned closer. His hand was almost choking her.

Sakura's eyes almost bugged out at his demeanor. He was nothing like the Kakashi she had known, and yet, perhaps the compilation of every deviance in personality, every note or look that had ever struck her as suspicious, as too sharp, from before. Menacing and terrifying, his presence crackled
through the immediate area like the electricity he had just produced. The peaceful atmosphere that always arose after a battle won—no matter how devastating the cost—fractured in the face of it, driving every shinobi around to be on-guard as though the bloodshed was still impending.

"I'm a genjutsu user," Sakura bit out against the painful, calloused hold. She ignored the way her heart raced in her chest, aware of what those hands had accomplished. He wore the ANBU uniform like a second skin, the pale span of his actual skin visible only at his muscled upper arms, which were exposed between his flak jacket and elbow length arm guards, and his hands—which were on her. "I wasn't able to dispel the genjutsu entirely, but…enough."

Kakashi's gaze passed over her form and the amount of blood splattered on her. "Had fun, did you?" he mocked.

Her body stiffened at the accusation. He felt it immediately. His body became flush with hers. And now, Sakura did feel her eyes bug out, at the roughness of the deadly form so close to her, at how intimately she could sense what could brutalize her.

"Your name," he demanded gutturally into her ear.

"Saori," she hissed when his hand tightened warningly. Her anger bled into her voice. "Saori Mori."

Like a hound scenting blood, Kakashi reacted to her hostility, pressing closer. "Do you have a problem, Saori Mori?"

Sakura wanted to laugh loudly in his face.

"You've made me break two of ANBU's first-level rules. And I want you to get off me."

Around her, her teammates looked at her like she had gone insane. Rat seemed to vibrate with excitement at her impending fortune. Fucker, she thought poisonously.

He stepped back and swept a cold, dismissive look over her team. "Get back to Konoha and debrief."

Sakura spun and left without a second look, palms fisted and trembling at her sides.

"You have perfect chakra control—use it. If you maximize the efficiency of your chakra-use, you will be toe-to-toe with opponents of even the greatest chakra reserves."

Sakura ducked a fist encased in volatile chakra and flipped over a spinning kick from another opponent, trying her best to forget everything that had happened the previous day.

After two and a half years, after no contact, she had seen him—like that—


"Didn't you say I was a genjutsu user?" she bit out, making fast hand signs to release a water dragon that collided through ten of the shinobi. "When are you going to teach me advanced genjutsu?"
"I have already taught you some genjutsu," the crow answered calmly, watching the battle below with unreadable eyes. "Anything beyond what you currently know will require you refining your precision in chakra consumption so that perfection is instinctive."

Sakura snarled and exhaled high pressure streams from her mouth, skewering the rest of the faceless shinobi remaining around her. "And then I'll be able to make genjutsus like yours?"

"That would require the sharingan," Shisui answered coolly. "You will need to summon me before you can place anyone under this level of genjutsu."

"Convenient," Sakura muttered. With the shinobi remaining, she unsheathed the chokuto and charged forward, edging the blade with her chakra. As the crow had promised, it had 'taught' her how to use the weapon—primarily by conjuring shinobi to pummel her until she learned to move correctly.

Learning the chokuto, though, had come in use in the missions Sakura had been assigned in the past year. Of course, that had been Shisui's influence as well. Ever since the crow had determined missions could also be used as lessons, it had continued to influence the assignments handed to her.

She didn't know how it was possible—the level of duplicity required, let alone the pervasiveness of genjutsu required. Yet, the crow had maneuvered her into harder and harder missions. And Sakura was sixteen, now, and tall—even without a henge, she did not overtly appear unusual on these missions despite her true rank (she had, incredibly enough, managed to miss the chunin exams twice more and so was still technically a genin).

She blinked, distracted from her thoughts, as the shinobi surrounding her suddenly vanished. Her gaze went to the crow warily.

Shisui cocked its head to the side in visible annoyance. "Someone is approaching."

It turned its gaze to fix one, glowing red eye on her. The genjutsu released its hold on her and Sakura found herself standing alone on the rundown training ground she had made her own over the past two and a half years.

Footsteps, increasing in volume with considerable speed, sounded behind her and she turned to find three figures racing toward her. She slipped her kunai back into her flak jacket. It was the boy who had followed Naruto around all the time—he and his genin teammates.

"Oy," the boy shouted loudly, "He's back! Naruto nichan is back!"

He turned and pointed upward. Sakura followed his finger to find a lone figure standing on top of a tall wooden pole, above the buildings surrounding him, a good distance away. The figure's back was facing her but she knew that it was Naruto.

Sakura bent her knees and sent chakra to her legs. When she opened her eyes again, she stood in front of the tall pole, her hair settling around her belatedly from the sudden burst of speed.

Her gaze flicked to her right. Jiraiya stood beside her.

"Naruto," the sannin bellowed, "Get down!"

"Yeah, yeah," the heard the familiar, abrasive voice bellow back, only slightly lower than it had been two years ago. But when Sakura examined his face, she found a solemn expression as her former teammate surveyed his village.
After one long look, Naruto took a casual step off the top of the pole. When he landed on the
ground, his gaze immediately found Sakura.

Neither of them said anything at first. Sakura took her time to survey the boy who had annoyed her
so much in the Academy and later on Team Seven, and he did the same in turn. Like before,
whatever thoughts arose from his perusal were visible on his face. Chagrin at her height—she was
still taller than he was. Surprise—at her clothing, she guessed; Sakura's pants and loose shirt hid
the slight but definite muscle definition she had gained. It hadn't occurred to her, but she supposed
she did look very different from before he had left. She no longer wore the dress—and she had
once loved that dress, she supposed.

Naruto had abandoned his ridiculous—and impractical—neon orange and dark blue jumpsuit for
something only slightly less ridiculous. He had also grown taller and broader in the shoulders. But
the biggest change she could find was in his now pensive demeanor.

This impression subsided when his face cracked into a familiar crooked grin. "Sakura-chan!"

"Naruto."

His gaze shifted to behind her and his grin remained. "Konohamaru!"

That had been the boy's name. Sakura turned and found Konohamaru gasping for breath with his
two teammates just behind him.

"Boss!" the younger boy panted. "How've you been? Also look! Look! I perfected it!"

He made quick hand signs and a buxom brunette appeared before them, intimates barely covered
by bits of mist. Jiraiya choked beside her.

Naruto scoffed loudly, the gesture exaggerated and overblown like a kabuki actor's. "I've moved
beyond such low-level jutsu. Check this out!"

His hands met in rapid formations and multiple women popped into existence. Despite the unique
features of each women, they all shared one thing in common—nudity.

Jiraiya's grin was wide and greedy until he seemed to remember Sakura was there. "Run, Naruto,"
he informed the other gravely. "If she's anything like her mentor, you won't be living much longer."

Naruto's gaze shot to her with trepidation. Sakura viewed the generous bosoms of the women with
indifference and not a little medical skepticism.

"Boss," Konohamaru chirped, "the gang and I have to head back to meet up with Ebisu-sensei! But
we'll catch up later!"

As Naruto waved them away, Jiraiya spoke up again. "And that's our cue to see Tsunade."

Sakura blinked slowly. She had purposefully left bottles of sake all around Tsunade's office the
previous night so that she could sleep in a little before her training with the crow. "She drank
heavily last night," she said after a pause. "She'll probably be passed out for another hour."

Jiraiya clearly knew the hokage well, because he didn't seem surprised. "Let's meet at her office at
sundown, in that case."

Naruto straightened excitedly. "Want to eat at Ichiraku Ramen, ero-sennin? They have the best
ramen in all of Konoha—no—in all the great five shinobi nations!"
"No way," Jiraiya scoffed loudly. "I'm heading to the bathhouse to sample some of Konoha's... fairer offerings. Catch you later."

He disappeared with a pop, leaving Naruto and Sakura alone. With a complex expression, Naruto reached at his side and pulled out his frog wallet. Sakura noticed that when he jostled it, it made no noise.

Naruto caught her looking at him and immediately beamed widely. "Ah, it's so great to be back. I can't even wait to see Tsunade-bachan and—"

"You know," Sakura interrupted, "I'm feeling a little hungry. Let's go."

His eyes bugged, before lowering. "Ahh, I can't. Gama-chan is empty, see?" He squished the wallet demonstratively.

"I'll cover it," Sakura said, already setting off in direction of the restaurant. But she didn't hear footsteps follow her, so she was forced to turn around again. Naruto gazed back at her in utter amazement.

"Hey, Sakura-chan," Naruto asked dazedly, "are you asking me out on a d—"

"No. We're—were—teammates, and we're grabbing a meal together."

"Okay," Naruto said easily. And strangely, his expression did not change—as though her offer of companionship was all he had really been after in the first place.

Sakura frowned as they made their way to the finest ramen establishment in Konoha. Ayame took their order and conveyed it to Teuchi, who prepared their meal behind her. Naruto settled into the stool beside her with a groan, inhaling the smell of the restaurant with great satisfaction.

"How've you been?" he asked after they had settled down. The blue eyes that looked at her were serious now. Sakura wasn't able to stare into them for very long, inevitably averting her gaze under such piercing examination.

"Fine. It's been fine," she said shortly. She quickly shifted the topic of conversation. "Tell me. What did you learn while you were away?"

It was a fortunate thing that even three ANBU missions paid a mini-fortune or Sakura probably would have been eaten out of her house with the amount of ramen Naruto consumed in between enthusiastic retellings of his adventures.

She leaned forward and listened with determined intentness to Naruto's wild tales of narrow escapes and grueling training and rasengan developments and editing Icha Icha drafts. It was endless chatter, perhaps for the first time welcomed.

A month ago, the crow had managed to place Sakura on her first ANBU mission, and even after two more, the memories of the dead and the dying undeniably had yet to lose their hold on her: kept her scrubbing her skin in the shower for longer than she realized, made her burn the clothes she had worn each time, made her fingers spasm each time she reached for her blade—

"And then, it EXPLODED!" Naruto wiped his mouth with a blissed-out groan. Sakura gazed outside and found a thin sliver of the sun resting above the horizon.

"We should head to the tower," she commented, placing down the money. Naruto nodded distractedly, rubbing his protruding stomach lazily.
Given Naruto's condition, they decided to walk there instead of employing chakra. Just as the thin sliver of gold disappeared, the two entered the building and made their way up the spiraling levels to the top level, where the hokage's office was situated.

They found Jiraiya already there, leering at the golden-haired woman sitting at her desk. Tsunade's attention moved instantly to the newcomers of her office. As she saw Naruto, her stern expression melted into a reluctantly fond smile.

"So, you're finally back. A little more grown up too, I hope?"

Naruto struck a pose, thumbs up. "Believe it!"

"Willing to bet on it?" the Godaime challenged, teeth bared. The golden gaze unexpectedly snapped to her.

Sakura shrugged. "Sure. I'll place money opposite whatever you gamble on."

Tsunade glared viciously. "Brat," she chewed out. She leaned back into her chair and surveyed them both over her intertwined hands.

"Do you think I would have come back, if I had not come back with results?" Jiraiya interjected into the silence silkily.

Tsunade met this proclamation with a sly smile on her lips. "If that's the case: I want to see these 'results' as soon as possible."

Sakura watched as Naruto straightened beside her, a fierce expression on his face. He looked ready to battle any monster Tsunade might decide to summon before him.

"I'm placing you two back on a team," the Godaime barked commandingly.

"Really?" Naruto asked eagerly, almost vibrating with excitement.

"Despite his position and usefulness in ANBU, I've called him back to Konoha yesterday precisely for this reason." There was a mean grin on Tsunade's face.

"Who?"

"Come in!" Tsunade called out, savage smile widening.

A figure blurred into existence in the room.

"Maa," the figure that had caused Naruto to pale and pull out his kunai drawled. "Is that anyway to greet your old sensei?"

Sakura's palms broke into a cold sweat. Her mouth—conversely—dried almost painfully.

She should have suspected this, that Tsunade might call Team Seven back together now that Naruto was back. It was exactly the sentimental kind of thing she had learned her mentor was inclined to
do. Rationalization, however, did not help temper her visceral reaction to Kakashi's presence in front of her for the second time in twenty four hours after two and a half years.

Sakura's teeth bit into the side of her cheek.

_Haruno Sakura is unsuited to become a shinobi._

She exhaled sharply, the air searing her throat.

_Monster,_ Noriko whispered, as though right behind her. At this point, Sakura didn't know who she was talking about.

Kakashi stepped forward, familiar gaze framed by silver-white hair and a black mask. He looked no different from before, and at the same time, worlds different—a sculpture now ostensibly molded by a knife instead of the human hands that had long been assumed. His hitai-ate was absent from his forehead, as ANBU procedure dictated.

He smiled, the resulting narrowing of his gaze harder and cruder than his former, fake crinkling grins.

"How long has he been away from civilian life?" Jiraiya muttered under his breath to Tsunade. Sakura noticed that Kakashi’s snapped to him as soon as he opened his mouth, tracking his words with a chilling smile.

"Two and a half years," Tsunade returned grimly. She pursed her lips, returning the ANBU captain's gaze unflinchingly. "He'll adjust."

Jiraiya's lips twisted ironically, his following words barely audible. Sakura caught them only because she was closest. "Do rabid dogs ever return quietly to the kennel?"

Sakura watched her mentor turn a hard gaze on Kakashi again, with the slightest tightness around her eyes.

She shifted her weight. Almost immediately, Kakashi's gaze flashed to her. She was struck by how different this glance was from what she had faced hours earlier. Before, in another's features, she had been weighed like a threat, an encroaching predator a lion attacked to preserve its territory.

Now, his gaze related an enormous nothingness, an indifference, toward her—toward _Sakura_—transparent in a way it had never quite been before.

Very much aware of the attention of Tsunade and Jiraiya on her, she forced a smile to her face after an awkward pause. "Hi…Kakashi-sensei."

The word sensei choked her on its way out.

"Wait, wait," Naruto said with wide eyes, "does that mean Team Seven is reinstated?"

The godaime nodded firmly.

Kakashi's gaze settled on uncaringly her, like a wolf discarding a piece of meat it found not to be up to par. "Her studies would better be pursued under your guidance."

"My decision is final," Tsunade barked, unwavering. "Team Seven is active once again."

Kakashi's eyes were shuttered. "As my Hokage commands."
Sakura kept her expression as unaffected as humanly possible through it all.

"Sakura," Naruto waved to her tiredly the next morning, five am sharp. His eyes widened when she neared. "Hey! You're wearing a dress again!"

She was, in fact, wearing a dress, red like the one from almost three years ago. The dress was silk and, paired with flashy high boots, even more grossly luxurious than her first. But fitting nevertheless, she felt, because she was betting that she would be trained even less now as part of Team Seven than she had before. Despite its fragility—and here, exactly, was the irony—she wagered its continued well-being.

The dress was really a private joke to herself. And she had a guess she would need the amusement in the next few hours.

When she stood beside Naruto, she kept her gaze pointedly away from where she knew Kakashi was positioned in the tree to their left. He wasn't even masking himself completely, but it seemed that Naruto had yet to notice.

"Ah, why did I even show up this early? I forgot, he never shows up on t—AH!"

Naruto flinched back as Kakashi appeared in front of them, arms flying back wildly. Long, dangerous limbs were hidden once again under deceptively loose cloth; Sakura's nose twitched at the scent he carried beneath the standard jounin uniform.

Blood, the Voice clarified helpfully with unholy glee, It's all over him—

"Okay," Naruto puffed self-importantly, "Let's hurry up and start the training for a new knockout jutsu! I need more in my repertoire."

Sakura confirmed, if it hadn't already been so, that whatever thin veneer of harmlessness Kakashi had maintained two years earlier with a team of genin had clearly been just that: a veneer. It was blatant in the forest two days before and blatant in the way he looked at Naruto now.

"Why don't you show me what you can do?" he bared his teeth darkly.

Sakura stiffened, something foreign curling in her stomach. Naruto shivered, wariness flashing across his features. Then, he inhaled beside her and recovered with characteristic boldness: "Alright. Let's do this!"

Naruto made the hand signs for a kage bunshin. The bunshin began rotating its hands rapidly around the boy's open palm, producing a rotating sphere of highly volatile wind. Rasengan. She had seen it before, but never at this size.

"How'd you like that, sensei?" Naruto grinned arrogantly, looking down at his creation.

"Interesting," Kakashi murmured, straightening to his full height. And to Sakura, it really did look like he was interested: a cruel, voracious interest that communicated his own enormous capacity for violence and a consequent interest in others' capacities for it as well. He approached Naruto, his
slow stalk forward more reminiscent of a wolf's gait than the hunting dogs he was known for.

He didn't look at her as he walked past.

"Do you know your chakra nature, boy?"

Boy? Sakura's eyebrow twitched. What did he think Naruto was: a masked tool in his ANBU squad?

Had he forgotten the short, but concentrated amount of time he had spent with Naruto before? Did he feel that dissociated from it? Was the barely civil man in front of her now or the poorly civil one from before (and who knew there could be such a magnitude of difference between those two striations) genuine—and which was cultivated? Was it possible that they were both real, like…she and the Voice were?

Being entirely ignored, she took the time to consider leisurely: what could ANBU do to a person with time, but leave behind the rawest, hardest edges of a character if only to survive. And if so, what, in times of commanded complacency, could keep that cruelty in check...

"Cool!" Naruto roared. He thrust a split parchment up triumphanty. "Look, Sakura-chan, I have a wind nature!"

Honestly, any idiot could have guessed from the size of that rasengan. What had been questionable, perhaps, was whether he possessed any others—

Her forced, detached calm was utterly annihilated as the chirping of birds crackled through the air with sudden, deafening volume. Lightning sprung from Kakashi's hand.

Sakura's heart thumped wildly, her blood pulsed wildly, as she responded instinctively to it, eyes narrowing dangerously. The Voice jolted as well, remembering equally as well what that lightning was capable of.

"After chakra transformation," the man murmured in a voice that belied the savage intensity of his body language—

"Wait," Naruto paused, brow furrowing, "what about Sak—"

"—follows this."

And whatever his initial, earnest misgivings, Naruto was immediately distracted, while Sakura remained on high-alert and struggled to keep her own killing intent and weapons out of sight.

****

When she walked back home three hours later, she didn't bother controlling the ugly smile on her face. As predicted, not one stitch had pulled on her red dress.

"Sakura," Naruto sighed, dragging out her name. He was collapsed against the counter of Ichiraku Ramen a week later. "That man…that's not Kakashi-sensei."
Sakura paused in sipping the broth of her ramen.

"He's..." Naruto appeared to struggle for words. "Meaner. And not lazy! He never shows up late, and he makes me train until I can barely stand anymore. And—" he paused, before adding—"he pretends like you aren't there."

She looked at Naruto for a long moment. Blue, impassioned eyes gazed back, righteously indignant, clear of the blood and the muck and the guilt that Sakura had begun to bathe in.

"Well," she said after a pause, with remarkable pretense of indifference, "he didn't exactly ever think I was his most talented student."

Naruto skipped right past the obvious explosive hidden in that answer. "But now it's like he hates you!"

Sakura's gaze made another pass over the restaurant and paused on its newest occupant. Hinata Hyuuga had just stepped in, her cream-colored jacket still rippling from the light breeze. Her gaze alighted on Sakura with a polite smile; when she found Naruto, two bright spots of color flared in her cheeks.

"Hey Hinata!" Naruto cheered, "Come join us!"

"A-are you sure?" the dark-haired girl questioned. "I would hate to interrupt."

"Not at all," Sakura said. She watched as Hinata hesitated, before tentatively taking a seat to her right.

As the other girl placed her order—sending sly glances to her left where Naruto sat as she did so—Naruto resumed slurping his own ramen with gusto. Apparently, Sakura and his previous conversation had been placed on the side burner.

"How have you been?"

"Well," Hinata responded to her. "Just finished a six-hour surgery."

"You just got here from surgery?" Naruto demanded, eyes widening.


Naruto's expression twisted jokingly. "Your hands must have been covered all over in blood—gross."

To Sakura's surprise, Hinata didn't giggle along or blush at with this statement. Instead, she suddenly stiffened.

"A-actually it isn't, Naruto-kun. It's no more blood than you've had on your own hands while protecting Konoha. O-only instead of h-hurting people, I'm saving them."

Hinata's features were almost...sharp. At first, Naruto gazed back, his jaw slack. Sakura glanced at him and Hinata, wondering with distant incredulity if she needed to intervene.

But then Naruto straightened abruptly, a strange look on his face. "You're...right, Hinata. I shouldn't have said that."

Hinata's expression softened again. "Thank you, Naruto-kun." The blush returned.
Ayame brought Hinata's order to the table and, with gentle grace, Hinata reached forward to accept the bowl. As she ate, Naruto's gaze remained on her, even though a full, untouched bowl of ramen had just been placed in front of him as well.

Sakura gazed down at her own bowl with a blank gaze, mind somewhere else.

The next morning was Saturday—which meant no Team Seven training, thankfully. At the crow's command, Sakura found herself at the ANBU locker rooms at six am, washed hair disguised brown and longer, dampening her shoulders.

"Crow," the captain with the panther mask called from behind her—it was the one who had given her her assignments for the previous ANBU missions.

Sakura turned as she finished pulling her arm guards up in sharp movements. "Yes?"

"A special request was placed for you for your mission today."

She felt her muscles lock, the tan skin around the dark eyes of her henge tightening. "What?"

"Relax," the slim woman said sardonically. "Clearly you're moving up the ranks and quickly too. I've never even been assigned on a mission with him, meaning he's never requested me. And I've been in this shithole a damn while longer than you have."

Sakura forced her shoulders to relax, but the painful set of her jaw—hidden by the mask—remained. Someone requesting her meant that she had stuck out too much. And that was problematic.

"Who?" she demanded lowly.

The panther mask cocked to the side. "Hatake Kakashi."

It felt like the mask was laughing at her.

Author's Note: Wow. Okay. So I wrote everything up to here in a solid stretch of a few days. Is it worth continuing? Lord knows I have other stories I should be focusing on lol. Leave kudos / comments, and let me know if I should keep going!
Oiran

Chapter Summary

Sorry it's been such a long time! I want to let you all know that I really appreciate the comments you leave behind—they're really what motivate me to keep writing this story. I actually have several of the following chapters written out now (still undergoing editing)!

What Happened Last: Sakura just found out she's been called to go on a mission with Kakashi's ANBU team

That being said, I know it's been a while, so the best thing to do may honestly be to re-read.

The trees were thick, barren, and provided no coverage from the wind. Along with increased winds, snow had just begun to dust the tips of the leaves, signifying their movement north. Sakura knew that her bone-deep discomfort was easily visible in the tense line down her spine. Hopefully it would be chocked up to mission nerves.

A special request was placed for you for your mission today.

She cringed just remembering the words.

Now, two hours later, she raced through the trees with the same ANBU members who had been with Kakashi in the forest: two brown haired men with bear and raccoon masks and two women, Snail and Hyena.

Retrieval mission of high-level Hyena had curtly explained to her. Assets had been detained in a prison in the Land of Snow. Diplomatic efforts had failed.

The copy-nin had not said a word the entire time.

She was beginning to wonder if he even noticed she was there (a rather familiar thought, actually).

“Three hours,” Bear called out. A burst of chilly wind shuffled through the trees again, prompting a violent shiver to wrack through her body.

Sakura kept a sly grip on her weapons.

True to Bear’s words, they reached the prison just as the sun set. Sakura almost missed the prison entirely, so deeply entrenched was it into one of the mountains. The cavernous entrance glowed dimly, evidence of torches and habitation. If there were shinobi guarding the entrance, they were well hidden.

“Snail with Bear. Hyena and Raccoon with the girl,” a guttural voice emerged from behind for the first time.

Her body instinctively stiffened at its sound. She relaxed immediately after, hoping to hide the reaction.
For a fleeting moment, Kakashi’s eyes landed on her. Then, he vanished. Tortured screams echoed through the mountains a second later.

Raccoon gave a signal, and she and Panther entered the now sentry-less prison. The cave was poorly lit, but there was enough light to catch on the spilt blood coating the walls.

As they moved, her ears popped from the combination of their speed and the narrowness of the tunnels branching downward. They passed an opening into the level Snail and Bear had taken—a flash of evenly matched combat and piteous groans of inmates pleading to be released—before they arrived at the bottom.

Sakura ducked a scythe and grasped Raccoon’s waist in the next instant, twisting to swing him behind her and into the enemy-nin attempting to sneak up on them. Close confines and the threat of collapsing the tunnels prohibited large ninjutsu use, but Hyena’s hands immediately began flashing through signs for Earth-release jutsus, making ample use of the element surrounding them.

Sakura almost did the same, but stilled as she remembered her own lack of finesse with the justu. In the end, she pulled the chokuto from her back.

When they had cleared enough of a path, Hyena pushed forward to find the Konoha shinobi in their cells. Raccoon and Sakura both shifted to pick up the slack.

“I’ve got eyes on her,” the man signaled.

Sakura signaled back the affirmative. She grimaced when her blade nicked a vein and blood sprayed all over the ground. Some landed on her pant leg.

Getting messy these days, the Voice whispered.

She inhaled sharply. The smell was never going to go away, and even if it did, she would always know it was th—

Raccoon made the hand sign to exit. Gritting her teeth to reestablish focus—everything was happening so quickly, too quickly—Sakura turned and saw Hyena with four injured Konoha shinobi. She shunshined to the other woman and grabbed two of the shinobi before continuing to the exit path they had opened up.

If Sakura had thought traveling through the tunnels before was a struggle, it was worse now with more people. She stopped only when she burst through to fresh air and stood on the opposite mountain. The woman in her left arm gave a loud grunt, coughing up blood; the man in her right was unconscious. A quick visual scan suggested that neither was in immediate critical danger, though bones would need to be reset.

“We need to find better cover,” Hyena murmured. Her form vibrated then disappeared. Hefting the two bodies up again, Sakura crouched low into the snow and followed.

They travelled for half an hour before they reached a cave well-hidden and well-sheltered from the weather outside. Once they settled the prisoners down—wrapped their wounds and covered them with blankets for protection from the cold—they could do nothing but wait for the rest.

Half an hour passed by silently. Just as the snow finally seemed to slow, the Voice stirred and Sakura stilled in mid-motion along with the other ANBU.

Snail arrived first, an unconscious woman clutched in her arms. Then Bear, two men—both conscious and looking in comparatively healthy condition—propped on each shoulder.
When Sakura’s gaze went to the mouth of the cave again, she found Kakashi standing there. His entrance had been soundless. He looked remarkably like the demons depicted in some of the older temples: bathed in blood, monstrous not because of malice but because of seeming indifference.

One of the men whom Bear had carried in stood up loudly. “We need to move. Now.”

“We have to wait. Most of the other prisoners need bandaging and rest before we can move again.” Hyena negated almost immediately.

“There’s no point in bringing them,” he declared, pointing demonstratively at the man Sakura had carried in. “Look at him! He’s just deadweight.”

“Our mission is to—”

“Then the parameters have changed. I am a member of the council, and I outrank all of you here —”

The sound of a blade being unsheathed cut him off. The man stopped speaking abruptly, a soft, choked noise emitting from his mouth. He backed away from Kakashi.

“I’ll take second watch, taichou,” Snail voiced over the man, beginning to pull out bedrolls for the former prisoners to lay on.

“Rabid dog,” the councilman hissed, face deathly pale.

The blade didn’t move for a long moment, still pointed in the man’s direction. After a moment, and without a word of acknowledgement, Kakashi disappeared from sight. Sakura’s eyebrow twitched.

Sakura rolled onto her heels, using the momentum from the motion to stand up. One by one, she and the other ANBU rolled out the thin pallets.

She watched as Snail slid a kunai under the pallet they were sharing before lying down. Sakura padded her own stash of kunai, shifting them on her person so that the edges wouldn’t cut her, and then joined her.

The next morning, they left by dawn. By evening, they reached Konoha and deposited the prisoners at the hospital.

Kakashi disappeared between one spring breeze and the next. As soon as he did, she began to breathe easier. When she turned, Bear caught her gaze. The other ANBUs uniformly paused in their movements, suddenly all paying attention to her as well.

“Everyone scouted for the squad runs a test mission like this, quick, in-and-out —” Snail began bluntly—“The usual missions are…much messier.”.

“Just a heads up,” Raccoon added with private irony. “Kami knows I would have appreciated one.”

Sakura’s lips turned downward.

“You have no right to complain,” Hyena scoffed. “There were complications with my first. I didn’t even get a baby mission like you did.”

“Don’t bother getting your hopes up,” Bear drawled to her, “It’s too early to tell whether he wants
you back.”

Sakura cracked her neck, considering that with bubbling hope. Kakashi hadn’t given even the slightest hint he was particularly aware of her presence, hadn’t looked at her more times than she could count on one hand.

She didn’t spare them another glance as she left ANBU headquarters. Once a suitable distance away, she entered an abandoned courtyard and diminished the henge, changing into clothes she had sealed into a small scroll she kept on her person. The scrolls were intended for shinobi specializing in undercover missions, but had ultimately become an entirely quotidian convenience among all ninja. Only a few years ago, she had used them to pack for sleepovers with Ino. Funny, how times changed.

Dusting off her clothes when she finished putting them on, she shoved her hands into her pockets and reentered the bustling main street.

“—ah!” Sato moaned, back arching.

“Hey.”

“Let me,” the shorter man growled, dark eyes shadowed by hair. “Let me touch you.”

“Sakura.”

Sato found himself stilling at the other man’s expression. Seichi wasn’t the most expressive person he had ever met, quite the opposite, in fact, but—

“Sakura.”

Today, Sakura thought to herself darkly, sucked. And her latest attempt at distraction—which had been heavily championed by the bookstore’s newest employee—had failed utterly to distract her from that fact.

In many ways, though, it was a wonder today hadn’t happened sooner. “A challenge,” the copy-nin had said when Naruto arrogantly demanded one at training, tasting the word like it was a delicacy. “A taijutsu bout, then?”

Sakura had heard enough in the copy nin’s voice to be immediately on-guard. Naruto had bulldozed right past all signs of danger to enthusiastic reciprocation.

When their beloved jounin captain had left the training ground half an hour ago, he had left his student a broken mess at its center.

“You mind?” Naruto asked now roughly.

She reached out a hand coated in green chakra without responding.

Her face felt stiff. It was no coincidence that Naruto hadn’t looked at her for the last half an hour; not even when she had first tried to approach him to heal him. He had recognized exactly the way Kakashi was looking at him by the end, the disregard Kakashi directed her way on the rare occasion he looked at her during these training sessions....
“That’s all I can do for now,” Sakura said curtly, finishing up with the fractured rib. “Check in with Hinata tomorrow at the hospital.”

“R-right,” Naruto coughed out, a strange expression on his face. It lingered, then disappeared. “I guess it’s home for me. See you tomorrow.”

He turned, but ended up staggering to the side instead of forward. When he took another step and almost landed on his face in the dirt, Sakura rolled her eyes. Gripping his wrist, she threw his arm over her shoulder and took his body weight onto her frame.

“What—are you doing?!”

“What does it look like I’m doing?”

“But I’m getting blood and dirt all over you.”

“I noticed.”

“…You promise you won’t hit me later?”

“Why would I hit you for that?”

“Who else would you hit?”

Sakura didn’t answer, nudging Naruto to the side so that he avoided a protruding rock he undoubtedly would have tripped on. When the normally boisterous figure next to her continued to be uncharacteristically silent, she turned to examine him.

Blue eyes squinted back at her. “You know, you’re really different now. You don’t yell at me as much.”

She didn’t miss a beat. “Have you ever thought that maybe it’s because you’ve become less of an idiot?”

“I’m not an idiot!” Naruto cried dramatically.

Her lips tightened. “You’re right. You’re not. You’re just…really oblivious.”

“Oblivious?” Naruto echoed, brows furrowing. “Hey, I know lots of things, okay? Like the book you’re reading! I mean, I don’t really see their great value, but I personally edited every scene of every book that the ero-sennin has published since I was thirteen—”

He came to a sudden stop, eyes widening in recognition as he looked around. “We’re here.”

She looked up at a tall, pale colored complex with rust brown roofing.

“You live right next to the civilian prison.”

“Yep,” he hummed unconcernedly, “it gets a little noisy whenever there’s a riot, but otherwise it’s great. Really keeps the mortgage rates down.”

Her mouth twitched.

“…which apartment?”

He pointed.
Sakura eyed the long spiraling of stairs up to Naruto’s floor and then lifted him in her arms. He was gaping by the time she put him down.

Naruto reached behind a conspicuous potted plant and pulled out a key. He wedged it into the lock and shoved the door open. The table she caught sight of was stacked almost to the ceiling with empty ramen cups.

“You’ll be good from here?”

Naruto blinked back slowly. Then he smiled widely. “Don’t worry about me! I can barely even feel anything anymore!”

Even if he hadn’t winced near the end of his sentence, she probably would not have believed him.

“Go to the hospital tomorrow.”

He scratched his head sheepishly and then nodded. Sakura gave him one last glance and then turned to jump over the railing and onto the street below. She landed with a thud, not bothering to disguise the sound.

A familiar, chilling caw sounded behind her.

In an instant, her shoulders tensed, hunching slightly. She felt the solid pressure of clawed feet curving around her shoulder. The caw sounded again, this time directly by her ear.

Sakura turn her head to the side to meet the crow’s mismatched gaze. Clutched in its beak was a small cylinder—a scroll. When its gaze continued to burn into her, she reluctantly reached up a hand to retrieve it. She unrolled the parchment, reading it quickly as each line was revealed. It wasn’t long.

“Are you the one making this happen?” Sakura demanded lowly. She hadn’t asked it until now—but it was now too possible to ignore. “Do you think it’s funny, putting me on ANBU missions with Kakashi?”

“I put you in ANBU, but this happened without my interference,” Shisui returned, placidly, “As always, ensure that you are not found out or risk my…disappointment.” He released a loud, shrill caw and took off from her shoulder.

Numbly, she rolled the scroll back up and stuffed it into her pack. After finding an abandoned restroom, pulling out the scroll sealed with her uniform and applying the same henge, she made her way to the ANBU headquarters.

It hadn’t even been two days. *Two days.*

Snail’s back was the first to greet her. When the other woman heard the sound of the locker room opening, she turned, eyes widening in recognition. “So you’re back after all.”

Bear came to stand beside her, surveying her evenly. Behind the both of them, Raccoon offered a small nod.

“Right,” Sakura muttered, stomach sinking the entire while, “what’s this one about?”

“We don’t know yet,” Bear answered, sounding equally displeased about this turn of events.

Raccoon snapped his shin guards on, the metal on metal creating a clang. The door open swung
open behind Sakura. Sakura turned, gaze falling first on long, pale limbs before she made her way to the straight, long black hair and hyena mask.

“Details?” Raccoon prompted.

Hyena was silent for a moment. Then, in a blunt tone, she began.

“Messy,” had been the first word out of Hyena’s mouth. Later, Sakura knew exactly how much of an understatement that had been.

Messy. The word did a laughable job of describing what transpired.

Even ‘horritic’ scarcely did justice. But she would use it for now. It had been beyond anything Sakura could have ever imagined; she had already stopped three times in the three hours they had spent travelling back to stumble over to a bush and vomit.

(Fire, hot, suffocating, the sweet-sick smell of burning of flesh, the rhythmic cadence of their screams—)

The urge to burn the clothes she was wearing—even though she knew they were clean (they had all been forced to change with the sheer amount of blood on them)—persisted like a drumbeat, paired with each breath.

She jerked when she felt something bump against her hip. Looking down, she saw that Raccoon was offering his canteen to her. They were alone at the back, a good mile behind the nearest ANBU in the formation. In the dark, Sakura tried her best to meet the other man’s gaze, but it was impossible, especially at the pace they were moving.

Her head threatened to split. She felt like any second the world might suddenly tilt to the side and leave her adrift, senseless in a void. She grabbed the canteen and lifted it to her mouth. She ended up choking on more of its contents than she swallowed, but it was enough to remove some of the awful taste.

Taking another swill, Sakura spat the water out and handed the canteen back. It reassured her that the hand that reached out to grasp the water wasn’t entirely steady. The growing nausea in her gut surged again. She scanned the forest for miles ahead, looking for the best location to make her next vomiting pit stop.

She managed the next few minutes until there by inhaling and exhaling deeply, eyes closed.

When the proper amount of time passed and her gaze darted to her chosen point again, she found that their squad had veered off-course. They were leaving the thick of the trees for a sparser stretch of forest. And sparse flora usually meant that—

Streams of lanterns glinted through the leaves. Civilization. For some reason, they were heading straight toward it.

A tall, brass gate soon emerged, proclaiming proudly: Tanzaku Quarters.

Her eyes narrowed. That was the infamous den Naruto had retrieved Tsunade from years ago,
famous for gambling, dinking, and—

“Who wants to...gamble now?” she bit out.

Raccoon finally turned his head. When his voice emerged, slightly muffled from beneath his mask. “There’s no point trying to be coy, Crow.”

Sakura’s face was torn between too many disparate reactions. “But—”

“For some of us, it’s required to...maintain that subtle distinction between ANBU and more disturbing pathologies.”

There was a darkly, knowing quality to his voice. Sakura’s mouth pursed, torn between incredulity and something else.

Her progression from there—the outskirts of Tanzaku Quarters—to the foyer of its finest house of oiran was less of a willing descent into lechery and more a result of herding. But even she had to admit that the building they arrived at was resplendent: crimson and obscene even in the licentiousness of the nearby brothels and bars. The scent of alcohol was thick in the air throughout the entire district but only thickened, joined now by a scent of expensive, heady perfume, when they passed through the entrance.

Civilians flinched away as they entered. Sakura was almost apologetic—the aura of imminent violence about her team had become deadly accompaniment to the lusty drum beats and samisen that greeted its other visitors.

A woman emerged from a curtained passage, slim and swan-necked. Her lips were painted blood-red, and her hair was drawn back from her face. A few wisps escaped in delicate curls to brush her cheeks. She smiled, peering up at them through her lashes.

Oiran weren’t exactly discussed in polite company, but Ino had been more than an ample resource to anyone around in her younger years. Sakura knew, though not much, at least that they were the highest ranked of their kind. According to popular gossip, there were daimyo who had gone without the touch of the oiran they lusted after, so sparing the elite were with their favor.

“My girls have always enjoyed your visits of your kind,” the woman continued, making suggestive eye contact with each member of the squad. Her gaze passed over Sakura, of course, but missed—

Sakura turned, eyes narrowed, to find that Kakashi was not there.

The woman approached Hyena, a distinctly lustful smile curving on her lips. Hyena returned this glance by tilting her head to the side, long hair falling over one shoulder as she did so.

“I assume you have no objection...” the woman murmured, already loosening her obi. The cloth parted to reveal a dangerously deepening path of skin. Sakura yanked her gaze to the side, observing the courtyard-like structure of the building. Every level looked out onto the open ground floor, she noted with great concentration.

Hyena, the owner, and the rest were gone before Sakura’s next blink. Which left just her and the owner’s assistant behind.
A hesitant cough sounded. Sakura’s gaze moved back to the left.

“The divans on each floor outside the rooms,” she interrupted before he could speak, “I’ll just take one of those. Just to rest.”

He looked unsure. She wondered if she would have to pull the chokuto out to convince him. Because there was no way she was stumbling out now into the drunk and high masses to try to find somewhere else to sleep.

Perhaps it was her glare, but he relented. “O-of course. The divans on the top floor are… most comfortable.”

Sakura gave a quick nod and then sent chakra to her feet to boost herself upward. When her feet settled once again on lush carpeting, she found that the highest level was possibly the most extravagant of them all.

Sakura swung her chokuto off her back and uncaringly stabbed it upright into the floor. It would be easily accessible in her reclined position.

The divan she had chosen, at the end of the hall, was incredibly long, but also narrow. She shifted for a moment, trying to get comfortable. She wouldn’t be able to sleep like this, exposed and so out in the open. But she would take what she could get.

She shifted onto her side and closed her eyes.

And opened them a second later.

Moans: distinctly female, breathy, and high with ecstasy. She could tune out the noises from the other rooms, but these—were louder than the rest.

Sakura growled and shifted onto her other side. As though at the behest of a sadistic conductor, the moans steadily rose in pitch and urgency. She shut her eyes determinedly.

A long, drawn-out wail pierced the air. It lasted longer than human lungs had any right to allow.

Sakura’s eyes flicked open and glared violently at the ceiling. One of the golden doors on the floor swung open a scarce thirty seconds later. It was the precise door behind which those noises had emerged.

A figure stood in the open entryway, silhouetted by the dim lighting inside. The woman’s pink lips were downturned in a light pout, ostensibly at her departure from the room. As she made her way down the hall, her kimono was untied, revealing firm breasts and full, curved hips. She seemed considerably unconcerned by this. Her movements were slow, and at each step forward, her eyelids fluttered tellingly, features drawn with echoes of pleasure.

Sakura remained in her reclining position, reluctant to hear the shrill scream that would result from startling her.

When the woman’s eyes inevitably fell on her, the pout abruptly vanished from her lips and was replaced instead with a haughty smirk.

It was an arrogant expression and entirely self-satisfied. She passed by with a gentle brush of air, kimono and long, black hair fluttering behind her.

The smell of rich, jasmine perfume reached Sakura’s nose—and then something else. Sakura’s
brows furrowed as she sniffed lightly in an attempt to identify it. It smelled…familiar: smoke, metal, pine, and—

She straightened urgently, eyes flying to door that had yet to close.

A pair of mismatched eyes, half-lidded, gazed back. Feral.

She stared soundlessly, her mouth tight behind her mask and face hot.

He had turned out the oiran in less than five minutes, with almost militant precision. What had been the point? *Due diligence?* The poorly guised savagery in his eyes had not abated at all.

With a cold, indifferent curl of the lip, he blurred and then vanished. The open door revealed an empty room. The bed, some irreverent, unconscionable part of her brain noted, hadn’t been used.

Author's Note: Please let me know what you think! Your feedback is so, so wonderful!
The mission ended with a swift and altogether uneventful journey back. (And she tried—*really tried*—not to think about what she had seen. All of it.)

Sakura settled back at home, burned her uniform, and showered. She tried to sleep after, because she’d been running on a sleep deficit the past few days; but it was midday and her body clock wouldn’t let her.

Eventually, she threw on some clothes and went to the grocery store across the village. She hadn’t visited it in years, not ever since she’d purchased that unfortunate bottle of milk.

Sakura should have known by now to stay away from that store.

“Watch out!” an ink-covered Naruto bellowed. “He’s the devil’s spawn! *Run*—”

“That’s not a very nice introduction, dickless,” a cool, monotonous voice intoned, stepping off a giant, ink creature.

A wide, plastic smile stretched across the newcomer’s face. His skin was as pale as parchment. eyes and hair as dark as possible in contrast. “I’m Sai.”

“What he is,” Naruto growled, trying to shake off the ink on him like a wet dog, “is the devil’s spawn. There’s no way I’m letting Tsunade baa-chan make him a part of Team Seven.”

“Haruno Sakura,” she returned, ignoring Naruto’s betrayed look. What was there to feel betrayed for?

New members might have seemed like a curve ball to Naruto, but she had spent the past few years on make-shift teams for one-off missions—because Team Seven had disbanded and Tsunade hadn’t been the type to abscond from Konoha with her protégé. Well, Tsunade might have been, before…but not as Hokage.

“Sakura,” Naruto said softly, face deadly serious. “He’s not part of this team. I’m not letting anyone replace Sasuke—”

“You mean the traitor?” Sai interjected, smiling kindly.

When Naruto gave a wordless scream of rage, air hissed through Sakura’s teeth and she stepped forward to catch the back of his shirt, ignoring the clenching in her own chest at Sai’s words. Sai’s smile flickered slightly when Naruto was unable to pull free.

“Interesting,” the black haired boy commented. “The reports I’ve read indicate that you lack talent as a shinobi, Haruno-san.”

“It’s Sakura. And when we get to the training grounds in a few minutes,” Sakura smiled back humorlessly, “I’m sure our captain will readily assure you that’s just the case. Come on.”

It didn’t take much effort to drag Naruto the rest of the way to the training ground. Sai followed behind them at a sedate pace, dark, unreadable eyes taking in everything from the street vendors to the stray dogs with equal interest.

Sakura kept a disinterested eye on him the entire way. Sai was somehow…both extraordinarily
unusual and extraordinarily ordinary. She wasn’t blind. He had much of the classical beauty that had made Sasuke a fan-favorite among her peers, herself once included. But his expression was so unrelentingly bland, that it rendered him somehow…forgettable at the same time.

Sai’s gaze slid to hers, catching her mid-perusal. He returned the look frankly, without the self-consciousness most would have shown.

“Man, can’t he forget once?” Naruto muttered as the field—and Kakashi—came into sight. He had stiffened somewhat, apparently remembering their last training session. “Or at least come to training late, like he used to.”

“The legendary copy-nin…” Sai noted softly, attention shifting away from her.

“Yeah, yeah,” Naruto scoffed, flapping his hand, “So what?”

“He looks like he has a big dick,” he added after some consideration.

Naruto choked on the saliva in his mouth. Sakura, in turn, hastily let go of Naruto. (No. She had not heard that. And she hadn’t seen anything last night either.)

She moved onto the field. The moment she escaped the shadowy comfort of the inner city’s tall buildings for the open expanse, she began to feel the full brunt of the sun. She could almost see the pulsating wave of heat coating the earth.

“Taichou,” Sai greeted, bowing sharply. “I am eager to prove my worth to this team.”

Kakashi’s head cocked to the side as he straightened to his full height, centimeters above all of them.

His hand flashed out of sight for a second. She felt more than saw Naruto flinch beside her on reflex. A second later, yards of cloth unfurled in the air—orange, gold, crimson—and then landed in her hands.

“Nice, uh, kimono,” Naruto said blankly.

Sai reached for the scroll resting on the boulder beside them. “An escort mission,” he filled in, dark eyes scanning the document. “For the daimyo’s daughter. The royal family has been receiving threats in light of the oldest son’s upcoming marriage, and they want shinobi on top of their full guard detail. They also want a body double for her travel to the wedding.”

Both his and Naruto’s gaze shot to her. Sakura looked down at the kimono in her hands.

Kakashi’s eyes rested on Sai indifferently. “You. Run point.”

“And what will you be doing?” Naruto demanded, squinting.

“Watching from afar,” the Copy-nin said, spinning a kunai in his hand lazily. “Don’t fuck up.”

From her experience under him in ANBU, Sakura wondered meanly if any action on his part could only end in mass-bloodshed, and that was why he was distancing himself—

That’s a tad unfair, the Voice mocked. We’re not much better, are we?

Sai smiled stiffly at her, and she went behind a tree to change.
Harasa Mihiko, she learned, was the daimyo’s eldest child and only daughter. Sakura hadn’t encountered many upper class women on her missions so far.

But the last had been the princess who had watched her kill Noriko.

Other than their shared social status, Mihiko and Mako shared nothing in common. Mako had been, if not meek, then mild-mannered—and understandably shell-shocked by the slaughter of her ladies-in-waiting. She had spent most of the mission afterwards crying softly into her handkerchief, uncaring of her audience. She had also been beautiful.

As Sakura surveyed her, she knew that Mihiko was not beautiful. She was too jarring for beauty: red hair, straight as straw, plummeted down her back to the backs of her knees; bark brown eyes beneath thin, arched eyebrows peered out at them, clinical. She wasn’t beautiful, but there was something…compelling about her nevertheless.

If one could only look past her arrogance, of course. Sakura swore that she could sense Mihiko’s seeming baseline condition of extreme condescension from almost two kilometers back. It permeated those around her too. She felt the skeptical scrutiny of Mihiko’s samurai guard keenly. She knew she didn’t look exactly like Mihiko. But, per the mission specs, she had changed her hair to match hers, and the kimono hid any obvious differences in their figures.

The daimyo’s daughter’s face wasn’t exactly one that was publicized; most royal women were heavily sheltered before marriage.

“My lady,” Sai greeted calmly. He blinked for a second, and then bowed slightly. Naruto coughed before he and Sakura followed suit.

Mihiko’s brown eyes slowly passed over them sharply. “I was told the copy-nin would be here.”

“He will be keeping perimeter,” Sai responded. It wasn’t strictly true—Kakashi had only said he would be watching from afar. It sounded better, though.

Mihiko’s face tightened slightly. Without warning, the daimyo’s daughter’s attention moved to her.

“You,” Mihiko said softly. “Follow.”

She spun immediately after this declaration, red hair fanning out behind her. Two of her guards—tall, bulky men who tied their hair in the way of the samurai—bent to help her into the palanquin. It was the largest one Sakura had ever seen; most fit two to four individuals. This, however, had enough space for at least ten, which she guessed from the ten foot soldiers carrying it.

Sakura followed. The heavy curtain fell behind her with a loud swish, just brushing the back of her kimono.

The daimyo’s daughter was already seated, lounging on cushions with feet bare on the tatami mat. Two ladies-in-waiting sat to her left in seiza. To the right, a woman wielded a brush over a large piece of parchment.

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“The black-haired one would have looked better in a kimono,” Mihiko remarked coolly.

Sakura blinked, not sure how to grace that with a response. Most probably prompted by the awkward silence, the painter’s eyes left the painting, darting up from beneath a thick curtain of lashes to analyze the palanquin’s newest occupant.
Sakura blinked.

The woman wielding the brush was not, in fact, a woman at all. Or at least, not a born one.

Sakura wasn’t immediately sure what betrayed it. On the whole, the performance of femininity was startlingly convincing: long black hair, tied low at the base of the neck, paired with a narrow, angular face. As the painter shifted, the loosely tied kimono revealed planes of chest that were flatter than they should have been, affirming her intuition. She? He? She settled for he for now.

He continued to stare. The daimyo’s daughter noticed.

“Do you like what you see?” Mihiko murmured. The painter averted his gaze back to his painting.

The silence that followed was charged.

“Do tell, Asahi-chan,” Mihiko said, voice artfully distant, "She captured your attention, after all, when you’re supposed to be hard at work for me. I wonder what it could have been.” Her posture indicated what would have seemed to be utter disinterest in the matter. “Her eyes are too pale to prompt poetry. Her features are too hard, too sharp to allude to what I have observed is a desired softness in women.”

Until this point, the daimyo’s daughter’s face had undergone only the minutest shifts to communicate her displeasure. It was a surprise, therefore, when she suddenly stood up and stalked forward, wrapping a slim hand around Asahi’s long throat.

“She distracted you,” Mihiko said coldly. “So pay the girl her due compliment. Tell her what you liked.”

A strand of hair of the painter’s hair fell forward. The voice that emerged was not what she expected at all, a smooth, low tenor that did not attempt to disguise itself.

“I only thought that the shinobi’s disguise did you no justice, Mihiko-sama,” Asahi said, head raising slowly.

His gaze shocked Sakura, who had thought him timid until now.

Two spots of red appeared on Mihiko’s cheeks. Her hand spasmed, before she dug her nails into the painter’s skin.

“Don’t think your poisonous words will have any effect on me,” the daimyo’s daughter said stiffly. “Try again.”

His head rolled to the side, and he peered up at her through his lashes. In a swift movement, he shifted to his knees, putting his head a scant few inches below hers. Mihiko’s companions gasped, sharing scandalized looks.

“I’m an artist,” the painter breathed. “I saw a blank—untouched—canvas.”

“Then paint it,” Mihiko breathed back, nostrils flaring, “if you’re so eager.”

“You know it’s not the canvas I want.”

A loud slap echoed through the room. Asahi’s head snapped to the side like a rag doll’s.

“Don’t overstep,” Mihiko said stonily. A glitter of challenge flashed through her eyes. “Tattoo her, if you want so badly to ’paint her skin.’ Then, finish the portrait. My dear brother’s wedding
Baffled by most of what had just transpired, Sakura’s head snapped up at that. “With all due respect, tattoos are identifying markers in my line of work.”

Mihiko looked at her like an errant fly had suddenly spoken. “Your black ops force wears them. Shall I ask your captain, the copy-nin, for permission?”

“My lady,” one of the women sitting still in seiza interrupted to Sakura’s immense gratitude. “You can’t let him touch her!”

Another lady-in-waiting nudged her frantically, attempting to silence her. But the original woman did not back down, flicking a disgusted glance at Asahi.

“He was a kagema,” the woman whispered. “He’s held women and men.”

The third lady-in-waiting, apparently not in the know, gave a horrified gasp. The former kagema in question had returned to his painting dutifully, a smug tilt to his lips.

“And?” For all her ladies-in-waiting’s horror, the daimyo’s daughter looked unperturbed and even annoyed.

“And?” the third lady-in-waiting echoed incredulously, eyes as round as coins.

“It’s not right!” the second woman finally exclaimed. “For a man like that to touch an honest woman. He shouldn’t even be in here with us.”

Mihiko’s eyes narrowed. Then she laughed riotously, if a bit haughtily.

“What’s ‘not right,’” she announced, “is that he’s like the rest of his kind. He may try to hide it with his pretty kimonos and his elaborate fans, but in the end, he too thinks his penis is godsend. Alas, he’s the best painter in the Land of Fire. And brother dear does deserve the best for his wedding. His own blessed cock has granted him that unearned status.”

Sakura shifted her weight slightly. Her ankle was a bit sore from a previous mission.

The red-haired woman caught onto the movement like a viper. Her voice was a hiss. “You disagree, shinobi? Kaito is an idiot, and yet, my soon-to-be-wed brother will be the one to succeed my father—a boy who believes his bodily desires are sooner grounds for war than poverty or draught. Do you think any other kind of man exists in this world?”

“Mihiko-sama,” her companion gasped, “You shouldn’t speak like that, especially—”

“Shouldn’t I? Make no mistake that in another world, I would be your ruler,” Mihiko continued ruthlessly.

She and Mihiko locked gazes, for a moment. But the moment passed—as quickly as though it had never even existed—when the palanquin lurched to a sudden stop and jerked as it hit the ground.

Sakura was immediately on guard. There had been no sounds of commotion outside, but this was not a planned to stop. Seconds before the curtains shielding the entrance opened, Sakura lunged forward and shoved Mihiko into a wardrobe. She acted not a moment too soon.

A large man with skin as rich as the earth entered through the curtain with a smaller, purple-haired woman. They were both armed and wore no hitai-ate.
“Who are you?” Sakura demanded imperiously, carrying herself just as Mihiko had done seconds before.

The ladies in waiting scattered from their neat line in belated reaction, clinging to each other in fear.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw Asahi shift his body slightly to cover the wardrobe.

“Our fine lady been asking for this, hasn’t she?” the purple-haired woman giggled, eyes widening at Sakura. “Take a look at this room, Jirou.”

“Shut up and grab her,” the man responded gruffly. His gaze passed over the other occupants of the palanquin without interest.

Sakura shifted her weight, taut with tension as her mind worked rapidly. Should she fight and resist capture? But there had been no sounds of a fight outside, as though they had been allowed into the palanquin. Was that her new team member’s—Sai’s—aim? Was he an enemy who had infiltrated Konoha?

The woman stalked toward her. “I hope daddy pays up, sweetheart,” she crooned, gripping her hands painfully and tying them together tightly with wire.

Sakura allowed it, letting a pained grunt spill from her lips as she was gagged and promptly tossed over the woman’s shoulder. She couldn’t see Sai or Naruto anywhere, but she did sense mostly-hidden chakra. Her eyes narrowed.

The two enemy shinobi didn’t dilly-dally. Paying no mind to the samurai and foot soldiers they had knocked out to break in, they took off into the trees.

Just before her view of the palanquin disappeared, she saw a lone figure finally step out from the shadows of the trees. It was Sai.

He gave a wide, plastic smile as his hand to his lips in a silencing motion.

Sakura squinted at him before he disappeared. A second later, dozens of more shinobi from the surrounding trees abandoned branches to follow them.

The new shinobi punched the man’s shoulder in celebration, jeered that “they hadn’t even been needed as back up,” why the hell had he made them all come?

One even let his hand pass roughly over Sakura’s bottom.

And she abruptly understood what Sai had done.

As long as these shinobi thought they had the real deal, Mihiko and the rest of her entourage could travel safely to the wedding without delay. The samurai and the foot soldiers had only been knocked out. They had probably been told not to put up a fight.

The enemy shinobi’s numbers vastly outranked theirs, and rather than engaging in an prolonged battle, Sai had clearly decided to readily offer Sakura to distract them.

Fucking Sai. Maybe Naruto had had the right idea after all.
They travelled for a little more than an hour until they reached a sprawling camp. The entire way, Sakura screamed and cried and clawed at her captors, playing her role aptly while biding her time.

Belatedly, she wondered how Sai had made Naruto agree to this. Granted, it wasn’t like she was actually in much danger.

But the idea of Naruto being complicit in this plan…

She hastily distracted herself from her thoughts, welcoming the sharp pain in her knees as the enemy shinobi tossed her into a cage at the middle of the camp. When she looked up, she was surrounded by what looked to be the entire group, counting upwards of fifty.

“What am I here? Who are you?” Sakura asked, her voice a hoarse rasp from the gag.

The man who had aided in her capture responded. “As long as your family provides payment before the deadline, no harm will come to you.”

“And if they don’t?” she demanded, straightening to her feet. “When’s the deadline?”

How long until Mihiko and her entourage reached the wedding? About two days. Then, another four until she made her way back to the palace.

Sakura would have to keep this farce up for six days, minimum.

“Two days,” the man responded, after a short pause. Too little time for a courier to reach the camp. They must have arranged a drop off location, Sakura guessed.

“Oh, tell her the truth, Jirou,” the woman who had carried her cut in, a wide smile on her face. “That’s just the soft deadline. After that, we start cutting off body parts. Sending them. Don’t worry, Mihiko-sama, nothing vital, at first. But we’ll keep cutting until nothing’s left. That’s the hard deadline.”

She let the panic show on her face, because it was a fitting response for a daimyo’s daughter. Pointedly, though—there was no way she was going to be able to keep up this sham for as long as she needed to.

They left her, then, presumably to let her hysterically sob without imposing on them.

Sakura appreciated the space. It allowed her to consider her options.

If she stayed, she would either have to invent a jutsu to help her fake-sacrifice body parts (unlikely) or actually sacrifice them (which, no, she was not willing). Maybe Sai had kindly sent a hawk requesting an extraction team, but they wouldn’t reach in time, not with the time it would take for the bird to travel and for most teams to actually come.

The only kind of team that could reach fast enough was an ANBU team. But they wouldn’t send ANBU for Sakura Haruno. The only rare time ANBU performed extraction without ulterior motive (not just to protect information or punish treason) was if it was one of their own. Which ‘Sakura’ was not. It was the harsh reality of there always being more demand for ANBU than there was supply.

Nonetheless, she could escape by herself—she was more than capable of it.
But…if Sakura broke free, even this group wouldn’t be stupid enough to miss the skill of another
shinobi; they would know they had been duped and descend on Mihiko and her entourage on her
way back.

She supposed, with some generosity, that this had all happened because Sai did not know for sure
what Kakashi was capable of. It was probably that uncertainty—the chance that the stories were
tall tales, as many shinobi accounts admittedly did become—that had made the latest Team Seven
member doubt whether their team would be enough to oppose the larger numbers.

If she was being generous: it wasn’t a surprise Sai had assumed the worst. The infamous copy-nin
had hardly made the best impression or shown that he was in the least bit inclined to intervene in
any violent altercation. He didn’t know that Kakashi was one of the most devastating forces anyone
could encounter in a violent altercation.

But the point stood, that Sakura had been sacrificed quite pointlessly.

She scoffed, shifting herself until she was lying on her back and staring at the twilight sky. The sky
was cloudless here, a fiery blend of smoky orange—so beautiful it burned—and a deep, resilient
blue.

It was almost…nice, like this. Quiet.

And the infernal crow wasn’t here. Sakura could always find it within herself to appreciate that.

There were guards positioned a short distance from her around the cage. One woman and three
men. She cataloged the kunai on their bodies as she enjoyed the light breeze.

She closed her eyes.

When she opened them, it was dark.

Author's Note: Please review!
Deus Ex Machina

The camp was mostly silent. The shinobi had cooked meat and eaten around the fire hours ago. Sakura had been given some food as well, had been made to bow with her hands tied behind her back to eat it.

Now, she sat boredly inside her cage, counting stars to pass the time.

Outside her cage, the shinobi guarding her (a different set now) traded bawdy stories to keep themselves entertained. Only one held back. It was the purple-haired woman from the beginning of this debacle—Akane.

Akane had assumed her shift with a wide smile as soon as dinner had finished.

Sakura hadn’t noticed it at first, too preoccupied with other things. But now she saw that there was definitely something off about the older woman. Akane had been staring at her intently for the last two hours—which was not in and of itself unusual, perhaps, because Sakura was her prisoner. But it was the content of her gaze.

“And once there was a lady who bathed in rose petals,” one of the shinobi bellowed, having succumbed to the sake in his bottle, “and one day she hid—”

Akane gave Sakura brief, hungry look before walking over to the man. She tossed a kunai into the air and caught it by the blade.

“Akane-san,” the bigger man gulped, fearful at her sudden presence. “Was there something you wanted?”

“What I want,” Akane murmured, a smile stretching now across her face now, “is for you and your friends to be gone.”

Sakura’s lips twitched, hiding a smirk. Akane wanted to be alone? Well, that would make escape considerably easier.

At first, the man blinked without comprehension. Then, he stammered. “B-but Jirou told us that four of us had to watch her at all times.”

Akane arched a brow, tutting now. “Do you really think I can’t handle one itty, bitty lady all by myself?”

Her kunai traced its way delicately down the line of his throat, down his chest and stomach, until it rested between his legs.

“I’m leaving,” the man gave in immediately. The other men readily obeyed, abandoning the cage and heading towards the edges of the camp. After a moment, Akane withdrew her blade and the man followed, the stink of his sweat trailing behind him.

The purple haired rogue-nin turned back around slowly, black eyes gleaming. Sakura watched unflinchingly in the shadowed part of the cage.

“Finally.” Akane gave a breathy sigh, taking a moment to palm herself. Then, she reached to her belt to pull out the key.
Sakura waited with what she believed to be admirable patience.

“Are you scared, darling?” Great. She wanted to talk.

“Terrified,” Sakura said a little too forcefully. Akane paused, lips twisting. She corrected herself hastily. “Please. Please don’t do this to me. What do you want? I’ll give you anything—money, weapons, whatever. Please don’t hurt me.”

The words tasted like blood in her mouth. That was because she bit into her tongue saying them.

Akane was panting now, fumbling to fit the key into the lock, jamming it in and wrenching it to the side in her impatience. And then the purple haired woman was in front of her. The door of the cage was open behind her.

But still, Sakura waited. She wanted to escape with as little disruption as possible. She hadn’t watched the men as they left, but she had been listening. And she hadn’t heard them enter their tents; she couldn’t verify that they weren’t still watching.

Sakura had heard their footsteps heading away, and now—nothing.

As she puzzled over this, Akane drew a fist back and punched her in the face. The motion sent Sakura into the side of the cage with a loud clang. Akane gave a delighted giggle.

“Gut her,” the Voice snarled.

Sakura glowered at the tree in front of her. The purple haired woman packed more of a punch than she’d thought.

A hand curled into her hair, stroking delicately. “Oh, I’m sorry, Mihiko-sama. Did I hurt you?”

The hand slipped down to cup her face as Akane looked down at her.

“You look so pretty, you know,” the woman gasped, fingers digging greedily into her cheeks, “So, so pretty. I wish I could keep you forever. But climax is the little death, after all, and—god—you’re going to bleed so good for me—”

She was stopped by a terrible coughing fit. After a moment, blood began to spill from her mouth. Sakura looked down. A hand protruded from Akane’s chest. Its counterpart didn’t bother trying to cover the woman’s mouth.

Rage—jealous and petty—burned through Sakura. She knew exactly whom that hand belonged to. Of course, he had shown up, just at this moment.

Akane gaped at her, black eyes panicked and suddenly childish. “What—” The woman collapsed limply.

The tall figure stood like a specter over Akane’s collapsed form. His tanto was coated to the hilt in blood. Finally, she realized why she hadn’t heard those men return to those tents.

(He had killed them all. There was no one else was alive in the camp. No one to follow them.)

She hadn’t thought to do that.

“Get out,” the figure said softly.
Sakura gazed back with remarkable stoicism, or so she thought. Glancing down at Akane’s dead body, she gathered the ends of her kimono and stepped over the pool of blood steadily spreading. She didn’t quite manage it. As her left foot landed, she felt the—

“I’ve seen thousands of your kind.” Kakashi’s eyes passed over the dried tracks of fake tears and blood on her face.

*Our kind*, the Voice whispered, something like trepidation in its own voice.

She shook her head minutely, brain processing his words through what seemed to be haze of noise.

“You greatest accomplishment for the ages will be feeding the grass,” the copy-nin continued tonelessly. “After the first few years, your parents alone will remember you. Because when others ask them how their child died, the pit of shame in them will continue to burn—that their daughter died for nothing. That, in the end, she was meaningless. And that this, as a result, will also be their legacy.”

It was the most he had ever said to her.

When she turned back, she found that he had already vanished into the trees. Her nails dug crescent marks into her palms.

It was an hour or so before dawn that they reached the camp. They traveled in silence, Sakura striving as much as she could to contain her anger and largely mutilating her hands in this endeavor.

As soon as Sakura broke into the clearing, she felt a heavy force drive into her solar plexus. It took her a few seconds to realize that she was not, in fact, being attacked.

She spat coarse, blonde hair out of her mouth. After a moment, the grip relented slightly.

“That—*that*—” Naruto didn’t seem to be able to find a word bad enough for Sai, “He made sure I wasn’t here. When I found out what he had done…”

A sweet bolt of relief lanced through her.

“Haruno-san,” their newest team member greeted politely, expression untroubled.

“You,” Naruto growled, hands contorted into claws, “Don’t you dare—”

“Shut up, dickless,” Sai said with a smile. “Taichou.”

Kakashi’s gaze flicked up, pausing his wiping of the bloodstained tanto against the tree behind Sakura.

Sai bowed sharply. “As I was uncertain of how much you intended to intervene, I conducted the team in the most effective way to ensure success in our mission regardless. I trust that you have found my leadership satisfactory.”

Naruto was almost incoherent in his rage. “You *gave up* a teammate!”
“If Haruno-san had been injured,” Sai interrupted smoothly, “that would have been most unfortunate. But as it stands, the mission would have gone on unimpeded and—”

Kakashi had suddenly appeared in front of him, inches from his face.

Sakura watched the altogether bizarre scene occurring before with annoyance.

“Taichou?” Sai’s smile had dropped.

“I know what you are,” the copy-nin drawled, his body entirely relaxed. “I know what you’ve been trained to do. But how should I put this…”

Kakashi leaned in, until his mask brushed the younger man’s ear. He whispered something that Sakura could not hear.

“I don’t understand, taichou. I have always received positive…feedback.”

The copy-nin cocked his head to the side as though he were mildly amused by the other’s words. Or maybe it wasn’t amusement. The clouds had stretched to cover the moon, and she couldn’t see Kakashi’s face now either.

“I will correct myself,” Sai said after a pregnant pause.

Sakura watched as Kakashi’s hand tensed—as though, for a second, he really were going to swipe the blade still held in it across the other’s throat. Then, fortunately, he flickered and disappeared.

And Naruto shoved Sai back against a tree.

Sai’s voice, when it emerged, was as monotonous as ever; but he was clearly still distracted by what had transpired with Kakashi. “I do not understand your anger.”

Naruto snarled. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“The mission is my sole priority. It should be yours as well,” the dark haired boy began calmly.

“Forget about the mission!” Naruto raged.

“Naruto,” Sakura cut him off. She took a step forward and pulled him off Sai. “I’d like to speak with him alone.”

Naruto was…concerned, some part of her realized. It had been a while since she’d seen that directed her way. She didn’t know how she felt about it. She didn’t need it. But…

Naruto’s hand tightened at his sides. He looked like he wanted to argue, but something on her face must have told him it would be futile. He left without another word.

Sakura, despite herself, was shocked by his quick acceptance. It made her wonder how unfair she must have been in the past.

No, that wasn’t quite right.

What it really made her wonder was if she had been as bad as Kakashi. If they had—her teeth gritted—both played a part in making Team Seven as dysfunctional as it had been.

“And what is your complaint, Haruno-san?” Sai asked delicately. He had recovered slightly, returning to his normal color and begun smoothing his clothes.
Sakura’s lips twisted wryly. Suddenly at ease, was he?

Her eyes scanned the thick forest surrounding them, checking for any hint of chakra. Her gaze caught something in the trees—but it wasn’t a shinobi. After a brief pause, she clenched her fist and drove it toward Sai’s midsection.

He blocked the blow, hands snapping from his sides to catch her fist. Her eyebrow arched; without pause, she twisted and brought her forearm against his throat, pinning him to the tree like he had been just a minute before.

Sai’s face still revealed little, but his eyes had narrowed slightly.

“You’re ANBU, aren’t you?” Sakura demanded lowly. I know what you’ve been trained to do, Kakashi had said. Not quite familiarity, but something like it.

His lips stretched in a thin, meaningless smile that Sakura was quickly beginning to get sick of. It reminded her of his smile, when he had—

“That would require me to violate protocol, Haruno-san, if it were true.”

And now she was hearing her own words echoed back to her.

“As I said before,” Sai said, “I do not understand your anger.”

And that was…a good question, she thought to herself. She hadn’t truly been placed in danger. How could what had happened in the last twelve hours compare to what she had faced on ANBU missions in the past?

But it persisted, nevertheless.

“I do not understand your displeasure,” he repeated, eyes flickering over face, “or why the copy-nin considers me to be scum.”

Is that what Kakashi had told him? Sakura scoffed. Then, her mind processed belatedly what he had said. Something in them…

_Piercing hunger,_

_the taste of failure._

And—

_those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum_

Air hissed out through her teeth. That.

“Do you not believe that completion of the mission is the highest obligation of a shinobi, Haruno-san?” Sai asked calmly.

Sakura’s eyes snapped to his, distracted. “No.”

“Oh?” He looked puzzled now, an odd innocence about him. “Then what is?”

She stared at him expressionlessly for what could have been as long as a minute. She hadn’t thought her refusal through, only knew it—instinctively—to be true. Now, she searched for an explanation. He waited patiently.
“Peace.” She wanted to get back to punching Sai. It had popped out of her mouth as soon it had crossed her mind, and it had crossed her mind because it was Shisui’s ‘other human’s’ stance. The crow lamented about it constantly, she recalled with a scowl. Let Sai wrestle with it now.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t finished.

“A shinobi maintains order precisely by completing his,” he tilted his head to her, “or her mission. This is why the mission is of the utmost importance. Above any individual. Isn’t that right?”

Sakura’s eyebrow twitched. She wasn’t interested in a philosophical debate now—why did he have so many questions? “Order…is different from peace.”

“Then what is peace?”

Sakura searched the sky above her for an answer, wondering how she’d ended up here. “It doesn’t always mean completing the mission.”

“Like when a teammate’s safety is at stake,” Sai pondered, “Is that why Naruto and Kakashi-taichou believe I am…‘scum’?”

Sakura’s face contorted almost on reflex to a sneer at the copy-nin’s mention. But Sai was already speaking again, something like an epiphany dawning on him.

“Enforcing peace as a shinobi means…” the black-haired shinobi murmured, eyes widening slightly. “I see. If one values a teammate, then that teammate must not be sacrificed. Taichou and dickless will uphold this value while completing their missions—despite their missions. There are…certain values that cannot be sacrificed to maintain the peace, because those also contribute to the state of peace.”

His words had Sakura’s gaze fixated on a small ant crawling up the curves of the bark. “Violence,” she muttered, “is a tool.”

She turned her head and locked gazes with an unflinching, black pair of eyes.

“Violence is a tool for peace,” Sai said slowly, “thus, the mission, too, is only one tool for peace.”

She backed away from him, letting her forearm slide from his throat. Somehow, abruptly, her anger had receded, leaving behind only a sense of confusion.

“Teammates,” the other shinobi pressed, “are they something all shinobi must hold…precious?”

Sakura’s arm paused, half way down from Sai’s throat.

“Would you die for a teammate?” Sai pressed.

She grunted. “That’s beside—”

“For dickless?”

“Yes.”

Her mouth seemed to have taken free reign. Die? For Naruto?

Annoying, noisy, obnoxious, all-around miscreant Naruto. The bottom-last of their class, whose apartment to this day probably violated several health codes.
…who would also readily die for her and for any of his teammates to protect them. Maybe even Sai, if the circumstances were dire enough, because he possessed precisely that kind of sentimentality.

She laughed, a bit humorlessly—and a bit surprised—to herself.

This was an unexpected development, she knew, considering where she had begun. In the beginning, she had wanted to be a shinobi to be like Ino. Then, she had thrown herself into it—there was no point disguising it for anything it wasn’t—for survival.

Sakura completed her own ANBU missions because she was forced to by the crow, not because of patriotism. She reconciled herself to the violence she committed because she had been coerced to do it; when she wasn’t actively killing people, she used violence only to protect herself.

But…

But, she thought with a farce of a smile, she wasn’t managing very well, was she? The mountains of burned uniforms, the chafed skin around her hands from hours of scrubbing, the nights of insomnia—they could attest to that fact.

“I see,” Sai said for a second time, interrupting her thoughts. Then he bowed from the waist. “I am grateful for this conversation. I see that I have much to learn.”

She surveyed him closely, even as he left. He had walked away with answers; Sakura felt like she had only been burdened by questions she didn’t have the time to contemplate. A frustrating outcome for an interaction she had seen going in an altogether different direction.

She reached up hands to shove her hair behind her ears. “You can come out now.”

Her words were met at first with silence. Then a soft rustle sounded behind her—silk brushing leaves—and a figure emerged.

Sakura leaned back against the tree, crossing her arms across her chest.

The painter from the palanquin (Asahi, she remembered) returned her gaze evenly. Amongst the tall pine trees and the endless expanse of the sky—the battleground of so many shinobi, of blood and steel—his lounging, silken clad presence seemed utterly at odds.

“Interesting conversation you were having there. One might have thought you were scholars and not shinobi,” he commented lightly. “Did you both know I was here?”

Sakura inclined her head slightly. Yes. And a genin would been able to tell.

“What are you doing out here?” she asked. “It’s late. As you saw, the woods are not always safe.”

He didn’t respond immediately, taking the time to remove a leaf that had fallen from the canopy above him onto his shoulder.

Then he looked up, blue eyes piercing. “I think you are like me, Haruno-san.”

Sakura inclined her head slightly. Yes. And a genin would been able to tell.

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He didn’t respond immediately, taking the time to remove a leaf that had fallen from the canopy above him onto his shoulder.

Then he looked up, blue eyes piercing. “I think you are like me, Haruno-san.”

She was nonplussed at first. Then, understanding dawned.

“I don’t mean that,” Asahi laughed gently. “Well, not exactly that. You and I, Haruno-san—I have the sense that you too are not what you seem.”

“Are you a woman?” Sakura asked bluntly.
But Asahi just ran a smooth hand down the length of his—her?—loose braid. It looked like a black snake curling its way down his shoulder.

“Woman, man,” he considered them lazily, “Both suit. I also, incidentally, like to fuck both.”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Why are you here?”

“Well, I owe you.” The painter’s voice was still playful, but delivered through suddenly tight lips.

“Do you?”

“Of course. You saved the only daughter of the royal house that is my benefactor.” Vulgarity followed. “She has the most sinful ankles, you know. It would have been such a loss. She could make a killing with those in my old line of work.”

Sakura paid no attention to the words. She arched a brow, waiting.

Eventually, Asahi reached pulled out a scroll. Sakura took it and opened it.

“What is this?” she asked after a moment.

“For your back, I would think,” the painter said, blue eyes glinting. “Give it to an ANBU tattoo artist. They’ll do it justice.”

Sakura closed it and tucked it indifferently to her belt. “If that’s all—good night.”

“Good night, Haruno-san.”

The painter turned in a swirl of silk and headed back toward the palanquin.

“I noticed,” Sakura called out a few seconds later.

The delicate face turned back in question.

“You moved when they entered. In front of her.”

Pink lips curled beneath warning, blue eyes. “Did I?”

“Don’t be alarmed, Asahi-san,” Sakura said wryly. “I’ll keep your secret if you keep mine.” The painter had seen her threaten Sai, after all. And it wouldn’t do to have that kind of thing going around.

The former kagema’s eyes fluttered. “Well, then. I hope you enjoy your gift.”

Sakura wasn’t actually surprised to find herself in Tsunade’s office with the copy-nin less than two hours after returning from their mission.

The hokage looked up from the mountains of paper on her desk with a fierce glare, amber eyes flashing in warning at their entrance. Sakura’s gaze drifted to the untouched sake settled on the window sill. Apparently, Tsunade had been too busy to drink herself today to her usual mellow buzz, which didn’t exactly bode well for her current mood.
But if her jounin captain was concerned, he certainly didn’t show it. He seemed impervious to Shizune’s glower as he tracked mud onto the previously pristine floor, settling against the side of bookcase with feline grace.

Tsunade glanced at him and then to Sakura. She addressed her remarks to the latter. “Why are you here?”

Sakura kept the glare off her face with difficulty, striving for indifference. “I’m afraid you’ll have to ask him, Tsunade-sama.”

The older woman scoffed, wisps of blond hair flaring with the exhalation of breath. Then she turned to Kakashi and demanded: “Well?”

Kakashi’s head rolled to meet hers lazily, but his eyes were steely. “I want her off.”

Tsunade repeated the word soundlessly. “Off. Off? Off what, Hatake? The roster for the yearly Konoha fly fishing competition? You’re going to need to be more specific.”

The copy-nin’s eyes crinkled. The look in them was not pleasant. “Team Seven.”

The hokage’s lips thinned into a tight line. “Not this again.”

“I want her off,” Kakashi continued uncaringly, voice cold. “Now.”

Tsunade’s hands tightened into vicious fists, like she wished she could strangle him. Sakura sorely wished the same.

“Why?” the woman snapped finally, temper tenuously held back.

He pushed away from the bookshelf, standing at his full, imposing height as he delivered his words. “She’s a liability.”

“She’s my student,” Tsunade said warningly.

“So make her a full medic-nin.”

“I believe with time,” the hokage said through gritted teeth, “she can be more than that.”

Kakashi looked imperiously down at the leader of one of the most powerful shinobi villages in the world.

“There isn’t enough time in a human’s life span for her to achieve that.”

Sakura saw the blow land. Tsunade wasn’t quick enough to hide her flinch, or the flicker of doubt that passed through her features. Sakura’s stomach clenched. She knew she hadn’t been as available to meet with Tsunade for lessons in recent years, thanks to the Crow. But she had tried her best.

Only, now even the woman who had given her her first life line couldn’t speak up for her.

“Tsunade-sama,” she said lowly. Her mentor’s attention went to her immediately.

“Yes,” Tsunade said, blinking rapidly. “You. What do you have to say?”

“I’m staying,” she said unflinchingly, back straight.
Leaving Team Seven wasn’t going to remove her from active shinobi life. The crow would probably kill itself before it let that happen. Ironically, in fact, Team Seven offered a mostly benign distraction to the other parts of her life (despite Kakashi being their jounin captain). Sai was a piece of shit, possibly with potential redeeming qualities she had yet to find. And Naruto was—well, she owed a lot to Naruto.

The point was, she wasn’t leaving Team Seven.

Funnily enough, her words were all it took.

“Allright,” Tsunade breathed, reaching behind for her sake and taking a deep gulp. “That settles it. She stays.”

The temperature in the room dropped ten degrees.

“I would,” Kakashi said stiltedly, eyes slitted, “advise you to revise that decision, hokage-sama.”

The hokage looked up at him with a thunderous look on her face. “I would advise you to remember where you stand in this hierarchy, Hatake. You’re not here yet; and if your current inability to curb your more insubordinate and frankly violent tendencies continues, you never will be.”

The sound of a blade being unsheathed cut through the air in a brutal hiss. Tsunade was standing now; Shizune’s hands were sheathed in blue chakra.

“I might as well kill her now,” Kakashi said lazily. He tilted his head to the side, looking down at the hokage callously.

“Sakura, see yourself out.” Tsunade bit out. “Your taichou and I have a few matters to discuss.”

Sakura looked at her mentor in disbelief. Leave? That was the last thing she wanted to do right now. Did Kakashi really intend to use his blade against her? Execute Sakura to save their opponents the trouble?

Let him try, the Voice snarled, we’ll tear into him before he knows which way’s up.

She pretended she didn’t hear the slight trepidation in the Voice’s words.

“Get out, Sakura.” Tsunade growled again, slamming both hands flat against the wood of her desk.

Sakura’s eyes jerked back to her at the loud noise. At Tsunade’s expression, Sakura grimaced and then gave in.

She spun on her heel and didn’t look back.

A Belated Omake (to make up for my absence! <3)

Hyuuga Hinata liked mornings. She liked the crisper than usual breeze, long before the sun had warmed the earth. She liked the quiet and the calm, before the bustling of midday. And above all else, she liked the piping hot, shincha (picked earliest in the season and the sweetest) her favorite
teahouse offered its early guests at discount that time of day.

It was a small teashop, worn and homely. Nevertheless, it found more than its fair share of customers.

Possibly because it was positioned right opposite Konoha’s best purveyor of ramen.

(So, maybe the tea wasn’t the only reason Hinata was drawn to the teahouse).

As it happened, Hinata had spent many mornings, afternoons, and evenings in this particular booth. The shincha really was excellent. And—well, it wasn’t so much stalking as—appreciating the view. She was simply appreciating the view.

The shopkeeper had caught her once or twice (actually, every time after the first), but he had never noticed. Which didn’t actually surprise her. Naruto attacked his ramen with the kind of one-track mindedness that was genuinely frightening.

And, well, it was the perfect start to her day. For reasons. Even if, nutritionally, she really couldn’t condone the consumption of ramen for breakfast.

With a relaxed sigh, she finished off the last of her shincha. It was much needed fuel for what was looking to be a long day.

An ANBU had been dropped off the night before with first degree burns all over his body. The emergency team had worked until nearly dawn to stabilize him. Now, it was time for Hinata and her team to come in to finish the healing process.

It was looking to be a full day of work. Which, normally, Hinata wouldn’t mind, except that she had recently been placed in charge of individuals who had formerly been her peers. Peers who had all but told her the previous day that, no, they weren’t inclined to listen to her because they very much felt she had been chosen only because she was the hokage’s chosen apprentice. Never mind that all their applications had been reviewed by a third party counsel, or that all their names had been stricken out, or that they had all been evaluated solely on the basis of their track records.

Hinata wasn’t a person who conscientiously entertained violent thoughts (entirely why her career as a field medic-nin had turned out the way it had). But, now, even she was sorely tempted to let one Gentle Fist…

She shook the horrible thought away, a frown on her face.

It was simply that—she felt she had finally found her place. Hinata hadn’t been good as a combat shinobi because she hadn’t wanted to be. But in the hospital, she wanted to be good. And she was good. It felt good. A calm she had never felt before washed over whenever a critical patient was placed in front of her. In the surgery room, it wasn’t hard for her to take command.

Ironically, it was exactly as her father abandoned the idea of her as clan leader, that Hinata began to see it as...possible. Hyuuga Hiashi, of course, did not think someone who had never killed, never ‘sacrificed’ (as he put it), could lead them.

Hinata privately thought this...close-minded.

As though she didn’t make sacrifices each day in the surgery room—cutting the limb to save the life; letting someone go blind to save his chakra paths; focusing more attention on a daughter than her father because she had a better chance of survival and they only had so much time before both were dead.
Hinata, like any combat shinobi, had had a hand in the death of countless individuals as a medic-nin. Unlike combat shinobi, she had not intended for it to end that way. It was a burden on her conscience, each life she lost. But it was one she could live with; killing had not been.

Suddenly realizing how hard she was gripping the cup in her hands, Hinata let go of it abruptly. It clacked against the wooden table with a high ring, but thankfully, did not break.

Setting it aright, she lowered her head and gave a relieved sigh—

“Hi.”

Her head darted up. Hinata blinked when piercing blue eyes met hers, then felt her face redden.

“I, uh,” Naruto scratched his head, “saw you. From there—” he pointed demonstratively at Ichiraku Ramen—“though I’d swing by and say hi.”

Hinata swallowed with difficulty. Her throat was so dry.

“Hi,” she croaked finally.

“Right,” Naruto said, staring strangely at her. “I wanted to thank you. For taking care of me in the hospital. And that ointment! It worked really well.”

He beamed at her.

“I’m glad.” But then Hinata frowned, remembering something. “Y-you know, you never told me how you got those injuries.”

“Oh,” Naruto said, eyes widening slightly. He squinted up at the ceiling. “Well, see, there was this thing, and then that happened, you know? So, it sort of just…It really was an accident—”

“Naruto-kun,” she said. “It’s not right to lie to a medical professional.”

Her voice was still quiet, so she was taken aback when Naruto froze like she had barked at him.

She regretted that, a little. But she didn’t take it back. She had seen enough wounds to know the ones on Naruto had not been accidental. They had been made with almost surgical precision—intended, not to harm the most, but certainly to hurt the most. To teach a lesson.

And the thought of anyone touching Naruto like that made her—made her—

“It was a training session,” he answered lowly.

Hinata’s eyes flew wide open. “Sakura-san did that to you?”

“No, no,” Naruto said, waving his hands as though to bat the accusation away. “She’s actually a lot nicer now.”

Understanding chilled Hinata’s body, causing hair to raise on her flesh. “Then Kakashi-san did. He hurt you like that.”

Naruto looked at her, his face grim and somehow so—so young. After a moment, he nodded shakily.

And Hinata was…

“No!”

“You’re yelling,” he said dazedly. Then his forehead scrunched. “I didn’t know you could. Wait, why are you yelling?”

Because Hinata was furious.

“Every shinobi has to go through a yearly checkup,” she muttered to herself, “If I move things around—y-yes, I could manage that. It’s a little below my position, but it wouldn’t look too odd. I can be there—”

“Are you going to hurt him?!” Naruto gleaned from this, arms flapping. “No—no you shouldn’t. You’re a doctor, you can’t…”

Hurt a patient? Oh, yes she could. Funny how until two minutes ago, Hinata hadn’t thought her conscience could condone such a thing.

Now? It definitely could.

“—I just, I don’t get why?” he finished mumbling, “Why do you care at all?”

“Because I take care of what’s mine,” Hinata snapped, “and what he did—”

Wait.

A minute.

What did she say?

It took what seemed like an infinity for her gaze to reach Naruto’s face. Terror had stolen speech from her. She gaped as her eyes landed on a red face and wide, blue eyes.

She—she had just as good as run him off for good now, hadn’t she? Oh god, oh god, oh god…

“Ahhh,” Naruto wheezed, “whaaa…I didn’t—I mean, did you—”

Her face was beet red. She did actually feel like she was going to faint any second, actually.

But….then she noticed that Naruto didn’t exactly look…disgusted. He looked surprised. But also…his face was red…just like hers. And he wasn’t running, exactly, was he?

Maybe it was…Could it be? That this was…the best teahouse in the world?

“Huh,” Naruto finished dazedly.

Possibly.

Author’s Note: Please review! Some exciting *developments* between Kakashi/Sakura about to come :D
Kakashi was a feral, out-of-control menace that threatened to do Konoha just as much if not more harm than he did good.

This is what Sakura had decided in the past week.

*He needs to be put down*, the Voice growled.

Sakura would like very much to be the one who put him down.

Unfortunately, this was an impossible task at the moment.

“Your genjutsu technique is improving,” the crow commented, interrupting her thoughts. The words were delivered indifferently.

Sakura straightened, wiping sweat off her face. “You said before that I could use you to produce better genjutsus. How do I do that?”

Shisui’s wings fluttered rapidly, propelling it into brief flight before it landed on the bench next to her. It cocked its head to the side; the spinning sharingan bored into her.

“I suppose you’re nearly there,” it settled with. Something like a garish smile crossed the crow’s features—only it wasn’t quite a smile, because it was not human.

“There are rituals,” Shisui told her, “that allow a summon and its summoner to share certain abilities, as if they are one.”

“Your eye,” Sakura guessed, a sour feeling in her stomach.

“The sharingan is a tool of illusion. Born of hatred and despair, the self learns to deceive and to see deception. When Uchihas confront this phenomenon, their eyes learn to do the same. Your eyes will see through mine, will use mine, to do the same.”

Sakura leaned back into the bench, keeping her voice deliberately light. “Your other…contractee. Did he give you that sharingan?”

It pecked punishingly at her, drawing blood. For Shisui, she knew, this was its literal manifestation of biting amusement.

“You’ve grown bolder.”

Sakura listed off to the blue sky. “You have a sharingan. You’ve taught me fire techniques that only… they know.” That she had only ever seen Sasuke use.

“This is true.”

Her gaze flicked to it and then away. “So it is true.”

Not Sasuke, she knew. That left…the other one. I-ta-chi. Weasel.

Sakura paused, a metallic taste in her mouth.

“If your other master and I were ever to fight each other, who would you protect?”
The crow smirked. Then, Shisui descended from her shoulder to her lap, digging claws into her skin through layers of cloth.

“Shall I tell you a secret?”

Sakura peered down at it dryly.

“I hold secrets very dearly, girl,” the crow said in a deathly whisper. “I tell you this because, at that critical moment, you must remember this.”

She was unimpressed. “Go on, then.”

It looked up at her, eyes burning straight through her. “You will never stand on opposite sides.”

Sakura blinked at it. “Right.”

“It is true.”

“Well, I don’t believe it.”

“You will come to,” the crow said genially. The crow cawed loudly, a cruel laugh. When she blinked again, she was alone, sitting on a bench in the middle of an abandoned park. Shisui had broken the genjutsu and left.

It couldn’t be true, she decided. God, the crow had been feeding her rot since the beginning. Peace—sure, only if Sasuke’s brother had a truly twisted conception of it.

So she resolved to forget about Shisui’s words entirely, and headed to the bookstore on the other side of the park.

“We need to talk,” Naruto announced.

Sakura coughed under her breath. It was a stunning coincidence, after all, that she, Naruto, and Sai had ended up in the same exact bookstore at 5 o’clock that afternoon. So much so, that it could not be a coincidence at all.

She placed the book in her hand back onto its shelf.

Sakura hadn’t seen either of them for days, because Team Seven’s training had been called off indefinitely. She suspected it had to do with something like a strong-arming effort on Kakashi’s part against Tsunade.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Naruto straightened sharply. “Nothing. Well—a lot, actually. We need to talk if this is going to work.”

“Did you have such a discussion with the traitor Uchiha?” Sai asked innocently.

Naruto’s features contorted in a snarl. “Don’t call him that.”
“Ok.” Sakura said swiftly. “Let’s talk. The park’s right out there.”

“This is fine with me as well,” Sai said now, nodding seriously. “I read that communication is critical to the progression of any relationship—”

“Cool.” Naruto said with forced calm.

“—certainly before any sexual activity,” Sai added casually.

“No sexual activity,” the blonde burst out, eyes wide in alarm.

“Of course. Not with that small dick.”

“I’m going to kill you—”

Sakura grabbed them both by the collar and dragged them out of the bookstore to the park nearby. When she dumped them on the ground, Naruto rubbed the front of his neck ruefully.

But Sai had something to say. “You do that a lot, I’ve noticed. Are you into that kind of thing, Sakura-san?”

Sakura ignored him.

“Well?” she prompted Naruto.

He sighed, and his expression grew hard. “We don’t abandon teammates, no matter what. We don’t sacrifice teammates, no matter what. That’s my ninja way, and I won’t watch anyone else do it. Okay?”

He looked only at Sai.

“I understand, now,” Sai responded slowly. His brows were furrowed. “Mostly. I’m still working out the minutiae of the rationale, but—I will act accordingly.”

Naruto looked skeptical, but he clenched his jaw and nodded sharply. “Ok. I’m going to trust you.”

Sai nodded back solemnly.

“Ok, next.” Naruto swallowed sharply. “Honesty.”

She stiffened. Then, she saw Naruto himself blanche. That was unexpected.

He looked back at both of them. His face was full of fear.

“Naruto?” she asked quietly.

He told them the story of the nine-tailed beast.

She didn’t know what she looked like by the end, but her insides ached with shock. Now that she knew, of course, she could see the signs.

“Do you think I’m a monster?” It was clearly a question that had been weighing on him some time.

Sakura glared. “No. What it did is not what you did.” If only she could say the same about her and the Voice.

“Indeed,” Sai said blankly.
“And what about you Sai?” Sakura said sharply. “Why don’t you tell us who you actually are.”

Sai smiled generously. “I can’t say.”

“You don’t get to do that,” Naruto growled.

“I can’t say,” Sai repeated.

“And I said that you don’t get to do that—”

“Naruto,” Sakura cut him off, “I think he literally can’t. He must be sealed.”

Naruto’s mouth opened and closed. “What?”

“I know he’s ANBU, though.”

The blonde pivoted with incredible speed, face red. “He’s ANBU? Gaara’s already kazekage, Sai is in ANBU, and look at me—”

“Stay away from ANBU,” Sakura cut him off sharply.

He recoiled, looking hurt. “You know, I am working hard.”

She exhaled impatiently. “I don’t mean that. I just mean that you would hate ANBU. You should hate it. It represents almost everything that violates your—your ninja way.”

“Oh. Really? I mean, I don’t actually know what ANBU does, just heard someone mention it….”

He looked pensive now. “Well, straight to hokage was the original plan anyway. Yeah, I can make that work.”

“Sure, dickless,” Sai scoffed.

“Shut up.”

Sai’s attention thankfully moved to her before the matter could escalate.

“I suppose I owe you an apology, Sakura-san. I would like to repay you,” the boy said stoically.

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I insist,” Sai said seriously. “I do not believe we can begin again as a team until I have repaid you. The book I’m reading says that no relationship can progress before all wrongs in the past have been properly addressed.”

“That’s right,” Naruto said stubbornly.

Sakura looked tiredly at the both of them. “Fine,” she sighed. “What’s on the table?”

He pursed his lips. “I could kill someone for you,” he considered.

We can do that ourselves, the Voice rumbled throatily.

“Hey!” Naruto shouted.

“Something else.”

“Well. I am also…rather good at art.”
Sakura laughed under her breath. Funny, that. She had never thought about it before (beyond the mandatory ANBU tattoo her false identity had been required to have). But then the painter—Asahi—had given her that scroll. And she had yet to remove it from her pack.

She never would have taken the initiative to search out a shinobi to do the job—this was true. But now such a shinobi had practically fallen into her lap. And he owed her a favor. And she just wanted that favor over with. (And, somehow, the idea of marking her body in a way that wasn’t a scar or a burn wasn’t entirely…unappealing).

“Have you ever done a tattoo?” Naruto gaped at her.

“I have…come across it,” Sai answered.

“In that case.” She pulled the scroll out and unrolled it. “This. I guess on my back. And then we call it quits.”


It was impressive. Mihiko hadn’t been lying when she suggested Asahi was talented; he was clearly the kind of artist rumored to sell their soul to be granted such talent.

“Oh,” Sai said calmly.

Two figures met their gazes, drawn in a style intended to evoke the art of the temples. One figure’s face was hidden—the woman’s. One of her arms arched up above her head and then bent down, wielding a fan that covered most of her face and revealed only smiling lips, simply painted. Her dress was also tied simply, but from cloth in hues of such deep blues and reds that it looked bafflingly indulgent. Her other hand held an amulet. Her whole body was curved toward the other figure, as though she would just as easily dance with it as attack it into submission.

For the woman faced a demon—the second central figure, rendered in vicious reds and blacks. Its body was covered in ancient armor. A violent smile decorated its face, telling both of bloodthirst and of amusement. It, too, curled toward its opponent, caught indefinitely in a state of both attraction and repulsion.

Between the two figures were elements of smoke and other iconography common to the genre.

Those were Sai’s words, not her own. He had picked up the painting and begun to explain its composition with something like passion in his voice.

The painting, he continued, was in the deep, rich colors of classic irezumi, but with such devastating elegance that it surpassed all that he had seen before—

“How long will it take?” she interrupted.

Sai paused. “Two hours because of the complexity. But it will be done by sunset.”

She paused now. “Do I have to do anything to prevent infection?”

She didn’t know much about tattoos. Shinobi wore them like scars. In the civilian world, only criminals had them.

“Not with this method,” Sai said. “Now, then. Shirt off, please.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Naruto said hastily. “You’re doing it here?”
Sai looked at him without comprehension. “I prefer natural lighting. Also, this is an abandoned park. That means no one maintains it. Which means no one comes here.”

“But we’re here,” Naruto argued with panic, gaze darting around as though he expected someone to jump out of the bushes. “People come here. We’re people.”

“We’ll sense them,” Sakura said. Then she remembered who she was talking to and corrected herself. “Sai or I will.”

“But Sakura—”

She turned away from them and pulled off her flak jacket, then the shirt beneath. The ANBU tattoo on her arm was hidden by the jutsu she almost always used before she left the house.

“Do I need to remove this?” Sakura asked, referring to her bound chest.

Sai seemed paused to think about this. Finally, he said, “No. I can work around it. One hand makes the jutsus; the other needs to be in contact with the skin where they’re being applied. I will have to reach under the bandage for those parts on your back, but I do not need to remove it.”

“Good.” She put her flak jacket down on the grass and then lay on her stomach on top of it. “Go on.”

She heard Sai pull some more things out of his satchel, before a cool hand rested on her lower back. A second later, a painful, burning sensation made her skin throb violently. She gritted her teeth, but withstood it without flinching.

“I’ve been told it hurts more this way,” Sai said conversationally. “About a thousand times more. Usually, only shinobi can stand this. And some civilian women who have been through labor. They’ve said that was worse, actually—”

“Why do you have so many scars?” Naruto burst out, sounding disturbed.

Sakura paused, nostrils flaring. “I’m a shinobi,” she said lightly, after a moment. “Don’t you have scars?”

“No,” Naruto said. “I don’t have any.”

“That’s probably because of the tailed-beast,” Sai intoned helpfully.

“Right. The scars are normal,” Sakura grunted.

“Oh,” Naruto said, sounding calmer. “Huh. Who knew Kurama would be useful that way!”

The conversation elapsed into silence for a while. Until Naruto spoke up again, two hours later.

“So. Can I get one too? Like a dragon or something? You know—cool.”

Three days later, her back felt just as it had every other day of her life.

A good thing—because three days later, she was called for another mission with the copy-nin’s
ANBU team.

She stumbled out of her bed that morning in a foul temper. She had fallen asleep later the previous night than she had wanted. Then, she had woken up late. As a result, she was forced to forgo breakfast, instead showering hastily and then hurriedly applying the jutsus to change her build and her features.

Although she had done it many times, watching her features morph into the olive-toned, inconspicuous ones of Saori Mori was still an unnerving experience. Avoiding her reflection, she tied the thin brown hair on her head up in a ponytail and set her mask in place.

She scanned herself one more time to make sure nothing would betray her; then she left her apartment and traveled the roofs of Konoha to ANBU headquarters.

Just as she passed through the doors, she realized that it hadn’t even occurred to her to cover the newest addition to her back. She hesitated for a moment, debated sneaking into a stall to fix it. Her gaze fell on the clock. Ultimately, she continued inside. The only people who knew it existed on ‘Haruno Sakura’ were Sai and Naruto, after all.

“Meeting room 13A,” Panther called out from behind her, sipping the last of her morning coffee beneath her mask.

“Thanks,” Sakura muttered, sending her a distracted wave without turning back.

Stalking her way down the hall, she stopped at the worn, wooden door and gently pushed it open.

“Late,” a low, rough voice said coldly.

Sakura scoffed below her breath. She realized only when Hyena stared at her with incredulous eyes that she hadn’t done as good a job at hiding her animosity as she might have wanted. Moving away from the door, she sat down at the opposite end of the table without another sound. Bear straightened in his chair, sending Sakura a warning look.

“Right,” Kakashi’s second-in-command said. “Let’s get started, then. Taichou?”

To Sakura’s immense surprise, Kakashi stood up. The tilted chair he had effortlessly been balancing on—with both feet on the table—smacked to the ground with a dull thud.

“Scout teams have pinpointed Kino’s location.”

Sakura had never heard the name ‘Kino’ before, but it was clear the rest of Kakashi’s team had. They all straightened in their chairs. Hyena picked up the scroll resting on the table.

“Finally,” Bear growled.

Even Snail sounded cold. “Mouse died for that bastard.”

“What’s he been?” Raccoon asked quietly.

“Deep undercover for the past six months,” Hyena read from the scroll, eyes angry behind her mask. “Posing as a butcher just on the other side of the border.”

“Smart,” Raccoon said softly, shoulder tight. “We were looking for someone running—strangers passing through villages. And he went straight there and just settled down.”

The amount of killing intent in the room was the most she had ever felt from Bear, Hyena, Snail, or
Raccoon. And she had been on *slaughter* missions with them before.

“What’s our play?” Snail asked.

“Kino was a genjutsu specialist,” the copy-nin remarked coolly. “Crow and I will infiltrate. We will execute him.”

Silence met his words.

“What about us?” Bear demanded, voice rough.

“You will dismantle his network of contacts, the ones who helped hide him,” Kakashi answered. His tone brooked no argument.

Bear and Snail looked like they very much wanted to argue. The skin around their eyes was pinched. And yet, Sakura found, they voiced no protest. Whoever Kino was—he was obviously someone they wanted to face themselves. Possibly, for closure. But Kakashi seemed to run his team as tyrannically he did Team Seven.

Sakura scowled behind her mask. She wondered why she had been chosen to assist Kakashi.

“We leave in ten,” he finished, departing from the room.

Hyena patted Bear’s arm and Snail’s shoulder and then followed.

Four hours later, Sakura and the copy-nin stood beneath a giant oak tree, a kilometer away from a modest shack at the edge of a modest village.

A gust of wind blew, rustling the matching black hair on her and Kakashi’s head. They both stood almost a meter shorter than usual—just a brother and his sister, running a small errand.

Quietly, Sakura followed the copy-nin as he stalked to the door and knocked.

The wooden door swung open, revealing a large, grizzled man with red hair and a face with long, smile lines.

“Well, what d’you want?” the man asked, squinting down at them.

“Kaa-san wants cow meat,” Kakashi said impetuously. “Let us in already, it’s cold.”

The man raised an eyebrow. After a moment, his gaze left him and turned to Sakura.

“Please, sir?” she asked. “He gets annoying when he nags.”

“Does he?” Kino chuckled. “Well then, I guess I better get you two what you need, then.”

He turned his back to them to go inside.

A second later, she ducked just as Kino’s arm snapped back out, hurling a fuuma shuriken that would have decapitated her.

“Kaido!” the red-haired man bellowed. “*Run!*”
Sakura didn’t know who Kaido was. At the moment, she didn’t particularly care. Releasing the
jutsu disguising her features, she felt herself grow to her usual height as she darted between
exploding kunai.

Which—honestly—was rather juvenile for an ex-ANBU. She knew sometimes simple could be
best. But, for god’s sake, Kino knew he was facing the copy-nin now. Kunai were hardly going to
kill him.

Speaking of which, Kakashi merely stood placidly beside her at his full height, black mask beneath
tell-tale steely grey and sharingan red eyes. The fuuma shuriken was held aloft almost lazily in his
hand.

“Switching to new toys now?” the copy-nin asked tonelessly.

Kino made rapid hand signals. Sakura felt the brief, jarring moment when the genjutsu slipped over
her. The world vibrated for a moment, a buzz sounded in her ears. And then she found herself in the
middle of a battlefield.

A mountain of bodies towered over her. Faces she knew peered at her from out of the pile, features
twisted in agony. Every face she knew was there: Naruto, Sasuke, Ino, the rest of her year, her
parents, her primary school teacher, even Sai…

Calloused hands grabbed her from behind, cutting off the circulation in her shoulders.

“You’re just like me,” it whispered, voice inhuman. “A monster.”

“Kai,” Sakura said coldly, clapping her hands together.

The world melted way, dark colors running like viscous oil as they withdrew. She saw that Kakashi
had broken the genjutsu before she had, probably because of the sharingan. He spun the fuuma
shuriken—a weapon she had never seen him use before—with deadly skill.

Sakura squinted at him, wondering why he hadn’t attacked yet.

Kino barked out a loud laugh. “Alas, I’m no match for Konoha’s rabid dog, am I?”

Kakashi’s voice was arctic. “You should have thought of that before you betrayed Konoha.”

The large man shrugged. “I’m a simple man, you know? They offered me a cushier deal. Of
course, I do appreciate the irony of how it all turned out, seeing where I am now.”

“Mouse died because of you,” Sakura said stiffly, feeling dutybound to relay Snail’s words in her
absence.

Kino grimaced at her. “Do I know you? Don’t remember. Mouse—yes, that was regrettable. Liked
her, you know.”

He looked up at the sky for a moment, something eerily nostalgic on his face. “Mouse,” he
muttered. “Funny woman.”

His head dropped to Kakashi abruptly. “You going to kill me now?”

But Sakura’s gaze narrowed, now, remembering something she had previously ignored. “Why
don’t you tell us who Kaido is?”

At those words, Kino’s entire demeanor changed. Something terrifying possessed the man’s face,
twisting it into something unbelievably angry. “You piece of shit. You’d go so low?”

Sakura’s jaw slackened, shocked by his sudden vitriol. His large frame trembled and then suddenly he was in front of her, on the offensive as though he hadn’t seemed ready to accept death seconds earlier.

He was a physically imposing man. But his strength was nothing compared to hers. Each contact shattered bones beneath his skin. He noticed quickly, making hand signals in a shift to ninjutsu instead.

Halfway through the second sign, his head suddenly jerked to the left. Instinctively, Sakura’s head followed. A pale hand flashed over his shoulder through where his head had been, cased in crackling electricity.

His fingers speared the space millimeters from where her own head formerly was.

Scowling, Sakura’s hands snapped forward and grabbed the copy-nin’s wrist (below the still crackling chakra). Propping her foot on Kino’s thigh, she hefted upward and flipped Kakashi over the taller man’s shoulder.

He twisted midair—a terrifying blur—his other hand already lunging out to finish the job. This time, the blow landed, gliding through bone, flesh, and blood like they were little more than butter.

Kino gave a terrible groan, crumpling to his knees. Kakashi pulled his hand out, towering over him like a vengeful demon.

Sakura hung back, wiping her blade clear of blood on the grass.

“You going to make it a slow one, taichou?” Kino hissed. “Gonna let me bleed slowly?”

Kakashi was silent for a moment. For a long time, they simply stared at each other.

“I see. You’re a man now, aren’t you,” the man laughed humorlessly. “No longer the boy-captain who commanded ANBU hand spans taller than he was.”

Kakashi was silent still. But a second later, his hand lit up again, the deafening sound of a thousand birds filling the forest.

Kino grinned like a shark.

But as his hand arced downwards, a form blurred into existence in front of Kino’s. Kino roared, a sudden wordless vocalization of terror.

And Kakashi’s hand froze.

In a terribly unfunny repetition of events, another boy glared up at the copy-nin, protecting the man behind him from chidori.

“Kaido,” Kino hissed. “I told you to run.”

“Move, boy,” Kakashi commanded, face unreadable.

“NO!” Kaido screamed, arms flung out in front of the large man. He had red hair too. “Can’t you leave him alone? Can’t you all just leave him alone!”

“Is he your father?” Sakura asked with difficulty.
“He’s all I have left,” the boy spat at her. “I don’t care what he did. I—He’s all I have left. Please.”

“I can’t,” Kakashi answered callously, gazing straight ahead of him.

Her body tensed at his words, wondering why the copy-nin hadn’t lied. Why he hadn’t said something else just to get the boy away.

“Then,” Kaido panted, chest heaving, “then you’re forcing me to do this.”

He opened his palm, revealing an explosive that—with one small hand sign—would blast them all straight to hell.

Fuck, the Voice grumbled.

“Hey, look at me,” Sakura said softly. Even though she was farther away, she crouched low so that she was near the boy’s height. “He’s already dying. Don’t risk your life now. Mourn him. Then avenge him, if you have to.”

The boy’s trembling shoulders stilled abruptly. “A-already dying?” he asked woodenly.

“Move, boy,” Kakashi repeated, voice dark and uncharacteristically urgent now.

“Run, Kaido!” Kino shouted, face puce. “For god’s sake, you stupid boy—”

“I can’t,” Kaido wept, “I can’t leave you. I’d rather—you know I’d rather.”

“Move.”

Sakura froze at this softer imperative, piercing even through Kino’s wordless bellowing. It had been almost soundless, a harsh whisper. She had only just heard it.

It was unmistakable.

(The sound of the terrible copy-nin, killer of thousands—had she imagined it?—begging.)

But the boy had already chosen. His fingers twitched infinitesimally, rotating in just the right directions—and Kakashi’s tanto swung out, swift and ruthless, decapitating him.

And Kino screamed.

The sound was terrible, as though his own heart had been scooped out of his chest. Sakura flinched. She had heard men and women burn alive—and even then, they hadn’t sounded like that.

The terrible noise stopped only when Kakashi cut off his head too.

Kakashi held the dripping tanto in his hand, staring at the two fallen heads like he had never seen anything like them before.

She stood silently behind him. Her ears were…ringing. She wondered if there had been an explosion, only she hadn’t noticed.

The wind blew again, rattling the rickety shutter doors of the shack. Goosebumps sprouted all along her arms.

Between that breeze and the next, the rest of the ANBU team appeared.
“The targets were dealt with, taichou,” Hyena murmured.

Bear leaned forward with interest, pupils dilated. Considering his personal animus against Kino, Sakura supposed, she shouldn’t have been surprised.

“God, I wish I’d been here for this,” the ANBU said, voice low and mean. “Who the fuck’s next to him? Did you give them hell, taich—”

Kakashi’s crackling fist landed in the tree right to the left of his head. Singed chunks of hair fell in clumps onto Bear’s uniform. But it didn’t stop there. The lightning in the copy-nin’s hands only seemed to grow brighter, bigger. Black spots flashed across her vision. And the noise was painful now, like knives stabbing her ear drums—

Dazedly, Sakura felt a hand fasten around her upper arm. They were shunshining, she realized belatedly, she and the person holding her.

When the ground beneath her feet settled again, she found herself kilometers away from where she had been seconds ago.

In the distance, great bolts of electricity lit the sky, brightening the dark clouds above for seconds at a time. It seemed as though the heavens had released lightning, but without rain or thunder as nature normally dictated.

“Fuck,” she heard Bear curse behind her. She turned and saw them all: Bear, Hyena, Snail, and Raccoon.

“I thought you were dead meat,” Snail said shakily.

“He almost was,” Hyena said coldly.

Bear’s shoulders tightened. Sakura watched them all like they were bizarre puppets she had seen move of their own volition.

“Well,” she asked impatiently. “Shouldn’t we go back?”

All eyes snapped to her, incredulous.

“No,” Raccoon said quiet, reasonable. “We wait here.”

Her lips twisted. “How long?”

“Until it passes,” Hyena answered gravely.

“But he’s going to alert every enemy-nin in a fifty kilometer radius that we’re here.”

The team shrugged like it was used to this. “He takes care of it.”

Sakura exhaled. “You can’t be serious.”

“Crow,” Snail said with forced calm. “I know you haven’t been on this team for long. But trying to intervene in that is a fool’s errand. You’ll end up dead, trust me.”

She should, Sakura thought, stepping away. She should trust them, their expert opinion on how to handle this. They’d probably been on this team for ages, knew Kakashi like the back of their hands. She should, honestly, trust them and do exactly as they say.
Only, the sound of Kakashi whispering *Move* was echoing like a broken track record in her mind, over and over again, an alien, disturbing thing that had her teeth on edge.

And beneath that—

*those who abandon their comrades are worse than scum*

God, Sakura thought, tilting her head up to the sky. She really, *really* wanted to kill him.

Before she had consciously decided it, her body flickered and then disappeared.

Naturally, he *did* try to kill her.

He was quick too—too quick. She couldn’t even see his face. In a blur, he was zig-zagging toward her, and she moved forward, flesh, bone, and muscle all burning, to meet him.

The weather had also changed for the worse in the seconds it had taken her to arrive there. As though called by the false-lightning, rain poured from the heavens, masking both their scents and making it exceptionally hard to see.

As it happened, however, Sakura didn’t need her other senses. Soon, his body was so close that it didn’t matter.

She defended with her shoulders hunched, frame tight and aggressive like a brawler’s, before feinting to the side and then twisting over him—heat burning through her clothes at the contact.

Without pause, Sakura gathered chakra into her fist and drove it at his midsection. He shifted with blinding speed. The blow didn’t make contact, her arm merely brushing along his ribcage. Unfortunately, the momentum of the punch carried her forward, and he took the opportunity to her cage her in.

A second later, she yanked her head to the side, the side of his hand just glancing her hair. The rush of air sent the rest of the strands flying back. His fist went into the tree.

Sakura twisted and her own fist finally landed. A swift, brutal uppercut that he avoided the full force of with lightning quickness, but still skimmed his cheekbone.

He snarled, a guttural, animalistic sound, sharingan spinning madly in his eye.

“Stop,” Sakura growled.

Pushing off against the tree, she snapped her neck back and then forward, drilling her forehead into his. He grunted.

And then punishing arms wrapped around her midsection and tossed her into a boulder.

Sakura’s back hit the rock with a thunderous crack—like lightning—shattering it. She landed on the ground on top of the rubble, cursing furiously.

“Calm the fuck down,” she snapped.
A bit ironic, isn’t that, the Voice whispered, sounding riveted by ongoing events. If Sakura had had the time, she might have rolled her eyes.

She dropped down a millisecond later. A ball of fire scalded the air above her.

“Seriously?” she hissed, heart rate pulsing at the look of unholy rage in the other’s eyes.

She sidestepped his kunai and slipped into space between his arms. She reached up to grab wet, white-silver hair, fingers knotting in the long locks with one hand. With the other, she punched him in the face.

She didn’t use her full strength, obviously. But she put enough force that it had to hurt.

His mask was in tatters around his neck. She noticed only when she saw his teeth. Because Kakashi was baring his teeth at her, like he wanted very much to tear out her throat.

Only, then, inexplicably, incomprehensibly—

His mouth was on hers.

It burned. Burned like a brand, like fire on metal.

(It didn’t actually seem…amorous.)

Kakashi’s lips were hot—hot like burning.

And he kissed her like he was trying to use her mouth to breathe. As though he couldn’t figure out how to breathe himself.

That was the only reason Sakura didn’t shove him away.

He was holding her, she noticed, calloused hands cutting off the circulation in her upper arms just like they had in Kino’s genjutsu. Still, Sakura didn’t pull away.

His lips moved savagely against hers, ragged breath fueled greedily by hers, and she didn’t pull away.

Only when his hands moved mechanically down to her waist, maneuvering to slip under her flak jacket—soullessly, mechanically—did she react.

She grabbed his wrists with deadly strength. When mismatched eyes blazed down at her, she looked up at him neutrally. His whole face was exposed to her now, unmasked. His hair hung low, brushing high cheekbones, wetted by the rain. Kakashi’s pupils were dilated, focusing down on her in rapt attention.

He looked feral. Wild.

Without warning—as though watching to see if she would flinch, as if this were a game of chicken—his head snapped down and his nose rested at her throat.

He inhaled sharply, hands flexing at the top of her arms. Sakura was paralyzed by a curious
mixture of shock and horror.

He stayed like that for at least a minute. It felt like hours. When he left—as brutally and silently as
his mouth had landed on hers—she did not follow.

**Author's Note (yep, a long one this time):**

Ok, so I do definitely feel obligated to address some things I've kind of glossed over until now;
keep in mind that, in some regards, I am liberally abusing my creative license lol.

1) Sakura's ANBU henge

According to the story so far, no one other than Sakura and the crow, Shisui, knows the truth about
her identity; additionally, (and please educate me on the sharingan, I am certainly not claiming to
be an expert), I believe there is enough leeway for me to propose that Kakashi can detect the
existence of the henge, but he doesn't necessarily automatically see through it to what is beneath.
As for why he might not make efforts to see through the henge: I am also going to assert that it's
fairly common for people in ANBU to use jutsus to disguise more obvious / identifiable bodily
features / hair colors / etc. as measures for protecting their true identity.

2) Ages / Power Dynamic

I do want to say first that teacher/student romantic fics make me pretty uncomfortable, and I find
them generally problematic if not handled in a way that ultimately negates the very imbalanced
power dynamic usually inherent in such a relationship. The only reason I am okay with an eventual
Kakashi / Sakura development here is because I genuinely intend to show that Kakashi has never
performed (nor understood himself to be in) the role of the teacher and that Sakura has never truly
felt she was Kakashi's student either. (Honestly, I find the idea of a character falling in love with
someone he/she/they once considered genuinely to be a student to be kind of creepy, even in fics
where both characters are much older). I know the 'fiction is fiction' defense exists, but I wanted to
offer something a little more in case you have concerns similar to mine when reading about this
pairing. I just find it hard to buy into the 'romance' when Sakura earnestly calls Kakashi 'sensei'--if
you feel the same, I want to assure you that is not the case here. In my mind, I'm pairing Kakashi
with someone he knew very distantly when she was thirteen, but only gets to truly know when she
is older. Age-gaps exist in healthy, consensual relationships all the time. Essentially, I want to
make it clear here that both characters are on a level-playing field by the time they engage in
anything resembling a romantic relationship (and that there isn't and hasn't historically been a
perception of power imbalance between them). Naturally, you could probably take issue with the
fact Kakashi is Sakura's ANBU captain. Maybe. Eh. As of now, it really doesn't bother me--I think
the role of a teacher is very different from that of an ANBU captain (and I think Naruto canon also
lends itself to the same understanding).

Now to the point I've primarily titled these paragraphs with: ages. I am going to fudge the dates a
little here to narrow the age-gap, because this too makes me more comfortable with this
relationship. (As I said: creative license). I imagine that Sakura is actually around a year older than
Sasuke and Naruto--currently seventeen. Kakashi, currently, is twenty three, nearing twenty four.
To give some context, I think this means he was about eight when the kyuubi attacked. We're
going to run with it. So: let's say he graduated from the Academy at five (when it was actually six).
He became a jounin at seven (actually ten) and joined ANBU shortly after (i.e. he spent a year in
ANBU before the kyuubi attacked). In my story, Sakura is definitely above the age of consent. I've
based Konoha's laws on Japan's existing laws; I am relying on the de facto local "corruption of
minors" laws and "obscenity statutes," which essentially make the age of consent 16-18. In real life, I would still be wigged out by a relationship between a seventeen year old and a twenty four year old (not the seven year age gap, just the point in time in which that relationship is occurring, like barely legal). But now I am going to conveniently use the 'fiction' defense and not really think about that...

I mean, honestly, if you're still reading this story, you probably don't have a huge problem with how I have been constructing Kakashi and Sakura and their prospective relationship (beyond the fact that Kakashi is clearly an asshole with problems he needs to work through) (but also if you do, please don't read more beyond this, because I don't think I can shrink the age gap more and I'm forcing myself to make do with this). It is important to me, with how I imagine this particular story and what I want it to be, to try to reconcile what I would accept in reality with what I may be 'romanticizing' in fiction. I am trying my best. So, yeah, anyway--this is my spiel. Apologies for any typos, I wrote this in a rush!

3) Omakes?

Did you like the Naruto/Hinata one? Should I add more? Any requests? Let me know :)

As always, please leave behind a comment! Your feedback on the previous chapter really blew me away!!!
Chapter Summary

Sorry, not another *real* chapter yet :(

But--I have been ABSOLUTELY blown away by the response to this story. Thank you so much for all your kind words and passionate support. As a show of my profound appreciation, here are a few things I've written in my spare time :) They're extras, but you can consider them to have occurred alongside the main plot line of the story.

This is, um, almost 8000 words. Oops.

Holiday Season Special! (And to celebrate reaching 200 reviews :) )

~omake one~

Sai was perfectly content as he sat by himself at the bar. Swirling the dark liquid in his cup for a moment, he tilted his head back and downed it in one smooth motion.

The world was loud around him—louder than he was accustomed to. Drunken laughter and banter met his ears wherever he turned. Belatedly, he wondered if ‘bar-hopping’ was an activity meant to be conducted with others. The book he had read had not explicitly indicated it to be so; yet, he could hardly ignore the evidence before him. The booths lining the sides of the bar were filled with groups of both shinobi and civilians who had clearly arrived together.

Perhaps…he should have invited his teammates? ‘Bar-hopping’ seemed to be a form of bonding. And they were, in truth, still curiously alien to him: strange creatures that scarcely seemed human, at least, in the way that Sai was. But then, Sai had yet to meet many people who were human like he was.

He was beginning to wonder, in fact, if he was the deviance rather than the norm.

Naruto—was he what the average human embodied? Loud and impulsive; by the textbook, an obvious victim of small penis syndrome. Was Sai, too, meant to live life compensating for something?

Tapping his fingers idly, he considered his other teammate. Haruno Sakura was just as puzzling as Naruto. Possibly more so. She was reserved most of the time, but possibly had anger issues as well. He remembered that she had slammed him into a tree. That had been unexpected. Unprecedented, as well, given what he had read about her from mission files and ROOT intel.

Haruno Sakura was hiding something, Sai guessed. But as long as it did not interfere with his mission, he did not know why he should particularly care.

He frowned, examining an oddity within himself, that he was curious despite the fact he had no
reason to be.

That was strange. And yet, his art—not originally his, but delivered by his hands—decorated her back. It did seem concerning that his art, usually entirely subject to his control, might operate with motives mysterious to him. Sakura, of course, was not herself art; but the art existed on her, she merely its canvas. A walking, talking canvas—he wondered who had ever decided tattoos should exist.

An immobile, silent canvas, after all, could only be inherently superior in the endeavor of creating a flawless composition of ink strokes. It seemed counterintuitive that a canvas should distract from that composition.

But he digressed now. The point stood that he was inexplicably invested in the thoughts and motives of not only Sakura but Naruto too, when he had no reason to be.

A trill of sharp, bell-like laughter pierced the air near him, interrupting his thoughts.

Sai cocked his head to the side and examined the source of the noise. It belonged to a blonde girl his own age. She had soft, delicate features of the sort popularly classified as ‘attractive,’ though Sai personally did not see their appeal. Long, healthy hair as well—she flipped it now over her shoulder as she talked to the boy sitting across from her. She was sitting next to another boy her age with short brown hair, but her attention did not seem to focus much on him, other than a glance every now and then.

Those glances were platonic, Sai decided after moment. But not the ones directed to the boy across from her. Her face blushed an interesting hue of pale pink every time she addressed him. Her laughter seemed to become only more trill-like as the conversation continued. Her pupils grew more dilated with time, her limbs curving suggestively as she imbibed more alcohol as well.

She was exhibiting the common courting practices of individuals his age, Sai reflected. He found this incredibly interesting. He knew he would find other examples if he continued to examine around the room. Yet, he settled with observing this one. He would prioritize proximity and depth of observation over diverse sampling just now.

Curious, his gaze moved left to the object of her amorous attention. The boy across from her, also Sai’s age, nursed a tall glass of what he knew to be bitter-sweet alcohol.

It was hard to tell from where Sai was sitting, but the boy did not seem to possess much musculature. Nor, he found with slight puzzlement, did he have many of the features commonly deemed ‘handsome.’ Intrigued, he wondered what drew the clearly socially desirable female to this particular male.

Tapping his fingers still, it took him a moment to realize his examination had been noticed. The boy’s eyebrow twitched in a small, miniscule moment. Then dark, cat-like eyes slid lazily to their right—sliding straight past the blonde girl, past the girl whose hands were inching their way down her partner’s pants against the wall, without pause, to Sai.

The girl continued to chatter. If the boy next to her noticed his friend’s sudden inattention, he did not show it.

The eyes that met his were razor-sharp, despite the amount of alcohol consumed in the glass before them. A slight chill swept over his body. Sai tilted his head to the side, captivated by his body’s reaction. He felt the urge to look away. That was odd. Was this embarrassment?
To luxuriate in the novelty of this feeling, Sai continued to return the stare. The eyes boring into his were unnervingly penetrating.

Deciding that a period of contemplation and reviewal was now due, Sai turned in his seat without hesitation to face his empty cup and the bartender again.

“Another drink?” the smirking woman asked.

Sai paused to consider the question, then nodded. He liked the sweet taste of the sake offered here.

She reached down to pull out the bottle. As she poured, the end of the bottle brushed her prominent breasts. His gaze flicked to them for a moment, then back to the cup.

She caught the movement. “Not interested?” she asked, pointing at her chest.

Sai’s gaze darted up briefly, unbothered by the question. “Not particularly.”

She huffed a laugh. Sai idly wondered if it were fake or genuine—he was unable to tell the difference as of yet. Her gaze moved to somewhere above him.

Grunt-like sounds began to emerge from his left.

He twisted slightly to look over. It seemed the girl against the wall had successfully made her way into her partner’s pants at last. Her arm moving in a telling up and down motion. The man’s expression was contorted in a tense display of ecstasy as he panted against the peeling wall.

Most averted their eyes from the sight in exaggerated horror, Sai observed. In truth, however, their body language betrayed them. The shifting of thighs, rubbing covertly together; the slight hitch in their breaths, unnecessary pauses in their story-telling.

Sai was no stranger to this conduct, though it usually arose within him independent of an individual, occurring instead as the periodic if not rare result of his body’s natural call for sexual activity. He tended to address it in the usual hand to groin manner. (This was not to say Sai had never had sex with another person. Some ROOT missions in the recent past had made him a well-experienced participant in a variety of sexual acts.)

Despite the contradictory evidence in front him, Sai himself didn’t particularly see the appeal of sex with another person. He was entirely sure he had never worn such a ravished expression as the man before him. One’s body was known best, addressed with the most efficacy, only by oneself. This was what Sai had learned in his own experience.

It was oddly frustrating, therefore, that the man against the wall existed in front of Sai in the way he did. He was proving an exception to Sai’s rule. The man continued to writhe against the wall, causing clientele to nervously stutter their disapproval, until he reached completion. When he at last spent himself into his partner’s hand, he gave a loud, debauched cry before mouthing at her neck in worshipful gratitude.

While most around him continued to pretend to look away, Sai watched without qualms. The girl brushed her partner’s hair back with a strong, possessive hand, the other twisting in sly, quick movements, though he must have been oversensitive. He gave more soft, breathy cries, mouth slack with bliss. Sai’s gaze narrowed, wondering if the man were a masterful actor, and if so, what his agenda could possibly be.

“Noisy pair,” a smooth voice—intricately modulated—commented from behind him.
Sai turned and found a pair of dark, cat-like eyes examining him piercingly from the boy suddenly in the stool beside him.

“You’re the new one on Team Seven,” the boy said lazily, sipping the last of his drink. He exhaled lowly, the bitter-sweet scent of his breath curling into Sai’s nose.

“How,” he answered with careful blankness. When in doubt, he resorted to this state—a fortress of impenetrability. As manners dictated, he returned: “Your name?”

“Shikamaru.”

“And why are you here?” Sai asked without pause.

The boy’s—Shikamaru’s—lips curved. “To get another drink, of course.”

He faced forward and waved a hand nonchalantly, as though the effort even this required was somewhat distasteful to him. The smirking woman from earlier noticed the motion and drew closer.

“If it isn’t my favorite,” the woman purred, eyelashes fluttering.

Sai watched this with persisting confusion. The reason for this boy’s—Shikamaru’s—apparently pervasive appeal still escaped him.

“Mirai-san,” Shikamaru returned, nodding without making eye contact. He seemed suddenly distracted by a crack in his glass. “The same.” He handed the glass forward.

Mirai pouted and took the glass. “You know you can’t keep treating all us girls like this, right, Shikamaru? Is the Nara clan going to end with you?”

Shikamaru flashed his teeth in a convincing semblance of a smile. “You’re beginning to sound like my mother. You should know that’s hardly advancing the right agenda.”

That was undoubtedly an insult. Yet, Mirai received it with surprisingly good humor. She rolled her eyes. “Watching the scene over there was like watching a dog get kicked. Put that dear girl out of her misery.”

The boy’s smile widened, but Sai felt that it has suddenly become…sharp. Was it real? Fake? It annoyed him that he could not tell.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Even more puzzling—Shikamaru was clearly a fellow novice at social interaction. Why was he so sought after? “You may wish to take some lessons in understanding social cues,” Sai offered. “If you want, there are some helpful books I can suggest.”

Mirai covered her mouth behind the bar. Sai did not know why.

Shikamaru’s gaze slid to him leisurely.

“The girl across from you was peacocking,” Sai explained patiently. “She was repeatedly displacing her hair and laughing excessively. Her pupils were dilated as well. I don’t know how you could have possibly misunderstood. Are you generally obtuse?”

Mirai burst into laughter.
“Pea-cock-ing,” Shikamaru said slowly, leaning back in his chair.

The pout returned to the bartender’s face. “Maybe this one does have a point. You’re being deliberately obtuse, Shikamaru.”

The boy’s face cat-like eyes flashed. “What a pain.”

Mirai’s pout grew more pronounced. “What she feels is—”

“Troublesome,” Shikamaru cut her off. “She’s like an actual serial killer when she’s horny. I’m just the latest victim, the closest person with a penis she hasn’t tried yet, so she fancies herself infatuated with me.”

“Actually,” Sai interrupted, “I believe that that is natural, not a demonstration of psychopathic behavior as you seem to be suggesting. I’ve read that it is quite advantageous to choose a long-term partner that is sexually compatible; this would seem to require some sampling, of course, to make such a determination.”

Shikamaru leaned forward. The bitter-sweet smell of the alcohol followed him. “Well,” the boy drawled, getting uncomfortably close to Sai’s face (even in Sai’s perception), “then it makes sense that I don’t fuck what I’m uninterested in permanently tying myself to, right?”

“Ah!” Mirai cried triumphantly, slamming down the cup for the customer beside them with this statement. The customer jumped in his seat, looking alarmed. She pointed an accusing finger at Shikamaru. “You know what I think? I think you’re scared of women.”

The boy had propped his elbow against the counter and leaned his face into his hand; after a delayed moment, he shifted his gaze from Sai to the bartender “If you’re asking whether it is the utmost priority of my life to avoid entanglements with them,” Shikamaru said coolly, “then—yes.”

“Why?” Mirai demanded.

“In my experience, women are overly emotional,” Shikamaru answered immediately, tone unbothered. “They are prone to bouts of irrationality I cannot comprehend. To try to understand them is a futile endeavor—it would mean engaging in a path wrought with inconvenience and conflict.”

The bartender looked at him silence for a moment, lips pursed.

Then she placed Shikamaru’s filled glass in front of him stiffly. “People may call you terrifyingly smart, Nara-san. You probably have all the best scrolls in the world in those clan grounds of yours—generations of money and knowledge passed down as well. I certainly didn’t have that upbringing, you can be sure of that.”

Shikamaru inclined his head.

“So you really do have no excuse for your instances of stupidity,” she finished, flipping her hair with a sniff. She turned to Sai now. “And you?”

“What about me?” Sai responded with a smile.

“Well, while we’re at it, cutie,” she said, flashing a pretty grin again. It looked vaguely dangerous. “Do you have anything to add to the matter?”

Sai blinked. Words-wise, that had been a question. But it had been delivered in the tone of a threat.
How…puzzling.

“Are you asking for my commentary on his thoughts?” he clarified.

“Sure,” Mirai returned. “And if I like the answer, you get to walk without paying.”

That seemed fairly promising. All he had to do was give the right answer. Sadly, Sai genuinely did not know what the ‘right answer’ meant to Mirai. He only had his own thoughts to rely on.

“Well,” he began slowly, smiling all the way through, “I disagree with this Shikamaru-san on almost all counts.”

For the second time that night, Shikamaru’s cat-like eyes snapped to his with incredible speed. The black of his irises, Sai noticed distantly, were indiscernible from those of his pupils.

“Promising start,” he thought he heard the bartender say under her breath.

“Oh?” Shikamaru prompted, face unreadable.

“Yes,” Sai said, smiling still. “In my experience, I have observed very emotional persons possessing penises. My teammate, Naruto, for example. Initially, I too believed his emotions led him to act irrationally; now, however, I understand that there is compelling reasoning to his strongest emotional outbursts. In summary: I do not believe emotions correlate with irrationality. Additionally, my female teammate, Sakura, is generally very quiet during training and missions—this also is contrary to your statements.”

He watched as Shikamaru’s eyebrow arched at this last statement.

“I should also say that I disagree vehemently with your methodology,” Sai continued evenly. “You’ve decided, from what seems to be obvious, incomplete sampling and observation, that females are ‘inherently’ incomprehensible to you. I have clearly done more diverse sampling and careful observation—I have found that most if not all individuals, regardless of gender, are completely incomprehensible to me without concerted effort to understand them. I have resolved myself, therefore, to trying to understand them. With this resolve, I have in fact made progress and learned a considerable amount. I would suggest you attempt to do the same.”

The bartender was staring at him, lips slightly open.

Sai turned to smile at her. “Respectfully, Mirai-san, I must disagree with you on one point, even if I must pay for my alcohol as a result. I do not think Shikamaru-san is as smart as you suggest. The gaps in his logic do not seem to be instances of rare oversight, but rather, founded from structural issues with his way of processing information—”

“Oh,” Shikamaru cut in lowly, taking a sip from his glass. His gaze was oddly bright. “Have I been found out?”

Despite the lengthiness and breadth of Sai’s answer, Mirai looked confused. “It is too…simplistic, too clearly…wrong. It makes no…”—suddenly, her eyes widened—“Wait a second.”

Sai was not following her thought process, so he returned to his drink.

“You don’t actually believe any of it, do you?” Mirai guessed, sounding exasperated.

Sai stilled now, the rim of the cup an inch away from his lips. Was she suggesting that they had not been having a debate in good faith?
“And it was working so well,” Shikamaru said boredly. “What a pain.” It seemed to be a phrase he used often.

“It did,” the bartender agreed, sounding impressed despite herself. “I went completely dry down there.”

“Is that medically possible?” Sai inquired politely, trying to move past his annoyance. It couldn’t serve him now, after all. But—why did people never say what they meant?

Mirai didn’t answer, turning her attention back to Shikamaru. Suspicion made her mouth purse again. “You know, I did hear once that you refused to fight a girl to the end in your chunin competition.”

“If I’ve ever refused to hit a girl,” the boy drawled, “it was for the same reason I have ever refused to hit anyone else. First, it probably required too much effort. Second, I was probably likely to receive uncomfortable injuries in that effort. My mind has always been the tool that is going win real battles; not my body. Accordingly, I don’t see the point in putting my limbs through that kind of trial by fire.”

“You pretend to be a sexist to ward off unwanted romantic advances,” Sai concluded blankly. So, he had wasted his breath after all. How…inefficient.

Shikamaru nodded. After a moment, he added wryly, “And sometimes, to goad female opponents.”

“Fine,” Mirai said, resting her hands on her ample hips. “But tell me this—what’s wrong with Ino-chan? She’s a sweet girl. And she’s your age.”

“She is also beautiful,” Sai added distractedly, still frowning.

Shikamaru’s eyes seemed to bore into him especially penetratingly now. “You think so?”

“Yes.”

He seemed oddly intent. “For what reasons?”

“That is,” Sai began reluctantly (was this a false debate too?), “she has features that are commonly praised in the texts I have read.” Then, he listed: “Small nose, full lips, unblemished skin, long, richly colored hair…”

Shikamaru took a careful sip from his glass. When he spoke again, his lips brushed the glass. “Perhaps,”—he rested his cheek leisurely into the palm of his hand again—“the question I meant to ask is: do you find her to be beautiful?”

Sai paused, brows furrowing. “I do not know what it means to find someone beautiful.”

He had never considered that, before. Maybe…

Maybe, this had something to do with what was wrong with him—with what made him different. And naturally, having just witnessed a sexual act he himself could not reproduce with comparable pleasure, Sai’s mind went there first.

Was Sai unable to enjoy sex with other people because he had not until now found them…beautiful? What did it mean to find someone beautiful? Was that the same thing for every person? Was it the same for Sai as it was for other people?
Some of his confusion must have shown on his face, because Shikamaru’s lips curled.

“For me,” the boy said simply, “I find it in a glance.”

“I don’t... understand what that means.”

“If that glance compels me,” Shikamaru said lazily, eyes dark like pools of ink, “if it draws me in. If the words that follow are ones so earnest I can’t put up a pretense before them. Then—I cannot look away.”

Sai’s limbs felt oddly heavy where he sat. If he hadn’t known better, he would thought he had been drugged.

“Compels you,” he latched onto with difficulty. “I must examine, then, what compels me?”

Shikamaru hummed. His eyelashes, Sai thought to himself, looked like strokes of ink as well.

“I like to paint,” Sai said. “I like only to paint certain things—those that compel me. So is what I want to paint what I find beautiful?”

“What would you like to paint?” Shikamaru asked.

The alcohol must have gotten to him, he theorized. What was this odd feeling? A sort of reluctance... Shame? No. Embarrassment? But Sai had never felt embarrassed before.

“Beasts, birds, rivers, mountains—” his brother—“and...”

“And?”

“Your eyes,” his mouth said quite directly. “I think I would like to paint your eyes.”

Shikamaru was silent for a moment. Then, he let out a breath of air and looked up at the ceiling. “Do you look at everyone like that?”

“Like what?”

A second later, there was a hand—firm, unabashed—lifting his chin up. “I can’t find a word for it,” Shikamaru said, smiling to himself as though amused by a private joke. “Irreverent?”

“Ah,” Sai said, wondering if he had angered the other boy. Smiles could be lies, after all. “If I have upset you—”

Shikamaru closed the distance between them. Sai watched his progress without comprehension.

It would have been an exaggeration to say their lips met; when the distance became the breath between molecules, the contact was unfailingly soft. Despite the strong grip of the hand that had curved to the side of his face, the kiss was terribly gentle, the gentlest he’d ever been given—it was almost unbearable, like being presented with a sweet, but being only allowed to just glance it with your tongue.

And yet—even in that brief, ephemeral brush of lips—the slightest taste of bitter-sweetness was imprinted, like the slightest trace of paint from a brush onto a canvas.

Sai drew back, blinking slowly. His tongue flicked out, unthinkingly, to follow the curve of his own lip. Shikamaru traced the motion with a dark gaze.
“Does that answer your question, Mirai-san?” the boy asked uncaringly.

Without waiting for an answer, he drew closer again. Sai watched him with calmly this time. When the other boy took too long, he tilted his head up in silent demand. For the sake of observation, of course, he was obligated to put himself through this again.

(So what if he wondered, suddenly: if this boy held him, would he achieve what the man against the wall had?)

“Yes,” the woman said very belatedly, sounding dazed. “That, ah, explains quite a bit.”

Neither ended up paying for their drinks.

~omake two~

Ino had spent most of her life loathing Konoha’s Torture and Interrogation Force.

As a child, T&I had taken stolen her father at odd hours of the night, only to return him looking troubled and wan days later. Although neither she nor her mom ever brought it up, the following nights had been ones of restless sleep for all of them, perturbed by her father’s shouts as he relived the things he had seen.

(The things he had done).

This was not to say her mother was without her own demons. All in all, in fact, both her parents looked much happier when they were at the clan flower shop.

From a young age, Ino had thus learned where the recipe for happiness could be found for a Yamanaka. It was undoubtedly the flower shop. It was where both of her parents would retire, contentedly tending to variations of flora for the rest of their days. Almost all Yamanakas did.

Being allergic to flowers was, indeed, an unheard of condition among members of her clan.

Ino hadn’t realized she was until she was ten.

She had finally been given permission to work in the shop, but the longer hours had only revealed what she had missed during shorter visits. After her first shift, red, blotchy hives had sprouted all along her skin beneath her clothes. Ino had been angry and ashamed; she had hidden the traitor marks from her parents and friends. She hid them still, now, and continued to work in small shifts at the shop. Some jutsus were handy in covering up the symptoms.

But the dream of the flower shop had been stricken down, nevertheless. Cruelly so.

Perhaps, still, she considered now, if certain events had not occurred as they had—perhaps it was possible that she still could have avoided T&I.

The facts were: on paper, Ino had been the top ‘kunoichi’ in her year. But that hadn’t really meant much; she had never tested at the same level as the top of her class. Like Shikamaru, she had been distracted by other things while at the academy (though not the same things): boys, dresses,
crushes. Anything other than learning the skills that she knew would send her straight to T&I.

By all accounts, no one could have thought Ino would have ended up here—even her own father had believed she wouldn’t make it, had seemed happier for it. She didn’t have the grades, the track record, or the necessary recommendations.

Promotion of ‘elite chunin’ into the department should have passed over her. It had in the regular recruiting cycle.

Of course, then Ino had gone and fucked everything up.

It had been a late night out—the alcohol had been sweet but heady. She had been walking back humming to herself, when she had seen the man beating his son right there in the open, unafraid of censure, confident in his own perverted power.

The boy couldn’t have been more than seven, too. He hadn’t even begged for it to stop, only kept grasping at his father’s pant leg, as though yearning for the one morsel of painless contact to ground himself. To survive the barrage.

Ino had entered the man’s mind and broken him.

Unfortunately, Morino Ibiki (the man she knows now she had always hated, though she hadn’t known it was him before, calling her father out every night) had seen it all.

Morino, the sick fuck, had calmly told her that he’d seen her break the law (apparently, what she should have done was call a military police force officer?). There had also been the slightly underage drinking. So, he posed, she could either get written up and risk jail-time—or he could negotiate a deal if she agreed to use her talents in a well-regulated setting.

And thus: just as her father had begun retreating from T&I, allowing a new generation to take his place, Ino had been handed the ugly, grey uniform after all.

Months had passed since. She still didn’t know how to tell him; he came into their headquarters so rarely, it had been laughably easy avoiding him. Ino didn’t want him to see her here, not when he had been so happy thinking she had escaped.

Also: it was a god ugly uniform. The fewer people who saw her in it, the better.

Really, Ino was confident she could pull off almost anything, but the baggy, grey button down jacket paired with loose grey pants did nothing for her. Worse, she wasn’t allowed to wear earrings or any jewelry—apparently, those were too great a danger near high-risk prisoners determined to escape.

Ino felt suffocated here—unsexed, caged, leashed. If she dressed more flamboyantly these days than was practical on missions, it was because she felt it to be well-deserved compensation.

Ino knew she was pretty, and she liked flaunting it. She liked boys a lot, too (always had), and she liked when they looked at her like they hadn’t seen anything so beautiful before. There was something especially exciting when daimyos’ sons and courtiers knelt before her. For all the magnificent, unparalleled artwork around them, it was Ino they viewed as the exotic flower.

Yes, Ino liked being the most beautiful thing in the room. Which was why today had taken a turn for the worse the precise moment Hyuuga Neji had walked into their headquarters.

It was possibly a little known fact that Ino hated Neji. To be fair, there were very few
circumstances where her animosity could come up. He was a jounin and she was still a chunin. They rarely encountered each other.

Just three years ago, Neji had merely been an uptight, cargo-shorts wearing prude. Sasuke had been the threat if at all, though his features were usually too contorted in annoyance for that to amount to much. He had been uptight as well, but the sexy kind of uptight; the kind that threatened to just say ‘fuck it’ and one day make him a rogue-nin. (Of course, it became very un-sexy when Sasuke went and did just that. And also when she had lost Sakura over him. They didn’t talk much these days. Ino regretted that more than she did losing Sasuke.)

But Neji had to be a surprise, didn’t he? In three years the older boy had gone on to make happy with Hinata, take a mild chill pill, and in thus doing, manage to fuck up everything for Ino.

Because in the last three years, Hyuuga Neji had (there was no other word for it) blossomed.

Ino surveyed him now as they waited for Morino to let them into the interrogation room. She still couldn’t bring herself to deny it.

He was the stark opposite to her, skin pale where Ino was bronzed. His hair was a heavy curtain of midnight black-blue, unlike her blonde locks, though equally long. Where she was soft, gentle curves, he was prolonged, sloping lines and angles, an intricate composition of lean muscle and profound delicacy. If they stood side to side, she had no idea who would come out on top. She had no wish to find out.

To make matters worse, he looked otherworldly in his cream, kimono with billowing sleeves. His fashion sense, unfortunately, had also apparently improved with time.

She scowled to herself, wishing she could burn the grey clothes off her body right now.

The older boy’s glance rested on her expression with indifference. “Yamanaka. I had no idea you worked here.”

“Please, call me Ino,” she responded dully. “It’s a bit new. Just something I’m trying out.”

“And how did you find yourself here?” Neji asked with distant politeness.

Thankfully, the door in front of them opened. She had been about to barf.

“Great,” Morino grunted. “Glad you could make it here on such short notice, Hyuuga Neji.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Morino-san. I always make time for matters that concern my clan. I am honored to represent them today in this capacity.” Neji said, bowing. His hair looked silken as it slipped over his shoulder. Ino glared at it. What did he use? Freshly laid eggs? Milk? Honey from the heavens?

“Ino,” she heard belatedly. Morino was snapping his hand in front of her face.

“Great,” Morino grunted. “Glad you could make it here on such short notice, Hyuuga Neji.”

She sniffed. “What, old man?”

He looked frustratingly unbothered, though Neji’s eyes narrowed disapprovingly. Still a prude.

“I’ve gotten all I can out of him. We need you to go one year back,” the man instructed. “The seventh day of the seventh month of that year.”

“Piece of cake,” Ino muttered.
The worst thing was it was. She was unprecedentedly good at this (Morino’s words, not her own).

She stalked into the room. The man was chained to a steel chair in the middle. He had clearly been roughed up, purple bruises and open wounds spotting every inch of skin that was visible.

He coughed, spitting up some blood onto the floor. “Ah,” he began to leer, “aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.”

Ino giggled. “That’s so sweet of you to say.”

She could feel Neji’s gaze on her, disapproving.

Without a further word, Morino shut the door behind them, leaving her in charge. He knew she got results; he would review the video tape later if he needed.

This left her in the middle of the room with Neji at its corner. She didn’t exactly know why Neji was here, but apparently, somewhere, this man had made a powerful enemy in the Hyuuga.

“God, those tits,” he grunted, shifting to lean closer. “Wish I could see them. Must be things of beauty.”

Ino’s smile twitched slightly. She hated that word—’tit.’

“They don’t fit very well in the uniform,” she pouted, leaning forward so that her hair just brushed the ends of his fingers. “The buttons are kind of…tight.”

The man gave a small, nasty grin. He knew she wasn’t the lascivious, airhead she was pretending to be; she knew he wasn’t as enslaved to his cock as he was pretending to be. They were playing a game, and both knew it.

The difference was that he thought he could play it better. But he was wrong. Ino knew exactly how to do this.

The enemy-nin’s gaze caught onto Neji exactly as she had guessed it would. “And who’s that?” he grinned, revealing bloody teeth. “Boy or a girl? Fucking pretty too, huh.”

“Boy,” Ino said easily, sitting primly on the steel table she was supposed to interrogate him from. She smiled back at him. “Doesn’t really matter to you, does it?”

“No,” the man returned with a jeer. “It doesn’t.”

The older boy was beginning to look slightly pinched.

Ino rolled her eyes, then began to fold her sleeves up slightly. The motion brought the man’s insincere attention back to her. “Going to hit me, darling?”

“Nope,” she said with a smile. “That isn’t really my style.”

“Oh?” he indulged with a mocking smile. “What is your style, then?”

“Gentle persuasion. Also, it’s Ino.”

“Hiro,” the man said with a flippant smirk. His gaze went calculatingly to the corner again. “His?”

Ino tilted her neck back, letting the light from the fluorescent lamp hanging above caress the column of her throat. She looked at Neji, letting her voice become throaty. “Neji. Speaking of
which, why don’t you step forward? We’re feeling a bit lonely here.”

Two spots of red appeared on Neji’s face. Ino knew they were from fury. In the harsh light of the interrogation room, it only served to heighten his beauty, the stark pale against the pink-vermillion.

“My, my,” the man returned flawlessly; his voice was a convincing rasp. “You are a pretty thing aren’t you, Neji. I’d probably kill my own mother to get those lips around my cock.”

“Hm,” Ino hummed, drawing slightly closer to the prisoner. “I wonder if his cheeks would go red like that then, too.”

“Yamanaka,” Neji said tightly. “Stop.”

The man’s grin widened. Ino smirked behind the ‘offended’ hand at her mouth.

“Not used to this kind of thing, are you?” the man said lightly. His eyes were still calculating. Ino watched him with razor focus, though she pretended to play with her hair.

“He isn’t,” she agreed. “But he is very tempting, nevertheless. Or maybe because of it?”

“Because of it,” the man agreed with a dark, knowing smile.

Ah, he still thought he was ahead of Ino.

“What would you do to him, if you could?” she asked innocently, biting her lower lip.

He raised an eyebrow at her, looking lazy for a moment before he switched seamlessly back into his lecherous persona. “Where to start. He’s got a tight ass with slim hips like that. It’d be a true shame to loosen him.”

“You think?” Ino pondered. She slipped off the chair and walked toward Neji. He watched her approach with a tight frown.

“What would you do, Ino-chan?” the prisoner asked with fake interest.

“Me?” she echoed. With quick fingers, she reached up and broke the tie holding Neji’s hair together. His hair cascaded around him, thick, dark, and silken.

He gave an outraged hiss, but he was cornered by her body against the wall.

With a lone finger, she penetrated the space between two locks of hair, and then brushed just upward. The upper lock twisted sinuously through her fingers.

She turned to look at the prisoner. The man’s cool gaze flickered between the shocked anger on Neji’s face and the seductive twine of his hair around her fingers.

“I think you should loosen him, shinobi-san,” Ino said quietly. “I think his mouth would slip open, making another pretty, pink hole, just like that. I think he would struggle to keep his moans inside, but he wouldn’t be able to, with his mouth helplessly gaping like that.”

The man didn’t respond. He watched silently from the chair.

“Yamanaka,” Neji snarled under his breath. “I don’t care if I start a clan war, you are dead—”

She slipped her two fingers into his open mouth. He stopped abruptly, eyes flaring in incredulous rage. He looked almost too disbelieving of her gall to even move.
“I think you would wet your fingers just like this, and he would glare at you, furious, as he does now,” Ino whispered. She used her other hand to grab Neji’s hair and yank, just harshly enough. “And then you would pull his hair just like this, and he would keen for you—”

Neji’s palms were glowing when they hit her hard in her midsection, with such devastating force, that she skidded all the way across the room until she collided with the table at its center. The steel table was nailed to the ground and, still, the nails protested under the duress forced on them, making a high-pitched screeching noise.

Ino let herself lean against the table’s surface, elbows level with its surface and face contorted slightly with pain. Her hair had become unkempt too, she knew, slipping in tendrils from her own hair tie.

“I think he would play rough with you, shinobi-san,” Ino moaned. She pushed against the surface and slid behind the prisoner, dropping her head to relay her words just by his ear.

“Look at him,” she instructed in a murmur. “Isn’t he the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen? Those coveted, Hyuuga eyes glaring up at you as you would fill his mouth. As pale as he is, but his cheeks flushed with so much vitriol—”

And there, for the first time—for just an instant—instant, visceral lust flickered through the prisoner’s eyes.

Ino sneered openly now. “Got you.”

She made the hand signs and, in the brief instant of weakness birthed by his authentic lust, it was child’s play to break into his mind and take over.

In seconds, she had what she needed.

Hiro was mindless with anger in his chair, pulling furiously against his chains. Pain pulled at his features, because Ino had not been gentle.

“You fucking bitch,” he spat, saliva dripping from his mouth. “You fucking cunt—”

Ino glared. She hated that word too.

“After you, Neji-san,” Ino said lightly, holding open the door. He didn’t move as quickly as she would have liked, and so she went through anyway and let go of the door.

An instant later, she heard the door shut behind her. Another, and there was a body blocking her path.

“What just happened in there?” Neji asked, features cold.

Ino looked at him. “Lust tends to make minds vulnerable,” she explained monotonously, “especially for shinobi like him, who train to reject every other emotion but choose to indulge in sex; when they feel sexual hunger—one of the few emotions they allow—it feels all the more potent to them, leaves them all the more crippled, because their minds are otherwise so undisciplined in operating with emotion.”

“That may be the case,” Neji returned cuttingly, “but that does not explain why you chose to exploit me in that manner. You very well know that was not my intended purpose in the room, whatever your ulterior motives.”
“I have no idea why you were in the room with me. To ensure T&I was doing its best with your sworn enemy? I don’t care,” Ino snapped back. “But I did my job in there. We have many, many prisoners here, Hyuga-san, and my duty is to break them as quickly as I can. You were there. I used you. I played the heavy-handed femme fatale; he knew to guard himself against me. But in my heavy-handedness, I also made you seem all the more appealing, all the more credible; it made him vulnerable to you, because all your reactions were authentic. You sped up the work greatly.”

His face was unreadable, now.

She drew back after a moment. “I am sorry,” she said bluntly. “That I made you feel uncomfortable with my words. And for sticking my fingers in your mouth. And for…pulling your hair. I would have asked for your permission ahead of time, if that wouldn’t have ruined the overall effect. I am willing to…compensate you for that, as long as what you decide it is reasonable. You can also write me up for unethical conduct; I won’t stop you.”

The older boy looked like a statue, now, for all that Ino could comprehend of his motives and thoughts from his face.

She sighed wearily. “Alright. If it needs to be the face, then it needs to be the face. But let me know, so I can clench my teeth ahead of time.”

When he moved toward her a sudden burst of motion, she locked her teeth together and shut her eyes.

She opened them a second later when she felt hands on her abdomen. Without causing pain. If anything, the area was starting to feel better.

“You…” Ino felt very disturbed. “Healing me?”

“My cousin taught me the basics.”

“Why?” she asked, eyebrows climbing to the top of her forehead.

“I thought it would be useful.”

“No—why are you healing me?”

Neji looked at her, unblinking. “Because you thought you were doing your job. I didn’t, and I hurt you for it.”

“Of course I was—” Ino cut herself off, gaze narrowing. “What do you mean thought?”

“You were doing your job,” Neji allowed after a moment. “You were also unaware of what…I knew. I didn’t realize that.”

Ino was lost now. “What the hell are you talking about?”

The older boy looked down at her, silken hair still curtained around his pale, aristocratic features. “As you may know, the byakugan allows its user to see into the intricate mechanisms of the human body.”

“Yes, yes,” she waved off, “we all learned this in the academy.”

“We can sense heartbeats, sense lies,” Neji paused for a moment. “We can also learn, with time, to recognize…certain responses.”
Ino stilled. Her ears were filled with a rushing noise, like she had been caught out, before she even knew what the ludicrous charge was.

“Oh?” she demanded. “And what did you see?”

“Yamanaka-san,” Neji said after another brief pause. “You became wet.”

What.

“What.”

“Between your legs.” As if that was the part that needed clarification.

She went deaf for a moment—the sound of the air-conditioning whirring, the rustle of leaves in the breeze outside the window—nothing.

“The hell?!” she snarled. God, she was going to slam that pretty boy against the wall. “Do you fucking get off on lies? You think I like non-consensual bad touches? Or are you going to say it’s when you shoved me? News flash, that’s called acting. I didn’t like that any more than I did when —”

“It occurred,” the older boy interrupted calmly, “when you touched my hair.”

Well, she didn’t have a fucking hair fetish either. Ino broke off, calming down abruptly as reason returned to her brain. “Look, you’re beautiful. I won’t deny it. But actually, I hate you because of it. So there’s really no way I’d ever—”

She stopped when a hand, pale and slim, reached up and embedded itself in the roots of her hair. After a brief pause, he moved his hand parallel to the ground, pulling the strands gently with him so that they fanned out before falling again.

“Again,” he said calmly.

“No.” It had. This time, she had felt it. A hot, molten pulse between her thighs. God, Ino thought, could this day get any worse?

“Also, when I touched you to heal your abdomen,” he added.

“Fuck you,” she responded, equally determinedly.

He looked at her coolly for a long, examining moment. Then: “Possibly. Only after a considerable amount of consideration and some time.”

Ino gaped. Where the hell had the prudish, virginal Neji gone? Wasn’t she supposed to be the sex fiend? God, she had even considered fucking Shikamaru at one point during a dry spell (speaking of which, she could hardly live it down now). But this—no. This was the line. There had to be a line.

She couldn’t fuck someone prettier than her. An ego like Ino’s wouldn’t be able to take that kind of blow. Never.

“Never,” she vowed, staggering back. She must have looked terrified. Her eyelids hurt from her eyes being so wide.

“Hm,” Neji hummed. It wasn’t in agreement. If anything, he looked mildly arrogant now, like he had been posed with an intriguing challenge.
Fuck.

T&I was intended to be Ino’s personal hell, wasn’t it?

She should have just done the easy thing and gone to jail.

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**Author's Note:**

So. Despite the very popular Kakashi/Sakura main pairing, I do have a thing for non-traditional pairings--that's basically where these come from, as a kind of challenge to myself. These were also intended to be generally light-hearted, but ended up being a little *spicy*. Oops. Oh well. All just practice for the main event :D

Let me know what you think! Hopefully this will tide you over until the next chapter :) :) :)

Also: I didn't know until now that I felt oddly protective of Sai?? I just want someone to take care of him lolll. And Ino is SO different from Sakura (also, genuinely, very, very different from me). She was a ton of unexpected fun!
“This is such a waste of time,” she heard someone mutter behind her. “Cover for me. I’m going to slip out the back—”

“This is a mandatory training all shinobi must go through to remain a part of the hokage’s forces. No need to whisper, you are entirely free to leave. Just make sure you take your hitai-ate off first.”

Despite the coolly delivered threat, the room’s inhabitants still darted skeptical looks at each other. Sakura commiserated. Really—had no other shinobi-owned space been free other than a classroom in the Academy for this particular ‘training’?

Perhaps, Tsunade truly was that sadistic.

Her gaze passed over her fellow members in Team Seven, then Team Eight, Team Ten, and Team Guy. All that was missing from the scenery was Iruka. And, in point of fact, every few seconds Kiba would peek over his shoulder—like he was concerned the teacher might just pop out of the wall work, catch him unawares, and smack him with a folder like he used to on a daily basis.

“Why is Team Guy here?” Naruto pondered moodily. “ Didn’t they have to do this last year?”

Sai’s mouth twitched. “They must have missed the date last year due to a mission, like I did.”

Naruto gave an annoyed groan beside them. Unfortunately, the noise was loud enough to catch the attention of their ‘instructor.’

“You,” the man said, his silky voice grating against Sakura’s ears much like a too-sweet dessert. “Since you have so much to say, I’ll leave it to you to introduce the topic of today’s training.”

Kiba was abruptly assailed by a loud coughing fit. Shino patted his back stoically.

Naruto’s face scrunched into a look of intense concentration. “…when two people like each other very much after, hm, maybe five chapters? But sometimes less. But on average, definitely, five—”

The instructor didn’t bother letting him finish.

“You?”

Sai’s head lifted, his face unreadable. “The topic of today’s conversation is sex, an issue I have found inexplicably makes many of my peers bashful, though I am sure they regularly engage in said activity. I have also found, in my experience, that definitions are often subjective determinations,” He added after a short pause. “I once read that everything in the world is about sex except sex, and that sex itself is ultimately about power. If this is in fact the case, then I suppose today’s discussion will translate into a discussion on the nature of power.”

“Is that so? Yes, I suppose many scholars have indeed found sex and power to be…inextricable,” the instructor commented softly, eyes glinting.

It was a dangerous line of thought, Sakura realized too late. Her lips throbbed in hateful remembrance.

Fuck. And she had thought she had managed to wipe it from her mind entirely.

It had been two nights since she had returned home with a drenched uniform cold as ice, the door
still swinging shut behind her as she made the hand signs to remove her disguise (sloppy, she knew, but at the moment, she could not bring herself to care).

Two nights, since she had pulled off her uniform and tossed it into the corner of the room. Undid the binding around her chest. Filled the tub in her cramped bathroom to near the top.

Leaned back, letting her head partially submerge in the water, just until her ears.

Forgotten shortly after. Now, her mind suddenly wouldn’t let her ignore it any longer—mysteriously prompted again—and turned the puzzle over with almost manic energy.

The Kakashi she had thought she had known and the one in front of her now—both frustrating enigmas. She wanted to dissect. Lay open. Until she had all the pieces in her hands, and she made those pieces make sense.

The theory wasn’t implausible, was it? It had long seemed to Sakura that the copy-nin was a force, almost above all else, of arrogance and egotism. Perhaps, his….

actions had in fact been driven by some impulse to overpower her, to resort to other means when fists had failed. She would be remiss, after all, to forget the oiran, and how he had taken her: obligatorily, meaninglessly. Why did the copy-nin touch an oiran in the first place, if not to exert his power over a being obligated to comply—

“Move.”

Her lips tightened. A soft imperative, which from any other would have been a man begging a boy to save his own life—but not Kakashi, because that simply did not make sense, did it? And what place exactly, Sakura reflected coldly, did that admitted oddity have in this?

“For civilians, we may settle this as a matter of opinion,” the instructor said nonchalantly—she blinked, having managed to forget where she was—“As shinobi, however, what is true is that you will face sex as your opponent; it will be weaponized against you.”

“As you all know,” he continued smoothly, “there are shinobi branches that utilize and practice seduction for the purposes of information gathering and assassination. Konoha, as it happens, is one of them—it is the branch I belong to and, perhaps, one that some of you may join in the future.”

Based on the discomfited expressions of the particular people in the room, this appeared generally unlikely.

“Sex may also, however, be weaponized against you far more literally—and I use the term ‘sex’ loosely here,” he continued, still remarkably calm. “That is, as a form of violence and a means of denigrating your person—without any pretense or appeal to your consent. I am here to warn you. At worst, to prepare you.”

Her gaze shot up as the instructor pivoted and walked slowly through the aisle in the middle of the room. “A common misconception,” he continued quietly, “is that women alone are victims of sexual assault. If you believe this, I will have to disillusion you: the kind that engages in such behavior often does not care to discriminate.”

Finally, the instructor had every member of the room watching him with rapt, grim fascination.

“Whatever gender you ascribe to, you are not impervious.”

He gave a humorless smile. “Now that I finally have your full attention, let us begin.”
Two hours later, Sakura and Naruto sat on either side of Sai at the counter of Ichiraku Ramen. Unlike usual, their group was entirely silent.

His words had been enough, hadn’t they? To bludgeon reality over them all—and there had been so much blindness in that room, her own too, conveniently pretending what had almost happened hadn’t. Caught unawares, without weapons, thirteen and ill-prepared—civilians, not shinobi, but that mattered little. She hadn’t been able to handle the reality of it then, so she’d buried it within her, housed it inside like a hidden shard that only grew sharper with time.

It pierced her again, now, as keenly as kunai blade deep within where she could not soothe the pain.

Lighthearted conversation and laughter drifted around them, but Sakura felt largely distanced from it. Lifting her gaze from her bowl of ramen felt like lifting a tree with the effort it suddenly required, when she finished her meal. She made brief eye contact with Teuchi, who shot her a look of concern before directing his gaze meaningfully to Naruto.

Sakura surveyed her fellow teammate and understood. Naruto had barely even stirred the spoon in his still-full bowl. They sat in silence for some time more, until Naruto himself broke the silence.

“That was…” he began, quietly.

Sakura nodded, unsure what to say in response. The training had been eye-opening for everyone, if in different ways—all sobering.

Her gaze flitted over the restaurant, before following the trail of condensation her glass had made as it was placed in front of her. A minute movement to the left suddenly caught her attention. It took her a moment to realize what she was looking at.

Then, her focus zeroed in on the way Sai’s too-pale hands gripped the bowl in front of him. And the way they trembled, just ever so slightly.

She looked now slowly upwards from beneath her lashes. Had they been like that the entire time? The horrible, unspeakable tightness only continued to gather in her chest.

She heard a shattering sound. Oh—that had been her. Her hand, which had been clutching the bowl, had clenched too tightly.

“Who?” Her voice was deathly quiet.

He jerked like he had been electrocuted, eyes widening.

For a long moment, it looked as though he would deny it altogether, plastering yet another plastic smile on his face. But then, consideringly, his glance flickered between her and Naruto.

“A woman,” Sai said finally, blankly. He blinked again, looking down at his hands as though he were seeing them for the first time. “It was not like that. I agreed to it. I didn’t find it enjoyable, certainly, but then—until fairly recently, I had thought it impossible for my body to even derive pleasure from sex with another person.”

Naruto’s eyes were slitted, his fingers curled into tight fists. It had been part of a mission, Sakura
read between the lines.

“But you’re not part of the seduction branch.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Sai lacked the necessary social skills to have been that type of black ops member.

Sai’s coal black eyes drilled into her.

No words had to pass between them.

Whatever line of work Sai had belonged to, it had been the dark underbelly of Konoha’s operations, under the radar and unregulated. There had been no training, no vetting, nothing. And that was saying something, given what Sakura had already found to be the case in ANBU.

As children, they had all been told that the mysterious, masked ANBUs—while enigmatic and frightening to the common citizen of Konoha—were the trusted confidantes of the hokages: eyes, ears, and, indeed, extension of heart. The hokage alone was supposed to know the faces behind the masks, the ANBU as the humans they were: their histories and their personal sacrifices for their village, when no public monument could recognize them.

Sakura knew now, of course, that this wasn’t the exact case. She had no clue what went on with the captains—but she knew none of her peers met with the hokage on a personal basis. Pointedly, the organization was simply too big for Tsunade, or any hokage, to micromanage and track every ANBU to that mythologized extent. What Tsunade knew in detail was no doubt determined by a need-to-know basis, given how spread thin she was.

And look what had managed to slip through the cracks. Her teeth bit into her lip, drawing the iron taste of blood to her tongue.

“I know you can’t tell us about your…background,” Sakura said lowly, turning to face Sai fully.

“We’ll figure it out ourselves.” Naruto’s back was ramrod straight, as stiff as though a string had been drawn up from his tailbone through to the top of his head.

Sai’s mouth parted slightly, a small sound escaping. His eyes widened, as though shocked by the involuntary noise.

“And what if…” He paused, face smoothing. “What if what you learn changes what you may think of me.”

Sai seemed to be under the misapprehension that whatever his teammates had thought of him so far had been generally positive. She didn’t bother correcting him.

His face tensed as Naruto gripped his shoulder with bruising strength.


Sakura blinked. Naruto’s gaze slid to her and he stared at her fiercely, daring her to—she didn’t know.

She removed her hand from the counter and, after a moment of hesitation, slipped it down to near her side. Curling, she slid her fingers into the cool, smooth ones next to hers. She didn’t look away from the bowl in front of her as she did it, face stoic. But she felt the pulse of breath beside her
stutter. After a moment, the fingers entwined in hers tightened their hold.

They finished the meal with no more conversation, parting ways silently just as it became twilight.

The next day, Sakura received summons via the crow.

But of all the things she had expected, the last perhaps was the sea of individuals crowded in the locker rooms when she arrived. Sakura had been prepared to charge directly to her assigned locker to pull on her armor for another unsavory mission. Shortly after entering, she realized that would be patently impossible.

The room was packed beyond the point of maximum capacity, the conversation between its numerous inmates culminating into something deafening. The movement of bodies eventually moved her in an entirely different direction than she had originally intended. Fortunately, it was there that she found Hyena and Snail.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, shooting a glare as she was knocked forward once more.

“Rounds,” Hyena answered shortly, tying her hair up with a leather band with sharp, economic twists of her wrist.

“Rounds. What are…rounds?”

“Black ops members have to periodically defend their positions in ANBU,” Snail explained delicately. “So we have rounds of spars in the training stadium without warning few times a year.”

“To determine fitness,” Hyena summarized shortly, rolling her shoulders as though already priming her body. “Weed out the weak; reshuffle, if appropriate, those who stay.”

“And every ANBU member has to go through this?” Sakura demanded.

“Not every person,” Snail allowed. “I suppose the captains have their own system among themselves.”

“But for the rest of us, yes,” finished Hyena. “So you better get armor on.” She handed Sakura what seemed like a spare set from her locker.

Sakura strapped them on blindly. A thought suddenly occurred to her, and her eyes widened. “Wait. So that means I could be moved off of this team?”

Hyena looked at her strangely for her tone. “If you don’t perform to standards.”

“And what will happen then?”

“You don’t need to be concerned, Crow-chan, you’ll do fine!” Snail said with a cheerful punch to her shoulder. After a moment, she let her hand swing down. “You definitely won’t be kicked out—that only happens to ANBU who are no longer physically capable of the role, and you still have all your body parts.”

“My bet? You’ll be booted off to a lower team,” a new voice added—Bear, Sakura’s identified sourly—“Don’t know how you got here, Crow, but you’re certainly going to face the due trial by fire now.”
Sakura shrugged dismissively, eyes narrowed from behind her mask. Get booted off to a lower team? Excellent.

A loud bell rang through the room, cutting through the noise easily.

Snail nudged her. “People are heading out now. Finish strapping up and follow.”

Nodding, Sakura finished tying her arm guards and fell into line behind her other teammates. They crossed through the lobby she had entered just ten minutes ago into the other section of the headquarters, which housed a giant stadium (that she had until now wondered at its purpose entirely).

When they entered, Sakura’s mouth fell open.

Had she thought the locker rooms had contained all the ANBU? Clearly, most had already entered the stadium. Not all the seats were filled, but there were certainly more ANBU gathered in one place than she had ever seen in her life.

“So how does this work,” Sakura muttered, still gaping. “Is there one bout at a time? Who chooses who you fight?”

“It’s randomized,” Hyena muttered back, leading them to where Raccoon sat. “And there are usually four to five spars at one time.”

“Or we’d never fucking get out of here,” Bear grunted.

“We each do three bouts in a row, short breaks in between of course,” Snail explained cheerily. She pointed downwards where a long line of ANBU sat separate from the normal stadium seat, looking directly onto the fighting grounds. “After, the captains vote on whether or not we stay. If yes, then they decide where we go until the next rounds.”

Hyena settled down into her seat with a short sigh of relief, rubbing her recently sprained ankle. She saw Sakura watching and added briefly, “Any of the captains can make a bid on you if they think you’re more suitable for their team. Your current team captain can argue to keep you or let you go. They argue their cases before the group, but ultimately, all the captains vote, and majority decides.”

“Ah,” Sakura said, leaning back.

One of the figures among the captains stood up, and the stadium fell into silence.

“Some of you have been here for years; for others, this is your first time going through rounds. No matter the outcome, know that in carrying the will of fire, your past year of service has been—”

“Always wondered why he’s commander,” Bear said, bumping shoulders with Raccoon for all the world like he was at the movie theaters, talking just quietly enough so as not to get shushed. “You know?”

“Everyone knows you don’t put your best soldier anywhere other than at the center of the battlefield,” Raccoon offered without pause, as though he’d answered this question many times. After a short pause, he added. “Plus, the taichou is… young. He might have more experience than most of us, but—”

“He hasn’t been alive long enough to match the commander’s years,” Hyena finished, nodding in agreement.
Sakura’s scowled, so grateful for yet another reminder of how ‘prodigious’ their precious taichou was. She tapped her fingers lightly against her knees. “So…how many rounds have you been through?”

All four turned to look at her in one, eerily synchronized motion.

“Five under the copy-nin,” Hyena answered first. “Fifteen or so before that.”

“Five as well, twenty before that,” said Snail.

Bear soundlessly held both hands with all fingers stretched. He didn’t offer anything else.

Raccoon leaned toward her so that she could hear his muffled words. “Two with this team,” she heard. “Twelve before.”

In case it had been uncertain before, it was abundantly clear now how much her teammates’ experience outclassed hers.

“Why am I on this team again?” she asked aloud.

No one was able to answer her.

“It’s not that you’re not an excellent shinobi, Crow-chan,” Snail explained hurriedly. “It’s just that, well, on the past few missions most of us have each been doing our own thing. None of us have really had the chance to observe the full extent of your skills.”

“As I said,” Bear said, the pleasure in his voice gratingly apparent, “there’s no time like the present.”

Sakura cracked her neck and shifted to look back to the fighting grounds. The commander had apparently just finished his speech and was in the process of sitting back down. Just as five pairs of names flashed on the screen, the large brass doors to the stadium cracked open again to admit one more figure.

Mismatched eyes scanned the crowds of ANBU—who abruptly went silent, even more quickly than they had for the commander—before he shunshined to an empty seat on the judging panel and reclined into his seat. His temperament was one of a predator long impatient with complacency, feet on the long table but vibrating with pent up energy.

It would take an idiot to miss that this was the last place the copy-nin wanted to be right now.

Sakura’s mouth went tight at the first sight of Kakashi in days. He hadn’t even bothered to wear the ANBU mask—not that it mattered much, she realized after a moment. It wasn’t like he ever bothered to disguise his hair.

They all watched as the commander shifted in his chair to say something to Kakashi. But the copy-nin barely even tilted his head to acknowledge the words, attention seemingly focused somewhere else. After a moment, the commander appeared to give up and shifted to the center of his seat again.

“Are the combatants ready?” the older man boomed.

Ten figures walked onto the fighting grounds in response.

Shinobi on either side of the stadium erected tall barriers, protecting the audience from the
combatants and the respective fights from interfering with each other.

Coins were handed out to each pair, and then flipped. Genjutsu, taijutsu, ninjutsu, or kenjutsu, Sakura noted, were spar options given to the combatants.

And then the rounds began.

Randomization, she learned soon, was both a good thing and a bad thing. Some of the pairs on the grounds proved themselves to be so unevenly matched that the spar ended in less than a minute. Others, however, suffered from the lack of disparity and dragged on for almost half an hour.

By noon Sakura was stir-crazy, ready to create a small explosion so that she could escape and grab something to fill her stomach. She regretted immensely now skipping breakfast that morning.

Snail’s stomach grumbled loudly beside hers as well. She rubbed it apologetically.

Protein bars were passed around.

By mid-afternoon, only Raccoon had been called to the fighting grounds. He had won the first coin toss and finished a taijutsu bout with fair ease. The second, though, had been rougher—kenjutsu and not his choice; his opponent, a heavy-set man wielding a blade the width of Raccoon himself, had emerged the winner. But at the third bout, she had learned that ninjutsu was, in fact, Raccoon’s real forte.

“Will he be alright?” she heard Bear ask Hyena.

She had nodded without hesitation. “His ninjutsu is good enough to compensate for his kenjutsu. No one’s going to take him if taichou makes it clear he wants him to stay.”

Whether Kakashi had, in fact, ‘made it clear’ was a bit suspect to Sakura. In truth, the commander had seemingly directed another question to the copy-nin again, Kakashi had not responded, and no one else at the table had consequently bothered to speak up.

So, on Kakashi’s team Raccoon apparently stayed.

By early evening, the sky outside had deepened into the purple-pink-orange of twilight. With the dimmed lighting where they were sitting, it was easy, somehow despite the noise, for Sakura to imagine herself comfortably in her own room, just about to sleep. (She was…tired.) The sounds were loud but also fairly repetitive—white noise, really.

The spars in front of her all started to become the same.

She didn’t exactly remember when she fell asleep. In truth, she wasn’t really surprised that she had; she hadn’t been getting much sleep the past few nights, for some reason or the other.

Next thing she knew, she was being roughly jabbed awake, from both sides of her.

“Huh?” she grunted, snapping up in her seat. “What?”

Bear looked at her like she’d been running around with her head cut off.

“The board,” Hyena hissed, looking both mildly concerned and generally disapproving.
Her gaze snapped downwards and landed on the list of the next ten names.

Hers was listed there.

“Oh,” she sighed tiredly. “Right, then.”

Swinging herself onto the staircase, she didn’t bother to shunshin and merely walked the rest of the way down. In the distance, she could see another figure already where she was supposed to be.

Sighing again, she hastened her pace.

As she stepped onto the fighting grounds, the full force of the stadium lights beat down on her. Sakura grimaced with discomfort; the sheer heat radiating from the strength of the light was a force to reckon with.

There was also—uncomfortably—a sort of nervous energy in the air, which she hadn’t been able to feel from where she had been sitting, distant from the action. She felt it now. The hairs on her arms pricked and blood started pumping heavily through her body.

The Voice growled in her head, emerging from total silence without warning. She hissed warningly under breath back at it—no need to get excited, she wasn’t letting it out now.

Tightening her arm guards, she didn’t quite look at her opponent yet, looking instead to the two names blazoned above the part of the grounds sectioned off to them.

_Crow vs. Robin_

Two birds. She scoffed under breath as her eyes moved downwards to the ANBU in question.

Well, she knew why he was called Robin now. He had shoulder length red hair that gleamed in the light like flashing silk. It looked…oddly familiar, actually—

“No,” Sakura whispered aloud. She took a stumbling step back.

But she couldn’t unsee it now. She blinked rapidly.

It was the same exact color.

“Hey there, Crow,” Robin greeted, shrugging his shoulders. “You look around my age. But…”

He was seemed a few years older than her. Just like Noriko had been. Sakura’s hands trembled at her sides.

“As your senior, I think I’ll pick first,” he said with a wink. He gestured to the shinobi handling the coin toss. “Heads.”

The shinobi threw the coin and snatched it from the air in a blink of an eyes. The head of the hokage gleamed brightly.

“Taijutsu,” Robin decided affably.

Sakura couldn’t move her eyes off him, completely oblivious to all the other coin tosses going on around them. Eventually, a dull gong rang through the stadium, signifying the start of the spars.

“Ready?” the young man asked, a smirk in his voice. He didn’t wait for an answer. In an instant, his entire form was a blur. A blur that was rushing toward her.
And all Sakura could see was the ghostly mirage of Noriko’s face manifesting above his mask, just because he had similar fucking hair.

*Move, you worthless carcass,* the Voice snarled.

Sakura blinked dazedly, but it was too late. A fist landed in her stomach and sent her careening into the opposite of the stadium. Metal railing crumpled beneath her back. The air rushed out of her as pain seeped in.

She was shaken. Sakura had a spare moment to curse beneath her breath, before Robin was on her again.

He was quick—but not *that* quick, not really. Certainly not near the quickest she had ever faced. But each time he twisted, the air catching strands of his hair to send them fanning out, Sakura felt like a boulder had been dropped on her all over again, and she was dazed, and precious seconds went by, and—

Wow. She hadn’t gotten her ass kicked like this in a long time.

And it was the truth—she was getting her *ass kicked.*

*You worthless piece of shit, what is the point of you if you can’t even handle shit like this yourself? LET ME OUT! LET ME—*

Sakura, out of the sheer rage the Voice managed to incite in her, found some clarity and landed a few well-placed blows at key points in Robin’s midsection.

But they lacked her usual strength, because still, some part of her couldn’t let go. And when she looked up again—a terrible, fatal mistake—it was Noriko’s dying face that look back at her, a beaming smile drowning in tears.

Sakura groaned.

A fist landed soundly, truly solidly, planting into the side of her head. The force of it vibrated through her entire body, but Sakura was oblivious to it—only knew that her vision was going black.

When light returned, she was blinking up at the towering dome of the stadium.

“Robin, Crow, 1-0!” she heard a woman cry out.

A hand manifested above her. She gazed blankly at it. After a moment, it reached down and heaved her up.

Sakura managed to land on her feet. Everything around her, however, was a deluge of sensory and auditory information she had trouble processing.

“Stadium locker rooms,” she heard someone say. “Until you’re called for the next bout.”

Robotically, she followed the figure ahead of her to a set of doors tucked into one of the walls. She kept her eyes on her feet and very carefully did not look at his hair. The brass doors opened and closed with a small creak of protest. And then she was in silence, in a cool, dark room, where there was a table filled with bandages.

“So,” the ANBU next to her began with a slow smile. “No hard feelings?”
Sakura focused hard on his voice. A little higher than that of a fully grown man—but definitely lower than Noriko’s. This was just another shinobi with dark red hair. It was *just* dark red hair; she’d seen other people with red hair after Noriko and hadn’t reacted like this. *Why the fuck now?*

Inhaling, Sakura steeled herself and then looked up. Her vision swam.

“No hard feelings,” she returned, looking down again.

He gave a short laugh. “Great. Have to say though, I wiped the floor with you—”

He broke off, his gaze widening at something behind her. Sakura twisted to follow his glance and then froze.

Tremulous awe glowed in Robin’s eyes. “Sir, it is an honor to finally meet you—”

“Scram.” The word emerged in a dark rasp. Sakura grew even stiffer.

As for Robin—she wasn’t sure what the ANBU thought. Whatever it was, he blinked for a few seconds in confusion. Then, the request processed. With a swift bow and a suspicious glance her way, Robin exited the room.

Sakura looked back at Kakashi with ire, waiting. “What?” she demanded finally, tone flat.

Another she hadn’t really expected today was—this. Kakashi shoving her roughly into the lockers. “What the fuck was that out there?” A guttural demand, harsh on her ears.

“Excuse me?” she gasped, mostly from incredulity.

She lifted her hands and shoved him back—he skidded a few inches. “You,” she growled. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

“I’m your captain,” he said coldly back. “And you answer to me.”

Sakura let out a harsh bark of laughter. “You think I give a fuck what you think? *Try me*—please, give me the chance. You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting.”

The Voice seared through her veins, and for one terrible moment, Sakura couldn’t quite draw the line between it and herself.

Fingers clenched her chin beneath the surface of her mask, pulling her forward. And then the heat of him—the heat of his rage—scalded her there first, spreading after until her whole face felt like it was burning.

“Is that so?” he mocked, his voice low and dark. “And where was *this* when that waste of space was tossing you around like a mannequin?”

Sakura stared up at him, speechless, and then pulled back, shoving his hand away from her. “Why do you even care?” she snapped. “I can count the number of times you’ve spoken to me—”

The fingers on her chin tightened their hold warningly.

“Drop it,” Sakura gritted out.

“Maybe I was unclear before,” Kakashi told her, baring his teeth from beneath his black mask. “You answer to me, shinobi.”
Sakura was breathless with fury.

“You want to know the truth so badly?” she said, eyes spitting venom. “It’s as simple as this: I saw a ghost.”

Her throat closed getting the words out.

Kakashi’s expression did not shift, didn’t reveal even the minutest twitch of the eye.

Her eyes stung fiercely and she shoved against the copy-nin, driving him into the opposite row of lockers, hands knotted in his flak jacket. “Did you hear me?” she grunted out, “I said I saw a ghost.”

His hands snapped to her wrists, hot—almost molten—fingers burning into the skin there. Not pulling, not yet. But enough to make her feel his strength; and she could.

Her mouth was coated with blood—probably her teeth too—and she knew the same dark brown-red dripped from her nose, but she couldn’t feel any of those things just now. Not really. She only felt hate. And, perhaps, a terrible, agonizing emptiness where happiness and peace once could have been.

“Don’t pretend now, taichou,” Sakura whispered, mouth trembling. “Don’t.”

Kakashi’s dark grey and red eyes traced the pattern on her mask.

“Pretend?” he said tonelessly.

“That you don’t know,” she hissed, and her diaphragm was twitching now—struggling—couldn’t find its proper rhythm. “That I wasn’t there.”

Who would have guessed—that ‘Haruno Sakura’ would know something about the copy-nin that ‘Saori Mori’ didn’t? Because Saori alone would not have known Kaido had been a ghost of Haku. But Sakura did.

She didn’t get to gloat over his response—didn’t even get to look at his face to see if there was any. Something was crumbling inside her, an inestimable force wreaking havoc on her insides suddenly. Sakura doubled over, not knowing how to fight it when it was herself, trying her best to hold herself together. Her forehead scraped against the rough material of flak jacket.

He’d felt this too. She knew he had. This feeling, like there was no more air left. Or maybe that there never had been, and she’d just been pretending the whole time.

But all the while, he felt like a wall of stone, his hands still circled like chains around her wrists.

Sakura closed her eyes, fighting for breath fiercely, fighting the pain. “You’re going to deny it…taichou?”

With difficulty, she craned her head upward—unable yet to straighten her back—to survey him.

“Stop rambling,” he said tightly, controlled.

“Rambling,” she smiled humorlessly. Then, her mouth flattened, and her eyes were stony. Because she knew he was lying. She knew it.

His voice may have been controlled. But his gaze revealed everything.
“Fine,” she said softly. “You want me to win? I’ll win the next two in less than a minute: kenjutsu, genjutsu, taijutsu, ninjutsu, it doesn’t matter. I’ll do it.”

Sakura used the hold he still had on her to yank him closer, until his eyes were level with hers and nothing so arbitrary as height could distance them any longer.

“And when I’m firmly back on the team, I’ll have all the time in the world to make you tell the truth.”

__________________________________________

Author's Note:

Sorry for the wait! Please let me know what you think!! Your comments mean the world to me--seriously, I reread each and every one for motivation to keep writing these stories :)

__________________________________________
Scalded

Sakura stilled, the tendons in her forearm tensed as she held the chokuto’s edge a scarce millimeter from skin.

The world was silent around her. She watched the pale column of skin beneath the blade retreat—swallowing, some part of her remembered—with rapt attention.

Then, slowly, sound filtered in: shouts from the crowd, the sound of mouths chewing on ration bars, the clangs and thuds from the other fights around them.

“Crow, Mouse, 2-2!”

Sakura blinked. It took her another moment to pull back the blade and offer a hand. The man ignored it and flipped into a low crouch before standing.

The shinobi who had announced their respective standing scores gestured them to the space in front of the long platform where the ANBU captains sat.

“Wait there until the other matches are finished,” she said brusquely. Sakura and Mouse made their way to where she had indicated.

Mouse watched the other matches intently as they waited. Sakura, in the same time, struggled to make sense of what had happened the last two matches. She had vowed to both win and finish the bouts in less than a minute. She hadn’t expected this drive to inadvertently catapult her into such a bizarre headspace, where now she could scarcely even recall the details of what had went down. She had been hyper-focusing—myopic, and now distance somehow made what she had been looking at blurry.

Almost fifteen minutes went by before the sound of the gong being struck thundered through the stadium, announcing that everyone in Sakura’s set of bouts had all finished their assigned three. Nine other individuals lined up alongside her.

She fought to keep her frame steady and unflinching when Robin sidled up next to her.

“Hey you,” he said lazily, “You know, I think this might just be the year the copy-nin takes me. Speaking of which, how did that chat go? Didn’t look too good to me when I left.”

Sakura shrugged in response, gaze drilling straight forward.

An ANBU with a monkey mask, who stood at the very right end of the line, was the first to go. Her score was announced—one win, two losses—and then her time in ANBU—four months. Following a gesture from the commander, the captains began their discussion.

The noise of the stadium was enough that their words had been impossible to hear from the seats; but here, every word was perfectly audible, to all ten of them. Monkey hadn’t done any worse than most of the first year ANBU, but the captains didn’t hold back in highlighting the flaws of her fights. In the end, both her current captain and two others made bids for her.

When the matter was settled, the captains’ attention went to the ANBU to the left of her. Sakura realized, a little too belatedly, that this ordering meant she would be the last to go.

She stared stoically at a beam holding the dome aloft as she waited (she was very carefully not
glancing at Kakashi). It was easy to ignore the proceedings—that was, until the captains’ next subject was the figure next to her.

Robin straightened to his full height.

“Robin, three wins and no losses,” the commander announced as prologue to the discussion.

“Damn right,” the redhead beside her murmured, voice thick with satisfaction.

“Strong candidate,” a clinical, yet melodious voice noted. “Won in taijutsu, ninjutsu, and then kenjutsu—clearly well-balanced.”

“He’s young too,” another captain said bluntly. “A good part of his tenure is still ahead of him.”

A few other captains chipped in with similar remarks, while the others nodded in silence.

A female captain with a cat mask swiftly prompted. “Who’s interested?”

“I’ll take him,” the same woman with the clinical tone offered. “I could use someone as versatile as he is.”

“His strength merits a higher level team,” another captain argued.

“He is very strong,” the commander nodded slowly.

“My team has been down one since Squirrel retired,” a new voice intoned. “I could take him in.”

“Perhaps,” the commander said ambivalently. “But now that I think about it, that team of his would be a good place…”

All of the captains—and all ten ANBU lined up before them—shifted to see who he was talking about.

Kakashi’s head rolled carelessly to meet the address. “Did you say something?”

The commander didn’t even blink. “That kid,” the older man repeated, deep bass voice resonating, “he should be placed on your team.”

If it were possible, Robin’s back straightened even more beside her. Sakura watched as Kakashi’s mismatched eyes narrowed above his exposed black mask. He didn’t even bother looking at the ANBU in question.

“No.”

“Excuse me?” the commander said, tone flat. It wasn’t a question.

“It appears you’re becoming hard of hearing in your advanced years,” Kakashi drawled disinterestedly. His tone became a fraction deadlier. “I said no.”

Robin’s shoulders were tight now.

“And as you are well-aware, this is a democratic process,” the commander responded icily. “One in which my opinion has weighty influence over that of others’, because they trust my judgement, my years of experience. So you will have to convince the council of your peers—by which I mean, you will first have to convince me—if you want anything else, Kakashi.”
“My team already has six members.”

“At least one spot has marked itself so far as ripe for switching.”

The copy-nin’s demeanor appeared to become even more irreverent. “Oh?”

“I believe he’s referring to Crow,” the woman with the cat mask offered lightly, abundantly aware that her fellow captain was already aware. For the benefit of the rest of the captains, ostensibly, she pointed at Sakura.

Sakura stared at the lone finger pointed in her direction. Yes, she’d initially wanted to get kicked off Kakashi’s team. But then, in the heat of the moment, she’d gone and made that promise. Now, it was a matter of pride; now, Sakura needed to be on this team.

“Two wins and one loss,” the commander recounted coolly. “Not a bad record by any means. Her two wins were finished admittedly quickly, but she’s not the first to finish a bout in less than a minute. And pointedly, her one loss is to this ANBU here. It’s clear which one is better.”

Kakashi swung his propped feet to the ground, soundlessly. He then leaned against the table, the pale of his forearms a jarring contrast to the steel surface beneath.

“Deaf as well as blind, then,” Kakashi said coldly. “My current shinobi beat a kenjutsu specialist at kenjutsu and, before that, that one over there—” he pointed at a heavy set man with a shock of purple hair—“whose taijutsu is only slightly more pathetic than—alas, I can’t remember his name. Her loss to him was only fluke.”

“Robin,” the captain seated next to him muttered helpfully.

“Robin’s,” Kakashi repeated slowly, his tongue flicking mockingly over the syllables. “You want to place someone on my team? At least choose one who would survive more than a day.”

“His ninjutsu bout,” a gruff-voice captain added. “He did exceptionally well there.”

“Yes,” the commander built on this intently, voice booming, “his jutsus were complex and highly suited for the combat work your team works in. Not to mention, his kekkei genkai—”

“Now, I would hope you knew better than that, commander,” the copy-nin said coldly. The title was delivered with as little regard as possible.

“She’s two years his junior,” the commander growled, “and Crow is still a first year ANBU. What have we seen today? She beat a kenjutsu specialist—great, but kenjutsu isn’t the firepower we need on our elite teams. And as you stated so eloquently, neither Robin nor he—” Sakura’s gaze snapped for a second to the heavy set man she had fought in her second bout—“are taijutsu prodigies. So she lost to one and beat the other. What does that amount to? We simply have to believe you when you say she’s skilled enough? Well, I ask then: what makes her unique, copy-nin? What makes her stand from the pack? Robin’s skills will improve with time—will become finely honed under your team’s influence—and his kekkei genkai is unique; how will she compare then?”

Sakura’s lips felt like they were bloodless. That’s probably why she could scarcely tell when they opened of their own volition.

Fuck this. *Fuck*. She had driven herself into this corner now, hadn’t she, where suddenly she couldn’t *bear* not being on this team.

“If I may.”
The commander looked at her immediately; despite the mask, she could see the way the skin around his eye was contorted upwards, as though he were raising an incredulous brow at her gall.

Sakura’s mouth twitched. “A kekkei genkai is only a weapon. Some shinobi are born with weapons in their body; the rest of us merely have to build them or find them outside of ourselves. I wouldn’t dismiss diligence and talent so easily in the face of a bloodline limit…”

Should she?

 “…and idiots from renowned, supposedly all-powerful clans die all the time precisely from their idiocy.”

That had been a little more direct than she had intended. Oh well.

There was choked laughter from the ANBU seated throughout the stadium. The captains controlled themselves better.

“Enough.” The commander slammed both his palms flat on the table. “Seeing as this asshole here will seemingly do anything to make sure that Robin doesn’t get on his team, can anyone else here—someone I actually trust not to lie to my face—attest to this rookie’s skill? I’m not putting this ANBU back on the most combative team there is in this organization only to serve her as cannon fodder. I am not in the habit of serving mere body parts of fellow shinobi to the parents who raised them after only months of service.”

Sakura’s lips tightened.

The air within the stadium suddenly became thick and bone-cold as Kakashi’s killing intent lashed out in terrible tides, washing over the stadium’s occupants without remorse. Even Sakura, who was more used to this than most others, fought to control her instinctive urge to lash out in defense.

The broader, older man didn’t shift an inch, but Sakura could see that his whole body was tense. “Settle down now, soldier—”

“She was on my team before, commander,” a familiar voice barked out.

It was Tiger, from her first ANBU team, standing some rows above them.

“I was Rabbit’s second-in-command,” she continued, “and Crow was one of eight other rookies. We were attacked a hundred kilometers out in the thick of the forest by a battalion of the invisible shinobi.”

The ‘invisible shinobi’—as they had been aptly dubbed—had been enemy combats against Sakura on her last mission before Kakashi. She hadn’t realized, however, that there were more of them.

Based on how countless heads in the stadium suddenly snapped in her direction at this news, it seemed that the invisible shinobi were a pervasive problem. Knowing how they had mowed down her first ANBU team, she readily understood how deadly they could be.

Sakura’s fists tightened at her sides. How many ANBU had they lost already?

“We were not prepared for the attack,” Tiger said after a brief pause. “It would have been a slaughter. Rabbit was already down. The rest of us were in disarray. We would have been slaughtered if not for Crow.”

“What happened?” the commander requested with ill-hidden impatience.
“She’s a genjutsu user,” Tiger said faintly, “She could see them without a dojutsu. And after she could see them—I don’t know how to describe it…”

Sakura’s skin crawled with discomfort. It didn’t help that what Tiger was describing was the Voice. For the worst of her to be exposed inadvertently like this, no matter how unknowing the audience was…

Tiger’s voice emerged again, controlled, her words succinct. “They were meant to slaughter us. Single-handedly, she began to slaughter them.”

“How many?” the captain with the cat mask asked.

“Between fifty to sixty,” the woman responded after a moment of consideration, “and then the copy-nin’s team crossed paths with ours and finished the rest. After that, Crow was…essentially moved to his team.”

The commander stared at her stonily for a long while, apparently at a loss for words. Sakura could read from the set of his shoulders that this wasn’t the outcome he had wanted—whether that had anything to do with Sakura herself or merely wanting to impose his will over Kakashi, she did not know.

At last, he gave a low grunt. “Fine. Crow remains on the team—any opposed?”

Not a single hand went up.

“Now, as for Robin…”

Sakura couldn’t quite ignore the glare burning into from her left.

Snail whooped as they muscled their way into the bar through the heavy crowd. “What did I say? I knew we would all make it through!”

Bear grunted beside Sakura, shooting her a look. “Some of us, barely.”

“Get over yourself, Bear,” Hyena said dryly, sweeping a scratched hand through her hair—a purely lucky shot, she maintained. “Tonight’s the one night you don’t have to pay to get over that massive stick up your ass. Luxuriate in it.”

That seemed to be, indeed, the attitude of every ANBU now populating The Shush-ya, the largest bar in Konoha, which was also conveniently operated by shinobi for shinobi. It seemed that it was tradition for the ANBU to treat themselves to an open bar and have the entire place to themselves following every set of rounds; the hokage, apparently, generously covered the cost.

Sakura observed as the music picked up around them, a thudding drum intermixed with the sultry wails of the biwa. Alcohol passed easily through the masses—whole bottles were handed around rather than glasses, and masks shifted just slightly to imbibe them.

Snail was the first to get her hands on a bottle. Taking a long swill, more than enough for her short stature, she passed the bottle next to Sakura. Sakura looked at it skeptically for a moment, then shrugged and drank some herself. The rich, bitter taste went down with some difficulty, burning the entire way. When she lifted her lips from the rim of the bottle, she grimaced and rubbed at her lips.
“Easy there,” Raccoon remarked with some amusement. She handed him the bottle, but he only passed it onto Hyena. “I’m good tonight.”

Hyena took her own portion and then passed it to Bear, only to find that he’d already gotten his hands on another bottle. Rolling her eyes, she placed the near-empty bottle on a vacated table.

Sakura examined the bottle with interest. She could already feel the effects.

She had had alcohol for the first time years ago, so she was no stranger to it. Truthfully, she knew her tolerance much better now. Sure enough, she felt only a certain extra warmth and light buzz, but nothing more. If she still needed to kill, she could do it without a second thought.

A second after that reflection pulsed through her mind, Sakura flinched.

Fuck. Was this how it was going to be the rest of her life? To kill or to be killed.

_It’s a dog eat dog world_, the Voice crooned, before giving a shrill laugh. Sakura hissed as the sound scratched against the walls of her brain.

“T’m going to dance,” Snail called out, pointing to the mass of congregated bodies at the center of the large open space. She gave them a short wave and then disappeared into the throng of shadowed figures.

There was something pleasantly bizarre about it all, Sakura reflected to herself. They all wore the same ANBU uniforms they had fought in earlier today, complete with bandages and newly won scars as well. ANBU captains were present also, though they seemed to keep entirely to themselves. The contrast between the actual rounds and the atmosphere of…whatever this was, however, was—laughable.

The next few minutes passed by easily with sporadic conversation between Hyena, Bear, Raccoon, and herself—none of them seemed desiring of a prolonged discussion, content to relax mainly in silence. Unfortunately as time passed, the temperature of the bar steadily increased as more bodies were crammed into the space.

“I’ll be back,” Sakura told them, fanning herself.

Muscling her way through the bodies was a task that took longer than she would have thought (sadly, she couldn’t exactly drive her fist into the ground to make the sea of bodies part, though part of her considered it). Eventually, she reached an open space of the wooden counter.

“How can I help you?” a short man asked swiftly, hands busy at work preparing two different drinks.

“A glass of ice.”

He didn’t blink an eye at the request. Hand darting out with impressive speed, he procured a glass and used a kunai blade to slide a large cube of ice into smaller slivers. He handed the cold glass to her.

Sakura took it gratefully, allowing her hot palms to rest against the cool surface for a little while.

The music twisted in and out of the space around her—sometimes distinct and keening, other times muffled and incomprehensible. Closing her eyes, she sucked on one ice chip at a time, enjoying the spread of liquid each time the ice melted.
She felt a body slide into the small space between her and her former neighbor. Sakura’s hands spasmed for her weapons instinctively at the imposition, before she eased them consciously.

“A glass umeshu, please. Actually? Make that two. One for me and one for her.”

Out of distant curiosity, Sakura darted a look to her newest neighbor. That’s how she realized by ‘her,’ the newcomer ANBU meant Sakura.

“Unless you’re opposed?” the girl—she sounded only a few years older—behind the tortoise mask intoned lightly, tilting her head to the side.

Sakura considered that for a moment. She was still far from drunk; one glass wouldn’t push her significantly closer there either. “Sure.”

“Excellent,” the word was drawn slowly, delicately, “Two glasses of umeshu then.”

The same short man silently went about preparing the drinks. Sakura returned her attention to the ice chips, surveying another one with almost academic interest.

“Crow, right?” the voice beside her prompted again, pointing at her mask.

Sakura turned to look again at her. Apparently, she was waiting for an answer. “Yes,” she said slowly. Then, she felt obligated to return: “Tortoise?”

Tortoise hummed in assent, reaching out to collect the two glasses from the bartender. Holding one, she slid the other to Sakura.

Sakura took a sip without much ceremony, surprised to find that she actually enjoyed the taste. She had come to believe that all alcohol tasted generally shitty, desirable only because of its impact.

“Good, isn’t it?” Tortoise prompted.

“It is.”

The aftertaste was also pleasant.

“You have beautiful hair.”

Sakura saw the hand move toward her head—slow enough that she could shift comfortably to avoid the impending contact, which is why she ultimately allowed it. Foreign fingers curled through the strands of her hair, pulling gently so that there was a light tension at the base of her scalp.

“It’s fake. A jutsu to disguise more identifiable hair.”

The fingers let go of her hair as Tortoise gave a short laugh. “Hmmm,” she said, cupping her chin in her hand, “you really don’t know how this works, do you?”

Sakura’s brows furrowed.

Tortoise surveyed her for a long moment. She had unusual eyes, Sakura noted—purple, if they were real—that stood out all the more because of her black hair.

The girl leaned forward, and Sakura saw her mask shift the minutest bit, as though she were smiling below the porcelain.
“I want to kiss you,” she asked straightforwardly. “Can I?”

Sakura tossed another ice chip into her mouth, unblinking. “Why?”

“Ohmmmm,” Tortoise hummed again, tapping her nails against the wood. “Because I like your voice, I think. A little low, a little arrogant. And I’m in—how should I put it?—that sort of mood.”

Sakura glanced down at the glass in her hand, swirled its contents.

It wasn’t something she had explicitly contemplated before. It wasn’t the alcohol that made her consider her it now. The truth was…

This fascination of lips on lips. She’d ascribed to it as a young teenager, because that’s what children did. Abstractly, it was a ridiculous thing—evolutionarily, the contact was completely arbitrary. Then, recently, she’d experienced the contact once and it had felt…

She didn’t really want to think about now, but—would it feel the same with Tortoise too?

“Why not?” she wondered after a short pause.

Sakura knew by the way the mask shifted again that Tortoise was smiling again.

The other girl shifted closer to her on her chair, knees slotting into place between Sakura’s perched legs. Tilting her head to the side—making eye contact the entire time—she slowly slid her mask upwards to reveal her lips. Sakura watched the subtle adjustment with interest; she was a little intrigued by how this would happen, whether or not their masks would still knock into each other.

“May I?” Tortoise asked lightly, purple eyes gleaming.

Sakura nodded, and a tanned hand rose to brush the edge of Sakura’s mask, nudging it slightly upward. The increased exposure provided a new depth of sensory information. The air had become slightly humid, and she could taste the smell of incense, blood, and alcohol on her tongue.

With a curve to her lips, Tortoise approached until her eyes bore straight into Sakura’s. Belatedly, she realized that this was because their lips were now touching. They shifted. A breath passed between their lips. It was swallowed. There was nothing shy or tentative about the contact.

A tongue curled lightly against Sakura’s lips. After a moment, Sakura’s mouth parted. In the same instant, Sakura’s hand left her glass to grasp a hip, hand curling into the flak jacket there.

She had thought their masks would collide; she found the solution now, though her body moved her there unthinkingly. She pushed forward, compelling Tortoise to tilt her head slightly back, and the other girl slanted her mouth beneath Sakura’s.

This was—pleasant, Sakura reflected. Her heart didn’t pound, her blood didn’t rush violently through her veins; it was a gentle, trickling kind of warmth, like sinking into a warm bath. Tortoise made a small, breathy sound, and then stood, slotting her body more firmly into the spaces of Sakura’s.

Somewhere, somehow, even though the other ANBU had instigated the contact, Sakura had assumed control of the kiss—based on the sounds emerging from Tortoise’s throat, she preferred it this way. Tortoise’s moans, indeed, were a constant, throaty accompaniment to the strings singing smoothly in the background.

Curiously, Sakura let her tongue graze the roof of the mouth beneath hers. A strangled sound of
pleasure was her reward. Smirking—and maybe feeling a little more now the alcohol buzzing through her system—her hand left Tortoise’s hip to grasp her chin, pressing more intently.

People had been passing behind them the entire time. The bar was busy, naturally, and more than one ANBU had found their way to the counter to order drinks. So, the fact that a group of shinobi paused right behind them right at that moment wasn’t an immediate cry for Sakura’s full attention.

When the sound of low voices and laughter sounded, her eyes flashed in irritation, but she paid no more mind to it.

Then she heard a few jeers, clearly from the individuals standing right behind them.

Sakura tensed, pulling her mouth from Tortoise’s. Before she could turn, a strong hand slid from her hair to her upper arm, stopping her. Sakura looked at the ANBU, whose purple eyes were locked on the jeering shinobi.

“Don’t,” the girl said softly, eyes wide.

Sakura’s gaze narrowed.

“Just ignore it,” she pressed.

Despite her stiffness, Sakura let the other girl pull her forward again. Their lips met once more.

Tortoise gave a small sigh and locked her hands behind Sakura’s head.

“Hey ladies,” a low, male voice called out amidst riotous laughter, “why don’t you remove those masks and give us a real show?”

In the space between one breath and the next, Sakura ripped through Tortoise’s locked hands. A second later, she had the ANBU pinned against the bar wall by the throat.

“Crow, don’t—!” she heard behind her.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing, kunoichi?” the man growled, the stink of alcohol thick on his breath.

Sakura didn’t know where the sudden burst of temper had come from, but she was seeing red. “Just thought I’d give you the show you asked for.”

“Easy there,” a slow, lazy voice added from behind her—one of the friends—“It’s Crow, isn’t it? I remember you from earlier today. Nice speech and all.”

“But you know,” the man continued, laughing still, but there was edge of warning to it now, “your quota for insubordination without consequence is about filled up, don’t you think?”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Leave it,” Tortoise said lowly, purple eyes pleading. “Crow, they’re—”

“You can call me taichou. Him too.”

“—ANBU captains.”

“You should listen to your friend,” the man said flatly.

Sakura’s mouth flattened. So they outranked both of them? She angled her head back, to survey the
small group. She recognized them now—each one an ANBU captain who had sat at the table beside the commander. Fine. She didn’t actually give a fuck.

But then she darted a glance to the other girl, who obviously did.

“No harm done,” she said reluctantly, after a long pause. She brushed off his shoulders, mostly for show, and stepped back. “He’s all yours.”

She turned, shoulders tight and struggling to control her temper. Tortoise was pale, her purple eyes still wide, but her body slowly began to relax—

“Sluts these days, you know, someone just has to teach them a proper lesson—”

Sakura’s face was contorted into a snarl. Without even turning to look, her hand snapped back and grabbed the new person who had spoken. She saw his hands move with blinding speed, no doubt to pull out weapons; before he could, she threw him toward the counter.

He slid down the length of the wood, knocking empty and filled drinks alike that had been placed there.

He would have slid further, if not for a pale, scarred arm stopping him. The owner of the arm coolly picked up the cup of sake that had just been placed in front of him and smoothly tossed it back.

Though other ANBU captains crowded around the counter around him, his feet were outstretched to prop on the adjacent stool, taking two seats for himself. His gaze was half-lidded, the hitai-ate positioned to cover the sharingan—but his lone, charcoal eye drilled into Sakura, dark and intense, looking for all the world as though he had been watching the entire time.

Sakura’s spine snapped straight, face hot. How long had he been there—

She felt a hand knot itself into her hair, cutting off the thought. Silently, she reached up to cup the side of the man’s head and drove it into a stool with a loud clang.

“Crow,” Tortoise begged, “Stop it. It isn’t worth it…”

Shut up, the Voice growled. Sakura, at this point, largely agreed. She had tried walking away. They were the ones who hadn’t let her peaceably do that much.

The man who had intervened earlier now stepped forward. He was tall and lanky, with a dangerous grace to his movements.

“Look, Crow,” he said lightly, “my friends here have had some drink. They like to talk—” he shrugged—“It didn’t really need to come to this. But now? Now, this is has become a matter of insubordination, one that I have to deal with.”

He made a show of pulling out his weapons and piling them on the nearest table. “I’ll go easy on you, alright?” he said mildly, “Just fists.”

Sakura cocked her head to the side, dropping the unconscious man in her hand so he hit the floor. Then, without pause, she began stripping herself of her weapons too.

“Are you crazy?” an unwanted Samaritan hissed behind her, “Keep the weapons or you won’t stand a chance!”
“You should listen to him,” the man said amusedly.

Sakura tossed the last kunai. “Oh,” she said, “Thought he was talking to you.”

He shrugged again. “It’s your face.”

Without any further preamble, he feinted and lashed out with enough force to crush her skull against the wall behind. Sakura twisted, kicking off the same wall to drive her elbow backwards.

He evaded with a fluid motion she vaguely recognized. Her gaze moved from his palms briefly to his eyes. Pale orbs peered out between dark lashes.

A Hyuuga.

Immediately, Sakura created more space between her body and his. She considered her situation. He could see into the chakra points of her body; her medical knowledge of the body made her more competitive than most, but she couldn’t expect to pinpoint at the same level as he could. There was no point competing on that front.

No weapons? Fine. That didn’t rule out—

“Maa, look at the damage you’re doing to that wall.”

Sakura became an impressive example of abruptly, arrested motion. Gaping, she turned in the direction of the copy-nin, who still was seated nonchalantly on two seats.

“Taichou,” the man next to her said a little belatedly, stiff as well. Some part of Sakura’s mind was functional enough to realize this as strange; technically, this man and Kakashi were the same rank, there was no need for the honorific.

Most of her mind, however, was devoted to the shock of hearing something as close to the lazy, nonchalant jounin captain from before as she had in years.

“Taichou,” the man repeated again, “Crow’s actions were insubordinate—”

“Reny, Renya,” the copy-nin interrupted in a mild, scolding tone—the ANBU captain flinched, Sakura continued to gape—“you know the hokage isn’t going to be too pleased having to cover additional costs. You should learn to relax. Have a spa day. Read a book. Take a nap.”

Kakashi swiped another cup of sake, one that was not his (but other than a squeak, the shinobi didn’t muster any further protest). He circled the contents with sharp, subtle motions of the wrist.

Then he looked up again, and his face—or what was visible of it—had transformed. The guise of the disinterested bystander had been all but cast off.

“Didn’t anyone teach you not to make a mess?” he questioned softly, darkly.

Sakura was finally yanked out of her state of shock by that ridiculous remark. Unable to control herself, she scoffed lightly beneath her breath. If anyone was messy...

His gaze snapped to her instantly.

“You,” he muttered, pacing toward her, “you’re really something aren’t you?”

Her lips twitched. “I try, taichou.”
“Perhaps you’ve forgotten. I’ve thrown you into a tree.” A warning, she interpreted.

Sakura’s gaze narrowed. “As I recall, my fist made contact. With your face. Multiple times.”

His eyebrow twitched. “You shattered a boulder. When I threw you into that as well.”

“A testament to my strength,” she sneered.

Kakashi’s attention drilled into her. He didn’t seem to remember that the Hyuuga even existed any more.

“Follow,” he demanded. He spun on his heel and moved toward the exit of the bar.

Sakura watched him brows raised. A hand brushed her arm, and she jolted, looking to her side.

“Are you okay?” Tortoise murmured, voice low and sweet, “I was so worried—”

“Follow,” the copy-nin snarled behind him, cutting her off.

Sakura let air hiss loudly through her teeth. Sliding her hands into the pockets of her flak jacket, she gave an awkward, apologetic nod to the girl and then left her and the bar.

The cool, outside air hit her with a welcome chill, drying the slight dampness on her skin. She tilted her head back and inhaled. Her head was rushing a little—the alcohol, no doubt.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw Kakashi standing in front of her in the narrow alley way.

“…another unwarranted lecture, taichou?”

His voice was low, derisive, when it emerged. “If you can’t muster the respect, shinobi, you might try skipping the title altogether.”

“I see,” Sakura nodded sagely. “Like how you used ‘commander’ earlier today.”

His gaze was slitted as he peered down at her, the breadth of his shoulders silhouetted by the moonlight. Suddenly, his nostrils flared.

“You stink of her,” he said, disgusted.

Taken aback, it took her a moment to understand whom he was referring to. Then, she was confused that he mentioned it. Were they merely going for the obvious? Fine.

“And you’re a coward who can’t tell the truth.”

“Don’t test me,” Kakashi said, voice dangerous. He leaned closer, nostrils flaring once again.

And that was only fuel to the fire. Hot, fiery blood pumped through her veins; she had burned through the alcohol now; all that was left was the headiness from an unfinished fight.

“Coward,” she charged coldly. “There’s nothing to test—”

Her mask was ripped off her face. Sakura’s eyes widened at the new sensation of cool air on her cheeks and forehead.

Her gaze moved, and she found Kakashi holding the mask in his hand. He stared at it intensely.

“Has anyone ever told you, Saori Mori, that you’re the kind where your voice says one thing,” he
commented lowly. “but your face says something entirely else.”

She seethed. “And here I thought you had a fascination for ripping off unsuspecting people’s masks.”

Kakashi’s eyes slowly moved from her mask in his hand to Sakura’s face. And as soon as his eyes landed there she was—

(rambling and speaking of masks, when you walk around with hair and eyes like that, everyone already fucking knows who you are, so what’s the point—)

A manic sort of agitated rage made Sakura pale, made her lips tight and her fists clench.

He took a step closer to her, silent.

“Stop,” she called out loud—commanded. The hoarse, venomous word echoed in the alley way.

Kakashi stilled immediately.

She breathed rapidly, ribcage heaving like she couldn’t intake enough air quickly enough.

She saw a pair of lips curl beneath the black mask. And then he leaned, a movement so swift and sharp it was a blur, until his face was a scarce inch from hers.

The pair of charcoal and red eyes—the tomoe spinning in a dizzying revolution—were hot on her.

“Coward,” he breathed.

Sakura gritted her teeth. Sneering, she straightened to her full height. “I’m not.”

Raising an eyebrow, gaze still just as forcible, he raised an arm slowly—slow enough that she could move, find a kunai and attempt to stab him, or run, if she wanted. Sakura jerked her chin upward and merely stared at it in contempt.

“Go on,” she goaded.

She wasn’t sure what she expected. A punch, perhaps. Maybe a slap, though that somehow seemed uncharacteristic. She had thought he wanted to put her in place, and while Sakura was never a glutton for punishment, she wouldn’t be called a coward in the face of it either. Did she think it would be rightful punishment? No. But Kakashi was her ‘taichou’; and more importantly, she would get her own later.

Or, she would have gotten her own, that is—if that had been what he had done.

Instead, his hand reached chin first, a searing, brief touch. And Sakura recoiled. Until, glaring, she held herself steady once more.

Still mocking, he then moved to the back of her neck, touching her there just as briefly. The muscles in her upper back clenched, provoked by the contact.

Sakura exhaled a sharp breath, angry and confused.

Then his hand, calloused and scarred, paused in front of her mouth. And that’s when she realized what he was doing.

He was erasing. The scent.
Kakashi held himself still with the dedicated patience of a practiced predator. Or at least, that’s what Sakura tried to make herself believe.

Because there was something unnerving, now, about the content of his gaze; the way his lips were clearly parted beneath the black mask; the way the arm possessed by this raised hand was an object of tight restraint, as though repressing a—a helpless urge, that his hand, fingers, and every limb had been made a slave to.

He waited. And Sakura didn’t know why. It made her angrier still.

“Go on,” she snarled. “Go on.”

(Later, she wouldn’t know why she said it.)

He did. Without blinking, without moving otherwise an inch—though it seemed like an entirely new animation could be seen in his features—the tips of calloused fingers grazed her lips, scalding them.

And Sakura burned. Hot, molten, uncontrollable. In the next breath, she shunshined to her tiny apartment thirty blocks away.

Author's Note: Guys, I have been absolutely blown away by your response to this fic. Thank you so much for all those comments--this chapter practically wrote itself, fueled by those beauties. Hope you enjoyed it! Please let me know what you thought :)

(Also, I really hope I don't have to say this, but if you have an issue with Sakura kissing another girl....don't bother leaving a comment complaining. It's 2019, folks. get with the program.)

Hope those of you in college had a wonderful spring break! I'm crying, having to return lol. Until next time!
Sakura’s fingers knotted in the hair of the woman pressed hotly against her.

“I—” the woman’s eyes fluttered helplessly, “I’m going to—”

“Me too,” the man behind Sakura whined, his hands tight on her hips.

“Not yet,” Sakura hissed, teeth clenched.

“I can’t,” he gasped for breath. He moved against her with desperate force. Sakura snarled into the open air, needing the burning there—

The man behind her muffled his cries into her dull pink hair as he climaxed.

*Let’s gut him*, the Voice said rasped.

“Touch me,” the woman pleaded against her lips, interrupting her thoughts. Her blue eyes glistened.

Sakura shelved her own frustration for the moment. She shifted closer, hand sliding through long brown hair, down the valley between breasts, to the hot, silken space between two, smooth thighs. The woman—Hitomi, she recalled—threw her head back as she keened, hair plastered to her neck with sweat.

Fingers curled into Sakura, quick and greedy. Air hissed from between Sakura’s teeth, as that—

—*the pulsing* below her abdomen, a throbbing that made the hair on her skin rise and her skin feel hot (*scalded*) and uncomfortably tight—

The man (Raido, he had declared shortly before the ongoing proceedings) shifted to mouth at Hitomi’s neck. Eyes locked onto Sakura’s mouth, the other woman gave a shrill cry as she came.

For a moment, the only sound in the room was that of ragged breaths. Then, the man and woman crumpled against the cool sheets of the bed, faces slack with pleasure.

Sakura leaned back against the headboard beside them. Glancing down, she contemplated herself. Had she—?

She had. Somewhere along the way. It had been so silent, so mild and underwhelming in its nature, that she had hardly noticed it.

But there was a slight soreness, deeply, invisibly—in the muscles she had never worked before, yes. Otherwise, nothing about her situation *had changed*. (She still felt…that infernal knot of seething, insatiable hunger in her lower abdomen, which had been brought to life as soon as *those* fingers had grazed her lips—)

Sakura shifted from the bed to stand, aware they probably watched. Once, she would have blushed and been horrified by the prospect of this. Now, her body had served so many more infinitely more important purposes, that she could hardly remember why she could have felt self-conscious of something so insignificant.

“You could stay…” Raido asked suggestively, his tone suggesting more would follow than just sleep.
After straightening the disarray of pale pink hair on her head, Sakura silently finished pulling on the clothes she had discarded a little more than ten minutes ago. The grey-green pants and black shirt weren’t normally what she wore when undisguised, but they were all that she had managed to grab.

She would have had the presence of mind to change into her usual clothes, too, if she hadn’t been —

She frowned privately, taking the moment now to finally reflect on how she had arrived here. This certainly hadn’t been the plan. She had shunshined home. *That* had been the plan.

Only, then, she had noticed leaving hadn’t been enough to escape consequence entirely from her… previous encounter. It became immediately evident that things weren’t quite *alright*. Her hand had barely grazed the door knob, really, before she had been distracted by this lamentable itch in…

In her cunt, she thought coolly. She had killed people. What was the sense in shying away from *this*?

First, she had thought to ignore it. That soon appeared patently ostensibly as every step she took, every chance in which the inner skin of her thigh grazed her—it was impossibly distracting. How long would it last? How could she possibly *sleep* like this?

And then had she thought: an itch. Well, an itch could be scratched, couldn’t it?

Why *shouldn’t* she scratch it?

It was entirely natural, though the timing was a bit unfortunate (poor timing, that was all it was, she assured herself). All she needed to do was visit another bar to find someone to do the job. To discover what all the fuss was about.

That was how she had ended up here.

“Some other time,” she answered finally. Sakura perched on the open window sill, and then launched onto the nearby roof before taking off in a sprint to her apartment.

Even the vision Konoha presented at night—silent and deadly, but also beautiful—was not enough to improve her mood.

As she landed her apartment building, her thoughts took another direction altogether, sensing a foreign chakra presence right in front of her door. Her hands immediately went for her weapons, then stilled. She knew that chakra very well.

The figure in front of her door stopped his loud knocking, spinning to her with a pale face when she suddenly appeared.

“Naruto?” Sakura asked cautiously. “What are you doing here?”

“It’s Gaara,” he said urgently, voice cracking as he spoke, “He’s been kidnapped by that—that group called Akatsuki.”

Sakura’s mouth parted; then her eyes fell to the scroll held tightly in Naruto’s hand.

“We were supposed to leave ten minutes ago, but you weren’t there,” he said in a rush. “I thought you must have missed the summons because you were sleeping. Kakashi-sensei said we should leave without you, but the rest—”
She unlocked the door to her apartment and retrieved the pack hanging on the hook inside, precisely for emergencies like these. She wished she would have had the time to at least…shower, but—

“I’m ready. Let’s go.”

Naruto exhaled like a great burden had been relieved off his shoulders. Exiting the same way she had just entered, the two of them took to the roofs again and moved in the direction of the forest.

“Are we the only team being sent?” Sakura asked.

“Team 10, Team Guy also,” Naruto said grimly. “And Hinata—the message said Gaara’s brother had been poisoned.”

They travelled the rest of the distance in silence. As they came upon the edge of the forest, Sakura swallowed hard, forcing blankness on her face.

“I told you your student would eventually find her way,” Gai boomed.

“She’s cost us irretrievable time,” Kakashi bit out. Sakura tried very hard not to look at him “We leave now.”

He took off onto the trees. After a moment, they all followed.

________________________________________

They reached Suna at sunset. By dawn, Hinata was able to concoct and administer an antidote to Kankuro’s poisoning.

“He’s still in danger, though,” she told them softly. “The poison’s fighting back—I will need to watch him for the next few days.”

“The rest of us need to head out. We’re wasting our time here.”

“We need a medic-nin,” Asuma responded lowly to Kakashi’s looming, thunderous presence by the window sill. “You might comfortable fighting without one, but the rest of us can’t just step into battle against the Akatsuki without a healer.”

“We have one,” Sai pointed out politely. “Sakura-san has learned how to treat battle wounds in combat situations specifically.”

“Truly?” Gai boomed, eyes wide in wonder. “The presence of such vital youth really does bring tears to these eyes!”

“She has?” Asuma responded, looking confused.

“Yes,” Sakura said, “Tsunade-sama taught me herself.” She glared at Kakashi (or more accurately, around him, she still couldn’t quite make eye contact). Would he deny it? Did he think Naruto and Sai’s training wounds had been healed by some anonymous, benevolent benefactor?

“She’s a lousy fighter,” Kakashi said coldly. “We keep her to the back.”

Sakura’s shoulders tightened with the strain of restraining herself. A hand landed on her shoulder, and she straightened, blinking as she looked back at Naruto.
“Team 7 and Team 10 will track the Akatsuki to where they’re keeping the kazakage,” Kakashi commanded. “Team Guy and the kazekage’s sister will watch the boundary of the villages, in case the current weakness of the Hidden Sand should be revealed.”

The respective teams nodded, accepting their roles without argument.

“What Kankuro managed,” Asuma murmured, handing forward a scrap of black cloth.

A wolf-dog with sharp teeth appeared in a burst of smoke, summoned by the copy-nin. With hungry eyes, it stalked toward the torn fragment of a mask and inhaled.

Sakura along with the rest of her team and Team 10 raced to keep pace when it darted. They were quickly out the hospital doors and soon under the blazing, desert sun. Travelling in Suna was harder than in Konoha, what with the ever-shifting sand beneath their feet rather than solid ground.

Near midday, they began to reach thick settlements of trees and warm, red-brown dirt. On more familiar territory, their pace consequently picked up. But abruptly, just as they seemed to settle into the quicker cadence, the wolf-dog paused and made eye contact with its owner.

After a moment of silent communication, Kakashi stoically summoned another summon and signaled Team 10 to follow the smaller canine.

Sakura watched them depart with a narrowed gaze. When she turned back, she saw what Kakashi had already taken off, a speck in the distance.

Naruto cracked his neck and bent his knees, preparing to follow, but she stopped him with a hand to the shoulder.

“The Akatsuki are after jinchuruki, right?”

Naruto stiffened. Sai drew closer, eyes wide with interest.

“I don’t care what Asuma or Kakashi said,” she said gruffly, “You stay behind Sai and me, got it?”

“But Sakura—”

“What she says is a valid strategy, dickless,” Sai said indifferently. “Yes, Sakura-san is functionally our medic-nin today, but it also hardly makes sense to serve you up to them on a platter.”

“But—”

“There is no literal platter, of course,” Sai said pleasantly, “It’s only a turn of phrase. Idiomatic.”

“I know that,” Naruto huffed indignantly.

Sakura’s hand tightened with bruising strength on Naruto’s shoulder; he let out a grunt of pain. “No buts,” she said pleasantly. Not willing to listen to any other protests, she leapt into the trees again. She heard Sai and Naruto follow behind her.

As it happened, they didn’t end up travelling much farther. Sakura first saw the deceivingly relaxed expanse of Kakashi’s back as he stood in an open space with few overhanging trees.

Then, she saw the second figure in front of him.
The first thought that came to mind when she saw Uchiha Itachi was not how much he looked like his younger brother, but that whoever had composed Itachi had done so with the notion of a shinobi as far from their mind as possible.

Calm, dark eyes peered thoughtfully at them from a pallid complexion, as though the man himself had never been built for the outdoors; the sensitive curve of his mouth and the long lines beneath his gaze would have seemed to profess to hours of introspection rather than physical training. He was neither tall nor short, neither slim nor broad. To Sakura, he looked more a poet or a philosopher than the weapon of destruction he was said to have become.

It was possible to see, in one instant, that this man was Sasuke’s brother and that—also—he was worlds apart from the boy she had grown up with.

In the next instant, her gaze landed on the small, unassuming creature perched on his shoulder—unassuming, that is, except for the spinning sharingan that looked back at her, somehow both unreadable and mocking.

The crow, Sakura processed.

The Voice shifted restlessly in the back of her mind, a slumbering beast prodded awake by her panic. Clenching her fists, she forced herself to calm down. She had known for a long time now that Itachi was Shisui’s other summoner. Now, the day had come that she and Itachi would stand on opposite sides of the battlefield. But whom the crow would fight for, she did not know.

Her frown deepened. If Shisui would abide by some sort of first-come-first-serve basis, of course, then she had already lost that battle…

“Sakura,” Naruto muttered, voice strained, “that’s—that’s him. He’s why Sasuke left. I can’t…just stand back here and watch—"

If Itachi came for Naruto on Akatsuki’s quest to extract all the tailed beasts, he would have to claw his way over her dead body.

“You can and you will,” she answered darkly.

The man who was Uchiha Itachi surveyed them all with a cool, indifferent eyes. No killing intent radiated from him; he seemed for all the world like he had merely been contemplating the weather in this empty space of forest before they had stumbled upon him.

Then his gaze flashed to Kakashi, and his almond-shaped eyes narrowed a bit. It was the first, slight evidence of fracturing in the man’s seeming impenetrable calm, but it was enough.

Now, Sakura knew that while Itachi thought very little of them, he was wary of the copy-nin.

Her eyes widened. There was….familiarity there.

“Nearly a decade has passed since I left, but I remember fighting under your command once,” the man said dispassionately, confirming her suspicions. “You do remarkably well for a man with a borrowed eye. The Akatsuki would readily embrace your skill.”

“It has been some years,” Kakashi remarked coolly. “But you might remember Kino. You may also have heard that he recently…left.”
Itachi was silent, dark eyes emotionless.

“I hunted him down. Killed him in front of his own son,” the copy-nin said, vicious pleasure saturating his words. He cocked his head to the side, voice lowering a fraction. “Is there any witness you would like to request for yourself?”

Naruto made a noise behind her. Sai blinked impassively.

But Sakura paused because, suddenly, everything before her had ceased to make sense.

She knew how Kakashi had been after he had killed Kino’s son and Kino. This ostensible bloodthirstiness and sadism was ingenuine. It had to be. The realization was abrupt and devastating, though she didn’t have the luxury to fully comprehend it now—

“You!” Naruto growled, “What have you done to him? What have you done to Gaara!”

“Quiet, Naruto,” Sai said, warning bleeding into his normally bland voice.

Sakura caught a fraction of motion in her peripheral. She whipped her head around to catch Itachi’s hand swiftly rise. Before he could complete the motion, Kakashi attacked.

“Don’t look into his eyes,” Sakura hissed to Naruto and Sai, well-aware of the sharingan’s capabilities. She had more experience resisting the sharingan, but she knew it was best also to exercise caution.

“How can we know then—”

“Watch his feet and his body,” Sai advised.

Sakura lips tightened as the fight between the two shinobi ensued. It was an odd feeling, to be in an altercation of this caliber—especially with Kakashi—and not be expected to fight at his side. It gave her the rare opportunity to survey him from a distance.

And Kakashi in combat was terrifying and...somewhat disturbingly beautiful, though she was reluctant to admit that. Both participants twisted and lashed out with inhuman grace; it seemed almost choreographed, like they were taking turns in a deadly dance.

Then, abruptly, Kakashi pulled away.

Itachi blinked slowly in response.

Kakashi let out a foul curse and tilted his head up—as though listening to some distant sound or scenting something in the breeze. He stiffened. Then, his irritated gaze settled on Naruto, Sai, and her.

Naruto pushed against her restraining hand. “What’s happening?” he asked unsurely.

“This is a convincing copy, not worth my time,” Kakashi snarled. “The real one is likely guarding the kazekage.”

“Save Gaara,” Naruto demanded shakily.

Kakashi’s body was a statue, he was so still.

“I have Kurama,” the boy beside persuaded desperately. “We’ll be able to hold out until you get back!”
Sakura watched the complex evolution of the content of the copy-nin’s gaze with rapt attention. It was clear the moment he made his decision, though his frame was tense with repressed fury.

“No stupidity,” he commanded coldly. Then, he disappeared with the next breeze.

Which left them standing in the sparsely covered expanse of forest with Itachi, alone.

Naruto tried to rush forward, no doubt to stand in front of them and play the rough-tough save-the-world type of idiot he was so often wont to do. Sakura grabbed him and hauled him back.

“Sakura—!”

“Not today, Naruto,” she said, unblinking. She made a few, short hand signs and, in less than a second—before he had even known what hit him—Naruto was unconscious and on the ground with a dreamy smile on his lips.

Before Sai had the chance to process what had happened, she caught his chin in her hand and forced his eyes onto hers. Just as his gaze began to widen, his eyelids slid shut. He fell beside his teammate.

Then her gaze darted up and she made eye contact with Itachi. His expression did not betray any surprise, though she sensed that this was not what he had predicted.

Sakura inhaled and then exhaled. The sound seemed to thunder in her ears.

“I do not know you,” the man commented distantly.

“I’m not surprised by that,” she responded, standing in front of the unconscious bodies of her teammates.

“That was a foolish thing you did,” he said disinterestedly. “The three of you would not have been enough to defeat me. You are…but an insect.”

“So I’ve been hearing.”

“Do you have a death wish?” he asked. The question was entirely absent of malice, merely curious.

She could feel the crow’s heavy gaze on her.

“Is a shinobi a weapon for peace?” she asked instead. Part of her was incredulous at herself. What was she testing for? Sanity?

He stilled, and a wild hope surged in her chest. Then, his expression smoothed again. “The members of Akatsuki are teachers to the world of the true meaning of suffering, so that the world may finally turn away from warfare and conflict forevermore.”

She gazed at the crow accusingly. It blinked back at her, placid.

What a joke, she thought, scoffing. Even if she was generous and believed that Itachi’s ideals once, perhaps, may have been compelling and admirable, in the time since they had clearly become twisted. Akatsuki was no place for the sane.

“Ready?” she asked. She didn’t really expect an answer.
A few minutes later, she had the small pleasure of seeing surprise flash through fake-Itachi’s dark eyes as her fist drove through his midsection. It didn’t feel like much of a victory, though.

It had almost felt…too easy.

But then, she hadn’t been fighting the actual man. The black cloaked figure slowly melted into the corpse of a former shinobi of the sand. Sakura frowned down at it. He had died fighting for his village, and then for his body to be so grossly misused without his consent— Her stomach turned.

She made the hand formations to wake the two figures behind her.

“I told you I would do it!” Naruto crowed once he stood, unaware that he had been unconscious at all. He pumped his fist in the air. “One rasengan was all it took!”

Sakura nodded, watching Sai closely. Her genjutsu had clearly worked on Naruto, leaving him with doctored memories of the fight. She wasn’t so sure how the same had worked for Sai. For the moment, he said nothing.

The sound of an unnatural breeze gathering made them all tense. They relaxed slightly when they realized the form that appeared.

Over Kakashi’s shoulder was an unconscious boy with red hair, dressed in the long robes of a hokage.

Naruto darted forward, blue eyes wide. “Is he—?”

“Barely.” His gaze then passed over the corpse that had been Itachi. His sharingan gleamed with feral interest as he surveyed her teammate.

“All in a day’s work,” Naruto beamed back.

The journey back to Suna frustratingly seemed to take longer than the trip from there. Once back, she decided to have an early night in. Scraping sand from her skin, she soaked for a little in the bath in the corner of her small room. She hadn’t had time to pack much, so she pulled on the same uniform she had been wearing before back onto her slightly-wet skin (it was hard to dry quickly when the air was so hot).

At first, she paced for a little, trying to work through her thoughts. Itachi, Itachi, Itachi—either the crow was a liar or it had been mistaken. There was no third option.

Eventually, however—when no clear conclusion emerged—she settled onto her bed and tried to force herself to sleep.

It didn’t work.

Restless, she left the bed she had been given to open the window. The warm breeze caressed the locks of her hair, gently sending them away from the damp expanse of her neck.

Then, a loud banging on her door interrupted her momentary peace. Scowling, Sakura stormed
toward the door and yanked it open.

She blinked dumbly up at the irreverent, cool gaze that looked straight past her to seemingly survey her room. After narrowing his eyes, the copy-nin reached wordlessly behind himself to shove someone else into her.

The figure in her arms groaned before straightening. “I really appreciate the sensitivity,” the boy drawled, “Damaged goods and all, here, you know.”

“Shikamaru,” Sakura said blankly. A second later, her gaze fell to the wound in his side. She led him immediately to the table at the middle of the room, sweeping its contents onto the floor.

“Take it easy,” the lanky boy hissed, catlike eyes narrowing. “God, why is everyone so pushy with the crippled today—”

“You’re hardly crippled,” Sakura said, tearing off the cloth obstructing her gaze from the wound. As she worked, her gaze flicked up to the cluster of individuals Kakashi had ostensibly brought to her room.

The man himself loomed in the corner of the room, as pleasant a presence as a poltergeist, watching her like he expected her to faint from the blood any moment. An unconscious body was draped over his shoulder—ostensibly why he had been forced to come in the first place.

“Just a bit of knitting up, not even beyond my limited skill,” she said with saccharine sweetness. Then, the fake smile slid off her face. This was well within Hinata’s capabilities. “Were there any complications with Kankuro?”

“The kazekage’s brother is fine,” Shikamaru said lazily. “Lee went and got himself impaled though. He and that Suna old lady are working on him.”

“His injury is taking more time to heal than Hinata-sama initially thought,” Neji explained calmly, still hovering near the door. He held his left arm gingerly. “She thought it best to send half of us here. Asuma-sensei, Tenten, and Kiba-san remain there.”

Sakura cracked her knuckles. “This is going to sting. Try not to move.”

Shikamaru gave a derisive laugh, cut off by a wince as her hand made contact. Sakura shut her eyes as she scoped out the wound with her chakra. Not dire, but there was some internal damage.

Steadily, she directed the flow of energy into sealing the wound. It was enough to get him into fighting-shape but there would be some discomfort, a consequence of working more quickly than she would have liked because of the line behind Shikamaru.

“You’re good enough for now,” Sakura said a few minutes later. “But you should spend the night in the infirmary in case there are any internal complications.”

Shikamaru hummed uncaringly. “No need.”

Her eyebrow arched. “I might not be a full-on medic-nin, but I’m not stupid enough to send you alone to your room to pass away quietly in your sleep.”

“On the contrary, I don’t think there’s a more desirable method of dying,” Shikamaru said idly. “The point is moot, however, as I won’t be alone.”

None of the shinobi in the room—certainly not the one passed out over Kakashi’s shoulder, whose
“Curious?” Shikamaru asked, an odd, sharp smile on his face.

“That will suffice, I suppose,” she said, “And—no. I don’t really care about who is or isn’t your bed, Shikamaru.”

She paused, evaluating that statement a little. “Unless it’s either one of my parents,” she corrected consideringly.

“Really?” he said, almost silently now. The words were only for her ears. His eyes were cool and measuring as he gazed at her. “Funnily enough, he seems to care about you. And Naruto. He tries to hide it, but he happens to be really, really bad at that—to those who look, at least.”

Sakura froze, her hands gripping the end of the table she had been leaning on. Sai?

“And you’ve been looking a lot these days, I take it,” she said coolly, voice equally low. “Did he want me to know?”

“He wants you to know him,” was the offered response, delivered so boredly one might have almost been fooled.

“And you know all this,” Sakura said slowly, “because…?”

“I look.” Equally nonchalant.

She surveyed him for a moment. Then she smiled just as pleasantly. “Well, that’s just wonderful. And in case you ever try to forget how wonderful, please remember all the hard work I just did.”

“Which you can just as easily undo?” Shikamaru guessed.

Perhaps, if he had known exactly what ‘work’ Sakura had accomplished with her hands, he would have demonstrated more wariness than amusement.

“Precisely,” she finished curtly.

Shikamaru exited the room with a lazy wave, leaving her with the three other occupants of her room.

“Neji-san,” she prompted, trying to keep the latent irritation out of her voice. She had forgotten that also—how annoying Shikamaru could be to talk to. No wonder he and Sai had drifted to each other.

The Hyuuga’s face was unreadable.

Now, Sakura had trouble hiding her exasperation. What was he waiting for—an official summons? “You’re next.”

“You can address Yamanaka-san first,” Neji said stiffly.

Sakura blinked first in incomprehension. Then her head snapped to the unconscious body tossed over Kakashi’s shoulder.

“Put her down on the table.”
A second later, Ino’s unconscious body was on the table and her former carrier was back in his original corner of the room, gazing coldly back.

Sakura’s fingers probed at the other girl’s throat and then along her pressure points. There were no injuries—at least, none that she could find visually.

“How long has she been like this?”

“Since the end of the battle,” Neji answered, an odd quality to his voice. “Shortly after using the mind transfer jutsu.”

Ah. She drew her hand back and delivered a resounding slap across Ino’s face.

The blonde girl surged up like a corpse rising from the dead, a truly dramatic, wheezing gasp emerging as well that soon transitioned into a short series of sneezes.

“Bitch,” she complained. “What the hell was that?”

“Catharsis,” Sakura muttered. Clearing her throat, she said, “I imagine Hinata was just too kind to do this herself. You’re good to go.”

Ino grumbled a few more times, rubbing her red cheek.

“I have a broken arm to fix,” Sakura pressed blandly.

Ino’s blue gaze went to the figure behind her. Sighing dramatically, she stood up. Before she left, however, something strange flickered through her expression as her eyes settled on Sakura one last time—was it sorrow? Sakura’s throat became strangely dry.

But then, as though the look had never existed, the odd expression disappeared, and Ino smiled prettily.

“A beauty needs her beauty rest,” she said primly, before stalking out, a long, rippling stream of blonde hair following her. “Later, forehead.”

Sakura watched silently for a moment, watching the back disappear behind the door. She turned to face her final patient.

“You,” Sakura said impatiently, pointing at Neji.

With a smooth, swift grace that spoke of a very particular sort upbringing, the Hyuuga settled serenely on the table, holding his injured arm aloft in front of him.

She prodded at it as considerately as she could; unfortunately, his winces were necessary to determining how clean the break had been.

Her examination revealed that it was a messy one. She frowned. Applying chakra, the jagged breaks in the formerly smooth bone began to close. She knew the other boy tried to hold himself as still as he could, but it was a painful, draining process, and he began to shake.

“You need to be still,” Sakura warned.

“I—” Neji said stiltedly, “am trying.”

Sakura didn’t look up, but her jaw clenched as she directed her words to the figure in the corner of the room. “Hold him still.”
When Neji continued to tremble, unaided by any other force, Sakura’s head snapped up, seething.

“What are you waiting for?” she snarled, forgetting herself.

The copy-nin surveyed her coolly for a moment. Then, without a single word, he sauntered to the table and placed one, long-fingered hand firmly on Neji’s shoulder.

The color drained from the boy’s face. Sakura couldn’t tell if it was fear or pain. Probably pain, she decided.

Sakura pressed on, watching Neji’s face warily. To heal him as quickly as she was, she was drawing in part on his energy as well. Unfortunately, that meant he was likely to pass out at any moment.

“My vision is going black,” the Hyuuga said lightly.

“That’s to be expected,” Sakura returned with some bluntness.

“Some forewarning would have been appreciated—” Neji slumped over before he could finish the words.

“Hold him up,” Sakura said stiffly, trying her best to avoid Kakashi’s presence in every other regard. She didn’t look up to see his reaction, but Neji’s body was propped up as she finished healing him.

At last, she pulled her hands away and straightened. “Done,” she announced—perhaps, redundantly, but she felt the sudden need to break the silence.

But scarcely a second later, she found out that something else would have broken the silence for her. She only had a brief moment to prepare herself, before the door crashed onto the ground with a loud thud, denting the clay floor so that particles of red drifted upward in a small cloud.

It was the lady who had been helping Hinata, Sakura identified immediately. Only, that had not been the entrance of an ally, but someone with rather hostile inclinations. Not thinking twice, she grabbed Neji by the collar and tossed him onto the bed behind her and Kakashi.

Her hand immediately went for the kunai on her leg holsters, only to find when she looked back up that she was staring at a back. Kakashi’s back.

Sakura’s gaze brushed the ends of his hair, cut messily above the pale column of his neck.

“Copy-nin,” the woman croaked, her voice hoarse.

“Lady Chiyo.” Sakura couldn’t see his face, but she could guess what he looked like by the way his head was tilted. She’d faced it one too many times, that infuriating look that was simultaneously disinterested and somehow relentlessly predatory.

“Konoha’s dogs have always been a plague on my family,” the older woman said softly. She folded her hands neatly in front of her, straightening to her full height—which was not much, but her presence seemed to expand to fill the room. “I shouldn’t even be surprised, should I?”

Sakura shifted to the right. She was tall enough to just see her over Kakashi’s shoulder, but not tall enough to have a comfortable view.

She only had a second to look—to take in the creased face, the dark eyes, and silver hair—before
her vision was blocked again. Blinking, Sakura gaped once more at the back in front of her once more.

“Your protégé, I assume,” Chiyo demanded, cold.

“A nuisance inflicted on me by the hokage,” Kakashi said coolly, a grating disdain in his voice. “Have to obey certain rules, you see, or I’ll get in trouble for the others I…accidentally break. Getting more to the point: are you here to kill me, Lady Chiyo, for killing your traitor grandson?”

A choked, stifled noise echoed through the room, before the woman’s voice emerged harder than before.

“Have you no shame, boy?”

“It was the Akatsuki that attacked your kage,” Kakashi said uncaringly. “Sasori is Akatsuki. I certainly don’t make it a habit to make myself easy prey for the sake of individuals such as yourself: the self-delusional.”

“The White Fang took my son and his wife,” Chiyo said slowly, deadly, “And now—you. You’ve taken my grandson from me. I don’t think it’s a coincidence, copy-nin, that the others got away and that he alone is dead. You hunted him, didn’t you? Like the dog you are. Like your father was.”

Sakura watched as Kakashi’s shoulders curved just slightly—just infinitesimally. But she understood, in that minute change, that something had shifted. His killing intent had been an insidious, thrumming presence the moment Chiyo had entered the room; now, it had grown into its full-fledged form, making it difficult to breathe, let alone move.

Sakura gritted her teeth against it. The White Fang. She had heard the name before—she hadn’t known he was Kakashi’s father. Now that she thought about it, she’d never even considered whether or not the copy-nin had parents.

“Did you even give Sasori a chance?” Chiyo asked, voice strained; Sakura could finally hear the grief in her voice, the pain desperately trying to be hidden. “Did you even try to—to resolve the conflict some other way? To talk him down?”

Kakashi didn’t answer her questions. Instead, he watched her silently. More than ever, Sakura wished she could see his face. Was his silence admission? Or had Sasori been like Kaido—

“Of course you didn’t. You’ve surpassed even your father in your bloodshed,” the old woman snarled.

Sakura heard a deep, slow inhale, before the following words.

“At least he had the good sense to kill himself.”

Sakura’s mouth flattened. Whatever her personal qualms with the copy-nin, that had crossed a line. She expected Kakashi to erupt any moment now. She had no idea what to do—stop him? Fight Chiyo?

Of course, Kakashi found it suitable now to defy expectations.

“Leave,” the copy-nin said, voice deathly soft.

Both Chiyo and Sakura gaped at him in shock. The older woman recovered first. Her face contorted as she took a short step forward. “You fool, you think—”
“You’re acting in grief,” Kakashi cut her off, turning to glance at the window. Sakura could see his profile, now. He looked like stone. “You should know better.”

The older woman physically recoiled from him like she’d been slapped.

“Your kage is weak, if you may recall,” he continued lowly, emotionless. “You bring war on your village, and it will be slaughter.”

The small woman stared at him for a long time, eyes dark and beady.

“Bide my time—is it?” she sighed finally. She gave an unpleasant smile. “You must know, son of the White Fang, that you had a better chance of surviving now than you will against my poison in the future.”

“Do I,” he voiced indifferently.

“Until that day,” Lady Chiyo said, acting as though she hadn’t heard his words. She gave a shallow bow, before departing the room as abruptly as she had entered it.

For a long time, both she and Kakashi remained exactly as they were, silent. Sakura was still processing what had happened—or rather, what hadn’t happened.

Because: how could someone so... incendiary as the copy-nin tolerate words like that? Was it Chiyo’s age? Sakura doubted it; she had seen Kakashi kill older. Had it been that she was a woman? That was even more ridiculous to contemplate, because for all his flaws (and there were many), Kakashi had never been a chauvinist.

He believed Sakura to be a silly, frivolous girl, but that had less so to do with her being a girl and more to do with believing her to be...well, an utterly useless shinobi.

As this thought crossed her mind, Sakura’s mood took a sharp downturn again.

“Good night, Kakashi-sensei.” Get out, she thought.

He gaze latched onto her with sudden intensity, like he had forgotten she was even there. Sakura tried to maintain the smile on her face.

His head snapped away dismissively, and he took a step. But there was something odd about that step, a bizarre swaying—

Sakura’s eyes fell on a small scratch she had missed earlier on his upper arm, almost entirely unnoticeable. Hardly a millimeter in width, that was all his opponent had been able to get. But it was enough: the scratch was raised and an unusual color.

“The blade that grazed you there. It was poisoned.”

He paid her no attention, moving straight towards the door as thought that moment of instability had only been imagined.

“You’re breaking the poison in your system down with your chakra, aren’t you?” she guessed, eyes narrow. She straightened to her full height. “You’re draining yourself unnecessarily.”

He paused finally, turning toward her. His jaw could have cut through diamond with how tightly it was clenched.

“You saw me heal them,” she said stiffly, hating that she had to do this—to persuade him to let her
heal him. Given the chance, she would have let him walk; if only there would be no consequences for such a decision. “Hinata’s the expert, but I can do the job good enough.”

His eyelids lowered to half-mast as he contemplated her. In that moment, Sakura felt like an insect pinned beneath a magnifying glass.

“It’s up to you,” she muttered. “You can travel and fight at full strength tomorrow. Or at diminished. To each their own, I suppose.”

Sakura was almost entirely certain that he would have hit her then, if he could have mustered the act, that is. Instead, he settled for glowering at her, the full force of his ire conveyed through the rapidly spinning sharingan.

“Onto the table,” she gestured, mostly to be annoying.

He didn’t shift an inch. Instead, his head rotated carelessly to face the window again.

Because he wasn’t looking, Sakura allowed her face to become something truly fearsome.

“Your shirt needs to be off,” she said through clenched teeth.

It was like Kakashi couldn’t hear her. Or, alternatively—that something truly fascinating was happening outside the window that consumed all his attention. Just to double check, Sakura glanced quickly.

Nothing but night sky.

Stalking forward, she grabbed ahold of Kakashi’s flak jacket—making sure to knot her fingers into the black cloth of the shirt beneath too—and rent the layers of clothing in two.

A guttural snarl emerged from somewhere deep in the copy-nin’s throat, his head shifting with lightning quickness. Sakura didn’t flinch, even when his face ended up a scarce few inches from hers.

“I need to track how far the poison has spread,” she explained stiffly.

His shoulders were hunched inward, like he intended to intimidate her with his larger size. Sakura would have sneered, if her attention hadn’t turned immediately to the task at hand.

She cracked her fingers before flexing them, lit with green chakra. She surveyed the entry point of the poison and then shifted her fingers through a short sequence of jutsus. A second later, the expanse of pale, scarred skin was lit by an intersection of glowing lines, where the poison coated his veins.

The glow was admittedly faint; Kakashi’s chakra was doing a good job of breaking it down through brute force.

She concentrated the next ten minutes on drawing the poison out, vein by vein, depositing the blue, viscous fluid into the potted plant in the corner of the room.

But sometimes, every few seconds, she would get distracted—

Distracted by, that is…

She was trying her best, she reflected bitterly. To ignore it. But increasingly, it was becoming impossible to.
It was—nothing. And simultaneously, everything. The smell of him: smoke, metal, pine, and—
The heat of him, his skin almost feverish every time her finger tips glanced it. The lean, scarred
expanse of his flesh gleaming in the dim lighting.

It had all meant nothing to her, until the point when it abruptly did.

And now, now Sakura wanted him. She resented him, wanted to stab him several times, and also—
apparently, now—to fuck him. What a devastating, soul-crushing development.

Sakura couldn’t exactly skirt around it anymore. Not when she was trying so determinedly hard to
suppress it. God knew what he could smell on her already, from her previous activities—but she
was determined to finish her work before he could smell this.

“Done,” she said a little too loudly.

He disappeared before her tongue had even curled to make the ‘n,’ taking Neji unconscious body
with him.

Sakura cursed loudly and collapsed flat on her back onto the bed. Then, after a moment of hateful
consideration, her hand left its former position at the edge of the bed to move somewhere else.

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**Author's Note:** SO sorry for the long wait! I had to go through finals rip:( But IM BACK NOW!!
Thank you so, so, so much for all the wonderful comments. I am determined to update more
regularly this summer, so sustain me with all your amazing thoughts/feedback!!

Also don't worry, I know we didn't get to see a ton of Itachi this chapter, but we will definitely see
more of him in the future!!!

On another note, I’m sort of high key considering starting a Sakura/Sasuke fanfic? Let me know
what you think / if you'd read it lol.

Another note: I CANT BELIEVE THIS FIC HAS REACHED 400 COMMENTS!! I will post an
omake soon to celebrate :D

Yet another note: also, I'm considering starting a fic of one shots with unexpected Naruto pairings--
also let me know if you would read this / what pairings or scenarios you would want to see.

Kk, that's all I have for now. Until next time!
Two trees away, Snail sat perched on a tree in a bright red kimono. Nestled between her thighs was a small mirror, which she peered down at to line her eyes and paint her lips.

Between every exchange for another makeup tool, she directed a very discreet glance Sakura’s way.

Hyena was sharpening her tanto against a rock a few meters away. Sakura could sense her cool attention on her as well, well-hidden by the curtain of her black hair.

Raccoon was slightly more polite about it, Sakura appreciated wryly. He had turned the opposite way as he slipped on his purple hakama, though he glanced at her occasionally as well through her reflection in the nearby river.

“So what happened?” a low voice demanded a scarce foot from her.

All three figures’ heads jerked up.

Sakura finished tying her obi, then met the brown-haired man’s equally unabashed nosiness with a narrow glare. Her mask was down, like Raccoon’s and Snail’s; Bear looked at these features, unimpressed.

“Everyone here’s wondering, alright? I’m just the only one with the balls to pursue the issue. I mean, we didn’t really think he’d kill you when he called you outside the bar, but—”

“Crow, I think you tied your obi incorrectly,” Snail interrupted abruptly.

Sakura glanced down at the obi with the sort of familiarity one normally directed toward foreign animals only glimpsed in rare scrolls.

“Does it matter?” Bear drawled. “It’s not like anyone’s going to look at her with you there.”

He said it like Sakura was meant to take offense, but it was rather the point. Sakura and Raccoon had been chosen for their respective roles precisely to make Snail stand out. And Snail was, without question, very pretty (or, the face she wore for ANBU missions was). Being petite, with a soft, tremulous voice and a certain air of innocence—almost certainly false, given what the shinobi did in her day to day—lent her an easy transition to her assigned role on this particular mission.

Snail slipped down from the tree, kimono fluttering in the wind as she descended. She reached Sakura and firmly took grasp of her obi, fixing it quickly.

“Get moving.”

Sakura kept her limbs loose with great effort at the sound of this new voice. She looked up from beneath her lashes.

Kakashi stood as tall as ever, but his skin had abandoned its pale cast in favor of something closer
to the color of sand. Other than that—and the fact that his eyes were amber and his hair black—his face and build remained largely unchanged.

Of course, the others probably didn’t have any point of comparison. But if the copy-nin remembered that she had seen him unmasked (or anything from that day at all, for that matter), he did a remarkable job of hiding it.

Bear hastily took his place atop the horse tied to the carriage, complaining beneath his breath about the animal’s smell. After a brief pause, Sakura, Raccoon, and Snail made their way into the modest vehicle. Hyena gave a nod their way and then disappeared into the trees.

Kakashi tracked her progress before entering the rickety carriage as well, sliding into place beside Snail. Sakura thanked the heavens that it was Raccoon beside her, and not him. She gazed studiously out the window.

“Move,” Kakashi demanded curtly. Bear lifted the reigns and prompted the horse into motion. The carriage made a concerning creaking noise before following.

“You have the drug?”

“Yes, taichou,” Snail answered.

“When he’s unclothed, inject it into the femoral vein. The aphrodisiac-sedative combination should keep him occupied for thirty minutes maximum.”

“I understand.”

“It’s critical that he believes a sexual encounter transpired and that our ‘visit’ goes unnoticed,” Kakashi continued stoically.

“Understood, taichou.”

Sakura knew from Tsunade that drugs like the one Snail was carrying were exceptionally precious. Villages had to keep their use of such compounds discreet, as they left traces that could easily be deconstructed and analyzed given the slightest suspicion. If discovered, targets could build immunity years of work and research became abruptly useless.

Sakura’s gaze fell unbidden on the copy-nin. Like many other villages’ special ops, there were branches of ANBU that engaged in actual seduction. Kakashi’s team was not one of them—hence the seduction drug.

Was this mission, like the previous, meant to end in a bloodbath too, she wondered idly. Was that why their team had been chosen?

She couldn’t rule out the possibility for sure. In an unusual turn of events, everyone had been informed of their roles for this mission and just that. The target of the drug, indeed, seemed to be only one minor step in a multi-layered, complex plan that only Kakashi knew the entirety of.

Which was fine with her. It was an odd mission when Sakura didn’t have to kill someone.

_Boring, you mean_, the Voice offered.

Sakura gazed peacefully out the carriage.
Almost a full day later, they reached the sedate, unassuming establishment they had been searching for. After a brief conversation with the owner—and after a few coins changed hands—they were allowed to enter and to display their ‘wares’ among the private rooms. They struck gold on the third.

Seated in front of them on a tatami mat, Hachiro—their target—sipped his sake indifferently along with his fellow accountants.

From her demure position, Sakura could see that the copy-nin’s shoulders were slumped and his back slightly curved, making him seem far less aggressive than usual. His voice, when he spoke, was a carefully modulated tenor, higher and smoother than usual.

“So fine a group, and yet so lacking in…suitable entertainment. Please, allow me to present to you my finest.”

It was a silkiness she had never heard before. Sakura detested it.

At the sounds of jeers, Snail stepped in front of Sakura and Raccoon, curtsying. The shoulder of her kimono slid down and revealed a naked shoulder.

Hachiro was a handsome man, which didn’t bode especially well; he might turn them away altogether if his libido was satiated sufficiently elsewhere. But the man beside Hachiro nudged him, a slightly fearful smile on his lips. “Hachiro-san, you work so hard. Perhaps, one of them may help you…relax.”

Hachiro tilted his head, seeming unconcerned by this.

“Gods!” another man laughed riotously, clearly drunk. He swayed, even seated. “Such a tight ass.”

The first man’s eyes widened in panic.

“By all means,” Hachiro sipped his sake casually. “If you don’t like your job, I can easily relieve you of it.”

The drunk man seemed to abruptly sober. “H-Hachiro-san, don’t take what I said the wrong way,” the man laughed nervously. “I-In fact! Tonight will be on me! Pick any one of them, I’ll pay for it.”

Hachiro smiled unfeelingly. “No matter the price?”

The man swallowed with ostensible difficulty. “Any…one.” Clearly, he was willing to take a blow to keep his job.

“What was your name again?”

“Nazako, at your service, sir,” Kakashi said, bowing smoothly.

“Who is your most expensive whore, Nazako?” Hachiro asked lazily, sipping his wine.

“Why, let me introduce you,” Kakashi answered, voice like velvet.

As soon as Snail was within reach of Kakashi, he wrapped his arm around her midsection and spun her around. His forearm pressed right into her ribcage right beneath her breasts, unmistakably bolstering them to make them more prominent.
His other hand moved swiftly up to grasp her chin and tilt her head to the side, displaying the long line of her neck.

Sakura’s lips tightened darkly at the sight, before she gathered the wherewithal to avert her gaze to the floor meekly.

“This is Odori,” Kakashi said with a slow, indulgent smile. “Odori-chan is unmistakably the best I can offer. She comes with superlative reviews.”

He delivered the words hotly against Snail’s cheek.

Kakashi pushed her forward, and she moved swiftly to kneel by Hachiro’s side, resting her head against his chest. The act was deceptively innocuous, for in doing so and leaning slightly forward, she slyly allowed him a good look down the gaps of her loosely tied kimono.

He didn’t look.

“How much is she?”

Kakashi’s gaze shifted between them with the pretense of calculation, before listing an obscenely high price. The man who had offered to pay looked like he might keel over.

“I’ll take that one,” Hachiro said. “For the price you just stated.”

Sakura heard only silence in response to this proclamation. She lifted her head just slightly. Her gaze landed first on a finger pointed in her direction. Then, it moved to the owner of that finger.

She blinked incredulously at it. Her eyes darted to Kakashi.

He wasn’t looking at her. He was staring, with exceptional stillness, at Hachiro.

“What!” the man cried out, looking on the verge on tears at this prospect. “She isn’t even pretty!”

“Didn’t you know?” Hachiro said lightly. “It’s the whores that are unremarkable that work harder to make a living. I only want to get my money’s worth, Akiro-san. Forgive me, I misspoke—your money’s worth.”

Sakura’s mouth twisted with incredulity.

Without a further glance, the accountant gestured for ‘Odori’ to move away from him. Snail stood up with a ferocious pout. As she turned to stomp her way to Kakashi, the panic in her eyes was clear.

Sakura stared at him hard as well, trying to find some silent signal as to what she should do. Would they attempt to move the drug from Snail’s person to her person? She knew it was probably too risky, could possibly jeopardize the whole thing, but—

But when she looked at him, Kakashi genuinely appeared uncaring about this outcome, even bored. It was only when Hachiro’s attention went to him again that the copy-nin’s expression changed, suddenly becoming animated with a greedy smile that befitted his character.

Sakura’s lips tightened. She read the message loud and clear. It seemed that this was no longer the copy-nin’s—or Snail’s—problem but hers. Oh yes, the mighty Kakashi probably had infinitely more important aspects of this mission to address.

Raccoon’s hiss beside her jolted her into motion. She stood up swiftly, perhaps a little more swiftly
than a civilian should have, and walked over to the man.

He stood up as well.

“Akiro, I’ll leave you to take care of payment,” Hachiro smiled. He placed a few coins onto the table. “For the drink and the mediocre shamisen.” The geisha behind him flinched.

As she and the man crossed the room to exit, Sakura flicked a glance to her captain, jaw clenched.

His back faced her as he casually negotiated with Akiro for payment.

The most immediate issue, Sakura decided calmly, was that she did not have the drug.

No, the sole vial was contained somewhere on Snail’s person—which would go entirely unperturbed tonight. She was beginning to theorize that she possibly had murdered an innocent orphan in a previous life; how else could she have earned herself laughably horrible luck in this one?

Snail had been the most likely choice for the whore picked tonight, if at all (they had known from intel Hachiro preferred women to men). Placing the one available dose on her had been the smartest choice. And yet—here she was.

The rickshaw slowed to a stop. A second later, the runner stepped forward to help her down. She heard Hachiro step down lightly behind her.

Genjutsu was the only feasible option. She had a seeming advantage in the fact that he didn’t seem suspicious of her; but then, his face was a remarkable study in marble for the most part.

A male servant greeted them at the door.

“Take her to the bedroom and draw a bath.”

The servant bowed low and then directed Sakura up a staircase to a relatively austere master bedroom. It contained the bare minimum—a large mattress, bedecked by simple, unremarkable sheets and cushions. A similarly unremarkable dresser lined one wall, with a modest, serviceable mirror. Window-doors on the opposite side opened up onto a small balcony.

The bedroom was separated by no more obstacle than a curtain from the bathroom. When the servant finished drawing the curtain back, Sakura’s gaze found the white, porcelain tub at its center. He filled it with steaming water, tendrils of steam floating toward the ceiling.

“Undress,” the servant said, as he rotated the valves shut.

Sakura pretended she hadn’t heard, continuing to survey the steam idly. The servant left the room.

As she heard footsteps approach the door, she seated herself on the bed. When Hachiro at last entered, he cast her a nonchalant glance before removing his hakama. Without a word, he slid into the tub and leaned his head against the porcelain edge.

Sakura watched him closely. Had he forgotten about her, she wondered. Perhaps, he had simply intended to purchase her time using Akiro’s money without touching her at all.
For a long moment, she thought the man had decided exactly that. Then, slowly, his head tilted upwards.

His gaze passed over body—slow and deliberate. He stood and rivulets of water streamed down the expanse of his body and onto the cold floor. He moved forward, a slow, sedate pace to his steps.

As his path neared the side of the room with the dresser, Sakura moved as well. It was more the unexpected nature of the act than the use of much strength on her part that made Hachiro take a step back as she collided with him. As she had mostly expected, he responded with force. She felt hands grasp almost at her waist, and then her back was shoved hard—hard enough to leave concerning bruises on a civilian—against the dresser in retaliation.

Sakura let out a small cry, expressing of pain she had long ceased becoming susceptible to.

“I wanted to touch you,” she explained, voice weak. To control his hands so he wouldn’t detect her telling musculature.

“You try something like that again, and I’ll give you to the servant outside and anyone who passes by this house until dawn. Understood?” he said coolly.

Sakura’s temper flared. Outwardly, she nodded and shrank back against the dresser.

His hands latched onto the sides of her cheap kimono and pulled, ripping the material. Her fists tightened instinctively as his cold hands met the surface of her flesh. She hid the action with a gasp that caused his eyes to flicker in annoyance.

As he palmed her breasts, his teeth glanced a vulnerable part of Sakura’s neck that—in any other situation—would have made her tear his throat out. With her teeth.

Instead, however, relegated to the role she was tonight, Sakura clenched her teeth and gave a low, strangled moan, throwing her head back.

When she opened her eyes again, she made eye contact with Kakashi.

Her head snapped back up with painful quickness. The apparition did not disappear.

There he was, completely visible through the double doors-windows that led to the balcony. Kakashi had removed the henge and wore his mask again. His posture, she noticed, was relaxed as he leaned against the railing of the balcony.

Hachiro did not cease his rough handling of her body, but Sakura had become all but numb to it. Her body was cold, almost sensationless, as she examined the figment outside the window.

It was dark outside, but somehow she could see his eyes with unerring clarity. The crimson-vermillion red of the sharingan and brooding charcoal of his regular eye told a different story.

Despite his relaxed posture, Kakashi’s gaze was savage and intent on her.

Hands gripped her knees and wrested them apart. Sakura’s face contorted into a snarl, forgetting ‘who’ and where she was. She regained control of her expression just in time as Hachiro’s eyes passed over her face. His hand moved simultaneously to slide between her thighs.
Moving quickly, Sakura tangled one hand in Hachiro’s hair—holding his head firmly in place so that he could not look behind him; with the other, she made the signs for the one-handed genjutsu.

His eyes slid shut and he crumpled toward the floor. Before he could fall completely, she picked him up with one hand on his collar and tossed him onto the bed. Hair fell into her eyes with the motion. An object entered the peripheral of her vision. Her hand snapped out, snatching the incoming object out of the air. She turned it over. It was her hair comb.

Her head slowly moved up from her open palm. Kakashi now stood inside the bedroom with her.

Stoically, she grabbed the damaged halves of her kimono and pulled them together. After a moment, she paused, eyes narrowing. Her obi was strewn on the ground barely a meter from her. She looked up to examine the room’s only other conscious occupant.

She didn’t know what possessed her to do it. Madness, possibly. (Probably).

“Pick it up,” she commanded.

Sakura couldn’t see Kakashi’s face, as it was cast in the shadows. But his eyes glowed—with something ineffable and dangerous—as he surveyed her. And then, as her own eyes lowered in a blink, he became a blur of motion.

By the time her lashes had lifted again, he was down on one knee, his head was level with her knees as she perched on the dresser still. His head was cocked to the side, his nostrils flared, as his fingers grazed over the white obi.

Sakura yanked her chin up and raised her hand, palm open in wordless demand.

Kakashi’s mismatched eyes burned into her from his position, unmoving. The clouds must have shifted, because abruptly, light was cast into the room again from the moon. It lit half his face. But the half she saw was enough to make her still. There was insanity on the visible half of his face, a barely restrained something that had her mouth twisting.

“Give it,” she whispered, the words harsh in the utter quiet.

His head was still tilted, his eyes still burning into in that peculiar, scalding manner, as his hand lifted slowly—a mockery of his earlier speed. The heavy material of the obi made a sibilant noise as it slid from the floor.

Sakura watched its progression with determined focus. She was immediately aware, therefore, when the copy-nin’s hand stopped again, barely above her knee.

His hand hovered there, the heat from his radiating from his palm and making the hair on Sakura’s leg rise.

Kakashi’s face was half obscured by the black mask, but when her eyes darted to him, she knew what he was going to say before he had even said it.

Shock made her numb. Dust particles that had had floated through the air, steadily, gradually, stopped their natural trajectory. The whistle of the wind through the trees dissipated into sudden, deathly silence.

“I want you.”

The dresser shook suddenly with the force of both the copy-nin’s palms settling on it, framing her
body. He looked deranged by the confession, like he would have liked nothing more than to make it untrue.

And, abruptly, Sakura came back to herself.

His eyes were half-lidded, feral, as he peered up at her from between her legs. “I want to fuck you.” Her ears burned.

“Find an oiran,” she snapped.

“I did,” he spat back.

A humorless laugh bubbled up. Was that what she had been for? But she felt the seemingly ever-present knot now between her legs clench, so exquisitely, painfully tight.

She watched his hands spasm on either side of her, his nails digging long cracks into the marble surface of the dresser.

“I don’t feel the same,” she tried, attempting to sound indifferent.

But she knew her fingers trembled too much, frenetic and uncontrollable, like an addict long deprived. Sakura watched as his nostrils flared, and he looked up at her, gaze terrible and knowing.

“I can smell you,” he said, voice a rasp. For one, devastating second, his hot gaze flickered toward that part between her legs, which was undeniably wet.

Her shoulders trembled violently. “So?” she told him coldly.

His eyelids slid down further. “Let me touch you,” he whispered, gaze simultaneously livid and hungry.

The last of Sakura’s cool control snapped. Her hands knotted in the hair at the back of his neck, but it didn’t feel so much that she was pulling him up as her hands were following his motion upward. In an instant, the eyes that had drilled into her from below were level with her. His palms, coarse, rough, and blazing with unnatural heat settled on the tensed muscle of her thighs.

“You want to touch me?” she hissed. “Touch me.”

His eyes flashed with victory.

And then hands slid up her legs with lightning quickness, electrifying the skin, muscle, and tissue there. He flicked aside her kimono with disparagement, like it was contemptible for obstructing him. And then, he cupped her, the weight and heat of his palm against her a fatal blow.

She felt like she was on fire, like she was liable to become ash at any moment.

The moment his fingers drove into her, Sakura’s head crashed into the mirror’s dresser, shattering it. Glass shards fell over both her and him, as ecstasy stole words—all semblance of language—momentarily from her. She grasped at his shoulders with bruising strength, and he took it, eyes dark, wild with equal greediness.

The roughness of the skin on his hands felt glorious inside her, the width of his knuckles spreading and twisting wrecking her with how terrifyingly well he fit, how almost-perfectly filled she felt at last.

His fingers curled, and Sakura’s mouth fell open in a soundless gasp, a mere breath of air exhaled.
The world consisted only of that hot, desperate space between her legs and his fingers. And then—the iron heat of cock pressing urgently against her. Her gaze flicked down to it, rapt, then back up to his face.

The copy-nin’s face was a beautiful painting of both insatiability and starvation, the tension in his jaw visible even through the black mask. Sakura’s hands snapped to his hips and dragged him hard against her, cradling him—his cock, she thought, and a new rush of heat flooded her core—between her thighs.

She watched him, heady with—she didn’t know what it was. An odd sense of power, perhaps. And also, a keen knowledge that—

She locked her legs behind his back, possessive and also half-wondrous. And, like that, Kakashi’s face was suddenly in front of hers, his ragged breath a hot caress against her lips. For a long moment, Sakura glared at him, and he glared back at her equally resentfully.

Then, his mask was gone, and his mouth was on hers, filthy and dirty and harsh, as his tongue dragged forcefully against her own.

The full force of his body was driving her against the dresser as he rutted against her, his snarls swallowed by Sakura’s mouth. His fingers, belying the savagery of his mouth, were calamitously deft inside her, manipulating that particular spot in her to the point of madness—her madness. And Sakura felt like she was dying—the most terrible, hateful death possible because it seemed both so thunderous and terribly sweet, and she wanted it so, so badly. Her only consolation was that there was equal desperation on his face, in the dangerous tightness of his jaw, in the strained veins of his neck and arms, in the hardness of his cock.

“Look at me,” he growled into her ear, his newly revealed mouth—firm and sensuous—hot on her.

Sakura suddenly felt like she couldn’t direct her gaze anywhere else.

“Look at me,” he repeated again even though she already had, and he knew it. She saw white as she came, gaze blindly locked on his. Dimly, she felt the body rutting against abruptly still, tight against her. Possibly, he said something. Possibly, he was entirely silent. She was deaf to the world and didn’t know.

He left immediately; the loss of his lips first, his fingers a second later; the double door windows parted and shut soundlessly, and Sakura didn’t really care.

Disbelieving of what had transpired, she left the dresser and staggered toward the bed. She settled on it, cheeks red, marks trailing from her neck and down, and smelling like sex. This, ironically, could only aid her whenever Hachiro woke up.

But Sakura didn’t have it in her to be grateful right now.

She was livid—at herself, at Kakashi, at the fucking ceiling above that had seen it all.

So she had known before this how regrettably undiscerning her libido was—she cringed just thinking about it—fine. But she had never, ever intended to act on it. Her body was supposed to defer to her mind, which very, very strongly maintained a decided stance of antagonism toward the individual she had just—

It had clearly been a lapse of judgement for the both of them. At this acknowledgement, she began to calm down. Neither of them had touched each other just now because they liked each other. This had just been…a shared momentary lapse in judgement, and it would never be repeated.
Perhaps, even, this had been a necessary evil in order to purge herself of that misdirected lust. Now, she would be able to pretend this all had never happened.

Sakura settled back against the pillows and waited for Hachiro to wake up.

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**Author's Note:**

Soooooo :o Yep. I know I wasn't being very coy with chapter title, but...that happened :D Please let me know what you think and continue leaving me all those wonderful, delicious comments / kudos!

P.S. In an unprecedented turn of events, I actually almost have the next chapter ready to go!

P.P.S. Ummm I don't really watch Boruto, but this popped up on youtube in my recs and Sakura here (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XJYgh5Wwuk4) is basically FIRE, did you guys know about this?? Thoughts??

Until next time!
A sullen Bear rolled up to Hachiro’s estate on horseback halfway between dawn and noon the next day, pulling with him the same rickety carriage they had arrived in. As the carriage creaked to a stop, Hachiro placed a cool hand on the back of Sakura’s neck, as though she were cattle that he was ensuring wouldn’t run.

The door to the carriage swung open. Sakura directly at the sun and wondered if the act would be able to blind her for the next few painful minutes.

“How effective had that genjutsu been exactly?” Hachiro’s hand shifted from her neck to her chin, lifting her face to look up at him. “It’s so rare to find a whore that obeys so well. I’m almost tempted to keep this one.”

“Tomo-chan treated you well?” Cool, business-like.

Sakura scowled.

That distracted her, if for a moment. How effective had that genjutsu been exactly?

Hachiro’s hand shifted from her neck to her chin, lifting her face to look up at him. “It’s so rare to find a whore that obeys so well. I’m almost tempted to keep this one.”

“Very,” Hachiro said to Kakashi. “She exceeded expectations.”

Nope. Bowing, Sakura pulled away with a shaky laugh and walked backwards the entire way until she was in the carriage.

“I’m so sorry,” Snail said immediately, face tormented. “I can’t believe that happened—”

“There’s nothing to apologize for,” Sakura said quickly.

Before she could explain, the door swung open again and Kakashi entered. She gritted her teeth as the man settled in beside her, the full side of his body flush against her own. The copy-nin surveyed the expressions of her team members.

“Who’s been hanged?” he rasped disinterestedly, voice finally settling into its normal tone.

“Genjutsu,” Sakura blurted, eyes wide. “I used a genjutsu.”

Snail gaped for a bit, then grabbed Sakura’s hands. “I’m so glad,” she said fervently. “I couldn’t sleep all night, just thinking…”

Not for the first time, Sakura was touched by Snail’s warmth. It wasn’t what one usually saw in ANBU.

Still, she was beginning to realize that for all the mythology surrounding ANBU members being heartless, soulless machines—especially in the lower ranks—it was just that: mythology. Sakura guessed now that, when it mattered, everyone just hid it well. After all, Raccoon had offered his water to her after her first truly awful mission, had tried to console her in his own quiet way. Even Bear, whom Sakura detested mightily, had exposed his humanity as much as his teammates had during the Kino mission. And one more, Sakura forced herself to acknowledge. For all his arrogance, his condescension, his seeming sheer disregard for the lives around him except for their capacity to enact violence—Kakashi had betrayed himself that day as well.

She leaned against the side of the carriage.
Trying to save Kino: that had been the first crack. Another: that he had come after her when she had been ‘kidnapped’ by Akane. And Kakashi’s fixation on Naruto, the way he ran him into the ground again and again during training. She knew now that the Akatsuki were after him. Could Sakura honestly say in his position she would have done something much different? Had Crow? Fine. She could give him that.

But then—*Your greatest accomplishment for the ages will be feeding the grass. After the first few years, your parents alone will remember you.* He had said that to her, derisively, while Akane’s corpse was still warm. Kakashi thought she was useless and hopelessly so.

If, she thought scowling. If she pushed aside the issue of *why* for a moment (and this was hard for her to do, made her feel like she was being too generous): then what she had left was what he had ostensibly intended to do about it. His words, hateful and cruel, had been meant to alienate. If Sakura had been the girl he imagined, it would have demotivated her.

She shifted in her seat, shoulders tightening. *If* she were the girl Kakashi imagined, someone who had never been given any reason, *real* reason, to change from the twelve year old she had once been, he would have…probably saved her life.

Potentially, Sakura corrected, glowering at nothing in particular. Perhaps, she would have been nothing more than that thirteen year old, simply aged a few more years and with a few more meaningless credentials. Possibly, she would have been lucky and found some legitimate path, though never on par with or the same as her teammates’.

It almost physically hurt her to admit it. But now that she could, Sakura assured herself, she could identify every reason for loathing Kakashi that was *undeniably valid.*

Pointedly, he had never given her genin self a reason to change. He had taken one look at her and declared her a lost cause, unworthy of his effort, when he couldn’t have possibly known what she was capable of. And *whatever* his rationale had been, in that park that night it had almost cost her everything. Why had he never given her the chance he had Naruto? Sasuke, for god’s sake, had been fucked up enough to leave Konoha and join Orochimaru. Had it been her personality? Her particular brand of ineptitude?

She huffed loudly and rested her head tiredly against the side of the carriage. Her timing was poor, however, as one of the wheels hit a rock on the road just then, jostling all of them. Sakura’s head hit the edge of the door with a resounding thud.

“My bad,” Bear called from outside, not sounding very apologetic at all.

“Did he do that before you could perform the genjutsu?” Snail demanded angrily. Belatedly, Sakura realized the other woman was speaking to her. At her confused expression, Snail reached out to brush a spot on the side of her neck that had been just revealed by her disrupted kimono.

“Yes,” she settled with, voice a bit too tight, the entire while uncomfortably aware of the heat of the body pressed against her.

She rested her right back against the edge of the carriage and hoped for several other giant rocks on their path back to Konoha to concuss her memory out of her.
They stopped twice, primarily to feed the horse. Sakura took each break as a chance to escape the confines of the carriage and hope for a different arrangement upon her return. Unfortunately, Snail and Raccoon seemed determined to stay where they were.

Coming back from the second break—which had been rather unnecessary, they were quite close now—Sakura stared blankly for a moment at the open space left to her before settling into it stoically.

Sakura inhaled sharply. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she looked at him at last. She wasn’t sure what she expected to find; Kakashi looked as unperturbed as ever. Here, she had been sitting and barely maintaining any pretense of normalcy the entire while, especially under Snail’s questioning, and here he was—

Maybe, she wondered suddenly, face darkening, the copy-nin fucked all his teammates. Maybe this was all quite normal for him. Maybe Snail had blushed when he’d held her in front of Hachiro not just because of his proximity, but because of remembrance of something more.

What if this was some fucked up rite of passage, she contemplated icily. Was that why Bear and the others had been so nosy at the beginning of the mission about what had happened when they left the bar? Had this all happened to them too?

She wasn’t aware she was glaring at him until mismatched eyes flicked in her direction, meeting hers and then narrowing at what they found.

Slightly, fractionally, Kakashi’s right brow arched.

Sakura turned her gaze away, expression thunderous as she surveyed the window. The entire carriage was silent as they completed the last leg of their journey, except for the random curse from Bear.

They reached ANBU headquarters at sunset. Despite the cooling effect of night, the air was especially humid—it had probably rained during the day. Sakura’s kimono was sticking to her slightly, and she shifted to create some separation.

“I’m out of here,” Bear said, just as the carriage came to a full stop. They all heard the distinctive noise of shunshining.

“Ah, thank the gods,” Snail said, nudging at Raccoon.

“I’m moving,” he said good-naturedly, swinging open the door. He had barely stepped out, before his frame began to vibrate, disappearing a scarce second later.

“See you, Crow. Taichou,” Snail said cheerily. She took off at a hasty pace north of the headquarters, fanning herself.

Sakura, who had been waiting impatiently, anxiously, the entire time, moved quickly for the door.

Only to be stopped. Jaw tight, she lowered her gaze slowly to the cause. The pale, long fingers on the sleeve of her kimono were only slightly curled, holding her almost lazily.

Swallowing, she smoothed her expression into something suitably distant. “Taichou?”

The copy-nin’s face scanned her face coolly. “You’re angry,” he drawled, tongue flicking on the last syllable.
She stared at him guilelessly. Just after the gap between question and answer became uncomfortably long, she smiled sharply and answered: “Oh, don’t worry, just the usual pre-menstruation phenomenon.”

If Kakashi had displayed then the usual squeamishness most men demonstrated whenever the topic of menstruation came up, her temper might have improved. To her dismay, he didn’t even blink. Instead, his eyes glinted with what looked like mockery to Sakura.

She shifted her weight forward, resting her elbows combatively on her knees. “Did you want to know the details of my flow as well?” she pressed with a sweet smile, “In the past five months: heavy, regular, regular, light—”

“You’re lying,” Kakashi interrupted.

Sakura’s lips twisted. “Excuse me?”

He stared at her for a long moment, head tilted back and lids slanted down. “You have a tell.”

Her shoulders tightened. “Really?” she asked, voice as deadly as it was quiet. “And how would you know?”

Next thing she knew, she had left her side of the carriage and was pressed against Kakashi, her hands knotted in the collar of his black shirt.

“What are you playing at?” Sakura whispered coldly.

He lowered his head, and even though he was only a hand’s span taller than her, it abruptly felt like more. “I could ask the same of you.”

And suddenly, he was inhaling, dragging his nose from her hairline down her neck, until his gaze darted back up, barely restrained. “You walk in here, you sit next to me the entire time, smelling like that—”

“Like what?” Sakura demanded through clenched teeth.

His lips pressed hotly against her ear, electrifying even despite the mask. “Like my fingers weren’t enough,” he snarled.

Sakura reared back, something like fight or flight shrieking in the back of her mind. Fight won. She crowded him against his seat, tightening her hold on him. “Shut up,” she raged, vicious. “Shut the fuck up.”

He didn’t seem to hear her. “What is it about you?” Kakashi demanded, eyes slitted. “You’re not beautiful—” his gaze roved over her features with a sort of frustrated madness—“everything about you is unextraordinary—”

I could you kill you pretty well, Sakura was about to say. As you’ve seen, I could make you dead in some truly extraordinary ways—

“And yet,” he drawled coldly. “And yet.”

He cut himself off, eyes narrowing at her.

But she was smarter this time. Fumbling, Sakura’s fingers found the handle to the door. She yanked it, stumbled out, and shunshined away.
Coward, the Voice whispered. And Sakura did what she usually did—that is, she ignored it.

When she received summons the next morning for Team Seven training, she threw the scroll straight into her trash bin.

She wouldn’t, she decided coolly. She couldn’t. Not today.

She strolled into her bathroom and went about her morning activities calmly: washed her face, brushed her teeth, patted ineffectually at her hair. It was a warm day. Nice. Her refrigerator was also near-empty. What better time to make a trip to the grocery store?

She made a quick list, taking stock of the contents of her pantry and refrigerator. Tomatoes, cucumber, cauliflower, egg…

As she went to grab her wallet, she finally paused. If she didn’t show, she confronted at last, reluctantly—well, what would happen? She didn’t have a note from a medic.

Sakura shrugged to herself. She could forge one.

But if the issue ever circulated to Tsunade? She frowned. The hospital records would not be on her side.

And worse, it dawned on her suddenly, if she didn’t show—Kakashi the captain of Team Seven could have the perfect excuse. This was precisely the sort of opportunity he was probably waiting for. He would undoubtedly present this to Tsunade as evidence that ‘Haruno Sakura’ needed to be removed from active combat duty.

Ultimately, as though it were the eve of her execution, Sakura gravely made breakfast with the last of her supplies. Her food tasted like sawdust in her mouth. She chewed it slowly.

“Are you alright, dear?” her neighbor asked when she finally left. Mrs. Ito petted her white cat with long red-painted nails as she posed the question; the cat looked rather harassed by the contact.

Sakura blinked at her and nodded, leaving the complex without another word. As she walked, she noted the cloudiness of the sky. Although the sun had definitely peeked out when she had first woken, it seemed the weather had taken an unexpected turn.

Ironic, she thought sourly. Sakura tried to walk as slowly as possible, but reaching her destination was inevitable, if lamentable.

When she arrived at the training grounds, it was to an odd tableau.

Naruto, perched on a giant rock, crouched in a bizarre position as he surveyed another figure with suspicion. Sai stood beside the same rock with a rather sedate expression, looking as though his mind were miles away.

And the man in front of them, who gazed back at the two with exquisite blankness, was decidedly not Kakashi.

“Who are you?” Sakura asked.
“My question exactly!” Naruto trumpeted, lunging to his feet with a finger pointed in the stranger’s direction.

Said stranger merely blinked. He had short, tufty brown hair the color of over-steeped sobacha and dark, glittering eyes. “Call me Yamato,” he said without any aplomb.

Sakura rubbed her eyes tiredly, aware that they were ringed by black. At this point, she didn’t even care who the strange man on Team Seven’s training grounds was.

“Where is Kakashi-san?” Sai intoned, finally looking somewhat interested in the scene before him.

“He is otherwise occupied,” Yamato explained—which explained, really, nothing at all. “Therefore, I will be your stand-in captain for the foreseeable future.”

Foreseeable future? Sakura’s mood brightened. It seemed the gods really did care; this was proof that miracles happened, if nothing else.


“Yamato-san, is it? Great,” Sakura said, smiling sweetly, “I look forward to being under your care.”

Yamato blinked, for a moment almost seeming touched, before his expression smoothed over. “Yes,” he announced, clearing his throat, “I look forward to being under your care as well.”

“Sa-ku-raaaa,” Naruto complained, jumping down from the boulder. “I was really sure he was going to teach me a kick ass jutsu this time!” He kicked up dirt onto her shin guards as he landed. Sakura glared at him.

“I think we can all agree that a brief change of leadership may benefit your immediate well-being, dickless,” Sai said delicately. He sidled to Sakura’s other side as he bowed.

Yamato inclined his head a bit belatedly. Something odd passed between them, a coded message Sakura couldn’t read.

“Ah,” Sai said softly. He looked uncharacteristically grim. “We have much in common.”

“Sakura,” Naruto muttered urgently into her ear, “I think he just—”

“Yes.”

Short of looking at them directly, Sai couldn’t have made it more obvious that this was a hint for them. What Sai couldn’t tell them about himself, Yamato maybe could.

“The hokage has given us a mission,” the older man continued, unblinking. “As you might recall, Kakashi-senpai killed the Akatsuki operative Sasori during your last team mission. Before doing so, he was able to extract critical information about Orochimaru. Another shinobi pursued this information.”

Sakura straightened. Kakashi-senpai? That suggested that Yamato had been under Kakashi’s command at some point, because the man was otherwise clearly older than Kakashi.

Naruto was unnaturally quiet beside her. Belatedly, she realized the name that Yamato had mentioned that would be of especial interest to him: Orochimaru.

“This shinobi was to go to Tenchi bridge in the Village Hidden in the Grass at high noon to meet a
spy Sasori had planted as one of Orochimaru’s subordinates. She did—” Yamato paused shortly, before continuing bluntly—“It was a trap. An altercation occurred. She did not survive. However, her summons were able to track Kabuto back to Orochimaru’s hideout and convey their information.”

“So our mission is?” Sai prompted calmly.

“To validate this information; not to engage.”

Sakura frowned. “Tsunade-sama wants us,” she began slowly, “to investigate the hideout of the man who killed the sannin. The three of us. And you.”

If she remembered anything from that day in the Forest of Death other than the bite with the curse mark, it was that Orochimaru had not only wanted Sasuke, but Naruto too.

And it was obvious, now, in retrospect why the copy-nin had been assigned the captain of Team Seven despite his unparalleled success in ANBU—he had been charged with guarding and training the last Uchiha in Konoha and its only jinchuriki, two of the village’s most sought after and thus vulnerable individuals.

Why the hell would Tsunade suddenly want to dangle Naruto in front of Orochimaru, in his very own hideout, without Kakashi on the same mission?

Yamato was more observant than she had expected, because he asked quietly, “Is there a problem, Haruno-san?”

But nothing she said now was going to change anything. All she could hope was that the four of them were enough. She pasted a smile on her face. “Not at all.”

There wasn’t much to do other than to double-check their packs were mission ready before they left. As they ran, Yamato kept a slightly faster pace. This created some separation between himself and the three of them, which allowed them to talk openly.

“Orochimaru,” Sai said slowly, expression blank. “That would be the person your former teammate defected for, yes?”

“Yes,” Naruto affirmed moodily.

“We’re meant to investigate, not engage,” the dark-haired boy said slowly.

Sakura darted a look at Naruto from the corner of her eye. His lips were pursed, his blue eyes darker than usual.

“Naruto,” she said, voice warning.

“He’s—he’d be right there,” he burst out. “It’s been three years. Who knows what’s happened during that time.”

“Exactly.”

Naruto spun on her, angry. “I don’t get it, Sakura,” he accused. “You begged me to bring him back. You made me promise. And now you seem so…like you don’t even care.”

“I grew up,” she hissed, nostrils flaring. “I realized that I never should have asked you to make that promise and that you should never have agreed to it. I realized that if I wanted something, I should
have damn well done it myself. And I realized that, in the end, what you or I possibly wanted then or want now doesn’t matter in the least.”

“Why not?”

“Because if Sasuke doesn’t want to come back, what’s the point?” Sakura said coolly. “What do you think will happen? You break all his bones, you drag him back to Konoha, and as soon he’s healed, he tries to escape? Are you going to keep him locked up for his whole life?”

“Of course not,” Naruto argued, face reddening. “That’s why we have to convince him. Whether that happens before or after we bring him back to Konoha—that doesn’t matter. Being home will change his mind, if it hasn’t been changed already.”

“And if it doesn’t, how long will you wait? Years? His whole life?”

Naruto’s brow furrowed. He turned suddenly to Sai. “You. You’ve been awful quiet. What do you think?”

Sai blinked, clearly not having expected to be consulted. He considered the question very seriously, answering only after some careful thought.

“I believe people are entitled to make their own mistakes,” Sai said softly. “I believe that they must also face the consequences of those mistakes in order to learn from them. However, I believe also, as the saying goes, that no man is an island. It is, perhaps, the responsibility of friends to help each other recognize their own transgressions.”

“Another time,” Sakura snapped. “When we have better reinforcements, then Naruto can make his case. We aren’t prepared for that kind of mission. If we infiltrate now and Sasuke is deaf to what Naruto has to say, we’re in the middle of enemy territory and vastly outnumbered.”

“So you elect to abandon a former friend until then,” Sai considered, voice void of judgement. He considered her with oddly penetrating eyes.

Sakura’s mouth flattened.

“It doesn’t matter,” Naruto spoke up finally. His voice was hoarse. “The risks, the odds…As soon as any of that starts to matter, I violate my oath: the promise I made when I figured out what it means to be a ninja—what it means to me to be a ninja.”

Sakura felt a headache coming. She had the sense that she didn’t exactly have the moral higher ground here, certainly not in Naruto’s book. But when she had seen so many men and women die, most by her own hand—when she had seen their final moments, their final regrets, their final words—how could she want anything other than to selfishly protect those whom she considered most precious to her, no matter the cost?

Perhaps, Sasuke had once been one of those individuals. Then, he had left and, demonstrably, not looked back since. That night in the park had changed everything for Sakura, too. Despite what she had deluded herself of before, she was no longer interested in persuading herself that she and Sasuke had ever shared a legitimate bond. Sakura and Sasuke had hardly been teammates, let alone friends.

In truth, Sasuke felt like—a toy from her childhood: one she had one-sidedly obsessed over and played with years ago, only now, she could hardly figure out what had drawn her to it in the first place. If anything, she could only see how immature she had been, to play with it.
It wasn’t that she had an active desire to harm him, though she tried to best not to think about how she had once acted toward him and how he had once treated her. But if she had to choose between Sasuke and Naruto, she would choose Naruto.

Her gaze fell without thought on the black-haired boy to her left. She would choose Sai too.

“It’s settled, then,” Naruto announced gruffly.

It wasn’t settled, but she felt that it would benefit her to leave that as a surprise for later. She didn’t respond, turning her head the other way.

“You are very determined, dickless,” Sai observed with his usual bluntness. But his tone was slightly off to Sakura’s ears. “I suppose I must have been a considerably unsuitable replacement.”

Naruto’s head whipped around on his neck so quickly, she thought she heard a crack.

“You’re a part of Team Seven, proper,” he muttered gruffly. “Nothing changes that.”

She caught Sai’s gaze. He seemed, if plastic was malleable enough to allow such a thing, deeply conflicted. She faced ahead again, frowning, wishing she could know what was going on through his head.

Sakura, really, really wished she had known what was going through Sai’s head three hours later, when they took a short water break in the final stretch to Orochimaru’s hideout and, after, could no longer find him.

“I don’t understand,” Naruto said, waving his hands in demonstration, “Sai was right there. I looked away for one second and—”

“He’s gone,” Yamato murmured, eyes narrow as he gaze through the thicket of bushes.

Naruto’s face was tight as he turned to their interim captain. “You know who he really is, don’t you?”

The older man blinked, gazing somewhere above both their heads. Finally, he sighed. “I guessed as soon as I saw him—everyone had that look in Root. I suspect he is an active member that was assigned to your team with his own mission.”

“What is Root?” Sakura pressed.

“An autonomous subdivision of ANBU with no oversight from either the hokage or the council. It was supposed to have officially disbanded years ago, but apparently its leader has still been operating underground in the time since.”

“If what you’re saying is true, how did Sai end up there?” Naruto demanded. “What’s his mission?”

The ex-Root member gave Naruto a blank look. “I’ve never seen him in my life my life, not until today. I have no idea. I had no idea, even then, how people ended up in Root. It seemed to be something that a person…fell into. And by that point, it was already too late to back out.”
Sakura’s fingers shook. A subdivision of ANBU with no oversight? There would have been nothing to stop Sai from being sent on missions without the proper training or the necessary backup. ANBU as a whole was already notoriously bad at both those things. But without even the pretense of accountability—what would be allowed in Root?  

“Who’s the leader of Root?”  

The Voice thrummed with frenetic energy inside her. Bloodthirst? it murmured greedily, It’s been far too long.  

Yamato stared at her hard, as though weighing the consequences of giving her this information. He seemed to decide in her favor, for after a brief pause, he admitted carefully: “Shimura Danzo.”  

“We need to go after Sai,” Naruto said grimly. He locked gazes with Sakura, a question on his face that it infuriated her he asked.  

“Oh course,” she answered angrily. She knotted her hair to keep it away from her face. She emptied her satchel of everything that could function as a weapon, and tied it high up in the trees for safekeeping.  

“If only we knew where he went,” he muttered, gaze roving over the expanse of green.  

“We do,” Yamato remarked.  

“He left tracks, idiot.”  


Sakura rolled her eyes. She grabbed his head and turned it in the right direction.  

“If he left tracks,” Naruto began. His voice lowered, gaze sharp. “Do you think he meant to?”  

“I don’t know.” She straightened. “We’ll have ask him when we find him.”  

Yamato wordlessly took off in the direction of the tracks. She and Naruto followed. Part of her wasn’t even surprised when the location they reached was precisely that of Orochimaru’s alleged hideout. Though why Sai was here was beyond her.  

“We’ll go in,” Naruto said strongly. He turned his head to Sakura, though his eyes remained fixed ahead. “You can stay here and keep watch—”  

“I’m going in,” Sakura said shortly. She shifted, cracking her neck.  

Yamato gave her an unreadable look. “Haruno, this will be more dangerous than almost any other mission you’ve been on,” he informed her.  

Sakura eyes widened briefly in shock. He’d seen her official file, she guessed, which admittedly didn’t amount to much. “I should find it character-building, then,” she muttered.  

He gave her one final look and left it at that. The entrance to the hideout was exceptionally discreet to her own eyes, but Yamato made short work of whatever was hiding it. After that, it was almost laughably easy to enter.  

Which suggested, Sakura considered, that its occupants were fairly certain no one would ever made it back out.
They were immediately confronted by a fork of three possible paths. The tunnels were so dimly lit, that it was impossible to see more than a meter ahead. They looked at each other in silent agreement before parting ways. Sakura took the middle path, a long winding tunnel that at times seemed almost to circle back. Every now and then, a door appeared.

Sometimes she heard a strange scratching or groaning behind them, as though they held back wild animals rather than humans—but the heartbeats she detected were human.

Her face was grim as she sprinted through the seemingly endless tunnel. She’d heard, of course, the circumstances of Orochimaru’s defection from Konoha. He had been Tsunade’s teammate. Before he had left, the pair of them had been the village’s most promising candidates for medical and scientific advancement. Now, there was only Tsunade.

Despite what he had done, there was still a thread of regret in Tsunade’s voice whenever she mentioned him. Perhaps, Sakura considered distractedly, what she felt for Orochimaru was similar to what Naruto felt for Sasuke.

Sakura reached another fork and skidded to a halt. Three paths again. She was about to turn to the left one, when the sound of an explosion rocked the ground beneath her feet. She blindly chose the tunnel she was closest to, fearing that the walls might start caving in. As she ran, she began to see brightening natural light ahead of her.

Each step she took, the bark brown color of the tunnel’s walls became more and more visible until, at last, she burst through into open daylight.

The explosion she had heard had made a crater right at the center of the labyrinth of tunnels. At the middle stood Sai, only his profile visible to Sakura. But from his strained jaw and furrowed brows, as he looked somewhere up, he seemed almost—

Fearful.

Sakura was at his side in less than a second, moving quicker than she knew was supposed to be capable of and uncaring who saw. Sai had already started to turn his head, but she grabbed him by the collar and forced him the rest of the way.

“I thought Naruto was the trigger-happy idiot,” she hissed. “If I’d known you were liable to run into here as well, please note that I would have given you the same exact speech too.”

“Sakura-san,” Sai said softly, dispassionately.

“So this is my replacement.” Her hands loosened slightly on Sai’s shirt. She knew that voice.

I bet he still has pretty, pretty blood, the Voice whispered.

For a long time, his farewell had become synonymous with her recollection of those men coming after her. Only now did the association slide fully into place. The last time she had seen her former teammate, she realized abruptly, had been hours before the first time the Voice had ever taken over her. Hours before the first time she had ever killed anyone.

Part of her, she found with some shock, had resentfully, childishly hoped to go her entire life never seeing Sasuke again.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze from Sai toward the sky until she found him, silhouetted by the sun.

“Sasuke,” another voice identified, choked. On the opposite side of the crater, Naruto had just
emerged. The wind rustled Sasuke’s garments, disrupting the rope around his waist and the loose, white long-sleeved shirt he wore. The shirt only barely covered his front, revealing musculature that spoke of years of harsh training in the time he’d been gone.

Sakura watched them size each other up, Naruto’s face contorted by grief, Sasuke’s smooth with implacable calm. Just as before, they seemed to be suddenly in their own world, and no other person existed to them.

“Naruto, is it?” Sasuke said coolly, posing it like it was a guess. Sakura almost rolled her eyes.

Naruto recoiled like he’d been struck. He breathed rapidly. “You…back then…why didn’t you kill me?”

She felt Sai stiffen beneath her hands. Blinking—belatedly realizing she was still holding him tightly—she let him go.

“A whim,” Sasuke commented, voice distant as he looked at the horizon. “I didn’t particularly care whether you were alive or dead. It made no difference to me.”

Then his gaze lowered and sharpened. “But it seems you’ve come to make yourself an annoyance now. And pests? Those require exterminating.”

In an instant, he had descended from his lofty position to stand immediately in front of Naruto, draping a longer, heavier arm over his shoulder.

“Tell me, Naruto, do you still want to be hokage after all these years?” Sasuke drawled, “Pity. You should have spent more time training instead of chasing after me. Because this time, at my whim, you will lose your life.”

He drew out his katana slowly, precisely. She was about to move when Sai’s hand fell on her shoulder.

“I’ll go first,” Sai said under his breath, dark eyes gleaming.

“No,” Sakura said immediately. Her eyes narrowed. “Why?”

He gave a small smile. “You’ve hidden it well, Sakura-san. But small things betrayed you over these past few months. I think both you and I know why you should wait.”

“I’m not sure what you think you—”

“The person most likely to land the final blow,” Sai finished conversationally, “should take every measure to ensure they hold out until the end, yes?”

Sakura’s mouth slackened. She was still gaping as Sai pulled from her grasp to shoot towards Naruto and Sasuke. He reached just in time, sliding behind Naruto with one hand latching onto Sasuke’s wrist, the other hand swinging out with his tantō only to be stopped by Naruto himself.

All three figures froze for a moment, taking stock of their situation. Sasuke was the first to act, his hands coming together in a blur. Lightning crackled through the air. It was tightly controlled, quieter than she was used to; his comparative inexperience showed (Sakura had seen Kakashi use chidori in ways that begged suspension of disbelief), but he wielded it with concerning mastery.

The lightning expanded, knocking Naruto first—and hard—then Sai. They flew a few meters back and landed hard, curling in on themselves.
Sasuke’s katana hissed through the air as he spun it, adjusting his hold. He examined Naruto and then Sai. He moved towards Sai.

Sakura shunshined in front of Sai, picking up his fallen tantō in the same quick motion. The blade was shorter than she was used to, she considered as she looked down at it. No matter. A sharp edge was a sharp edge.

“I hate cleaning excess blood off my blade,” he continued indifferently. “But if you think your standing in front of him will stop me, you’re mistaken.”

“Your last words to me were ‘thank you,’” Sakura muttered dryly, trying to keep an eye on Sai and Naruto’s condition. “I wonder: where did all that gratitude go?”

Sasuke looked down at her, bored. “Do you even know what to do with that?”

*His blood looks prettier by the second,* the Voice cajoled.

“Leave her alone, Sasuke!” Naruto cried out from somewhere behind her. “Sakura, I can’t get up yet. You have to—you need to—” Whatever he intended to say was cut off as he dissolved into violent coughing, eyes shut as he grimaced in pain.

She heard Sai groan into consciousness behind her, shifting on the ground. Sakura watched Sasuke closely, tantō held deceptively loosely in her hand.

“Go on then.” The Voice purred in the back of her mind.

When Sasuke had said he didn’t care—to her at least—he had truly meant it. His limbs shifted from utter stillness to stunning motion ruthlessly, his katana slashing downward to make what would surely be a killing blow.

The last thing she heard was Sai’s quick inhalation, a sound of undeniable apprehension despite what he had told her earlier—and then Sakura’s focus sharpened to nothing else but the oncoming figure.

She abandoned her improper position: shifted her weight, planted her feet, and brought her tantō up unblinking. Sasuke’s blade drove into hers with ferocious force from above. A loud clang thundered through the crater, but her arms didn’t buckle a millimeter. Sasuke’s expression was still disinterested, but she could see that it was clearly a thin veneer now. His eyes flashed tellingly with something like annoyance and surprise.

Sakura leaned back and shifted her blade under Sasuke’s to its flat side, causing his to slip. His mouth tightened as he shifted his stance to counteract his instability. She pivoted on her feet, about to strike, when she heard Yamato shout from behind her, running toward them.

Her gaze darted to Sai, and she made a split-second decision. She leaned back to grab him and then shunshined to Naruto, allowing Yamato to replace her. She healed the most debilitating of their injuries, all the while watching the fight closely. When wood emerged from Yamato’s hands, her eyes widened. She’d never seen anything like it. Unfortunately, his makeshift dome didn’t imprison Sasuke for long, and he sliced through the top, soaring through the air to land where he had started.

Yamato staggered back with a grimace, clutching where Sasuke’s sword had pierced his chest.

“None of you are a match for me,” Sasuke said coldly. His gaze flicked for a second to Sakura, expression stiff. “Luck will not sustain you.”
But Sakura’s attention was elsewhere now. “Can you stand?” she asked, helping Sai up.

“Yes,” he exhaled, face paler than usual. “He took me by surprise. I’m still weak, however; I don’t know how much use I’ll be fighting.”

She considered him for a second and then bared her teeth in a brash smile, like she would have beneath her ANBU mask to Snail or Bear. “That one up there?” she said lightly. “I can take him.”

Sai straightened suddenly, eyes widening before narrowing. “And what about that one?”

Sakura followed his gaze. Standing beside Sasuke, seemingly from out of nowhere, was Orochimaru.

“Fuck,” she said aloud. Yamato had been stabbed in the chest and on the ground, Sai and Naruto were healed now but still weak. Which left her to handle both Sasuke and Orochimaru and also heal Yamato, before his injury worsened.

But then, unexpectedly, Yamato straightened, his face regaining some of its former color. “Apologies. I didn’t want to do anything too rough to your former teammate in front of you, but I believe I have no choice but to get serious now.”

Sakura’s frown dissipated slightly, replaced by mild shock. But now that she thought about it—it had been a little early for a man of Yamato’s seeming background to be put out of commission.

Sasuke looked down at them disinterestedly, his hands flowing through hand signs until his entire body was coated with rippling, white chakra.

“Serious?” Naruto asked, voice cracked. His attention was fixed on Sasuke, mouth downturned. “I can’t just let those who left the village in the same way as Orochimaru run loose,” Yamato clarified calmly. He looked at them then, brow furrowing. “Don’t look so concerned, Naruto. If Orochimaru himself is here, that means reinforcement is well on its way.”

She arched an eyebrow. Reinforcement?—someone had been tracking Orochimaru, she pieced together. She had assumed that the sannin had emerged from inside the base, but that clearly wasn’t the case. If Orochimaru had been aware of being tracked, then he had only to returned here due to a signal from someone on the base.

“What reinforcement?” Sai asked politely. As Naruto nodded vigorously in support of the question, the Voice suddenly became quite vocal in her mind. Get your head out of the clouds, it seethed. Pay attention.

She stiffened, head finally snapping to the left. “No,” she hissed, face reddening. He’s coming, the Voice murmured.

Lamentably, it was true. And now that she had noticed it, it felt like waiting for a tidal wave. His killing intent crackled through the air with such intensity, that his abrupt appearance in the crater—the dust settling like after-thought around him—was almost anti-climactic.

Nevertheless, there Kakashi stood, as arrogant and discomfiting (for her) as ever. The pale of his scarred arms gleamed under the sun—he was wearing his ANBU uniform. His face, however, was covered only by the black mask.
And Sakura’s face had blossomed into a full-fledged vicious scowl. ‘For the foreseeable future’ her ass. Where had her reprieve gone? She had thought she had days, potentially weeks, free of him —

“You’ve been hunting me, copy-nin,” Orochimaru said, voice as oily and silky as it had been the first time she’d heard it.

Kakashi’s eyes crinkled in a savage smile. “You’ve been running.”

“Are you okay?” Sai asked her, pointing to her trembling shoulders.

Sakura gave a humorless chuckle. “Nope,” she grunted. “Now I actually do want to stab something, but the chance of that happening has become considerably less likely with him here.”

“Because he doesn’t leave leftovers,” the other boy guessed, face questioning.

“Let’s go with that.”

Sasuke made a sudden motion forward, and Sakura’s face grew grim. Kakashi’s attention slid to his former student, eyebrow arching like an errant cat had tried to swat at him.

The last person she expected, however, acted to stop him. She blinked rapidly, wondering if she had imagined it. But when she opened her eyes again, Orochimaru’s hand remained on Sasuke’s wrist.

Sasuke’s head turned slowly to face him, eyes unreadable.

“It would be…myopic of us to forget the Akatsuki,” Orochimaru stated, amber eyes glinting. “Your former captain, you may not have heard, has made a name now as an Akatsuki-killer. With the Akatsuki out of the way, you must realize your revenge would become that much easier.”

“I don’t need his help,” Sasuke said in a monotone.

“Of course not,” Orochimaru said, bowing his head. His gaze lifted again, chiding. “But we will let the copy-nin do his job, because it is convenient for us.”

Sasuke stared at him silently for a little. “That’s a pathetic reason,” he remarked. You are running, was what he didn’t say but what everyone understood was being accused.

Orochimaru didn’t award this with a response. He faced forward again, locking eyes with Kakashi, gaze narrowing. And then he snapped his fingers, and both he and his protégé’s bodies became consumed by fire as they quickly disappeared.

“Sasuke!” Naruto roared, leaping forward. Kakashi coolly grabbed him by the back of his neck, holding him in place. He didn’t seem very unconcerned that the person he had been tracking was vanishing before his eyes.

“Kakashi-senpai,” Yamato said softly, bowing. Sakura was taken aback by the solemn deference in his regard.

“Tenzou,” Kakashi acknowledged, gaze haughty as it then passed over the rest of them. It landed, finally, on Sai.

In an instant, the copy-nin towered over him, his shoulder just inches from Sakura, who also stood beside Sai.
“Someone looks guilty,” Kakashi noted softly, sharingan glowing. “Doesn’t he?”

Author's Note: Hm, not as happy with this chapter as I wanted to be. Mostly because I wanted to write so much more but knew it was too early--I'm holding back on Sakura-Sasuke confrontation for now, but we will see more in the future!! And Itachi :D And others, upon consideration from comments ;)

As always, pls, pls, pls shower me with your wonderful love via kudos and *maniacal grin* lengthy comments. Reading your comments during breaks at work were the UNDENIABLE highlights of my days.

Also: more comments/kudos means quicker updates :o oh yes, I am shameless.

Until next time!
Sakura didn’t mean to fall asleep. Dusk loomed in the horizon, and with it, Tsunade’s decision about Sai. But no matter how much she wondered how Sai was doing or how Naruto was holding up or what in the hell Kakashi was thinking, really, at any time—her body simply couldn’t keep up.

She’d become a terrible sleeper over the last few years, prone to long periods of time without rest altogether. When she did sleep, therefore, Sakura was somewhat used to closing her eyes and waking up only to find the moon peeking through her curtains once more.

That was, partly, why she woke up with the feeling of terror. When she felt a breeze wash over her (she hadn’t opened the window?) she tripped out of her bed and stumbled over to the window, terrified of what she would find once she pulled open the curtain—

Perched on the ledge was a singular creature, almost as black as the expanse of sky behind it. If not for the unusual coloring of its eyes—one normal, the other red—she would have had trouble distinguishing it in the darkness.

“Not now,” Sakura began, voice hoarse from lack of use. But she was too late. Before she knew it, she had already been transported to the discomfiting dream-illusion plane that was the backbone of Shisui’s genjutsus.

For a moment, she stared at it, speechless with rage. She quickly broke out of her stupor.

“You,” she stalked toward it, voice low and dangerous, “I have put up with your shit for years now, I’ve done almost everything you’ve wanted, sure, to some extent, because I started to see something in it for myself, but also because you made it very clear that you weren’t interested in giving me much of a choice. I accepted that back then, but I’m stronger now—you made me that way—and you are going to listen to me, when I say that I don’t have time for this—”

“We’re hours from dawn,” the crow interrupted calmly. “I can make months of time one minute in the real world. I have no interest in making you hate me, despite what you might believe.”

Sakura wrestled with what to say next. In the end, she demanded, “Well, why are you here?”

The crow turned its head until just its red eye gleamed at her, almost accusingly. “It’s time.”

It took a few moments for Sakura to understand. Her eyes caught on the sharingan and widened, a passerby viewing an impending collision.

“Why now?”

“Because you’re ready.”

Her face twisted at that. “Am I?” she challenged. “Or do you just need me to be?”

Shisui gazed indifferently at her.

“I don’t understand how you can possibly believe I would trust you anymore,” she muttered.

“And once again, I am shown that humans truly are the most ungrateful of living beings,” was the creature’s swift response. “I have given you every tool you possess now. I taught you to survive,
when others would have left you groveling in the dirt. I taught you to become someone who would hunt those who would ever dare to harm you.”

“And?” Sakura snapped, “Don’t paint yourself as a selfless benefactor. The entire time, you’ve made countless demands on my person. I’ve shed blood for you, and I still don’t know why. All those missions, forcing me into ANBU, making me live with this—”

Illusions, scent distorters, disguises, lies, secrets: all manners of means used to make sure no one would ever know Sakura and Saori Mori were the same person. Sakura wouldn’t be surprised if she spent the latter half of her life (assuming she hadn’t lived past the half-mark already) spending the admitted small fortune she had made on therapists.

“Don’t be naïve,” Shisui snapped back. “Nothing is free in this world. Your anonymity was part of the price for your training. And of course, your training serves its own end.”

“What end?” Sakura exclaimed, frustration taking over. “Why, of all people, me?”

The crow shifted its weight—in other circumstances, she would have read it as hesitance, perhaps even discomfort. Now, though, she saw only layers upon layers of deception, and that Shisui was likely delicately manufacturing a very superficial reveal.

“I needed someone who could use my sharingan to fight another pair. You had the chakra control and…seemed easily moldable. Of course, even I err now and again.”

Sakura blinked dumbly. “You want me to fight Itachi?”

The crow was silent for a long pause, but Sakura read a lot in that silence about its estimation of her.

“Not Itachi,” it revealed tonelessly. “Sasuke.”

And that—well, that wasn’t what she had expected. Though, given how bizarrely protective Shisui was of Itachi, and the fact that Sasuke wanted to avenge his clan…

“Itachi can’t handle Sasuke himself?” Sakura asked doubtfully.

“Itachi doesn’t want to handle Sasuke,” Shisui cut her off brusquely. “Not in any way that ends with his survival, at least.”

She squinted at it. “Not sure how you missed this, but: Itachi is part of the Akatsuki. I don’t think he’ll have any trouble—”

“Is today the day you want to cross me, Sakura?” the crow asked softly.

Sakura looked at it stoically. “To be perfectly honest, I don’t mind the odds.”

“Is today that day?”

Sakura didn’t believe she needed a sharingan to confront Sasuke. Something else was at play here, something Shisui was still hiding.

Eyes narrowed, she evaluated the crow.

“Fine,” she said finally, softly. “Get on with it.”
She wasn’t quite sure what she expected. In the end, the ritual amounted to a small fire, copious provisions of blood, chanting, and a small seal placed at the space just beneath her ribcage. At first, nothing seemed to happen, and Sakura wondered if it all been a part of an elaborate prank, if the crow had finally come to possess some sort of ill-informed sense of humor.

But then a searing, terrible pain suddenly split her head, the focal point her left eye socket. She stumbled back.

“If the fighting can be stopped, I’d like to stop it.”

“Me too.”

A solemn pact, made between one breeze and the next, beneath the yellow-green canopy of leaves.

She curled over her knees, eyes scrunched. And then, she was flooded by a deluge of memories that were not her own.

They were cousins, but somehow—until this moment—Shisui couldn’t remember having really ever spoken to Itachi. Had not realized until today that the ally he had been searching for could possibly be his own blood. Well, it was no surprise it had taken so long to find him. Shisui had many, many cousins.

They didn’t understand each other at first. At least, not beyond this one tenet they shared. Potentially, this was because of Itachi being so…odd. Naturally talented, yes, but glum too.

“What is the purpose of a shinobi?” Itachi asked him again and again. “What is the meaning of a village?”

It was the sole content of their first conversations. Itachi really wasn’t a verbose personality—precisely, Shisui guessed from the few remarks he did share, because he spent so much time thinking. And if his mood was somber, it soon revealed itself to be a result of the fact that so many of his cousin’s thoughts were decidedly unhappy ones.

Shisui himself, of course, wasn’t built for such sustained introspection; and, more pointedly, he was considerably better at concealing his own bouts of grimness with noncommittal smiles. Still, clan members began to mention their names as a pair, a scarce breath of pause between—a phenomenon that baffled him every time he observed it.

Because no matter how outwardly comparable they were, there was no question as to how crucially they were dissimilar as well.

Shisui was cognizant enough of himself to realize that his decisiveness at times veered into impulsiveness; his judgement, admittedly, was swift and unforgiving. But Itachi, especially as he grew older, was increasingly quiet and somber, reflecting and reevaluating in cycles.

There were other differences as well. The fact that no matter how much time Itachi time spent with his lofty philosophizing, his love for his family was as steadfast as the mountains surrounding Konoha. Shisui watched it all with confusion, and if he was being strictly honest with himself, not a little resentment.

Since learning about the coup, Shisui had long-forsaken his clan. A quick, clean—and mostly unobserved—break. Itachi’s persisting love—even knowing about the coup and resolving to prevent it—would be a profound weakness, Shisui guessed.
It wasn’t a sudden progression, but slow, like the water trickling out of the spout in front of his house.

(Until, one day, the earth below started to bevel, to cave in and crumble.)

They spent time together. They talked. But the final blow was when he could see the way Itachi listened to him carefully, looked to him for guidance, as though Shisui were—

Shisui had no family. Except, maybe, for Itachi.

A blind man would have been able to tell that the care he had nurtured for Itachi was one his cousin really only returned similarly toward Sasuke. Still, Shisui didn’t bother resenting him for it. Itachi would shoulder the world for his little brother, if that was what the universe required of him. And, possibly, Shisui would do the same for Itachi, simply because he had no one else left.

Sakura groaned, eyes fluttering. Blood began to seep from her closed eye.

Months pass, seasons come and go. Shisui grew wiser and harder.

He entered a state of self-imposed isolation, and Itachi—a bit baffled—let him. He couldn’t help but hate himself a little during it. It was only because he had allowed himself to care so much, that he felt such a keen sense of loss after.

He began to share less and less. He began to tell Itachi “Don’t worry, it’ll be fine,” even though Shisui knew better.

“Shisui,” Sakura gritted out at the crow, “what…” Her throat closed on the words.

“Something didn’t feel right, so I came back.”

“I’m glad.”

They were of a height then. It struck him keenly as he continued to speak: explained Danzo’s involvement, the inevitability of the coup, and what must happen to the Uchiha. He knew that silently Itachi was being broken down, piece by piece, from each word. But, now, it was beyond whatever Shisui wanted—it was necessary.

“They’ll come after my left eye too.” It was almost night, the oranges and blues of dusk so beautiful his heart hurt. “I need you…to take it.”

“Shisui.” It was the first time Shisui had ever seen anything like anger on his cousin’s face. He wished he would have had the time to see more.

(Who would have known they would end up here, years after they made a pact with beneath the yellow-green canopy of leaves, with Shisui’s death the price of their clan’s salvation?)

“You’re the only one I can trust. Protect the village, and the Uchiha name as well.”

“I will, but where will you—”

“That isn’t the only thing that I need to give you.”

The wind rustled through the leaves, the edge of the cliff brushed against his heels, and his head exploded with pain as he removed his eye.

What he didn’t say was “You’ll be forced to walk down a long, dark path, one that’s filled with
pain and suffering, and you’ll only have to take it because I was too weak.”

“Don’t worry, Itachi,” Shisui smiled instead, softly, fiercely. “It will be fine.”

And then he plunged from the cliff.

Sakura’s eyes snapped open, and the world was split in front of her. On one side, she seemed to peer through a dusty, near-opaque window. But the other: she saw with a clarity she could never have even conceived of before. It was as though she had been blind before and only now was seeing for the first time, color and texture little more than abstract concepts to her until this moment.

Her face was wet, she realized, wiping it. Blood. Then her gaze moved upwards. In place of the crow’s left eye was an empty socket.

“Was that…even real?” she asked tonelessly. “Or just another one of your attempts at stringing me along.”

The creature met her gaze without reservation.

“Is he really dead?” she asked softly, confused by the tight feeling in her chest. These feelings, they weren’t hers.

“Yes,” Shisui said, blunt.

“And Itachi,” she exhaled, hands tightening into fists at her side.

“Yes,” he repeated again.

Even saying the name now inspired something in her that had not been there before—it was a foreign emotion, alien to her. And yet, its hold was compelling.

Sakura groaned and rubbed at her eyes furiously. “Is this going to stay here forever now,” she demanded. “It hurts—”

“Already unbearable?” Shisui mocked. The crow, Sakura reflected, was nothing like its namesake. And yet—

“You were affected by it,” she realized abruptly. “Did you know—?”

“That this imprint would be tied to the eye when I accepted it? That something of the original Shisui’s outlook, his sensitivity, his motivations could remain in what I considered then only to be an ownerless weapon?” the crow finished for her, curt. “No.”

“And now you’ve infected me too,” Sakura noted with a humorless smile. It soon fell flat.

Danzo. Both for Sai and now for Shisui—he deserved to be toppled from his pedestal.

“Something still doesn’t make sense,” she muttered. “How did someone like...that Itachi end up massacring his whole clan?”

“He was left with no other choice.”

Something about the crow’s words were fierce, impenetrable, though he was as unreadable as ever.

“But—"
“Enough,” Shisui snapped at last. “No matter how much time we have, there is much to do. And you’ll have to master the basics before you can get anywhere near the mangekyou sharingan.”

When Sakura entered the real world again, she felt like she had aged far more than the time she had actually spent in the genjutsu—and even that had been months.

She was relieved, as well, that the world was blurrier around her and that her regular left eye was in its usual place. With a few hand signs—that was all the ritual now required—she could access Shisui’s eye when she needed; and Sakura was determined to keep that time to as minimal as possible.

The streets of Konoha were mostly abandoned, the only sounds from birds and the few shopkeepers who were still closing up. She reached the door to Tsunade’s office just as Naruto did. Once seeing the other, both paused.

As the sunset in the horizon, they shared a grim look of understanding. Then, they entered.

The sight of Sai chained with ANBU guards on either side of him proved to be a little too much for Naruto.

“Look here, Tsunade-baa-chan,” Naruto growled, “I know technically you’re the hokage, but the way I see it—”

Sakura’s voice rose to join his. “He was coerced, and he was sealed to prevent him from telling anyone—”

“And that’s why he’s only being suspended from active duty for the foreseeable future,” Tsunade cut them both off irately, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

Sai straightened, blinking like a newborn chick: wondering and a bit lost.

“Come on, baa-chan,” Naruto groaned, but his face was regaining its usual pallor now. “It’s just Sai. He already went through T&I and everything.”

“Well ‘just Sai’ was working for an organization that I thought was long-dead. So just Sai is going to make sure he keeps an extremely low profile until I can manage looking at him without getting a migraine from the requisite anger, understand?”

Her amber eyes narrowed on Naruto and Sakura. “And you two—keep an eye on him. That’s an order.”

Sakura examined the clock above the hokage’s head, foot tapping rapidly. “Sure. But if Sai really is such a security risk, then why isn’t our jounin captain here?”

Tsunade’s lips curled humorlessly as she looked at Sakura. “If he were a security risk, Sai’s throat would be slit and he’d be lying in a ditch somewhere at your captain’s hands. As it stands, regardless of what Sai wants, the people previously in charge of him may attempt to make contact with him again when he is alone.”

“Ah,” Naruto remarked, brow clearing. “Well. See you later then!” It was clear his plan was to leave before Tsunade can change her mind.
“Make sure later isn’t too soon, brat,” Tsunade muttered. She swirled her cup and downed it in one go.

“Impressive,” Sai reflected as the ANBU removed the chains from his wrists. Sakura couldn’t quite stifle her laugh, and she quickly found her mentor’s ill-tempered attention on her.

“Get out of here,” the hokage snapped, “Give me some peace. Out!”

They high-tailed it out of the building before objects could be thrown in their direction. Once they were a few blocks away, they slowed down to a more moderate pace. Her gaze darted to Naruto considerably. Then, she recalled the near-level of toxicity in his apartment’s air.

“You’ll have to stay over at my place,” Sakura declared, resigned.

Sai nodded peaceably, but Naruto’s eyes widened. “You’re having a slumber party,” he exclaimed, hands flying out, “Without me?!”

“You can come along,” Sai generously granted, nodding his head in self-affirmation. Sakura’s mouth moved soundlessly for a few seconds, aghast yet again at the true failure of Sai’s social skills, this time in his offering her meager apartment up like it was his own.

But then her eyes landed on Naruto, and she grunted and gave up.

“Let’s do takeout from Ichiraku’s!”

Sakura’s stomach grumbled obligingly as they made their way over to the ramen place. Thankfully, given the late time, there wasn’t much of a line ahead of them. Within twenty minutes, they were shouldering their way through Sakura’s door with full cartons of ramen in their hands.

Her apartment was by no means big, but she had some open space near the foot of her futon where she planned to lay out the two mission pallets that she had. She started pulling out some extra pillows and quilts as Naruto and Sai began digging into their dinners.

“You know,” Naruto slurped loudly, “your place looks a lot different from what I imagined.”

“Really?” Sai responded. “What did you expect?”

“A lot more pink,” Naruto confided.

Sakura was in the middle of rolling her eyes when Sai chose to chip in. “From what I’ve seen, Sakura seems to wear a lot more red than pink,” the black-haired boy said, forehead scrunching contemplatively. “That, for example.”

Her head swiveled too late in the direction Sai pointed to. A lacy, more-sheer-than-solid-material bra in crimson red—and which clearly belonged to a much more blessed woman than Sakura—hung from the edge of her dresser.

Her hand twitched belatedly to remove it.

“A sleepover?” the blonde tried, face a little red. While the size discrepancy had clearly gone above Sai’s head, it hadn’t Naruto’s, apparently. Great. The one time Naruto opted to be observant of the details.

Sakura felt her cheeks heat up a little despite herself. “Of a…sort.”

Sai’s head shifted slowly from her to Naruto, expression sage, “I think that was a euphemism for
intimate relations—"

“I got that, Sai,” Naruto said a little high-pitched, digging intently into his ramen. “Thanks!”

The conversation lapsed into a brief period of silence. Sakura dumped the quilts in her arms onto their respective pallets and then went to retrieve pillows.

“So you like girls?” Naruto spoke up again, clearing his throat and clearly making a concerted effort into looking as relaxed as possible. It didn’t help that he leaned his chin into his hand, only for his elbow to slip against the lacquer surface of her coffee table.

“Yes.” She dropped the pillows. They landed with twin thuds.

“Oh.” Then, his face scrunched up in confusion. “Wait a minute, but you were crazy about the teme when we were—”

“I didn’t say I liked them exclusively, idiot,” she snapped, grabbing her own ramen with a little too much force. She settled down on an unoccupied side of her coffee table and began eating viciously.

“Oh.” Naruto’s expression took on an introspective look.

“I never liked anyone,” Sai said primly. “Until Shikamaru, that is.”

At this, their other teammate’s calm fractured. “You and Shikamaru? Since when?”

“Around the same time as Yamanaka-san and Hyuuga-san, I believe.”

“What?! Hinata is seeing Ino—!”

“Obviously not, dickless. The other Hyuuga close to our age.”

Naruto exhaled a giant sigh of relief, fanning himself like an elderly civilian who had just been put through the paces climbing his own staircase. “You can’t scare me like that, Sai. Like, Hinata is way more adventurous than I thought, but I don’t think I could ever be on board with—”


“Er, right.”

Somehow, they managed to scarf down the rest of their ramen without any more outbursts or mishaps.

They spoke some more: inane, idle conversation, really. Sakura had some ice cream in her freezer that hadn’t yet gone bad, so she grabbed that too and served it to them. Not long after, though, Naruto began to yawn loudly—wide, jaw-cracking yawns—and they started to settle down for sleep.

“Thank you. Both of you, for…” Sai paused for a while, as though he too weren’t sure what to say. “For standing by me,” he settled with finally.

Sakura, who had just stepped into her bathroom to change into a pair of sleep pants and a loose shirt, stilled. “You don’t have to thank us,” she said at last.

“Yeah,” Naruto echoed, voice dark. “Don’t. Or maybe wait until we’ve actually done something to make up for what happened to you.”
Sakura stepped out from the bathroom, eyes narrowed. “Exactly.”

Sai’s dark solemn eyes honed in on her. “Are you going to kill him?”

“Um, well,” Naruto said a little uncomfortably, “maybe that’s—”

Sakura’s gaze flicked to Sai. “The thought has crossed my mind,” she commented calmly, eyes locked onto him.

“Uh, Sakura?”

“You tell me, Sai,” she said quietly. “Will someone like him stop unless he’s dead?”

The boy shook his head slowly.

Sakura’s lips twitched humorlessly, head tilting back. It still wasn’t the case that she—Sakura (not the Voice)—liked enacting the violence she was capable of. But certain individuals certainly made it easier than others.

“You can’t,” Naruto said lowly, standing up. “Planning someone’s murder like that: that’s a line you can’t ever uncross. That’s what the black ops are for. Not us.”

“Until now, the black ops have done nothing,” Sai observed, voice unprejudiced.

“Tsunade knows the truth now,” he argued, “so they will.”

And that was…probably true. But if that particular mission was deemed to be a particular classification, it might actually be passed to her team—and then, in some way, it could actually be Sakura’s responsibility to kill Danzo.

Sai seemed to sense that there was more truth than exaggeration to her words. He looked at her solemnly, even as he stretched out along the pallet. He had, since joining their team, grown leaps and bounds in reading the people around him: she and Naruto especially. And, in equal turns, Sakura felt some measure of discomfort and some measure of relief in being seen.

“It’s a non-issue now, anyway,” she finished diplomatically. She walked to the opposite end of the room to grab a hair tie from her nightstand.

Naruto, for a moment, looked like he didn’t want to let the issue go. But another yawn broke out—this time from Sai—and his shoulders slackened a little. Sighing, he shook his head and settled down onto the pallet.

Sakura moved towards her bed as well, but paused as she heard a scratching noise at the window. Her gaze landed on Shisui waiting impatiently at the window.

She exhaled, disbelieving. Sakura stalked toward the window and yanked it open. Again? She hoped her expression conveyed the monumentality of pain she would bring on it if it pulled anything now.

Giving her an unreadable glance, the crow turned away from her and offered up a scroll. Her throat tightened.

Red. Red scrolls were—

She snatched it blindly and unraveled it, fingers trembling.
“Sakura,” Naruto mumbled tiredly. “What is it?”

“Just a message from the hospital. They have a shortage of medic-nins today, so they need me to come in.” Pitch-perfect. Unfailingly even.

“Will it be all night?” Sai, this time.

“Yes,” Sakura said, almost soundless.

“Feel free to take the bed,” she added a second later.

She grabbed her ANBU mask, her back covering her actions, and left the apartment.

“No,” Bear said blankly. “Just—no.”

They all looked at Raccoon’s dead body, swathed in ceremonial cloth and ornamentation, with incredulity.

“We just saw him,” Snail whispered, eyes shining. “Just the other day.”

“Yeah,” Hyena said, tone formal and distant. But it only took one look at her face to realize that she was struggling too. Everyone liked Raccoon. Raccoon was likable. Even when it had been the last thing Sakura had wanted—being on this team—she had liked Raccoon.


The other ANBU members stiffened, looking almost hostile to her interjection. Unconsciously, her hands tightened at her sides. She could understand. She was too new: almost a voyeur here compared to them—to the grief they probably shared.

But then, unexpectedly, Bear grunted out an earnest: “Yeah. Fucking reconnaissance.”

Sakura stared at him, taken aback. Once she recovered, she could do nothing more than nod tightly.

“All it takes is one slip,” Hyena remarked.

“Shut up,” Bear growled, shoulders trembling. “Why was he even on this team, if he had…”

They all tensed.

It was custom as part of the ceremony to—at least here, in the privacy of the ANBU headquarters—commemorate the lives the fallen operatives had lived outside of the headquarters. A hollow attempt at softening what was objectively a shitty end, Sakura thought. Because there would be no recognition for any of them outside these walls; at least, not for what they had done as ANBU. Even in death, relatives and loved ones could become targets of revenge, and names and identities could be dangerous.

And Raccoon—calm, likable Raccoon—has left behind a two year old daughter, for whom he had been sole guardian.

“Piece of shit,” Hyena managed, eyes scrunched.
Snail recoiled. Her hand tightened around the other woman’s bicep. “You shouldn’t—”

“No, that is some bullshit,” the black-haired woman raged. “How the hell could he have been so irresponsible? What’s going to happen to his kid?”

“He must have had his reasons,” Snail said softly.

“Well, fuck his reasons!”

Sakura rocked onto her heels and then back forward again, blinking rapidly. All of them were wrapped and suffocated in the misery of this place, in each other’s misery. She could see the others shifting as well, perhaps victims of the same discomfort.

“I need to be alone,” Bear whispered.

“And I need to get out of here,” hissed Hyena.

Snail nodded shakily, and Sakura offered no protest. The two nodded stiffly to them in farewell, before disappearing.

“Crow,” the other woman said quietly, after an eternity of staring at Raccoon’s unbreathing form. “I’m not sure if you’ve been in ANBU long enough on any one team before to grow close to someone like this, to…experience a team member’s death that matters. What I can tell you, is that we all…manage only because we have our support mechanisms, whatever they are. And whatever works for you, it might not be what works for anyone else. But…if—if you need—”

“Thanks,” Sakura interrupted, chest aching from the strain Snail was clearly going through—to try to be helpful, to be nice, even now. And she meant it. “I’ve got it handled.”

That last part—that was the part she wasn’t sure of.

“A bottle,” Sakura demanded, seated perhaps ill-advisedly at an ill-reputed inn she had seen self-respecting individuals only skirt around during daylight hours. Probably contributing to its poor reputation, the inn was outfitted with a sizable bar. Another contributing factor: its clientele.

“You paying now or charging to a room?” the bartender asked, raising a brow.

“You to my room,” she grunted, writing the number down on the parchment handed to her.

She ignored the glances around her. She still wore the sleep pants and shirt from earlier, unmasked, but with the appearance of Saori Mori. She knew she made an odd visual ultimately, at odds with the inn’s other occupants, who composed the non-shinobi half of Konoha’s seedy underbelly: thugs and loan sharks and the like. She didn’t care. Not like there had been anything in the room for her to change into.

“What’s a nice girl like you doing here—”

“Thanks,” Sakura bit out, grabbing the bottle from the bartender before he had actually made the motion to hand it to her. She twisted the cap loose and brought it to her lips, swallowing the burning liquid like it was water.

“Take it easy there, lady,” a boy—younger than her—with a scar bisecting his eyebrow warned. An older woman stood beside him with a thin smile, watching indifferently.
“You his mom?” Sakura sneered, jerking the bottle at him.

Her smile widened. “If I am?”

She swung forward, the alcohol hitting her hard and burning through her veins, until her face was inches from the other woman’s.

“Then that’s fucking,” she spat.

A hand, from somewhere behind her, landed on her shoulder.

Sakura shook it off violently, eyes slitted. “Don’t touch me.”

A tall boulder of a man bumped into her from the right, and she honed in on him like a moth to a flame.

“Look at you,” she sang, giggling, “you look like exactly like the kind of thing good people think goes bump in the night—” the smile fell from her face, and she craned upward with a ugly snarl —“want to go?”

“Hey,” the bartender snapped, fingers connecting in front of her face. “I’m not having any of that here. Go back on up.”

Sakura twisted violently, nostrils flaring. “What?”

“I said go the hell back on up,” the man repeated, liking he was talking to a child. “I’m not having the authorities over here because a stupid girl tried to rebel and got murdered.”

A bark of laughter burst out of her, sharp and animal. “Fine,” Sakura allowed, “But I’m taking this —and this with me.”

She grabbed her own bottle and her enraged neighbor’s and made her way toward the rickety stairs, uncaring of the shouts behind her. The stairs curved ever so slightly—which made them a little tricky to navigate—but she reached the landing of her floor in less than five minutes. All in all: a win.

Glowering at nothing in particular, Sakura shoved the key into her door; after a bit of noisy scrabbling, the lock twisted finally, and she stumbled in.

There was already someone in the room.

In one instant, Sakura burned all the alcohol from her body and twisted in the direction of the foreign presence. Through the door-less, worn frame of the entrance to the tub, a lone, pale figure with silver-grey sat in bloodied water.

The blood drained from Sakura’s face.

He turned, slowly, emotionlessly. His face, she saw, was covered in blood too—just like the uniform he still wore, which painted the water around him an ugly brown-red.

“Where were you?” Sakura whispered, ice-cold. Her lips felt bloodless too, numb. Why are you here now?

He stared at her, right through her, as though she had said nothing.

Anger lanced through her veins and she stalked forward, hands slamming into the sides of the tub.
“Where the fuck were you! When the rest of us were there—”

“They’re dead,” he said, eyes at last sharpening. His voice was a rasp, almost inaudible.

Sakura rocked back for the second time that night, this time more violently than the first. “What?”

“I killed them,” he stated, now clinically. Simple. Factual.

She glanced downward, into the water. Blood of the ones who had killed Racoon, then. Not just anyone’s blood. She kneeled blankly, palming it.

And then she couldn’t stop herself, couldn’t stop the words and hated their pleading quality.

“How did it—how did it make you feel?” Did it help? she needed to know.

Did it feel good? the Voice wanted.

He twisted in one fluid, deadly motion to face her, and his gaze was cruel.

“Don’t test me, shinobi,” Kakashi snarled, each word like a knife.

Sakura grabbed him by his matted hair. Shinobi? She would have laughed, if she had had it within her now to find anything humorous.

“Don’t even try it, asshole,” she hissed, gaze boring into his. “Tell me the fucking truth.”

She rested her forehead against his, and there was nothing but desperation and resentment in the act, that she needed him to say it.

“You came here,” she rasped, accusing.

His sharingan spun, a dizzying endless loop of motion. And then…and then—

“Like suffocating.”

And then he was gasping, trembling: full-body tremors shook through him, and all Sakura could do was watch. His hands sliced into the water and then drove toward his face, scrubbing desperately. And the entire time he was silent. Disconcertingly silent.

It took her a long time, longer than she would like to admit, to understand what she was seeing—that this was, perhaps, what lay beneath it all: an injured, self-loathing animal, at last cornered. An animal, Sakura could see, that was as liable to lash out, deadly and uncaring, as it was to curl in on itself, cowering from its own violence.

His breathing was erratic; his hands attempted to rend and also to cleanse and failed at both. For every portion of skin he cleaned of blood, he opened long, crimson lines elsewhere, until Sakura could no longer watch and stopped him.

He snarled and snapped, and Sakura held the straining pale muscle of his biceps effortlessly.

“Who are you,” the copy-nin growled, surfacing at last. His eyes, when they met hers, possessed their sharp, predatory edge once more. “Who are you?”

Sakura’s hands curled and then began to scrub, working to remove the blood from him as well.

“I don’t know,” she returned, angry and confused. Her hands passed over his skin, and each self-
made wound she encountered, she closed.

He grabbed her wrist, lifting the inner part to his nose. “Your scent,” he said darkly, his regular eye metallic in the flickering light, “Why do you wear distorters?”

Sakura’s pulse stuttered.

“Why do you think? When there are trackers like you out there,” she bit out, “I try my best to make your job as hard as possible whenever you decide to kill me.”

“Am I going to have to kill you?” His lashes, long and dark, dripped water.

“You’ve threatened it more than once.”

“And you’ve never believed it.”

“And you pretended,” she whispered, livid. “The perfect shinobi; the perfect weapon, blood-hungry and remorseless. You’ve pretended—and you’ve let us all believe it, when it never existed. When it never could exist.”

His perfect, lying mask.

She shoved away from him before he could respond, before he could try to lie again. Even without words, all it would take was one condescending, uncaring look, one distant sneer. And she didn’t care to entertain it. She made quick hand signs to summon of a blast of air that dried her in seconds. And then with determined resolve, she yanked the thin duvet over herself and shut her eyes.

It was silent for so long, that she was almost certain that he had left. Possibly through the window, though she hadn’t heard it open. That seemed to be his modus operandi. She didn’t open her eyes to check.

An infinity later, however, she felt a brush of air near the side of the bed—as though there were someone standing beside it. She stiffened in response, debating how to react. But he moved with incomprehensible speed. A hand landed on the middle of her back, brief, so transitory it had to have been a blur to the eye, and with such terrifyingly controlled force that it was enough to displace her from the center of the bed to the side.

Another body—hard, compact—settled beside hers.

(Heat, some part of her noted, radiated from him like a furnace.)

“Seriously?” Sakura drew herself up onto her elbows, incensed. He didn’t say anything. Just stared at her, eyes lidded. She watched him, lips thin.

Get out, she meant to say. “How long did you know him,” was what came out instead. She paled in the dark.

His face could have been chiseled from stone.

“A year.”

Sakura turned over onto her side, away from him. “Is that long?”

“Longer than most.”
Sakura’s lips curled. “How long do you give me?”

The distance between them disappeared. Abruptly, she felt the full force of his body against her, crushing her as though to punish her, weighing down on her as though he meant to be oppressive. She saw red and twisted, about to spit vitriol.

She would have done it too. Had she not then noticed it: his hands, and the way they curled around her ribcage carefully—softly.

And she realized then that his…hold had not been what she had thought it had been.

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**Author's Note:** Heyooooo how's it going I know I did a lot here hope you don't hate. I know this was a slower chapter, but I think I needed to lay a lot of groundwork finally / tbh might come back and edit things / add things later. Also.

Also.

I was BLOWN AWAY by the response to the last chapter--THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR WONDERFUL WORDS!! You have no much idea how much time I spent beaming and thinking about this fic. I'm finally starting to see the end (still pretty far away though, no fear), but that is definitely a first for me.

Also, I guess I write slow burn... I, uh, just noticed? Oops. Is it tolerable out there lol or are you all dying of the thirst :D

Anyway, hope you enjoyed! Let me know how felt / what you thought by leaving behind wonderful comments/kudos!!!

With all the love in the world,

madstoryteller999

P.S. Anyone recognize the chapter title??? :)

P.P.S. YAY TO THE U.S. WOMEN'S SOCCER TEAM ON THEIR WIN AND FOR BEING FEMINIST AND LGBT ICONS, WE LOVE YOU (AND ALSO TO ALL FEMALE ATHLETES YOU KICK ASS HARDCORE) <3
Sakura woke flat on her stomach, her face embedded deeply into a pillow. It was a gentle progression to consciousness—for which she was grateful, because it didn’t happen often like this. Usually, waking was more of a jarring process, thanks to the mother down the hall who was always screaming for her son to get up or ‘goddammit, Shiki, you’re going to be late again!’ No screams now, however.

In fact, there wasn’t much noise at all. Except, she realized gradually, a soft sibilant hiss—but metallic. Like metal sliding against metal.

Her gaze narrowed. Then, she shifted onto her forearms and swung her head around.

He stood at the opposite corner of the room, looking tall and hard against the dull cream of the walls. His hands worked coldly—as callous as they had been soft before—as he strapped on his armor. She shifted to a sitting position, her tousled hair settling against her neck a second later. Kakashi’s head tilted in her direction, as he tightened the straps of his arm guard. His hands did not pause.

Air expelled from her in a sharp, furious burst. “Look at me.”

When he did, his gaze was distant.

Her nails dug into the sheets around her.

Indifferently, he slid his hitai-ate into place. And Sakura was about to become deranged. She wanted—she needed to see what she had seen before. Because if the copy-nin could break down, it meant—it meant that no one could be alright when they had done, what she and all ANBU had done. It meant that it was okay to feel what she felt, to experience the constant—

But it seemed, in this moment, that it all could have very well been part of a fool’s dream, born from nothing more than desperation.

“Don’t.” It was all she could manage: hoarse and livid.

The copy-nin’s eyes were dark. A bird had landed silently on the window sill. There was no message attached to its leg. But, without one more glance her way—

His form flickered, and he disappeared out the window.

(The bird itself had been the message, Sakura would realize later, fists deep into the trunks of some unfortunate trees.)

It didn’t take long after that for her to realize that Kakashi had decided to operate in the world like she didn’t exist.

Sakura watched him like a hawk, so much so that she was nudged more than one time (by Bear of all people) for her stare becoming a little too much glower. But she glowered more. Because mission after mission—it was as though she had become a complete stranger to him.
And she hated stake outs. Those had basically been the last three Team Seven missions, which hadn’t helped improve her mood. As it happened, they frequently gave her ample time and quiet to think about everything she didn’t want to think about.

For once, the jarring contrast between ANBU missions and her other missions was—in a sense—welcome.

“You need to get new kunai,” Hyena advised, examining the state of her blades as Sakura sheathed them.

She couldn’t help her wince. “They are, uh, new.”

“You get that much blood on them?” Bear observed, unholy glee on his face.

They all straightened as the metal door to the locker rooms swung open.

But it wasn’t Kakashi. Instead, it was a familiar short, compact figure with silken, blood-red hair. Sakura’s stomach soured at the sight of it. She was gladdened to realize that was all.

“The copy-nin’s team, right?” said the boy who had made her eat dirt during rounds, an arrogance in his voice that was youthful enough to earn some forgiveness. His eyes scanned them, finding Sakura last. “And the one who took my place. Got here in the end, though—wish the circumstances could have been better, of course.”

He bowed his head to them, but the movement was too cursory to demonstrate he truly understood what it meant to lose a team mate.

“Fuck, why are all the new ones babies,” Bear groaned, adding to Sakura, “No offense.”

Sakura shrugged it off, finishing sharpening her chokuto. She slid it into the sheath strapped on her back.

“Shut up, Bear,” Hyena said calmly. She turned to Robin. “You read through the brief?”

“Yes ma’am,” he drawled. “Man, this team gets all the big shots. Spread the wealth, you know? Let the rest of us earn a name.”

Snail laughed, though no one else did.

“Who did you get assigned, Robin?” she asked.

Despite the mask, it was easy to sense the way his face twisted into a frown. “Ran Osamu. Now Tsuruga Taiki—”

“—Is the copy-nin’s assignment,” Hyena said curtly.

Sakura listened in without really understanding. Neither name was familiar to her—nor was the name that she had been assigned as her target in the ambush.

“Of course,” Robin said too quickly, eyes gleaming, “But have you heard the stories? Now that’s a kenjutsu expert if you’ve ever heard of one.”

The door swung open again, though only partially. This time it was Kakashi.

“It’s time.” The door shut again.
“Charming,” Robin muttered next to her.

Sakura looked at him, wondering what she had been like to the others when she had first joined the ANBU team.

“You don’t know the least of it,” she remarked blandly.

They travelled more quickly than usual, and more grimly than they had in the past (for several reasons). Sakura didn’t know who had retrieved the information necessary for the imminent ambush, but it had been communicated to them that the person had died for it.

By the time the moon was high in the sky, they were hidden in the trees. Tsuruga Taiki was a Sound shinobi, the captain of a squad much like Sakura’s, and his squad’s planned route was through this pass tonight.

They waited.

There was something about the moon and the light breeze that left her in a considerably reflective mood. Kakashi was—and she didn’t think this to be a coincidence—positioned on the farthest possible tree from her out of all her teammates. Her anger grew, until she wondered suddenly what the point of all of it was.

Why did she care so much? She knew that it was a façade now; that a façade existed had become an undeniable truth, though confusion and incredulity had made her doubt herself initially. It couldn’t, she thought heatedly, have anything to do with—with whatever else had happened. That had been a lapse of judgement and insignificant—

Look at me. The hoarse, livid demand he had made as she had climaxed curled into her ears, like he was behind her, right now. Sakura hissed at the sudden unwanted phantom sensation of those fingers inside her—the way they had been rough with her, possessive of her anatomy, and unconscionably greedy—

She strangled her rising arousal viciously.

Enough, she thought coldly. It was time she washed her hands off all this business. Pride or not, Sakura was going to find a new team. She didn’t care how it happened; only that it needed to.

Newly resolved, her grip tightened on her hilt of her chokuto. Just in time, too, as six figures burst into the area beneath them.

Sakura spotted her target—a rail thin girl with purple hair—and launched off her branch. The sensation of free-fall was briefly peaceful, before her opponent recognized her approach and attacked.

As Sakura’s hands shifted through multiple jutsus, she heard cries from other figures around her, now fighting as well. Sakura gritted her teeth and planted her feet, darting quick glances around to gauge the situation. Hyena and Bear were fighting as a pair against their targets, who had teamed up at the first notice of attack. Snail seemed to be holding up well, but Robin had only just engaged his target in combat.

Sakura heard a telling spark and returned her attention to her opponent, raising a wall of earth just in time to absorb the impact of the resulting explosion. She twisted to avoid the debris and caught a brief glimpse of Kakashi fighting what must have been Tsuruga Taiki.

A piercing bird cry rang from somewhere beyond in the trees, and Sakura watched sourly as the
girl she was fighting shaped her fingers to amplify her own responding call. It was the last thing she did, because Sakura was there the next second, her blade sliding smoothly into her stomach and then up.

Unfortunately, it was too late, as proven minutes later when a second Sound squad broke through the trees to their precise location, moving with a swiftness and deadliness that matched the first—which meant that they were decidedly outnumbered now.

Sakura growled and flipped her blade, joining the fray anew. She guarded Bear and Hyena’s backs, warding off two shinobi, but concernedly watched Snail, who fought farther away, as another shinobi approached. By his uniform, he was the captain of the second team.

A new figure crossed her vision in a black blur and cut the figure off, fists crackling with lightning. Unsurprised, Sakura looked back and saw Tsuruga Taiki bleeding and unconscious on the forest floor.

Show-off, she thought uncharitably.

Her attention returned to the man and woman in front of her. Sakura wasn’t the most patient of fighters, and she wanted to end this quickly. A triumphant cry sounded through the air just as Sakura began a genjutsu—Robin, she identified in the back of her mind.

He saw her look and shrugged cockily. “On to the next one, I guess!”

She didn’t pay it much mind, moving sinuously between the attacks of her opponents, which slowed as they increasingly fell prey to her illusion.

So pacifistic, the Voice grumbled.

It wasn’t the most exciting of fights, Sakura allowed, but at least her uniform was clean. With luck, she wouldn’t even have to wash it until after the next mission.

“Robin, don’t—!” she heard Hyena cry, but she ignored it. It couldn’t be too pressing, because none of the new shinobi were back there.

Death cries sounded a few meters ahead of her, and her eyes drifted to Kakashi again, unconsciously. His katana was speared through one shinobi’s chest, and his other hand still crackled with electricity in the chest of another. Sakura would have turned her head away then, most likely scowling, if not for the expression on his face. She would have expected feral satisfaction—or even indifference—before the look on his face as his eyes went toward—

Sakura’s gaze followed his and in an instant, the world stopped.

The scene in front of her presented as a still—a single frame of reality. Robin, on his knees, and his mask torn from his face; but it wasn’t his face Sakura saw, but the flash of his hair.

Bright and unreal, like silk.

And Tsuruga Taiki stood above him, apparently not-so-dead, with his blade angled down to drive into—not Robin’s—but Noriko’s heart. Just like Sakura had done.

The slip from Sakura to the Voice was seamless in a way it had never been before. Sakura choked, paled, and the Voice trembled into life, sliding into her limbs with a fury.

And she was gone.
Eventually, because she had to, she returned.

And when she did, Sakura blinked and found a heart in her hands.

It was still pumping. With each pump, blood poured from it all down her front—as well as onto the ripped open chest of the man collapsed at her feet. And all she could do was watch dumbly.

She heard a few strangled noises from something beneath the body of the dead man. With a quick heave, the body was thrust off, and then Sakura saw it—the vermillion strands in that same exact fucking color—and the terror set in.

“Fuck, that’s gross. Would you mind throwing that thing somewhere, I don’t know, else, please? Like, sometime soon—”

Sakura’s face contorted in grief and fury as she grasped the face beneath that hair punishingly between her hands. Why? Why had Noriko forced this guilt onto her? Why couldn’t she have just walked away that day—

New hands, burning with heat and strong, locked onto her biceps, and Sakura snarled.

“Let go,” a harsh, guttural voice in her ear.

She lunged out of the hold toward the red hair—“Why did you ask me to do it?”—but the man caught her at the last possible moment, drawing her body forcefully close to this.

Sakura turned her crazed gaze to him at last. Kakashi’s gaze was a study in restraint, revealing absolutely nothing. It was enough to jar her back to reality. She inhaled rapidly and then—wide-eyed—swung her head around again.

She could see Robin now, sputtering and scrabbling away, beneath the curtain of red hair. Robin, not Noriko. Beside him was Tsuruga Taiki’s dead body, his heart dropped next to him as unceremoniously as a fallen kunai.

It was sickening—not the sight, because she had long become desensitized to that, but the lack of control. She had not allowed the Voice to take over, but it had. If she could no longer stop it—

Sakura crumpled, held from the ground only by Kakashi. The forest was silent around her. All the targets had been eliminated, and now it was just her teammates who stared at her. She didn’t want to see their faces. She couldn’t. She needed to leave. Now.

“Let go of me.”

The fingers around her arms didn’t twitch.

Agony pierced through Sakura. “You,” she panted, bitter. “Let go of me—”

He didn’t let go. Instead, she felt the air around the both of them vibrate as her body was disassembled and then reassembled. They had shunshined somewhere else, and by the looks of it, far from where they had previously been in the forest.

She realized the irony of their situation, distantly. She wasn’t in the mood to be amused by it.

“Can’t you fucking listen,” Sakura spat. She spun and shoved him up against a tree. She wasn’t gentle—but his expression did not change. She knew because she had ripped off his mask, baring his face to the world. Sakura wanted him angry, she wanted him to fight her, but all the while, he
remained implacably calm.

But, some part of her noted with vicious satisfaction, he was finally looking at her.

“So I exist now?” she mocked. “You pretend for three weeks that I’m nothing but air, but now, now that I’ve clearly lost it, the situation is dire enough for you to start paying attention?”

A hand raised toward her face, and Sakura regarded it with livid warning. But it moved slowly, unfailingly slow, as it settled at the base of her neck. Sakura recoiled in confusion, and his fingers slid into the gaps of her hair.

And next thing she knew, she was kissing him. Her lips met his—harshly, cruelly, at first. Her hands, dripping blood and clawed, acted to tear at him. But he bore it all unflinchingly…worse, gently. His hands cradled her, and Sakura could have screamed, except everything inside her fractured and then fell apart.

And she was in pieces, rent into a thousand pieces by his roughness, his stupidity, his sudden, terrible tenderness. Warmth surged through her, slow and heavy like the trickle of honey, and she fell into him, her fingers yearning now, stumbling, faltering, awkward because they no longer sought to destroy. Her hands, as they stroked artlessly at his face, left streaks of blood; she knew this, because she could feel the unnatural slick and glide. But he did not flinch. She licked his teeth, because she suddenly adored them, adored the way they glanced her lips every now and then, and he did not flinch.

In this moment, she realized, absent of everything else—of what he had been to her or what he could be—she... Because of the way he held her, because of the way he moved beneath her hands...

It was hateful. She loathed it. If she could have, she would have buried her fingers in her own chest just to rip the sentiment out.

But it persisted.

Don’t leave, she almost said.

“Am I weak?” she forced out instead.

His eyes, as he looked at her, were incomprehensible.

“Or am I monstrous?”

His breath brushed her face, causing her jaw to slacken. “Is there any other option you’ve left yourself?”

“To be?”

“Not contemptible.”

“Are you not contemptible?”

Something—an echo of many nights ago, before he had crawled into a bed beside her—flashed over his face.

“No,” he said coldly.

“Then how can I be?”
He drew back, abruptly, harshly. “We are not the same.”

Sakura followed him, unrelenting. “We’re not. But I don’t know any other ANBU my age who’s split as much blood as I have. You can probably say the same. Is there an award for that? Should we be applauded?”

Kakashi’s face darkened further; both of his eyes could have been black.

She looked at him for a long moment, and then she turned her head. Just as she made the motion, she felt fingers curl around her neck once again. She stilled, chest tight—waiting.

“You know me outside of ANBU, don’t you?” he said softly. “Don’t lie. Coyness doesn’t suit you.”

She stiffened as she realized the precise placement of the pads of his fingers. His fingers kept track of her pulse.

And, just like that, hatred returned, washing aside the...softness that had been plaguing her. Even now, the copy-nin was a predator: he had spotted weakness, hadn't he, and then gone for the jugular. How long had he been waiting? The swing from her previous bizarre calm to what followed was staggering. Fear pulsed through her—then anger, hot and heady, which was much better. “Should I kiss you instead?” she threatened, baring her teeth.

His eyes slanted down, surveying her coolly. But then, with something like softness again, he grasped her chin and his lips slid over hers, just briefly, an ephemeral contact that was gone too soon.

Sakura stared at him, disarmed.

“Your antagonism,” he murmured, “It’s always been personal. You wear scent distorters not just for anyone; you wear them for me.”

She fought through the return of the molasses, struggled for vitriol. “Point of fact, then—I could be anyone. A man. A woman. Your next door neighbor.”

The returning smile on his face was mean. “Besides the point. I’ve never wanted to want you.”

She could have been offended by that, except that it would have been hypocritical. She leaned away, first, then pulled completely away.

“I told you not to be coy,” he warned lowly, eyes tracking her motion.

Before he could reach her, she shunshined away.

Was he looking now? She leaned back onto her bed, glowering. The thought persisted.

Did he look at every face around him now and wonder if it was her? Not important. Because he would never look at Sakura of all people and wonder—of that, she was certain.

“What a mess,” she said aloud. She repeated it, just to hear the sound of her demise out loud.

Lust, with difficulty, she had been able to tolerate. This...feeling was infinitely worse: contradictory and inestimable, simultaneously vicious and trembling. And it was foreign, like
nothing she had ever felt before. She didn’t know if she wanted to hurt Kakashi or consume him until no one could tell the difference between her and him. The hunger she felt was surely unconscionable.

But it had been born the moment he had held her in her madness, double-fold, triple-fold, to anything she had experienced before. Sakura didn’t know how to reconcile it all to herself: that she hated, still, the man she had only ever known as ‘Sakura,’ but could feel this way—so decisively—about someone she had met as ‘Saori Mori.’ It was—

Contemptible.

“And you,” she said, voice cool. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten.”

*I was beginning to wonder if you’d gone senile,* the Voice hissed. *More and more, it seems like it.*

“I won’t lose control like that ever again. So appreciate the memory while it’s still fresh.”

*But it will happen,* the Voice corrected, sneering. *Anytime it becomes too much, I’ll be there, and that’s when you won’t be able to fight me.* Sakura’s first instinct was to lash out in retaliation, but she contemplated the words with careful restraint instead. It could never become ‘too much’ ever again.

The door to her apartment creaked open, interrupting her introspection.

“Just because you have a key now doesn’t mean you can’t knock, you know.”

When Tsunade has said Sai needed to be watched closely, she had assumed she or Naruto would have a ‘guest’ over for just a few days. But he had been removed from suspension for a week now, and both Sai and Naruto had continued to inhabit her meager apartment like it was a free hotel.

“Fine,” Naruto allowed, eyes narrowing, “but did you take a look at the scroll on the table like I asked?”

Sakura’s mouth opened and closed, soundlessly. She hadn’t.

“I did,” Sai said, expression grim. “It’s far trickier than the previous, but I believe with no less than five attempts, we shall be able to perfect it. It will require a lot of energy and fortitude of mind, however.”

If there had been observing ears, she reflected, it would have sounded like they were talking about an *important* scroll, possibly related to battle strategy or a new jutsu—what usual team members discussed after missions. What they were talking about was the latest tonkatsu ramen recipe Naruto had found.

“I have full faith we’ll continue to live up to expectations,” Sai assured.

“And surpass,” Naruto said, very serious. “We have to be ambitious, Sai.”

Sakura grunted, standing now. “Both of you are tracking dirt all over the place. Why?”

Naruto scratched his cheek. “Well, you see, there was this bet with Tsunade—”

“We would rather not disclose the details,” Sai interjected quickly.

“But we won,” her blonde teammate finished, looking shifty now. “Ah…so.”
“So what?”

“What Naruto is trying but failing to relay,” Sai said calmly, “is that Tsunade has agreed to give us the next month to track Sasuke and bring him back.”

**Author's Note:**

Hi! Hello! Hey there!

You can blame certain *cough* parts of this chapter on the song "Adore You" by, uh, Miley Cyrus. I have no shame. It gives me feels. Anyway--so, hope you're all doing well, and I truly hope you enjoyed the chapter! Thing are about to pick uuppppp :D :D :D As always, give me LOOVVEE pls via kudos & (gasp, even better) comments!!

Ever awed and grateful that people actually read this fic,

madstoryteller999
“Shopping.”

Naruto blinked at her. “Ah…what? Did you hear me? Tsunade baa-chan finally said we can go after Sas—”

“I need to go…” Sakura paused, stared blankly into space for a moment. “Shopping.”

“For what?”

Sai was a little too astute, Sakura thought. She picked up her wallet and gave a firm two-fingered over her shoulder. She made sure to keep her pace casual—neither too slow nor too fast. When she had fully exited the apartment building, however, she shunshined into an alley a kilometer away that she knew would be abandoned.

She hadn’t even fully corporealized before her fist was swinging. It landed with a satisfying crunch into the brick wall work, causing the neat hierarchal stacks to crumble in on themselves.

“Fuck,” she whispered, the word swallowed by the sound of her small act of destruction.

Sasuke—Sasuke was like a seasonal cold that she couldn’t get rid of. No matter how hard she tried to forget about him, he kept coming back. And now there was the added complication of Shisui, the crow’s, expectations. And the actual Shisui’s as well.

Sakura cursed under her breath. The ritual for the sharingan had messed up everything. She wished she had known the outcome then and had decided to rebel against the crow that day after all.

Biceps straining against an invisible force, Sakura stood for one moment in utter stillness, before mustering the will to push off from the wall. Her fingers twitched lifelessly, and soon, her visage was that of Saori Mori’s. She affixed her ANBU mask and rejoined the crowd on the streets.

It didn’t take her long to find Kanami and Kane’s. Operated by a brother and sister, the weapons shop was a veritable fortress, extending half a kilometer in total. It was the premiere source of weapons in the Hidden Village; in point of fact, every weapon cost enough to outvalue gold in its equivalent weight.

While technically, any shinobi could purchase weapons from Kanami and Kane’s, the cost was greatly subsidized for ANBU. Sakura couldn’t afford weapons here as herself, but she could as Saori Mori.

As always, not long after stepping one foot inside, Kanami appeared with all the forewarning of a sudden apparition. Unsurprisingly, she looked just as she had her first visit. Sakura had been here many times over the past three years, and yet, she had never actually observed the aging process in the other woman. Her hair was pure white—from time, Sakura knew, because paintings on the wall showed her once with midnight black locks—but only a few lines on her face otherwise betrayed her.

“Crow-san,” the handsome woman greeted, tilting her head down. Sakura returned the gesture.

“How can my sister and I help you today?” Sakura’s gaze flicked to the left and found Kane. Like
his sister, he too wore his hair long, but it still contained streaks of black.

“Just browsing,” she muttered.

“Is there a particular section we can direct you toward?” Kane asked politely. Which was fair. The shop was large enough with so many hidden rooms that, if she had to guess, very few shinobi in existence understood the whole layout.

“Katanas,” she said after a short pause. She might have imagined it, but she felt a slight vibrating suddenly from the blade strapped to her back.

Kanami’s green gaze was penetrating. “You’ve never once purchased a long blade from us,” the woman noted quietly, her infamous memory proving itself one more.

“I wasn’t interested until now,” she said shortly, hoping that would end the conversation.

It did. Without another word, the pair directed her through a seeming maze of rooms until they reached a large, red hall. Here, blades gleamed brilliantly against their crimson backdrop. Other individuals, most clothed in the characteristic black and grey of black ops forces, also roamed the displays.

“Call once you’ve made your choice,” Kanami said softly. She disappeared with her brother, the slight smell of cinnamon left in the air after their departure.

Sakura turned on her heel. Stretching her hand out stiffly, she grabbed the first blade she found and spun it in her hand. It whistled through the air, catching the light like a flash of lightning. She flipped it, testing the feel of the handle. Too decorative, she decided. There was unnecessary weight there. She placed the katana back and stalked past its neighbors—each more extravagant than the last (were these for daimyos or actual shinobi?)—until she reached a more understated set of katanas.

Her gaze flicked impatiently over the row of blades, stopping only when she saw a slim, generally modest blade, which only stood out because of its unusual color. Grey-black, like charcoal, she reflected; it was…oddly compelling.

The Voice hummed impatiently in the back of her mind.

Slowly, she made her way to it. Her fingers wrapped around the simple handle, and she lifted the katana to test its swing. It seemed to sing through the air.

Delicious, the Voice moaned.

“Found it?”

“Fuck!” Sakura choked out, eyes flaring wide. She stopped herself just in time, the blade a scarce millimeter from the Kane’s throat.

He raised a brow, giving the appearance that this tended to happen to him often.

“You would think, by now, that you and your sister would learn to stop appearing out of nowhere —”

“Or that you ANBU would learn to pay more attention to your surroundings,” he responded evenly, scrawling out the price on a piece of parchment.
“I do,” Sakura said sourly, “I just tend to swing first and ask questions after.” She handed over the requested amount of money, unable to help the wave of gloom that swept over her at her now mostly empty pouch.

“Enjoy your purchase,” he responded, his form starting to blur tellingly.

“Wait, Kane-san, I’m finally done! Here, I’ve got all the money pulled out…” A hand promptly dropped a blur of coins into the older man’s open one just as he vanished.

The new masked face turned belatedly to look at Sakura. She blinked back.

“Oh,” Tortoise said.

“I’m sorry,” Sakura said, clearing her throat, leaning against a lamp post outside the weapons shop. “I hope… what I did that night didn’t have any repercussions for you.”

Tortoise stared at her silently for a moment. “None, actually,” she said finally. “Which was… an unexpected boon.”

Sakura nodded in agreement, brow furrowing. Neither of them had been punished—unlikely, all in all. Tortoise, of course, had truly done nothing. But Sakura… well, she had been outright insubordinate.

“Let’s head into the forest. I have more to say, and we have no privacy here.”

After a moment of consideration, Sakura followed her, until they were well masked by a thick spread of trees from the dirt paths of Konoha, at least visibly.

“There were no repercussions,” Tortoise said lightly, “But that doesn’t make what you did okay.”

Sakura raised a brow.

“You didn’t know we would both go unpunished when you did it,” the other woman pointed out. “When you went after those ANBU captains.”

“I didn’t,” Sakura acknowledged.

“And I asked you to stop.”

“I did try,” she attempted blandly.

“No, you didn’t. Not really,” Tortoise returned, “You clearly have a temper.”

Her words, Sakura reflected somewhat apologetically, had no more effect on her than that of a stern teacher on a particularly uncaring, errant student. She couldn’t really bring herself to… care. Not about this, at least.

“You didn’t actually do anything,” Sakura pointed out. “They can’t demote you for getting frisky in a club, you know.”

Tortoise was silent in response to that, which she took to mean she had won that point. Maybe, Sakura would have felt differently now if the stakes had been different. As it stood, however, nothing she had done could have harmed anything more than Tortoise’s paranoid sensibilities.
Which she had, in fact, initially attempted to appease.

The black-haired ANBU let out a huff of incredulous laughter. “You really are an asshole, aren’t you?”

Sakura wasn’t sure how to respond to that. Or if she was meant to. Purple eyes rested with some strange emotion on Sakura’s face.

Tortoise gave another incredulous exhale. “It’s still kind of hot.”

Suddenly, she was pushing Sakura back against a tree. Sakura let it happen, mostly in shock at not having expected it at all—first Kane sneaking up on her, now this?—but when fingers brushed the bottom of her mask, her hand snapped up instinctively to shackle her wrist.

“It’s all fake anyway, isn’t it?” Tortoise breathed, pupils dilating. “Look, I’ll do mine first.”

True to her words, and without an iota of hesitation, one hand curled around the bottom of her mask and pulled up. Large purple eyes and arched brows were revealed above a soft, sensitive mouth.

“Now you.” And Tortoise was pulling again, and this time Sakura’s face—her fake face—met the cool air.

The other woman pressed forward eagerly, until soft, gently warm lips brushed Sakura’s. She stayed like that for only a moment, though, before tilting her head so that their lips slotted more firmly together.

Sakura drew back a second later, blinking.

“Is something wrong?” Tortoise asked, a soft, seductive hunger in her voice.

“N-No. Or rather,” she said, brow furrowing. Why had she pulled away? It hadn’t been unpleasant.

“Shh,” the ANBU murmured, leaning in again. As their tongues curled together, the shorter woman’s body curled into hers, angling up so that her breasts brushed against her own. It felt nice. Very nice. But it still wasn’t—

She pushed back, holding Tortoise back now by her hips, which were… Well, quite nice as well, actually. But there had been a reason she had moved away—

“Interesting, what happens in the seven hours it takes to catch a scent.”

Sakura’s breath caught in her throat and her head jerked to the side.

He stood there in full ANBU regalia—even with the porcelain mask, for once. Rather than limiting the force of his gaze, the red lining framing the openings for eyes made his all the more prominent, all the more potent.

Horror set in. She knew there must had been something like naked panic on her face. She had expected him to come after her, of course—but not like this, not so soon. She hadn’t even thought about it when she had put on the disguise. So stupid.

“Granted,” he told Sakura, “for six and a half , I was outside Konoha on a mission.”

Tortoise shifted, her body positioned just barely behind Sakura’s now as she darted glances between the two of them. “Has he…has he entered one of those episodes of madness that everyone talks about?” the other woman whispered.
Sakura couldn’t quite remove her gaze from Kakashi.

Tortoise’s form stiffened against her. “Or,” she said, voice returning to normal volume now, “is there—is there something between the two of you?”

She scowled and found her voice. “No—”

“Yes,” Kakashi said, with something like savagery. “Leave.”

Sakura stiffened as well, stance becoming more combative. Tortoise pressed more closely into her, her breath a nervous flutter against Sakura’s neck. She felt Kakashi’s eyes examine the motion.

“If she doesn’t leave,” the copy-nin drawled, voice a rasp. Killing intent radiated from him, every long, powerful limb held in exquisite restraint. His sharingan spun as it rested on Tortoise, who flinched back.

“No,” Sakura said, voice soft and eyes hard.

Kakashi’s eyes roved over her with a feral, manic rage. “I want to,” he snarled.

“Crow,” Tortoise began.

“You should probably leave,” Sakura said calmly, eyes flicking to her.

The other woman nodded and began to move—only to halt again as she realized she wasn’t being followed. Tortoise looked at her incredulously. “You’re staying,” she said, lips turning down.

She waited, but Sakura remained still, silent. With one final glance, with the air of something like accusation, Tortoise shunshined away.

Sakura’s mouth tightened as she turned back. “You shouldn’t have followed me.”

“As I said before,” Kakashi observed coolly, eyes darkening. “don’t be coy.”

Air hissed out from between her teeth. “I think we can both acknowledge that this, whatever this is, is a terrible idea—”

The mask—both masks—slid off Kakashi’s face, until she was staring directly at the devastating cruelty of his features, their heartless beauty. Her breath caught, and his eyes flashed knowingly.

“And yet it’s inevitable,” he was behind her now, his breath just brushing her ear, “isn’t it?”

Sakura tensed. He was so close, but he wasn’t actually touching her. The distance, precisely because it was so little, made her want to—

“You know it too,” he whispered, voice simultaneously ravenous and livid, “or you wouldn’t have pushed her away.”

“That had nothing to do with you.”

“I can smell you,” he hissed, dragging his nose up the line of her neck, “so don’t lie to me.”

Sakura cursed with feeling.

Kakashi laughed coldly. “You recoiled from her. But with me?”
She could feel the planes of his chest against her shoulder blades, against the muscles and scars of her back. She had moved into him.

She shifted, teeth bared. “Don’t ask me questions I won’t answer.”


“Don’t,” she choked out.

“Don’t what,” he breathed above her mouth, just millimeters away, holding himself back. Holding himself back from her, even as she strained to take him. Devour him. Have him.

“Don’t be…” she strained for him, nostrils flaring with rage, “cruel.”

His callous expression diminished. Perhaps, it was her words. Or maybe her voice, which betrayed more than she intended it to.

“Then don’t drive me mad.” And he kissed her.

Despite what some part of her, insidious and rebellious and against greater reason, had always contemplated, it was not hard and fast and punishing; nor, however, was it slow and sweet. Mostly, perhaps, because that would have required constancy and predictability, and neither of them were the sort to ascribe to such pillars.

If there were such pillars—pillars of fucking.

Mostly, indeed, she was incredulous that he fit in her: the full, steely length of him—the width too, because of course, yes, the bastard was significantly larger than anything she had ever thought could comfortably fit. She was arrogant, too, that she was strong enough then to take the full feral, brunt of his thrusts and match him, overpower him at times, knot her hands in his silver mess of hair and make him kneel for her, until he flipped her over and drove into her from behind.

And then, also—even then, though she might never have imagined it, had never allowed it before—it was glorious.

She could do no more that pant, voice gone and thoughts in total disarray, as her fingers scrambled for purchase on some surface—any surface—to tide her through it all. But the bark beneath her fingers merely gave way until she was on the ground again, and he was still behind her, slower now, even more powerful, twisting his hips so that the molten length of him only just brushed that part inside of her, and she screamed at him, raged at him, cursed at him for more, and he held her through it all, the sound of his low breathing sounding like begging to her ears.

Her fingers touched him greedily, harshly enough—she knew—to leave bruises on his pale skin. And she was all the more glad for it, unconscionably pleased, because then anyone who ever saw him would know…

“Bastard,” she snarled.

His thumb, calloused and rough and divine, kneaded the locus of nerves above where they were joined, and Sakura screamed.
“Kakashi,” she spat out, like it was hateful—but there were tears in her eyes, and they were from pleasure, sheer, mindless pleasure—“Kakashi, Kakashi, Kakashi—”

He groaned against her mouth, and she locked her legs around him more strongly, forcing his hips into her, so that he was deeper in her than he had been before. His sharingan spun in a dizzying blur, as though memorizing her broken expression at the resulting bliss.

The sight of it inspired a burst of insanity.

“Bet no one’s made you wrecked like this,”—mindless filth spilled from her mouth—“wish you could say my name, wish I could make you scream it for me—”

“Give it,” he demanded.

“No questions,” she warned, eyes flashing. Then, because it felt too good, her head fell back again. “Fuck, just, the way you—”

Kakashi snarled too, sounding like he had been wounded. “Like it’s mine,” he seethed, in response to her unfinished remark. And then his hips pistoned even faster, as though he couldn’t bear to be outside her.

“Fu-uck,” Sakura cried out, undulating with him, against him, to make the violence of it even more devastatingly sweet. “Please, please, please…”

He wrested her thighs apart, held her open as he thrust into her. And this was infinitely worse and infinitely better, and she was against a tree for fuck’s sake, her pants rucked down to her knees, her shirt torn and hanging desperately to her arms, his clothes no better, and she wanted to ruin him. Ruin him so thoroughly that she owned him, so that he would be hers, so that she could—

She didn’t know who came first, but the strength left her first. And then he leaned into her, and that was no good, because they were on the ground now, and he was shuddering around her.

Eventually, they were both still.

She felt him behind her, his breath caressing the side of her damp neck. Long, calloused fingers curled around her hip, helping him press his cock greedily into her, even though he was softening, even though he had just come.

And it was just as Sakura realized she couldn’t bear the thought of emptiness, that she realized the monumentality of the mistake she had made. She wrenched his hand from her and moved forward, forcing him to slip out of her—ignoring the feeling of his cock dragging against her walls, causing unintended spasms of pleasure—before she stood up.

She began adjusting her clothes, using minor jutsus to fix the damage done. Kakashi’s eyes didn’t leave her once, claiming her nakedness with presumptuous authority.

“This was a mistake,” she told him.

She turned to leave. She didn’t make it.

“Fuck,” Sakura gritted out, fist colliding with the trunk of a tree. It cracked and split. She breathed heavily. “You won’t thank me for this, Kakashi. I know I certainly won’t thank you.”

He moved with lethal grace to a seated position on the forest floor, his elbows resting on his knees. His expression did not change.
“What was it?” she demanded. “This body? This face? Artifice. You know that.”

His mouth curled now—at last, a reaction. “And for you?” Kakashi drawled. “Was it my cock?”

She understood the point being made. It didn’t matter.

“This won’t happen again,” she promised.

His eyes followed her as she left, and she pretended—to herself—that she didn’t notice.

“You look like you didn’t sleep at all,” Naruto observed.

Sakura glared at him. It didn’t appear to have any affect.

“New katana?” Sai remarked quietly. She shifted her glare to him as she swung it over her shoulder. They exited the door of her apartment.

“Wait, Sakura,” the black-haired boy murmured as Naruto marched cheerily ahead of them, “I think you should…hold off.”

“Hold off on what,” she snapped.

“Your plans with Sasuke,” Sai said bluntly. He squinted ahead, his gaze landing squarely on Naruto. “Perhaps…he’s right. Perhaps there is a chance.”

She paused, felt several expressions flash across her face. She settled on indifference. “There are no plans,” Sakura said, “The new katana is just that—a new katana.”

Sai’s mouth twisted slightly. “I may not have been friends with you as long as Naruto,” he said quietly, “but I think of all your acquaintances, I fare the best in identifying when you lie.”

“What do you think I’m going to do, Sai?”

“Kill him,” the other boy said without hesitation.

Sakura’s eyebrows raised. She looked away from him for a second, to the rising run. “Hm,” she intoned.

Sai watched her closely, seeming paler than usual.

“And if I tried,” she said softly, “would you fight me?”

She watched his features spasm, something remarkably—on anyone else, she would have identified it as such—like pain flashing across them.

Sakura abruptly felt terrible.

“You shouldn’t,” she whispered back, gripping his shoulder until he looked up at her again. “If that time ever comes, don’t do anything to endanger your safety here.”

“But—”

“But, of course,” Sakura said, smiling awkwardly, “this is all in the hypothetical. A silly conversation, really.”
He fell silent.

Eventually, as he always did, Naruto whined for them to walk faster. After a moment of inaction, they picked up their pace. They reached the outskirts of Konoha just as the sun was fully risen. Two figures met them there: Yamato, who seemed to have become a new addition to their team, looking somber and square-jawed. And beside him, the copy-nin.

And when Sakura stood in front of them, she bowed her head and gave each a polite greeting, ice-cold.

Author's Note: Soooo I'm baaackkk. Sorry for the delay... But wow! Something happened!! As always, please let me know your thoughts :D Your kudos and comments have sustained me through several years / tens of thousands of words to this point. I've never finished a multi-chap story before lol, but this might be the first one!!
P.S. A moment of silence for Tortoise, who never manages to get any.
P.P.S. If you haven't watched Fleabag, WATCH IT. This advice is entirely unrelated to this story, but it is a great show :D

P.P.S. The title of this chapter is actually a reference to an Andrew Marvell poem (one of the most famous example of carpe diem poetry lol)...called "To His Coy Mistress"
That they behold, and see not what they see?

It took Naruto twenty minutes to notice. His nose twitched like a squirrel’s, before his eyes widened.

“Did Kakashi-sensei ditch us?”

Sai wasn’t alone in turning to him with something like disgusted awe. Yamato in particular seemed to have a hard time finding words as they all flitted between the cedar trees. Sakura, sadly, was used to it by now.

“Dickless, he left us two minutes after we left Konoha.”

“No way,” Naruto scoffed. But he seemed then to reconsider his incredulity, past experience clearly passing through his mind. “Why?”

Now, that was a better question—one Sakura had been too stubborn to ask. She turned her attention to Yamato who, feeling her gaze, seemed to straighten.

“He’s tracking ahead of us,” the older man said simply. “He’ll join us at night.”


Yamato stared at the black-haired boy in a decidedly blank manner, which Sakura belatedly interpreted as calculation. “To take measure of the situation,” he said slowly. “If it proves too dangerous, he will send one of his summons with the instruction to turn back.”

“That was not part of the deal,” Naruto growled, blue eyes flashing. “Tsunade baa-chan said we could go after Sasuke—”

“Not necessarily that you would be the ones to confront him,” Yamato cut him off, as steadfast as the wood that sprouted from his palms. “Sasuke was last seen with Orochimaru, a known threat to Konoha and someone—pointedly—who has expressed concerning interest in you in the past. Our hokage may be a gambling woman, certainly more so than I can comfortably condone, but she is not foolhardy.”

Sai coughed politely beside her. Sakura ignored him. “And what about Kakashi? You herd the rest of us back, and he deals with Orochimaru and Sasuke by himself?”

“That’s certainly the way senpai prefers to do things,” Yamato considered. “It’s proven effective in the past.”

Sakura scowled, because he wasn’t a god and too many people seemed to think he was.

“Why do you call him senpai?” Her words lashed out with ill-disguised annoyance. “He’s younger than you, isn’t he? And you aren’t on his ANBU team anymore—”

“How would you know that?” His voice was sharper, now, just minutely.

Sakura regretted her words, thinking fast. “At Orochimaru’s hideout...It looked like that the two of you hadn’t seen each other in some time.”

Yamato watched her silently for a few more, torturous seconds, before nodding. “It is true. I hadn’t seen Kakashi-senpai for some years until then—” he paused, before continuing—“I suppose it’s no
“secret that he is an ANBU captain. And I’ve already told you of my own involvement in Root and ANBU.”

“Yes. And?” Naruto said sourly, his mind still clearly dwelling on the previous exchange.

“He, one could say,” Yamato seemed to hesitate over wording, “facilitated my leaving of Root. Soon after doing so, he became my ANBU captain. He was even younger then, of course—most if not all his age were genin. Still, somehow, even then, he always seemed…untouchable. Light years beyond anyone I knew. He still seems that way to me, to this day.”

Crescents formed on Sakura’s palms where her fingernails pressed in.

“You’re not wearing a dress,” Naruto said abruptly. He looked at her with something like accusation, as though departure from normalcy was a crime.

“It seemed a little impractical for a long term mission,” she managed distractedly. “We have no idea what climates we’ll be travelling in, and besides—”

“Sai didn’t bother changing,” Naruto countered. “And he has his whole stomach out.”

“It’s my best feature,” Sai explained without blinking.

Yamato made an odd sound beside them.

“Don’t be stupid, Sai,” Sakura muttered. “That’s obviously your face.”

Naruto grunted in reluctant agreement.

“Truly,” the ex-Root member sighed, shaking his face toward the sky.

When night came, it arrived with a welcome breeze that chilled the air. Sakura lifted the short, uneven hair from the back of her neck, luxuriating in the brief freedom this gave her damp skin. In the distance, she could hear Naruto’s crowing voice intermixed with Sai’s softer tones as they splashed themselves in the nearby stream, hidden by the trees. Her body thrummed with the prospect of her turn.

“You manage well.”

Sakura turned quickly. She hadn’t heard anyone approach.

“Your anger earlier was telling,” Yamato revealed, looking a bit uncomfortable. “I realize that things must not have been…easy. That Kakashi-senpai must not have made them easy.”

She blinked at him, at first disarmed.

“On the contrary,” Sakura said, “learning from Kakashi-sensei has been exceptionally easy—” she kept her voice light—“he hardly ever teaches me anything.”

The older man’s face didn’t change. He shifted his weight slightly, so that he leaned against the tree behind him.

“You’ve known him many years now, haven’t you, Yamato-san,” Sakura demanded as it suddenly occurred to her. “He was even your captain, one time.”

She gave him time to respond. But he remained silent.
“I have ideas, of course,” she continued, voice hardening. “That he’s prejudiced against civilians. Or maybe—maybe it’s women he has a problem with: silly girls, he’s been thinking, better for them to stay at home and be daughters and wives than to play at shinobi—”

She had said it, not because she believed it, but because she had hoped it would provoke a response from him. It did.

“No,” he said shortly. “He wouldn’t have welcomed the sandaime’s very own grandson any more than he welcomed you.”

“Well?”

He watched her, face unusually hard, for what seemed like an eternity. Then, Yamato looked past her into the trees. “Could you even understand?” he questioned, wryly. “When you have a mother and a father and a home and everything that is alien to him—alien to most of the shinobi whose names go down in history. When only broken men and women seem to survive in this line of work.”

Her mouth flattened. “So I was too coddled for him to teach? Too sheltered for him to even attempt it?”

Yamato’s expression was unreadable. “Not at all. Anyone can be broken.”

“Anyone can be broken,” the man repeated. He turned to look at Sakura. “So? Should he have encouraged it? Enabled it?”

“And well-adjusted people have no value in violent conflict,” Sakura voiced incredulously. Never mind that as each day passed she increasingly seemed to be neither.

“From personal experience, it is a burden that they are ill-equipped to handle,” Yamato said softly. A strange smile appeared on his face. “I suppose I’ve exposed myself too, now. Maybe I would have shunned you as well, but more gently. Maybe, for that reason, I would have succeeded.”

He paused, then blinked rapidly, frowning. “Or perhaps, all this is what I think and not Kakashi-senpai at all. It’s hard to know.”

Sakura’s frustrated exhale was drowned out by the noise of Naruto and Sai’s return. The former stomped loudly, shaking the water out of his hair as he did so that it sprayed in every direction. She twisted slightly to avoid it.

“The stream is all yours, Sakura-san,” Sai said, gazing first at Sakura then at Yamato. Afraid of what he might see, she turned and marched swiftly to the stream.

She didn’t bother folding her standard issue black shirt, pants, or flak jacket, instead tossing them all onto the grass as she waded into the water. The cool temperature of the water was a pleasant surprise, retaining less heat from the day than she might have imagined. A full moon shone that night and rendered her reflection with unusual clarity.

She twisted to wash her back. The long stretch of irezumi on her back was reflected onto the water, the colors astonishingly vivid.

Her gaze flicked away—only to return, her lips twisting.

It was admittedly odd. Sometimes, she went for long stretches of time forgetting that the tattoo existed entirely. Fitting, she supposed, because the decision had been a whim; when one treated
one’s body conscientiously as means of survival, what went on it often hardly seemed to matter.

And most days, that was precisely how Sakura felt. But then, other times, she could hardly stop thinking about the irezumi—trying to touch it, steal glances at it. This mark after all, unlike most every other on her body, was something she had ultimately chosen. And somehow, sometimes, that made all the difference.

(Sakura’s alone. Not Saori Mori’s. Not the Crow’s or the ANBU’s.)

She didn’t know how long she stared at it, lost in thought. But she was abruptly forced back into reality as a familiar song of killing intent encroached their area of the forest. Sakura straightened and walked toward her clothes, roughly tugging them on after making the signs for a gust of wind to dry her body. Her hair, still wet, dampened her shirt—but she bore it stoically as she made her way back to their camp.

She found Sai and Yamato already sprawled on their pallets, the latter already snoring lightly. Sakura’s eyes flicked through the trees, locating Kakashi quickly.

Sai caught the motion. “He’s on first-watch.”

“Naruto?”

The black-haired boy silently pointed to a hill just at the edge of their line of sight. Alone, crouched on the branches of the very top of a tree, was a figure distinctly clad in black and orange.

“You should talk to him.”

“Why me?” she asked. Why did tonight’s theme seem to be having all the frustrating, uncomfortable conversations she wanted right now to avoid?

“Because only you could understand,” Sai answered. “Sasuke was your teammate as well.”

“As you know,” she responded, “having known Sasuke—to whatever extent I did—I have a decidedly different opinion from Naruto’s.”

Sai looked at her, eyes narrowing slightly.

“Is it really so hard for you to understand, Sakura?” Sai wondered calmly. “Naruto’s simultaneous frustration with the traitor and his…captivation?”

Sakura scoffed. “Yes, I’m not interested in making friends with anyone who’s run me through—”

“You show it too,” Sai said, softly.

“Excuse me?” The words emerged harsh and cold.

“I am admittedly a novice in this area, but—it seems to me often that you can’t help yourself,” the boy explained without inflection. “Most of the time you glare and, in those moments, I think it’s because you hate him. But other times, it’s different. The quality of your gaze, the way you stare at Kakashi-san…”

Sakura’s stomach dropped to the floor.

He broke off, face twisting. “I’m…not sure quite how to categorize it. It requires more studying. But, indeed, based on these factors alone, an observer might conclude that you are just obsessed with the taichou as dickless is with the traitor—”
“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about,” Sakura spat out.

Sai inclined his head. “That may be true. Still. Talk to Naruto.”

The manipulative little twit. At this point, Sakura was grateful for the chance to escape—exacty as he had no doubt intended. She let him have this victory and launched herself through the trees until she reached Naruto.

It was a tall tree—well-chosen, as it provided an excellent vantage point from which to observe the expanse of forest below. Not that Naruto seemed to notice. The blonde was slow to respond, even by his usual standards. When he did look up, it was with a grim expression. For a long time, they stared at each other in silence.

Realizing that this wouldn’t be quick, Sakura heaved a sigh and settled onto the branch. A knot in the tree dug into her back, but she managed, for the most part, to ignore it. She stared steadfastly at Naruto instead.

Woodland creatures rustled through the wilderness, a cacophony of noise, but Naruto was silent. As another second passed, the unease within Sakura grew.

“Hey,” she said loudly.

His distant gaze finally gained from focus. He looked paler than usual—but maybe that was the moonlight.

“You know,” he said slowly, the words stilted, almost dazed, “sometimes…I think I may have forgotten what it was like to have him on our team.”

Sakura had been about to shift her weight, that knot a little too annoying after all. She paused now.

“Maybe I am chasing after something that doesn’t exist,” he whispered, “maybe I’ve just imagined it, and everyone’s right, and I’m just…”

Sakura knew, in an abstract sort of way, she that should have been pleased by this. Instead, she felt discomfited.

“Well, you know what I think,” she settled with.

But he waited—his head tilted to the side, listening, but not quite looking at her. As though she needed to say more. And she could have cursed out loud. “I don’t know what to say, Naruto,” she said, relenting despite herself, despite reason. “You know what I think, but we both know that you knew him best.”

“Did I?” he asked with unusual cynicism. It tested her forced calm.

“You did,” she snapped now. “And it was obviously reciprocated. Back then.”

He exhaled sharply, rubbing his eyes. “I don’t know what’s real anymore. But…it used to feel like he was the only in the whole world who could understand,” he said, voice rough.

She opened her mouth to speak again, but ultimately restrained. A myriad of expressions were passing over Naruto’s vibrant features, and it was impossible to keep track of them.

“I don’t know what’s right, Sakura. But I feel—I feel like I owe it to that Sasuke to chase him to the ends of the earth, even if only the ghost of him exists. That’s how I feel, and I can’t change it.”
Sakura met his burning gaze. “Naruto, did you—”

He read her face immediately, reddening slightly. “It’s not like that. But it doesn’t feel…any…less strong, okay? The way you feel about your hand or…or your foot…Sasuke was that. He was like this mirror that showed me everything in myself. Every failing, every flaw—but also that I was…that maybe I could be more than what everyone else saw…”

He broke off, but she was beginning to understand. And realization gave birth to a terrible, sinking sensation in her chest.

“Get some sleep,” she muttered.

He shrugged. “Probably not going to happen tonight.”

She could understand that. Some nights, Sakura was so wired she couldn’t even keep her hands still, her fingers vibrating with frenetic energy like some part of her still thought she was in active combat. She wondered how long it would take for her limbs to rid themselves of those instincts. Probably never.

*When we’re dead,* the Voice whispered.

Sakura stood up.

“Try,” she insisted. She stepped off the tree.

The week passed in a blur of mind-numbing monotony. As the following week began, she realized that the second Sasuke retrieval mission had now become her longest mission with Team Seven. The realization arose, perhaps not unexpectedly, as a result of growing frustration with her situation. Long-conditioned by the Crow and ANBU missions to live by a certain standard of vigilance, it was hard to adjust her trigger-happy reflexes to the ordinary, the mundaneness, now surrounding her—certainly for such an extended amount of time. They passed through village after village, and maybe—possibly—Sakura was beginning to understand a little of why Kakashi grated so ruthlessly against the cadence of the quotidian.

Or—not. Definitely not. She took that thought back.

“Oi, oi,” Naruto panted, eyes wide, “I think it’s ready!”

Sai smacked his approaching hand away.

He and Yamato had been delegated the task of grilling the meat at the yakiniku restaurant they had stumbled upon—for good reason, because Naruto’s impatience when hungry always led to undercooked or bland food and Sakura—

Well, apparently no one liked Sakura’s cooking. She sipped her water indifferently.

Her gaze passed over the occupants of the small restaurant, mostly obligatorily. She didn’t actually expect to find anything interesting.

“I’m heading to the restroom,” Sai said with ostensible reluctance, darting a skeptical glance Naruto’s way. “Don’t fuck it up, dickless.” *Or else,* he left unsaid.

Naruto eagerly grabbed the prongs, his stomach grumbling loudly as Sai departed. Sakura couldn’t quite stop herself from salivating too.
“It’s night time, and we’re finally at a restaurant,” Naruto pondered. “Why didn’t Kakashi join us? It’s meat.”

Yamato looked abruptly grave, an oddly humorous contrast to his current task. His next words, however, removed the bizarre humor from the situation entirely. “He believes we’re getting closer.”

“To Sasuke?” she found herself asking. As though it needed clarifying.

“Are we actually close? It feels like we’ve been moving randomly,” Naruto said skeptically. “North and north and north, then south, then west, now back east…”

“From what I understand from senpai,” Yamato said carefully, “Sasuke is no longer with Orochimaru. It seems that your former teammate is currently tracking someone else—hence our somewhat circuitous route.”

“No longer with Orochimaru,” Sakura repeated blankly.

The meat was all but forgotten. Naruto’s face grew increasingly red. “He’s been—He left? Why?”

Yamato looked a bit shifty-eyed now. “It’s hard to say—”

He was cut off by the muffled hiss of a kunai nailing neatly into the chunk of meat currently burning on their grill. Naruto grunted, and Sakura’s panicked eyes found a kunai embedded in his shoulder.

Her nostrils flared, the Voice awakening with growing scent of blood. What the fuck?

As cries of pain and terror sounded all throughout the restaurant, Yamato moved without hesitation, grabbing the platter and upending the meat to shield them from the next volley. Sakura launched herself into a crouch on the table, fitting her body behind the large silver disk; she felt Naruto settle beside her.

An attack on the singular yakiniku restaurant they had chosen? How shitty exactly was their luck…

“What is it?” Sakura voiced, urgent. She shifted slightly as well and understood immediately. Her hands fisted at her sides.

“These shinobi have been garnering bit of a name for themselves. They use genjutsu to simulate invisibility,” Yamato said grimly.

…the ‘invisible’ shinobi. Sakura would have given anything to have encountered in any other situation—even alone would have been preferable.

“If we don’t manage this situation carefully,” Yamato instructed, “this will become a slaughterhouse. Now, listen carefully, we know that they take shinobi and civilian bodies for experim—”

“Sai,” Naruto blurted, just as Sakura jerked in the direction of the bathroom. They all strained with
their senses to find his chakra; in an emergency situation like this, he should have flared his chakra a few times intermittently, just enough for those attuned to it to find him.

She didn’t detect anything.

“Likely, he has been captured,” was the blunt conclusion relayed to them. Naruto made a low, wounded noise. Sakura snarled and shifted for the katana on her back, uncaring of Shisui’s commands now—laying low was simply no longer an option.

But…kidnapped? Her mind worked quickly. The necessary course of action here was not to fight. The opposite, in fact. She dropped her katana to the ground.

Yamato blinked slowly at her. “Sakura, what are you—”

“I’ll find him,” Sakura hissed to Naruto, “stay safe.”

She launched herself into the chaos.

Just as Yamato had predicted, their objective had clearly been to grab and dart with as many still-living bodies as they could. This, she supposed, had saved her from considerable amounts of injury in the willful act of being kidnapped. She had only taken one kunai to her leg before she was deemed easy-pickings and struck over the head.

She winced now as they dragged her down a seeming labyrinth of prison cells, at least fifty miles from where the modest yakiniku restaurant had been, still feeling the force of the blow. If she hadn’t regained consciousness quickly enough, she wouldn’t have had time to heal herself from the resulting concussion before they had put the chakra-dampening chains across her wrists. That had been luck and nothing else.

Getting captured—purposefully—was a just as inadvisable experience the second time as the first, she reflected with some private amusement.

“This one is a shinobi too,” the man herding her growled.

She was unceremoniously tossed into a dank cell, lit only by a torch hanging almost out of sight in the corridor. She skidded on her knees, stopping her momentum with increased friction as she applied more pressure to her toes. Small divots appeared in the rocky ground beneath her until she stopped.

It took some time for her eyes to adjust to the new lighting. When they did, she found Sai almost immediately. Eyes closed, leaning against the back wall of the cell, a darkening bruise livid against the skin of his cheek, he sat there seemingly indifferent to the bodies around him in the same cell. She made a beeline for her teammate, ignoring the people she had to push out of the way. Some pushed back, threatening violence; she ignored them, dogged in her pursuit.

“Sai,” she whispered, voice soft. She reached for his cheek.

His eyes snapped open, then widened. “Sakura.”

He pushed away from the wall, grimacing. She frowned. “Where are you hurt?”

“Broken ribs, shoulder out of alignment,” he recounted calmly. “Blow to the head as well—I think I’m concussed.” His eyelids slid downward.
“No sleeping,” she commanded. She slid in the small space between him and the corner, glaring out at the gazes that measured them, some frightened, some desperate, others clinical. She could imagine it wouldn’t take long for them to turn on each other—the weakest would fall prey to the stronger, be the first served up when the guards came knocking.

Right now, Sai looked vulnerable, and the hawks circled.

“We…have no chakra,” the boy beside her said blearily. He straightened. “How did you get captured? You were with Yamato-san and Dickless—"

“I wasn’t letting you get captured alone,” Sakura muttered, shoulders tensing as her gaze darted over the cell. “Sounded like too much fun.”

Sai made a small noise. She turned to look at him. She didn’t think she’d ever seen him look so young.

“You don’t have any chakra,” he repeated, gaze sharpening. “There’s no straightforward exit strategy here. You’ve only invited unnecessary torture—possible death—onto yourself. For what reason?”

Her chest ached and her head hurt. “You know why,” she said simply, in a tone that brooked no argument.

His glance cut downwards. “It isn’t worth—"

“Shut up,” she growled.

A man, by a considerable margin the largest of the bunch, had emerged from the crowd. His gaze flicked over Sai, cataloguing his injuries. Sakura peered up at him indifferently. The man’s eyes, dark and beetle-like, drifted to her.

“Don’t do yourself a disservice here, girl,” he said told her, voice smooth. “You’re only going to become collateral damage if you try getting in the way—” his mouth curved into a cold smile —“Without him you’ll last…well, longer. Maybe.”

“Sakura,” Sai said softly from behind her.

“Shut up,” Sakura said again. She stood and cracked her neck, one quick snap to the left and then to the right. She eyed the men and women flanking her challenger with a raised brow.

The Voice cackled inside her. *No jutsu just fist and bone and blood and desperation…*

Against her will, it goaded her, if just slightly.

“Hey Sai,” she called out, “what would Naruto say? Something loud, stupid, and straight out of a mafia movie, right…Let’s see…”

She smirked at her teammate. “Want to rumble?”

She could hear Sai’s choked, incredulous laugh as she feinted, twisting to avoid the man’s heavy fist. Using the same momentum, she kicked off the back wall and drove her elbow back, right into his solar plexus. She felt him buckle and then stumble back.

Sakura waited, fists drawn up, impatient. “Come on, old man,” she groaned, “I’m going to fall asleep over here.”
He snarled and charged toward her. She latched a hand onto his collar and yanked his head straight into her knee.

*This isn’t even interesting,* the Voice grumbled.

He went down like a sack of potatoes.

The other shinobi in the cell watched in silence. Sakura sighed and then pushed her short, uneven hair back, uncaring that she had probably laced blood into the strands.

“This is going to be a slug fest, isn’t it,” she remarked.

Three of them came for her next.

Even though it was gross, even though she was well-versed in medical ninjutsu, she couldn’t stop herself from picking at her split knuckles.

“You shouldn’t,” Sai spoke aloud.

She hadn’t noticed him waking up. It was hard to tell what time of the day it was, but she reckoned he had slept at least the past five hours (once she had determined that he had managed to escape a concussion). Thankfully, he had finally regained some color.

Sakura became abruptly aware of herself, crouched and vibrating with ill-managed energy. The prison cell was getting to her: the dark, the absence of her chakra, and the fearful watchfulness of every other cellmate in here towards her. Each time she accidentally glanced at one of them, they flinched.

“Are you scared?” she asked.

“No,” Sai answered easily. “Just resigned.”

“Resigned to what?”

He shifted his weight. “Even with your abilities—without chakra, you cannot protect me for long if those rogue-nin choose me as their next subject. And given that we have no idea how long we’ll be here...”

“The situation isn’t that dire, Sai. We’ll be out of here soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Kakashi will be here soon.”

Sai blinked at her. “He will?”

Sakura rolled her eyes. “Undoubtedly. He loves stealing the thunder when it comes to this sort of thing.”

Sai’s gaze suddenly seemed incredibly penetrating. She drew back a little, frowning.

“I really don’t understand,” the boy said lightly.

“Understand what?” she asked, picking at her split knuckles again.
“How your face can express so much resentment for him, when you still believe that he will… abandon the trail he’s been pursuing for the past week, neglect the mission he has been assigned by the hokage, to pursue us—without any doubt.”

Sakura felt adrift, not quite sure how to manage this accusation of inconsistency. “He told you himself, didn’t he? His… philosophy that anyone who abandons their teammates is scum. Never mind that he’s a terrible, catastrophe of a teacher—”

“Yes, I’ve heard it,” Sai said unflinchingly. “He’s an instructor; it is his duty to propagate such lessons. Often, lessons can be ideals, compromised in the most strenuous of circumstances. This is one such circumstance. But, still, you believe he will follow through… unflinchingly.”

“So?” Sakura returned, feeling defensive. “It’s just one not-shitty thing he manages to remain faithful to. Don’t make a huge deal out of it.”

“In the work we operate in,” Sai considered aloud, “how can it be as insignificant as you suggest?”

“If Naruto were here, he would be telling you the same exact thing,” said Sakura shortly.

“Naruto is still naïve to the worst parts of what it means to be a shinobi. You are not.”

She opened her mouth to retort with, but she was cut off by shouts from further down the corridor. She jolted in place, recognizing what those sounds meant. He had, as ever, impeccable timing, Sakura reflected sourly.

The other occupants of the cell began to shift restlessly, eyes flaring with alarm.

“Don’t move,” she barked, face still dark from her previous exchange with Sai. They froze immediately, crowding the back wall away from her. Sakura stared at them for a moment, unnerved by their immediate obedience, until she shook herself out of her momentary stupor.

She stretched out a hand. With difficulty, Sai pulled himself up. Sakura slung his arm over her shoulders and supported most of his weight.

“H—here, just here,” they heard a voice cry out, accompanied by stumbling footsteps, “please, I’m begging you, don’t hurt me—look, look they’re right here, we haven’t even touched them. Unharmed!”

A short, square jawed man appeared in front of their cell, panic wracking his frame so violently that only survival instinct seemed to keep him upright. A moment later, the copy-nin himself appeared in front of the cell, surveying the contents of their cell almost leisurely.

His entire demeanor of laziness was betrayed, however, by the savage gleam in his eyes. And then there was the blood that coated his uniform in broad, crude strokes, vermillion and telling. He had killed his way here—there had been no subterfuge. The Voice hissed within her, both livid at its perceived competition and reluctantly admiring. And Sakura… Well, Sakura stood there, face blank, trying to ignore Sai’s words about why, when she had doubted almost everything else, she had not for one instant doubted this.

Kakashi’s gaze passed over them. He paused at the livid bruise on Sai’s face.

“I did not authorize that—!” the man tried to plead. Kakashi’s blade slid clean through his throat; he didn’t even bother looking as he killed him.

As one hand slid the blade back into its sheath, his other tensed to produce a familiar spark of
lightning. When the high pitched chirping abated, Sakura looked over and found the bars of the cell all but melted. Kakashi stepped forward, one long leg followed by another, until he stood fully inside the cell with all of them. No one moved, but the temperature seemed to drop. Sakura’s jaw clenched to the point of pain.

He grabbed Sai’s chains first, fist tightening with chakra until they crumbled into small particles. Without pause, he moved to Sakura next. His fingertips just grazed the insides of her wrist, and her face went pale, her gaze flying up to the ceiling to hide what it might reveal.

“Injuries,” Kakashi demanded, voice low and dangerous.

“Broken rib, shoulder out of alignment,” Sai listed hastily, before adding tentatively, “possibly a fractured cheekbone.”

She felt the weight of that gaze on her next. Her nostrils flared. “Nothing. Just a few scrapes and bruises. I can heal him now.”

She didn’t wait for permission. Hands flaring with green, she found Sai’s injuries with business-like directness. The boy’s frame quickly relaxed under her hands.

“Are Naruto and Yamato-san far?” Sai asked, sounding a bit drugged.

Kakashi’s attention flicked over the other inmates of their cell. Like with Sakura—though in his case from fear of reputation alone—they shrunk back.

His mismatched gaze landed on Sai again, narrowing. “Close,” he said shortly.

Sai nodded, hissing lightly as Sakura finished the last of her work. She stepped back after, discreetly trying to wipe the blood from her hair. Would he think it was her own? If Kakashi noticed it, he didn’t show. He cast one final glance over the cell and left. Belatedly, Sai and Sakura followed.

Like the copy-nin had said, they did not have to travel far. The encampment was easy to spot from even a distance, the smoke from a live fire curling its way into the twilight sky. As they approached, Naruto burst through the trees. His strained face found Kakashi first, then moved left, settling on her and Sai. He careened into them a second later, his arms swinging out to engulf them both. Sakura returned the embrace with a small smile. She located Yamato over his shoulder. He watched them carefully.

“You must be hungry,” Yamato said, voice quiet. “Come.”

Naruto and Sai went immediately, arms still slung around each other. Sakura would have joined, but she felt Kakashi’s eyes intent on her.

“I’ll join you in a second,” she said almost soundlessly. Sai’s eyes narrowed as he looked back. Naruto waved an errant hand and continued to pull him away.

Yamato stayed, eyes wide. “Senpai,” he started.

“Leave.”

Sakura’s lips turn downward. Yamato stared at them both, dark eyes unreadable. He looked at Sakura last, his expression changing slightly, before he obeyed.

Sakura watched his back lingeringly, wanting desperately to escape. Here she was, alone with the
person she had sought most desperately to avoid. The last time the two of them had been alone—
No. No. She couldn’t think about it.

Blood rose in her cheeks. It was unfair. She resented the fact that she alone had to bear the burden
of the truth; Kakashi remained in blissful, fucking ignorance. Anger was better, she realized.
Anger, now, could save her.

“Was there something you wanted?” she said stiffly.

She peered up and found him watching her intently, sharingan spinning. “No injuries,” the copy-
nin said slowly.

She understood the point being made; Sai had had a list. Sakura controlled her expression with
immense effort. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to suggest.” Sakura controlled her expression with
immense effort. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to suggest.”

His eyebrow arched just slightly, deadly. “You and I had a conversation,” he said lowly.

She just barely flinched. “Yes,” she said, voice slightly rough. “About what happens to shinobi like
me. I recall.”

“Are you deadweight, Haruno?” her captain asked her, voice feral.

She hadn’t abandoned Sai. She had protected him, had tried to. Why did he misconstrue her
every
time? Sakura wished she could have raised the fisted hands at her sides and used them, to show him
the weight she carried, could carry, had carried. She wanted him to—

To know the truth.

This time, she did flinch—fully. She scrambled to cover her slip, to distract herself from her
nonsensical thoughts.

“I’m not,” she insisted, voice weaker than she would have liked it. She repeated it for emphasis.
“I’m not.”

The condescension was proclaimed loud and clear in his gaze as he looked past her. It was
insufferable, and she couldn’t—

“Why do you hate me?” she demanded.

Fuck. She had lost it, truly. She knew her face was red. Her heartbeat was thudding in her ears, and
she was truly caught in that infernal state now, of want: wanting him to know her rage, her hatred,
her lacerations—all of it.

With insufferable languidness, his head turned to look back at her.

Sakura exhaled sharply. It was too late to stop. “Why do you want me to fail?”

His eyes were unbearable. She couldn’t stand them. In an instant, however, it all became worse. He
removed the distance between them, until he was right in front of her. And then, his face was
contorted as he looked down at her, terrifying in its savagery.

“You are weak and incompetent,” Kakashi said coldly, “and the day you get someone killed, you
will understand what hatred means, what failure means.”

Sakura stared up at him, her face pale, her chest aching.
His face flashed with disgust, and she could have happily sunk a kunai in his chest. *You don’t see me,* she wanted to snarl back at him. It was on the tip of her tongue, she could taste it, bloody and metallic: look at me, look at me, look at me—

(His hands knotted in her hair, his breath ragged against her throat, the iron and muscle of his body against hers—the heat of him, the callousness and cruelty and the unexpected softness, *none of it hers*)

Sakura’s vision was overwhelmed by red. She didn’t see him leave. But when she looked again, he was gone.

She laughed, at first disbelieving, then with cruelty.

“You stupid, stupid fool,” she whispered to herself, “This is what happens. *This* is what happens.”

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**Author's Note:** Surprise! Kakashi is an asshole. Oh, wait, we already knew that. But, you know, a lot of things have fucked him up—so maybe we can understand why? Hmm up to you to decide. Still an asshole, either way.

Also, yeah, wanted to jump immediately into 'the action,' but this chapter needed to happen. It’s definitely more of a filler, but I hope you enjoyed it anywaayyy.

**BUT GUYS IM SO EXCITED FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER. SOIGUSOIGJDOIGH.** Leave me comments / kudos so I get around to writing it fast :D

(Am I a terrible manipulator? Yes. But we also already knew that.)

Until next time! - madstoryteller999
On the Pursuit of Euphoria

The wind whistled through the trees. Sakura tilted her head back, allowing the gust to whip the hair back from her face. The guttural protest of displaced branches did little to appease the primal rage burning in her chest.

Her face contorted in the dark.

This— She had let this happen. Barbed wire had wound around the pulsating, meaningless mass in her chest, and she had done laughably little to deter it, had decidedly enabled it. If she could have, if the mass had been vestigial, she would have torn it out herself.

She raged at the bark beneath her fingers instead, wreaking pointless violence. She was determined to do so until dawn. The lone tree she had chosen as her resting place was perfect for this task, as far she could manage from the rest of the team.

This isn’t satisfying, the Voice growled, if you’re going to tear up our fists before they’ve even healed, at least do it on someone’s face—

Sakura’s head snapped to the side. She waited, though some part of her already knew what she would find. A few moments passed before the moon peaked through the canopy of gray-black clouds, casting light on the black feathers of a crow.

“Shisui.”

“Human,” it returned.

She watched it quietly, anger still smoldering in her chest, as it encroached on her space. She shifted seamlessly into a crouch, hand on the katana Yamato had returned to her only an hour ago.

It paused. “You dare?”

“Oh, I dare,” she said. Her gaze was dark, intent upon the creature before her. “It just so happens that tonight, I don’t actually happen to have the patience for your brand of casual cruelty.”

“And once again, you’ve managed to get it quite wrong,” the crow said equally coldly, sharingan spinning with malevolence. “It doesn’t matter what you think or feel. All that matters is what I demand of you, human, and you will give it.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because that, Sakura, is your payment.”

She smiled humorlessly at it. “That’s not going to work anymore, Shisui. I’m no longer scared of you.”

She hadn’t been for a while now. And she had killed and killed and killed until she had forgotten what it felt like to have clean hands—what was one more on her ledger? Her mouth firming, and she began to pull out the blade. The soft, sibilant hiss, which had once disturbed her, was nothing more than static noise.

Shisui’s gaze flashed. It extended its wings, and feathers seemed to sprout from the end, flying into the air in dizzying amounts.
“Listen, then,” it cajoled. “For Itachi.”

Those two words had a profound effect on Sakura that she could not have anticipated. A torrent of emotions, none of which were truly her own, overwhelmed her—terror, desperation, and rage. Uchiha Shisui’s legacy, she recognized belatedly: the memories that had somehow become partially her own.

She loathed the creature in front of her for it.

Her hand released the handle of the katana without conscious permission. It slid back into its sheath with a high pitched ringing sound.

“Sasuke is chasing Itachi,” the Crow continued calmly. “And the copy-nin is chasing Sasuke. Between them, Itachi will not survive.”

Sakura straightened, voice hard. “He’s managed to evade capture for almost a decade now.”

“He’s sick.”

Her heart had no reason to drop at that, not a single legitimate reason. She didn’t know Itachi, had never even truly met him.

Still, Sakura found herself stalking the length of the branch until she was in front of the crow, eyes pinched. “Sick?”

“Sick from an ordinary, human disease that he could have had treated but has refused to,” it relayed stoically. “He won’t survive an attack from the copy-nin, and he doesn’t want to survive an attack from his brother. He will die unless you extract him.”

“Extract him,” she echoed blankly. She blinked, and then her gaze sharpened. “You want me to take him and—run?”

Shisui’s head cocked to the side.

Sakura’s mouth worked soundlessly. This wasn’t— But he was— She let out a frustrated hiss.

“Fine.” She regretted the word, mostly because she knew it meant the crow had gotten its way.

“Good,” it said blandly. “Your plan?”

She arched a brow warningly. It didn’t blink.

“I’ll slip away at dawn,” she muttered, picking at some of the bark she had decimated. “A new disguise…not Saori Mori. Black hair, maybe, this time; I’ve never used black hair—”

“No,” Shisui snapped. “No disguise.”

Sakura didn’t know how to react to that but to laugh. The alternative was too ludicrous to consider. She would lose it all—everything precious she had managed to scrape together between the bleeding and the killing and the futile attempts at being clean.

“You want to make me a traitor?” she asked scathingly. “After all this time? That’s your grand plan?”

“No, you fool,” the crow said icily. “You’ve built credibility now as a shinobi of Konoha, if a well-meaning, inept one. Your mediocrity, your perceived simplicity, the fact that you are the hokage’s
protégé— Itachi has been alienated by Konoha for too long, but its doors will crack open, if at all, for you and not a stranger.”

It stared at her with chilling ferocity. “Tomorrow, you will extract Itachi, and then you’ll do everything you power and mine to bring him to Konoha to make him…safe.”

A curious thing happened to creature’s voice as it shaped that final word, but she didn’t have the chance to examine it. Without warning, its wings snapped out. In seconds, it had dissipated in a burst of feathers, swept away by the breeze.

Leaving Sakura there alone, with nothing but her thoughts. She wondered if she imagined the taste of blood on her tongue, or if she had actually bitten it at some point and had not noticed.

(Shisui had alluded that saving Itachi would mean not only crossing Sasuke, but also crossing…)

She bared her teeth at squirrel staring at her. It scuttled off, alarmed by the jolt of killing intent she sent into the air. She settled back against the thick trunk of the tree. A bell could have rung from the heavens in that moment, and she would not have blinked twice. On the contrary, probably would have thought it fitting. Tomorrow was to be…doomsday after all—or something like it.

She contemplated that for a moment.

How disturbingly normal this night was.

Some wind, yes, perhaps stronger than normal. A neither too-clear nor too-obscured sky. A moon caught somewhere between waning and waxing. A taste of rain, possibly, but it was too slight to tell.

Sakura’s mouth twisted as she shifted her weight, wondering how on earth she was going to pass the time until then. When a bird chirped, she contemplated whether or not she was, in fact, above throwing kunai at woodland creatures. There was going to be no sleep for her tonight. Every sense was on high-alert, preemptively activated for what would come once the sun rose.

She forced her fingers to relax, slid them down from the handle of her katana toward her lap. She paused midway, eyes widening infinitesimally. Tilted her head to the side, considering.

Something made her feel reckless. A careless curl manifested across her lips. Her fingers slipped beneath the band of her pants.

It was, some part of her recognized, the worst of times, the most terrible of times to do this. And she did it, nevertheless.

Because she never could have imagined—

Because, for all her careless abandon, she had never expected that her body’s response might be, as she immediately found—

So brutal it eviscerated all rational thought in her, leaving behind only one impulse. She felt unequivocally debilitated, and worse, it was by her own hand. She hadn’t known, couldn’t have known she would feel herself part so easily, like she had already (had long-been) prepared.

What the fuck?

Her expression shifted to incredulity even as her body moved, positioning itself unthinkingly into a better position, to a better angle, as she pressed fully into herself in one hungry, ruthless thrust. Her
head hit the bark hard.

*Fuck.*

As it happened, that was the general idea. A flurry of sensations and scenes washed over her. Hands entwined in her hair, a sultry moan—moans, male, female—, fingers digging greedily into her skin, rough, gentle, soft, coarse, and…

And she could feel herself dripping in a steady stream around her fingers—that’s how ready she was—and it was no one in particular but everyone in particular—

Precisely at that moment, it flashed through her mind: painfully clear and vivid in detail.

A mouth, hard and cruel, on the thinner side—and yet, with a persisting sensuousness, an unmistakable generosity. A slight curve, too: an ephemeral impression of arrogance and condescension, of irreverence. A subtle parting, and the flash of tongue.

She recognized it immediately.

The visions changed, and suddenly it was *him*, and he was between her legs, his head resting indolently against the inside of her thigh like he was bored, his hands curled firmly against the tensing muscles of her thighs, steel against steel.

His mismatched eyes stared at her, *there*, until she could feel it throb in agony, and then—only then—would that gaze slide up, hot and challenging, until it found hers.

“*Fuck you,*” she would whisper.

And that imperious, enigmatic face would finally lower, without shame, with feral, cunning intent. And *fuck*—it would finally be right, that mouth finally doing the work Sakura had known it would excel at.

Her lips parted silently, stifling furiously the noise she wanted to make with a fist to her mouth.

Because she knew how it would go. For hours, and then hours upon that. His head there firmly between her legs, driving her mad, like this task required it all—his legendary strength, his ruthlessness, his feared intelligence—this *precise* task.

And how could Sakura withstand that?

She came with sudden ferocity, her teeth biting into her fist until she drew blood.

When she woke up in the morning, she tried and failed to convince herself that it had never happened.

It didn’t get much better from there.

“*No,*” was Yamato’s greeting once she joined them.

To be fair, it wasn’t really his fault.

Admittedly, it was rare to observe (beyond the obvious fact of Sasuke leaving and Sai joining) the differences each Team Seven member had undergone in the last three or so years. No one knew Sai well enough from before to realize what he had been prior to Team Seven. Sakura herself was essentially a sleeper cell at the crow’s behest.
And Naruto: well, there were days where you could hear him in pissing contests with just about any other hotheaded shinobi in the village, and on those days, one could easily imagine that no time had passed at all.

Of course, Sakura was forced to acknowledge now, time had passed.

Because the fact that Naruto had managed to sneak past all of them (granted, they had been separated: Yamato had gone to check the perimeter, Sai to find kindling, and Sakura had only recently opted to leave her isolated tree) would have been entirely beyond the scope of possibility three years ago.

“Kakashi-senpai entrusted me with keeping an eye on all of you. And given Naruto’s condition, in particular—I alone possess the capability of containing him without harming him if he loses control.” Yamato looked like he was going to have a panic attack.

“The dickless can’t track for shit,” Sai reasoned. “Even given the fact that he’s miraculously managed to leave, I doubt he’ll have any idea where to go to locate Kakashi—”

A massive explosion rocked the ground beneath them. A mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke could be seen kilometers in the distance, even above the trees—it was rapidly expanding.

“I correct myself: he might know where to go,” the black-haired boy said with a blank smile.

“We have to go find him,” said Sakura quickly.

“I’ll go,” Yamato declared curtly. “You two turn back and head toward Konoha.”

Sakura nodded immediately. Sai’s eyes drilled into her from the side with confusion. Ultimately, however, he remained silent.

If Yamato had had the luxury of time, he might have interrogated them more rigorously. As it was, his face rapidly paled as more time passed and the noise of the far-away battle continued.

He gave them a sharp tilt of the head, before he was off.

Sakura’s placating smile dropped. She exhaled, and the sound was somehow deafening in the silence between her and Sai.

He stared at her expressionlessly.

“You are going, aren’t you,” Sai said finally. “And you’re going to tell me to stay. Which, actually, I don’t think you have the right to ask of me.”

Sakura considered that. “Maybe not. But it would be for the better.”

His mouth curved into a full smile, teeth bared. It looked painful. “That’s not what being on this team has taught me.”

“Do I have to say it outright?” she said softly.

He took a slow step forward. “You think that I’ll try to stop you.”

“You should,” she said stoically. “You’re on thin ice already because of Root.”

“I’m not going to fight you,” Sai said firmly.
She fought against the softening of her voice, kept it hard. “You can’t help me.”

His eyes flicked to her hands. Sakura read his actions immediately for what they were. She was willing to use genjutsu to subdue him, and he knew it.

Sai’s face contorted. “Is that what it will take?”

“Yes,” she answered unflinchingly. “Don’t intervene—no matter what happens.”

“Fine,” he said coolly. “If that’s what it takes. If you won’t let me stand by you, you can’t stop me from standing by Naruto.”

Sakura’s gaze softened. “Promise?”

Sai’s dark eyes flashed. “Promise.”

Sakura drew back, wiping her expression of all feeling. She couldn’t afford to lose any more time. She launched herself into the trees.

As she passed through the tall evergreens, the air became thick with smoke and dust. Leaves, branches, and other debris hurtled through the air. She darted between them, maintaining her speed though finding footing became harder as the damage increased. She passed through the final remnants of some trees, stopping short when the ground ahead of her became abruptly barren.

This, she realized, was where the blast had begun; and it had destroyed almost everything living in its vicinity. This part of the forest was now lifeless—except for the tableau of figures that had survived the blast and still spanned the field.

She found Sasuke immediately.

Clothing as black as his hair—indeed, the garments of an executioner—covered him from head to toe, a jarring contrast to the extreme paleness of his skin. Even from her position hidden in the trees, she could identify stains of blood along his arms and open chest. His katana was stained with blood as well.

He flicked his blade, and droplets of blood rained from the metal onto the scalded stubs of grass below.

“I see you haven’t learned from our last encounters, Naruto,” her former teammate said lowly, sharingan spinning.

Her chest tightened at the pained look on Naruto’s face. No injuries, she concluded as she scanned his body. At least, no physical ones, she corrected. Yamato’s hand rested on his shoulder, his own expression a mixture of stress and graveness.

And then beside them, though she could only see the smallest sliver of his profile, was—

Sakura leaned a little further out from the branches, risking exposure for closer examination. Because there was a tension, a hawkish watchfulness, that she could read in an instant in that body, and it wasn’t directed at Sasuke.

She craned her head further to complete the revolution she had started, and she found two more figures. A tall, muscular man with colorless eyes and grey skin, cloaked in the characteristic black and red cloak of the Akatsuki, and next to him, Itachi.
Almost indistinguishable from his cloak, perched on that shoulder, was the crow.

She felt Sai reach the field, his chakra a de facto siren to every figure already there. A small sound of shock emerged from his lips as he too took in the scene.

Kakashi’s gaze darkened and snapped towards him as he broke through the trees and into the clearing, his killing intent suddenly exploding across the field.

“Tenzo,” Kakashi snarled.

Yamato’s confusion dissipated when he saw Sai; his face reddened, and he looked torn between murderous rage and sheer terror.

“Come. Here,” Yamato strangled out. Sai flickered from his position to just beside Naruto. She watched as his hand rose—just slightly, discreetly—to grasp Naruto’s arm, bolstering him. She ground her teeth, wishing she could do the same.

“You fucked up,” the copy-nin said coldly. Yamato was stockier in build, but it was hard to remember that fact looking at the two of them now. He towered over the older man, his sharingan glowing an unholy red. The older man’s head was bowed.

Yamato seemed to regress to old habits. “Taichou, I should have—”

“Not now,” Kakashi growled, his gaze scanning the figures around them. “Sasuke will go after Itachi first, and I will help him. When Itachi is subdued, I will deal with Sasuke. You, Naruto, and Sai keep Kisame in check; make sure he does not interfere.”


Without another word, Sai and Naruto veered toward Kisame. There was a mix of disappointment and resignation on Naruto’s face, while trepidation had washed over Sai’s features. But Yamato was right behind them—and that brought a measure of relief to Sakura.

She felt a small, almost unnoticeable genjutsu suddenly take hold over her. She didn’t even blink, because she was so used to it by now.

“Pay attention,” Shisui’s voice instructed coolly in her mind.

She turned rigidly toward the fight she would inevitably join. She understood why the crow had intervened a second later. This fight had already begun.

Sasuke was a blur in the air, so fast that Sakura could only distinguish him by the black streak of his clothing and hair; he wielded his blade with a surety that spoke of hours of practice and many more hours of real use. And yet, despite the exponential growth he had visibly undergone under Orochimaru’s tutelage, he was met unfailingly by Itachi again and again.

If Sasuke had gained mastery, Itachi had made his craft as natural to him as breathing. His eyes glowed and bled tears—Sakura winced sympathetically, as she now knew how that felt—and, still, he fended Sasuke off effortlessly.

She quickly realized, however, that while Sasuke was making little progress, someone else was.

Kakashi watched with a savage kind of boredom as Sasuke made his attempts, then lunged with the feral calculation of a more experienced predator, wielding his sole sharingan with a terrible
efficacy. When it was Kakashi who attacked, then—only then—Itachi gave ground, skidding several meters back.

Sakura couldn’t help but stare, heart pounding.

Kakashi’s reflexes were, admittedly, probably the kind that occurred in nature as often as lightning struck the same spot twice. Often, she knew, it was implied that the copy-nin was nothing but animal instinct when he fought; this was an accusation of both lack of self-control and incomprehensible physicality. But it was a prodigious intelligence that had made him a prodigy feared even in his own village—potentially beyond all the terrible dojutsus and missing-nin of their generation—and that was on overt display here.

Right now, Kakashi was far more than Sasuke’s match; and he was more than Itachi’s too.

Sakura would be lying to herself now if she didn’t acknowledge a lance of nervousness piercing her somewhere in her core. Even so, there was also an…undeniable, certain amoral thrill in knowing that she had never truly tested herself against Kakashi—not since that moment in another forest, and then, Kakashi had not been in his right mind—

And that she would now.

She generated small amounts of chakra to warm her muscles. Her shoulder blades shifted beneath the weight of the sheath on her back, which, generic, hid the unusual blade contained within.

“Faster,” the crow snapped.

Sakura’s features shifted to a glare as she skirted the surviving undergrowth along the edges of the field. Her glower strengthened as Kakashi made a long incision in Itachi’s side, causing the latter to take a step back.

As he retreated, the older Uchiha coughed into his sleeve. Sakura had enough medical training to know what accompanied a cough that sounded like that, though it was disguised by the black of his Akatsuki cloak.

He was sick, and he was coughing up blood. The crow had not lied.

“I don’t need your help,” Sasuke declared icily. “Your misplaced sense of obligation as my old captain is meaningless.”

Her ex-teammate’s dismissive tone, as well as his rather off-base assumption, took her aback. That was when she realized that the last time Sasuke had spoken to Kakashi, the copy-nin had convincingly been performing his very benign, laid-back caricature of a persona.

Sasuke was decidedly ill-prepared, she reflected, for Kakashi’s deadly gaze slowly to turn from Itachi to him, mismatched eyes glinting. As well as for the decidedly predatory way the katana rotated slowly in his hand, until the blade pointed in another direction.

“You,” the copy-nin murmured, voice thick with mockery, “talk big for a whelp.”

He covered the distance between them faster than any human eye could track. When he stilled, hair and clothes settling into place a second later, his blade was inches from Sasuke’s eye, held back only by the latter’s blade. Sasuke’s katana had slotted into place just in time, catching the copy-nin’s blade near its tip.

Sakura thought for a brief moment that Sasuke had managed, until she spotted a second glint of
metal. Kakashi’s second hand loosely handled a kunai that just ever so slightly pressed into Sasuke’s ribcage, exactly where it could be driven into his heart.

“Unlike Naruto, I could have broken every bone in your body when you threatened to leave. I gave you the chance to choose then. You are here now, in front of me, because of that choice.”

Sasuke’s eyes were slitted.

“Your brother may be a more pressing threat to Konoha, but I haven’t forgotten that you are a traitor too, Sasuke,” Kakashi finished with dark amusement, “I serve my village whether I eliminate you or him—remember that.”

Sakura might have observed longer, if she had not then caught a small, almost negligible movement from the corner of her eye; her head twisted to its source. Itachi’s expression was as implacable as ever, but she had seen it. In that fraction of a second, he had leaned forward at Kakashi’s words—toward Sasuke. To intervene, even as the blood from his cough still stained his sleeve.

Sakura’s frown deepened.

“Do it,” Shisui whispered. She turned and found him by her shoulder. “The copy-nin will fall to you with certainty today because he will underestimate you. You will never have this advantage again as long as you live. Today, every disguise you have worn, every deception I have made you enact, will bear its natural reward—it has all been for this advantage, at this critical moment.”

She stared at it for what felt like an eternity. Finally, however, she exhaled and made the hand signs. Because, yes, even she wanted to save Itachi—even she knew that whatever ending he deserved, it was not this.

When she opened her eyes again, one of them had been replaced by the crow’s sharingan. For the first time outside of a genjutsu, Sakura forced its transition to the mangekyou sharingan. She was not prepared for the pain that followed. Somehow, when she had practiced it in Shisui’s genjutsu, it had been subdued, maintaining that odd dream-like quality even the most nightmarish illusions somehow possessed. Now, however, the pain was brutal and real. Her knees buckled slightly.

Sakura bared her teeth in response.

The crow’s talons dug into her shoulder; a feathered wing grazed the nape of her neck.

“I have mitigated the risk to the greatest extent possible,” it hissed. “And you will perform, human. Not for me, but for yourself—because this is the conclusion you have hungered for.”

This was, perhaps, the best motivational speech the crow could have given in that moment. Sakura’s muscles tightened in acute anticipation.

Itachi was still watching the pair across from him intently—biding his time. Her eyes slid left.

Sasuke was still suspended between the two blades, one which pressed into his ribs. And Kakashi —

Kakashi’s head was cocked back. He had noticed Itachi’s unusual behavior and watched now with a feral sort of curiosity, eyebrow arched. He hadn’t put it together yet, Sakura guessed. Possibly, she acknowledged, because he hadn’t been handed the missing pieces Shisui had provided.

Sakura shook her head until a few strands of hair fell forward to hide the sharingan. She shunshined onto the field, feet settling onto the ground between them.
Slowly—almost lazily—charcoal and red eyes shifted from their original subject to her. Sakura’s jaw hardened in preparation.

“Why step out now,” he said languidly, “when you were doing such a good job of hiding?”

Sakura’s nostrils flared. Had he noticed her, even though she had been suppressing her chakra? Or was he merely theorizing based on his impression of her as a coward?

Stifling her temper, she turned to look at Itachi briefly. His face revealed nothing at her abrupt appearance. She glanced irately at the crow, which was now perched on the ground between them. Had Shisui not told Itachi why she was here?

Probably not, she considered glumly. It seemed from the crow’s desperation that the older Uchiha had no wish to survive, and possibly would not welcome her help.

Kakashi’s gaze was derisive now. “Go back to wherever you were hiding.” He tossed the words at her like he expected her to greet them with gratitude.

Sakura stared back, unmoving.

His features altered slightly, sharpening.

“Not a genjutsu—he wouldn’t have chosen you,” the copy-nin appraised her laconically. His voice lowered into a mocking rasp. “So perhaps you really are just that stupid. Are you that stupid, Haruno?”

Her eyelids slid to half-mast over her eyes. “No, taichou.”

“Then what are you doing?” And this time, there was no mocking amusement in his words: only the usual, unmistakable disgust and possibly, beneath that, a thread of warning.

She could hardly look at him, so she stared around him, in the space between his hair and his shoulder, the gap between his arm and his side—

*Do it*, Shisui’s voice echoed in her mind.

Sakura’s head snapped up, eyes narrowed.

His eyes narrowed fractionally as well as she raised her head, displacing the hair that covered her eye. And then, suddenly, the upper half of his face was terrible to behold as it contorted, even more so because it somehow retained an ineffable, wrathful beauty.

And it felt—it felt.

Blissful, euphoric—*like vindication*—to see him hurt, this man who had been the captain of Team Seven, who had erased her from his view like she was nothing, who would have had her weak and at the mercy of the others for the rest of her life.

Sakura would have rejoiced whole-heartedly, might have even given in to the inclination to laugh… if only that were it.

Because there was more. There was that smaller, detestable part of her that survived no matter how she tried to repress it, that knew: this man was also the man who had held her when she had feared her own power (and the Voice) the most, who had fucked her harshly and kissed her with insufferable tenderness, who gazed at her like she was—
“He’s breaking it,” the crow thundered.

Sakura’s eyes widened, processing the scene before her again. Her face paled abruptly. Kakashi’s body should have crumpled by now; he should have gradually lost control over his limbs as he increasingly succumbed to her genjutsu.

He remained firmly upright.

Worse, his sharingan, as though in instinctive response, had shifted and transformed into a similar pin-wheel design as her own. She hadn’t known that he had—

“I did not know that he had the mangekyou,” Shisui stated sourly, “A simulation of mere physical pain will not be enough for someone like him. Find something else.”

Sakura’s nails dug into her palms. How fucking strong was he?

“You’ve watched him for years, girl,” it accused cuttingly.

Her fingers twitched futilely for her blade, wishing she could silence it. As it happened, her mind only relayed back desperation as she contemplated the problem.

She had to remember the fractures in his mask, she concluded coldly.

If she wanted to guess at Kakashi’s innermost thoughts…If she were to guess what would truly make him vulnerable…

It arrived to her like a drop of water into an empty vessel, and it swelled like a tidal wave, gaining traction and fuel, the genjutsu she had to conjure.

Her stomach turned. Sakura looked down at it detached shock.

Her eyes flicked to Itachi—whose sleeve covered his mouth again, even though he was utterly silent—and she knew she had no choice.

Sakura’s stolen sharingan spun violently as she conjured a new genjutsu, constructing her memories with flawless detail: the leaves that had fallen from those trees, the smell the grass and dirt had retained just hours after a fresh rain, the heat of the sun as it had beat down on them. The way Haku’s face had crumpled in both agony and relief; the desperation that had painted every single feature on Kaido’s face, even until his last moments. She drew on their deaths with abhorrent, irreverent clarity. She layered, detail upon detail, until she herself had difficulty removing herself from what she had created, as compelled by it as actual reality.

(She was sickened.)

She didn’t have a chance to see for herself if it worked. In the instant she enforced the genjutsu, Sasuke broke free from Kakashi’s hold and sailed through the air. His katana caught the sunlight, reflecting a painfully bright light, as it drove unerringly toward Itachi.

Which was also, she noted blankly, toward her. Because she stood between them, and the sight of her didn’t see to deter him in the least.

He was going to mow right through her to Itachi.

And she didn’t even care; not one ounce of her felt a single thing about it. Because after what she had done—
All that mattered was this: her limbs were loose and ready. And just as Sasuke’s blade was about to sink into her breast, her hand lashed out with chakra-enhanced strength, diverting it. She saw the instability in his right leg as his arm recoiled upward from the blow. She unsheathed her own blade and struck with surgical precision into the meat of his thigh just above his knee, in one, uninterrupted motion.

Sasuke hissed and darted backward.

His face contorted into an ugly expression. “You’re not her.”

Sakura felt soulless. She dodged his right hook and delivered a resounding smack to his face. His head whipped to the side.

“I’m sorry,” she said silkily, “did that hurt Sasuke-kun?”

“You can’t be Sakura,” he responded coldly, as his hands rapidly weaved through a series of familiar hand signs. A second later, he roared, and it was fire that left his mouth, not breath.

She launched herself above the flame, and in the same motion, met fire with fire; the combined heat threatened to scald her eyebrows off.

“Really?” she smirked meanly. “Why not?”

Sasuke circled around her, his sharingans transparently scanning her for any sign of weakness. She rocked back onto her heels and then rushed forward in a burst of speed. He dodged her kunai, but that was alright, because she was already making hand signs for a more complex jutsu. Water pulled from the seemingly barren ground to create a writhing, water beast. It shot through the air toward Sasuke.

A gigantic, humanoid form appeared around the black-haired boy’s body, protecting him from the blast. Water rained harmlessly down on him. His long black hair was plastered to his head as he looked up, mouth tight with rage.

“Sakura could never do this. Who are you?”

Sakura could have sobbed or laughed with equal enthusiasm. She slowly straightened from the crouch she had landed in, her face obscured by her unruly hair. Annoyed, she swiped the hair back.

A tingling awareness of something behind her cut through her momentary annoyance. Sakura forced her shoulders to relax.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” she informed the figure behind her stiffly. She revised a second later: “Not seriously.”

Knowing how unconvincing she probably sounded, she didn’t give Itachi time to debate the issue. She shunshined into Sasuke’s personal space. He reacted instantly, the kunai in his hand already rotating to target her vital points. But Sakura was stronger than he was; she glanced his arm with her fingertips and she felt the bone beneath fracture. His strategy immediately switched from deflection to evasion.

A high-pitched noise pierced the air: chidori, one-handed at that, Sakura acknowledged with distant, reluctant admiration. His fist was a blur, and she twisted just in time. The electricity caught her hair instead of her head; singed stands fell to the ground.

But he hadn’t retreated quickly enough. Sakura grabbed his wrist locking him into place.
“I’ve seen bigger,” she sneered. She head-butted him, and he went down instantly. She followed him swiftly, catching him around the waist. She should have felt victorious. She felt empty.

When Sakura looked up, she saw—as she expected—Itachi directly in front of her.

“Haruno Sakura,” he said slowly. He hadn’t known her name the last time.

Up close, she could see the blood on his sleeve, the severity of the wound Kakashi had made in his side, and the way he was swaying lightly on his feet.

A breath of air brushed her arm, interrupting her examination. She looked down, disturbed, at the unconscious body in her hands. She wasn’t quite sure why she had caught Sasuke at all. Sakura dropped him abruptly.

When she opened her mouth to respond to Itachi finally, a jolt of piercing pain entered her brain. Her temples throbbed with a vengeance.

“H-he’s breaking it _again_,” she hissed haltingly at Shisui. “I can feel it. I don’t think—_fuck_—I can hold him much longer.”

The crow shifted its weight crossly on the Uchiha’s shoulder. Itachi’s eyes widened.

Sakura laughed weakly, “Did you know Shisui had another human?” She didn’t wait for him to respond. “Never mind. What matters is that Kakashi is going to hunt us down when he breaks that genjutsu, and we don’t have much fucking time left.”

The man swaying opposite her took in this information with remarkable calm, mouth tightening only fractionally. He was rapidly paling, however, so Sakura guessed he was not going to belong much longer to the world of consciousness anyway.

Maybe it was Shisui’s memories—a persisting remembrance of that remarkable intelligence and that steadfastness and that gentle introspection—that made Sakura resist the very notion of forcing him. Even though it would be easy now, given his illness and his wounds.

“As you can see, Shisui has been concocting an objectively terrible plan,” she said roughly. “And I might be an idiot for reasons you can’t yet understand for going along with it, but I’d like to remind you that you’re too weak to fight me right now.”

He looked at her evenly. She wondered if he could even perceive her still, or if he was already seeing black from the amount of blood loss.

Another lance of pain struck her. Panic drove her heartbeat to pound even faster, her pupils to dilate just a little more. She didn’t know if Itachi would have given assent or not. He passed out first. Sakura let out a long, passionate curse as she swung him over shoulder, but was also selfishly grateful for it.

She _hadn’t_ technically forced him, she assured herself. She cast one final glance backward, and then she ran.

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**Author's Note:** ...I await your response.

P.S. UM MMMM ALSO THANK YOU FOR BEING SO, SO GOOD TO ME!!! I'M GOING TO POST ANOTHER HOLIDAY SET OF OMAKES SOOOOONNN (if ppl are down ofc lol) :D <3
Canto XV

_In. Out. In. Out. Inoutinoutinout—_

An elementary technique to pacify the body, alleviate a state of extreme stress or panic. It appeared to be failing.

He was starting to understand that he had effectively lost complete control of his own lungs—they kept seizing, almost as though he were about to cough, only then the cough never came, nor that final sense of relief, caught instead in an infinite state of suspension.

Admittedly, it was among his lesser concerns at the moment.

(Naruto and Yamato had been fully distracted by Kisame during their fight, but Sai had not. He had said he wouldn’t interfere, but that hadn’t meant he couldn’t _watch_. He had possibly received more wounds on his body as a result, but the point had been—)

He didn’t think he’d ever felt more caged (caged by a promise) than when Sakura had given him that final glance before she had run, Itachi slung over her back.

And he didn’t think he’d ever felt more terror than when the copy-nin had followed.

Sai swallowed.

Kakashi’s face when the genjutsu’s hold had broken at last—he would…never be able to describe it. All Sai knew was that he had never understood the exercise of comparing a human to a demon in their common vernacular until that moment. And that, perhaps, no words, not even Sai’s own brush, could begin to conjure the instinctual fear that had overcome him at that sight.

The copy-nin had followed her tracks without hesitation, without a glance their way, and he hadn’t bothered disguising his killing intent in those few seconds before disappearing; it had been unfathomably strong, stronger than Sai had ever felt it. Everyone remaining on the field had frozen instantly.

A few seconds passed before any of them were able to move again.

Their own fight, Sai recalled, had not lasted much longer after that. Kisame had discovered his partner’s disappearance belatedly and had taken off—to where, Sai had no idea.

Then Naruto had spotted Sasuke.

“What the—” Naruto muttered, crouched as he examined his former teammate. He stabbed his cheek with a finger, then brought his fists up defensively as though expecting retaliation. The traitor Uchiha didn’t move.

“It doesn’t appear as though Kakashi did this,” Yamato observed. “Sasuke looks…” He gazed down meaningfully.

“More living than dead,” Naruto acknowledged.

Sai was distantly aware of his mouth opening and relaying something—but the words seemed to plummet into some deep, unseen crevice in the ground, for all the reaction they gained. Maybe he had only imagined that he had said them.
Then Naruto’s blue eyes narrowed and his head swung around.

“What.” The singular utterance was short and dangerous.

Yamato huffed a small laugh. His smile dropped once he realized no one else was laughing. “You’re…serious?”

Sai stared unblinkingly. “Yes.”

The expression on Naruto’s face was forbidding. He stalked toward Sai, shoulders—certainly broader than his own—high.

“No,” he said simply, forcefully. “Sakura?”

Sai’s eyebrow arched slightly. “Why not?” Did Naruto feel threatened, he wondered. Once Sasuke had left, everyone had regarded Naruto to be the strongest member of Team Seven (likely, Naruto himself as well). Sai had believed it initially too.

Several expressions flitted across Naruto’s face, before he settled on something between hostility and vulnerability. “I’m her teammate. And if—if she was capable of that—I should have known. She should have trusted me.”

The raw emotion in Naruto’s voice seemed…somewhat more intense than his words—until, belatedly, Sai remembered that the notion of teammate for Naruto was utterly synonymous to that of friend. Sai wasn’t accustomed to the role of the comforter, but Naruto was his…friend too, and he was willing to try. He shifted forward, just about to bring up his hand—

“But you. You knew.”

There was accusation in Naruto’s voice; it was directed…inwards.

“She never told me anything directly,” Sai said slowly. “I pieced most of it together on my end, and I had an…educated intuition that something would happen today. I know you both had to cover my back just now; it was because I was perhaps paying more attention to their fight than ours.”

Naruto didn’t appear appeased. “You would think after losing one teammate that I’d be good at keeping the remaining ones I have. But here we are again, and I’m…just as blindsided.”

A firm hand landed on his shoulder. It wasn’t Sai’s.

“Often, it’s easier for those who maintain secrets to identify others of their kind,” Yamato said calmly. “We look more harshly at those around us; sometimes, I wonder, if because we’re so revolted by the notion of being looked at ourselves.”

Sai felt his cheeks burn.

“So Sakura…knocked out Sasuke and took Itachi,” Naruto summarized roughly, “And Kakashi is following them. And we don’t know what he’s planning to do, and we also don’t know why any of this happened. In fact, we don’t know anything else.”

“That seems to be about right,” Yamato allowed, stress lines more prominent on his face than usual.

He wondered if this would be a good time to mention that he was ninety nine point nine percent
certain Sakura and their captain had had sex at some point.

“Run faster.”

Another jolt of chakra the legs, a burst of speed—and the world became static noise.

He ate his stew without tasting any of it.

“Seconds?” someone prompted.

Naruto jolted to attention, stiffening. His gaze passed over the narrow tent which had been built to fit two bodies, not three—certainly not four—and found Sai sitting not far from him, expression seemingly as calm as ever.

He knew, of course, that this wasn’t true. He had spent hours and hours with that initial, blank Sai: that had been true, implacable calm. Naruto knew that every blink, twitch, microcosmic shift now communicated something.

Sai felt just as unbalanced as he did; he just did a much better job of hiding it.

“No,” Naruto said finally, rubbing his eyes. “No, I’m good—”

The previously unconscious figure between them tensed, then flipped into a sitting position.

Sai placed the vessel down with a dull thud.

“Get these off me,” the figure demanded, lifting his chakra-binding shackles.

Naruto stared at him for a moment. Eventually, his gaze flicked back to Sai. “As I was saying, feel free to finish the rest.”

“Naruto.”

“I think I will,” Sai said calmly. He ladled the rest of the stew into his wooden bowl and began eating. Naruto raised his own bowl and started eating again.

“If you take me to Konoha,” Sasuke threatened, eyes slitted, “you won’t be doing yourself any favors. I’ll burn that village down if that’s what it takes to—”

And Naruto erupted. Before he knew it, he was standing, the bowl had gone flying into the side of the tent, and all he could see was red.

“Believe it or not, Sasuke—” was the red because of the kyuubi? He couldn’t tell—“the world doesn’t revolve around you.”

Sasuke watched him, expression unchanging. And Naruto wanted to hit him as hard as he could right in that smug face. He might have, if the other boy hadn’t been defenseless.

He stared at him, the sound of a war drum thudding in his ears.

And it all came out. “Ino, Shikamaru, Choji: they had dinner at each other’s houses every night of the week. Hinata still makes ointments for Kiba and Shino before they head out on missions. We could have had that too, but you—you couldn’t stand the thought of it. Why?”
Sai stood silently, edging not quite between them, but close.

“Don’t presume to know how I feel,” his former teammate said coldly. “You’ve never had what I had, what I lost—”

“You think I can’t say the same thing?” Naruto hissed back. “You’ve never been ostracized or ridiculed or dismissed, you’ve never known what it was like to be looked at like a monster by everyone around you, you’ve— Should we keep comparing grievances, Sasuke? Should we argue about what was worse? Is there any fucking point?”

Sai’s hand wrapped around his upper arm, restraining him before he launched forward. Naruto’s frame trembled.

“How do we keep making the same mistakes over and over again,” he choked out, gaze averted to the ground, “and now, Sakura—”

“Where is she?” Sasuke demanded.

Sai smiled politely. “Sakura took Itachi and ran. None of us know where or why.”

Every angle of Sasuke’s features hardened. “That’s not possible.”

“Yet, it happened.”

“It wasn’t Sakura,” Sasuke responded, face abruptly unreadable.

But there was a look in his eyes that Naruto recognized—a darkness that had been there on that roof when they had aimed the rasengan and the chidori at each other. And that was how Naruto realized, even despite the contrary words, that Sasuke knew he had fought Sakura.

“Can we knock him out again?” Sai asked.

“Split the kage bunshins.”

“I’ve already made ten.”

“I don’t care. Every half hour, make each clone summon four more and then send them in the cardinal directions.”


Feet or heart? It was impossible to tell.

“You want me to fractionalize my chakra stores exponentially.”

“Do it.”

He stubbed his cigarette on the ground and was vaguely gratified that there was no one to see it. Sometimes, there would be months without a single one, and he’d think then that he had truly shaken the habit. Then—there would be a day like this one.

Civilian background, likely coddled, had been Yamato’s first impression. A well-meaning girl, certainly, but hardly useful. A distant sort of pity had once followed, knowing how his senpai must have treated someone like that.
That pity had transformed into something sharper and decidedly more complex now. Traitors always brought the worst taste to the mouth, didn’t they? That bittersweet mix of revulsion and denial.

He could hear the chatter of voices from inside the tent. Not calm, but better than it might have been. Yamato had been meticulous about keeping his expression as smooth as possible in front of them—or, as much as was believable given circumstances.

Out here, though, there was no need to hide. So his fingers trembled, and he swiftly lit another cigarette and brought it to his mouth.

He hadn’t been prepared for this assignment, he reflected blandly. He had naively thought nothing could match ANBU. He had left his team because someone had died in front of him one too many times, and he had wanted to know what it was like to not care as much (because, surely, hearing about a teammate’s death was better than being there to witness it).

He wasn’t quite sure when he had started deviating from that understanding. He had no justification for it. Team Seven was, perhaps more so than any team he had been on, profoundly flawed. Sai made Yamato look like a social butterfly and reminded him of times he would rather forget. Naruto, determined and principled as he was, saw primarily in tunnel-vision and dangerously so. And Sakura—

He exhaled smoke, watched as it traced lazy spirals in the air.

In less than twenty four hours, Haruno Sakura would be dead.

Worse, he could picture…exactly how it would happen. A hole in the chest from chidori or raikiri—depending on how much of a fight she put up—her body still charged with electricity for hours afterwards. Strangling was possible as well; Yamato had seen it once.

Or, perhaps, beheading—

Yamato took another inhale and then stubbed the cigarette, before making his way into the tent.

—that was how he had heard Kino had been killed, after all.

“We need to stop.”

And as much as Sakura would have liked to disagree with Shisui, she couldn’t: she had been on foot for almost sixteen hours now, her chakra had been depleted by the small army of clones she had sent out to leave false trails, and then—well, then there was Itachi.

The sour-rust smell of blood still coated her collar, fresh as it had been hours ago. Itachi was still bleeding. Sakura had done her best given the time frame with Itachi’s battle wounds—on any average shinobi, that might have been enough. But Itachi’s condition wasn’t anywhere near what a medical professional might consider an ideal state of health, and it was clear now that the duress of Sakura’s running as fast as she could was undoing much of her healing.

Sakura didn’t want to delay getting back to Konoha. On the other hand, what was the point of talking to Tsunade if all she brought back was a corpse?

“Closest covering?” Sakura muttered.

The crow’s sharingan was locked straight ahead. “We hit the mountains in ten kilometers or so—
continue north.”

It was impossible for her to see any mountains through the thick of the trees, but Sakura took Shisui at its word. She clenched her jaw and sent a jolt of chakra to her legs, boosting her speed. She made it to the cave in the mountain’s side just as the first droplets began to fall from the sky in a gentle drizzle.

Debris—rubble, branches that had been blown in by the wind, and more—littered the ground. She swiftly cleared a space for Itachi to lie down. With some careful maneuvering, she shifted him from her back to the ground, gently placing his head down last.

“Thirty minutes,” she said curtly. “That’s all the time we can spare.”

“Are all of your clones still intact?”

“Yes, none of them have returned yet.”

She paused to look down at Itachi. His eyeballs were rolling beneath his eyelids, and his frame had started shivering violently. She shrugged her flak jacket off to cover him.

“He needs a fire,” Shisui informed her. It had settled in the deepest parts of the cave, vigilant by its human’s side.

Sakura glanced at the crow out of the side of her eyes, mouth curling. Again, she would have liked to disagree. Instead, she turned and stepped off the edge of the cave, plummeting to the forest floor once again—and quickly found that the rain had already drenched the ground near the base of the mountains.

Knowing she would have a better chance of finding dry kindling where there was denser foliage, she circled within a tight radius of the mountains. But it soon became clear that the fundamental task of scouring the ground for something as simple as dry kindling had somehow become infinitely hard; more than once, she realized belatedly that she had looked down and seen absolutely nothing.

She was…a mess, she reflected sourly—still as knotted and tensed and anxious just as she had been as she weaved that genjutsu; her mind couldn’t focus now that the weight of Itachi’s body had been removed from her back.

After a moment of consideration, she cupped some of the fallen water and rubbed it against the imprints of blood Itachi had left on her, hoping it would help.

It wasn’t an immediate remedy, for sure. Slowly, still, she felt her body begin to respond. Fractionally, her shoulders started to loosen just a little, her breath came a little easier, and she no longer felt quite as much as though she were balancing on a kunai’s edge.

She spotted a large maple tree a kilometer south, its trunk a lighter brown than its smaller neighbors,’ and propelled herself toward it until she stood beneath its thick branches. She made a quick pass with her fingers over the mix of fallen leaves and branches below. She was gratified to find them mostly dry, having been shielded by the thick overcast of the tree’s remaining foliage.

Unfortunately, the tree she had found was a large one, with correspondingly large branches. She began splitting the wood into quarters so that she could easily tuck them beneath her arm.

A crack sounded behind her.
She twisted around, teeth bared in warning, and—

All the blood drained from her face.

(It wasn’t possible. How? How? Every single kage bunshin had split, and then those had split, and so on and so forth, just like the crow had said, and still.)

He was right there. Somehow, some way, in defiance of all probabilistic chance that he should be miles away with a kage bunshin in Suna or the Land of Tea or the middle of an ocean, he was right there, eyes dark and burning like he had been watching her for some time. As though, indeed, he had made that noise intentionally.

There was a choking noise coming from somewhere. Coincidentally, she couldn’t find the air to inhale. Her hand scrabbled against the tree for purchase. She bent her head, forcing her exhales to slow down, to slow it all down, so that her fucking brain could think.

But it was too late, because now Kakashi’s face was right above hers, and she couldn’t deny it—every line, angle, and feature was drawn with barely constrained rage. His hand wrapped around her throat while the other yanked at her hair, forcing her head up.

There was no other explanation for the way that dark gaze lingered over the bridge of her nose, the cut of her jaw—every feature that was congruous with her ANBU double that he had never noticed before.

He knew. He knew.

Sakura shuddered for breath, and she felt his chest expand with hers—because they were so close, because his examination was so ruthlessly intent—and his breath, as it washed over her face, felt like it could scald her.

Her head whipped to the side, teeth cutting into the side of her mouth from the force of an unexpected fist. Sakura rocked on her feet as she spat out blood.

His eyelids were almost fully shut as he looked down at her.

That might have been slightly fair, she considered humorlessly. She peered up at him, swiping the remaining blood from her mouth slowly.

The waiting had been the torture, she decided. She had known she would have to confront him; she just hadn’t known it would be so soon.

“Who taught you,” he said, deep, arrogant voice almost soundless, as he forced her head to the side, “to do that to me?”

Her mouth flattened.

He had positioned her head away from him so that she couldn’t see him, even as his gaze perused her freely, collected information she would know nothing about. Thankfully, she didn’t need to see him to drive her elbow into his solar plexus or to duck when his hand swung out with a kunai.

“Still so afraid to give me credit?” she observed tonelessly.

Her feet shifted automatically, pivoting to sidestep his next attack. His left leg, hidden from her sight because of the way he held his body, whipped out with blinding speed, building force from the brutal power with which he twisted his own body. She brought her arms in tight to withstand
the shock of his kick, skidding several meters back into the trunk of another tree.

She exhaled for a moment,

Then, she launched herself back in, careening through the air right again into hard muscle. They struggled for a moment, and maybe, she forgot herself for an instant—possibly, her heartbeat stuttered when his fingers brushed her hair, maybe her face went a bit hot, and—

He shoved her back by the throat into a tree, and she felt the trunk crumble beneath her shoulders. Muscle memory kicked in. Sakura followed the motion backwards, breaking his hold and tossing him over.

Slowly, she brought her fists back up, shoulders tight.

Despite the violence in his face, he moved with a deadly calm. He took a step to his left, and she shifted incrementally. He took another, and she realized that he was circling her.

He hadn’t used a single jutsu yet.

The discovery broke her cold calm for a moment.

Was it arrogance? the bitter, seething part of her prompted. Her face tightened further as she evaded the copy-nin’s swipes. His fists flew with blinding speed, but she was attuned to the way his body moved now from hours and hours of observation, and she evaded until she saw opportunity.

A kunai sank into the muscle of her shoulder (like a kiss), and Sakura bore it with a snarl. She deflected his brutal upper cut, and her hand lashed out, just barely glancing cloth—just enough to rip the mask clean off his face.

The face that looked down at her was as she had never seen it before, terrible to behold, afflicted by an inhuman sort of wrathful beauty.

Sakura held the black cotton mask in her hand.

“It’s not a bell,” she announced, looking coolly down at it. “Is it enough for you to take me seriously, though?”

Her gaze flicked upward, her face contorting into a sneer.

And then she mouthed the fatal word.

(Sen-sei.)

Author’s Note: Sorry for the delay! This chapter took a long time to figure out for some reason, but after that, the writing was actually pretty quick.

Also.

ALSO.

I CANNOT BELIEVE THIS FIC BROKE 1000 COMMENTS??!?!? ALSO THE LAST CHAPTER BROKE 100 COMMENTS??!?!? ALSO IT'S MORE THAN A 100,000 WORDS NOW??!?!? These are ALL firsts for me, and I am OVER THE MOON! Never in my wildest dreams did I imagine this fic achieving this much readership / success. Thank you so, so, so much
for encouraging me and sticking with me through this long journey. This is legitimately the first fic I have written for (relatively) consistently / diligently, and I'm really determined right now to keep this up until the end.

Also, if you're in a chatty mood lol, I legitimately want to hear your thoughts on the following:

1. What are your thoughts on Kakashi right now? / Like, emotionally, where are you? <-- help a bitch out (I'm the bitch)
2. What do you think Itachi *needs* for happiness? I want to hear other perspectives.
3. I don't think my story passes the bechdel test YIKES? Thoughts?? Considerations???

Even if it's a short one (though I ADORE the longer ones oops sorry for the innuendo) please drop a comment! I'm already brainstorming for the next chapter, and I'm so excited!!! :D
Extra / Author's Note

It would be really impressive if I just did two updates in two days, but this isn't another update yet--sorry for the false alarm!

BUT: I thought it would be fun to share some of the images that I draw inspiration from for this fic. Totally ignore this if you prefer to imagine your own characters / I definitely feel that way for some fics and fandoms, but otherwise, you can take this as a very non-serious notion of 'casting' for the fic hahaha.

Also, as you may notice, a lot of these characters appear a bit older than they actually appear in Shippuden, I guess because that's how I prefer to imagine them? Also, a lot of the guys are shirtless, because... Well, I have no good explanation for that *coughs*

I take precisely 0% credit for all of these images!

SAKURA

Note: These aren't really the clothes I imagine Sakura wearing in this fic (given a choice), but I love her aggression here lol. It GIVES ME LIFE.

KAKASHI
Note: This image is SO beautiful, and I love what it evokes--it's hard for me to verbalize. He's also, despite what I commented earlier, a character I definitely imagine younger than he is depicted in canon (as I've mentioned in an earlier author's note, the Kakashi in this fic is like 24/25)

SAI
Note: Angst AND abs?! Apparently, yes.

NARUTO
Note: So not this expression lol, but I do picture Naruto with this shorter hairstyle / a little more mature and basically with this build.

YAMATO
Note: Nothing revolutionary here, tbh

SASUKE
Note: The abs are back. But yeah, I picture him decidedly more muscled than Itachi / I see it as a telling point of contrast between the two.

ITACHI
Note: Itachi - pacifist, low-key philosopher, possibly a great shamisen player, i.e. a man who really never should have been a shinobi?

TORTOISE
Note: Not sure who this actually is, but hope she gets more than Tortoise does in this fic LOL

HINATA
Note: Sadly, I couldn't find a good image of Hinata in a medic-nin outfit, but I'm down for this otherwise!

INO
Note: This is EXACTLY how I imagine T&I Ino, and I am SO glad this image exists in the world.

Anyway, this was just a bit of fun! Hope you enjoyed it for whatever it's worth :)
She could have dropped a bomb into a minefield, and it might have had less disastrous of an impact. It took just a fraction of a second; and then, his state of inexpression fractured completely. Red eye—insidious, cloying like blood—and black eye both so dark the pupils were undiscernible, both so contorted like he might just kill her. Kakashi took a sudden, menacing step forward.

“You’re going to kill me,” she said slowly, just to hear it out loud.

*Fight*, the Voice whispered, trembling.

His face was averted from hers. The words reached her ears slowly, through a thick, rushing sound.

“You don’t have the chakra to fight me now.”

She gritted her teeth.

“Not the best strategy to waste it on all those clones, was it.”

The wind whistled through the trees, sending a scattering of leaves fluttering down between them.

“But then,” he said darkly. “I suppose your sensei is to blame. We can both agree that that wasn’t me.”

She flipped the kunai in her hand.

“Who was it?” he demanded, coldly. “That you would devote yourself so *thoroughly* to their cause?”

It took her a second to parse the meaning of his words, When she did, Sakura felt her own kunai dig into her own fingers.

“I suppose it’s hard to deviate from such long-standing precedent. But as always, you’re wrong about me.” A flash of motion caught her eye. Sakura kept her expression unchanging.

He watched her, features drawn harsher by lividity. “Oh?” His voice was dangerous. “And what are you?”

*STRONG*, the Voice roared.

Two minutes, she calculated. That was as much of a head start as she needed. They were a stone’s throw from the outskirts of the village.

“Capable of so much more than you’ve ever given me credit for,” she said bitterly.

Shisui burst forward with a shower of feathers, cawing loudly in attack.

Sakura ran toward the cave.

*Coward*, the Voice spat. It didn’t sound as upset as it usually did though. Apparently, even the bloodthirsty creature in her brain recognized a fight it wasn’t likely to win.
She hurtled through the trees and, at an admittedly ambitious distance, launched herself into the mouth of the cave. She landed inelegantly, upsetting the gravel on the cave floor. Itachi grunted, shifting away from her.

She picked him up and settled him onto her back. She hit the ground sprinting. There was no time for doubling back or circuitous routes. It was straight to Konoha now.

“What,” he asked weakly, voice almost soundless, “are you doing?”

“Running from certain death,” she muttered, “We’re not that far.”

A thunderous explosion sounded a few kilometers behind them.

“Fuck,” Sakura hissed. She pumped chakra into her legs and raced faster. They were so close.

So close.

“Pretend you’re unconscious,” she hissed. He bent his head marginally just as the first sentry peeked his head out. Maybe Itachi had some self-preservation instinct after all.

“Haruno Sakura,” the guard instructed, recognizing her on sight and by chakra signature like he was trained to. He squinted at the person on her back. “Identify your passenger.”

“Emergency situation,” she called out, bending her knees in preparation, “He needs immediate medical attention.”

“You know the rules,” he responded indifferently.

“Sorry,” Sakura called out as she barreled through him.

There were ANBU on her in less than five seconds.

“Cease and desist, Haruno Sakura, or we will be forced to engage.”

“Maybe…next… time,” she huffed, charging forward. In seconds, she was cut off by a new squad of ANBU stationed further inside the village.

As the squad attacked, she maneuvered her body, protecting Itachi from the cross fire. As one ANBU attacked her from above, Sakura brought her katana up, angling her feet in. The full brunt of the strike rocked her body.

She saw the man’s eyes widen above her arms.

She smiled humorlessly. Then, she swarmed her muscles with a sliver of chakra and tossed him effortlessly backwards.

She twisted and caught another ANBU’s wrist before the woman’s chakra-coated weapon could spear her through the stomach. She swung her into the air too, just in time to duck beneath some heavy-duty earth ninjutsu. She shoved the heel of her hand blindly into another person’s throat, sending him backward, choking.

The roiling electricity of familiar killing intent suddenly overwhelmed the air, making it difficult to breathe. Every shinobi in her vicinity jolted in response too.

She didn’t have any time left.
Her glance darted backward at the veritable legion of ANBU gathering behind her. Having cleared a path through now unconscious bodies, she was somewhat ahead. And she was one building leap away from the hokage’s office now.

She exhaled, and then careened through the air—and then through glass—into the office.

She lifted her head to find Tsunade leaning against her desk, arms crossed like she had been waiting for her the entire while. The hokage’s amber eyes—cool and warning—belied her otherwise relaxed appearance.

“You’ve been causing quite the stir, Sakura,” Tsunade said lightly, gaze flashing. “And with such a… choice guest.”

“He’s more valuable alive than dead—and he needs healing now. I can explain,” Sakura said urgently.

Tsunade’s gaze flicked down, narrowing.

“I’m not a traitor,” Sakura said, staring hard into her mentor’s eyes. After a moment, she dropped to her knees in seiza—slowly, because Itachi was still on her back.

“For the chance you gave me then, for the trust you believed I deserved then,” she reminded, gaze still connected with the hokage’s.

For the rest of her life, she would never know what made Tsunade’s mind in that moment. In her position, Sakura knew she almost certainly would have turned the ostensible traitor, protégé or not, away. But perhaps, there was a god above watching in that moment, and in one of its many whims, it had decided in that singular moment to move Tsunade’s mind.

“Get off the damned ground, girl. Fuck, I don’t get paid nearly enough for this,” the hokage snapped, waving errantly at a wide-eyed Shizune. “Take him to the hospital. As she’s said, at the very least, we’ll have a living Akatsuki member we can interrogate.”

The hokage’s assistant obeyed without a second of hesitation, vanishing a second later with Itachi in her hands.

In the next instant, Tsunade’s right hand snapped up to make a signal to the ANBU to stand back. Sakura’s pinched face turned toward the window, watching as one by one, the black ops members blended back into the shadows of the village—that is, all except for two.

A broad-shouldered, menacing figure, whom Sakura recognized immediately as the commander of the ANBU, remained on the rooftop, arms crossed. Beside him, crouched low was Kakashi, the muscles in his arms tensed in acute, savage restraint.

Sakura swallowed heavily.

The blonde-haired woman sent her a long, examining look.

“Start talking,” she said at last, coldly. “And I should remind you that—while I’m a damn sight nicer than those two—I didn’t become hokage because of all the very gracious people I’ve kindly healed.”

Sakura nodded, moving towards the seat across from the hokage.
“Let me just make sure I have all the facts straight,” the hokage declared lowly. “Four years ago, you broke into our archives, stole a summoning scroll, forged a contract, only to realize that your summon not only had its own agenda and but was also willing to abuse you and threaten you to accomplish it. Do I…have that all right?”

She hadn’t reached for her sake for an entire hour. Sakura didn’t think she had ever seen that before.

“And then we have your consequent series of offenses,” Tsunade continued, without waiting for even a nod, “Identity fraud, credential fraud—believe it or not, it’s against the rules for a genin to be ANBU—and just recently, insubordination on an S-rank mission, in which you turned on your own team captain…using a sharingan, which I should note, is technically Uchiha property and which no living Uchiha actually consented to give you. Hm?”

“…Yes,” Sakura muttered after a considering pause.

“And why should I let you keep your head?” Tsunade asked with a poisonous smile. A small, rush of air signified Shizune’s return. Sakura exhaled sharply.

“Report,” the hokage demanded.

“Uchiha Itachi is in stable condition,” Shizune said lowly. “Because of his fragile constitution at the moment, T&I was only able to do a preliminary scan in terms of interrogation.”

“What did they find?”

“From what they’ve seen,” the black-haired woman said carefully, all emotion meticulously removed from her features, “it seems that Danzo secretly ordered Itachi to eliminate the Uchiha clan. After the massacre, Itachi infiltrated the Akatsuki to prevent them from moving against Konoha. As a public traitor, his true status was clearly never documented…consequently, the knowledge was never passed to you following the Sandaime’s death.”

Tsunade stared for what felt like an eternity, face reddening steadily. At last, she said, voice deadly, “And I see dear old Danzo never saw fit to inform me.”

Shizune nodded slowly. “That appears to be the case.”

“So what will happen now?” Sakura questioned, voice low. Her eyes switched rapidly between the two women.

But both were silent, staring silently at each other instead. Finally, the hokage’s eyes narrowed. “Itachi will be safe—there’s no doubt about that. Those old codgers have been slobbering all over themselves for a decade now to get the sharingan back.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She reached toward her aching shoulder, rubbing it distractedly.

“But you, Sakura, the council will happily sacrifice on the altar of bureaucracy.”

Sakura stopped rubbing her shoulder.

“Identity fraud, credential fraud, insubordination on an S-rank mission,” Shizune recited almost apologetically. “The council will almost certainly demand your execution, regardless of your motives.”

Ah. Sakura carefully smoothed her expression and took a small, soundless step back.
Tsunade caught the motion immediately. “It should go without saying,” the woman said shortly, “that complying with the council’s demands is almost categorically the bane of my existence. You’re no traitor; fortunately for you, I don’t condone punishing mere stupidity.”

She turned to the windows and arched an imperious brow. Sakura, who had forgotten altogether about the figures outside the office who had been watching them this entire time, stiffened so quickly that she felt her back crack in protest.

“Commander,” the hokage greeted in her usual no-nonsense way. Her amber eyes flicked to Kakashi next, who leaned silently against the edge of the window. Her lips pursed. “Hatake. I assumed you followed along our conversation.”

The commander bowed his head immediately in confirmation. The man next to him remained upright, gaze cold. He did not look at Sakura.

“Saori Mori,” the hokage said swiftly, “died on a solo assassination mission in the Land of Waves at noon today. She fought nobly and bravely in service of her village.”

A dull ringing sound echoed in her ears. Sakura winced. “Tsunade-sama—”

“That is the price you pay to keep your head,” the woman said warningly. Amber eyes examined her. “No goodbyes, no closure with former teammates. Saori Mori dies right here in this room.”

She shut her mouth stiffly.

“In fact,” Tsunade said bluntly, “don’t ever mention her name again. Forget she even existed. That is an order to all three of you. Let her…fade into anonymity like so many ANBU do: family-less, child-less.”

“As for Haruno Sakura,” The hokage stood suddenly, gaze flashing as she crossed her arms. “Haruno Sakura was following my orders this entire time, to the very point where she led my ANBU on a merry chase through the village and then crashed through this window. I suspected there was a traitor in our midst. I strategically withheld my suspicions and my protégé’s progress from the council, and she carried out my will when I deemed her prepared, as is my prerogative. And lo and behold, we have proof now of Danzo’s treachery.”

“Of course,” Shizune hummed, “Sakura cannot be tried if she didn’t break any laws.”

“It’s legal grey area,” the commander said gruffly. “The hokage might have some leeway during times of war, but to go above the council during a professed state of peace is—”

“The council won’t look that closely.”

“With Itachi back in the village and the younger one on his way as well they won’t press the issue,” Tsunade agreed, nodding.

Shizune’s eyebrows arched high on her forehead. “The younger one?”

“Yes,” Tsunade said, clearing her throat. “According to Sakura, the rest of Team Seven should be bringing him back now.”

“Tsunade-sama,” the assistant responded lightly, after a long pause, “the council might finally like you.”

The hokage’s expression shifted into one of disgust. “Yes, well, this will at least silence their usual
nagging for a little while. Stay—all of you. Until Sasuke comes.”

Sasuke made his appearance an hour later and with great tumult, dragged cursing into the hokage’s office by the remaining members of Team Seven.

“You should tell him,” Shizune prompted, looking slightly pityingly at the younger Uchiha.

Glaring, Tsunade finished off her cup of soju. After swallowing with gusto, and without a breath of pause, she delivered the truth ruthlessly.

As generally unsympathetic as she was (and she was), even Sakura winced, wondering if her mentor might have handled the issue a little more delicately.

—your brother massacred your parents and the rest of your clan on the orders of a council member, Danzo, in order to save your life, so maybe ‘stay in school’ next time around instead of defecting before you have all the facts—

“You’re lying,” Sasuke hissed, face twisted in hatred.

“Apologies, Hokage-sama,” Sai said with a bright smile. “We haven’t quite managed to get him house-trained yet.”

The hokage wasn’t impressed. “To what end?”

“This man, Danzo,” Sasuke accused nastily, “you must want him out of the picture. Pin a crime on him so that he stops angling for your seat—”

“That would be awfully crafty,” Tsunade agreed, “if Danzo were remotely the type to angle for something like the hokage’s seat. Unfortunately, a man like him never likes public attention or oversight; it rather hampers his generally unpalatable agendas.”

Sasuke glared.

“Danzo acted without approval,” the older woman said, a little more softly now. “Itachi never should have been placed in that situation. I wasn’t in Konoha when it happened, but I do truly regret—

“Lies,” Sasuke charged unblinkingly, the veins in his forehead straining.

“She isn’t lying, Sasuke,” Sakura interrupted at last. “Itachi—”

“You shut your fucking mouth.”

Sakura turned slowly, mouth positioned in a sneer.

“Sasuke,” Naruto muttered urgently. His gaze darted to her, a little pleading. “Sakura.”

“As it stands,” Shizune interrupted swiftly, “although Sasuke defected, he has done very little in the way of endangering Konoha. There were no deaths as a result of his defection and no critical intelligence was leaked, correct?”

“Right,” Tsunade confirmed, sending a warning look Sakura’s way. Reluctantly, Sakura forced her gaze away from Sasuke. “Pointedly, like Itachi, the council will want keep him and weaponize him for Konoha. But make no mistake, Sasuke, if you were anyone else, you would be—”

“Executed,” the ANBU commander grunted.
“Exactly,” the hokage said, eyes suddenly rapt at the copy-nin. She stared at him for a long time, unblinking. At last, she sighed. “You’re still the one who’s most qualified to keep the last Uchiha in line.”

“No one is keeping me in line. Get these cuffs off me.”

“You mean,” Naruto stammered, “Sasuke, he’ll be back on Team Seven?”

“He shouldn’t be,” Tsunade hissed irately. “But the council—”

Naruto crowed in joy. Sakura’s mouth flattened. Really? How…ludicrously unfair. If Sakura had abandoned the village like Tsunade had originally suspected, she would have been greeted by a swift death upon return by the council.

“You. All of you. You’re going to be on your best fucking behavior from now on,” the hokage said dangerously. “Take the chunin exams; save a few kittens for the village. Not one fucking toe out of line.”

Naruto nodded rapidly.

“And someone take Sasuke to see his brother when he’s conscious,” Tsunade snapped. “If no one else can convince him of the truth....”

Shizune nodded with some skepticism.

Tsunade released a frustrated gust of breath. “Dismissed,” she spat out, waving a wild arm at the door. “Get out. All of you.”

Sakura left without a backward glance.

As she walked home, the dusk golds and reds faded into a rich black-blue, enfolding the houses and shops in shadow. It had been almost a month since she had traced this path home, she considered. After almost a month of limited airflow, the air in her room must have turned a little stale. After climbing the three staircases leading up to her place, she opened the door and made straight for the sole window to crack it open.

She paused there, examining the scene outside through the glass. It took her a few seconds to find her watchers. The ANBU blended with the cover of night, masks angled skillfully away from the moonlight which might otherwise have revealed them. Having been one of them, however, Sakura was well aware of the tricks of the trade.

She would have liked to have said goodbye, she reflected. To Snail especially, but also to Hyena—even to Bear.

There was no use thinking about useless things. She stalked to the bathroom and ran the hot water.

Her reflection looked…wan. Exactly like she’d had the bare minimum of sleep these last forty eight hours. Sighing, she pulled off her clothes and sank into the tub, skin prickling with brief pain before pleasure sank in.

And Kakashi—

No, some part of her asserted with near violence.

The water quickly turned brown. Sakura examined it with a sort of fascinated disgust, continuing to
scrub her skin and hair with equal vigor. She froze when the door to her bathroom suddenly swung open.

Sakura blinked back at her intruder, unable to comprehend why exactly this particular person could be in front of her at this particular moment.

“What the fuck are you still doing here?” Ino hissed. “God, I came here just in case, but I didn’t think—you can’t actually be that stupid—"

“Excuse me?” Sakura asked slowly.

Ino uttered a noise of outrage. “In less than an hour, there’s going to be a warrant for your capture and interrogation. And I might crack open people’s minds for a living, but I stomped over your sandcastles when we were four. It’s not happening.”

Sakura paused. “I haven’t done anything wrong.”

“As all guilty people say,” Ino snapped, before her expression forcibly cleared. “Not that it matters. Now get the fuck up and leave.”

Sakura arched an eyebrow, leaning back. “Even if I did, I’d have ANBU on me in less than a second. They’ve got four squads lined up outside my window.”

“I know!” Ino hissed, her fist snapping out to collide with mirror. Shards rained down from the point of impact. Sakura felt like her mind was moving through molasses.

What was Ino proposing, in the case that Sakura was actually guilty? That they would fight their way out of here? Together?

“We haven’t,” she started. She tried again. “We haven’t been like that in—years. So why are you…"

“Been what?”

Sakura swept back the damp hair from her face. “We haven’t even given each other the time of day.”

“And I would have called you bitch to your face if you’d asked for it,” Ino sneered. “Probably.”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed as she pulled a towel over her body. “You’re not making sense, Ino. You’re the one that decided that—”

“Oh fuck him,” Ino exclaimed.

Sakura, startled, twisted to look at the other girl.

“You think Sasuke really had anything to do with it?” the other girl ranted, sweeping her hair back. “It was about the competition, forehead, about you and me—and the fact that you’d won, and I’m too proud to tolerate it. It was never meant to be…”

Sakura exhaled. “I wasn’t lying,” she said, toweling her hair slowly. “Despite what it looks like, I was…acting on Tsunade’s private orders.”

Ino’s eyes widened. “What?”

“I understand that’s probably not what your colleagues have been saying, but it’s the truth. I
haven’t committed any crimes.”

“Oh,” Ino said faintly.

After a pause, she straightened her clothes and brushed back hair, until once again she looked impeccable. “Fine.” Her pointer finger raised to point to the back corner of Sakura’s bedroom. “Now explain that.”

Sakura followed her finger until she reached a particular damning article of clothing hanging still from her wardrobe. She held back a tortured groan. The crimson, busty piece of lingerie was offensively bright even in the dimly lit room.

She rubbed the space between her nose and her eyes. “It’s mine,” she tried.

Ino gave a shrill laugh. “Don’t even try it, forehead. In your dreams.”

Sakura’s hand lowered. She stared blankly at the other girl. “Seriously? Now?”

Ino’s mouth gaped incredulously. “I would never have guessed.”

“Thanks,” she returned shortly.

“It makes sense of course, now that I think about it,” the blonde sniffed, sweeping the heavy curtain of her hair over one shoulder, “Growing up around me must have been formative.”

Sakura rolled her eyes.

“Right,” Ino said, looking pleased now. “Well, now that you’re not actually about to die—I hope you rot in a ditch, bitch.”

She turned on her heel and made for the door. Before it shut fully, though, pale, long-nailed fingers wrapped around the edge of the door, keeping it open by a sliver. “Dinner,” the disembodied voice said a second later, “Friday.”

The door shut.

Stalking forward, Sakura yanked the curtains shut. She slid into her bed and shut her eyes.

While Sakura may not have been dragged into a cell by T&I, she was subpoenaed to testify before the council the next day. (She honestly wasn’t sure which one, given the choice, she would have preferred).

It was clear, by the time of her entrance into the circular room, that proceedings had long been underway. Sakura found a rather tired, if stoic, Itachi at the witness stand before the gathering of council elders. A short distance behind him, in an area clearly designated for other witnesses to wait, was Sasuke.

Sasuke’s dark gaze flicked from his brother to her.

Sakura paused to look at him. “You look calmer today.”

His dark hair, which had grown longer in his time away from Konoha, hid his expression.

She shrugged to herself and then sat in the chair beside him, arms crossed.
Obviously, Itachi will join our ANBU forces again,” a silver-haired councilwoman with purple, beady eyes intoned to nods around her. “With your inside knowledge against the Akatsuki, we will be able to move openly against them with far more efficacy.”

Tsunade cleared her throat with barely restrained annoyance. “As I’ve said repeatedly, Itachi cannot be cleared for active duty until he passes his physical readiness tests—and that will be some time yet.”

“Surely within the month.”

“I think that Uchiha-san’s condition has perhaps been understated thus far,” Shizune cut in politely, sending a warning glance at the hokage, “He has a rare lung disease that, while not incurable, has progressed for years without any treatment. It will take him at least a year to reach a state remotely resembling battle readiness.”

The council did not look pleased by this news.

“Fine. But as for the younger one,” an older man now spoke, voice a deep bass, “his health is in a far better state, and his sharingan will be invaluable. We might reconsider given these circumstances, hokage-sama, the terms you have set—”

Sakura started tuning them out, bending over to pick at a hangnail on her toe. She felt a burning sensation on the side of her face, as though someone were looking at her.

“How did you do it,” Sasuke asked, almost soundlessly. She looked up, and he still faced the council—she wondered if she’d imagined the sensation of being surveyed. “You were the weakest one when I left.”

Sakura sighed and leaned back on the uncomfortable bench. “You’re not wrong.”

“Then?” he pressed emotionlessly.

She pursed her lips, staring at him. “Why do you think people try to become strong?”

He didn't respond.

“It was survival, I think,” she said curtly. "Hardly unusual. Probably the same for Naruto. Maybe even you, now that I think about it...even if Itachi never really was actually trying to kill you.”

“And what tragic event happened to you, Sakura,” Sasuke said coldly, turning toward her at last, “that forced such a dramatic change in your priorities?”

Sakura’s eyes narrowed. “I was almost raped and sold for parts by organ traffickers,” she returned equally coldly.

She blinked a second later, surprised and a bit alarmed that Sasuke was the first living person she had revealed this to. And she couldn’t even see his face.

“Kakashi?” he pressed boredly, like he suspected she was lying.

Sakura’s lips contorted into a snarl. “Evidently,” she said with great difficulty, ‘not there.”

They lapsed into silence again. The chatter of the council members filled the quiet: dull, static noise.

“But that wasn’t the point,” she said lowly.
Sasuke’s dark eyes examined her coolly.

Sakura’s lips tightened. “He never took me seriously the way he did the two of you, never paid attention to me and taught me like he did—”

“You were constantly falling over yourself to catch my attention.”

“Believe it or not, being a stupid, brainless teenager isn’t a crime. It’s—”

“Normal? The shinobi life isn’t for normal,” Sasuke said cuttingly, “It isn’t for frivolous, lovesick girls like you and the Yamanaka or for lazy dumbasses like the Nara. All of you were equally pathetic.”

“There are different brands of ineptitude,” Sakura sneered, “and he was more than willing to try with yours and Naruto’s.”

But her ears burned. She didn’t want to acknowledge the potential truth in what Sasuke said—the possibility that Kakashi trying might have changed nothing. Because that meant that those organ traffickers had been necessary, that something terrible like that had needed to happen: that Yamato was right and that shinobi, the ones who were strong and survived the worst, could never also be happy, well-adjusted people. And how the fuck was that fair?

“Sakura,” Tsunade beckoned shortly. She stood up immediately and stalked toward the witness stand. She didn’t make eye contact with Sasuke again the entire trial.


Sakura jolted out of her bed, snarling like a wet cat.

“Sakuraaaa,” she heard a familiar voice whine through the door. The sound of a key being turned in a lock reached her ears, and then the door was open, revealing Naruto—bright-eyed and beaming.

“Do you know how many hours of sleep I’ve had this week, Naruto?” she hissed. “Do you?” She could have cried—just burst into ugly, strangled sobs—that’s how tired she was.

“But everything with Sasuke’s finally smoothed over, and it’s our first team practice together. Don’t you want to head over together?” Naruto smiled fiercely. It looked painful.

“And?” Sakura grunted. “It’s going to be a shitshow.”

“It’s not.”

“It is.”

“It’s NOT,” Naruto snapped, face reddening.

To be fair, she reminded herself as she considered murder, Naruto wasn't aware of even a half a dozen of the reasons her attendance of any Team Seven practice would be catastrophic.

A soft set of knocks on the open door turned both their heads.

“Naruto told me to be here at six in the morning sharp,” Sai said with a bland smile. His eyes flicked over the both of them, and the smile slowly dissipated.
Naruto took a shuddering breath. He straightened to his full height. “Look, Sakura, there’s a lot of shit I’m ignoring right now, and some of that is the—some of that is the stuff you never told me, even though I’ve always been honest with you, even though we made a pact to be honest. But like I said, I’m ignoring that. Because if I think about that, I could…”

He broke off, his expression strained. There was an edge to his features that Sakura wasn’t accustomed to seeing.

“How come you’re not getting a piece of this practice?”

“Yeah,” she found herself saying stupidly. “Okay.”

Fuck.

Feeling resigned to her fate, and distinctly like she had been emotionally manipulated, Sakura dragged her weary body to the bathroom. After washing her face and brushing her teeth, she rustled around in the closet. She pulled out a dark top, a crimson so deep it was almost black, and tugged it over her head. The material settled loosely around her frame, the sleeves reaching just short of her wrists. Still rubbing sleep out of her eyes, she pulled on a pair of standard issue black pants and then stumbled out the door with them.

“I think he got about as much sleep as you did last night,” Sai noted as they walked.

“And you?” Sakura asked, eyes fixed straight ahead.

“Probably the same,” he responded sedately. “Shikamaru and I were up until—”

“But the same,” she said shortly. “But seriously. Are you happy about this? Sasuke being back, the negligible punishment for what he’s done?”

“It does seem unfair,” Sai agreed. He blinked calmly at her. “But other than that, I don’t have any other feelings on the matter. You, however, have, I think, many feelings. Some of which don’t overtly appear to be… entirely fair.”

Sakura arched an eyebrow at him. They stared at each other for a moment, until she finally turned her head away.

Just as dawn broke, they stood in front of their assigned training ground. Sakura peered down at her watch—they were early.

Even so, the training ground itself was not deserted.

Sasuke leaned against a post at the edge of the grounds, expression stoic. Sakura’s gaze flicked down. Metal bracelets inscribed with characters too small for her to read shackled his wrists. They were small enough to not impede his mobility, but they had almost undoubtedly been created to restrict his chakra use.

“Who’s that?” Naruto asked loudly, pointing at the masked woman crouched on a tree above him.

“His guard, undoubtedly.” Sakura gave her a cheery wave.

“You’re somewhat of an asshole,” Sai observed.

Feeling a sharp gaze on her, she turned her head slightly to meet it. Yamato, looking a great deal more recovered from the trials of the previous few, examined her with open incredulity.
“Dolphin.”

(The sound of that imperious, arrogant voice—)

The ANBU stepped off her branch, landing crouched with her head bowed. “Taichou,” she greeted.

“Report,” Kakashi commanded.

In any other situation, Sakura thought longingly, she might have been tempted to close her eyes and catch some sleep.

“In summary, since yesterday, he has used three jutsus, all low-level, made eye contact with ten persons, and communicated directly with three,” the woman finished, gaze travelling up at last to meet Kakashi’s.

His gaze, however, was directed at Sasuke.

“It’s my opinion that one in your position,” Kakashi said silkily, head tilting lazily to the side, “should be fully informed before making any…critical decisions. This is to say: given the slightest step out of place that Dolphin reports to me—if I have even the slightest suspicion about your loyalties—I have the authority to take action.”

“You betray this village one more time,” he murmured with a savage sort of interest, “and your throat will be slit before you even make it past the gate.”

Sasuke’s jaw visibly tightened.

“And in case it should need stating, there are many up to the task,” the copy-nin said, “Your own teammate has proven herself more than capable, hasn’t she?”

Sakura stiffened. Sai and Naruto both were similarly stiff beside her.

“In fact, I think it’s fair to say that Haruno is heads and shoulders above all of you,” Kakashi continued coolly, his gaze still directed toward Sasuke.

Sakura stared at the copy-nin, unsmiling.

Yamato cleared his throat. “And let that be motivation to make you all work harder. Naruto, Sai, pair up for a warm up spar. Sasuke, once you’re finished here, spar with Sakura.”

Naruto crowed, dragging Sai away. Face strained, Yamato followed them.

“Understood?” Kakashi asked leisurely.

After a long silence, Sasuke nodded. He shot a dark glance at Kakashi and then turned on his heel.

Sakura moved to follow him. Without her conscious consent, a fraction of a second later, her feet pivoted on the dirt ground, spinning back around.

Kakashi gave no reaction to her sudden movement other than to move his gaze, which had been fixed somewhere above her head, unconcernedly to her.

Sakura’s lips twisted, as she tried to find the proper words. She stared past him too, mouth working.

She swallowed, ignoring the pain from the rough sensation against her dry throat. “Saori Mori—”
she started, nostrils flared.

“Who?” he responded, voice emotionless.

Sakura’s mouth snapped shut, strangling any other words that might have followed. Her gaze roamed rapidly over his features. True to his words, there was not one sign of recognition on his face. Not even the slightest muscle had twitched out of place.

*Don’t ever mention her name again. Forget she even existed. That is an order to all three of you.*

It seemed, Sakura realized with an inappropriate sense of hilarity, that this was to be the one command in recent memory that Kakashi truly obeyed.

A trickle of sweat escaped her hairline and traced its way down her cheek. The sun beat down unforgivingly (shouldn’t have worn the crimson shirt after all).

If she followed his lead, she considered distantly, this would be it. They would both treat *that* as though it had never happened—exactly like the absurd anomaly it was. And there was so little to lose, she considered. Wasn’t it better, in the end, to forget?

What could possibly be said that wasn’t better left unsaid?

She thrust her hands into the pockets of her pants.

“Never mind.” She forced her numb lips into a smile.

His dark gaze didn’t change.

She turned around and walked towards Sasuke.

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**Author's Note:**

GASP. Yeah, so that just happened.

also SORRY, I know it's been too long :( My semester started out a little more hectic than I had originally thought and then coronavirus happened :( my college has been one of many to kick students off campus--and for very good reason--just been a little down because it's my senior spring, and I didn't really get a proper chance to say bye to so many of my friends. Hope everyone is staying safe though and practicing social distancing! Hopefully (looking on the bright side) I'll be able to churn more chapters out with all that social distancing and you'll be able to read them and leave even more / even LONGER comments :o :o :o

Let me know what you thinkkkkk. Feed meeeeee :D
A boulder tore through the air in their direction. Unblinking, Sakura shunshined in front of the rest. Tensing her arm, she swarmed chakra in her fist obliterated it into thousands of pieces.

A sixth sense made her drop to a crouch a second later. A hand landed roughly—impersonal and fleeting—between her shoulder blades. Gaze flicking up, she saw Kakashi hurtle over her.

He mowed through the right flank of the rogue-nin in seconds, brute muscle and taijutsu. Sakura stared blankly ahead as she took down the center, shoulders tight as she lashed out with fists and elbows into throats and eyes.

Not enough, the Voice roared, a starved beast.

A month had passed since she had careened through the glass into Tsunade's office with an S-Rank nin on her back, and in that time, this was all that they had managed to encounter. Even as part of Sakura might have trembled to do more, these rogue-nin, frankly, weren’t shitty enough. Anything more would have been...gross overkill.

“So this is a chunin mission,” Sai observed with something like polite disappointment.

It could be said that even their newly-won chunin designation was (decidedly) ill-fitting.

Her hair blew forward as Sasuke rushed by her and then curved toward the left flank, katana drawn in a tight angle against his body. Naruto and Sai followed suit—Naruto on the ground and Sai above, held aloft by a bird the latter had conjured.

“Should I—?!” the blonde slowed down, brows furrowed.

“Does this look like it’s worth a nine tailed beast?” Sasuke snapped.

“Fine! Kage-bunshin then.”

She rolled her eyes. Naruto quite literally alternated between three strategies in battle, and it was a wonder—in some ways—that he had made it this far.

Then again, as she saw a hundred doubles of the blonde emerge and overwhelm the remaining shinobi, it wasn’t that much of a wonder after all.

Sasuke wiped his blade on the trunk of a tree, a mildly irritated look on his face.
“There’s a stream southwest of here,” she muttered after a pause.

Naruto gave her an encouraging thumbs up. Sasuke gave no indication of having heard and turned to sheathe his katana.

Kakashi approached them with a cool gaze. He came to a standstill a meter in front of them, backlit by the sun.

“There are three types of choking,” the copy-nin said with lazy derision. “The first, as we all know, the literal. The second kind, when you fail to perform because of fear, Naruto, you fortunately haven’t repeated since that mission in the Land Of Waves. The third? That’s when you lose precious seconds deciding what the fuck to do. Doesn’t matter how much chakra you have; those few seconds are the difference between living and someone just quick enough or just lucky enough slitting your throat.”

Naruto’s expression grew grim. “I’m not—"

“You’re a missile with no finesse,” Kakashi said coldly. “You weren’t built for close combat. You might fare well on an open field, one-on-one, with a similarly flashy opponent, but if I locked you in a room with any one of the other people on this team, let’s just say I wouldn’t bet on you.”

The copy-nin’s gaze snapped to Sai next with savage interest. “You’re not nearly as aggressive as you should be, long-range.”

Sai nodded, unperturbed. “Subterfuge and close-combat make the majority of my field experience—I will address the deficiency.”

Kakashi’s head cocked to the side then to survey Sasuke. “As for you—a little slow without the sharingan, aren’t you,” he said slowly, with something like private mocking amusement, “Haruno and I cleared through more than twice the bodies you did. Naruto might have done as much, if he hadn’t wasted those seconds.”

Haruno. She scoffed internally. Sasuke received this all without any expression.

Kakashi’s gaze flicked over all of them. “Retrieve your weapons. We’re heading out.”

The Uchiha’s head raised suddenly, eyes narrowed. “And what about her? Nothing?”

The copy-nin’s eyebrow arched. Sakura had minimal difficulty keeping her expression placid as Kakashi’s eyes coolly cut to her. She had had practice the entire month to adjust to abruptly not being ignored.

“Nothing,” he said indifferently, “because she didn’t make any stupid mistakes.” He launched himself into the trees.

“Sasuke,” Naruto growled. “What the—"

“How did you know?” Sasuke asked coolly, head turning suddenly to examine her. “In that precise moment, to drop to the ground? He didn’t say anything or make any signals.”

Leaves crackled on the forest floor as Sai came to stand next to her. Sakura’s stoic expression hid her perturbation.

“Never mind that Naruto and I were also there next to you. He calculated his jump with complete confidence that you would be prepared for it.”
There was, of course, no good way to explain this. In the hours she had spent on Kakashi’s ANBU squad, one learned quickly to adapt to the movements of the others as easily as breathing. More pointedly, Kakashi and she—both on the aggressive, confrontational end of the spectrum—usually led the first attack, just as they had now. She couldn’t exactly say that.

“They discussed it while you were taking a piss earlier,” Sai said blandly.

Naruto—who had not observed any such plan—fortunately did not say anything to contradict him. His lips tightened slightly, however, and his gaze locked with Sakura’s. It promised a long conversation later.

Sai gave her a long look as well that she didn’t feel like reading into.

Eventually, they followed Kakashi into the trees.

They returned to the village just as the sun set. Sakura went straight home and stood under the scalding rain of her shower head for what felt like hours.

By the time she left her place, she had long resolved to blame her lateness on their team’s delayed return (and not the long shower she had leisurely strolled home to take).

“Table for two…under the name Ino.”

The host, looking oddly strained, led her inside. “Your dinner partner has arrived, ma’am—”

“You’re dripping,” the blonde said distastefully as she looked Sakura up and down. “At an establishment of this caliber, forehead, they might just make you pay for carpet damage.”

That would explain the strained expression. Sakura gave Ino a bland look, before tying her hair up into a tight knot. Strands shorter than the rest fell out seconds later.

“Did you cut your hair with garden shears?” Ino asked with interest. “I have a cousin who does that too into flowers, we’ve always thought. No one knows how to tell him, though…It just makes for very awkward family gatherings.”

Not for the first time, Sakura felt an abrupt sense of grief for the way in which she had been maneuvered into these weekly dinners. Still, as it turned out: almost anything was better than Ino banging on her door for hours on end because Sakura had ‘forgotten.’

“It’s lost pigment too,” Ino said factually, sipping at her wine. “Too much time in the sun, I rather think. Never too late to go medic-nin, you know.”

Sakura reached for her water. She started chugging it diligently.

“Not that you have the temperament for it anymore,” Ino acknowledged after a pause, blue eyes assessing her.

That was the other problem with these dinners. Sakura didn’t give a fuck about the petty criticisms; they were nothing more than a front, unimportant distraction. It was the persisting examination—the fact that Ino had only grown sharper eyed and more cunning in the years they had been estranged. T&I had had no small part in cultivating those qualities, Sakura could imagine.

“What is this place?” Sakura asked blandly, flipping through the menu. “Never heard of it.”

Ino gave a cough-laugh. “Never been wine-and-dined, have you, Sakura?”
Sakura’s eyes lifted belatedly from the menu to survey the restaurant’s clientele. Everywhere she looked, she found extremely well-dressed individuals—another explanation for the host’s demeanor as he had escorted Sakura in—with immediately telling bashful looks on their faces.

The restaurant seemed to subsist primarily on amorous couples.

“And why on earth did you decide we meet here?” Sakura asked dryly.

“Oh, just killing two birds with one stone,” Ino said easily, closing her menu and signaling the waiter with a delicate flick of red nails. “One could even say I’m still technically on the clock.”

The waiter eagerly rushed toward their table.

“You’d be surprised how helpful it is to know who’s fucking who in the village,” Ino said without an ounce as shame. The waiter reddened. “Comes in handy during interrogation. Nothing like threatening to reveal an affair to make a hardened shinobi—”

“I’ll have the sukiyaki,” Sakura cut in smoothly.

“Ah,” Ino said, apparently noticing the waiter for the first time. She gave a beatific smile. “Sashimi, please. And I’ll have ponzu on the side.”

“Excellent. I will direct these orders towards the chef right away,” he said, bowing low. He left with a slightly dazed smile.

Ino turned back to Sakura with raised eyebrows.

“So?” she demanded. “On a mission with the team, were you?”

Sakura nodded perfunctorily. “And your team,” she asked swiftly. “Been on any missions with them recently?”

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing,” Ino said with a small smile. She cupped her chin in her hand. “But—yes. We usually take on something once every week. The rest of the time, I devote to being old Morino’s dearest dogsbody—”

Sakura’s lips quirked infinitesimally at the poisonous look on the blonde’s face. A flash of familiar blonde crossed her peripheral.

Ino followed her gaze and gave a low whistle. “Would you look at that,” she said, a jeer on her face.

Sakura rubbed tiredly at the bridge of her nose. Perfect. Of all the places for Naruto to choose for a date night with Hinata on this particular night, it had to be here.

“Have you ever seen him out of that atrocious jumpsuit before?”

She cursed Ino’s loud voice as the pair suddenly turned to them, wide-eyed. Hinata smiled shyly once the shock passed and gave a small wave.

Naruto’s blue eyes seeming unusually bright. He turned to a waiter next to them and then pointed to Sakura and Ino’s table. “We’ll join them.”

Sakura stood. “No,” she said a little too forcefully. She gentled her tone a second later. “No. We shouldn’t interrupt the two of you—”
“Nonsense,” Hinata said softly. She had made eye contact with Naruto and something passed silently between them. “We insist.”

A pair of servers quickly and seamlessly assembled an extra table and joined it to theirs. Hinata took off her coat, revealing a gossamer-thin yukata as deep as the color of red wine. Sakura heard Naruto choke on his own saliva.

A server swiftly delivered a small plate of wagyu beef to the table, courtesy of the chef.

Naruto cleared his throat loudly. “You look…good,” he said roughly, brushing at his closely shorn hair.

“You too,” Hinata returned, cheeks pink.

Sakura sawed noisily through the meat. Ino smacked her across the arm.

“So,” Naruto announced, turning his gaze to them. “I haven’t seen the two of you like this in a long time.”

“The gossip hasn’t been scandalous enough until now,” Ino said with a sniff.

“Don’t listen to her,” she sighed tiredly. She straightened a second later. “Really Ino and I shouldn’t be ruining your night. It’s not too late to—”

“I think I should probably be apologizing ahead of time for ruining your and Ino’s night, actually,” Naruto said with uncharacteristic graveness. He looked up from his folded napkin a second later, eyebrows raised.

Sakura let out an incredulous huff of air, then leaned back. “Really?” she asked curtly.

“Really,” Naruto said with a firm smile.

“Now?” In front of them, she meant.

“Sai keeps covering for you,” he explained simply, crossing his arms.

Sakura glowered at him. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Hinata attempt to draw Ino politely into their own side-conversation.

“So?”

Sakura averted her gaze.

“Did you think I would react badly?” he continued intently. “If I knew…that you weren’t.”

He stopped.

“Weak?” she finished for him, tone flat.

It was odd, to hear him admit it, even implicitly; in the near-decade she had known him, he had never alluded to anything like it, even though for most of that time, it had actually been true.

“It wasn’t like that,” she said lowly. “I didn’t choose Sai as a confidante. I never really told him anything.”

“He noticed it on his own,” Naruto summarized, like he had heard this before. His gaze lowered. “I
keep wondering about that: the fact that I didn’t. Sai’s asked me about it too, that maybe I was… seeing something that didn’t exist, because some part of me wanted to keep seeing it.”

“No,” Sakura said bluntly, and she meant it. “How were you supposed to notice something that I was actively hiding? Sai probably doesn’t even realize that he had an advantage. He had no preconceptions about me. Not to mention he’s much more adept at uncovering secrets than you.”

“And why were you actively hiding it?” Naruto pressed.

Her fingers tightened around her napkin. “That,” she said forcefully, “I can’t tell.”

His eyes bore stubbornly into hers.

“Hokage’s orders,” Sakura said through unmoving lips, wary of anyone who might be watching. Naruto’s eyes narrowed. “Maybe someday, when you’re hokage, you can ask me. Maybe, then, I’ll be able to tell you.”

He struggled for a moment, features shifting between frustration and resignation. Eventually, he nodded.

“So,” Ino said slyly, “can I stop pretending now to not be eavesdropping?”

“Ino,” Hinata cajoled gently.

The blonde girl rolled her eyes. “Don’t pretend you weren’t trying to listening too.”

With remarkable timing, a waitress placed Sakura and Ino’s food on the table with a flourish.

“But I want to hear the really juicy stuff now,” Ino said with frightening intensity. She grabbed Sakura and Naruto’s hands. “Tell me.”

“About…what?”

“Sasuke, of course!” she cried out triumphantly.

Sakura cracked her neck loudly.

“He’s pretty much the same as ever,” Naruto said dismissively. “Just as arrogant and lame. More so, really, now that he’s back.”

“I don’t care about his personality,” Ino sighed, examining her nails. “I haven’t gotten to see him yet. How does he look?”

He squinted.

“Taller,” Sakura said boredly.

“I, ah, crossed him in the hospital before he went in for his medical examinations to be cleared for active duty,” Hinata said, looking very hard at the tablecloth. “He seems to be—very healthy.”

Ino smiled knowingly. “A fine specimen for medical study, was he?”

Naruto was red-faced. “What’s so good about that idiot? He has hair that looks like a duck’s ass. He is a duck’s ass.”

The conversation lapsed into silence. Sakura speared a cube of meat and brought it to her mouth.
“By the way,” Hinata said abruptly, turning to face Ino, “I just wanted to congratulate you and Neji, personally, as well as relay our clan’s gratitude as well. My father is very pleased.”

At the very least, Sakura would reflect later, the dinner had been well worth it just to see the way Ino’s face paled with mortification in that moment.

The next day found Sakura making a midday trip to the grocery store. All the non-perishables she had stocked up on before the ‘Second Sasuke Retrieval Mission’ had run out that morning. Well, that was almost true. More to the point, she was sick of living off of dried noodles and nuts.

Her mouth watered as she stepped into the store. She could probably kill now for a piping, hot cup of mugicha tea. She went straight for the tea aisle. Crouching low, thrusting her hand blindly toward the back of the bottom shelf, she rustled around until she triumphantly pulled out what seemed to be the last bag—

“Haruno Sakura.”

Sakura’s smug gaze snapped from the tea leaves to the man standing in the middle of the aisle. She paused.

She had known she had had a lot of explaining to do to the people around her. All she had been doing this past month, for the most part, was explaining. But not at a grocery store at 7 am while she was starving. Not to this particular person.

She blinked, but he was still there. Lo and behold, not a cruel figment of her imagination.

The light lines on Itachi’s face were all the more prominent under the fluorescent lighting of the grocery store. He looked very much like he had recently been retrieved forcibly from the brink of death. He also held a crate of tomatoes.

She stood up reluctantly.

“Should you be out right now?” She searched around for a nurse-caretaker in their vicinity.

He gave her a small, distant smile. “Apparently I’ve been recovering at an astonishing rate.”

Sakura’s mouth opened and then shut. (He didn’t look it.)

What she was supposed to do then, of course, was to make discrete arrangements for a suitably private area and a mutually convenient time for them to meet. Because, clearly, they were long overdue a conversation.

“Do I need to be worried?” she muttered instead, in the narrow, otherwise deserted, aisle of a grocery store.

Itachi’s face revealed, frustratingly, very little. Instead, he gave her that same, placid look. Sakura started to wish fervently that she could read his mind. It took her an instant to realize that it was a sentiment she had felt before and keenly. Not her, she corrected after a second. An imprint of Shisui, the man.

“Most of the time,” the man said calmly, unblinking, “I feel nothing.”

Sakura paused, examining him through narrow eyes.

“Other times, however, there is” Itachi disclosed evenly, “anger.”
Something about the way he said it—as though it were utterly foreign to him—made her a bit unnerved.

“Not that this is a conversation for a grocery store,” she said genially. “But are you threatening me?”

“Am I?” he said finally, with something like clinical curiosity.

The smile left Sakura’s face.

“I’m not pretending I was your savior,” she said roughly. “I’ve not been expecting gratitude.”

“You weren’t,” Itachi agreed. His voice held an edge right now. “You likely would not find it.”

Sakura turned her face away, shoulders tight. It was absurd. What was there to regret about survival? Without her and the crow’s interference, Itachi had been slated for a cruel, untimely death. And yet, she acknowledged uncomfortably, maybe—to him—there was something undeniably cruel about what she had done. That she had intervened as she had and possibly robbed him of...the freedom to choose—to follow through with a plan he had set for himself, that he had lived for, for years.

“Sasuke,” she said shortly, changing the subject abruptly. “He’s living with you?”

Something shifted in his face, subtly. “Yes.”

“The tomatoes are for him, I’m guessing.”

“...yes,” he repeated again, monotonously. His eyes followed her.

“Legacy of an unfortunate preoccupation when I was younger,” Sakura explained shortly. “If I recall, he liked them sliced into even quarters.”

His gaze flickered.

She scowled at nothing in particular, not sure why she had admitted to that.

“When I’m not around,” the older Uchiha said indifferently, looking somewhere past her, gaze unreadable, “watch him.”

She stared at him for a moment, mouth agape. “Me,” she said, sounding a little strangled. She dropped the bag of tea leaves into her basket. God, she needed to leave before this conversation had any more surprising twists. “Right. Okay.”

His words sank in a second later. She looked at him sharply. Something of that old Shisui surged in her, pained and panicked. When I’m not around—

She bared her teeth in a nasty smile. “But if you’re ever out of the picture, for any reason, I might just forget that promise. Might just let my hand slip, if you catch my drift.”

“You’re not,” Itachi observed after a pause, “an exceptionally good liar.”

Sakura shrugged insouciantly. “I’ve managed so far. Makes one wonder, doesn’t it?”

She gave a little wave and calmly completed the rest of her grocery list. When she exited the store, she spotted—as she had predicted—a small, stout man waiting on a bench in medic-nin robes. Sakura passed seamlessly through the crowd to the other side of the street.
She rested her bags on the bench and pulled out the bottle of milk she had just purchased, taking a quick sip. The older man looked up from her book, the thin moustache above his lips shivering slightly with a passing breeze.

“If he isn’t already,” Sakura said, smiling into the street and nodding politely at an old Academy teacher, “put him on suicide watch.”

She dropped the bottle back in as she picked up her shopping bags and then made her way home.

She didn’t sleep particularly well that night. In fact, she barely slept at all.

She found herself tossing and turning, eyes wide open the entire time. There wasn’t one particular thought—it was all of them. She couldn’t seem to quiet her mind. It had become possessed of something entirely out of her control.

A strange fear beckoned Sakura…but, perhaps, not unexpected. Maybe, even, a long time coming. She had more downtime than ever, without ANBU: more free time, more energy—more time to reflect.

It was corrosive.

How far away was she, some unsightly, shivering part of her whispered. How far away were the people who had been around her in ANBU? (Him) How many bodies? How much blood? In ounces or in quarts?

For the first time in a very long time, she wished she were…closer. To her parents, maybe. To someone. She wished (in that irrational, unmitigated way that can only happen in the privacy of one’s own thoughts) that there was someone who would come now, if she asked, and could lie to her, if she needed, and that she would believe them. Could believe them.

She leaned back in her bed and forced her eyes shut, even though sleep wouldn’t come for hours, and even then, not for long.

This continued for the next few nights.

The universe, it seemed, had a knack of holding Sakura to her promises, with very little consideration or regard for her altogether.

It took less than a week.

“Be still, Sasuke,” Sakura hissed, her fist landing with unbridled strength in the midsection of a tall woman with bright, white hair. She felt her ribcage compress beneath her knuckles, felt them cave in, and then shatter.

Not wasting a spare second, she shunshined through the swarm of sound shinobi in the narrow cave. Their team had been split as soon as they had been ambushed—she and Sasuke were only in one of many in a network of caves the sound shinobi now populated like bees in a hive.

Sakura bared her teeth in frustration as she brought a chakra lit hand to the wound on Sasuke’s leg.

“Get off me—”

“Don’t move,” she snarled. She forced her fingers into the wound, past the exposed muscle and
bone to the artery that had been all but shredded.

“They must’ve been tracking us for days,” Sasuke exhaled, face contorted in rage, “Kabuto, that
sniveling, worthless—he must have found out my chakra was sealed.”

Despite whatever he was capable of at his peak, she acknowledged sourly, an utterly chakra-less
Sasuke had been a more than achievable target in the middle of this small army of shinobi.

Just one lucky shinobi with enough medical knowledge to make a crude, surgical incision was all
that had been necessary.

“Stop moving,” she ordered. “This injury will kill you in the next minute unless I hold the frayed
ends of your artery together exactly like this.”

A heavyset man wielding a chakra-lit spear emerged at the forefront of the clamoring pack heading
straight for them. Sakura watched him with careful anticipation, timing her crouch for the precise
moment he was in arm’s reach. She lashed her foot out with chakra-induced strength, sending the
lower half of his leg snapping in the opposite direction of his femur.

She caught the sword of the next sound shinobi on the shoulder guard of her flak jacket. Her hand
latched in the same motion onto the front of the woman’s face. She squeezed, until she felt the
consciousness leave beneath her hands, shoved her back a second later.

Her gaze flicked up in annoyance to survey the rest. They had been biding their time as their
comrades attacked, would attack in the next few seconds. To keep her right hand still, she had to
keep the entire right side of her body stationary; that meant no twisting or rotating. That left her
with one hand and one leg, all on the left.

Which wasn’t sustainable, Sakura realized with thin lips.

As the first woman moved, body beginning to blur in the telling signs of shunshin, Sakura made a
split-second decision. Her left hand burrowed into the floor of the cave with thunderous strength.
The resulting sound was deafening, like a clap of thunder.

And then the entire cavernous structure around them began collapsing.

The rock fell like rainfall: at first, slow and unpredictable. Then, suddenly, faster and blurring. She
saw a boulder as big as a horse drop directly on the man mid-shunshin to them, crushing him to
death instantly.

Sakura gritted her teeth and raised her left forearm, muscle tensed in preparation as the rest came
down on them, chakra-lit fingers still wrapped tightly around the artery in Sasuke’s thigh.

The first boulder was nothing. Her arm didn’t shift a millimeter. The second and the third, directly
on top of that, were similarly insignificant. It was the fourth that made her left foot shift back
slightly. Then the next few came, and her arm buckled toward her head a centimeter before she
steeled herself, gritted her teeth, and forced her forearm back up.

Ten seconds—ten infinite, torturous seconds—passed until everything stilled. By then, it felt like
she was holding up a mountain, her forearm just scarce millimeters above the crown of her head.
Beneath her forearm, until the boulder right above her gave out, she and Sasuke were shielded from
the rest.

Agonizing pain seared through her body with the effort it took. She panted rapidly.
“What did you do?” she heard Sasuke hiss in the utter darkness.

She could have let him die, some part of her realized dully. Could have just let him bleed to death as she took on the rest of the sound shinobi. It wouldn’t have even been hard, she mourned. She was exceptionally good at the killing aspect of her job. The saving part, apparently, not so much.

(She hadn’t thought, when she had made that first choice—even the next—that she would be putting herself on the chopping block with him. And yet here she was, risking her life for Sasuke. Almost entirely unintentionally.)

_Fuck._

She felt the artery finally finish knitting together at the exact time her left arm buckled. Sasuke gave a hoarse roar of pain as she wrenched her other hand out of his leg and brought it up to support the piles of rock above them.

He shifted immediately, brushing her leg. “Try…to…minimize movement,” she strangled out to him.

_“This was your plan to save us?”_

Ungrateful bastard.

_“You can’t hold that forever.”_

She _knew._

“A minute, if at all.”

_“Sasuke, even if we’re both about to die now,”_ Sakura whispered hoarsely, _“you’re well on your way to convincing me to strangle you in the fraction of a second I’d have before those rocks crush us.”_

Silence met her words.

Then, tonelessly: “Save your breath.”

Alluding to their diminishing oxygen supplies issue, she understood glumly. Her legs bent against her will, her feet sinking well into what remained of the cave floor. She could feel the muscles in her forearms tearing, the skin there scraped raw.

She let out a coarse, ugly cry as her shoulders started to tremble violently.

_“Sakura,”_ was all Sasuke said. She didn’t have the brain power to analyze the way he said it.

Her eyes stung with frustration, because she could feel it. It felt like fighting the ocean. There was no way she could win. There was only the time until she gave in.

(The muscle in her right forearm tore just as she heard it.)

That shrill, sing-song battle cry, like the chirping of the birds.

She blinked dazedly in the darkness, trying to understand. There was a low, guttural rumbling sound growing louder and closer, like something was coming straight toward them.

Until that split second the boulder above her shattered, she didn’t even realize that her load had
begun to lighten. It went from everything, abruptly, to nothing—too quick even for her to luxuriate in the change. Dust and debris from the decimate rock filled the air. Her panting breaths turned ragged.

Sakura looked up and encountered then—which seemed for one, irrational second—the face of divine rage itself. The face above her was luminous (a consequence of the raikiri, she would later rationalize), sharper and harder by the starkness of the darkness around them.

She inhaled, soundlessly—and then the blood rushed back into her brain.

“Sakura! Sasuke!” she heard Naruto cry. He careened down from somewhere higher, kicking off one boulder onto another until he reached them. His gaze flitted between her and Sasuke.

Sakura knew she looked far worse than Sasuke at the moment. She wasn’t surprised when Naruto moved like a bullet straight toward her.

“Don’t touch her.” Kakashi caught him viciously by the collar and swung him a few meters away.

As Naruto stared in confusion, Sai touched ground beside him, silent and pale. His dark eyes seemed larger than usual.

“What’s broken?” the man inches from her demanded, eyes roving over her body.

Sakura opened her mouth and tasted blood. Her nose had bled. She hadn’t even noticed.

“His femoral artery,” she wheezed, trying to sound firm. “I knitted it together, but the hold is tenuous at best—”

“Not him,” the copy-nin snarled. She saw black spots and blinked slowly. A hand came into view, snapping harshly. “Look at me. Talk.”

“My arms…the muscles. They’re torn. My triceps too. I think I dislocated both shoulders”—she shifted experimentally, and held back a scream of pain—“my left knee too.”

Blessed green chakra crossed the field of her vision, and then it was supplied directly to her body. A dopey smile crossed Sakura’s face. Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Sai helping lift Sasuke gingerly onto Naruto’s back.

“Feels nice,” Sakura commented, eyes barely open.

The muscle in her arms finished knitting together. Muscle was always easier than veins and arteries.

“Nice,” she sighed again.

The skin on her forearms sealed.

“Should she be conscious for this?” she heard Sai murmur.

Hands grasped her thigh and her calf firmly, then moved quickly, aligning her knee back into place. Sakura swore viciously, forcibly ripped from the happy place she had been before.

Her eyes widened in horror. “Don’t you dare,” she managed to get out.

He slid her shoulders back into place in lightning quick succession.
“You absolute worthless piece of trash fucker,” she choked out.

But he had already turned to face the rest of their team. “Full speed back to Konoha,” he commanded abruptly, voice returned seamlessly to its usual indifference. Sakura wondered if she had imagined there being anything different before. “I’ll take Sasuke. His current condition will require more finesse than you two are capable of giving.”

Sai brushed her shoulder with his own. “So,” he said almost soundlessly, “how does one go in less than a month from trying to kill Uchiha Sasuke to almost dying to save him?”

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**Author's Note:**

two updates?? in (basically) a week?? i'm a new woman.

Lol, in all seriousness though, hope you enjoyed this chapter!! We have a small time skip, a Team Seven that is somehow miraculously functioning if not particularly well, a still very fucked-up Kakashi who is (in a strange turn of events) *actually* acknowledging Sakura's strength, Sakura (accidentally?) risking her life to save Sasuke, and a lot of repression of emotion on all sides. Delicious.

Also, just to comment on last chapter's comments (hehe): I've been kind of surprised by the general hate/anger in the comments--not really against Kakashi, because I find that legitimately well-deserved--but against Naruto?? It kind of drove me to write very noticeable parts of this chapter *cough* *cough* as you might have seen. Let me know what you think!

About everything. Let me know. Please. I LOVE your long comments so so sooo much.

They also make me update faster?? :o :o :o

(See? It worked for the last chapter)

Shameless, I KNOW. Ok bye.

P.S. To address something in case it raises in any questions, I've kind operated via the understanding that Kakashi would have copied rudimentary medical ninjutsu using his sharingan, like how to heal torn muscles/skin (but not, for example, how to reconnect a severed artery).

P.P.S. Also I have ZERO medical knowledge so I apologize for anything batshit crazy in this chapter

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Chapter End Notes

From the second line break until the fourth line break, there are allusions (not graphic or extremely specific) to suicidal thought. If you need to skip those sections for any reason but would like to know any general plot points you might have missed, drop me a comment, and I will reply as soon as I can with a summary.
Sasuke had been dying because of his injuries; her primary concern had been an oncoming avalanche of rocks.

And yet, both Sasuke and she were held overnight for twenty four hour observation—because Kakashi apparently had never undergone any official medical ninjutsu training in his near two decades of being a combat shinobi.

Sakura spent the night glowering at the vase of daffodils an overexcited nurse had left at her bedside.

Twenty four hours later, she was generally unsurprised to find herself filling out a thick packet of the hospital’s discharge paperwork. That Sasuke had been deemed to be in sufficient condition as well and was filling the same beside her was a bit surprising, but she took it all in stride—Hinata was an excellent healer.

As they waited for the nurse to check their documents over, Sakura rested her chin in her hand. She couldn’t help the curl of distaste in her stomach.

“A thank you,” she considered, “could be appreciated.”

He leaned back into his chair across from her, dark eyes unreadable. “Your actions were unnecessary and unwanted.”

It had occurred to her, sometime during the past half hour (and between contemptuous glances directed her way), that given…recent actions, he might still somehow think her still a devoted fan.

“I really don’t know how it’s escaped your notice, Sasuke,” Sakura said, smile dropping, “but I actually don’t like you very much.”

The contempt didn’t leave his expression.

Sakura arched an eyebrow. “You put a hole through Naruto’s chest, and have tried in the time since to put a hole through mine. That’s not very nice. Kind of makes me want to put one through yours too.”

Sasuke raised an eyebrow back. “What animus to overcome yesterday, then.”

“You’re back on Team Seven now,” she retorted. Sakura rotated her shoulders to get some residual soreness out of them. “So, yes, I tried to save your life. Because that’s what I owe you as a
teammate. Same as what you owe me and every other person on this team too.”

Sasuke’s mouth thinned. “I pay my debts.”

“Paperwork looks good,” the nurse called out, giving them a nod. “You’re all set to go.”

“Amazing,” Sakura announced, giving a wave to the nurse as she walked toward the exit.

She swung open the door to leave the medical ward with extra vigor, pausing when she realized that the recognized the two individuals on the other side.

Naruto and Sai stood side by side, locked deep in conversation. It took a few seconds for them to see her and Sasuke.

“They’ve let you out already?” Sai asked.

Sakura gave a grunt of assent.

“Right,” the blonde beside him declared abruptly, “so we should have dinner together.”

Sasuke scoffed. Sakura was polite enough to not do the same out loud. “We just got out of here, Naruto. This isn’t the time for…whatever it is you think it’s the time for.”

“It’s my idea,” Sai interjected calmly.

That brought Sakura up short. “Yours?” she clarified.


“And I rather think you owe me a dinner, Sakura,” Sai said, smiling slightly.

Her mouth flattened. It was the least of what she owed him.

Naruto’s smile widened as he read the resignation on her face.

“And because you owe me and Sasuke owes you,” Sai continued, equally assuredly, “I believe he might owe me a dinner too.”

Sasuke’s gaze narrowed.

“If I have to go, you’re coming too,” Sakura muttered. “You pay your debts, don’t you?”

Naruto turned on his heel with business-like focus, making straight for the door. Sai tilted his head, a curve to his lips.

She was modestly surprised when he brought them into a crowded bar, dim lit and with pulsing lights and music.

“Uh, Sai,” Naruto said, hands in his pockets as he surveyed the establishment he had unsuspectingly entered. “I thought we said dinner?”

A pair of giggling chunin—a green-haired girl and a rail thin boy—brushed past them. Sakura’s gaze tracked the pair with some interest, before a new figure appeared before them.

“Sai,” the bartender greeted, a wide smile across her full lips. Her eyebrows raised a second later. “And…friends?”
“Mirai-san,” Sai said, bowing his head in acknowledgement. “You have the table as I requested?”

“Of course,” she said, still sounding a little shocked. She cleared her throat, pointing above the bar counter to a point to their left. Sakura turned her head and located what looked to be the last free table in the establishment, a circular booth with plush red seating.

Sakura followed Sai and Naruto followed Sakura. Sasuke sat down on the very edge of the curved cushion with an air of extreme detestation.

A waitress passed by, depositing a tall bottle of shochu and three glasses. “Mirai-san said on the house.”

“I know that you just left the hospital,” Sai announced, unblinking, “However, you were both cleared for discharge, so I see no reason you cannot partake in this…team-building exercise.”

“Team-building exercise,” Sakura echoed with polite disbelief.

“Precisely,” Sai confirmed, dark eyes glinting. His gaze shifted toward Sasuke. “Unless you just happen to have weak stomachs.”

Sakura rolled her eyes.

“Ha,” Naruto barked out a laugh. He jabbed a thumb in Sasuke’s direction “One time, this bastard forgot to bring water on a mission, so he stole a water pouch off of one of our assignments. He started chugging it—only it wasn’t water—and spewed his guts out for the next hour. I had to hold his fucking hair back the entire—”

A glass clanked loudly against the ebony finish of the table. “Pour,” Sasuke hissed.

“Of course,” Sai said with a plastic smile. He tipped the heavy bottle over with elegant ease, filling all four cups to the brim.

“How on earth did you find this place?” Sakura sniffed at the cup.

“I had read that bar-hopping was a socializing activity commonly practiced by both civilian and shinobi. I conducted some research into locations preferred by shinobi in our rough age group, and this location was referenced most frequently.”

Naruto grunted.

“I discovered ‘pin pon pan’ in a similar manner,” Sai stated.

His words were met with blank stares.

“I, too, was unfamiliar with this exercise,” Sai acknowledged, tipping his head, “It is, however—I have observed it to be—extremely popular among shinobi our age. We must sit in a circular formation, as we are now. Someone begins the game by saying ‘pin,’ and the person to their left has to follow with ‘pon,’ while the person to their left must follow with ‘pan’. Once the ‘pin, pon, pan’ has been said, the person who said ‘pan’ must immediately point to a random member of the group who starts the cycle again. If you’re caught unaware and lose the cycle, you lose and must drink.”

“And what exactly is the point of this?” Sasuke asked, lips curling.

“Obviously to test our comparative reflexes.”
“Sounds good to me,” Naruto agreed sagely.

“Then,” Sai prompted, “shall we start?”

At minute ten, Naruto lost his patience and elbowed Sasuke in the gut. The advent of violence introduced new rules into the game.

One hour later, the bottle was empty.

“Fuck,” she said out loud, rubbing her eyes as the room spun.

Naruto smiled at nothing in particular. He frowned, rubbing at his ribcage. “You all have really jab—jab-by…fingers.”

“Your elbows,” Sakura accused, scowling, “are large.”

“Compensation for his dick,” Sai murmured, “which is—” he hiccupped—“overly small.”

A choked noise—vaguely like laughter—emerged from the least likely of sources. Sasuke grimaced a second later, as though in pain.


“I can’t,” Naruto whined, head burrowed in Sai’s lap.

Sakura pulled him up with one hand and then swung him onto her back. She rocked forward slightly but stabilized herself with concerted effort.

“Sakura,” he whispered, a tone of horror to the words, “I think I might throw up.”

“Don’t,” she hissed, “you dare.”

“Okay,” Naruto hiccupped. He rested his head on her shoulder and shut his eyes.

Sakura shook him. “Don’t go to sleep either,” she muttered. Her gaze shot to Sai, then to Sasuke. “Can you get him?”

“Don’t touch me,” Sasuke snapped, batting the other boy’s hand away. He stood—and then veered to the side.

He cast his arm about for some means of stabilization.

In the end—and determinedly not looking at him—Sasuke’s arm ended up swung over Sai’s neck, using the other boy’s bodyweight to keep himself upright.

“They look alike,” Naruto whispered confidentially to her.

“Huh? Are you blind?” Sakura demanded, squinting at them. “Whatever. We’re getting out of here.”

They stumbled out of the bar and onto the moonlit dirt road with more or less success, if not grace (more than one threat had been shouted at them because of an unintentionally upturned drink).

They paused once there, examining their respective passengers.

Sai blinked at Sasuke. “I have no idea where he lives.”
He turned to her with a questioning look. She had nothing to offer him.

“I believe I can help with that,” a new figure interjected smoothly, emerging from the shadows. Sakura turned (a little slower than usual). Sai stiffened.

Itachi stood before them, in a simple white shirt and black pants, expression revealing nothing.

“Ha,” Sakura breathed out in delighted astonishment, straightening. “Were you waiting out there? Does Sasuke have a curfew? Did he break it?”

“Sakura,” Sai muttered, seeming abruptly sober, “perhaps don’t antagonize the person who went on a murderous killing spree for—”

“Nii-san?”

Itachi’s mouth parted fractionally.

“What are you doing here?” Sasuke asked blearily. He seemed suddenly to realize Sai next to him and shoved him away. He stumbled for balance.

Itachi caught him, hands wrapping firmly around his brother’s upper arms. His sharingan spun—and then Sasuke collapsed, unconscious. He handled Sasuke with infinite care, shifting him in his hold.

“About Naruto,” Sai said lightly.

Sakura twisted to follow his gaze. Naruto’s face was scrunched up and paler than usual, like he was trying valiantly to hold something back.

“If you don’t mind,” Sakura said with a bright smile, depositing the blonde next to Sasuke. Naruto swayed forward and then moaned piteously as he collapsed against Itachi.

The older Uchiha stared down at both his charges, gaze narrow.

“Feel free to do the same—” Sakura waved her hands, in vague reference to the sharingan trick Itachi had pulled—“to him too. Have a great night.”

“How did you meet it?”

Sakura stilled.

“The crow,” Itachi said slowly.

Her shoulders tightened. “By accident. Have you seen…it recently?”

She could feel Sai’s curious eyes burning into both of them.

“No,” Itachi returned softly. The older man’s mouth curved without feeling. “Licking its wounds, no doubt.”

Even though Shisui had won those wounds fending Kakashi off for her, she felt no pity for it.

“Good,” she said shortly. She nodded her farewell to Sai and made her way home.

Seven hours later, Kakashi’s dark gaze assessed them with transparent disgust. Denial was
pointless, of course, when their captain could smell better than a dog in heat.

“Just a late night,” Sai tried very calmly, gaze protected from the sun by a pale hand.

Sasuke winced at the noise. Naruto was still cowering from any and all sunlight. And Sakura fervently wished that she had just thrown her alarm clock into the wall like she had wanted that morning and never left her bed.

“The hokage has received intel on the location of a sleeper cell of sound operatives close to the village,” Kakashi stated coldly, crouching on the boulder.

“They’re after Sasuke?” Naruto demanded, straightening.

Kakashi’s expression didn’t change. “We’re capturing them for interrogation before they can ever reach Konoha soil.”

“Oh?” Sasuke questioned through gritted teeth. “And I hope that the hokage has decided in her infinite wisdom to take off these shackles this time, given our last mission.”

The copy-nin’s feet hit the grass soundlessly. “Don’t worry, Uchiha,” Kakashi rasped, eyes glinting with cruel amusement. “In her infinite wisdom, the hokage has assigned us assistance to compensate for your…current handicaps.”

But there was something off about his demeanor, Sakura noted distantly. The upper half of his face was mocking and insouciant, and yet there was a tension in his forearms that he wasn’t trying to hide—not from anyone observant enough to look.

She understood only when three figures made their presence known, emerging from the shifting shadows beneath the gently swaying trees. The blood rushed out of Sakura’s face.

Hyena body-flickered to Kakashi’s right, head lowered slightly in deference. Snail and Bear blurred into corporeality at Hyena’s shoulders.

“ANBU,” Naruto muttered, mouth agape. “A mission with real life ANBU.”

Sai turned a polite smile toward the newest occupants of the training ground. “You are Kakashi-taichou’s ANBU team, I assume?”

Sakura fought hard to regain control of her expression.

“We are,” Snail said, bowing lightly. “We look forward to working with you, Team Seven.”

“I am Sai,” Sai said pleasantly. “These are my teammates: Naruto, Sakura, and Sasuke. We apologize ahead of time for how ungrateful Sasuke will undoubtedly be during this mission.”

Sasuke’s head rolled back to give the black-haired boy a dark, considering look. That disrupted Sakura momentarily from her stupor.

“Don’t,” she said tonelessly.

Sasuke’s eyes flashed, like that made him consider it more.

An unexpected figure intervened. “Back off, Sasuke,” Naruto said lowly, face hard. He shifted his position slightly, so that the breadth of his shoulders blocked Sai from his line of sight.

Sai looked like he had been struck over the head. Sakura was also…mildly surprised. She didn’t
“Think she had ever heard Naruto take that tone with Sasuke.”

“God, I’m sick of these fucking brats,” Bear growled, annoyance thick in his voice. “We just got the redhaired one off the squad, and now this.”

“Bear,” Hyena snapped.

“They can never handle themselves,” the man continued, venomous, “just marching onto that field with a temper and no brain and a fucking expiration date—”

“Enough,” Snail barked out, hair swinging forward. Something more than anger rang in her voice—something sharper, harder, grating like broken glass.

Sakura’s lips thinned. She didn’t know if the grief in Snail’s was for her—it could have been for anything, given how frequently terrible things happened in ANBU—but it made her…wonder. What they had been told. If there had been a ceremony at the headquarters for her. If they had said anything.

Maybe it was better, she thought bitterly, not to know.

(Shed…missed them. Funny, how she hadn’t really been aware of it, until now. She had thought it was just the violence.)

“Don’t betray yourself,” Kakashi commanded lowly. Sakura’s head snapped up. He wasn’t looking at her.

“It will be sunset when we infiltrate,” the copy-nin informed them, expression unreadable. “Make sure your henges are flawless. Give no indication that you are shinobi.”

“Our relationship with the hidden village in the Land of Steam is tenuous and cannot be compromised,” Hyena explained.

Naruto shifted uncomfortably, scratching his head. “Ah, I’ve never been on this kind of a mission before…”

“Yeah?” Bear said irately. “We’re here to keep you in check too.”

Sakura inhaled the scent of the warm ocean deeply, yukata fluttering in the gentle breeze. Holding onto her arm, Snail stared silently at the reflection of the moon onto the crystal clear waves as they walked.

“What a handsome young couple,” an old woman called out, emerging from her stall. Examples of her wares—light, gossamer scarves—dangled from her thin arms. “Just married?”

“We’re good,” Sakura said shortly, determined to follow the route Hyena had indicated on their map. The inn the sound-nin were purportedly occupying couldn’t be far.

“Honeymooners,” Snail responded with a sweet smile, making a show of eyeing one of the scarves. Sakura grimaced. She supposed one of the sound-nin could be in their vicinity.

“See?” the woman tsked, “The lady is interested. You’ll learn quickly, young man, that the key to a good marriage is saying yes to your young lady. Always.”

Sakura nodded impatiently.
Snail patted Sakura’s face, pouting. “Don’t look so glum, Yakiro. Indulge me for a few minutes, and then we’ll head to the inn.”

“Honeymooners indeed, I see,” the old woman commented, grinning wickedly. The smirk persisted as she asked, “What colors do you like, miss? With rich, brown hair like that, this pink one would look stunning.”

“You think?” Snail asked shyly, her henge’s round face blushing lightly.

“He’ll go wild when he sees you in it,” the woman whispered confidentially—and not every quietly.

Sakura kept her expression blank with determined effort.

After some back and forth, coins exchanged hands, and they walked away from the beaming shopkeeper at a leisurely pace.

Snail craned up to brush a kiss on her cheek. “Naruto and Bear ahead at 12 o’clock,” she murmured by her ear.

They were all on schedule, then. Sakura smiled down at her and then subtly sped up their pace.

The inn—loudly proclaimed ‘Secret Lovers’ Paradise’ on a bright flashing sign—was not in fact an inn at all, but a love hotel. Sakura could see how this was strategic. No one questioned or paid attention to the comings and goings of a love hotel’s occupants, employees often being paid precisely not to.

“Ten thousand yen for a room,” the squat man at the luridly colored front desk stated. “No negotiating.”

“We’re honeymooners,” Snail cajoled, blinking prettily. “Can’t we get a discount?”

“Ha,” the man said, unsmiling. “Keep the fantasies to the bedroom.”

As Sakura handed over the required amount of money, she surveyed the area discreetly to locate easy exits.

“First floor room, please,” Sakura asked. When the squat man looked like he was about to protest, she said firmly, “I’m scared of heights. Deathly.”

He released a beleaguered sigh and then bent down to rummage for a different key from the one he had been about to hand them. “Don’t complain to me about the noise,” the man said crassly. “The first floor has been bizarrely popular tonight, kami knows why. When you put a second mortgage on your house to pay for a first-class ocean view—”

“Have a great night!” Snail called out cheerily, tugging Sakura forward. They climbed the plush red staircase until they reached a hallway.

A door cracked open soundlessly just as their feet brushed the carpet, revealing a tall, silver-haired woman with red, hawkish eyes. There was something instantly sensuous about how she carried herself, like she had been born beautiful, knew it, and had had years of practice at it.

She scoffed internally—what else would she expected of a female henge from the copy-nin? She slipped quickly behind the door, tugging Snail behind her.
A man was tied and gagged on the bed, unconscious.

“Are all of the targets in the hotel?” Snail asked, eyes scanning the unconscious sound-nin.

“According to him—” Kakashi’s red eyes flicked disparagingly to the sound-nin as well—“two left around sunset to gather supplies. Hyena and Sasuke are after them.”

“Where is Sai?” Sakura kept her voice as even as possible.

“Handling the woman on the floor above us,” Kakashi said shortly, sliding kunai beneath the thin material of his dress. “There are seven in total. Six sound shinobi and an A-rank mercenary Kabuto hired to spearhead the infiltration.”

“How are we getting the bodies out?” Snail started tying her henge’s thick hair back from her face.

“Laundry chute. Naruto and Bear are stationed there to collect them. Haruno—take the twins in 612. Snail, 334 and 214. I’ll handle the mercenary in 701.”

“Taichou,” Snail asked hesitantly, sending Sakura a strange look. “Wouldn’t it be better for me to take 612? I might be better back up. In case the A-rank mercenary gets too noisy.”

“She’ll do,” Kakashi said distantly. Snail bowed her head sharply and then slipped out the door.

She yanked her gaze away as Kakashi turned towards her again.

“Enter through the window,” he ordered. He slid into the hallway as well a second later.

She shifted stiffly over to the window and pushed it open. Bracing her foot on the ledge, she swung herself on to the top of the window frame.

Nudging her toes and fingers into the grooves where the ocean wind had naturally eroded the building’s façade, Sakura pulled herself up the side of the building. It was dark, thankfully, or she would have been more concerned about being detected by civilians. The breeze was stronger the higher she climbed, and she became increasingly grateful for the male henge’s short hair.

Five levels up and shifted five rooms to the right positioned her exactly where 612 would be. Sakura loosened a kunai from her sleeve. She used it to pick the lock and then rolled into the room.

The first occupant—who had been exiting the bathroom, door still swinging shut behind him—she caught in a genjutsu, dropping him to his knees. The second, seated on the bed, she struck with blunt fingers to the throat; this twin was quicker, managing to side-step the full force of the strike. Two fingers landed, damaging his larynx enough to keep him from making noise.

He flipped over to the other side of the bed, eyes slitted. He was rangy in build, but his features were delicate, even doll-like, beneath lime green hair.

Sakura leisurely strolled over to his brother and dropped a heavy fist on the top of his head. He crumpled like a sack of potatoes.

She raised her head again to the twin across the room, arching an eyebrow. “Come on.”

As his form began to flicker with impressive speed, it occurred to her that she might have underestimated her opponent slightly. She had gotten the drop on his twin, but this other one wasn’t of the same caliber.

Tubes emerged from beneath his sleeves, emitting a high pressure of air that she couldn’t hear but
that caused piercing agony in her ears. Sakura scowled and flung a pair of kunai at him; as he evaded them, she slid over the bed and twisted, flinging her leg around with the momentum of her body.

The green-haired shinobi ducked her leg and shoved his palm into her midsection. Sakura’s body was blasted back by a violent pulse of air, but she managed to latch onto his wrist. Using this hold, she flung herself up, feet skating across the ceiling, until she landed on the carpeted floor behind him.

Before he could turn, she grabbed his throat from behind and squeezed until she felt his body relax into a state of unconsciousness. His body dropped with a heavy thud.

Sakura frowned. Well, the noise was probably nothing out of the ordinary in the likes of a love hotel.

She lifted the twin she had knocked out first onto her back and located the laundry chute at the end of the hallway. Wary of any opening doors, she shifted him from off her back and sat him onto the edge of the chute. She pushed him down.

An middle-aged man exited one of the rooms and passed by her with heavy, slightly clumsy footsteps, waving drunkenly. She waved back absentmindedly.

She hadn’t heard any unusual sounds above her, she considered, head cocking to the side as she turned back toward the room. It seemed the A-rank mercenary upstairs was being handled without much difficulty. Once she got the second twin down the chute—and assuming everything else had gone generally to schedule—they could be out of the Land of Steam and back on their way to Konoha within the hour.

Opening the door and shutting it quickly beside her, Sakura approached the second twin, who lay prone along the bed. His eyes scrunched at the sound of her footsteps, a telling sign of impending consciousness.

Just as she was about to apply a measure of brute force to his head—just enough to knock him out but not enough to make him unusable for interrogators—a scratching noise reached her ears from the bathroom.

Sakura froze, eyes narrowing.

Twins, Kakashi had said. Two sound-nin.

Was there a third combatant in the bathroom, unaccounted for?

She shunshined to the bathroom door and nudged it open. Her nostrils flared, put off by the smell.

She found nothing out of the ordinary. Then, she looked down.

A girl, scantily clad and thin—so thin that she couldn’t have seen a good meal in months, maybe even in years—was stretched along the pale pink tub. Her wrists, bony and scarred, were shackled to the faucets. Each breath she took sounded painful, outlining the painful definition in her ribs.

Round, blue eyes, framed by messy, smudge eyeliner like bruises, met hers, bleary and dilated from drugs.

Sakura took an unwitting step back, shoulder blades thudding with the door. The girl flinched at the noise, wrists tugging helplessly at her shackles in a futile motion to cover her head.
“No,” Sakura said, “I’m not—”

It didn’t matter what she said. At the sound of her voice, the girl in the tub began crying, the noise muffled because the gag in her mouth. Her body shifted, and suddenly Sakura was able to see the welts and purple bruises all along her legs.

She had ripped out the still-beating hearts from grown men and women. She had smelled the sweet-rotten incense of burning flesh. She had been party to the violence that had evoked the most agonized screams she had ever heard in her life.

But she had not been inured against this.

She bent over the toilet. Nothing came up as she panted through the nausea, eyes firmly shut.

“You’ve been more trouble than I anticipated.”

Hands restraining her arms. Other hands on her legs. The sharp pain of hair being ripped from her scalp. She couldn’t move, couldn’t fight—

The man behind her bending down, sniffing her hair, grunting at what he smelled.

“What do you think?”

Thick, cloying liquid dribbling from her mouth.

“I think it’s only fair compensation, given what she’s done to our friend over there.”

Hands on her legs, pulling—

Sakura’s eyes snapped open, the phantom taste of blood and milk on her tongue.

The Voice nudged within her, insidious and hungry.

The girl continued to whimper in the tub. Sakura pivoted on her knees and grasped her head.

“Quiet,” she instructed. The girl looked even more frightened. “I’m going to remove the gag. I’m going to untie you. But you can’t scream.”

Blue eyes watched her, wide, as she snapped the metal like it was a cracker. Giving her a warning look, Sakura slowly removed the gag.

“W-who are you?” the girl stammered, voice weak.

Sakura stood, expression dead. “Don’t come out. Not until I say.”

She exited the bathroom and shut the door behind her. The sound-nin on the bed had regained enough consciousness to roll onto his side. Purple eyes opened sluggishly, enraged.

You saw, the Voice coaxed. You saw what they did to her.

Sakura folded up the sleeves of her yukata.

It’s exactly what those traffickers would have done to you, the Voice whispered in her head. That would have been YOU, if not for ME.

The sound-nin sat up, hands clawing at the bedsheets.
Sakura struck his face with blinding speed, watched stoically as his head smacked against the headboard.

“I’ll kill you for this,” the man choked out, blood dripping into his eyes. “I’ll slit you from groin to your throat—"

She used the back of the same hand to hit him again, harder. He cursed through the damaged remains of his vocal chords.

Sakura’s shoulders rolled back, her fists braced loosely in front of her. The Voice started to laugh wildly in her head.

She heard nothing else.

Her fists were weightless, there was the feeling of something dripping into the grooves of her fingers, beneath her nails, into the lines in her palms, and discomfort too, because her mouth was stretched wide like she was grinning—

_grinning._

“Stop,” a harsh voice ordered in her ear. Hands wrapped like manacles around her forearms.

The feeling of being restrained agreed as well with her as a hot poker down her throat.

She tensed her muscles and broke the hold, whipping around. The entire lighting of the room was done in a deep red, casting the lithe female body in front of her into a monochrome of crimson.

Sakura bared her teeth, fist clenched as she started to turn back to the sound-nin.

“You’re scaring her,” Kakashi said, almost soundless.

Her head snapped to the bathroom. The door was ajar. A gaunt, slight figure trembled in the doorway. Blue eyes were watching her with something like hard-won clarity, a sort of petrified focus cutting through the haze of drugs.

It wasn’t the sound-nin she was watching with fear.

The air rushed out of her lungs. Sakura swiped the hair back from her face. Damp fingers intertwined with knotted pink strands. She had dropped her henge at some point.

“I’m not,” she said hoarsely. She took a small step toward her.

Something in the frail figure snapped. A desperate sort of violence seemed to come over her, compelling her forward with clawed hands. The girl-from-the-bathroom didn’t scream—she didn’t even have the energy for that; ragged pants filled Sakura’s ears as she was attacked, nails scrabbling weakly at her face, palms hysterically shoving her into the bed.

Sakura let herself be pushed back, numb.

Pulling a bathrobe off from one of the hooks, the girl tied it clumsily around herself and sprinted out the door, shoving it shut behind her with all of her meager might. The final thud echoed thunderously in the room.

For a few, infinite moments, Sakura could hear only her heartbeat. Then she pulled herself off the bed, teetering onto her feet.
Kakashi watched her, silent.

“This is your fault,” she whispered. She began to wipe the blood on her hands onto the bedsheets, slowly at first, and then in a frenzy of motion.

“Sakura,” he said sharply.

She jolted at the sound of her name (not Haruno?). Then, she ripped her hands out of the bedsheets and lifted one hand, pointing a lone, quivering finger at him.

“This is your fault,” she said lowly.

The copy-nin’s gaze shifted to the unconscious figure on the bed. “You’ll need to heal him on our way back or he’ll be useless.”

“Look at me,” Sakura demanded, voice guttural.

After a long pause, red eyes flicked up to meet hers. Kakashi’s jaw—softer, more delicate in his henge—tightened.

“This is your fault,” she repeated into his face. She clenched her teeth until it hurt.

He stared at her, expressionless. But his gaze—it wasn’t skeptical or disbelieving. It felt, instead, like he was merely been waiting—that, maybe, he had been all this while.

The air burned in Sakura’s lungs.

“And mine,” she garbled out, rocking on her feet. She shoved the meat of her palms into her eyes. “I was weak and stupid, and you let me be.”

“I let you be,” said Kakashi without pause or particular inflection.

“But they didn’t,” Sakura panted. “They didn’t let that brainless, oblivious, moron of a girl be. They held my arms and my legs and they pulled my hair when I tried to scream—”

The body against her convulsed—every muscle abruptly, ferociously activated.

“And for what they tried,” she said, as unflinching as rock, voice cold, “I killed them.”

The ocean wind blew, rattling the not-quite shut window.

“And then,” she said hoarsely, “I got into the habit of it.”

She exhaled—and maybe she imagined it, that he exhaled with her. That it felt like—in that moment—they were the same entity, united by this singular thing, this affliction—or was it something else? She didn’t know. She couldn’t think.

How could she? She gritted her teeth in futile resistance, because the air burned in her lungs. Was her own breath poison to her? What had it been like to breathe without pain? Was this how it all ended? To be ruined from the inside out?

It was something like the desire to live that drove her forward—not lust or veneration. She surged against him, lips landing painfully on his—only they were different, fuller, not-his, until suddenly they were—

He forced her head away; her neck snapped to the side.
“Don’t,” he told her, voice brutal.

The henge had…dissipated. Sakura’s eyes trailed over his restored features: the patrician nose, the thin lips, the pale, scarred skin, the mismatched eyes.

Her gaze roved over him, eyes narrow. “Don’t?”

She shifted forward, testing him. She found herself flipped and shoved into the wall, cheek scraping against the rough wallpaper.

Sakura inhaled and exhaled, breath even. Then, she stepped away, cool.

His expression was tightly restrained—and forbidding.

She stared at him as she bent down to pick up the body of the sound-nin. She stared at him even as she lifted that body onto her back, bile rising in her throat. She didn’t break his gaze until she left the room to send that final body down the laundry chute. He didn’t look away either.

Author’s Note:

Hiieee sorry this took kind of long; this chapter required a lot more foreplanning / strategizing than usual. BUT I hope you've enjoyed it!!

also SO MANY OF YOU left AMAZING comments on the last chapter, and it was so, so incredible to read all of them! I'm constantly in awe of the support this fic has gained in a fandom that I really thought was in its decline (and maybe it is, but actually guys, I thought I would be writing this for ten people or something, so I am OVER THE MOON right now).

ALSO--a HUGE thank you to Amyam for sharing your BEAUTIFUL artwork as seen below (full gallery linked here https://www.behance.net/gallery/95376043/Fanart-Sakura-Haruno). I am in complete awe of your talent! If anyone else reading is also artistically talented and is inspired by this fic, I would LOVE to see anything you come up with! Please post in the comments :D

As always, please comment, kudos, bookmark, and shower me with love. I've started writing the next chapter, and I can't wait to get it out to you!!

- madstoryteller999

P.S. just want to respond to a comment on a few chapters ago from a person called 'Seven,' as well
as to anyone reading this fic who is providing essential services right now--thank you so, so, so much for the work you are doing. I and many others will forever be indebted to you, and although insignificant, I hope something like this fic can provide a short reprieve from how hellish/crazy I know your life may be right now. Hope you're all staying as safe as possible <3

Chapter End Notes

When Sakura opens the bathroom door, there is somewhat graphic imagery of sexual violence--everything after the italicized chunk is milder, but there are still references made to this subject.
Holy Palmers' Kiss

“Apologies for the wait.”

Sakura nodded brusquely and tossed back the cup that had been slid in her direction. Mirai, Sakura vaguely remembered Sai calling her, raised her eyebrows.

“Have a lot to forget, do you?”

Sakura kept her voice ineffectual with determined effort. “Maybe I’m just looking for a good time.”

“Oh,” the buxom woman sighed sagely. “Is that why you’re chugging shots away from your friends at the table?”

Sakura pushed away from the counter, glowering slightly.

Naruto remained just as she had left him, with an expression of mild disgust on his features. Sai nodded at her in greeting. She nodded back and began chewing into some of the food they had ordered.

“It’s unnatural,” Naruto said after a long silence.

Sai calmly sipped his glass of water. “On the contrary, it’s rather normal.”

“You didn’t know him,” the blonde retorted, biting into some chicken. “In the Academy, he acted like girls were bacteria. He didn’t let them within three feet of him—just ask Sakura!”

Sakura shot him a glare, none too pleased to be invoked in this context.

“I, too, had virtually no sexual interest until very recently,” Sai countered with a calm smile.

“You’re different,” Naruto said carefully, brows furrowing. “Sasuke is…”

Sasuke was, in all likelihood, manifesting some sort of unnecessary crisis in response to the fact that he had all but gotten away with being a rogue-nin, rejoined a team far more adept than he had left it, learned the truth about his brother, now lived with said brother, and (consequently) had something resembling a family and a functional team for the first time in over ten years.

Sakura sighed, aware that she was probably…deliberately being ungenerous. She didn’t care much about it, though.

“The way I see it, Sasuke’s starting to give Sakura a run for his money,” Sai commented casually.

“What are you talking about?” Naruto scoffed. “She’s never stepped out in the middle on us.”

“What do you think that long bathroom break last time with the visiting Suna chunin was, dickless?” Sai rolled his eyes.

Sakura coughed into her fist, eyes watering.

Naruto turned red. “It was just a bathroom break, wasn’t it? Because you guys weren’t feeling too well—” he turned toward her—“Wasn’t it?”
Sakura lifted her head, staring at him. “I’m not sure what you want me to say,” she said finally.

Naruto’s mouth turned down.

Sakura’s mood darkened. “I’m not a monk, Naruto.”

He blinked back at her defensive tone, expression lightening. “You’re not— What?”

“You seem to constantly expect the best of me, and I have no idea why,” Sakura continued, and it was the alcohol that smoothed the way for the words she would have normally left unvoiced. “I’m mean, rude, and, yes, I lie. A lot.”

Naruto’s expression grew grim. He straightened in his chair as Sai watched them both, dark eyes bright. “Sakura—”

But she was on a roll now. “And do you even remember how I used to treat you? I was selfish, and I treated you like dirt. Sasuke was better than me. And I don’t think— I don’t think I’ve ever apologized for that, somehow.”

“You could now,” Sai suggested.

Her glance cut to him. “I am sorry,” she said curtly, not able to look at Naruto. “But the point is: I never set that bar high. So I’m not sure why you try to be—to make me be—”

She couldn’t find the right words, so she gave up. She leaned back into her chair and tilted her head back.

“I was just—surprised, is all,” she heard Naruto say, voice calm.

Sakura stared at the ceiling.

“I miss things that happen around me. I can be…self-involved—we both know that, don’t we?”

After a pause, Sakura rolled her head to look at him. “That’s how you survived, Naruto,” she said quietly. “How else were you supposed to when no one else was going to look after you or care for you.”

“And how did you?” Naruto asked sharply.

She flinched, eyes narrowing.

The blonde sighed noisily. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t look at me like that,” he stated evenly. “I’m not demanding answers anymore. What I mean is— I’m not holding you to any bar, Sakura, whatever that means. I’m not holding any of us to that. I just want…”

Sai placed his chopsticks down on his plate, solemn.

“I just want more,” Naruto finished, eyes burning. “For all of us. Everything we don’t have or we’ve lost—we can make it ourselves. I don’t have a mom or a dad or siblings, but I’ve got a team, haven’t I? Who said that couldn’t be enough?”

Sakura’s fingers gripped the edge of the table, creating small dents.

“How else were you supposed to when no one else was going to look after you or care for you.”

“Team Seven: a team by, for, and of the orphans,” Sai said consideringly.

“No,” Naruto said distractedly, “Sakura has parents.”
Sai’s gaze paused on Sakura. “Really? You never talk about them.”

Sakura shrugged stiffly. “I don’t see them much, day-to-day. I see my mom every few weeks or so—she’ll call me over for a meal.”

“And your dad?” Naruto asked, brow furrowing.

“My father is the head of our family merchant business, so he spends most of the seasons of the year travelling,” she answered evenly.

Sai’s mouth pursed. “You call your mother ‘mom’,” he said lightly, “and you call him father.”

Sakura paused. “We’re not particularly close,” she admitted because, of the facts pertaining to her personal life, this was among the least consequential to her. “I probably haven’t seen him in years because of his business and then my timing with missions.”

“Oh,” Naruto said, expression looking a little lost.

Sasuke chose this moment to return to their table. Nothing about his person revealed what had transpired; even his hair was impeccable.

“What?” Sai asked politely. “I can’t imagine twenty minutes on the tile in those back restrooms is particularly comfortable.”

“Speaking of which,” Naruto said wearily, “apparently, you and Sakura might want to start up a list. Or you might…double-pollinate or something.”

“I don’t pollinate, Naruto,” Sakura said irately.

Sasuke’s black eyes flicked to her. They shared a quiet moment of mutual disgust.

The next morning, Sakura woke to the sound of scratching against her window. Fully prepared to see the crow beckoning at her window, she flipped in her bed to glower. Her glare dropped as she located an unfamiliar hawk.

Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she stumbled over to the window and crack it open. The bird hopped in with an indignant caw. Her fingers fumbled with the string for a long minute, until she was finally able to release the scroll from the hawk’s body and open it.

**Name: Haruno Sakura**

**Rank: Chunin**

**Team Designation: 7**

*Your name has been suggested for psychological review. Please book an appointment within the next two weeks at your convenience. We look forward to your visit.*

**Regards,**

**Chako Yo**

“What the fuck,” Sakura hissed, crumpling the parchment in her fists. Blood rushed in her ears, and her tight control over killing intent slipped. She heard a muffled shriek from the room below her.
She tossed the scroll into the trash and stalked over to her wardrobe, blindly pulling on some clothes. She spared a minute to splash water on her face and clean her mouth before heading toward the door. After a moment of hesitation, she bent to retrieve the scroll and then left.

“Hey!” a man in standard issue uniform called out as she exited her building. “Keep it under control, will you?”

She didn’t spare him a second glance, senses sharpening as she scanned around her. Sakura wasn’t a chakra sensor, but Kakashi didn’t exactly keep his head down on a daily basis; when he wasn’t purposefully suppressing his chakra, there was always an edge of impending violence, of barely-there restraint about him (although she was beginning to doubt that the latter was actually true)—and it made him easily locatable.

Sakura’s jaw tightened as she found him.

Uncaring of who saw her, she propelled herself through the village along the rooftops until she reached the hokage’s tower. She pushed the double-doors open a little too loudly.

The crowd parted before her. Sakura scowled and at last tried to tamp down on the killing intent she had been leaking. She walked toward the start of the spiral staircase that wrapped around the inside of the whole building. Although Sakura had come here often while studying under Tsunade, there were parts of the tower she had never seen. She had never known the purpose of the third floor, for example—which she seemed to be heading directly towards.

She pushed open the double set of doors positioned by the landing and entered a hallway of more doors—each with a schedule posted above the knob. Sakura’s eyes narrowed as she spotted ‘Captains of Chunin Teams Mandatory Meeting.’

She made a bee-line towards this room and swung open the door.

The first man, closest to the door, she didn’t recognize. Sakura scanned over the rest of those seated around the large, square-shaped table that filled the room.

She paused on a familiar face composed of sharp features and red eyes. Hinata’s captain, Kurenai, she remembered. Her eyes shifted left next to find Ino, Shikamaru, and Chouji’s captain, Asuma, tanned and gruff-faced beside her. And then, finally, on the other side of both of them was Kakashi.

He was almost ten years younger than everyone else in the room. Rather than this fact keeping him at attention, however, he was sprawled over a chair that was positioned the wrong way, opposite the table—so that his feet could rest on the large window sill.

The familiar woman, Kurenai, evaluated her calmly. “Sakura, right?”

Sakura’s fingers thrummed on the door in impatience. He had yet to turn, even though he certainly could sense her in the room—had probably known the moment she had entered the tower.

“As the sign says,” another jounin captain said, head tilting to the side, “this is a meeting for captains of chunin teams.”

“Good,” Sakura returned shortly, arms crossing as she leaned against the door. “I’m on a chunin team, and I’m looking for my captain.”

“Another time, perhaps,” Kurenai said, voice lightly warning.
Sakura didn’t move.

Asuma sighed loudly and stood up. He gave her a vaguely annoyed look as he moved to stand in front of her, the dense mass of his body blocking her sight of the room.

He raised his eyebrow as he looked down at her, a cigarette caught between his lips. “Do I have to move you or are you going to move yourself?”

“Taichou,” she called out, stoic.

The older man grunted. “The former then.”

He stretched out a wide, tanned hand—presumably for her shoulder—and Sakura’s gaze tracked it until a body shunshined between them and a new face looked down at her.

A lone dark eye gazed at her, disinterested. The hitai-ate was lowered, covering his sharingan. “What,” he drawled. Sakura’s mouth tightened.

“This,” she said through gritted teeth, holding up the scroll.

Kakashi stared at it dispassionately.

Sakura flicked the loose knot she had tied, and the scroll rolled down, revealing its contents. His body blocked the others from being able to read it.

“Hatake,” Kurenai said sharply. “We still have items on the agenda to discuss. Remove your student from the room—”

“—so we can end this meeting and all get on with our lives,” Asuma finished boredly.

Kakashi’s face was equally bland. “Carry on without me.”

Sakura turned on her heel and opened the door, ignoring the protests that arose behind her. She didn’t turn until she heard the door shut with an echoing thud behind her.

He moved past her, the upper half of his face unreadable, to a door on the opposite of the room at the end of the hall. He opened it and entered. She followed.

Sakura closed it behind her, the muscles in her arm tensed in acute restraint. The other hand, in which she held the scroll, she raised.

“What is this?” she asked, voice blank.

“Don’t waste my time with stupid questions,” Kakashi answered, voice distant. “Ask the ones you mean.”

Her shoulders tightened.

“Alright then,” she admitted, voice dark. “Why?”

Kakashi looked unconcerned by her vehemence. “It is the duty of a jounin captain to report potential cause for trauma of any kind directly to the center of psychological services—”

“I don’t resent your suggesting my name,” she clarified through thin lips, looking down at her knuckles. “I resent that you’ve suggested it knowing that I won’t pass a review—” her mouth twisted—“That no ANBU would.”
Accordingly, as informal policy, no ANBU were ever asked.

“You’re not ANBU.” His voice was a rasp.

Sakura’s nostrils flared. “I’m not ANBU anymore. But the brand’s still on my shoulder. And its other legacies, evidently, persist.”

“So take the time off,” Kakashi ordered, eyes directed somewhere past her.

Sakura’s chest hurt. “I can’t.”

His gaze at last met hers, his brow dark.

“Don’t take this away from me,” she hissed.

It terrified her, that he could—and that now, with something like reasonable justification, Tsunade might let him. Sakura didn’t know what she would do without ANBU and Team Seven. Probably go crazy.

“I’m good at what I do,” she argued. “I have the most experience on Team Seven. When I was in ANBU, you trusted me as your back up. I might have lost control that…that one time, but I’ve never compromised a mission—”

Sakura’s mouth snapped shut.

That singular, dark eye roved over her, a strange quality in it.

“A moment of silence range between them—and then Kakashi leaned forward, seething. “I’m holding you back from the path that you’ve sent yourself hurtling down. Are you blind?”

Sakura’s eyes widened.

Then, she shoved away from the chair and stood, arms landing hard on the table as she took on a more aggressive stance.

“Why?” she breathed. “Why do shinobi become their strongest only when they’ve reached that state—caught between…”

Air hissed through the gaps around the window as the breeze shook the trees just outside, scattering the light.


“Guilt,” he finished, voice almost inhuman. “From whatever sliver of humanity remains.”

Her nails dug into the wood of the table.

“What do you do?” she muttered nonsensically, “How do you sleep without tossing and turning and waking up, and how do you pretend—”

She wasn’t conscious of her body acting, but in the next instant, she had pinned his hand beneath hers, flat onto the same table. His body reacted instinctively, twisting to evade the restriction. Sakura pressed down with punishing strength.
His eyes flew to hers. Her fingers flexed.

“Did you know?” Sakura said, mouth barely opening. “They say newborns can die without touch.”

His gaze narrowed.

Slowly, unconsciously, the pads of her fingers began to travel.

“They say when no amount of chakra can help, something as simple as a hand on a hand can bring someone back from the verge of death, can heal what was seemingly irreparable.”

His eyes tightened imperceptibly. She traced the grooves around knuckles, followed the ridges of scars—so many scars—pressed into callouses.

(She wanted to touch him—his throat. To see if it trembled.)

“Old wives’ tales, no doubt,” she said shortly. She started to pull her hand away.

He reacted without batting an eye, wrist twisting away. His face though, as it looked down at her, seemed, for an instant…but, no, she must have imagined it.

The sound of the doorknob turning had them both turning sharply toward the door.

She saw the moment Kurenai felt the killing intent in the air, oozing insidiously through the room like oil contaminating water. The older woman’s muscles tensed slightly.

“Hatake,” Kurenai said carefully, red eyes passing fleetingly over her and settling on him. “Your presence is required.”

Kakashi’s head tilted back, eyes coolly surveying her. A minute might have passed, before he pushed off the table and exited the room without another word. After a long, complex look Sakura’s way, Kurenai left as well.

She stared for a moment at the empty room until, disturbed, she too opened the door and exited. Sakura bowed her head and steered herself single-mindedly toward the exit.

She paused only when, perhaps inevitably, she bumped into someone. “Sorry,” she muttered.

“Sakura?”

Sakura lifted her head. Iruka smiled at her, wide and unreserved. “It’s been quite a while,” he announced. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been good,” she said slowly, mind still somewhere else, “How have you——”

The words died in her throat as she made eye contact with the person right behind him.

“Itachi?” she blurted.

“I know I taught you better than that, Sakura,” Iruka said sternly.

Sakura kept her expression neutral with concerted effort at the oddly nostalgic rebuke. “Itachi-san,” she submitted stiffly, “…why are you here?”

“I am filing some paperwork under Iruka-san’s guidance,” Itachi said, expression placid.
Sakura’s gaze burned into him. That explained precisely nothing.

Iruka at last took pity on her. “As per the hokage’s command, Itachi-san will be joining the Academy as an assistant instructor until he is combat-ready.”

Her mouth dropped. “Really? An S-rank nin?”

There was no way Tsunade had come up with that on her own. Someone had to have convinced her. Strenuously.

“This Sakura,” Iruka warned sharply, eyebrow arching. “Formerly S-rank, to be clear.”

“Right,” she said blankly.

Her baffled gaze settled on Itachi. He was looking at Iruka through the corner of his gaze, an odd expression on his face: a little wary, perhaps.

Sakura’s brow furrowed. Itachi, an instructor at the Academy? Surrounded by bratty, impatient children who cried and whined…

Maybe, actually, it was oddly fitting. Certainly more than being a massacring traitor had been.

“Survive the week, and I’ll buy you dango,” she tossed over back, still bemused, as she left. The words left her mouth without much thought.

It was only once she exited the building that she realized that the words had been familiar—and not her own.

ANBU?! Your balls haven’t even descended yet, Itachi. Listen--you better survive the week or I won’t be buying you anymore dango. Remember that, okay? Dango.

As fortune had it, she ended up returning to the hokage tower within the hour.

“This one,” Tsunade admitted, “is complicated.”

“Complicated how?” Naruto demanded.

“There will be some…politics to navigate and be wary of,” the hokage responded, inclining her head. “The risk of potential conflict is extremely low, but secrecy is extremely important to the client—hence the mission rank.”

“To be honest, I’m not exactly sure this is the appropriate team to send.” Her amber eyes flickered between Sakura and Kakashi, before landing dubiously on Naruto. “But,” she sighed, “you’re the only ones at-hand on such short notice and with a high-profile enough name to appease this client.”

Sakura’s head fell to the side, surveying Kakashi out of the corner of her eyes.

“Will the ANBU be joining us again?” Sai asked curiously.

“No,” Tsunade said shortly, glancing absent-mindedly at Sasuke. “As I said, the risk of conflict is minimal.”

She gave a huge sigh, rubbing at her forehead.

“The client is the daimyo,” Shizune explained.
Slowly, Sakura shifted her gaze from Kakashi to the hokage and her assistant.

“The daimyo, as we all know, is happily married,” Tsunade said carefully. “So I needn’t stress anymore how critical it is that this all be kept under the wraps.”

Tsunade and Shizune shared a glance.

“A few months ago, the daimyo privately gifted a ruby necklace, a very recognizable family heirloom, to the lady Okomo Aimi as a token of his…fervent affections,” Shizune said carefully. “Unfortunately, the relationship has now turned sour, and Okomo wants to out their affair. Recent reports have suggested that Okomo is planning to part with the heirloom publicly in an auction hosted by the court tonight, which both the daimyo and his family will be attending.”

“For obvious reasons,” Tsunade grunted, “this cannot happen.”

“So we have to retrieve the heirloom from her entourage before it has a chance to be put up for auction,” Sai summarized.

“Precisely,” the hokage said, eyes glinting. “Good luck.”

It went perfectly.

That was, until Naruto fumbled the drop-off and deposited the necklace in the wrong man’s pocket.

Sakura didn’t know if it was worse or better that she hadn’t been there to seen it. While the failed extraction had been occurring, she had been diverting Okomo’s bodyguards using genjutsu from entering the auction hall.

“Moron,” Sasuke hissed. “You had one job.”

“I forgot what your henge looked like,” Naruto groaned miserably. “I remembered the red hair, and there were only three people with red hair in the room. What were the chances…”

Sakura leaned back against the tapestry in the abandoned corridor they were currently occupying.

“And how were Okomo’s guards?” Sai asked, conversational.

“Fine,” Sakura said. “Not that it matters…anymore.”

“With this idiot’s luck, that merchant is already well on his way home,” Sasuke grunted sourly.

Naruto punched him in the shoulder.

“How’s your brother doing, Sasuke?” Sai asked offhandedly.

The Uchiha yanked his head away from Naruto to glare at him.

“Do you not talk?” Sai wondered.

This didn’t get a response either. A discomfiting, burning sensation curled in her stomach, like indigestion.

“Really?” Naruto pressed, momentarily distracted from his own plight.

“So what?” Sasuke returned coolly.
“Have you been ignoring him?” Sai inquired. “Even given your shared living situation?”

Sasuke’s features looked harder and crueler than she had seen them in sometime. He stepped toward Sai, muscles tight, like he was prepared for a fight. “I don’t have to explain myself to you —”

“Quiet,” Kakashi commanded indifferently from behind them. They all turned to find the copy-nin standing a few feet behind them.

Naruto yanked Sasuke back. Glowering, the black-haired boy allowed the motion.

“Any updates?” Naruto asked hopefully.

“The merchant hasn’t left yet—he’s spending the night down the hall and leaving tomorrow morning,” Kakashi said shortly. “He’s a Konoha citizen, so we have grounds to commandeer the necklace.”

“So no fighting,” the blonde clarified, looking relieved.

“Not unless he protests,” Kakashi said, voice dark, like he wouldn’t mind much if the merchant did.

He stalked down the hall, and they followed, sticking to the shadows as the moonlight peeked through the clouds outside. He stopped in front of a heavy, mahogany door with a peacock handle.

“Knock,” the copy-nin ordered Naruto.

He shuffled forward, stretching forward a tentative hand. Blinking, he rapped lightly against the wood.

“Civilian,” Sasuke snapped impatiently. “Remember?”

“Louder, dickless,” Sai advised.

“Ah, right,” he laughed sheepishly, scratching at his head.

With a bright smile, Naruto drove his fist into the door. A resounding thud echoed down the hall. Sakura winced.

Kakashi’s head rolled to look down at him, eyes sharp and scathing.

There was a moment of silence, in which she began to doubt the merchant was even in the room—then footsteps sounded from behind the door, balanced and even, approaching.

The door opened, revealing a tall man in his early forties with hair the color of copper.

“An item from the auction was misplaced,” Kakashi drawled without any introduction, “We’ll need to search your possessions—”

“How unexpected,” the man in the door observed.

Sakura blinked, before bowing her head stiffly. “Father.”

Author's Note:
omg WHAT? Sakura actually has parents??

Haha, in all seriousness though, obviously my rendering of her parents is going to deviate from canon--as we've seen so far, Sakura's parents are fairly distant from her / have very little idea of what's actually going on in her life. I think I mentioned very passingly in the first chapter that, in this story, she comes from a family of merchants. I think her canon parents were actually also shinobi, but that's always seemed to me like kind of a random decision on Kishimoto's part / strangely has never really come up in her character development as a shinobi...so. Yeah. I'm going to be doing something different.

Also, I might be interested in writing an Itachi's first day at the Academy omake lol...let me know what you think.

As always, hope you've enjoyed and let me know what you think!
Soo I know this most recent week and the ones going forward have probably been and will probably be pretty hectic with end of the year school work / finals for you too. I shouldn't have spent time writing this, for sure, but... Well, here it is! An omake about Itachi :)

“It’s so slippery,” the girl with pink ribbons grunted. “Why is this so hard?”

Itachi stared straight ahead. “Polishing any skill necessitates time and concerted effort.”

“…you use a lot of complicated words, Mr. Itachi.”

At this moment, the boy with the tell-tale marks of the Inuzuka lost his temper and launched himself at the girl he had been squabbling with. Fifteen seconds. Even less time than Itachi had calculated.

“Wait!” the girl—Imori, he reminded himself—cried as he began to move. “I’m almost done! Just need to tie it and…”

Itachi stood.

“Hey!” Imori shouted, outraged. “What did you do that for?”

“One braid was your condition to stop antagonizing—” he couldn’t remember the name, so he pointed at the girl currently glowering from the swings—"that one. The terms of our verbal contract were satisfied.”

“Huh? I didn’t do any ant-no-geez-ing,” the girl sniffed. Her face turned up suspiciously a second later. “What’s that mean?”

Round eyes the color of cement examined with him with brewing resentment—but, curiously, still absent of fear. He had slit grown men’s throats at her age; his name had already been in the bingo book. And yet, this girl didn’t seem to know him from the nidaime.

His name must have fallen out of conversation over the years. It seemed only the adults now remembered.

He walked over to the bickering pair and lifted the Inuzuka by the collar of his shirt. The boy, muddied and bleeding from the nose, didn’t take well to the intervention, growling and swiping at him.

As Itachi calmly stretched his arm so the boy’s fists were out of reach, a slight hissing sound reached his ears. He tilted his head to the side. A kunai flew past and landed with a loud thud in the tree five meters ahead.

Itachi turned his head slowly in the direction the kunai had originated from. A round-faced child with missing teeth gave him a sheepish grin.
“Ah, sorry about that Itachi-san. Just trying to get some extra practice in before Iruka-sensei tests us later today!”

“Weapons are not allowed during recess.”

“Let go,” Inuzuka yipped like a puppy, face twisting, “Did you hear me?!”

“Aw, see, I know that. And normally, I totally wouldn’t have brought them outside. But, see, like I was saying, Iruka-sensei said there’s a test and—”

“Weapons are not allowed during recess.”

“I HATE YOU!” the boy in his hand roared, veins bulging in his neck with the effort.

Itachi dropped him.

“Ugh, finally,” Inuzuka huffed, scowling. He stuck out his tongue and turned on his heel.

Itachi slowly retracted his hand, observing it in cool examination. He hadn’t intended to let go.

“All right,” a tenor voice called out from the building—it was a voice that had not been built for volume, Itachi reflected, but must have learned it over the years—“Let’s pack it up. Break time is over!”

The children rushed by him in a cacophony of groans, tracking dirt into the Academy building.

“Thank you for watching them,” Iruka said, smiling. The skin beneath his eyes wrinkled.

“It was the task that was assigned to me.”

“Ah, yes. I suppose it was. Still,” the Academy instructor insisted, voice warm.

Itachi stepped into the building and followed Iruka back into the classroom. Small bodies hastily arranged themselves back into their seats at the sight of their teacher.

“Did you give Itachi-san a hard time?” Iruka asked sternly, arms crossed.

“No,” the class chorused. Muffled giggles emerged among the seats.

Iruka turned sharply to him, brown eyes unusually steely. “Do you have anything to say to that, Itachi-san?” he asked quietly.

Itachi’s head cocked to the side.

Iruka waited.

“No,” Itachi said shortly. “I had everything in hand. They were fine.”

“I see.”

Iruka stepped forward and moved onto another topic—a history lesson, Itachi catalogued in the back of his mind. And yet, those two short words, the manner in which they had been delivered, were stuck in his mind. Iruka had seemed disappointed, as though Itachi’s feedback had been less than satisfactory.

Itachi’s eyes narrowed as he gazed over the class. Had Iruka wanted him to struggle? Why
convince the hokage, then, to give him this position in the first place? The academy instructor and
he had met briefly in the hospital when he had been recovering; it could hardly have been called a
corversation, more of an accidental encounter, what had transpired between them. He knew that
Iruka had advocated for him to be here; he still had no understanding of why.

On paper, Itachi acknowledged, his skills and battle experience were top of the line. But that didn’t
excuse the unspeakable crimes he had committed, even if they had been in the name of Konoha.
What parent would want an undisputed mass murderer teaching their child to handle a kunai?

“Break out into groups of three and discuss,” Iruka commanded. “In the last ten minutes, we’ll
rejoin and one person from each group will summarize what you each discussed.”

Brief bickering broke out as the class arranged itself into smaller groups. Iruka walked away from
the chalkboard toward the back corner of the room where Itachi stood.

“Next time, I would suggest that corner instead,” Iruka said lightly, pointing. “Hyuuga Ryoichi
likes to sneak out when my back is turned.”

Itachi’s gaze moved to the black-haired boy who, even now, was darting evaluating looks back at
them and then at the door.

“Noted,” Itachi said tonelessly.

He felt Iruka’s eyes burning into him from the side.

“Have you been enjoying your first day at the Academy?” the brown-skinned man asked. His voice
was still warm, like they were friends. It was unwarranted.

“It’s better than other roles I’ve been assigned in the past,” Itachi said finally.

Instead of being discomfited, a low, surprised chuckle broke out from the figure beside him. “I
wouldn’t dare contest that,” Iruka admitted easily.

“Do you enjoy your job here, Iruka-san?” Itachi asked disinterestedly.

Iruka’s brow furrowed in consideration, as though he had never received this question before and it
required careful forethought. Itachi imagined this was implausible.

“In full disclosure,” Iruka said smiling. “Most days don’t go without a moment where I want to
strangle their scrawny little necks. Somehow, miraculously, I manage to hold myself back.”

Itachi stared ahead.

“Really,” Iruka insisted. “But, you know, every now and then, there’s a redeeming moment.
Inuzuka-kun, yesterday, remembering the name of the shodaime. Or when Nanami finally
managed to land the kunai at the bull’s eye mark last week. They pretend they don’t listen—well,
most of them time, they’re really not listening. But…ah, I’m not explaining this well. It sounds
cheesy when I mention it like that, doesn’t it?”

Itachi didn’t indicate either way. “And you believe it’s all worth it,” he asked clinically. “Whatever
lessons you impart to them.”

Iruka raised his eyebrows. “What do you mean?”

Itachi surveyed him. “That Hyuuga will likely be cannon fodder for whatever clan dispute rises
within the next five years—” he turned to scan the classroom—“That girl there, as another example, has skills that will only thrive in T&I, but her foreign background will hold her back from ever getting hired in the department. And that boy—given his fervent determination to be a combat shinobi, I would give him two years before he is crippled or killed in action.”

“And what,” Iruka said carefully, coldly, “would be your basis for that?”

He had angered the other man.

“His mentality,” Itachi responded evenly.

“A lot can change between now and their graduation.”

“Perhaps,” Itachi acknowledged, inclining his head. “In my experience, desired change—especially when systemic—rarely occurs soon enough.”

He waited for the explosion. Iruka, he had learned from eavesdropping on the children, had an infamously loud temper. Contrarily, however, the man across for him seemed to be immeasurably calm.

“How many years did you spend in the Academy, Itachi-san?” Iruka asked.

“Four months.”

“So your experience comprises four months in the Academy,” the instructor summarized, nodding. “And your teachers? Do you remember them?”

“Not in particular.”

Iruka turned to look at him directly in the eyes, voice hard like iron. “Then they failed you.”

Itachi’s eyes narrowed.

The man next to him straightened, somehow seeming larger than before, although he was almost a hand’s span shorter than Itachi and slighter. “You’re right,” he said. “I can’t change decades of clan tradition. I can’t change what does or doesn’t happen at home. Sometimes, what I do in class is enough to shift their priorities; forgive my saying, but my experience is a little more considerable in this area. Then again, sometimes it isn’t enough. I can’t make every child want to practice, and I certainly can’t force every child to learn anything they don’t want to learn, no matter how much I might want them to. They pass the test, and I have to let them go. Those are the rules.”

He turned toward the class, gaze grim.

“But,” Iruka said softly. “I can care for them. I can nurture them—subject them to my attention until they’re suffocating, begging me to leave this Academy. And in doing that, I can teach them that they matter.” Iruka’s voice, so soft, grew harsh, “because once they leave, they might never meet an adult who will give them that ever again. And maybe they shouldn’t; the battlefield isn’t a place to be treated like a child or coddled. But here, for at least while...”

He panted raggedly for a moment, the force of his passion for this subject apparently having taken some of his breath away.

“It’s all I can give,” Iruka revealed, voice calming into something like cynicism. It seemed at odds with him; Itachi was, possibly, unnerved. “And, many times, it isn’t enough. Sometimes, they die. Or they leave, like your brother.”
Itachi’s body stiffened slightly at the mention of his brother. Somehow, Iruka seemed to catch it.

“And sometimes, they come back,” he said, gently. He paused for a little, before saying in an obviously, deliberately conversational tone, “I had heard from Naruto that the team is now functioning reasonably well. I know this is private—forgive a teacher’s overbearing nature—but how are things at home?”

“You’re right,” Itachi said, bowing his head expressionlessly. “You are overstepping.”

Iruka immediately nodded, without malice. “Of course. Apologies.”

Silence lapsed again between them. Itachi stared straight ahead, still, but now saw nothing.

“We don’t talk,” he found himself saying.

Iruka was quiet.

“It is to my taste,” Itachi recovered, expression smoothing. “We coexist peacefully and without any unnecessary distractions.”

One of the girls on the right side of the classroom began tugging at the ponytail of another. Iruka pulled an eraser from his pocket and tossed it through the air. It hit the girl right at the nape of her neck. Her hand rose a second later to cover the spot.

“Ow, sensei!” she scowled. “Got it, got it.”

Iruka gave a pleased smile. He turned a second later to Itachi. He hummed for a moment, still smiling.

“You know, even when Sasuke didn’t know the truth, even when you were the brother who had murdered his whole clan, part of him still worshipped you—” Iruka’s eyes crinkled—“I’d go as far as to say that he loved you nearly as much as he hated you.”

Itachi’s mouth tightened.

“I think it will only be a matter of time,” the academy instructor said sincerely.

He knew nothing, though, of what Itachi had done. Iruka saw a fellow man in front of him, when that couldn’t have been further from the truth.

A dark churning sensation was born in his chest—but it wasn’t unfamiliar, not these days, at least. He still didn’t know how to shield himself against it. It overcame him and left him lost at sea.

“I tortured him,” he found himself relaying, tone factual. He heard his voice as someone else’s in his ears. “After seeing the dead bodies of our clan members and the dead bodies of our parents, I made Sasuke relive it for three days, helpless to do anything to stop me.”

So that he would kill me for what I had done.

He barely finished the thought before he felt his breathing start to rise in his chest, faster, harsher. But Itachi managed his body meticulously, asserting his unbending will once more, making the loss of control imperceptible to the human eye.

His insides hurt, like there were nails scraping against the walls of his chest, but no one would know. It was a kind of pain he was used to. He had fought through worse.
“Has your impression of me changed, sensei?” Itachi asked coldly.

“I think,” Iruka started softly.

Something like satisfaction, neither warm nor triumphant, settled in his chest.

“Despite your obvious talent, I think that if I had been your teacher…I would have pushed you to become anything but a combat shinobi.”

The teacher’s eyes paused on his hands, for some undiscernible reason. Itachi ‘s gaze flicked downwards as well.

“I think, Itachi-san,” Iruka said, voice stronger now, eyes molten like bronze ore, “that you care far more than maybe anyone has ever given you credit for.”

A chair screeched against the floor. Itachi did nothing for a moment. His mouth parted, but he paused before he spoke.

“Imagining me this way no doubt makes my actions more palatable,” he said, unblinking. “Sometimes, however, there merely exists a shinobi and an order. And to have feelings about an order, when that order serves a higher purpose than any one individual, would be unproductive.”

Iruka’s mouth firmed in challenge. “Then why is Sasuke alive?”

And this was— It was. Nothing less than a blow, unanticipated and thus unmitigated.

This small, slight man in front of him—to the practiced eye weak, vulnerable. Something had whittled him over time it seemed, silently, secretly, and rendered him sharper and shrewder than he had any right to be--maybe his teaching, possibly his unprecedented proximity to more than one hokage. Or maybe, it was something entirely else, unknowable to him.

Whatever it was, Itachi watched now, warier.

Iruka smiled, unapologetic.

The bell rang, shrill and loud. Cheers rose from the class. Without pause, the teacher turned back toward his class.

“Ah, look at that. Sensei lost track of time, apologies,” Iruka said, smiling at them. “We’ll shift the discussion to tomorrow. Have a good day, everyone!”

The noise of chairs being scooted back and satchels being opened and closed filled the room. One pair of feet, in bright yellow sandals, stopped right in front of them.

“Yes, Imori-chan?” Iruka asked.

The girl who had negotiated with him earlier raised her hand and glared at Itachi. “You. Yeah, I’m talking to you. Next time,” she warned, “I’ll make two braids with red ribbons on each end. And I’ll make you wear them for the rest of the day.”

She turned on her heels and flounced away.

“Also, another observation, if I may,” Iruka said, mouth curving. “That is what happens when you tell the kids ‘they were fine.’”

Without another word, the smaller man moved past him to clean up the leftover scraps scattered
along the rows of desks, humming as he went.

Itachi remained where he was, but his gaze followed...captive.

**Author's Note:**

As always, I love reading your thoughts <3

P.S. also just want to say that I love reading your debates about the characters in this story. LOVE it.
“This would be the one,” Sakura’s father said, handing over a dark green kimono.

Kakashi took ahold of the kimono and tossed it to Naruto. “Search it.”

Naruto leaned forward precariously, barely catching it. He began rummaging studiously through the folds.

Her father watched Naruto’s brutish ransack from behind his desk with an easy smile. The red of his hair was softer in the room’s lighting than in natural daylight—at least, from what she remembered.

Sakura’s fingers plucked idly at the loose threads at her wrist.

The body next to her shifted, thoughtful. “Your father satisfies almost maximally the requirements of conventional attractiveness for his gender, and you do not. But you do look very alike.”

“Found it,” Naruto grunted, raising his hand triumphantly. The object in his hand gave a metallic clink as it was jostled. The necklace gleamed, large ruby gems beset by diamond and gold, and at the center: the damning daimyo’s crest.

“I see the cause for your urgency.” Her father’s eyes--pale like her own--evaluated the necklace closely.

It would have been helpful to know more about him now. Their more substantial interactions, if any had occurred, had been when she was too young to be particularly observant. From his expression, it seemed he had come to conclusions that weren’t far from the truth. If there had been a thief—a thief who had yet to be caught—there certainly would not have been an auction in the palace in the very first place. Thus, the necklace must have been willingly parted with, only now to be urgently retrieved. Information like that could sell.

Sasuke apparently thought the same, based on the elbow sharply in her side.

“We will require assurance, of course, as a citizen of Konoha, that you will not disclose either our presence here tonight nor the necklace’s.” Sakura forced her lips into a stiff smile.

Her father turned his head at last away from the necklace. His eyes paused on her, expression still warm.

Everyone else in the room seemed content to watch.

“That is,” she continued, “as a citizen of Konoha, you must uphold the oath of protecting to the best of your abilities the confidentiality of our operations both within the country and abroad. Anything less and you risk treason.”
“Sakura,” Naruto said softly.

She looked between them. Had she been too blunt? “Sorry,” she said slowly. She added belatedly. “Father.”

She settled back.

“Of course,” her father said easily, smiling. “I would hardly want to cause trouble to my daughter’s team.”

Sakura paused at pulling at the loose thread. She was a bit bemused at the sound of those words together: “my daughter’s team.”

“I’m afraid I don’t know all your names,” he continued casually. “I don’t interact frequently with shinobi circles, you must forgive me.”

“My name is Sai,” the dark-haired boy said. “I am a recent addition to Team Seven.” He nodded to the others. “Uzumaki Naruto and Uchiha Sasuke are her original teammates. Our captain—”

“The copy-nin’s reputation does actually precede him, even among hapless merchants,” her father said, inclining his head in acknowledgment.

Kakashi didn’t look to care either way.

The smile on her father’s face widened as he turned back toward all of them. “As I said, I am happy to comply. You’ll present the necklace to the daimyo in the morning, I assume?”

Sasuke nodded shortly.

“Then let me arrange you rooms for the night.”

“Really?” Naruto asked, eyes wide. “There’s been a knot in my neck for ages.”

“Oh, of course,” her father said amiably, voice sympathetic. He pulled on a velvet rope by the desk. A servant entered within the minute, cued by a bell they hadn’t been able to hear.

“How may I assist you, Haruno-sama?” the stout man asked, bowing.

“My guests will need some rooms for the night.”

“That the servant nodded and didn’t ask any more questions—in the daimyo’s very own palace—gave Sakura pause. Before she had been more or less kicked out of the house, her mom had given her the sense that they lived more modestly than they strictly needed to. How much more modestly, she now began to question, if her father could comfortably order a daimyo’s servants.

“Follow me, please.” The servant bowed to them now.

“Sakura,” her father called out as she shifted toward the door. “A few minutes of your time, if you are able.”

Sakura’s confused gaze met Sai’s even one, before she turned around. “Sure.”

She remained where she was even as the others moved past her. The heat of Kakashi’s body caused the hairs on her arm to prickle as he passed by. The door shut with a small rush of air behind her.

Her father looked at her, the smile still on his face like an afterthought. He stared at her for a
moment, before he gestured to the chair in front of the desk.

“Have a seat.”

Sakura stepped forward to the opposite side of the room. As she crossed the central area, she caught something she had missed before. Perfume. Her nostrils flared as she identified it. Women’s, probably, given the floral notes.

He seemed to read the discovery on her face easily and asked, unperturbed, “Does that upset you?”

She turned toward her father, hands loosely settled on the armrests of her chair as she lowered herself into it. Her own…recreational behavior was hardly laudable; then again, she wasn’t married.

Still, given the circumstances of what she vaguely knew of her parents’ marriage, maybe there was some arrangement between them that Sakura didn’t know of.

Seiji Kizashi had been nineteen years old when he had married Haruno Mebuki, a woman more than ten years his senior. Sakura had learned from a loose-tongued aunt some years ago that their marriage had been both rushed—because her grandfather had been on his deathbed—and controversial. Rather than choosing a distant cousin within the family or a second son from a comparable business, the old man had bestowed his daughter on an accountant who had worked for him for less than a year. Sakura’s mother had been the eldest of three daughters, the heir to her grandfather’s growing merchant business, and none of the three had apparently been interested in the business nor had any particular business acumen—so the oldest had been married off, and the no-name accountant had taken her last name to lead the business.

Her aunt’s characterization of her mother hadn’t surprised Sakura, unflattering though it was. Haruno Mebuki had never struck Sakura as particularly ambitious beyond desiring a means to live without having to do much. She had always seemed content to spend her days at home, inviting women from her social circles over on occasion and maintaining her appearance with militant dedication. It was plausible that she had never wanted more.

“You’ve grown,” her father observed, once it was clear she no intention of responding. His chin rested on his interlocked hands.

Sakura’s fingers absently traced the grains of the wood in her chair.

“Franky, I didn’t expect you to still be in this occupation.”

Sakura stared back in turn. As she waited for him to continue, a wave of fatigue seemed to overcome her, a quick rush that sank into her limbs and didn’t leave. She was unsurprised. Now that the mission-high had passed, there was nothing staving off the consequences of poor sleep.

He leaned back in his chair.

“Young grandfather, you might know,” he said amusedly, voice low and compelling, “couldn’t find his successor from within his own family—having been raised in the lap of luxury, they hardly knew how to work to achieve it. As they say, luxury has rarely built character.”

He smiled at her for a moment. Then, seamlessly, the genial smile that had been present all evening faded, and so too the most obvious marks of contrivance. His gaze shifted to peruse the room around them, pausing on the lavish chandelier suspended from the ceiling with something like vague distaste.
“I do not believe in garish displays of fortune such as these,” he said. “I did not grow up with them, and it would not have served me to. Our house is purposefully a modest one; there are no maids or servants, like there are here.”

“Your house,” Sakura corrected indifferently, bowing her head. She had been more or less kicked out.

Her father inclined his head. His gaze seemed to grow even more intent. After a moment, his eyes averted from her to somewhere past her. He huffed a hearty, but nearly soundless, laugh.

“I will admit,” he said, tone almost conversational, “that I have no interest in child-rearing. The limited time I have spent in your vicinity hasn’t inspired anything of the sort either,”

His gaze returned instantly to her, as though to survey her reaction to those words. Sakura didn’t react.

“But you are here now,” he said factually. “And you are, somehow, changed.”

Sakura blinked at her father, and wondered if he sensed the violence that sat across from him—if any iota of his consciousness was wary of it. If he noticed, he gave no impression of it. He stood and placidly roamed the room, examining the paintings that lined the walls with eyes that still communicated vague disgust.

“You were a spoiled child,” he said simply. “Coddled and catered to with no understanding of the world and of consequences. You demanded to go to the Academy with scarce comprehension of what it was, and your mother let you.”

She twisted in her chair to keep him in sight, unthinking and automatic, because that was how she had been trained. His back faced her now, silhouetted by a large tapestry.

His voice emerged, light and even. “When you failed your chunin exams it was evident that your upbringing had not been to your benefit.”

Sakura stood too, finally, and crossed her arms, leaning against the desk. It was more comfortable than twisting and craning to see him.

“And so you kicked me out,” she summarized, tipping her head again.

Her father turned back to look at her, hair redder against the backdrop of the tapestry than it had before. “It has always been within my legal rights to remove you from your chosen path at any time. But I’ve let you do what you want. For better or worse, I have always let you choose.”

Sakura knew that this was because of his relative indifference.

“But if you were to choose to continue to be a shinobi,” he continued pleasantly, “it was going to be without the safety net of your family’s wealth. It was going to be…an honest choice. Abandon your shinobi career or forsake our financial support.”

Her mother had delivered these words for him, face pale.

“As I said, frankly, I expected you to return home, apologetic and beseeching.”

Sakura’s head tilted back. Eventually, she said, “Would it surprise you to know that being forced to fend for myself economically has had no considerable impact on me?”
Her father stepped away from the tapestry, turning to face her fully. “No,” he said, lips curving. “On the contrary, it would make more sense. So?”

Was this latent parental interest?

Sakura pushed off the desk. “A freak accident,” she said shortly. “I don’t know about an honest choice, but I’m tied to this ‘occupation’ from now possibly until I die.”

Her father tracked her movement with raised eyebrows. “Is someone blackmailing you?” he asked after a moment.

She paused at the question. “If someone were,” she asked, softer than she intended, suddenly tired again, “would you help me?”

She regretted voicing the question. It sounded weak.

She headed towards the door. Her feet were lethargic, dragging on the ground. She was going to sleep as soon as possible—as tired as she was, she thought she could manage it. A handful of hours in more than a week now were not going to sustain her much longer.

She opened the door. “I’m not being blackmailed,” she said lowly. “Rather, I’ve gotten in too deep. I’m sure I don’t have to explain…what that means.”

Sakura stepped into the hallway.

“Are you Haruno-sama’s guest?” the servant asked. She looked like she had been waiting.

“Yes. Can you point me to my room?” Sakura tried to convince herself she wasn’t swaying on her feet

“Yes! Munakata-san said…” The servant rubbed at her forehead. Her eyes widened triumphantly. “That’s right! The seventh room—the one with the white peacock painted on the door.”

Sakura bowed lightly and walked towards blearily to the door. The room she entered was pitch black, the curtains drawn tightly shut against even the slightest sliver of moonlight (an unexpected blessing)—even with the lighting from the hallway, diminishing as it was as the door shut behind her, she just barely made out the shape of a bed at the center. Her heart instantly throbbed with longing for it.

She was too tired to do more than remove the outer layer of her clothing and her boots, leaving them scattered along the floor. Stumbling toward the left side of the bed, she collapsed on her front. She fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Sakura felt…warm—which was not a state her small, poorly heated apartment achieved these days. Toes ice-cold, approaching numbness, fingers stiff. That was more familiar.

Her body shifted lazily, and near-orgasmic pleasure coursed through her, at the pleasant heaviness of her limbs, at the drowsy, honey-like contentment in her mind, having tasted at long-last something like peace. Her lips parted, releasing a puff of air.

Something—not her—caused the bed to shift jarringly beneath her.

Sakura’s eyes snapped open.

There was someone else in the bed with her—yes, now, she identified it as the source of the
unusual heat—and that person’s near-violent tremors shook the whole bed.

She glowered in the dark and snatched the kunai she had stashed beneath her pillow into her hand, crouching as she moved silently across the expanse of the mattress. *Fuck*, she still couldn’t see anything.

Tightening her hand into a fist, she pulsed chakra into her fingers; they lit up with healing chakra. The green light illuminated the figure beside her.

She dropped the kunai.

It was Kakashi. But his face, removed of all feigned arrogance or imperiousness, unguarded from voyeuristic eyes like hers, looked…agonized. The sharp angles of his features were wracked with torment far greater than her genjutsu had managed, and his hands—

*Blood*, the Voice moaned.

His hands were clawed, tearing at each other. Blood dripped onto the bedsheets, staining them a deep vermillion. A nightmare, she processed with staggering stupidity. But as the Voice pleased in the sight, Sakura lunged forward without thought, latching onto his wrists.

He surged up as soon as she made contact with him, limbs driving toward her center of mass with lethal power, to skewer. She pressed clumsily forward, until her head knocked into his, and his eyes could look nowhere but into her own.

He looked at her. Eventually, he saw her.

He shoved her away, breath ragged. Sakura let herself fall back, hands knotting in the disturbed sheets. Her hand still lit by chakra, casting everything in the room into gradations of green, she saw him stand and stagger toward a basin of water at the corner of the room. He thrust his hands into the water and then onto his face with cruel efficiency.

When he was finished, Kakashi turned partially, just the profile of his face of his visible, sharingan blazing, and rasped, “*Get out.*”

Sakura shifted, that blissful, honey-like contentment utterly shattered, into a standing position as well, stepping off the bed. She didn’t have the words, yet, to explain the servant’s mistake—that she hadn’t *meant* to come here. She couldn’t do anything more than gape at him, eyes hungrily drinking in the sight in front of her.

He turned his face to her, exposed like she had never seen him.

“Are you here for your answers? Is that it?” he asked dully.

She stared, struck dumb.

“This is what I can teach you. Take a long, good look.” He stalked toward the blood staining the bedsheets, thick and cloying in the air. “Look,” he snarled.

She turned stiffly and looked at it. Somehow, even in the green lighting, the blood looked redder than ever.

He angled his head, so that looked down at her through the corner of his eyes, face contorted. “Leave.”
She stared into his face, blank as stone. She had seen him gasping for breath, desperate, just a few minutes ago.

“I just wanted to sleep,” she found herself saying. Her mouth tasted like iron. She had seen something that she had not been given permission to. It felt like a violation. “The servant mixed up the rooms. I didn’t notice when I came in, I wouldn’t have— I just fell asleep.”

*I have nightmares too*, she almost said. *They get worse. They’ve kept me up.*

He stared at her. Then, he turned, like he was about to leave instead of her.

“Stay,” she started.

His face was dark with warning.

“…I’ll leave,” she finished.

She picked up the haori she had discarded on the floor earlier and left without a backward glance. The hall was deserted, now. There was no servant waiting to assist her.

How had it happened? How had he slept through her entering the room?

She walked blindly.

Her senses couldn’t have missed him, she knew; she hadn’t survived in ANBU for nothing. No, some part of her mind must have known and permitted it. Some part of her mind must have known he was there and let her fall into that kind of sleep, without a second thought.

(But how had he not noticed?)

“The hokage assured me that this would be dealt with discreetly and quickly,” the daimyo announced the next morning. “I am glad to see that her words were trustworthy. I must say, I wasn’t certain in the beginning of this female kage—”

The advisor beside him, slim with fine, greying hair, interjected smoothly, “His majesty merely means that the rules of inheritance practiced by shinobi villages are dissimilar to ours and thus unfamiliar.”

“As he says,” the daimyo said, looking unbothered. “Still, despite this, you have done credit to both your village and to the Land of Fire. I am pleased.”

Sakura bowed her stiffly along with the others. She saw a piece of straw flutter down from her hair to the ground. She frowned. She thought she had shaken them all out.

They straightened from their bows. Sakura spotted a dead leaf clinging to her to her shirt and brushed it to the ground as well. Excellent. Another remnant of the stable she had woken up in.

“We’re gratified to hear it,” Kakashi said tonelessly, eyes surveying the courtroom with the irritability of one utterly disinterested in his current surroundings. “With your seal, we’ll be on our way.”

Unexpectedly, the daimyo turned towards his advisor, brows furrowed. They appeared to communicate silently.

The advisor bowed toward them. “There was one more agreement between the hokage and the
daimyo. This too must be satisfied before the daimyo will grant his seal of approval.”

Sakura’s mouth turned down. What?

“Did I miss this?” Naruto muttered.

“No,” Sai murmured back. “We weren’t informed of a second objective.”

Her gaze went to Kakashi.

“Is that so?” the copy-nin said, voice deadly soft.

The advisor nodded to the guards behind them, and the curtained entrance was drawn back. A woman stood there, exquisitely dressed and tall.

“My third daughter,” the daimyo announced. “The lady Himiko.”

Rich brown hair curtained the woman’s heart-shaped face, oiled so that the strands gleamed under the chandeliers. She looked to be Kakashi’s age.

“The daimyo has been searching for some time for a suitable match for his dear Himiko, who has been sheltered and protected as a jewel of our court,” the advisor said, voice carrying with ease in the hall. “The hokage, in her esteemed wisdom, has agreed to my lord’s request that there be an introduction. The Hatakes are one of few shinobi clans that are also recognized among feudal nobility, as seven generations ago, the then-daimyo gave your clan a title.”

Sasuke let out a small, disbelieving sound.

“You are an appropriate match for my daughter,” the daimyo summarized shortly.

Kakashi stared at the feudal lord with transparent, condescending restraint—it was more self-control than he usually applied. “The circumstances of my father’s death,” he said coldly, “infamously cast the clan into disgrace.”

The daimyo straightened, voice booming. “The shinobi villages and our royal court have different understandings of what disgraces a man. The title holds. Himiko, approach.”

The woman passed by them soundlessly, the silken cloth of her kimono trailing her. Sakura’s narrowing gaze caught the end of her skirt, and she found herself unable to look away.

When the daimyo’s daughter reached the front of the court, she turned to face them. Sakura watched as the woman analyzed the copy-nin, scanned the harsh beauty of the upper-half of his face, the lanky lines of his body—where lean muscle hinted at brutal strength—then the cut of his hips, lingering, below lowered lashes, like she was imagining how it might feel to lock her legs around them as he fucked into her.

Sheltered, was she?

“Show him the gardens, Himiko,” the daimyo ordered, looking very pleased with himself. “And escort him to the banquet tonight. An introduction was promised, and I will have that introduction before I stamp my seal.”

“I am honored to meet the copy-nin,” Himiko said, bowing. Her voice was soft, like the brush of a feather on skin. Kakashi’s gaze snapped to her.

Sakura almost missed the advisor’s attention shifting to her as he bent to whisper something in the
“Haruno’s daughter?” the ruler muttered. He waved his hand. “Very well. The entire team may attend the banquet. I will have rooms prepared for them all to stay the night.”

“Kakashi-sama, if you will follow me.” Himiko fluttered by them once more, giving the copy-nin a side-long glance as she did. Sakura stared at Kakashi’s back. He wasn’t the obedient sort. He wouldn’t just follow, just like that—

His hooded gaze bore into the daimyo until the older man shifted uncomfortably. Sakura waited, breath paused, for the chaos that would arise from his dissent.

Kakashi turned with feline grace and followed, head cocking to the side as his cool gaze rested on Himiko’s narrow shoulders—without much pause, the daimyo, his advisor, and his guards exited as well, their aim accomplished.

Silence filled the court, empty of all except for them.

Naruto brushed against her shoulder. “Kakashi’s important? How come no one ever told me?!”

“Are you stupid, dickless?”

“For reasons other than being the copy-nin, I mean,” Naruto growled.

Sakura watched absentmindedly as they bickered, straightening her haori.

“Do you have something against that woman?” Sasuke drawled to her, trying to look as disinterested in the question as possible.

She raised her eyebrows. “Of course not.”

On the contrary, Sakura adored a woman who knew what she wanted.

“Well, your face looks like you could happily kick that vase of potted plants right over there just to see it destroyed,” the Uchiha said indifferently. “You might want to figure that out before we have to show up in front of the daimyo and the full court tonight.”

They had nothing to do but waste their time, and they couldn’t agree on how to spend it. So, they parted ways. Sakura went to the parapets.

The wind whistled through the air, scattering her hair and sending a jolt of pain into her already numb ears. How long had she been here, she wondered, when it felt like an eternity had passed. The sun began to set, and she soon found her answer.

Too long. Certainly for this kind of weather in the thick of winter. But the view was astonishing, and she had needed relative quiet to sharpen the katana, to hear the soft hiss of the blade carefully to make sure it was just right.

It was peaceful here. So much so, that it was almost intolerable.

She paused at the soft brush of feet landing on stone behind her.

“Well?” Sakura asked.

She slid the katana back into its sheathe and hopped off the parapet, settling soundlessly back on
the dark stone.

“I have a theory.”

Sakura couldn’t help but smile incredulously at his forwardness. In a way, it was refreshing that Sai hid behind neither false bravado nor false insecurity—

“That you and Kakashi had sex.”

She blinked and found Sai struggling for breath, face reddening as he was squashed against the parapets. She glanced down and dumbly found her hand at his throat.

She let go. He slid down, coughing.

“I’m sorry,” she said, nails digging into her palm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

Sai regained his normal color. “That was odd,” he said, voice unusually rough. “Your face. You didn’t look like you were even aware of what you were doing.”

Sakura paled at those words. Had the Voice taken control without her knowledge, without her even noticing?

“You didn’t do any permanent damage, but I’ll accept your apology,” Sai said calmly, “with the compensation of some measure of the truth.”

Sakura’s mouth tightened.

He stepped toward her. “Don’t you trust me?” he asked, curious.

What if hadn’t been the Voice at all? What if it had been entirely her?

“I do,” Sakura said softly.

He was silent for a moment, merely surveying her and then turning, to survey the view. “From your reaction, I can see that I was right. I guessed it a while ago.”

She shifted her gaze toward the neat little rows of domes and roofs visible from their height.

“It’s not what you think,” she said eventually.

“As in?”

“He didn’t know it was me.”

“Ah. I thought he was just better at hiding it. So you used a jutsu to disguise your true features. But he has the sharingan, so he would have known. For him to not question it—” His forehead smoothed. “You were in ANBU with him. For a time.”

Sakura followed the last sliver of sun as it melted out of sight. “Until recently.”

Then he found out the truth,” Sai said, nodding. “His behavior toward you changed markedly after you brought Sasuke’s brother back to Konoha.”

The wind blew furiously. She shuffled tentatively closer to Sai so that they could both share their warmth.
“Are you in love with him?”

Sakura raised her eyebrows, calm. “No.”

She felt him turn to stare at her.

“What?”


Sakura brushed the hair out of her face.

“Have you been in love before?” he asked reasonably. “How would you know?”

“Why are you skeptical?” she asked.

Sai seemed to hesitate. “When he enters the room,” he started slowly, “your gaze doesn’t leave him for more than five seconds at a time. When he reacts, even if it’s as slight as the minutest shifting of his body, you react too. And when you saw the way that daimyo’s daughter looked at him—”

“It’s not love,” Sakura said. She turned to look at him. “But I can admit this now: it’s an obsession. You’re right, that I can’t look away. I don’t know if I want to hurt him or dissect him. Cut into him so he bleeds or cut him so that he’s in pieces and can hide nothing from me—until his habitual lies becomes nothing more than water droplets I can cast off.”

Sai glanced at her. “I see.”

“Do you?” she requested, smiling without humor.

His head tilted to the side. “We should head to the banquet.”

Sakura watched him turn without another word to climb down the staircase that had led them to the parapets. After a second, she made her way down the same staircase.

This palace may have been larger than the other palaces Sakura had seen, but they all seemed to have the same structure, more or less. The banquet hall, unlike the throne room, was never far from the main entrance. Possibly, though, it was the smell of freshly cooked delicacies—fragrant and heady—that helped them most on their way.

The guards gave them a cursory nod as they entered. Sakura caught sight of Sasuke and Naruto’s contrasting hair within seconds of entering the banquet hall.

Sasuke’s eyes narrowed at the sight of them. Naruto waved with a grin.

“Try those,” he ordered, nodding toward a platter of puff pastries.

Sai studied one of the pastries, then placed it thoughtfully in his mouth.

“Good, right?”

They sat down and began serving themselves food. Sasuke and Sai ate calmly, almost disinterestedly, but Sakura and Naruto consumed the items on their plate without any pretense. Her stomach was full only after a third serving—and even then, she wished that she had more room if only to taste more of the food.

“That was almost as good as Ichiraku’s,” Naruto allowed.
Nodding, she couldn’t help lowering her head and allowing her gaze to dart left, to the head of the table.

To where they sat.

Kakashi leaned back in his chair, long limbs sprawled. The food on his plate was untouched. The daimyo’s daughter conversed diligently with the other high-ranking nobles at the head table, apparently unaware of his utter abandonment of propriety. But the weight of her body in her chair was shifted towards him, the curve of her breast emphasized for his perusal, the shoulder propped to create shadow in her delicate collar bone—a silent, educated seduction.

Sakura sipped coolly at the soup she had ladled into her bowl. A hip brushed into her shoulder. Her gaze flew up.

A quick, unapologetic smile was directed down at her before the man continued on his way, as though she hadn’t existed.

She followed his back, considering. He hadn’t been hard on the eyes.

“It doesn’t appear as though the daimyo was honest,” Sasuke said coolly.

Sai nodded carefully, watching her. “I doubt he’s going to let us leave until there’s a more… binding agreement between them.”

Sakura tipped the last of her soup down her throat, maintaining her blank expression.

“Whatever,” Naruto dismissed easily. “As long as they feed us like this, I can stay here as long as the old man likes. By the way, Sai, did you know—”

Himiko stood as though to leave, swift and elegant. She bowed to the other men and women seated at the table. Then she bent her long neck to whisper in Kakashi’s ear, finally acknowledging him. Her lips curved as she spoke. The copy-nin’s head rolled up a second later.

She saw his eyebrow arch, slow and lazy.

They left. The clamor of the banquet subsided just slightly at the sight they made as they exited the banquet hall together. The daimyo watched them, a triumphant smile on his face. There was little question of what was about to transpire.

A more binding agreement.

“Sakura,” Sai said softly, warning.

She turned to look at him, head falling to the side. “Yes?”

“Have some bread,” Naruto encouraged, passing a roll to her. She took it and bit into it; it could have been dust for all she noted of the taste.

The Voice crooned in the back of her head.

Something terrible was growing in her chest—dark and seething and, she noted, with an edge of self-loathing. It was jealousy.

She hadn’t known it before, though as a preteen she had thought she had. This was what painted the silent, perpetual roar on every Hannya mask. This was what men and women held onto in their afterlives that transformed them into oni.
Sakura’s nostrils flared with impotent rage. Jealousy? Over that man? If she could have could looked the sentiment in its face, she would have spat at it. What had he done to deserve her jealousy? Fucked her? Scores of women and men had done the same, and she hadn’t given them a second thought.

She rested her chin in her hand, eyes narrow. He was as lost, hopeless, and fucked up as she was. What the fuck did he possess to make her jealous?

The banquet continued for two more hours. As time passed, the servants dimmed the lamps. Sakura’s fingers danced over the flickering candle in front of her empty plate.

“I think I’m done,” Naruto announced at last.

“Finally,” Sasuke scowled. He stood and dragged Naruto up with him. Sai and Sakura stood as well. They left the hall.

“Where are you going?” Sasuke demanded.

Sakura blinked at him. “My room’s in the other wing of the palace.”

“Oh,” Naruto frowned. He shrugged a second later. “See you tomorrow!” He roped his arms around both Sasuke and Sai as he ambled down the corridor.

Sai’s head turned back fractionally to make eye contact with her.

She took off in the opposite direction.

Now, she had to locate a servant and find an actual room so that she didn’t spend another night in the stables.

She arbitrarily took a left down one of the offshoot corridors and entered a part of the palace that was less lavishly decorated, though still impeccably clean. The tapestries were duller here, and the halls were less well-lit. Likely, she was nearing the servants’ quarters.

She walked aimlessly for ten or so minutes, somehow not encountering another living soul, until she heard soft footsteps heading her way at a furious pace. Her brows furrowed. The steps were too soft to be those of an adult.

A small boy, barely more than five, nearly crashed into her—would have, if she hadn’t stopped him with a finger to the forehead.

“Get out of my way!” he shouted, shrill voice echoing down the hall

Her hand fell when she saw his face. His nose had been bloodied, and his eye was swollen shut. Tears streamed down his face, mixing with the blood.

“Who did this to you?” She lifted his face up by the chin.

He smacked her hand away and struggled against her. “I need to get help! Get out of my way, lady!”

Sakura raised her eyebrows. “I can help.”

“You?” he demanded, swollen eye straining to get a good look at her.
“Yes,” she said. “I’m a shinobi.”

His battered face scrunched up. He thrust his hand into his worn pocket and pulled out five measly ryo. “I’ll pay you this much,” he said urgently, “to kill a man.”

Sakura stared down at it. “Ha,” she joked, folding his fingers back over the coins. “Save your money. It doesn’t even take that much to get me going.”

“Quickly, then! Follow me, shinobi-san!” He tugged her by the hand, running at the quickest speed his small, underdeveloped body could manage. He took her down a long, winding hall, where the doors started to become fewer and farther apart.

“Where are you taking me,” Sakura asked wryly, “all the way to the Land of Snow—?”

Her mouth snapped shut. The boy stilled too.

Around the bend was a small, dust-covered window. Two hands grasped the frame, fingers bleeding and desperate, as a broad, finely dressed man—the same man who had bumped into her earlier—shoved his cock into their owner.

“He’s the one,” the boy whispered, swollen eyes wide with murderous hatred. “Kill him.”

Violence and sex, intertwined in this depraved form—it grew wherever it could find a nourishment.

In abandoned parks. In love hotels.

Even in palaces, it seemed.

Like maggots.

The Voice panted.

Sakura glanced down at the small boy.

He gave a war cry, shoulders high, and charged. The noble lifted his head from the servant’s shoulder, gaze irritated, and backhanded him across the face. He resumed pumping his hips into the boy clutching the window. The broken figure against the window shouted.

“Go, otouto,” he begged. Blood ran down his temple from where he too had been beaten. “Leave. Don’t look.”

Face shadowed by her hair, Sakura kneeled to help the smaller boy back up.

“What’s this?” the noble drawled, head tilting back. “The brat’s brought help this time, has he?”

His gaze passed over her face. “Or were you meant to tempt me away from this one? Apologies, but I’ll pass.” He yanked the boy in his arms back by the hair. Miserable eyes locked onto hers, bright and purple. “Have a preference for those eyes, you see?”

Sakura pushed the boy behind her.

The noble paused, gaze narrowing. “What did you say to me?”

“I’ll only say it once more.”
Cold spread throughout her limbs.

“Get off him,” she said tonelessly. “Or I’ll cut it off.”

The noble laughed loudly, sweat dripping from his face. His pupils were dilated with inebriation. “I could have your head for that. Do you know who I am?”

The small boy roared behind her.

The man’s mouth spread in that same, frank, unapologetic smile, and it was as superficially charming as before. “You can’t do anything to me—”

Sakura stood between them and her wrist flicked down on his out-thrust, the kunai slicing through blood and tissue faster than a blink of an eye.

The mutilated organ hit the ground.

The noble screamed. The sound echoed like thunder down the maze of corridors. Sakura stared as he fell.

“Aniki! Aniki!”

“No, no, no,” the older boy cried, even as the smaller boy barreled tearfully into his stomach. He gripped her arm weakly. “What have you done? That’s Lord Botsudou’s son. Benkei, his only son…”

Sakura turned toward him. She felt like her head was under water.

The man whose name was Benkei screamed still, his vocal chords straining—it didn’t seem like he could stop any more than he could stop breathing. There would be guards soon, she processed slowly. The small boy still needed healing. His older brother too. Was there enough time—?

She tore absentmindedly at her top and rolled the scrap of cloth into a ball, bending to stuff it in his mouth. If she could quiet him, she might be able to gain—

A shadow fell over her.

Fingers possessed her wrists and turned them over, exposing the blood on her hands.

She looked up. Kakashi’s mismatched gaze bore into hers. He had located the source of the scream faster than anyone else in the castle.

Her mouth parted. “Where did you come from—”

Wordlessly, he pulled her forward. She shifted from her crouched position to a kneeling one, knees hitting the ground. He dragged her bloodied hands across his flak jacket. The stains transferred easily onto the harsh, olive-grey material.

“W-what are you doing?” one of the boys whispered.

“When they come, stay quiet,” Kakashi instructed, voice level.

The clamoring of approaching guards registered in her sluggish mind. Sakura reacted instantly, muscles tensing to move back. But Kakashi held her fast. She tried to comprehend what he was doing. Her fingers felt scraped raw against the material of his flak jacket.
At the last instant, he pushed her away.

“Benkei-sama,” one of the guards muttered as they were surrounded. The guard at the front, ostensibly their leader, signaled with right hand. One of the guards kneeled to slow the noble’s bleeding.

The man who had signaled now stepped forward. The insignia on his breast caught the light.

“How is responsible for this?” the captain demanded. Although he wore the uniform of the guard, his hair was drawn up tight in a topknot, as was the way of the samurai. A man of honor, then—or so they said.

Sakura’s mouth tightened, eyes flashing. She didn’t regret what she had done. “I—"

“I am,” Kakashi drawled.

Her head whipped around, face stricken.

“I see,” the captain said, eyes settling on the blood on the copy-nin’s clothing. “Arrest him.”

Author's Note:

DUN DUN DUUUUNNNNNN

I accept payment in lengthy comments, please and thank you <3

Lol in all seriousness, though, I hope this was as enjoyable for you in reading as it was for me in writing. In a SHOCKING turn of events, the next chapter is *gasp* almost, almost at the finish-line. You know how this works, folks--grease these palms with your wonderful thoughts and the sooner it shall arrive ;)

Now, a few shout outs.

First of all, I want to thank LegaciesandMemories for being an absolute SUPERSTAR. I read your comments, like, 20 times, and that is neither a joke nor an exaggeration. They seriously sustain me, so thank you for being such a wonderful, giving reader.

Also, hehe, so my sister did a little internet snooping and she found that someone called nitrocelxius made THIS AMAZING piece of artwork, inspired by my fic :o Whoever made this, I hope it’s ok to share here (comment if you’d like it taken down), but I am so touched/humbled and wanted to show it off <3
Additionally, in my own perusing, I found this *gasp* beautiful piece of art (made not at all in relation to this fic), but I wanted to share it with you all:

![Image of artwork](image_url)

I am speechless and breathless and gasping for air. I can't. More of this person's artwork can be found on Instagram at kokodraws01 and [here](https://www.instagram.com/kokodraws01/).

Finally, hope everyone is weathering finals / quarantine in relative sanity and safety <3 Until next time!!

- madstoryteller999

Chapter End Notes

As the title kind of gives away, a character is sexually assaulted in this chapter. You're good until the line: “Where are you taking me,” Sakura asked wryly, “all the way to the Land of Snow—?” but probably want to skip everything after.

There's also, uh, sort of graphic violence.

Comment if you need a summary of what happens, and I'll try to respond to you asap.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://archive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!