My Toes My Knees My Shoulders My Head

by LapizSagana

Summary

Sakura, Shikamaru, and Sai thought they survived the ambush when they woke up in the ICU alive and whole. However, when Sakura identifies Shikamaru as her husband, the Hokage and her team are forced to acknowledge the possibility that there was more to the ambush than a mission gone wrong.

Notes

Since it was first published in 2013, the circumstances of this fanfiction haven't adapted to the current revelations in the Manga. Originally posted on FF.net
Chapter 1

Shikamaru:

Mother didn't have to, but she woke up at three in the morning to set the table and make breakfast for me. It wasn't that I didn't appreciate her effort; she had stayed up all night waiting for dad to come home from an inspection at a prison outside of Konoha, and the fruits of her exhaustion etched on her face like charcoal scratched on a newly made canvas. She didn't have to bother with me too.

"Still sleepy?" Mum coughed and chortled. "Same here."

I tore the toast bread in half and nibbled on the burnt piece. Mum excelled in burning bread. "How was dad's inspection? Bet he got himself drunk afterwards."

"Not last night, no." She offered me a plate of scrambled eggs and sat next to me on dad's chair. "He was tired – didn't really say if there was trouble in the prison. I could guess, though -" leaning forward to whisper "- that he got what he needed from the prisoner he interrogated."

"I thought it was an inspection?"

"You know he only says that when he's been tasked to hurt someone to get answers." She winked. "Twenty years of marriage makes it easy to hear what's true and what's not. Aren't you impressed with your mother? You must have inherited your cleverness from me!"

I tossed the sausage into my mouth and nodded. Mom had done everything to catch up with the Nara intellect, she deserved some credit. "You sure aren't freaked out that dad just came home from beating a prisoner into a bloody pulp."

The door slid aside and dad entered the kitchen, yawning without covering his mouth. "I was already a jounin when I met your mother, Shikamaru. She's used to it."

"You're up early," I said.

Suddenly, and all too unusually, Shikaku stopped to stare at me. His eyes lingered on my flak jacket, which hung on the backrest of mum's chair. "Going out on a mission again, huh?"

"Yeah, dad. You make me pay the water bill." I gulped down my coffee. "It's troublesome but I gotta work."

"Hey, come here."

I arched my eyebrow. Shikaku arched his eyebrow, too. I stood and approached him, hands on my waist. He flicked his forefinger on my forehead.

"Ow!"

"Come home," he said.

Sakura:
I squinted in the gloom and pushed Naruto out of the way of a descending staircase. "Hey, you volunteered to walk me to the gates, so do you mind keeping yourself awake enough to stay out of manholes? I need to preserve my chakra, you know."

Naruto circled his hand over his stomach; his neck jutted forward, his steps slow. "I'm sorry, Sakura. It's just that I'm dizzy from all the medicines you gave me." He winced when he glanced at me. "Are those tablets really for indigestion, or are you mad at me for something I did? 'Cause if I got you mad, you can tell me and I can just apologize. You don't have to poison me."

"I'm not trying to poison you!" I hissed. "You've got to take care of yourself more, do you understand? I'll be gone for at least a week and if you don't like going to pharmacies to buy your medicines, read the expiration date on the instant noodles you stock in your apartment!"

Naruto halted. His back straightened. His eyelids scrolled up.

I followed his gaze and saw the entrance of Konoha. The pavement leading out to the forest hid behind the black and blue of the early morning mist. Dark, I thought.

Looking again at Naruto, I marveled at how his eyes shone more vibrant than any color in our surroundings. They were beautiful. His light could bring Sasuke back; he could bring me back even while my feet were but inches from his now. Naruto was a different kind of home I could always return to.

"I'm here first," I said, adjusting my travel bag behind me. "As always. Sai must be arriving soon."

"Sakura?"

"Yes?"

Naruto turned to face me, and he said, "Come home, okay?"

I gaped, and then I snickered. "Naruto, you're too paranoid."

**Sai:**

Shikamaru was the last to arrive. The mist was already lifting. Sakura and Shikamaru walked ahead on the path cemented by our ancestors, the original inhabitants of Konoha, to guide us, the new generation of ninjas, out of our homeland safely.

In the silence of the dawn, I looked back at the village we vowed to protect, and thought that if this path vanished, had anyone made another route leading home?
I awoke to another dream – a dream that was all black, all emptiness, all sadness. I had treaded this water before, and I dreaded coming back another time. How often did I have to be here? How often did I have to sit on air and hide my eyes behind my hands in order to will my mind to some place brighter?

I realized, after waiting an eternity in this place, that I would do just that. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. I would see what this dream had to offer now.

As I was sitting cross-legged in this void, something solid hit the back of my head, causing me to plummet forward. Crouched on all fours, I winced and touched the throbbing area. Only hair. No wound. No bump. I fingered my scalp for anything wet, sniffed the air for the disgusting bite of iron, and found nothing.

The hairs on my arms stood, and I yanked my hand in front of me, my palm facing the empty space. The air hissed. I doubled backward at the impact of the object thrown at me. I could not see it, but with its roughness and deformity, I dared bet it was a rock.

I waited for another to come from either my right or my left. There was nothing. No signs, and I was relieved. Then something hit me – not another rock, but an idea.

Perhaps I could shed light to this dream.

I found the first rock and rubbed one against the other. Sparks made my fingers visible. Slowly, something sprouted beneath me. I felt for it. Grass. Pulling out two handfuls, I struck the rocks together and kindled a fire.

Laughter sounded across from me.

"Who's there?"

Grey clouds seeped out of the darkness. Those weren't from my fire, I realized.

The sting in my eyes told me exactly what it was: burning tobacco. I grinned. "In the afterlife and still smoking, Asuma?"

Another laughter. "You're here often. In a mess?"

"...You can say that. I was out on a mission."

"Tell me about it."

I didn't want to. "Something about a woman named Kana who requested for Sakura's aid in removing a malignant growth in her body. The Fifth made me come to study Kana's case and help Sakura, which was really tiring and useless because I know nothing of medicine except the basics. Sai came along. That guy's cool and weird. He rarely talks. I like him. Wish people shut up more like Sai does."
"So Konoha's busy?"

"Yeah. Everybody's coming and going." I leaned forward, wanting to glimpse his face. "How's it being dead?"

"It's…nice, in a weird manner," he said. "I see Kurenai and the baby in her stomach. I see Kakashi and Guy, and I constantly see you working rather than sleeping, which is a good thing, I think."

I scratched the back of my head. "It hurts to say, but we all learn, don't we? I just hope…"

"Hope what?"

"When I wake up…everything's fine."

"Why? What happened?"

"I think it's my fault."

A gush of wind blew from Asuma's corner, killing my little bonfire. I sat there, staring at where the fire used to be. No. Wait. Let me stay here for a while longer. "Asuma?"

In the distance, the butt of his cigarette burned bright and died.

"Shikamaru Nara's awake!" cried a woman. "Call Lady Tsunade! Quick!"

No. The remaining specks of orange light were disappearing. I called on Asuma.

Beyond this void, a door slammed.

"Asuma, I screamed, Pull me back to the dream!"

"Okay, Shikamaru, open your eyes."

Against my will, my eyelids rolled up, and the light struck me. I heard a man moan and belatedly realized it was only me. "Fifth?"

Two, blurred images of a blonde woman in pigtails nodded. "How are you feeling? Does your head still hurt?"

"Where…?" I squinted, and the moving heads merged into one, lucid person.

"We'll let the drug finish its job. Shizune, call me again in an hour. His vital signs are good." Lady Tsunade patted my hand. "In an hour. Please be ready. We have work to do."

"Sai…S-Sakura?"

She turned and left. I let out a deep breath and lifted my eyes to the clock on the wall in front of me. Five in the morning. Around my bed, people moved. One was Shizune, who wouldn't answer any of my questions. The other one…I didn't know him.

Before I could even curse the hospital for its stench, Lady Tsunade came back, and I was no longer breaking the surface of a turbulent river. My vision cleared. My mind cleared. My speech cleared.

"Where's Sakura and Sai? Why am I in intensive care?" I panted, heaving my head from the pillow to see the rest of the room. Questions swirled in my brain. To the left, thirty-seven scrolls lay across a rectangular metal table: twenty-eight open and nineteen sealed. To the right, green and red lights
flickered on a machine that interpreted the signals it received through the wires connected to my body.

My body. The wires nipped and tangled themselves from my toes, my knees, my shoulders, and my head.

"One by one, Shikamaru." She motioned to someone behind the curtains as she sat on the stool beside my bed. Shikaku came around, his face rigid until he saw I was breathing.

For an aged and clever shinobi, I thought, he couldn't even tell that the Fifth wouldn't be talking to a dead man. Of course I was alive, dad. Thank you.

He went to the other side of my bed and folded his arms across his chest. "Your mother nearly killed me, you know? Lady Tsunade had to stop by our house to get her to calm down."

"I'm glad you're alive too, dad," I mumbled. If mom hadn't killed him, then I was her target.

Shikaku exhaled quietly and glimpsed the Fifth.

Lady Tsunade smiled faintly. "I've sent someone to reassure her because you won't be going anywhere for a while. We need you to answer some questions - check for some difficulties and trauma. Will that be okay with you?"

"Is this standard procedure for victims of unknown jutsus? Because if it is, I can tell you that what you saw where you found us was a rebirth jutsu – and no, I wasn't the target, so nothing's wrong with me. I'm perfectly fine."

"So you remember the mission?" Lady Tsunade said. "And the incident?"

I swallowed. "Yes. I told you I'm fine."

Shikaku shifted his weight to his other leg. He opened a folder containing several papers. "Standard procedure, Shikamaru. We have to proceed with this and confirm you're...identity before we can enlighten you of what's happening." He grabbed a chair, angled the metal table towards my bed, and sat behind it with the papers spread before him and the scrolls pushed to one side.

His scar twitched. I frowned. "Are those pictures?"

"Answer each one of our questions correctly and you're okay," he said. He lifted the first of several photographs. "What is the name of this person and your relation to her?"

"That's mom..." I said, slowly, taking my time to consider her face before speaking again. "Probably just months after I was born. You said she never cut her hair that short again once you guys had me."

Next. "That's you, dad, and you look weird without the scar. Why did you choose that photo?"

Next. "Choji: Classmate, teammate, friend, partner in crime – we used to skip class together."

Next. "Ino: teammate, friend – scolds me for appreciating the clouds."

He hesitated, stared at the next picture for two seconds, and then showed it to me.

I rubbed my forehead. The face of this man, I hadn't seen in my dream earlier, but he would always be in my memories. "Asuma," I answered. "Team Captain. He's dead. Killed by an Akatsuki. Who's next?"
For one long hour, the faces passed and blurred. I knew them, knew my relation to each one, knew everything there was I ever shared with them. They should stop. I was fine.

Then came Sai's picture.

Lady Tsunade crossed her legs and slouched, her upper body slanted towards me.

I pretended not to notice the anticipation of her pose and concentrated instead on ordering my words. "Teammate in my last mission. He's quiet and awkward but a good companion. He draws very well. Yeah, I'm sure of that."

Shikaku nodded and raised a picture of Sakura. I groaned on impulse. "The Fifth's apprentice, medic, Naruto's long-time infatuation, Ino's best friend and worst enemy, and my partner in my last mission which, nobody bothers to tell me about."

The adults exchanged a look and made a tacit agreement. Lady Tsunade pressed two of her fingers on the inside of my wrist. "Your pulse rate is normal - that's a good sign," she said. "Shikamaru, your dad isn't simply here to check on you; I've assigned him to head the investigation on your mission. You've passed the first stage of observation, and I believe you can help us by cooperating in this interrogation. Or do you need time to rest your mind?"

"What for? Where's Sakura and Sai?"

"They're in the other rooms – intensive care like you, and they're all recovering well," he said. "I'm sorry we have to do it so soon - you must be confused. Let me recount to you what happened, Shikamaru. You, together with Sakura Haruno and Sai, were sent out on a mission -"

"To cure Kana Fujiwaka and gather information about her disease, I know." "But instead you fell into her trap." He lowered his voice. "Two ANBUs led by Kakashi rescued you in a cave near the border of the Fire Country. Kana Fujiwaka and an unidentified man were found dead. Sai lost consciousness near the dead man, and his eagle led our rescue team to the depths of the cave. You were floating on a big pond with Sakura covered in a white cloth, wrapped in your arms, while a dead Kana drifted nearby, naked. Kakashi copied the symbols around the pond with his sharingan and we deciphered it as some kind of forbidden jutsu. Shikamaru, what happened in the cave?"

Flashes of pink hair and blood, staccato raps at the back of my head… I motioned for him to help me sit up. "Rebirth Jutsu, like Orochimaru's, although less complicated. I've had little time to work it all out before Sai and I were forced into action. First thing Kana was kidnapped and Sakura came after the kidnapper, Sai finds this hut packed with scrolls on theories of rebirth, we break into a room covered with pictures of Kana, Sakura, and the kidnapper, and the next thing I know I'm trying to save a life. Trying to save all of us, actually."

"Pictures of Sakura in a house?" asked Lady Tsunade. She had this motherly air, all of a sudden, like when I went home with a fractured left leg and mum only stared at me before yelling for dad, who looked at my injury once and said, 'You're not gonna die, son. C'mon, let's take your mum to the hospital.'

I shouldn't be surprised. The Fifth was old enough to have grandchildren, after all. "Ask Kakashi," I said. "Sakura said she's met this Kana once in a mission with Team Seven. Kana was very fond of her. If you ask me, they've been on her since and that request to be cured was their chance to finally grab her."
'A vessel," Lady Tsunade concluded.

"Can you identify the man with Kana?"

The images in my head hazed and slipped from my grasp. Kana said something before she died. I remembered a gold band around her finger. "Her husband. Ryo. He's her husband. Maybe."

"The kidnapper?"

"Yeah, Ryo is the kidnapper. Kana said something before she died and I took Sakura to safety, but I can't recall what exactly. I'm just sure they're married."

Shikaku jotted this down. "What happened in the cave, then?" he said.

"The cave..." A chill coursed throughout my body. "It-it all ready started when Sai and I arrived – the ceremony for the rebirth jutsu had already commenced. In the middle of the pond, Kana and Sakura lay naked and unconscious. They floated opposite each other, their fingers touching, their wrists bound by a cord. They were sinking into the water. Sai attacked Ryo, which slowed the jutsu, but the seal around the pond was still functioning. I painted a seal around it with my blood - anything to redirect its course. When it was safe...when it was safe and Ryo was nearly dead, I jumped in with the cloth and took Sakura, but the cord pulled Kana along. Ryo's jutsu had a reaction, some kind of electric force that put Sakura in a brief seizure. I cut the cord with my kunai and..." I blinked. I put my hand on my temple.

Lady Tsunade transferred to the edge of my bed, scrutinizing my face. "What's wrong, Shikamaru?"

"I don't." The dream. The emptiness. I gritted my teeth and shook my head. "I'm blank. Something happened. The last thing I remember is swimming to shore." I turned to Shikaku. "How long was I out?"

Lady Tsunade snatched my prognosis sheet from the foot of the bed. "You've been unconscious for a week and five hours exactly. Just a bump on your head and burns on your arms."

"A week? What the-and that's all the injury I have? Why was I asleep for a week?"

"It's the jutsu. The blood seal you made around the seal of the rebirth jutsu – we studied it with Kakashi's help – and theorized that it reacted like opposite poles of a magnet and infected your chakra." She loosened the bandage around my arms. "It's like pouring a newly discovered chemical on fire. The worst we could think of was a new kind of chakra-consuming virus, but it didn't come to that. In the end, you just lost all your chakra and blocked fifty of your channels - thirty of which were connected to major channels. Thank Neji Hyuuga for assisting us; his directions on where to poke the needles were accurate."

Shikaku shrugged. "You nearly ended up in a coma, that's all."

My left arm's flesh mirrored a bird's eye view of Konoha, complete with protruding blue nerves for rivers and brown and green bruises for the mountains and trees. A burnt Konoha, to be precise.

I sighed. "You can at least pretend a coma is serious, dad."

"Your mom is serious," he said. "But really, I was worried."

"He was," she agreed.

"I'll pretend I'm convinced. How are the others, exactly?"
The curtain bordering the intensive care unit in half swung apart, revealing Shizune. "Sakura Haruno's awake!"

The Fifth jumped like somebody just shouted in her ears that her dead daughter was actually alive, and she grumbled something along the lines of 'be right back' and 'wait here, don't move' before she sprinted out.

I clenched the blanket. The door was not too far. "Take me along."

Shikaku gathered the photographs back inside the folder. "Shikamaru, this is more serious than you're treating it. You need rest. I need to interrogate Sakura. Please don't make this any more difficult for your father." He fished in his pocket and tossed me a rubber band. "Tie your hair up if you can. You look like a clown."

Indeed, I was alive. If I was in heaven...well, I didn't think dad would go there with how much alcohol he consumed on non-working days. Then again, he was my dad. With all this stress building in my head, I was glad he came to annoyed me.

Oh, and thank you too, Asuma.

I spent the next hour thinking, remembering, retracing, and was successful. It was my fault, but I couldn't admit it earlier. It never occurred to me to confess. Sakura and I had a fight over the plan - over each other's credibility - and I could have literally pushed her to rescue Kana in order to prove me wrong.

It was my fault, why she lied there cold and stark white.

It was my fault, why Sai had to compromise to save me.

It felt like years, the day I promised I would never put the lives of my teammates in that kind of danger again. Choji and Neji nearly died because of my own lack of discipline and leadership skills. Now, older and more experienced, I was no better from the kid I was during our attempt to bring Sasuke back.

_An argument with a girl, Shikamaru._ I coiled under the blanket. I really had to argue with her, didn't I?

_Asuma, if you see either one of Sai or Sakura, please kick them back to Earth._

Another hour passed. No one came back. I braved myself to remove all the needles attached to my limbs. Once free, I tiptoed to the division and lay flat on my stomach in order to peer beyond the stretch of cloth. My eyes climbed the length of a nurse's leg and to his drooling mouth. His head lay on the table, the ink of his pen spilling over his notebook.

I pushed my body off the floor and folded my legs up in order to achieve a crouching position. Once there, I allowed myself a minute to steady my breathing. I checked the corners of the room for a hidden camera and felt dumb after seeing none. There was a reason they called it 'hidden'. I didn't have the stamina to check for any concealing jutsu. The best I could do was hope there were none and no one saw my humiliating attempt at spying.

Even the legendary genin could shame me in a walking contest.

I inched upwards, supporting my weight by keeping my hands pressed on my knees. Successful, I took a deep breath and straightened my back. I limped past the division, past the drooling nurse, and slipped through the gap of the door.
Kakashi stepped in front of me. "Escaping?"

"Breathing," I grunted. "Where's Sakura?"

He tucked his hands in his pockets. No Icha Icha books. No 'Yo'.

"You're not allowed to see her yet. It would help if you get back to bed and recover so you can be of use to the investigation team."

"I'm good now. I can help now."

"Shikamaru," he said. "The damage is in your chakra channels. Shikaku's spent every day and night watching over your progress, collecting every ingredient needed to melt the frozen chakra clogging your pathways. He's stumbled over ancient medicinal scrolls to help Shizune and he constantly lies to your mother to spare her. The most help you can do is to recover."

I bowed my head. For father to sacrifice a night of sleep for me must be serious; seven nights must mean dad was a saint now. "I'm sorry," I said. "It's just that it's getting to me. I wake up and the first thing they do is show me the faces of every person I know and ask if I recognize them. If they're in such a hurry, it means something grave has happened that you're not telling me...and I need to know."

"You will know when the Hokage says you can."

The need to be informed pinched my gut. I felt like throwing up.

He opened the door of intensive care for me. "Get inside. Isas there will get fired for dozing off and letting you out."

"I put Sakura in danger. I'm sorry, Kakashi," I said, certain it would buy me more time away from the stench of antiseptic inside that room. "And thank you for rescuing us."

"Don't be sorry," he said. "Learn from it. Besides, I am responsible for all of this. I was Team Seven's leader, and I overlooked a potential threat to one of my students."This was beyond your abilities, anyway. You all did good despite the ambush."

"It's not enough." I leaned on the wall. My body weighed twice it used to.

"This happens. Accidents happen. That's why we became ninjas. We survive what others cannot."

It was never my intention to become a shinobi. A Higher Being predestined this for me. "I dreamt of Asuma."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Did you talk? Does he still smoke?"

"Maybe I almost died, that's why I saw him," I said. "Seemed pretty real. Yeah, he still smokes. He said he...sees Kurenai and the baby and Guy and you and me."

Kakashi chuckled. "If he were here, he'd light a cigarette and pace outside intensive care. He'd have been there to save you."

"Maybe he did save me." I rubbed the back of my head and found a bump. "He threw two rocks at
me, made me start a fire. I told him I did something wrong. Never got to confess what, though."

"Shikamaru," he called, as if I were standing at a distance. "Sakura will be fine. You saved her. I saw what you did. Thank you. Naruto will probably say thank you, too. The Hokage sent him on a mission to ease his mind."

On the other end of the hall, Shizune burst from the door and stopped when she saw us. I froze, knowing what was to come.

"Shikamaru Nara!"

"Shikamaru?" echoed a soft voice.

Shizune moved aside to let someone through. Wheels squeaked. Sakura came into view. I pushed myself off the wall, watching as Lady Tsunade steered the wheelchair she sat on. Shikaku trailed behind them. He wiped the sweat in the hollow of his scars.

Something was wrong. Lady Tsunade's stare vitrified my bones. Sakura smiled at me.

"How's she?" I asked the Hokage.

Sakura leapt from her wheelchair, her hospital gown swaying. She waddled towards me but no one bothered to help her. They watched. I reached for her and seized her shoulders.

"Take it easy!" I examined her complexion, her hair, her eyes, and her lips. I asked myself if anything seemed amiss with her. "How are you?"

She scowled. "I'm not the one walking limp, Shikamaru."

"Sakura, you should-"

"They told me what happened." She sniffled and threw her arms around me. "Thank God you're safe!"

Behind her mess of pink hair, I raised my eyebrows at our audience. Kakashi transferred his gaze to Shikaku, also wondering. No one hinted an explanation.

"S-Sakura? Are you alright?"

She craned her neck to nod. "C'mon, where are you hurt? I'll heal you."

"Lady Tsunade, what-?"

"Your arm!" Sakura hoisted my arm. Her mouth was agape, about to scold, when suddenly she snapped her head up at me. "You're not wearing your ring, Shikamaru."

"Ring?" I said.

She dropped my arm.

I flinched, bending to my knees to restrain the weakness that was overwhelming my legs. "What's your problem?"

"Do you always have to lose it or misplace it, Shikamaru?" She scratched her back. "Fifteen years, this has been our problem! Do you ever see me lose mine? Better yet, have you ever seen me without it?" She shoved her left hand to my face.
"What ring?" I yapped. "Will somebody explain to me what's happening?"

Sakura gasped and withdrew her empty hand. "Where's my ring? I never lose our wedding ring!"

"W-wedding ring?"

Sakura scratched her back, infuriated.
Seven days and seven nights, all I had of my son was the rubber-band his mother made him. It was weaved from the fibers of a plant that only grew on Nara soil, and before Shikamaru was born we had gone to our family forest and created a hundred for him.

At age sixteen, Shikamaru had never broken one.

I had stretched and worn the rubber band over my own while waiting for reports from Shizune. I had stared at it while drinking my coffee at two o'clock in the morning. I had rubbed it between my thumb and forefinger while praying that, by some miracle, Shikamaru would wake up the same.

When, finally, Shizune tapped on my shoulder and said, 'he's awake, sir', a trickle of water oozed from the inner corner of my left eye and skated down my nose. The teardrop ran down my upper lip and fell on my tongue. Surprisingly, it was sweet.

Lady Tsunade had entered and left the intensive care unit so quickly, I thought she only came out to tell me that my son had died. Instead, she smiled, sighed, and said, "Shikamaru's still high on the drug. Let's wait an hour, and then you can see him. Don't worry, Shikaku, your son is a strong man like you. An hour and we'll start his interrogation."

All I could do was bob my head and hold myself upright like the man she described me to be. Once she had turned the corner of the hallway, I bent to my knees and pressed my hand to my face.

Shikamaru was alive.

The relief that befell me when I first saw him was stronger. Thinner, paler, sadder…but he was alive. Our eyes met, and his gaze was so similar to the time he came home with his first serious injury. Yoshino yelled for me, and Shikamaru laid out his fractured leg for me to scrutinize and he said, 'dad, this really hurts.' I had replied that it wasn't going to kill him, and that we should bring his mother to the hospital instead.

Right there and then I saw my little boy, laying out all his injuries, although now he was telling me, 'hey, dad, It's troublesome, but I think I'll live through this. What a pain.'

This sensation I felt, akin to when he was born and he slobbered on my face for the first time, assured me that despite the many facts presented during our initial investigation that persuaded us he would have abnormalities upon waking, my Shikamaru was the same.

On the day their team was brought back to Konoha, Kakashi had come to me with a sketch of all the seals he had copied using his Sharingan.

"I've never seen anything like this before," he had told me.

It had taken thirteen hours for the Hokage and my team to check all scrolls and come up with a sensible theory on the seals in the cave, and all they had in common was the motive of reincarnation through a vessel. I had checked and rechecked the elements transcribed in the seals, hoping they would change and I could tell them we had concluded wrongly, but my eyes would not lie. I simply could not accept someone could take away my only son apart from death.
My worries proved futile; with every correct answer Shikamaru gave as I showed him one photo after another, it was obvious our theories did not apply to him.

The trouble of it all did not begin until Sakura Haruno woke up. Before marching to our next interrogation, I took Shikamaru's rubber band from my pocket and tossed it to him. Good thing I removed it from my hair before coming in; I wouldn't want my son to think I was being sentimental. He would speculate it was only either because I was drunk or I was old.

I wasn't old.

While the Hokage and I waited for the go signal to enter Sakura's intensive care unit, she tapped her foot and checked the clock overhead like an academy student waiting for the annual marathon to begin. "You can smile," she said. "I'm happy Shikamaru's alive."

"If my loaf of a son is alive and well," I said, "I'm sure your apprentice is as well. Maybe even better."

The intensive care unit that contained Sakura made me shiver. Machines lined the divider between the medic's station and the patient's quarters. They beeped in the background in a continual reminder that every little detail about her health was under monitored and under control. Inoichi was convinced they were all the Hokage heard sometimes. She was here every day, but it seemed to him that she still spent her first few seconds inside engulfed in shock.

If a veteran medical kunoichi was appalled by this, I could not imagine how Yoshino could cope had this been Shikamaru's unit.

I walked around with Shizune's supervision and she explained the scripts they combined in order to form the seals which they painted in black ink on the floor and on the walls. These had not been used since the Third ordered Orochimaru's research to be concealed permanently.

With the cooperation of four senior medics, they reduced the vortex of scripts into a spiral surrounding Sakura's bed. They allowed us to come near.

"Okay." Lady Tsunade removed her green robe and marched past the division.

Sakura hefted herself to her elbows and browsed her environment with half-open eyes. Her complexion struck me as too pale, but I was sure in her case the doctors would classify that as normal.

"How are you feeling?" The Fifth sat on the edge of the mattress. "Sakura?"

"I'm dizzy…oh, Shika-" She blinked at me and nodded once. "Hello. Where's Shikamaru and Sai?"

Good, I thought. If she had the sense to worry, it meant she knew something went wrong. We interrogated her slowly, in a slightly different manner than we did with Shikamaru. She took longer to respond after seeing the photographs of her friends but she answered each one correctly.

I revealed Sai's picture.

Sakura glimpsed me, then Lady Tsunade. "I've never seen him before."

"Look again."

She arched her neck, chewing her bottom lip. "Wait…It's Sai. It's Sai. I'm sorry, I must have been…confused for a moment. I went out on a mission with him, but previously and more often, we're with
Captain Yamato and Naruto. Who's next?"

I flicked up the last photograph. "Do you know who this is?"

Sakura reached for her back and scratched it. "Shikamaru Nara, your son. He was my partner in the mission we were last in."

Nothing was wrong, the Hokage and I were convinced. Shikamaru and Sakura recognized their family, their friends, their teachers, and their superiors in Konoha.

Lady Tsunade briefed her on the ambush, and we drifted to the interrogation at her pace. I could not blame her. She could deny it all she wanted, but to her, Sakura was more than an apprentice.

"And what happened when you found out Kana was kidnapped?"

"I searched for Shikamaru and Sai."

"Then?" I asked. Her recollections were more detailed than Shikamaru's.

Sakura stared at me, as though waiting for me to give her the answers. "Well, I told them that Kana's lover, Ryo, took her and promised he was going to be with her."

"Ryo is only a lover?"

"Yes, Kana told me herself," she said. "Ryo and Kana met when they were eleven – they were training under a former ANBU squad leader called...ah, I can't remember. You must know, Lady Tsunade; it was supposedly under the Fourth's rule that children falling under a certain category and passing certain qualifications were trained in this program."

The Fifth's posture stiffened. She looked at me through the corner of her eye. "What did Kana say this program's goal was?"

"...Penetration? A spy in every hidden village to warn us of a plot against Konoha? Something like that."

I studied Sakura: the slight crease of her brow, the tilt of her head, the pitch of her voice, the twitch of her wrists while she gestured.

"And this Kana and Ryo were students in that program?" asked the Fifth.

"But Ryo was against it, believing Konoha separated them from their parents and made them believe lies while growing up," she explained. "Kana tried to stop him from leaving but failed. Around ten years later, the day I was preparing her body for the stress of the operation using a triangular seal, Ryo returned for her. He attacked me, accused me of attempting to murder Kana, and asked her to leave with him. Kana agreed, but I assumed she only did so to try and pull him back to his senses. Once I had regained control of my body, I ran out to find Shikamaru and Sai."

"Did Ryo tell you where they were headed?"

"There's a seal I put on our wrists so she can draw chakra from me during the operation, assuring her stability and my control of the energy she releases." Sakura showed us her wrist.

"You altered it without consulting me?" Lady Tsunade inspected the seal, grazing her thumb across the faded ink. "If her disease turned out to be viral, you could have died!"

"I increased her chances of her survival by three percent!" she said. "Besides, Kana has a
background on medicine. She's tried it out before. When I painted this on us, I felt the seal was working fine. That's how I found her."

Lady Tsunade paced the room, holding her forehead.

I understood her frustration. If we shared the same understanding, that program was as ticking time bomb. Anything Kana persuaded her into doing or taking could have been a fatal assault.

I proceeded to question her so as to divert her attention from the Hokage. "What was Shikamaru's plan of action?"

Sakura paled. "We argued about it, I think, right after he ordered Sai to ask for back-up as quickly as possible. Why we argued, I still can't recall, but I…I'm sorry. I went out by myself and found Kana in the cave. That's as much as I remember. Although, there were things in my dreams that bothered me. Like…I don't know if this happened, but I was in water, cold, naked, and I was calling out to someone and when I opened my eyes to search, I saw Shikamaru. By the way, where is he?"

I didn't feel right that moment and I immediately stopped from rearranging the photos and notes in the folder. Her tone suggested something different, implemented something more sentimental; hence I averted the subject to see her reaction. "Shikamaru's okay. Sai is in the next room. He's recovering, but it might take another day before he wakes. Would you like to see Sai?"

Sakura blinked at me. "Yes, Shizune told me about Sai, but I want to know where Shikamaru is. Is he all right? Is he awake yet?"

Lady Tsunade finally ceased pacing. "Sakura, we'll inform you all about their condition later. Right now, I want to know if there's anything out of normal in your body. You were badly injured, and —"

"Please!" Sakura scratched her back some more. "Why won't you answer my questions now? How is Shikamaru? Is he alive? Is he awake yet? Can't I see my husband yet?"

I fell back down on my way up from the chair. My initial thought was to dislocate Shikamaru's fingers, but the better half of me could not believe my son would do such a stupid thing as to marry without my blessing.

Silence spilled into the room while oxygen oozed out. Nobody moved. We all stared.

I stared harder at Sakura, and the credence in her expression burdened my soul.

"Your husband?" Lady Tsunade repeated to Sakura.

Sakura and I looked at each other again; she had the decency to lower her head. "Why does it feel as though nobody knows? We've been married for fifteen years."

She was only sixteen, I reminded myself. Without warning, Lady Tsunade yanked my arm down and put her mouth next to my ear. "Let's see where this goes."

The worse we had expected was Shikamaru identifying Sakura as his wife. They were both in the pond circled by a forbidden jutsu and restrained by an untested blood seal. Perhaps the effect on Shikamaru was delayed, but there all the same, as was the case when Sakura recognized him only as my son in the beginning and then claimed he was her husband just forty-eight minutes later.

While I lowered her to a wheelchair, I realized with a jolt that this young woman was the person my son risked his life for. A thousand pointed ideas resurrected my migraines, and I distanced myself from her while she was being prepared to leave intensive care.
There had to be a more logical explanation.

"Did they share a romantic relationship beforehand or is this simply the result of a faulty rebirth jutsu?" Lady Tsunade asked. The bite in her intonation impaired my eardrums.

"It could be either," I hated to admit.

She hugged herself, unconscious of the faces she was making. "Didn't Shikamaru hint anything relating to her or…wait, don't answer that. Knowing him, he would have let you figure it out on your own."

"I know my son," I said. "I know him."

As we walked out intensive care and saw Shikamaru talking to Kakashi, I vouched this was the rebirth jutsu's doing.

We approached him. He saw us.

Then those two young shinobis shared a few seconds when it was as if only they existed in this hall. I recognized the relief on his face as a mirror image of mine sixteen years ago, after the Kyuubi attacked Konoha and I searched for my wife and found her, with our baby still in her arms.

The horror and guilt that mixed and sank in his visage while Sakura clung to him was so apparent, I saw all the hints without trying. I saw him accept her embrace. I saw his confusion when none of us spoke. I saw his worry over this girl.

The notion that I failed as a father - that I failed to recognize my son had grown up - weighed on me. Maybe he did not marry her but he did share something special with her, and I didn't know.

Sakura's outburst brought me back to the present.

"Where's my ring? I never lose our wedding ring!"

"W-wedding ring?" Shikamaru spat.

Sakura scratched her back.

Lady Tsunade twisted the steel of the wheelchair's backrest into a helix. "Shikaku, do you see the tattoo on the base of her back? Take a good look at it. Call three of our best ANBUs. We'll have to contain her."
Chapter 4

Shikamaru

Three ANBUs sat cross-legged around the quarantine room separate from the hospital. Lady Tsunade stood beside Shikaku, nodding her head. "That's fine. Perfect," she announced.

I pushed my head back, pressing it against the wall until the cold seeped into my scalp. Numb. I needed to be numb. The gloom in this underground containment area eased me back into my reverie of Asuma and the bonfire.

Had I not been salvaged, would I be smoking cigar with him? Would I be watching them from above, detesting this tunnel, the ancient characters they painted on Sakura, the friction in the air, the sparse lighting, and the fact that if I were gone, I would have no chance to redress this?

"Son," called Shikaku.

My eyes shot open so wide they hurt. Oh no. Dad only addressed me as such in public when he needed to be a concerned father. By concerned father, he meant I had done something incredibly stupid behind his back that needed a talk down. "What?" I said.

He loomed over me, his gaze piercing, his scar twitching. "We need to talk."

"No, dad, I didn't marry Sakura while we were in this mission, and no, dad, I didn't marry her fifteen years ago when I was still a crawling, drooling, brainless baby." I buried my face in my hands, willing my palm to absorb the heat in my face.

He sighed. "I know, son. I know. All I've been meaning to ask is if...you have something romantic going on with Sakura."

This wasn't happening. I heard her voice; I heard my voice; our voices, rising above each other's. "Nothing. The only boy in her head is Sasuke. I never had an interest in her, and even if I had and tried to compete with her obsession with Sasuke, I never could have won." I looked up at him. "It's the rebirth jutsu. It might have short-circuited something in her brain. I don't know. There must be a way to correct this."

"Shikamaru." Lady Tsunade struggled to ease the muscles in her fists. "Relax. This isn't your fault. You saved her life."

Her words nipped the nerves in my brain. I shut my eyes. She must resent her self-control. I would have allowed her to punch me if she requested it.

"I'll bring him back to his room." Shikaku patted my shoulder and I nodded over and over.

The last thing I felt was dad lifting me in his arms and telling me to sleep.

I saw my young self. No more darkness, no more rocks, no more Asuma.

A five-year old me ran across our garden and hung like a monkey on Shikaku's leg. No wrinkles on his forehead yet, I noticed. He picked me up and dusted off the grass on my hair.
"Hey, didn't I tell you to use the rubber band mama made you?" He pinched my cheek – the younger Shikamaru's cheek.

I ignored his question and traced the scar across his face with my fat, little finger. "Does it hurt, dad?"

He smiled sadly. "Nah. Not anymore. During winter it throbs, or when it's extremely cold."

I kissed his scar. Leaves drizzled on us, and the garden was green and lovely. Mom should not have napped that afternoon; she missed a stunning sight.

"What's that for?" Shikaku laughed.

"So it won't hurt," I said.

While I watched this projection from the past, I felt something touch my forehead. In the middle, warmth was subsiding. This invasion from reality hazed my dream. I sniffed the air. That perfume. I groaned, and the vision died in the fog of consciousness. "Ino? …Is that you?"

There was a sob. "Hey."

A smile crept up my lips at the sound of her voice. "Hey. Are you allowed in here?"

"Dad's with Lady Tsunade and your father," she said. "Shikamaru, what are they doing to Sakura?"

I opened my eyes slowly and saw her gasp and smile. "It's nice to see you," she cooed.

"It's…It's nice to see you too." I told the truth. She wasn't in her usual purple mid-drift; today, she sported a loose, orange dress. 'Sunshine' was the first word that came to mind. Ino felt like sunshine.

She bent on her waist and pressed her face against my left palm. The burns ached where her tears fell but I didn't mind.

"When dad said I could come along to see you, I dropped my nail polish and raced him to the hospital!"

"That's flattering, Ino. Did anybody see your unfinished nail art?"

"I'm serious, Shikamaru!" She raised her head slightly, pouting. "You were in intensive care for one week! I come home from fetching two injured genins, tired and fed up with arrogant children, and dad tells me over breakfast that you're in intensive care!"

I craned my neck to the right. The pillow caressed my cheek. "Gee," I muttered.

"Gee?" Her brows drooped over her eyes. She glowered at me. "What is that supposed to mean, huh?"

I covered my eyes with my forearm. "I don't know. Maybe it means 'thank you' when I can't think of anything else to say and 'sorry' when it's my fault that Sakura…"

"Shikamaru? A-are you crying?"

"No."

"What's with Sakura?"
I would have preferred having Choji over instead of Ino. He wouldn't have asked for details, would have just sat there and ate like he was the one ridden of decent food for days. I didn't want to make a confession, yet with Ino I had no choice. I told her, maybe because the truth was even if she annoyed me, I trusted her more than I dared allow myself to. She didn't mock me for crying. She accepted men were human.

So I told her my best account of the mission, and she was silent. "…What did you argue about, exactly?" she said.

"I had a plan. The plan was to wait for back-up. I didn't want to make a move and risk everybody like she did because it was only when Kana was kidnapped that she told me the kidnapper was actually Kana's lover. Worse, when we reached the cave, I realized Kana and Ryo were already married. Their story must have reminded Sakura of what happened between Sasuke and her. I said some nasty things I never thought I could say, just so she wouldn't rescue Kana on her own. She believed it could all end well, without needing to harm either of them or their relationship. I was convinced otherwise. She went out to prove me wrong."

The mattress sighed. The tip of Ino's hair tickled my skin. "Sounds like something Sakura would do."

"Dad asked if she and I were romantically involved."

"What?"

"Of course he would think the adverse effect of the rebirth jutsu altered something in us that was present beforehand." I slid my arm over my head, choosing to stare at the ceiling instead than to witness her reaction. "It could have been possible if we were infatuated but we weren't. I feel like it's on the tip of my tongue, but I can't begin to explain why she suddenly thinks she and I are married."

"For fifteen years, right?"

"Fifteen years. When I was fifteen, I…"

"Shikamaru," she said, softly, shifting her angle, crossing and uncrossing her legs. "It's all right. You can tell me if you like Sakura. In fact, it would help clear my mind."

"Clear your mind?"

Ino jerked. "I-I mean the case! The investigation! Right! You can tell me."

I tugged at her hand, and she bit her bottom lip. "Do you think I like her?" I said.

"Well, it depends," she croaked. "You're freaked out but you're concerned and then you're guilty and I can't decide what really is going on with everything you told me."

"I don't like Sakura. Not romantically, anyway." I tugged at her hand again, wishing she would look down at me and see I was serious. "Do you want Naruto to kill me? Being friends with him is troublesome enough. How can I stand being a rival?"

Finally, she turned, and we gaped at each other.

Red ascended on her face. I, too, felt my face burn.

We laughed.
Ino had to leave. She embraced me lightly, whispered a prayer, and waved goodbye. I wanted to point out that she was also a medic and she could assist in keeping me alive for the sake of my sanity, but remembered how clumsy she was with medical paraphernalia. That moment, however, while I watched her walk out of intensive care, I believed I wouldn't mind if she killed me because of a careless mistake. At least it was by her hands. I wouldn't bear a grudge.

After two hours and twenty-two minutes, Inoichi and Shikaku came to tell me what had been happening in Sakura's quarantine room.

"We did another interrogation, matching your story with hers and tracing them to the evidences we have gathered in the cave." Shikaku flipped a page on the open folder he held. "On her account, Ryo is only a lover."

"She didn't see the wedding rings," I insisted. "Sakura was the target. The stories they told her were invented to persuade her of their cause – to gain her sympathy."

"And both of you had an argument," Inoichi said, silencing me.

Shikaku propped his elbow on the monitoring machine and stooped low enough so our heads were next to each other. "Son, we need to know everything. What was it you were arguing about with Sakura Haruno before she went on her own to rescue Kana?"

Something inside me looped down the abyss of shame. I hoped dad knew without needing to ask me. Looking him in the eyes, I whispered, "I was angry because she wouldn't listen and I was afraid she'd risk us all…I told her that…even if she tried to, she couldn't save Kana on her own…just like she couldn't do anything to bring Sasuke back."

Shikaku watched me for a moment, perhaps wondering how his own blood could be so cruel, but he said nothing as he scribbled on the papers in his folder.

"I never got to apologize." I clenched the blanket, saw my knuckles turn white. "It's my fault this happened to us."

"Well, she doesn't remember it, Shikamaru," he said. "You can't upset her now. She can't be upset by anything no matter what."

"Why?"

"There's a tattoo on her back shaped like a seed." Inoichi showed me a sketch. He turned the page. "After your confrontation about your missing wedding rings, the seed – it sprouted. Now it looks like this, and with every passing minute that we reject her idea that you're her husband, the seed grows."

"Lady Tsunade thinks it's the design of the rebirth jutsu, only it feeds on her uncertainty," Shikaku said. "We don't know why, of all people, she thinks you're her husband while you do not share that inclination, but at worst we're expecting her to start developing Kana's memories."

They hadn't said it, but I heard it anyway. "And you're convinced I might develop something later on?"

He dragged a bag from behind the annoying beeping machine and tossed it at my feet. "We'll never know, Shikamaru, but we have to be careful."

"Dad, it didn't affect me."

Shikaku nodded once and continued to scrape his pen against his pad.
"And you'd have me pretend to be her husband to delay the completion of the jutsu, correct?"

He and Inoichi nodded together.

"So basically, we all have to play along and make her as happy as possible." I hoped dad would respond differently, hoped he would lash out on me if he was angry or cry if he was disappointed at me.

*Anything but silence, dad.*

Shikaku opened the upper pocket of his vest and flicked a ring at me. "That's mine. I'll lend it to you until we can get the ones Kana and Ryo had. My team is not finished with their bodies yet. Are you ready?"

"What do I do?"

He pulled the quilt from over my legs and prodded me to get up. "Get Sakura to spill how much memory of Ryo she's merging with her memory of you."

"It might be more than just her memories of Ryo if the rebirth immediately had her recognize me as her spouse."

"Elaborate, Shikamaru."

"Kana once tried to stop Ryo from leaving the program, and Sakura once tried to stop Sasuke from leaving Konoha." I balled my hand over my mouth and coughed. "The rebirth ceremony was never completed, so something else aided her misconception of me as her spouse. The nearest and most probable explanation would be the semblance of Kana's story to hers, only Ryo returned and married Kana. Now, Sakura, through a ploy unexplainable as of yet, is recognizing me as her husband."

Shikaku stroked his beard. "You hypothesized this based on your argument with Sakura."

"We were never in love and she practically hated me when she disbanded from Sai and me in order to rescue Kana, so there must be an alternative reason to her madness," I said.

Inoichi looked up from his tablet. "Madness?"

I rolled my eyes. "Misconception, sir. Her misconception that I married her as a vomiting infant in some mini church a priest carpentered for special cases like ours who insists to be married after being just alive for one year."

Shikaku pointed at me. "Don't raise your voice at your superior, Shikamaru."

"Pardon me." I scratched my cheek. "I'm sorry, Mr. Yamanaka, sir."

Inoichi chortled and slapped Shikaku's back, encouraging him to loosen up. Shikaku motioned to my bag and told me he would be waiting for me outside the room with the wedding ring around my finger.

Judging by his awkwardness, I was certain a part of him still believed I kept a relationship behind his back. I should have told him how helpful his doubts were but instead I bounced off the bed and dressed in what clothes he brought me from my wardrobe.

He drove me mad.
People had been coming and going, coming and going. I was too tired to answer questions, but Lady Tsunade couldn't seem to notice that no matter how hard I hinted.

She had a worry I had never seen on her before, and so often, I had glimpses of the woman she was apart from being the Fifth Hokage. Her words were strict like they always were but her touch reminded me of my mother's. Mum would be horrified, yes, but I wanted her to be with me now more than ever.

"Alright." The Hokage removed another two wires curled around my arm that pierced a nerve beside my pulse. I winced, no longer caring whether she viewed it as a sign of weakness or not.

I was in pain, and nobody cared to tell me why.

As I watched her update my prognosis, I remembered what happened yesterday when she visited me after nightfall. I had asked her why there were ANBUs outside my room. Perhaps she thought I would not sense it, but their containment jutsu was only as obscure as the sparse air of a genjutsu. She had only smiled and denied it was for containment, explaining that it was for security against possible attacks instead. "After all," she had said, "Ryo could have accomplices interested in taking their revenge on you."

I had agreed it was indeed for security, but not for my benefit.

After that first attempt, I decided it would be my last...at least, with her.

I scratched my back, and she lifted her eyes to take note of my action. "Lady Tsunade," I said, "how long do I have to remain here?"

"It depends. We don't know the full extent of the jutsu Ryo assaulted you with." She hung the prognosis sheet back on the foot of my bed.

"Has Sai regained consciousness?"

"Not yet, but he's just asleep from all the drugs we've been injecting him." Slipping into her green robe, she rolled her eyes and said, "He's fine, Sakura. You should worry about yourself."

"And Shikamaru?"

"With Shikaku. He's being briefed on his therapy."

"What therapy?"

"Chakra therapy. I told you, his channels were blocked and chakra still can't flow through them properly." She busied herself with packing the scrolls on the nurse's desk. "And it's not as though Shikamaru has a lot of chakra. Once Neji returns from his mission, he'll be assisting him in getting back in shape."

I looked down at my hands, imagining it over his burnt arm, healing him. "How long before I see
him again?"

When she gave no response, I turned to her and saw she was staring at my hands also. It was there again, that anxiety she had been wearing since I woke up, but she would not tell me why even if I asked a thousand times.

"Are you worried for him?"

"Naturally, yes," I said, feeling the words roll and tumble on my tongue. "I mean, when I saw him earlier, all I felt was relief that he was alive. After all we've been through, despite how ignorant and stubborn I was during the mission, he came for me…he and Sai."

"He's fine," she assured. "A lot of people are taking care of him. As I said, get well so you can see him soon."

The Fifth left. I sat there, alone, wondering why everybody was acting strangely.

In fact, everything else since I first saw Shikamaru had been strange.

My containment area was separated from the hospital by two miles of land crowded by a few trees. From the window opposite my bed, I could see the east side of the hospital, and in the hallways, the people passing.

It took me two hours of intense observation before I confirmed what this truly was.

The medic looking after me, Genji, excused himself, and Ino entered.

I turned from the window, slowly, and blinked twice to check if she would vanish. She didn't - she was real - and I rubbed my eyes to wipe the tears without her noticing.

"Hey, forehead." Ino approached, the heels of her shoes creating a rhythm against the linoleum.

Tip, tap, tip, tap, tip, tap…like water dripping…like water from my hair dripping back to a pond.

I grunted and sat on the windowsill. "It's Ino the pig. Two weeks, and you still haven't lost the weight? Hey, your nail polish is undone!"

She stopped and collapsed on the edge of the bed, sobbing.

I jumped off the ledge. "What's wrong? Did something happen?"

She motioned for me to come close. I stepped forward, and she threw her arms around me. "You were gone for two weeks, idiot!"

"I was home the second week."

"You were unconscious the whole time!"

I bent lower on my knees to embrace her properly. Her hair still smelled of that lavender shampoo she created herself, and the perfume oil she grinded from roses was still dabbed on her neck. Burying my face on her shoulder, I cried.

As the tears escaped my eyes and soaked her dress, exhaustion overwhelmed me. I sat beside her and pulled away, but I couldn't bring myself to let go of her arms. I hung my head low, ashamed and tired, caring and not caring at the same time.
"Oh, Sakura...I never knew," Ino muttered. "No one told me. If I had known much earlier, I wouldn't have left your side in intensive care."

"I don't know why, but I'm...I-I..." I shook my head faster and faster. "I'm so scared."

Tucking my hair behind my ears, she lifted my chin up and grinned. "C'mon, you were scared to pick flowers in the field when we were kids, but your choice and arrangement was one of the best in class! You were scared to look at boys in the academy, but one day you suddenly came hollering at us about how much you liked Sasuke! How about the chuunin exams? I saw how anxious you were in the forest, but you and Naruto and Sasuke managed to reach the tower! Heck, you didn't even back out during the preliminaries even if you were up against me!"

I ran my hand across my face and took a deep breath.

"That's it!" She fished in her pouch and brought out cosmetics. "Ta da! Let's get you cleaned up in the bathroom and make you feel better again. And - " She brought out a pair of scissors. " - I'll also have to trim your hair. It's a disaster, Sakura! Let's go."

As I sat there, listening to her narrate her last mission involving genins, I almost felt like the child I was in the meadow sporting a red ribbon around my head, always in need of comfort, always in need of assurance.

I closed my eyes as she leaned me back on the sink to wash my hair. The coldness of the water bit my scalp, and I jerked forward, struck by the familiarity of the touch.

"What's the matter?" She twisted the faucet close, and the shrill sound of water clashing against the sink died.

Stillness. The stagnancy of a pond.

I scratched my back and waved the thought off. She resumed to wash my hair.

"I wasn't as petty as you make me sound, Ino," I said. "You were threatened by me, admit it!"

She scanned her assortment of hair products with a sneer. "Threatened? No matter how close you were to Sasuke, he never fell for you! There was no reason for me to be threatened."

"Why was it always Sasuke between us?"

"...I don't know. He kept us close, though."

I sank in my robe. "I never told you...I did try to stop him."

Ino and I stared at each other through our reflections in the bathroom mirror.

"I knew more than I told. Orochimaru. The curse mark," I said. "Partly, his absence is my fault too. I was afraid Sasuke would hate me if I intervened even more. I was terrified, Ino, and now he's gone away...so far from us."

"And Naruto? How's he coping?"

"He's keeping his promise," I hissed. "No one needs to tell me, but it's that promise that's burdening him."

She rubbed cream on my scalp. "If that's so, then you should get better soon. Naruto will be furious when he finds out what happened to you!"
"What did happen to me?"

The movements of her hand slowed and she turned to get a comb. Once her face was visible in the mirror again, I saw the light in her eyes flicker, and she changed her frown into a smile. "This, you idiot!" she hollered. "Intensive care under the Hokage's watch is serious, Sakura! Hey, what scent do you prefer: rose or pine?"

"Why am I under the Hokage's watch?" I spun in my chair and gripped the backrest. "How come you're allowed to see me while I'm in quarantine?"

Ino dropped the comb and jumped back, startled by the clangor bouncing off the tiles.

I picked up the comb. "Okay? You can stop looking funny at me like that."

"Quarantine?" she squeaked. "This isn't quarantine. Why would you be in quarantine? You must have hit your head real hard during your mission if you're beginning to think like that. Geez."

I looked harder at her. There must be something on her that could help me understand; Ino was giving an unconscious hint that my suspicions were right. Look, Sakura.

She turned my chair again and took the brush from me.

That one last look I had of her before she wrapped her collars around her neck confirmed it.

After we got eliminated from our first chuunin exams, Ino told me that she grew rashes on her neck every time something happened that was gravely against her will to comply to. "Like fighting you in that tower," she had chimed. "You're a baby! I don't like hurting babies."

I was about to point it out until I sensed how uncomfortable she had gotten.

I nearly forgot.

Those rashes first appeared around the time she found out her mother was ill and she made her promise not to tell Inoichi because it was nothing serious. Inoichi just recovered from a mental attack during an interrogation in a foreign country. Her mother was afraid he could not do with more stress. She died.

Now those red spots were on her neck, redder than ever, and I was too much of a coward to ask why she needed to lie to me. If it was against her will, she should help herself and tell me the truth.

Wait. How bad was the truth?

"Sakura?"

The towel around my hair loosened and slipped. I caught it, glimpsing my reflection while so doing. "You cut it too short, Ino!"

"What? I did?"

Outside the bathroom, footsteps sounded. We exchanged looks and peered through the door.

Shikamaru stood beside my bed, searching the room, his hands in his trouser pockets. When, finally, his eyes darted to our heads which were poked out the bathroom door, he gaped. "Bad timing?"

I retreated inside.
"Not really, I just finished fixing her. Came to talk?" Ino tugged my arm. "Sakura?"

I put on the slip-ons Lady Tsunade brought me earlier and stepped out with Ino, aware of him watching.

For a minute, none spoke, none moved, and I scratched the base of my back. So itchy.

"You cut her hair, Ino?" Shikamaru said.

She let go of my hand and proceeded to file her things back into her pouch. "Yeah, uhm, should I go? I should go. The hospital needs as much help as they can get."

"Hey." I flung my arms around her. "Thank you. Thank you."

She slapped my back playfully. "No big deal, forehead. Get better. I'm going."

Shikamaru sidestepped as she passed, blocking her way. "Hey, can you…tell Choji I'm fine? I'll treat him to some barbeque once I'm out. You too."

"Yeah, of course!" She squeezed herself through the gap between him and the wall, chuckling. "I really have to go now, Shikamaru. See you guys around."

I waved at her, and she was gone.

"Did something happen with you two?" I asked.

He snapped his head towards me as though I just threw a kunai at him. "Ino and I? No."

"Oh."

"Your hair looks…great." He excused himself and went behind the division and reappeared with Ginji's folding chair. He sat. "I think you've never had it that short before?"

"Yeah." I climbed the bed, utterly aware of him, and sighed.

"Listen-" we chorused. I blinked at him, he at me, and we laughed a little.

"Go ahead," he said.

Tip, tap. The water again. "I'm sorry about earlier…about the ring. Lady Tsunade said it was only practical to remove it because you've been through operations." Through the corner of my eye, something glimmered, and I paused to see what it was.

Shikamaru held up his hand and his wedding ring was around his finger. He sucked in a breath and fidgeted on his seat, his face red. "I demanded dad to give it back to me before seeing you." Putting his hand back in his pocket, he added, "Yours is still with your other things. They're being cleaned, just in case the metal retained an amount of electric charge from the jutsu Ryo used."

"That's sensible." I massaged my temple. "I'm sorry. That was so irrational of me. I wake up and the basic procedures for intensive care flee from my mind! Anyway, how are you? How come you're allowed here?"

"My intensive care chamber is just next to yours. It doesn't require much effort to take those couple of strides to see you, Sakura."

"You're lying."
He met my gaze at last. "First I always misplace our wedding ring, and now I'm lying?"

"This isn't intensive care anymore." I went to the window, trembling with frustration, and made a hand seal.

Shikamaru ran to me and wrapped my hands in his. He panted. "What the hell...?"

"This isn't intensive care, right?" A surge of anger and confusion overtook me, but I managed to suppress them. I felt the blood recede from my cheeks, and I leaned my forehead against our hands. "Why are you lying to me?"

He was silent for a while before moving closer and whispering, "You know?"

I nodded.

"But do you know where you are?"

"Underground. This is quarantine. The view outside is a genjutsu. The people passing the hospital corridors are the same, varied by only three colors of clothing and coming in an interval of twenty minutes. I've read the Hokage's files many times before. This is only necessary when a patient is a threat." I untangled my right hand from his and reached back.

He caught my elbow, stopping my fingers from touching the dressing at the base of my spine. "Don't scratch. Please don't be upset. I'll tell you why you're here."

"How can I not be upset?"

He seemed lost for a moment. He prodded me towards him. The side of my face pressed against his chest, and deep inside me, annoyance melted into contentment. The itching stopped, and I was fine.

"Better?"

"Yes."

We moved back to the bed and sat facing each other. "You don't remember anything from the time you reached Ryo's hideout, correct?" he said.

"I lost consciousness, and the last I remember is seeing your face."

He put his elbow above his knee and cupped his chin. "I'm in quarantine too, Sakura. They think something important happened, and we've lost all memories of it. They're waiting to see if we remember it, and if we don't, Inoichi will be entering our minds for the answers. Dad won't lie to me. They're just making sure we're fit to go out on missions after recovering from this one. What if we recall an information that could save Konoha while we're in action? It could be too late to deliver the message."

I leaned back on the headboard, scrutinizing him, wanting to doubt him, but couldn't. "That's all?"

"Yeah. I thought there was something more they're not telling me too."

"Lady Tsunade could have just told me that!"

"Maybe she couldn't," he said. "Maybe she wasn't sure you'd believe her, especially after the shock of waking up in intensive care. The Hokage's really tired from looking after the three of us. She allowed me to come here to tell you."
My body relaxed, and the room felt safe. "She knew I'd believe you."

He rubbed his neck. "What are husbands for? Mom always believes dad because she said she'd feel it anyway if he's lying, and he knows how strong her instincts are, so there was no use lying to each other. They're funny that way. I try lying to mom sometimes to see if she'd see through it…heck, whenever she does, she makes me clean the entire house. Now I pay the water bill. Next year, I'm sure they'll make me pay for the electricity too. What a drag."

"I believe you," I whispered.

He stared.

"Anything wrong with what I said?"

"Nah. Just happy you're…you believe me.".

For a while, we sat in silence, and I enjoyed watching him think. Somewhere in me, I was being stitched up and completed, like a doll being painted, or a canvas being framed. I was satisfied being here, so near to him.

"Naruto's in a mission." He yawned and stretched his arms overhead. "The Fifth sent him on one so he'd stop worrying about you. Say, when he comes back…I was just wondering whether you guys are still on Sasuke's tracks."

"Of course we are." I frowned. "Team Seven will never be complete without him. But it is taking long, isn't it? Once we're out, I'll train hard so I can help Naruto."

"Yeah? I think you do enough."

"You're kidding me."

There was a sharp edge to his gaze and a drop of query to his tone. "Remember the time Konoha was attacked by Orochimaru? Kakashi sent us out with Naruto to track down Sasuke. I went back to delay those fiends following us because I thought you'd want to get to Sasuke and help him out rather than to stay behind."

"You called me a talentless kunoichi. Yeah, what of it?"

"I didn't!"

"Trust me, you did."

"I apologized for that."

"You can apologize now."

He winced. "Sorry. I was nervous back there."

"Ha." I sneered. "So what of it, then?"

"I…it's…you were so eager to get to Sasuke. You really like him, don't you?"

Tip. Tap. Tip. Tap. I touched my hair, but it was dry. "I'm going to get him back. Ah, wait, no – I mean, he's just a friend now and you're my-"

He waved his hand dismissively, a sly smile on his lips. "It's okay, Sakura. If I were Sasuke, I would
be glad to know someone cares for me so much. If I were _him_, that is."

"But you're not Sasuke." I scowled. Tip, tap. "You're my husband."

Shikamaru didn't move. "...Right. Enough beating around the bush here. Sakura, the other reason I came here is because I want...you out of quarantine as soon as possible. It hurts me seeing you here, knowing it's all my fault." He paused. "Dad and Lady Tsunade doesn't know what I really intend to do."

"I don't get it."

"I'll get you out," he explained. "So you have to help me put our story together. The sooner we recall whatever information it is they expect from us, the sooner we leave. Are you okay with that? Are you upset with me?"

"No, no," I ran my hand through my hair and stopped at my nape, thinking. "I want to leave. I'll do my best."

"Good. Okay, Sakura, when was the first time you met Kana? Do you remember what age?"

"Thirteen? I was thirteen, maybe. Kakashi fetched me afterwards."

"You were alone when you met Kana?"

"Oh yeah, Sasuke found me first!" I smiled at the thought of him coming to my rescue, more than what was appropriate to show in front of Shikamaru. "Naruto was taking too long mastering a technique, so I took it as an...ah, let's say, an opportunity to stroll the woods with Sasuke. It was just a silly infatuation before...anyway, we found this hut displaying beautiful chimes. He was thirsty, so he asked if we could have something to drink. Kana was the owner of the house."

"Did anything peculiar happen?"

"Well...Sasuke and I were chatting with Kana inside. We liked her. It was obvious she was sick, though."

"How?"

"Coughing and scratching. We were talking about the travelers passing the border of the fire country when Sasuke suddenly got up and told me we were leaving. Kakashi came then, and we hurried off. I asked why they were being so rude, and Sasuke told me there was a man in the walls of the house, watching him. We weren't safe."

Shikamaru straightened his back. He stood. "Do you have any idea who that could be?"

"Orochimaru's men? Weren't they always interested in Sasuke?"

"Perhaps."

"Perhaps?"

"In your sessions with Kana during our mission, she mentioned a program, didn't she? A child sent to penetrate hidden villages and serve as ears for Konoha?"

I stood and paced the room, lying that I was a bit over-rested and needed to move about. Kana made me swear to keep this our secret. If she died - if I failed the operation - she wanted one soul to acknowledge her existence. I shouldn't betray her.
"They worked for Konoha, even if Konoha disowned them," I said, disappointed at myself. "The former ANBU that served as their master told them they used to be many, but not all survived. Those of them fortunate to be alive were the chosen heroes who would one day be welcomed home to Konoha and accepted…they just had to fulfill their purpose and wait very patiently. Ryo wanted out because he no longer believed in that purpose. He left, he returned for Kana after ten years, and I knew she only came with Ryo to spare my life and try to save her true love from his madness. Afterwards you yelled at me that I couldn't save Sasuke…"

Shikamaru sat on his heels, head down, fingers laced in front of him. "That was a lie. I am sorry."

"I know you are." Water dripped on my chest. I could feel the water. "You came for me. I woke up in the pond, looking for my husband, and the first man I see is you, frightened and tired, but you were there. Fifteen years, and you've never broken your promise to save me every time, no matter the means, no matter the cost." I shrugged and smiled my best smile at him. "What can I do to show my gratitude? Tell me, I'll do anything. It's okay."

"Sakura…"he whispered. "There is one thing."

"Are you all right? What is it, Shikamaru?"

"Please don't forget Sasuke."

I would have said 'okay 'if it were really okay then. Why should it matter to Shikamaru that I never forget Sasuke?'
Chapter 6

Tsunade

"Shikaku,"

"Yes, Fifth?"

"Explain to me again why Shikamaru is under observation."

Shikaku looked up from the scrolls he was unsealing, at Inoichi, and then at me.

I had waited until his son was inside quarantine, talking to Sakura, and until the rest of his investigation team had left for a quick break before pursuing this subject. For certain, he wouldn't mind explaining in front of Inoichi; they had been comrades for so long, and their children were in one team for five years. Now the room was almost still, waiting for his response.

"There's a chance the effect of the jutsu on him could only be delayed compared to Sakura's, milady."

"I've heard that, yes, and I agree, but I want to hear the reason of the father – not the shinobi."

Shikaku put down the scrolls and returned his quill into the bottle of ink. "Something has changed with my son, and I am uncertain what it is, exactly. For this very reason, I am afraid he may also be a threat. Not now, but perhaps later."

I walked around my desk, wishing I had a bottle of sake to bring with me as I joined them in their table. "I know it's none of my business, Shikaku, and you can call this invading your privacy if you will. You must realize that the jutsu may have touched an area in your son's life that is intimate, and only you may know what it is. To express your doubts and fears concerning his behavior would help us a great deal in this observation. If you can't tell me, then I'll allow you a confidant – Inoichi. He can give me the information you give him in the form of technicalities instead."

Shikaku stood, his head level, and he said in a solemn voice, "Forgive me, Lady Hokage, but I have nothing to share. The truth is, I...I am in a dilemma with him myself. After Asuma's death, I had allowed myself to serve as his...shock-absorber, if I can call it that. The words I hear from his mouth are mostly angry and very few. Our joy and peace are expressed tacitly, and after witnessing what we did yesterday, I am not confident that I can say my son keeps no secrets from me."

Whenever I looked at him, I said to myself that was how Shikamaru would be someday. Their hair spiked in all directions, their eyes dim as their shadows, and their stance strong but humble. Yet, appearances could not account for their bond as father and son. I had taken them too lightly. "He's still a boy, if you ask me," I said, suppressing the touch of sympathy in my voice. "If he does keep secrets, you would know, I'm sure."

"And it's not as if there's anybody else to turn to now," Inoichi said. "He's a smart kid; he knows when it's best to confess something. It is the life of Sakura Haruno he'd be risking by staying quiet."

"Shikamaru and her are not-" Shikaku apologized and shut his mouth.

I held up one of the scrolls: classified information on all ANBUs since the first generation of Hidden-
Leaf shinobis, unsealed for the first time in over a hundred years. "They are not…? Go on."

He sighed. "Even if Shikamaru would not have told me about having a relationship, he would have told his mother. He's sensible; he'd have asked for my blessing afterwards. He knows it is not a game especially because they are both shinobis. Apart from that, he's my heir. There was enough trouble in my family when Shikamaru missed the annual meeting with the scholars and the Pillars thought I was hiding the fact of his death. His death isn't even a fact."

"Pillars?" I asked.

"They're the elders of my clan, milady. They keep the scholars checked and guarded. You will be meeting them in five months to assess which information you want to retrieve and which you want us to keep and invest on. It'll be extremely important for you to prepare for it, milady, as we specialize in rare forms of medicine. It coincides with the renewal of the Yamanaka, Nara, and Akimichi clans' oath to the Hidden-Leaf village. I'm meant to brief you on that next month."

"And I thought the Hyugas were fancy."

"We're not a noble clan like the Hyugas but we are numerous and troublesome."

Inoichi chuckled. "We live humble lives in the village, milady, to escape from the fact that we have blood relations in our responsibility. It takes time to get accustomed to all the clans and our whims, but you'll get used to it."

"Does this mean that Ino and Shikamaru are not allowed to be romantically involved under any circumstances?"

Shikaku and Inoichi looked at each other.

"They're your heirs. Unless you plan to remarry, Inoichi, and produce a male heir."

Shikaku patted his shoulder. "It seems to me I'm not the only one with problems in his clan."

"Has there been a case like that? Both heirs, a Nara and a Yamanaka romantically involved?"

"It's difficult to consider that prospect, seeing as the two act like siblings," said Inoichi."

"With your daughter's high standards, I'm certain she hasn't even considered him," said Shikaku."

Old men, I thought. It seemed to me they've lost all ties with their childhood. "Anyway, what does Ino think of Shikamaru's relationship with Sakura?"

"I inquired about that when I met with her earlier and all she said was that Sakura and Shikamaru worked well together as colleagues, but they're not the type to interfere with each other's personal lives."

Shikaku sighed again, his brow slightly furrowed. "Plus, the last he would want is a woman who can beat him up." He paused. "O-of course, I mean no offense to you, Lady Hokage!"

"Sakura does beat up Naruto without considering that he has the nine-tails…” There was no question in that. She wasn't his type, and he wasn't her type, but I still couldn't rule it out as impossible.

Inoichi gathered in his arms the scrolls I would have to seal again and arranged them on my desk. "Ino doesn't tell me much detail either, but Sakura is the closest she has to a confidant after her mother, and she cares for Shikamaru like a brother. Ino would have told me if there was anything to
be concerned about, knowing I can come to you directly, Shikaku."

"But a failed jutsu involving all elements of rebirth can't have an effect based on nothing!" I insisted.

"We asked Shikamaru – he denied it." 

"He would have confessed by now if it would help save Sakura – even if he has to face your fists, Shikaku."

"It could also be that Sakura has unspoken feelings for Shikamaru."

The two men looked at me. "That could be," said Shikaku.

"Who would have noticed if she had suddenly harbored feelings for him?"

"Yamato and Sai went on missions with them."

"Even if Sai is conscious, he wouldn't be much help in that area."

"Who else?"

"Naruto." I called an ANBU and instructed him to inform me the moment Naruto returned to Konoha.

The discussion about secret love affairs ended there. I had wanted to avoid delving into their private matters with their children, but I found it necessary to know those things if they played a part in curing Sakura. I, too, had replayed in my head the moments I spent with her, scrutinizing the stories she confided in me, trying to see if there had been hints of infatuation for an unnamed shinobi in her words.

I was sealing the last of the ANBU classified scrolls when Shizune escorted Shikamaru and Ino inside my office. I told her to go back and check the tattoo on Sakura's back, which silenced the people in the room.

"She's not confusing me with Sasuke, nor is she merging me with Ryo more than the fact that she thinks I'm her husband. We can steer clear of that now," Shikamaru said as he approached me, Ino tailing him.

"For now," Shikaku corrected from where he stood beside me.

Shikamaru only looked away.

I sat up straight to remind them of my presence, and in my presence, I preferred no family feud.

"What else?"

"She's still intent on bringing Sasuke back," Ino said.

"That's a good sign that she's still herself."

Kakashi entered through the window, hiding his Icha Icha book in his chuunin vest and bowing to me in apology. His tardiness and that book reminded me of the proposal I had Shizune write about banning that perverted novel. It seemed more ninjas saw Kakashi's reading habit as inspiring and had turned to that in an effort to excel in their field. The truth was, the only field they were to excel once they finished the series was in professional singleness throughout their sad existence.

"What about the program? Did she add any interesting detail?" he asked, diverting the conversation
before I could scold him. So much like Jiraiya, only with more grace.

"Yeah…it sounded as if the ANBU who was their master brainwashed them into being spies," Shikamaru said. "They'd be heroes and welcomed back to Konoha and whatnot. Idealistic and manic, if you ask me. Ryo was sensible enough to leave."

"What is this program, anyway?"

Kakashi ceased midway grabbing the scroll on top of the heap. "Can they know, Lady Tsunade?"

"You know?"

"That was my first assignment as part of the ANBU."

Oh. I should read Kakashi's records again. "They should know. Although, once you do, you will be oathed never to speak about this to another soul. This isn't just another ANBU classified mission." I looked them directly in the eyes, relaying the enormity of the information with my glare. "This started as an attempt to destroy Konoha, and if it ever leaks to anyone outside our circle, we will be risking war with other villages. We can't have that. Do the both of you understand?"

Ino and Shikamaru hesitated, and then nodded.

I didn't want to begin, yet I had to. I was the Fifth Hokage whether it was convenient or not, and this was my problem now. If the goal of this rebirth jutsu using Sakura Haruno as vessel indeed meant war, I would make sure we won. I would make sure everyone in my village was safe. I would have to stop denying what had all ready befallen us.

"Twenty years ago, during Minato Namikaze's reign as the Fourth Hokage, a group of children were abandoned in the forest outside Konoha. An ANBU squad led by a commander named Takeo, found them and soon realized they were only awaiting their deaths due to the amount of mercury already in their systems. Later, we discovered that they were kidnapped, hurt, and left to die in our premises by none other than Orochimaru. Those children, as a matter of fact, came from known families in various hidden villages and had been missing for three weeks. Shinobis were looking for them. The Fourth, deciding Konoha could not return them in fear that it would risk war against us, ordered for them to be given painless deaths in a sanctuary outside the Fire Country."

"So they can't be traced back to us, correct?"

"Yes, Shikamaru. Even the poison used had its origins from the land farthest our own just so we would not be blamed," I said. "All files relating to them were burned. Their discovery never happened, and the squad Takeo led was oathed to secrecy 'til death. If one word of it slipped their mouths, the Fourth himself would make them pay for risking the Hidden-Leaf."

"But before the execution, Takeo suggested the children be used to our advantage instead. He proposed a program wherein they would be taught in the ways of a Hidden-Leaf shinobi and penetrate their own homelands to warn Konoha of any plots against us. Minato refused him without a second thought, and ordered the children to be executed immediately."

Ino glimpsed everyone in the room, estimating their stillness. "…Were they executed?"

Shikamaru, of all people, wished the answer that would come out of my mouth was 'yes'. I saw it in his every move - how he would give up any limb than be in the position he was in now. I wished I could rewrite this story for them too, but adolescent or not, a shinobi had to face the truth. "Except for eight. Takeo escaped with eight out of thirty-two children. They had been top priority bounties until the death of the Fourth Hokage."
"You stopped searching? Why?"

"Because the nine-tails nearly wiped out Konoha." Kakashi answered, resting on the window ledge. "We all thought the worst had happened."

"Kana and Ryo were one of them?" asked Ino.

"Yes," answered Shikamaru. "Sakura said so. However, if penetration was their purpose, and unless Takeo had previous records on practice of forbidden jutsu, the whole idea of rebirth couldn't have come from the program. Ryo left. What did he do in the ten years he was gone?"

"He could have been away from the program, but he was still in contact with Kana," Shikaku suggested.

Inoichi requested me to open two scrolls I had sealed in my own design, and joined the conversation while waiting for me to finish. "Let's say they were fourteen when we found them, and the gap between that year to the present is twenty years – they'd be thirty-four now."

"Sakura said Kana and Ryo met when they were eleven."

"None of the thirty-two children found was under the age of thirteen."

"So they lied to Sakura and me."

"They would have been married at nineteen then," I said, handing the scroll to Inoichi and whirling my chair to Kakashi's direction. "Did you see Kana the time you fetched her and Sasuke in that house?"

"Yes. Although I barely recall the details of her face, I could say she has aged a lot since we last saw her." He held his chin. "If she's supposed to be in her early thirties now, she appeared a lot older than she's supposed to when we found her in the cave. Around forty, would be my estimate."

"It could just be the jutsu's effect after it went haywire."

Shikaku approached Shikamaru with a photograph. "This is Kana now, in the lab. Did she look like this when you met her during your mission?"

He squinted, his lips parting wider the longer he looked. "Worse. I thought she was nearing fifty. She appears her proper age there."

"So she's gotten younger?" I considered my theory of her aging as a counter-effect of the jutsu. If Shikamaru restrained it and unknowingly reversed the effects, it could be that she was experiencing the karma even as a corpse. I stopped to think it over. Loopholes – everywhere. My theories were not good enough. "She's thirty-four, looked fifty during the mission – maybe because of the disease turned forty in the cave, and one week later, she's her proper age."

"We need to clarify the timeline somehow." Shikaku probed a cigarette out of his breast pocket, saw me frowning, and hid it under his sleeve. "I mean, to identify which is true and which is not in what Kana told Sakura."

Ino stepped forward, her frame rigid, her jaw tight. "Lady Tsunade, please allow father and I to enter Sakura's brain. Maybe we can also find out why she suddenly thinks Shikamaru is her h-husband."

I could not stomach the thought. Put in Sakura's shoes, how would I feel, knowing strangers would see memories I preferred to be secret, would find memories of another I didn't know even existed in
I gripped the armrests, pushing emotions from my face as best I could. It was okay. Inoichi was a professional. Ino was her best friend. I had no choice.

"Me too." Shikamaru held Ino's shoulder, murmuring, "But I don't want you in my head. Those things – what I saw is far worse than what you will witness in Sakura's memories. You mustn't be where I was."

"It's time to grow up," I told him. "I know you've been teammates a long time, Shikamaru, but to spare her now is to render her helpless come the time she has no choice but to face worse memories."

"Only this once-"

"Shikamaru." Shikaku grimaced at his son.

Inoichi chuckled to lighten the mood. He ruffled Ino's hair. "There's no use arguing about that, really. Ino can only do one sitting a day. What Shikamaru might be trying to say is he doesn't want her to use his head as a training ground. We know what happened the last time she lost control and ran out of chakra."

"Dad!"

I needed my sake badly. "Ino, you'll be more use identifying any lapse or damage in Sakura's memories than in Shikamaru's. Another sitting might harm you, and I won't risk putting you into a coma like Inoichi ended up in once before. If we lose you, Konoha loses a major advantage. All right, people, let's go." I picked TonTon up from beneath my table, disturbing his sleep. "And Shikaku, while we're preparing our two patients for mind-infiltration, put Kana and Ryo's bodies under ice. I'll be checking on them later and hopefully I don't die under this stress. Did I say let's go? Let's go."

Drugged and asleep, Sakura returned to herself. She was Sakura again in my sight whenever she lay still and quiet. No significant changed had occurred to her, yet guilt swarmed me every moment I heard her voice. In some weird sense, as I readied her mind to be infiltrated, as I stroked her pale hair, as I apologized to her for doing this without her consent, a part of me knew she was different, if not totally estranged from the girl I nurtured.

Shikamaru was a different matter. While I prepared him, I took his silence as an opportunity to affirm an observation that had nagged at me since he came to report.

"You don't have any feelings for Sakura, huh?"

He moved his eyes to find me at the head of the bed, filling a syringe with morphine. "So invading memories is supposed to hurt me?"

"This is only to prevent you from experiencing headaches in case Inoichi searches deeper than normal. If your body fights the pain, coma is the least of your problems." I rolled his sleeve up. "Stop changing the subject just because you know what I'll be asking next."

"I don't know."

"What?"

"You're thinking I'm being protective of Ino because it's her I like." His face remained vacant of any expression. "I don't know."
I searched for a visible nerve on the inside of his elbow. "If I tell Shikaku, will he stop thinking you lied to him? About your relationship with Sakura?"

"I hope so," he said. "But let's not give names."

"Why not?"

"It's...troublesome."

Once the infiltration began, I forbade anybody but Ino and Inoichi in the room where they probed Sakura's brain for answers.

"Answers," I spat. I was only angry because I would be the one to make the ugliest decisions depending on their findings. Curse Jiraiya for refusing the job and suggesting I become Hokage in his place. Curse Naruto for persuading me. No, I take Naruto's curse back.

Shizune popped out of nowhere while I paced the hall. She took TonTon from me and replaced him with a bottle of water and a blue capsule. "It's supposed to ease you, Lady Tsunade," she said.

I waved the capsule in the air. "This is for old - for very old women - are you mocking me?"

She and TonTon grinned. "It might work? Lady Tsunade, if you won't take that, at least eat properly."

"I need sake. Ten bottles. Now."

"She has her own family," Shizune said. The usual bliss of her aura had dropped, and her face bore no sympathy. "With all due respect, but Sakura Haruno has a mother waiting for her at home. You have to consider now what to tell her if what they find in there requires us to hold her away for much longer."

My feet weighed me down in one place, and I looked at them, asking why.

Her daughter could become another person in an indefinite amount of days. That was the truth. Shinobi or not, she had to swallow what the world had shoved into my mouth as Hokage.

Fortunately, Inoichi and Ino finished before Shizune could press for an answer, and I was salvaged from having to address that matter. Later, I would. Now, I would save Sakura.

Shikamaru's turn didn't last long. He came out, his arm around Ino's shoulders for support, and he held his head and groaned.

Inoichi asked if he could begin, and I nodded despite the implicit strife between us all.

"I'll proceed with Sakura's, because Shikamaru pretty much told us everything he has in his head. Nothing much is new. Anyway, most of her memories from the mission are blurred." He paused to let Ginji and Shizune wheel Sakura out of the room and back to her quarantine.

My student.

"And?" Shikamaru's voice trembled.

"The blur is like a preying animal, an animate force crawling to her previous memories. It's the jutsu, I'm sure."

"Are they being replaced by Kana's memories?"
Father and daughter shared a glance.

"This is what's happening," explained Ino. "A fog is slowly covering her film strip of memories, while a developed picture is attached to the end of that strip, doing nothing. Well, nothing as of yet."

"And that developed picture is?" I asked.

"Shikamaru," Inoichi said, "Sakura recounted to you that in the pond, she was looking for her husband and she saw you, right? Through joint efforts and snippets of your brief battle, Ino and I did a 360 degrees of the pond at that exact moment Sakura said she saw you."

Shikaku jogged towards us, mopping the sweat on his face with his hands. "What did you find? Was the timeline correct?"

"No, but we found something very important," said Ino.

"The developed picture at the end of her memories, that memory Sakura remembers so clearly – it's not hers." Inoichi flipped his pad back to the drawing of the seed. "This tattoo on her back could be the physical manifestation of that memory. During the quick 360 degrees around the pond, Ino and I clearly saw that at the exact moment Kana opened her eyes to look at Ryo, which was within her view, Shikamaru stepped between him and her."

"The cord," Shikamaru blurted, his eyes round, his face ashen. "I moved in to cut the cord that bound Sakura to Kana the exact moment she was looking for her husband! Sakura registered that final memory of Kana before Kana died and merged me with Ryo, hence she thinks we're…"

"Worse," Ino said. "Based on what we know of Kana, the failed rebirth jutsu could be messing with their similar desires to bring back the man they love, and Sakura might blend her memory of Sasuke and Kana's memory of Ryo to the image of you all because of those two seconds before you cut the cord."

The world paid its respect to our grievances by being silent for a brief moment. In that indefinite moment in a time lost, the Fifth Hokage acknowledged the corresponding plan of action to this damage…while the woman I was apart from my duties decided that if I was Sakura's mother, I would prefer to hear the problem with a solution already at hand.

I was so sorry.

"I see." Tossing the blue capsule into my mouth and swallowing, I said, "Gather our team. I have a plan."
Chapter 7

Shikamaru

My room was clean when I got home. Mom usually left it covered in a veil of dust so I had at least one chore to do upon returning from a mission. I inclined the sole of my foot into view, surprised they gathered not a single speck of dirt. In fact, the floor wax made moving around difficult.

Perhaps this was her agenda: to avenge her restless nights by attempting to make me slip and fall face-first on the ground.

As I was stuffing three, black turtlenecks in my bag, I did slip.

I lay on the floor without the slightest intention of getting up any time soon.

I knew the truth, and the truth hurt too much. Mom bothered with my room because she knew I would need a suitable place to rest in once I was released from the hospital. She wasn't mad at me, no; she was extremely perplexed if she wasted the floor wax on me.

I smirked, remembering how dad had to make her stop scolding me for playing with the floor wax once when I was eight. He would buy two more bottles, he assured her, to which she retorted by saying she didn't use liquid wax in the first place. Dad and I later discovered mom only bought the ones in those circular cans we always thought was cat food. And we were wondering what the cat food was for when we didn't own a cat.

After I finished packing, I would lie to her, and then I would apologize for having to lie.

We first saw each other again while I was searching for my shoes, and she kicked the front door open. For at least thirty seconds, we stared.

Mom dropped her six grocery bags.

I jumped to my feet and reached out to steady her, but she stretched her arm to stop me from coming nearer.

"I'm okay." She smiled, nodding to convince herself. "S-Shikamaru –"

"Hi, mom." I picked up the bags and returned her smile. "Let's put these in the pantry cabinet?"

She fell on her knees, laughing and crying at the same time.

It was my turn to drop the bags. I knelt in front of her and sighed. "You're scaring me, mom. I'm alive. I'm okay. How have you and dad been? Oh yeah, I already put the payment for the water bill on the kitchen table."

"I-I'm so happy!" She kissed my hands and put them on either sides of her face. "I didn't show Shikaku that I was worried because I knew how grave it had to be if the Hokage had to come here to assure me of your safety. You boys from the Nara clan are such bad liars! I'm glad you're home!"

I put my arms around her back and rested my weight on her. She didn't smell like Ino or Sakura; her scent was more like Kurenai's, only softer. She wore the fragrance of onions that broke me apart
from the stench of anesthetic, and it was only now that I truly felt I was home. "Yeah…I'm sorry, mom. I didn't mean to worry you. Did you lose weight?"

"The water bill was long overdue, Shikamaru!" She slapped my arm and pouted at me.

"You weren't going to pay it on my behalf?"

"I was intending to visit you to check if you were awake! You needed to know!"

That was mom, I thought. I loved her.

I helped her arrange the canned goods on separate cabinets. She was too happy, I couldn't break it so quickly with my lies. Anyway, she wouldn't make me clean the house even if she saw through it… would she?

"Mom," I said, pulling a chair for her to sit on.

She blinked at me, and then sat down. "You're going to talk to me. I don't like you developing that look of your father's when he's about to tell me something I won't like, Shikamaru."

I winced inwardly and sat next to her. With a deep breath and a quick prayer, I said, "The Hokage's sending me on a mission-"

"Another one?" She stood. "Lady Tsunade-!"

"It doesn't involve violence!" I said, before she could march out and create a ruckus. "I only have to decipher some codes. It's part of my therapy, mom. They have to see if my mind's working one hundred percent fine! Yeah, and it's not far from here. I'll be in our forest, in grandpa's old house there, where he cared for our deer."

She resumed sitting. "Oh, I see. You should have told me sooner! I was getting ready to attack your father!"

"…You can't visit me, mom." I stopped upon seeing her expression. She was a little girl in so many ways, but this time I couldn't deem her that. Her face was at war between weeping and roaring, but in the end, it was composure that reigned.

"Will you explain to me what that therapy is for?"

I didn't delve into the details, because the details included a lot of needles and the Byakugan. She nodded over and over, pretending to understand, but the only thing that must be running in her head were questions as to why I had to heal so far from her.

"Besides, it will be a good chance for me to learn how to make those rubber bands," I said.

She traced the lines of my palm, quiet, cherishing my presence, and then she brushed my hair back with her fingers. "Who will you be with?"

"…Sakura Haruno. She'll be my medic."

"The pink-haired girl under the Hokage's tutelage?"

"Yeah, that girl."

"Is she kind to you?"
"Of course."

"She's very pretty." Mom pinched my ear. "Don't do anything stupid, son. You signed a contract with me that you won't get married or have babies until you're thirty. Do you need me to show you your signature to remind you?"

"Ouch! I won't do anything with her! That hurts!"

"I'll check your things to make sure you have everything you need." She got up and I grabbed her elbow to stop her.

"Mom, I need to go now. Trust me, okay?" I embraced her for the final time, kissed the crown of her head, and waved goodbye.

"I was only kidding! I love you, Shikamaru!"

"Love you too, mom." I closed the front door without looking back. Pinching my nose-bridge, I assured myself that was the best I could have done it. Mom was a strong woman, and dad would be there to make her happy.

Someone poked my forehead. "You finished? Let's go?"

I looked up and choked on my own saliva.

Sakura grimaced, hitting my back to soothe me. "If I were Sakura, I'd be offended."

"Ino," I coughed. "Sorry."

"Mind Transfer lasts longer than before now, but I can't stay as long as convenient." She took one of my bags and threw it over her shoulder. "Let's go?"

We travelled from roof to roof, deciding it was a safer route so as to avoid meeting Sakura's colleagues. A few turns to the west, and we jumped down to her balcony.

"Shouldn't we use the door, Ino? I mean, meet her mom and talk to her?"

Ino took out a hairpin from behind her ear and picked at the lock. "No need. Sakura always goes though her balcony to avoid her family whenever they get annoying. Here, it's open." She waved me inside. "They're used to her just appearing in her room. Don't worry!"

"She brings men through her balcony, too?"

Ino paused to consider. "Let's use the door."

Meeting Mrs. Haruno was the least pleasant thing I had to do yet. She hugged Ino upon seeing her, completely ignoring that she was with a man. Ino hugged her back and spoke in Sakura's words, narrating to the worried mother the lies we had weaved together in Lady Tsunade's office.

"This is Shikamaru Nara." She stepped aside to present me. "He'll be with me to decipher the codes."

Mrs. Haruno shook my hand. I didn't know why, but some sort of electric current ran through my arm upon that short, physical contact, and my windpipe narrowed. Was this guilt?

"I'll be making sure your daughter's safe," I mumbled.
Mrs. Haruno thanked me as she gathered her yellow hair in a ponytail, emphasizing how relieved she was to see none of us was seriously injured. Sakura was a klutz; it was not surprising that I looked as unhealthy as I did after going on a mission with her.

"And how come you took two weeks, Sakura?" she said. "Did you go scouting the borders for that rogue ninja again?"

"Rogue ninja? You mean Sasuke?"

"Stop acting like you don't do it at the end of every mission!" Mrs. Haruno turned to me. "Was she ever out of your sight, Shikamaru?"

"Not once, ma'am. We were together all throughout the mission."

Her eyed me with suspicion, but she conceded with a smile. "That's good, that's good. Welcome back home, my pretty little monster. I understand you have another mission, so I won't hold you back. Do leave your father a note. He's been having nightmares about you since you left. I told him there was nothing to worry about! You're a great kunoichi, plus you're with a Nara."

"Shikamaru?" Ino prodded me to step in. "Help me with my things? My arms are kind of painful, still."

"Do you want food, Shikamaru?" called the mother from the kitchen.

Ino originally intended to refuse, but I beat her to requesting tea. When she asked me why, I shrugged and ignored the weakness nibbling at my knees. There were no words to explain the difficulty of facing Mrs. Haruno while knowing deep in my gut it was my fault her daughter was hanging on to dear life.

This became no easier despite it being Ino's soul. After all, it was still Sakura's body standing in front of me. The physical was difficult to ignore.

We waited for the snacks in her room. Once it arrived, I made sure to thank Mrs. Haruno as sincerely as I could.

Ino only took a sip and went about throwing clothes into a red travel bag.

I shut myself from seeing her female necessities by picking up the wooden frame containing Team Seven's group picture. The glare Naruto and Sasuke shared was friendly then. Perhaps Naruto would never look at Sasuke the way an enemy did, and he would always see him as a friend, but I wasn't sure if he could manage to return their relationship back to what it used to be.

"Sakura made every effort to be cute for Sasuke." She took the frame from me.

I stepped back without her noticing. "Did he ever feel the same about her?"

"…Not exactly, but…" She placed the frame on the table, facing down. "He cared for her. I didn't mean to, but I saw the memory from when she tried to stop Sasuke from leaving. For him to have hindered her from coming with him could mean he knew the danger he was pursuing, and he didn't want anybody else to endure the pain for him."

"Was Sasuke mad at her for trying to talk him out of it?"

"He thanked her. I…I was always convinced he never thought much of her, but the way he thanked her before knocking her unconscious was the most sincere I've ever heard him."
"Did you know that Sakura was scouting for Sasuke at the end of every mission?"

"No. She knew I would have done something to stop her. I never expected her to be so reckless."

"Or so desperate to bring Sasuke back."

"Sakura's guilty. She told me it was partly her fault that he left. Maybe she's placing too much blame on herself."

I retrieved the frame and handed it to her. "Bring this. It would help Sakura."

The wind blew her hair to her face, but she did nothing to fix it as Ino normally would. "Did you bring our group picture?"

"Yes, I think so." I bent over my bag to check the pockets. "I remember grabbing it before I left my room."

She sat on the floor in front of me. "I don't want you forgetting Choji and I, okay? Especially not Asuma."

"I wasn't hit by the rebirth jutsu, Ino. I won't be forgetting anyone."

I slid my fingers into the side pocket to prove to her that I brought it, but she touched my hand, and I forgot everything else. I refused to look at her, because I would see another's face.

"We'll be here no matter what, Shikamaru," she whispered. "Sakura will go back to normal, and you'll treat us to barbeque like Asuma used to."

My eyes locked on our hands. This time, I thought of Sakura and her own significance to Konoha. The people who loved her, the people she loved, and the people she could heal. It wasn't fair, what happened. If anyone had to suffer the rebirth, I hoped hard it had been me instead.

The floor shuddered. The teacups beside us fell and broke as a silhouette of a man landed on the balcony.

I slid my bag away from the spilled tea, mouthing 'you're Sakura' to Ino as I stood.

"Naruto!" She glimpsed me, hesitant, and then ran to block the sliding door. "What are you doing here?"

"Sakura!" A grin erupted on his face. "You're out the hospital already? I thought –"

"I-I'm fine now, Naruto! What are you doing here?"

"Hey! Why is Shikamaru in your room?"

She gestured aimlessly. "He's helping me carry some things, that's all...H-hey! Stop looking at me like that!"

He leapt back from her.

"Naruto," I beckoned, but he was trapped in a stupor.

He pointed at Sakura. "Shikamaru, who is this?" He scowled, half-dubious, half-irate. "Where is Sakura?"
I hit my head on the wall. This was the last thing we needed.

Tossing Naruto my bags, I injected myself between them and nudged Ino behind me. "Come with us, Naruto. Lady Tsunade has something important to tell you. Ino, are you ready?"
"We do not know the full extent of the damage done to Sakura, Naruto, hence the need to put her someplace she can be observed without her growing suspicious of us. Since the failed rebirth jutsu is confusing her memories, and she is convinced she is married to Shikamaru, we are placing them in the Nara's forest lodging. The deer will serve as warning from people who would enter without Shikaku's permission, and three ANBUs will be guarding the house. Of course, Sakura knows nothing of these security measures, only that they are decoding codes from Kana and Ryo's belongings that may concern the jutsu. Her growing memories of Kana may aid her in deciphering it for us, making it easier to find a solution. Oh, you also asked about Sai. Well, Sai is still unconscious. We keep injecting drugs in his system because he might not be able to stand the pain while awake."
Lady Tsunade sipped her sake and signed another paperwork. "Shizune, are the bodies submerged in ice? Ino, are you feeling better?"

"Y-yes! The extra minute in Sakura's body simply made me lose feeling in my legs, but that's normal."

I craned my neck to the left and found her in a wheelchair a few feet from me. Further, Shikamaru was looking out the window.

"Naruto?"

"I don't understand." I said, turning to the Fifth.

She rested her forehead on her palm, seemingly tired. "We're working on stopping the rebirth from completing its effect on her. Meanwhile, she'll be with Shikamaru."

"And you put Ino in her body to fool her mother into thinking she's fine?"

Lady Tsunade hardened her gaze on me. "Do you have a better idea?"

"Tell her the truth."

"It will hurt." She poured more sake into her cup and finished it in one gulp. "If you'll cooperate, you can help us."

"How?"

"Well, we still don't know the real cause of the jutsu's progress," she said. "Perhaps if you come around to make sure she's still Sakura, it will help slow - if not completely diminish - the rebirth."

I gripped my chest. "If she's still Sakura?" I rose and kicked my chair. It crashed on the bookshelf, and a layer of dust swept around us in a cloud of brown smoke.

"Naruto," warned Ino.

"Naruto." Kakashi appeared in front of me. Captain Yamato stood beside him, his hands positioned in a seal.
I stepped away from them, only realizing now the burning sensation coursing through my body. My ears ringed, my joints locked, my bones steeled, my jaws tightened, my skin thawed, my stomach hollowed, my brain shook – I collapsed and caught myself.

"Shikamaru, Ino, clear the room!"

"Naruto, contain it!"

"Damn it, Yamato, restrain him now!"

I remembered walking Sakura out of Konoha two weeks ago.

"I'm not trying to poison you!" she had said. "You've got to take care of yourself more, do you understand? I'll be gone for at least a week and if you don't like going to pharmacies to buy your medicine, read the expiration date on the instant noodles you stock in your apartment!"

I did. Once the grocery store was open, I spent the next two hours choosing my food carefully, even asking Choji whether the expiration dates were correct. I also went to the pharmacy to buy medicines, just to prove to Sakura I had grown up to be a real man with proper survival skills. Medicines were nothing to be afraid of. Besides, once she came back, she could heal me without using her chakra. Just her, standing next to me, would be enough healing.

That was two weeks ago. Now, it wasn't me who had the tummy ache. Her life was in danger, and what was I doing? Turning into the Nine-Tails?

Sakura would be deeply angered and disappointed if she saw me this way again.

"Yamato, wait! He's calming!"

"Naruto? Naruto!"

I sat on my heels. The world regained its color. Kakashi put his hands on my shoulders. "Naruto. Can you hear me?"

The Fifth said this all started when we were thirteen. Suna had yet to attack Konoha, the chuunin exams had yet to lead to our encounter with Orochimaru, and I had yet to meet the pervert Jiraiya. No one - not even Kakashi - saw this coming. *Eyes in walls*. Sasuke felt them because those eyes were meant to watch him, only he didn't realize they also saw Sakura.

"Kakashi," I said. "You left me near the river to practice my chakra control when you went out to search for Sasuke and her, right? Back when Team Seven was still complete?"

He took a moment to answer. "Yes."

"That was the first time Kana saw her?"

"Yes."

Captain Yamato came into view. "Naruto, take hold of your emotions. Sakura is well taken care of. Nothing is certain yet."

They helped me stand. The foreign sensations departed from me, and I could hear the Nine-Tails growl in the pit of my stomach.

Lady Tsunade clasped her fingers on my jaws and turned my head down for me to see her. She scowled, but behind her annoyance was the look she had when Kabuto was beating me up because I
I couldn't nod because of the strength of her hold, so I forced my tongue to move inside my squished mouth instead. "I-I'm sorry, grandma. This will never happen again. Can I see her?"

"Compose yourself first." She let go of me and called for Shikamaru and Ino again. "Decide on how you will act when you see her. We're not exactly allowed to upset her in any way, due to the fact that it nourishes the rebirth."

"Yeah, Naruto, sit down." Captain Yamato offered me a chair, sweat clinging to his brow.

Kakashi exhaled audibly. "That was close."

"Yeah…sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, captain, Kakashi…"

"Imagine how terrified I was!" Ino motioned to her wheelchair. "I can't even run yet!"

"But Shikamaru always carries you anyway, Ino." I pointed at where he was standing, but he had already left the Hokage's office.

I stared at the door. "Did you send him off, grandma?"

She drank from the bottle of sake this time. A tinge of pink spread across her face. "Leave him alone for a while. This must be taking its toll on him. Kakashi, why don't you get Naruto and me some ramen from Ichiraku Ramen? I can't remember having eaten anything today. My treat. Get some for yourselves too, if you're hungry."

Then I realized the Fifth, too, must really be upset if she was suddenly spending money on me.

I couldn't shake it off, even while Kakashi and I ate our ramen outside the hospital. I had the reasonable answers in my head, and yet I couldn't put them into words. I needed to hear them, so I asked Kakashi, "Why did he leave like that?"

"Shikamaru?"

"Yeah."

"He was with her during the mission, Naruto," he said. "He has only himself to blame. That, plus he has the biggest role to play in saving Sakura's life. This isn't like the battles we've trained you in, but one he has to win every day starting tomorrow. Imagine pretending to be a friend's husband and watching out for every little thing you do or say just to make sure you don't upset her."

The noodles had gone cold. The beef had long been eaten. "I don't mind pretending to be Sakura's husband."

"Of course you don't." Kakashi threw his plastic bowl inside the trashcan beside our bench.

Man, I never even got to see his face. Opportunity lost again.

"But it would have been harder if you were in Shikamaru's position. Have you ever thought of that?"
"Why? I know Sakura. I'd be a great husband!"

"Yes, but she would be changing every day," he said. "Depending on the jutsu, what Sakura liked all her life may be what Kana despised – say the color pink – and you give her pink flowers, so certain that she'll love them, but suddenly she steps on them and scolds you for not remembering she's practically allergic to that color."

"So Shikamaru's obliviousness to what she does and doesn't like prevents him from having prejudices?"

"And prevents him from upsetting her and himself. Since he doesn't know her as well as you do, he won't be as easily affected by the little things that are changing."

"Emotional distance, you mean?"

"He's smart – he can figure out a way around it."

"But how can he know if the jutsu's developing if he doesn't know a single thing about Sakura in the first place?" I chewed on the noodles slowly. "I think I should ask grandma Tsunade to let me join them – you know, to make sure?"

"You and Ino will help us make a list of her hobbies, likes and dislikes…things like those. Shikamaru will always have it for reference."

Hearing his name weakened me. Sure, it was only because of his terrible timing that Sakura registered him as her husband. Sure, he was a good man and a good shinobi and he wouldn't harm her. Sure, Shikamaru was a genius. Thinking hard about it, this could be a walk in the park for him. But I hadn't seen him so devastated before that he would walk out on us.

"Did I make it any harder for Shikamaru?" I handed the plastic bowl to Kakashi so he could throw it away. I heard it drop inside the trash bin.

"Your losing control enough that the Nine-Tails threatened to come out displayed how badly this affected you," he said. "It was inevitable for him to blame himself further. He knows how much you like Sakura, and he know how hard you've been trying to bring Sasuke back…"

"I could have unintentionally implied that he was taking Sakura away from me too, huh?"

He nodded, twisting his upper body left and right and punching in the air.

I rolled my eyes. He was getting old if eating ramen while sitting required stretching his muscles afterwards. "Am I too emotional, Kakashi?"

He tipped his head, thinking. "For someone who has a tailed beast, it would be better if you are more in control, Naruto."

The Academy's school bell rang, and the children dropped their toys and sprinted across the playground. There was a time when I was young - after I realized no kid was going to play with me - that I learned to love the sound of the school bell. I anticipated it. That bell meant playtime was over and the others had no choice but to sit with me in the same classroom whether they liked me or not.

The only instance I ever hated the school bell was the afternoon I found Shikamaru hiding behind the slide. I had crept up on him, estimating his temper, doubting myself in striking a conversation. He had lifted his head to look at me and whistled me over.
I jogged towards him. "What is it?"

"It's an injured dog."

"That's Akamaru!"

"Akamaru?"

"Yeah, you know, Kiba's dog?" I had wanted to impress him, so I reached down to pat its head, but it snarled.

Shikamaru scooted back. "Not so friendly, this dog."

Kiba approached then, grinning, panting, looking back and fro Shikamaru and I. He scooped Akamaru in his arms and tapped my forehead. "Your It!"

I slouched to my knees to view the playground, recalling my first game of tag with kids my age. I had debated whether to leave Shikamaru all alone, because it was sad to be alone, so I sat beside him and tapped his arm. "It?"

Shikamaru had sighed and stood up, as slow as the eighty-three year old man in the firework's shop stood from his comfortable chair whenever a customer arrived, and he dashed towards Kiba. "I'll get you!"

The school bell drifted to a halt. The playground was empty.

"I think so too," I said, finally. "Shikamaru's been a good friend to me, after all. I didn't mean to add to his burden."

"He's mature for his age – he'll come around bearing no grudge on you."

"All right!" I jumped to my feet. "Where can Shikamaru be?"

After searching the whole of Konoha for two hours and sixteen minutes, I found him with Shikaku and Inoichi inside the Intelligence Department. It was impossible for me to explain how demeaning it was to see those three, gigantic brains in one room. They shouldn't be allowed to hang out like this.

Shikaku and Inoichi had stopped to look at me when I entered the book-infested room, and Shizune popped up from the very back to ask what my business was to interrupt them like that.

With a scratch at the back of my head, I snickered and pointed at Shikamaru, who only saw me once he dropped the tower of blue and green books before his father

He understood and excused himself.

"Were you busy?" I asked to break the ice.

He closed the door slowly so as not to make noise. "We were just rechecking the codes we would be bringing along to the house. I'm assuming you want to talk about it?"

"Uhm, yeah, you see - "

"You don't have to apologize, Naruto." He unfastened his chunin vest and sighed. "It was understandable – your reaction. I'll also understand if you're mad at me. I take full responsibility for what happened."
I thought that, if the rebirth jutsu hit him instead, Kana would be depressed being reborn into his body. Not only did I find the dark circles under his eyes unnatural, but the weakness of his presence compared to when I last saw him had dropped to a disturbing level. The first I saw him in Sakura's room earlier, all that had struck me was jealousy and confusion. I had neglected the fact that he had also been in intensive care for one week. "Is that why you walked out on us? Because you thought I was mad at you?"

He shifted his weight. "You want the truth? I was scared out of my life seeing you nearly transform, Naruto. Who wouldn't be? Besides, it was your initial reaction, so I don't mind if you blamed me. I left because if you saw me again so soon without having cooled down properly, you might not have been able to control yourself and lash. It's okay, Naruto – totally not your fault."

"I'm that unpredictable, huh?"

"Don't be depressed!"

"I'm not depressed…"

"If I had a tailed beast in me and the girl I liked suddenly started identifying another guy to be her husband, I would have already wiped Konoha clean."

I arched my brow and considered this. "Nah, you won't."

"Yah, I won't. Feel better?"

"I think so."

We were silent for a while. I watched my feet. While Shikamaru and Sakura were in the house inside the forest, I would train with Captain Yamato and gain total control of my emotions. "And Shikamaru, thank you for saving Sakura."

His small eyes widened.

"Yeah, I mean, you risked your life for her! There's really no reason for anybody to be blaming you!" I laughed. "And you're making the biggest sacrifice for her, right? It won't be easy - Kakashi told me - so part of the reason I wanted to talk to you so badly is to tell you that just as I will be doing everything in my power to support Sakura, I will squeeze every brain-power I have into supporting you! Although, don't count much on the brain thing – they're sort of short in supply sometimes, ha!"

Shikamaru turned around.

"Hey," I said.

He laughed so hard he had to wipe his eyes from tears.

The following morning, Lady Tsunade allowed me inside quarantine to say goodbye to Sakura. Before we entered, Shikamaru said that if anyone could make her feel better, it would be me. He was flattering me, it was obvious, but I wanted to believe it was true.

If I could make Sakura happy, even just a tiny bit, I would be happy too.

She was tying her forehead protector around her head when I entered. "I'm almost ready, just-" She turned and blinked at me. I grinned and waved at her.

"Naruto!"
"Hey,"

She approached me, and when I thought she was going to throw her arms around me, she punched my head. "What is wrong with you?" she said. "I asked Kakashi how your mission went, and he said you had to be sent back to Konoha because of a stomach dilemma. Stomach dilemma? Did you hear what I told you before I left for my mission?"

Rubbing my fresh bump, I answered, "Check expiration date, and check expiration date again. I did! I really did! Choji even helped me!"

"Then what's wrong with your stomach?"

"It's the medicine from the pharmacy!" I stroked my stomach. "They're terrible! They gave me medicine for skin rashes instead! I told you, Sakura, you're the only doctor for me."

She sucked in a breath, sat on the bed, and exhaled. "I give up. I'll tell Ino on my way out what medicines work for you when you have a fever, a stomach ache, and that really annoying cold of yours that lasts for weeks. I'll also contact Nami to prepare a weekly grocery for you, but it will be expensive. Ah, what the heck, you have the money to pay it. What else? Naruto, about your apartment – "

"Sakura? You look beautiful today."

She gawked and then she frowned. "Are you trying to borrow money from me?"

"No."

"I will be gone for some days, maybe weeks, I really can't tell." She stood in front of me, her expression changing from worried to angry to content. "Promise me you will take care of yourself. Don't…just don't do anything rash with searching for Sasuke without telling me first…or asking for my help. As soon as I'm done with those codes, I promise I'll never leave your side again, and we'll look for him together. Promise me, Naruto."

*Sakura, please do not change.* Her appearance was still hers, but granny and Shikamaru and Kakashi were all correct. Her voice had altered; her voice was a pitch higher now. She still wore pink, thank goodness. Her strength did not lessen in brutality, but around her was a gentleness so foreign I could smell it. The scent emanating from her was far from that of cherry blossoms, and it nauseated me. Please, Sakura. If I promised, would you also promise to come back the same?

"You know," I murmured, putting my hand on her shoulder. "I could never have managed Sasuke leaving if you were gone as well."

This hushed her.

The door behind us slid ajar, and Shikamaru cleared his throat. "Sorry, but it's time for us to go, Naruto. Sakura, you ready?"

Her countenance brightened at the sight of him, and she grabbed her bags on top of the bed and passed me by.

"Oh, and Naruto," She winked. "I came home like you asked me to."
Kakashi entered the Hokage's office through the window. The swiftness of his movements indicated momentum. He'd probably been running around Konoha, executing commands on behalf of his superiors since early this morning. "Naruto's with Sakura right now," he said. "Everything's ready for your departure to the forest."

Lady Tsunade set aside her paperwork. Though hunched over her desk and moving about with a slowness that revealed her true age, her gaze remained as sharp as ever. "How's he handling it?"

"Better, I suppose. He spoke to Shikamaru yesterday."

She leaned back on her chair and motioned for me to step forward. "He did? And how was it?"

"Naruto won't be a problem," I said. "He understands the nature of the mission. Furthermore, he's managed to grasp that I haven't taken advantage of Sakura before, during, and after the mission."

She raised her brow. "Taken advantage…?"

Shikaku, who had been standing to her far left, cleared his throat and answered for me. "I believe that's supposed to cover all aspects of that vague phrase."

"But Shikamaru never hurt Sakura," said Ino, shuffling beside Shizune as she organized a pile of envelopes beside the Hokage's desks. Mission reports, maybe. Everything in the past three years that could hint on activities from Takeo's program. She blew her hair off her face and when that did not do the trick, she tipped her head to the right and then backwards. "Or else dad would've seen it."

The growing awkwardness in the room was almost tangible, I couldn't help but swallow hard. Before Inoichi or Shizune could jump into the conversation to clear the matter for Ino, I raised both of my hands and told her that they weren't referring to physical or verbal abuse. "They're interested in knowing whether I'd had any sort of intimacy with Sakura. No emotions involved. Just plain physical, since we've all confirmed that I have no romantic inclination to her. Why I have to do this in front of everybody is beyond me."

Inoichi raced everybody to a reaction. "We're feeling our way in the dark, Shikamaru. And your personal life is inevitably involved in this case. Whatever information you divulge will be handled professionally."

"Because nobody believed me the first time I said I haven't touched her."

"No," said Shikaku. "Rather it's because we are crossing out all possibilities to narrow our focus. The reason we're here is to vouch for you and for Sakura because, unfortunately, she's not wholly present to speak for herself."

Shizune opened her black notebook and took out her pen. "If you're telling the truth, then it appears Sakura lost her virginity to somebody else."

I choked on my own saliva. Ino dropped the envelopes and gawked at Shizune. "Forehead? Lose her virginity? Without telling me? No way!"

"Thank you for the initiative to share that with our team," said Lady Tsunade, scanning the faces in
the room. "If Ino doesn't know, who does?"

"W-why do we need a name?" I knocked on my chest three times and coughed the uneasiness in my throat. "Isn't it enough to know she's – well – sexually active? We're talking about Sakura here. She really isn't the type to be fooling around with anybody. Let alone an enemy."

"So knowledgeable about her all of a sudden." The Fifth uncapped her bottle of sake, eyes still fixed on me. "Have any guess?"

"No."

Kakashi's eyelid drooped lower. Practically his way of being vague about his thoughts on Sakura getting into bed with the most likely men she'd do it with. "Definitely not Naruto," he said.

"Wasn't even considering him, Kakashi."

Shikaku stroked his beard once and motioned to the envelopes. "Is there nothing about her previous missions that could have led her to elicit sex as part of a strategy?"

"Highly unlikely," chorused the Fifth and Kakashi. They turned their head slightly to stare at one another. The authority in their speech both claimed superior understanding of Sakura as her mentors, and although their opinions conformed, Kakashi had to prove his side. Sex wasn't something women like Sakura would've discussed with a male so freely, after all. If she did, she wouldn't come running to Kakashi. The old pervert may be dependable in a life-and-death situation, but questionable in everything else.

Kakashi rolled his eye up to the ceiling. "Our last mission together proved more troublesome than we expected. She suggested using her 'feminine charm' to seduce the leader of the bandits into surrendering the hostage peacefully, but she strayed from the plan when she saw he was anything but handsome. Or human. I didn't approve of the plan, anyway. As far as I'm aware of her missions, it was only that one time last year that anything sexual could have happened to her. The rest was accomplished plainly through brute force. Even if she wouldn't have admitted it in her written report or during the debriefing, I'm doubtful nobody would've noticed. She's an open book to those who know her."

Shizune wrinkled her nose. She tapped her pen against the paper. "We check her thoroughly every after mission – just like we do with every other kunoichi upon their return home. She'd been a virgin from her last mission to the time before her mission with Shikamaru and Sai."

Ino snorted. "Sai wouldn't have known what to do."

Lady Tsunade simply flipped through her own black notebook. "Well, since nobody can name the bastard or even tell us when, we can assume her hymen broke due to physical exertion in training or in battle."

And just like that, Sakura was back to being a virgin.

"Her hymen sure has suspicious timing," said Ino.

"If that isn't the case, however, we'll have to keep an eye out for physical manifestations of Kana's body on Sakura. Although I'm highly doubtful a rebirth starts in the reproductive system. Given the amount of time between the kidnapping and the rescue, I'm also doubtful Ryo had enough time to rape her. Her memories gave no such hints." She pointed at me with her pen. "You on the other hand, have had three different sexual partners in the past five months as was written in your last medical questionnaire. Or would you like to come clean now in case what you wrote wasn't the
entire truth?"

I folded my arms across my chest and kept myself from sighing. My sex life wasn't the most pleasant topic to discuss in front of my father or any of my superiors, but it wasn't as though I could evade it now that the Hokage herself had brought it up.

Reducing three to one would only turn me into a loser pretending to be a big shot with the ladies by lying on his medical exam. But staying quiet like this, contemplating my options, also gave others the idea that three was thirteen and I was pondering the consequences of male prostitution. In the end, I sighed and said, "That's three altogether in the past five months. Nothing more, nothing less. What do my sexual activities got to do with this?"

"The rebirth's effects may be delayed," answered Shizune. "We need to confirm facts. Personal facts. See if any of your previous missions, people you've had intimate relationships with, those you've had an encounter with at the Southern District –"

"Southern District?" Shikaku dropped his stoic act in an instant. He turned from Shizune to me. "Shikamaru?"

"Only one of the three," I said. The voice to admit that hardly made it out of my mouth. "Naturally, I don't know her name. Her real name, at least. But she introduced herself as Emiko. The other two are acquaintances. Should I divulge you with their names so you can investigate them, too? See if they had contact with the enemy? Although I doubt it because it appears only Sakura was the target."

"And you're not romantic with the other two women?"

"No. It was just a matter of who was there and when."

"I'm afraid there will be a need for names. For precaution. This wasn't a spur of the moment plot. It was well thought of. I won't be surprised if you've been researched beforehand. The requirements of the mission specifically fit the character and skill of each one of you. A highly skilled medic to study and remedy an unknown disease – Sakura. A source of quick transportation and communication – Sai. An intelligent shinobi to assess the disease and its possible threats to nearby villages – you, Shikamaru."

My forearms felt cold. I closed my eyes and suddenly the entire mission was a blur of treachery from each person involved and topped by my stupidity. "Misaki Hanazawa."

"Misaki as in the Misaki who helped design the new water distribution plan in the village?"

"The other one - the Misaki who apprentices under our head architect."

Ino's frown continued to deepen. I pretended not to notice, especially when the Fifth demanded for the second name.

"Miss Sanae Fujimura," I muttered. "The two of us were heavily inebriated during the festival. We didn't... neither of us would've – I mean to say that if you are going to sanction her, you have to sanction me also. We were both aware it shouldn't have happened."

All but Ino and I groaned in disapproval. Kakashi followed his by a nervous chuckle. "It appears Miss Sanae's been targeting younger shinobis."

"This is no laughing matter," said Inoichi. "I thought you'd be the last person to fall for her trick, Shikamaru. I'm disappointed."
Shikaku kept his eyes closed and his fingers on his nose bridge. I turned to Shizune, who passed a note to Lady Tsunade.

"Trick me? Does anybody plan on explaining?" I asked.

"She's mastered a certain immunity to alcohol," Kakashi said, a smile visible behind his mask. "So when you say the two of you were heavily inebriated, that means only you were heavily inebriated and she was pretty much aware that she was going to make out with her underling."

Lady Tsunade hid her bottle of sake all of a sudden. The rigidity of her movements and the stiffness of her facial muscles suggested this issue had been playing in her mind for a while. "Sanae served as spy for Konoha in the war. She purposely made herself immune to alcohol in order to gain the advantage in her missions, which mostly required her to...interact with men and gain information from them through whatever means possible. She's one of the few people separate from ANBU who were tasked to fulfil those kinds of mission because of her excellent use of genjutsu."

"And excellent features," added Kakashi.

"It's true what they say about her immunity to alcohol," he said. "And no, it wasn't me. I saved Yamato from getting experimented on. He was so smitten by her that she didn't even have to try. He only came with me when I pointed out that Sanae had already collected DNA from his mouth."

"Wait, you're saying she tricked me into-?"

"She did," the Fifth answered. "And you won't be the first. At least now I'm aware of what I should do with her. She can't go on like this. Especially not under my reign. Corrupting young shinobis like that. Even Yamato! I'll speak to him after this."

Kakashi volunteered to fetch him. "He doesn't have to know your sources."

"Anything else you'd like to add, Shikamaru?"

"N-no. Nothing. That should be all."

"Now that we've settled that, let's move on to the mission. Since neither Sakura nor you are so innocent anymore - well, Sakura's is still unclear at this point - and your present circumstances makes it highly plausible for her to initiate sex while in the mission, I want you to do everything in your power to abstain without hurting her feelings. After all, we won't want Kana getting upset. But I'm prohibiting you from physical intimacy primarily because we're unsure of how it can deter or progress the rebirth in her. You might be wondering how you'll manage to handle her and this mission without any form of physical contact. Let's set the boundaries here for the sake of establishing controllable factors in our research. No sex. Not any form of it. Kissing is okay. But keep it to a minimum. Groping-"

"I get it!" I said, forcing myself to look at her and only her. "I get the picture, Lady Tsunade. As you said, I'm not new to this thing. I can imagine how you want me to play the part of her husband. It's clear as day."

Shikaku suddenly spoke up. But not about my carelessness. He recited my emergency options in other circumstances. Any medical dilemma and emergencies should be carefully evaluated before seeking the help of ANBU. Any suspicious progress or new ideas I'd conjure, I have to send to Konoha. And that was apart from my daily reports. Things like those.
I waited for him to reprimand me but no word of spite came.

As soon as he was finished giving orders to the rest of the team, Lady Tsunade stood and commenced the mission.

Kakashi left the office through the window. Shizune and Ino stayed behind to discuss medical information with the Hokage, and before the two of them moved to the front of her desk with their envelopes and boxes of mission reports, I caught Ino frowning at me.

I didn't have the liberty of time to pull her aside. Although we were aware that both of us had long graduated from the thrill of simply flirting with the opposite sex, neither had made a big deal out of it. We were still Ino and Shikamaru, Asuma's students and childhood friends. No open discussion about our partners, whether in dating or in bed. But this rebirth case had forced us to cross a line that bulwarked the comfort we felt in each other's presence. The case brought a sensitive awareness down with it that would make friendship or romance between us a daring pursuit.

I closed the door behind me and called after Shikaku. He stopped to look back at me. Inoichi, already a few paces ahead of him, immediately said that he'd be waiting for him in their meeting place with Kakashi after our hearty conversation.

He and I stood in awkward silence for several moments. I shifted my weight from leg to leg, uncertain if I should be the one to start or if I should be the one to keep my mouth shut all throughout.

Shikaku waved me over. "C'mon. Let's walk."

"Dad-

"We can't waste time," he said. "I'll scold you while we walk. Let's go."

I fell in stride with him. He acknowledged a passing kunoichi who greeted us. After a turn to the next corridor, he said, "That you're sexually active does not surprise me." A pause. "Actually, it does. I thought you'd be too lazy to do it."

"Geez. Sorry on behalf of my laziness. It didn't mean to disappoint you."

"But then again, this was bound to happen."

I stopped fiddling with the metal hook of my pocket. "Excuse me?"

"I should have talked to you about these things sooner," he said. "I'm sorry, son."

"Dad."

"I'm serious."

"Please don't get all emotional on me to make me guilty. I've fallen for that once and I'm not falling for it again."

He put his hand on my shoulder. His fingers pressed hard against my muscles. "I've been to the Southern District when I was your age. I have no right to act as though I haven't done what you've done. It's fun at first, especially when you're with your friends, but it can certainly lead to complications. That's not to say that getting women pregnant out of wedlock is okay so long as they're not from that place. All I'm meaning for you to consider is that yours is a delicate position. We may not be a noble clan, but we do contribute a big deal to the success of the Leaf village. And
the Pillars aren't exactly happy that you've been proving useful to the Village but not to our clan."

"I haven't been slacking like all of you think I am," I said. "I did monitor the clan activities and leave you a report before I went on a mission with Sakura and Sai, remember? Perhaps the Pillars should be reminded that Konoha is currently short on men and Lady Tsunade's given me the task of three jounins."

"I've told them that over and over, but they're not going to change their opinion of us," he said. "The best thing you can do now is to – " grimacing, suddenly looking more tired than he'd ever been – " choose your partners carefully. Although I'd prefer it if you'd be more responsible and wait until you're married. Use protection. Don't ever cross paths with Sanae again."

I rubbed my eyes to hide my irritation. "I can't believe it."

"For that one, I'm not blaming you."

"Yeah, you shouldn't."

Shikaku blushed. "Apart from being naturally cunning in her ways, she has a thing for men in our clan."

I stopped walking and stared at him, both eyebrows raised. "Don't tell me-"

He put his hands on his waist and held his breath for a second before exhaling audibly. "No. She's still trying to lure me, but it's safe to say your mother has made her warnings pretty clear. However, Sanae being Sanae, I didn't expect her to give up so easily. What I didn't consider was that you've grown old enough for her to target without making herself look like a pedophile."

"The age gap makes her look like a pedophile."

"Your mother certainly won't be happy to know that Sanae succeeded with you."

"She-mom-mom doesn't have to know right? Right, dad?"

Shikaku checked the corridor for eavesdroppers. "For both our sakes, no. It'll be our secret."

"What does she want from us? Did you offend her or anything? Is she mesmerized by how ordinary we look?"

"She's not into the way we look so don't flatter yourself. Sanae's obsessed with our intellect. And since using her face and body is her means of optimizing the use of her genjutsu, she's practically made it her mission to bed every Nara and see what's so great about our gene."

I found myself recalling the events that had transpired in the festival two months ago. Chouji had just excused himself to throw up – the poor guy still couldn't hold his drink – and I'd been left alone in our booth in the restaurant for a while when she showed up. She sat next to me, her chuunin vest still on but the straps already dangling from their hooks. She had hair paler than Ino's and eyes greener than Sakura's. She showed her age but carried it well. When we walked in the streets later that evening, the tired vendors still bothered to stare at her.

The first thought that came to mind when I first saw her was that I'd already finished work early for the day in order to enjoy the festival. If she came there to order me around, I wouldn't have been sober enough to decline politely. But instead she sat one chair apart from me and ordered another round of drinks. What followed had been a witty exchange about the project we'd cooperated with to accomplish.
Had Shikaku known about that project, he would've intervened for sure. But everybody was busy and I'd hardly seen him at all for three weeks. Before I knew it, Sanae and I were back in her office on a dare to solve an old puzzle from the first generation of shinobis that she'd been attempting to decipher. How I transitioned from solving a puzzle to ravishing my commander was something I couldn't recount in detail.

I lowered my head to affect grave frustration. If the corridors had only been dimmer, I wouldn't have any trouble hiding the colour of my face. "If you're going to check her for suspicious activities – I'm sure you'll find plenty considering her reputation among your ranks – it might help to…just, she dared me to solve this puzzle. An old one. Told me not even you could've solved it. Naturally, it was encouraging enough in my drunken state to follow her to her office."

"Don't – " Shikaku shook his head fast and curled his fists, almost raising them to my face " – go into detail. I don't need those kinds of information. It's troublesome enough that I have to deal with this strange matter with you."

"There was a puzzle," I said, shrugging one shoulder and gesturing aimlessly with my hands. "It-it looked suspicious. I don't remember being able to solve it."

"That's worth looking into." Shikaku stretched his neck left, right, forward, and back. On his face was a look of sheer pain. "Okay. Enough about this. I'll deal with her about that puzzle with the help of - of someone."

"Right." I made a motion to pat his back. "Find someone to help you, dad. I don't want to come home to find mom as murdered you."

I fetched Sakura in her quarters and said goodbye to Naruto. He grinned at the two of us without a hint of anger or jealousy, making me wonder how it was possible to live his life and still be so genuine. He made people like me feel somewhat incompetent. I had a family. An entire clan, in fact. And yet I still had trouble finding anything about life worth smiling about.

Not after Asuma's death.

Kakashi and Shikaku led our group through a secret passage that would land us straight to the middle of the Forest outside Konoha. From there, we'd use a shortcut to the Nara Forest that Shikaku hadn't taught me yet. While they briefed us of our route and expected arrival time at each rendezvous point where an ANBU would be waiting for us (they made a convincing explanation about worries of Ryo and Kana's accomplices ambushing us while Shikaku and Kakashi carried confidential files for the mission) I couldn't help but notice their cautious approach to Sakura. Perhaps, like me, they were also wondering who the 'bastard' was and how appearances were deceiving. The thought that she'd done it - in spite of there being sufficient ambiguity to counter this assumption - wasn't the mystery. It was the fact that nobody knew – not even Ino, for crying out loud. Until we had that meeting in the office, those of us who cared enough to assume things about her sex life believed she was saving herself for Sasuke.

"Did they include Shikamaru's medical results?" Sakura asked as we waded through the vegetation in the forest.

Kakashi looked back at us to answer. "It's not part of your mission to act as his doctor, Sakura. You're still recovering yourself. Lady Tsunade will be sending someone to check on the two of you regularly."

"Or she might go there herself," said Shikaku.
Sakura glimpsed me through the corner of her eye. "Yes, but…you can at least provide me with a general idea."

"I will, Sakura," I said with a forced smile. "In the forest. So don't worry about it, okay?"

"If you say so."

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah. Why shouldn't I be?"

"You sound like you're upset."

"No, I don't. I'm not upset."

"Was Ino able to pack everything you need?"

"She packed every piece of clothing I don't wear anymore."

"Must've been unconscious on her part," I said. "What did you and Naruto talk about?"

"This and that."

Her nonchalance irked me. "Interesting. It makes me feel guilty for disturbing you."

"What's with the sour attitude today, Shikamaru?"

"See, you are upset." I noted her right hand, how it remained at her side. She didn't scratch her back. "Cough it out, Sakura."

She pouted at me, her cheeks already as pink as her hair. "Why are you suddenly so pushy?"

"Perks of being your husband."

She scratched the base of her back and purposely slowed her steps. I matched her pace, realizing she wanted to distance ourselves from Kakashi and Shikaku enough to escape their hearing. "Shikamaru – pushing her hair aside and taking a deep breath " – It's been fifteen years already, huh?"

I stopped walking. "That's what's been upsetting you? How long we've been married?"

She opened and closed her mouth and decided to drop the conversation. Kakashi and Shikaku were not waiting for us several feet ahead, and Kakashi made the effort to appear innocent of what had been going on. "We need to hurry up, you two," he called out. "Or are you not feeling good enough to travel?"

Shikaku suggested we take a rest.

I stepped in front of her and held her arm lightly. "Do you need to take a break?"

She squinted at me. Her hands reached up to my cheeks and pulled my face closer to hers. I clutched her wrists, stammering, afraid she was going to kiss me in front of Shikaku, when suddenly she released me and touched her forehead. "I don't need to rest. I'm sorry. I'm being funny, aren't I? Fifteen years is a long time, don't you think so, Shikamaru?"

"Yeah, it does."
She gave me a half-hearted smile.

The real reason I couldn't shake off the team's discussion about her personal life struck me like lightning on a clear day. It was her smile – that innocent desire behind her hard work as a shinobi – that made me put my hands on her shoulders and squeeze them.

While Shizune and the Hokage doubted Ryo had raped her, the lack of confirmation weighed on me. I swore to myself then that if Ryo had indeed touched her, I would find his body, put his cock in his mouth, and feed his head to the crows. After that I'd burn him. I'd burn him until even his ashes could not hold any evidence of his existence.
Chapter 10

Shikaku / Shikamaru

Shikaku:

I returned to my office by noon and left it again half an hour later. Past the faded green bridge that connected the Hokage Tower to the west wing of the military compound, everything was made of metal. The walls, the doors, and the miniscule bumps on the corners that contained seals to deactive any shape-shifting ninjutsu, evoked the feeling of imprisonment. The chill that raced up and down the length of my arms, however, didn't come from the hostility of the corridors' ambiance.

I twisted the doorknob and let myself into Laboratory 5F. The shinobis at work turned to look at me, their hands in mid-air as they paused from their respective tasks. The last person to lift her head was Sanae. She moved only after she finished reading the report she held at a distance from her face and dropped it on a stack of papers on the floor.

Opening the door wider, I told everybody to leave the room immediately. Sanae's underlings turned to her in question, and when she merely stared back at me, I yelled for them to exit the room in three seconds.

They were gone in two.

Sanae slipped her gloves off and sat on the edge of the table, legs crossed. Her fringe hid the scar above her eyebrow that I'd caused in one of our bouts. She'd been proud of showing off my handiwork before. Why she hid it now struck me as suspicious behavior.

"If this interruption is anything less than threat of an invasion, Shikaku, I'm accusing you of – "

I locked the door. "You touched my son."

She lowered her hands to her lap. "How did you find out? Is he pregnant? I'm sure I recommended a morning-after pill."

"You touched my son, Sanae."

"Oh, relax, Shikaku! I wasn't his first."

I inhaled, and when I released it through gritted teeth, I was on top of her with my hand on her neck. I pushed her head into the sink. She spread her arms across the table and gripped whatever objects her hands found. Saliva spilled from the corners of her mouth to her cheekbones. She struggled beneath my weight. I extended my shadows to her thighs to restrain her. More gagging. More kicking. Less breathing. When her squirming weakened, I loosened my fingers on her throat and retracted my shadow from around her limbs.

Sanae lifted herself by her elbows. I lowered myself to her abdomen and encircled her head with my hands, my thumb caressing her cheeks. "Your next move against my family will be your last activity in the world of the living. Do you understand, woman?"

"Und – " gasping for breath " – derstood. Understood, sir."
"Did you tell him about Aiko?"

"No. I'd never do that to you, Shikaku."

"Good. Because if you did, I'd forget you were Aiko's friend and I'd decapitate you here and now."

She trembled as she laughed. "You-you know what's going to k-kill you, Shikaku? You have no ears. You don't know how to listen. Y-you were actually going to strangle me to death, weren't-weren't you?"

"You thought this was a joke to me?"

She stretched her neck and rubbed the tip of her nose against mine. "Someday soon, Shikaku, your son is going to be targeted for what he keeps in his brain. And you're going to come crawling to me for help to save him."

The door squeaked behind us. Sanae glimpsed the person from over my shoulder. "Your friend has come to fetch you. It's time to get off me, old man. Or I'd start to think you're jealous of what your son got from me."

"Shikaku," called Inoichi. "Take a hold of yourself! Release Sanae!"

I stared at my reflection in her eyes. Green the color of poison. I waited for her to confess agenda for seducing my son, to give me a reason apart from motives related to the rebirth case, to blame me again for Aiko's death, but she merely smiled at me.

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**Shikamaru:**

Her hair was coiled in a ponytail, and she wore a white bandana to keep her bangs off her face. There wasn't much to talk about. While I overturned tables and wiped them clean, she swept the floor and opened windows.

Half-done with the living room, she asked why I had stopped coming here.

I paused from hauling the bookshelf to catch my breath. "I'm not really sure about that. I guess after grandpa died, it just became too lonely for dad to return to this place, more so bring his family along."

"Do you need help with that?"

"Nah, I can move this myself," I said. "It's not that heavy."

"Maybe I'm still tired, 'cause I find all your wooden furniture extremely heavy." She tugged down her bandana and mopped her face with it.

I turned my head away to hide a sigh. The day was just beginning, and I already felt like noodles. Noodles. Naruto would have had no problem lifting these things.

"Would you mind if I ask what your grandfather was like?" Sakura glimpsed me while she slipped the curtains off the rod.
"I never told you about him?"

"I wouldn't be asking."

"You might have forgotten."

She sat on the floor, handling the curtains quietly. There was a slight snap to her movements. "You never tell me about yourself," she muttered. "You always have me figure things out. I won't mind if you answer once in a while. I rarely ask, anyway."

Ryo was like that.

I dabbed my hands on my shirt and sat opposite her. She slowed her movements, conscious of me.

Perhaps Ryo was the kind of man who avoided talking about himself any way he could. Would it be out of character to open up, or would it help earn her trust?

I cupped my face and rested my elbow on my knee. "What do you want to know about grandpa?"

She poked the windowpane with the rod to widen the gap and allow the air to enter. "What was his name?"

Ryo never told her anything, and they never returned to their villages. There was no way Kana would have found out, unless she was in contact with any of Ryo's relatives, which I doubted. A girl as submissive as her would not do such a thing behind her husband's back, so Sakura couldn't be testing me right now. I would tell her the truth, and she would believe me.

"Michio," I said. "It means 'man with the strength of three thousand'."

She folded the curtains on her lap.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing."

"You're smiling. That's not nothing."

She burst into giggles. "It's...that name's beautiful. I like that name. Was he as brutal as his name implies?"

I took six from the mount of orange curtains and folded them so she would not notice me calculating her answers. "He's a lot stronger than dad, and he was the best in the Intelligence Division. In fact, he was the one who helped Ino's family develop the mind infiltration technique, so more than one can access the brain at the same time. He bullies dad to be as great as he was, and he often took away my toys to force me to study harder, but nothing worked. They were always arguing, always on opposite poles...mom would cover my ears as we run from the house and into the forest. Whenever I'd ask why they hated each other, she would tell me, 'no, they don't hate each other, Shikamaru. Father and son fight, it can't be helped, but it's because they love each other so much they don't want either to get hurt.' But then she would embrace me and cry and I would be as confused as hell. I only acknowledged her excuse as the truth when grandpa died and father locked himself up in this house for a week."

"...Do you miss him?"

"Maybe."
"Is it okay to ask what you remember most about him?"

I peered at her fists – at her fingers clasping the fabric. It could be that if Ryo did tell her stories, he got pissed when she probed some more.

"Hmm…gramps was rarely happy with me…” I jolted at my sudden recollection, and then winced. "There is one thing: whenever I am left alone with him, he sits me down and tells me that I am the first born son, and I will carry the Nara name, so I better become an excellent shinobi and make good choices. He…he lectured me on the importance of listening to my father."

"Shikaku seems to be very proud of you," Sakura cooed. "I bet if Grandpa Michio is alive, he'd be happy with you now."

I couldn't help but sneer. "I hope so. Thanks. How about you?"

"I never met any of my grandparents," She said. "Mom's parents died when she was ten, and dad's died before I was born."

Was I speaking to Kana or to Sakura? Better find out. Best be careful. "Has your family always lived in this village?"

She brushed her stray locks behind her ear. "In Konoha?"

I nodded.

"My great-grandparents moved here during the reign of the second Hokage," she said.

Kana was from the Hidden-Lock village. She was still Sakura, I thought. I lay on the floor and stretched. I was so much more relieved than I expected to be. There was no telling how I could handle her morphing into Kana so early in this mission.

"Tired, Shikamaru?"

"A bit. I'll go check the other rooms, 'kay?"

As the day went on, Sakura proved to be more responsible and adequate than I expected. We finished cleaning the second floor of the house so swiftly, partly because I was excellent at hiding dirt, and partly because of her stamina. The sorting and classifying of the scrolls attributed solely to my determination to avoid repeating this boring task the following day.

Surprise, surprise. Grandpa's ridicules pertaining to my laziness were seeping into my ears, beating my conscience. The best I could do to drive him out was to hum grandma's favorite lullaby.

It worked.

Our conversations drifted to Naruto and the disturbing odor of his apartment, to her medical practice, and to my contributions to the new defense tactics of Konoha. Sakura and I were on separate rooms when she asked what I wanted to eat. That was the only time it occurred to me how loudly my stomach was growling. It was past three o'clock.

"Um, what I usually take!"

Her footsteps sounded on the hall. Soon, she was standing on the doorway, cradling a box on either arm. "There are no seafood in the fridge. Will beef do?"

Mental note: Ryo usually ate seafood. I could tolerate that.
"It's fine." I flattened the rag so she would not see the mass of dirt underneath.

At four o'clock, we were on the dining table, eating food that was not just edible, but actually tasty. I slowed down, suddenly, despite my hunger. The beef reminded me of Choji. I bet he was talking to the Hokage now, asking of ways he could help me. He was always like that, willing to sacrifice all he had for the friends he considered precious to him. The rice, on the other hand, reminded me of Ino. She never ate rice because Sakura always called her fat.

After eating, I washed the dishes, and we returned to working on breaking the seals of the scrolls. We had gone quiet then, perhaps tired with all the work we accomplished and the chakra we spent. Every time she would roll her shoulders back and groan, I would tell her to stop and rest. My nagging eventually fueled her temper, and she finally asked the cause of my underestimating her. I lied about the instability of the seals placed around the scrolls, even adding that Inoichi was hesitant to send that bunch to us.

Sakura spent the next five hours outside the house, performing all necessary measures to ensure no scroll would explode upon the seal's release.

In those hours, I hid inside grandpa's library, where I scanned the shelves for any deciphering books. This was supposed to be the stock room, but grandpa saw no reason to keep unused belongings, so he threw them all away without grandma's knowledge and built his empire of books here. Their scuffles here were famous tales in our clan.

One time, grandma attempted to burn the whole room down.

I was too intent on keeping my mind off the rebirth jutsu that I only noticed it was evening when the words on the pages were barely visible.

Darkness immersed the entire library.

I walked out, rubbing my eyes, bullying myself to stay awake, but it was no use. I desperately wanted to sleep.

"Sakura?" I yelled. It took me several moments to link those two consecutive thoughts to the prospect I had been avoiding all day.

I was sleepy. I was searching for Sakura.

Shit.

The front door was in view. I could pretend to take a walk and hope that she was already lethargic, if not unconscious, when I came back. I would rest in the other room, and sneak inside hers come morning. Certainly, she would be too tired to mind me.

"Shikamaru!" she responded from the second floor. "I put your bag in our room!"

There was a crash, a gasp, and an awkward pause. I dashed upstairs and nearly slipped as I grabbed the doorframe of the only lit room.

Sakura stuck her tongue out apologetically and rubbed her nape. "I was transferring your things when this box fell."

"I-It's okay, you don't have to fix my things. I can do that myself. You're tired, Sakura." I removed my socks, wheezing, and saw the rubber bands scattered everywhere. Panic coursed in my
bloodstream. Mother would be furious if I lost one of those. I swept them into the box, counting each one as I did so.

She grazed her thumb over the cover of the wooden box. "It has your name engraved on it."

"Ninety-nine -" I touched the band around my hair. " - One hundred."

"Why are you counting them?"

"Mother made me a hundred of these." I put it back inside my bag. "It's for good fortune – a tradition in the Nara clan. Mothers are supposed to make their first born sons a hundred of the rubber bands made on a specific fiber found in our forest."

"It seems there's still so much I don't know about you, Shikamaru." Sakura sat on the bed and tucked her legs beneath her, lost in her loneliness.

Her demeanor had grown softer now. I guess it would be safe to presume her relationship with Ryo wasn't so pleasant. It could be that they found comfort and belongingness in each other's company during the time they doubted Takeo's program, explaining why they got married at nineteen. If she was furtively upset by Ryo's secretive nature, then I had no choice but open myself to her.

I had no choice but to do this anyway.

Sitting beside her, I took her hand and slipped Kana's wedding ring on her finger.

Sakura's face flushed a disturbing color of red, and I didn't know whether the jutsu was affecting her or the gesture simply flattered her.

"I demanded it back," I said.

"It's as good as new…" She brought her fist to her face in order to examine it. She asked for mine.

I gave her the ring, and then my hand, and let her slip it on me.

Inside my chest, my heart did multiple shadow clone jutsus that swamped my head. The ring was colder than snow on my tongue, and her hands were hotter than Asuma's cigarette smoke in my eyes.

This was something I had never imagined of doing at this age. Wedding rings at sixteen, pretending to be married because of a two-second mistake. This was beyond the normal life I had always dreamt of.

Her joy was not hers. This lie was the last thing she deserved.

I could tell her the truth now, and maybe find another way around this. We could fix this without having to fool her and without having to scare me. I didn't have to give in to her, and she didn't have to believe me.

"Sakura."

She kept smiling at her ring. "Yeah?"

"Listen, there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

"I thought so. You've been acting strange all day."

I couldn't look her in the eyes anymore. "Do you…remember? Anything from the time Ryo knocked
you unconscious in the cave to the time I rescued you?"

"Nothing much. Why?" She put her hand on my chest when I didn't respond. "Shikamaru, if there's anything on your mind that-"

"If that man touched you." I clutched her fingers to keep her connected to me. To remind myself that this time, she was physically safe by my side. "If that bastard touched you, I wouldn't be able to forgive myself."

"He didn't."

I raised my head.

Sakura pried her fingers from mine. She embraced herself. "I can retain a sensual awareness of my environment even after I'm knocked unconscious. So I'm not totally unconscious. It's more of a paralysis of the will. If he'd come anywhere near me with his dick, I'd have woken up immediately to kick his ass."

"This is no joke to me, Sakura."

"Okay, I wouldn't have been able to wake up," she said, rolling her eyes. "The point of it was to stay in the know of what's happening while I'm paralyzed. I wouldn't have been able to stop him but I'd have known. The last thing I felt was water beneath my body before something just cut me off completely. Now stop looking like you've offered me on a platter to some S-class scum! Really, Shikamaru, you tear yourself down for the silliest matters! I'm fine!"

Water beneath her? The pond? Unless Ryo prioritized his sex drive above the rebirth, he wouldn't have raped her on the pond. It might've also affected the rebirth's outcome negatively. Any matter from his body transferred to hers would've resulted to something. Anything. Simply because whatever came from him wouldn't have been a natural component of her body.

He couldn't have. There would have been no point to stripping the women naked in a pond for the rebirth. Somehow, rape before a ceremony so sensitive and unstable felt wrong.

I threw myself on the bed and put my arm over my eyes.

Sakura poked my side. "I'm sorry for making you worry."

"Don't be sorry. It wasn't your fault."

"Sleepy? I am."

"I take the left side of the bed, okay?"

"There's a mattress in the other room. I'm sure you can bring it here yourself. I cleaned the floor. Don't stay up late." She spread the blanket over her legs and kicked me off the bed.

I let the shock subside before I dragged the mattress into our room. The light had long been switched off, and she had long drifted into her dreams.

Until past midnight, I could not put order into my thoughts.

I should be profusely relieved that we didn't sleep in one bed. Staying in one room was not a problem at the least. I could watch and care for Sakura in this proximity without provoking Lady Tsunade's temper or worrying Shikaku.
Yes, I would be more comfortable this way.

Yes, yes, yes...but something was not right here. Married people, as far as I knew, slept on the same bed. Yet, Sakura did not even consider the idea. Could it be that a part of her recognized me only as a friend? Impossible! She was too exhilarated with the wedding rings.

The more rational idea would be that she was this way with Ryo.

He was always absent, and she was used to sleeping alone.

That would be an utter contrast to how mom behaved whenever Shikaku came home from a mission. She would stare at him while he ate and never let go of his hand to the point that she annoyed even me.

Were Kana and Ryo really married, or was this another ploy they wanted us to believe?

I lit a candle and burned a piece of Harini, the yellow leaf that we fed our deer to calm them during storms. Grandpa did this to make me sleep. The aroma from the leaf, he said, had a natural component that induced drowsiness.

I spent my last ounces of energy seated on the floor beside her bed, my face pressed against the mattress, my fingers clinging to the hem of her blouse. The smooth fabric evoked memories of pulling her out of the pond and feeling for her pulse. A swirl of questions confused the images of the rebirth ceremony. How many miles had been the hideout from the inn where my team stayed during the mission? How many seconds did the seizure last? How much chakra had I expended in battle?

What was Ino doing in Konoha when I thought I was going to die?

Finally, I fell asleep. I dreamt. In my dreams, it was not Sakura who sat beside me on the bed, wearing the wedding ring.

I could not see the girl's face, only her long, blonde hair.

When she put her hands on my cheeks, I felt myself smile. I said, 'Ino.'
Tonight, I burned two Harini leaves for Kurenai. She was in her ninth month of pregnancy, and I promised Shikamaru that while he was away, I would be the one to look after her. Within minutes, Kurenai had finally calmed and fallen deep into slumber.

Earlier this morning, I had panicked to the point of immediate mental block when she complained of heartburn and swollen ankles. I insisted she be confined in the hospital today, but she said it would be unnecessary, because she was not due for another two weeks.

Kakashi had entered her apartment that moment in our debate, and he explained to me that everything Kurenai felt – including the bodily swelling – were normal.

I had bitten back my lips and scowled at him. "How are you so sure?"

Kurenai descended on her couch slowly. Kakashi seized her elbows and assisted her down. The leather squeaked and sighed at her weight.

"He's been in five of my check-ups." She chuckled as she rubbed her inflamed belly. "I got too alarmed this one time the baby stopped moving, and I called for him. Kakashi carried me to the hospital and since then..." she glimpsed at him with an apologetic smile.

He hauled the grocery bags in his arms high enough to hide his expression. "The doctor thinks I'm the father. He's practically taught me enough to be her midwife."

"Ino, can you help Kakashi put those away? He's not the best with sorting household goods."

"Sure."

Inside the kitchen, as I took out sixteen jars of Masashi's Special Strawberry Jams, my eyes drifted back to Kakashi. His weighing of the canned goods in his hands and constant pauses for deliberation were proof enough of his manhood. I pursed my lips to stifle a sigh.

At least, when mom passed away, dad cared enough to learn the difference between shampoo and conditioner for my sake.

He turned to me very slowly, his only visible eye petrified. "I'm sure Asuma knew nothing of this, too."

I forced a laugh to lighten the pressure on him. "Let me take care of that."

A little after I finished putting away the coffee, the milk, the noodles, and a pregnant woman's toilet necessities, Kakashi beckoned me to the living room to witness Kurenai's nosebleed.

She hit him with her slipper when he laughed at my reaction. "Sit down, Ino. Don't mind him. Kakashi, what's wrong with you?"

"She has to get used to it if she's spending the night with you," he said, handing her more tissue paper. "I should probably explain to you what's normal and what's not, and what to do when."
I couldn't tell if he went into elaborate detail because he needed to educate me properly or simply because he enjoyed torturing young girls about our inevitable future. His grotesque nature was the explanation to Sakura's brutality. For a moment while he explained, my thoughts drifted to Shikamaru back in the woods. It was such good advice never to let Sakura get upset. The consequences were too much for someone like Shikamaru to bear.

"Ino?"

"Yup?"

"Listen."

"Sorry!"

In the ninth month of pregnancy, apparently, the fetus kicked less because of the limited space in the womb. Kurenai worried a lot whenever her baby stopped squirming inside her, but her doctor said that was normal because fetuses had episodic interludes of sleep much like newborns did.

Anko, according to Kakashi, accompanied them to one check-up and started a debate between the activity of fetuses whose parents were shinobis and those whose parents were common employees. To check for normal fetus activity, mothers were supposed to feel at least ten movements inside their womb in the maximum span of one hour. Any less, and the mother should call her practitioner to test for fetal distress. Anko said that wasn't applicable with Kurenai because she was a ninja and so was Asuma. Kakashi then agreed that ninjas presided in the norm of extremes, and their babies were expected to behave the same way.

"The doctor was very upset with them that he banned them from his clinic until my baby is born." Kurenai had folded the last of her collection of baby clothes for the fifth time and snickered. "If they'll be present during my labor, they'll have to wait outside for an indefinite amount of time."

I had remarked something about Anko and Kakashi spending a lot of time together, but he dodged it by redirecting the conversation back to urinary frequency and nesting instincts. There was still a nag at the back of my mind to this moment about his romantic relationship, but was forcibly sidetracked with Kurena's folding and unfolding of the baby clothes. That, Kakshi had said, was the very example of nesting instincts.

Propping my elbow up her desk to ease my muscle cramps, I held a third leaf above the candle flame and watched Kurenai's belly rise and fall with her breathing. The scent was beginning to haze my internal musing. Why had I brought out the leaves in the first place? Ah, the headaches.

Kurenai had refused to take medicines, saying it could affect her baby. Kakashi had argued that stress would also do the baby harm.

I had settled the argument by presenting the pouch of Harini that Shikamaru collected for me last month. The rest led me to this very moment late in the evening, caring for the woman my deceased master loved.

I tiptoed out of her room the soonest the leaf was consumed by the fire because I, too, was getting lethargic. There was no time for me to sleep. I needed to study the texts I borrowed from Shizune in order to help with the investigation with Kana's aging.

The books banked on the coffee table in the order I needed to read them, and after two cups of coffee, I began.

Little did I realize that the gap I left on Kurenai's bedroom door seeped out enough of the Harini's
fragrance to mist my concentration. By the time I concluded this, the hours had gone by, and it was two in the morning.

Lifting my head from the notebooks I nearly drooled on but thankfully didn't, I slapped my forehead and groaned. A litany of curses swamped my mind. My irresponsibility was not going to help Sakura get better. If she was able to pin these medical procedures and facts, I was able to do it also - even better.

My nose itched. I sneezed.

"Someone must be thinking of you."

I snapped my head to the direction of the bedroom. "Kurenai! You're supposed to be asleep!"

"I'm usually awake at this hour." She stretched her arms overhead, yawning. "I'll go back to sleep a little later. So, who could be thinking of you at two in the morning?"

"I don't believe that." I pulled my eyelids up, forcing my vision to steady on the words across the page and drill them into my memory.

Kurenai flicked on the lights. "You shouldn't abuse yourself just because you're young. And it's sometimes nice to think we sneeze because somebody remembers us."

"Yeah… but then it's not applicable if you have a cold."

She laughed. "You don't have to be so severe about the saying."

I sneezed again. "Well… if that's true, then someone out there is thinking of me real hard and real bad. I'm beginning to get a headache, too."

She walked over to the coffee table, skimming the books I had laid out. "Something tells me you're into a serious medical dilemma if you're studying the human body clock and the art of reversing jutsus at the same time. Ino, did something happen?"

Hiding the book entitled 'Permanent Seals Through Body Arts', I shrugged and took a sip of my coffee. "Nothing you should be alarmed about. Anyway, it's not at all serious, but as a medic, I don't want to take things too lightly and risk my patients. Are you usually awake at this hour?"

Bending down, she picked up the photo frame behind my notebook.

I choked on the coffee.

She only giggled and pitched me the roll of tissue paper she used earlier.

"I always bring that along…" I said. "Asuma told me not to let Sakura get the upper hand, so I'm beating myself with all these studying. Kurenai…?"

"I heard Shikamaru was in intensive care along with Sakura and Sai. How are they? It's been two weeks since Shikamaru last visited me."

"Oh, he's recovered," I answered, casually. "There wasn't much problem, except he screwed his chakra pathways again, but other than that, he's in good shape."

"So where is he?"

"Just outside Konoha, in the Nara forest. He's deciphering some codes for the Hokage."
"I see." She put down the photo-frame.

I watched her walk barefoot to the windowsill where her flowerpots sat. She had grown timid with the baby inside her. As a little girl in the Academy, I had always seen her as a tough female – although not as tough as Anko – who was capable of nearly anything. She justified the image of a Konoha kunoichi…and also the saying that even the bravest women of them all could be tamed by a baby in her womb.

Through the gleam of the lamppost spilling across the room, I noticed that her hair, which used to spike sideways, had also slanted down.

In my medical studies, I had encountered the physical manifestation of depression, but to my relief, she exhibited none of those. The changes in her body were probably due to her pregnancy, and that distant look in her eyes as she studied her flowers must be due to Asuma's absence.

I walked over to her. We stood abreast, hands on the ledge, feeling the morning fog leach into our fingernails. Finally, I mustered the courage to ask. "Kurenai…how was it every time Asuma was sent away on a mission?"

She blinked at me, surprised. "Knowing the risks of his return? Why are you suddenly curious, Ino?"

I shrugged and rubbed my left arm. "Does it feel lonely, being unsure what he's doing out there…if he's really all right? And if he's not, doesn't it annoy you that you don't know and you can't ask? It's the not knowing part of this that….Kurenai, did you ever feel that way?"

Her countenance fell. She looked lost. "Yes, it always felt that way."

I hugged myself, reveling in the silence and the company of the person who understood my loneliness.

"But you should trust that person to come back because he promised he would," she muttered. "And when he doesn't, you just prepare yourself to accept that he tried his best, but it so happens the world is unfair."

I sneezed again, and the flowers swayed.

A petal floated to the edge of the windowsill.

"I'm sorry!"

"It's okay." Kurenai reached for the petal but stopped. "It's just that… the last time I saw a petal fall that way, Asuma never came home."

Hinata arrived in the apartment five hours later, and I thanked her for being prompt. If I walked fast enough, I could reach the laboratories before eight o'clock. Kurenai contended that it wasn't necessary for us to be taking shifts caring for her, but we all insisted that she be under constant watch for our peace of mind.

Kakashi had coordinated with Shikamaru last month on the tasks they should do on Kurenai's stead. The grocery shopping was Kakashi's job, but Choji substituted for him often. I was responsible for supplying her medicines. Shikamaru cleaned the apartment whenever he was here, Kurenai had told me with a bashful smile, although according to Kakashi, his job was only to deliver her paperwork for her case studies as an alternative to performing missions.

The pay for a kunoichi on maternity leave, in fact, was decreased by half. Lady Tsunade was
sympathetic about Asuma's death, hence she assigned her case studies regarding genjutsus in order to retain her full salary.

Kiba usually accompanied her for short strolls around Konoha whenever she felt good enough to go out, while Shino did an excellent job at silencing the crickets at night. We learned Kurenai became easily frustrated with the sound the crickets made. When asked, she explained their tune reminded her of a long wait.

Nobody brought up that topic again.

We all understood the difficulty of coping with Asuma's absence, and it was made harder by her pregnancy. Hinata came to my flower shop sometime ago to ask if I could deliver more flowers to Kurenai. She had been crying late the previous evening, and Hinata didn't know what to do.

In truth, I also lit the Harini leaves because I was afraid if she stayed up late, I, too, would catch her crying, and I wouldn't know how to console her.

Not with the situation at hand.

Sakura, my best friend, could turn into Kana any moment, and Shikamaru, my teammate and confidant, was left alone with the task of ensuring the worse would not occur. If I could, I would comfort her, but I hadn't the strength to do so after everything that had happened.

On my way out Kurenai's apartment, I glanced at the fallen flower petal for the last time. It bugged me.

The laboratories handling cases that involved forbidden jutsus and dangerous experiments stood ten miles away from Konoha village, to the north. I travelled the road leading there alone. The weight of the knapsack I carried was enough company. There were too much facts and technicalities to remember for me to bother with another soul.

A guardhouse appeared on the slope of the horizon. Three shinobis ordered me to stop where I stood and lift my hands in the air. The male searched my bag, while the female felt my body for any hidden weapons.

Their search was taking too long, I couldn't help but grunt. Suddenly, the gates parted, and a woman stepped out, waving at me. The mist distorted her face; it was impossible to tell who this frisky person was.

She showed a slip of paper to the guard and signed something.

The male shinobi guard put my knapsack on my back. "She's clear."

"You're Ino Yamanaka?" asked the female.

I nodded and brought out my ID.

The woman from the gate jogged towards us. "Thank goodness you're here! What took you so long?"

"Shizune!" It wasn't only the fog that obscured her. She was wearing goggles around her neck, a white lab gown, and a net over her hair. "You never told me how far this was!" I defended.

"You've got to come now." She grabbed my wrist and pulled me all the way to the gate.
ANBUs in cloaks stood on the pillars bordering the entrance. The concave holes where their eyes should be followed me all the way inside. I buttoned my cape. "Has something happened? Why are we in a hurry?"

"Because," Shizune slowed. She nudged me to stay behind her as a group of ANBUs encircling a shackled prisoner passed us. "I've had no assistance since yesterday. Lady Tsunade is keeping our research incredibly low profile. Even TonTon isn't allowed inside."

"But that's being too extreme to let you handle Kana and Ryo alone."

Shizune clipped my pass on my breast pocket. "I'll explain to you once we're in private."

The ANBUs disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

I agreed that we should hurry up to our destination. The towering infrastructures surrounding us had a presence that was neither welcoming nor kind. To our left and right, buildings loomed in colors of green and blue. I only bothered to ask about the architectural design of the compound once we were midway the main road, and I noticed the buildings were growing smaller and smaller.

"Believe me," Shizune said. "They're anything but small. The deeper we go, the graver the purposes of these laboratories become. Do you see Fifteen and Seventeen? Notice how their colors are faded. The lighter the color of the building and the shorter they are, the more dangerous and sensitive the cases they handle."

I skimmed the area. No more ANBUs with prisoners passed. This place was deserted save for a few cloaked shinobis standing guard outside their respective laboratories. "That doesn't make sense," I hissed. "Shouldn't their facilities be bigger? Or is it natural to have fewer staff?"

"Some have limited staff, while some require a big one." She shook her head. "It's nothing related to their staff, Ino. They appear small on the outside, because their facilities....they're all underground."

Her revelation did little to prepare me to how tiny and colorless Laboratory Five was.

My feet dragged towards it until they were too heavy for me to lift. I frowned at the height of our laboratory. "Shizune, this is two stories tall! What does that mean? And why is it called Laboratory Five when we just passed Laboratory Ten?"

"There are originally five laboratories," she said. "One is for developing and improving jutsus, Two is for deciphering the ancient scripts of the original shinobi clans, Three is for creating seals that restrain and contain biotic matters, Four is for the medical comebacks to every jutsu-induced injury, and Five...Five is for handling forbidden jutsus. This was closed some time back, until Orochimaru was found out and the Third Hokage formed a team to discover what he was really scheming. The rest of the laboratories were created only recently."

We marched inside. Everything seemed normal until we descended to the underground facilities.

It was like being trapped in a box - the chill that the branching corridors gave me. Every ten feet were seals that detected any disguising jutsu a person may affect. Engravings outlined the walls from top to bottom, and they only became visible once the sensory lighting system activated the next light bulb in the corridor we tackled.

We turned right, and then left, and to the room at the end of the hall.

"This is where we keep Kana's body." Shizune pushed the doors aside to let me through. "Ryo is on the other end of the hall."
"For safety in case their proximity worsens the rebirth?"

"Yes, because it was supposedly Ryo's life force that the jutsu drew upon. Although, nothing's really for sure. We're simply not taking any risks."

On the center lay a metal tub of ice with a glass covering. I drew close and saw Kana's naked body inside, her skin stark, her hair like spilled ink.

"...She's supposed to be in her thirties now, correct?"

Shizune passed me a lab gown. "Yes. Her aging has stopped, but so far we're uncertain if that's good news for Sakura."

"Why shouldn't it be?"

"Kana's disease was causing her to age," she said. "If Kana's corpse has been getting younger, and the rebirth jutsu is growing in Sakura, then it can only mean Sakura's absorbing Kana's soul well. It's not an impossibility, Ino. Kana's youth may be the physical manifestation of the rebirth occurring in Sakura."

I struggled to slip the buttons of the lab coat into their proper holes.

These damn buttons were too slippery. I gave up on the eighth and dropped my arms, sensing the strain in my muscles. "There is something we can do, right? There is something out there that can stop this?"

"That's what we're here to find out." She heaved the glass covering up. The hinges squeaked. I caught the glass midway up and let it lie on the other half of the tub.

Cold steam spilled on the floor, chilling my toes.

I glanced down at Kana's face. "Why is the Fifth so desperate to keep this discreet? The more people we have working on this case, the bigger our chances of finding a solution! We are trying to prevent war, aren't we?"

The florescent light above us flickered and died.

An emergency light on top of the door glowed a dim yellow.

Shizune cursed the deceased technician of this facility. "Lady Tsunade has her reasons, and if she decides to tell you – because I'm not allowed to-- you'll undoubtedly be on her side and have no problem working without rest. You want Sakura and Sai cured, yes, but sooner or later, someone will question if two adolescent shinobis weigh more than the thousands of citizens residing in Konoha. The breakers are behind you, at the back of the third cabinet. Mind switching it so we can get good lighting and start work? Ino?"

"Huh?" I looked up at her. "Yeah...yeah."

"Don't worry, it's not come to that yet."

I paused from pushing the cabinet aside. "Why would someone weigh Sakura and Sai's worth over that of the villagers?"

"...Forget I mentioned anything! Go on, we need to start."

"We can find a cure, right, Shizune?"
A glimpse at her while she painted a seal on Kana's forehead revealed her tacit contempt on the issue.

I didn't make anything out of her silence. She was probably encouraging me to work harder, using our lack of time as valid motivation. That was it. I mean, no one would disregard Sakura and Sai, no matter their youth, for the sake of Konoha. Both of them served our village well. They couldn't simply decide to sacrifice them. No one was that heartless.

Reaching up, I seized the lever and dragged it down.

Besides, there was no reason to sacrifice them.

"You have to do it three consecutive times," said Shizune.

What would that sacrifice mean, anyway? This was just a reincarnation of a woman who was victimized by Orochimaru years before we were born. There wasn't any political matter related to this case that they would keep from me.

I tiptoed and moved the lever three times. When still the lights would not return, I smashed the lever down to the breaker's metal casing.

Behind the walls, something hissed, and then the fluorescent light flickered.

The hissing grew louder.

"What's that?" I snapped my head to the ceiling.

The fluorescent light shone for five seconds, and then the bulb exploded.

Shizune and I ducked, our arms flung across our heads.

Once the hissing stopped, we dared stand. Glass fragments scattered everywhere, and I had four small shards stuck on my right arm.

"What happened?" Shizune gasped. "The body's damaged!"

I peered over the metal tub, and indeed, two shards had pierced Kana. I reached for the one at her collarbone, but Shizune slapped my hand away. "No, don't. Use forceps."

We took one pair each. I clipped the shard stuck above her left breast and, very cautiously, plucked it out. "Hey, she's bleeding."

Shizune plucked the shard on her collarbone. "Her blood's not supposed to look that way. She's been dead for more than a week."

We watched the red liquid flow across her chest in a thin line.

Then it stopped - everything stopped. The blood receded back to the wound, and her flesh sewn together.

Shizune and I looked at each other.

"Let's call the Hokage," she said.
Chapter 12

Sakura

I looked at myself in the mirror - at my face on the fogged glass - and even through the haze, my youth was undeniable.

Brushing my fingers across my cheeks, feeling their smoothness, identifying the tiny lumps of scars, I reminded myself I was only sixteen. Sixteen years old and yet I had been married to Shikamaru for fifteen years. The math was wrong, but my wedding ring fit just right. It was now where it had always belonged.

I was a married girl.

I stripped and entered the shower, scratching my back as I did so. Lately, the water had been my most comfortable company. The shampoo I scrubbed into my hair bubbled and slithered down my neck and further down my body. This sensation was familiar: the cold saturating my skin until it was numb…that was the last I felt before waking up in intensive care.

Reality blurred; the shower spurting water over me vanished along with the soap, the tiles, and the bottles of fragrances. I returned to the intensive care unit, on the bed, beside the monitoring machine, looking at the photos in Shikaku Nara's hands.

Lady Tsunade's gaze pressed on me.

"That's Kakashi," I said.

Flip.

"Naruto Uzumaki." His grin in that photograph eased me a little. He had always been protective of me, but the last time he escorted me out of Konoha at dawn for the mission concerning Kana, his presence had felt different.

I hadn't much time to dwell on that event when Shikaku flipped to the last photo. It saddened me that the last image they would remember Sasuke as was in his boyhood. Arrogance and silent pride emanated from him as though he was still beside me, and yet in my head and my heart he was never really far away. I should be glad they had that picture of him – the Sasuke who was still in Konoha. His next photo would be with Naruto and me as Team Seven. Together, finally.

"Do you recognize this boy?" Lady Tsunade asked, referring to Sasuke's photo.

I nodded. "Of course. That's Shikamaru."

She nodded, stroking my hand. "That's correct."

I pressed my forehead on the wet tiles. My reality returned to this small shower room, where something inside of me was screaming a name. The voice – my voice – screamed louder, intensifying the pain in my spine.

"Sasuke," I hissed, but the splashing of water around me drowned his name. Twisting the tap close, I said again, "Sasuke. That boy is Sasuke, Lady Tsunade."
Little by little, the stress in my muscles alleviated. The itching ceased.

"Sasuke," I said.

The water whirled into the circular drain between my feet.


"Sakura?"

I wiped my face with the towel and listened to his continuous knocking. The door trembled with each blow. "Yeah?"

"You alright in there?"

Slipping into my bathrobe, I tiptoed out of the shower and opened the door. "Why? What happened?"

Shikamaru eyed me from head to toe. He stared at my face. When he appeared satisfied, he stepped back and said it was nothing. "You were taking so long I was afraid you tripped and hit your head. Anyway, it's fine."

I grabbed a towel to dry my hair with. A hint pink surfaced on his cheeks.

"Tripped?" I said. "That's a subtle way of insulting a kunoichi."

"You may have collapsed," he said. "We've only been out of intensive care for a couple of days. Next time, don't take too long in a room alone. Geez, Sakura. If something happened to you, I would've suffered from heart attack."

I kept my eyes on him as I wrapped the towel around my head.

"What?"

"You weren't trying to peep on me, were you, Shikamaru?"

Pink morphed into red, and he tugged the towel over my face. "I want fish for breakfast, by the way."

"I told you, there isn't any seafood in the fridge."

"No? I think you just missed them. They were crammed at the back. They aren't fresh but they'll do."

"But I rummaged the fridge and the cupboards on our first day here." I tightened the lace around my waist, securing the bathrobe. "I swear I didn't see any."

He nodded as he rubbed his right eye. "Yeah, well, you could have missed them. I almost didn't see them, too. I'll prepare the scrolls while you get our breakfast ready, 'kay?"

I sidestepped to block his path.

My action seemed to smack him awake. He stared down at me, asking with his eyes. I'd have thought he was teasing me by feigning confusion, only his expression was so genuine it gave him away. I put my hands on my waist and frowned at him. "You interrupt me from my shower, accuse me of being a klutz, and order me to make breakfast without even greeting me good morning. What kind of husband are you?"
His left foot slid backwards, and he looked as though he was ready to bolt. "Uhm – good morning?"
"You're kidding me."
"What kind of greeting do you want?"
"Cook the rice yourself." I walked past him to return to the bathroom. Before I could close the door, however, he grabbed me by the elbow and made me turn to face him. When I didn't say anything - simply kept frowning at him - he inched forward and pressed his lips together as though he was holding back a cough.

His agony was so apparent, I felt guilty for taunting him.

Finally, he let go of his breath and leaned closer to peck me on the cheek. "Good… morning, Sakura."

The warm moist his kiss left on my cheek made me blush. I realized I didn't even know what kind of greeting I wanted from him. I just supposed I would've married someone who could shower me with romantic and thoughtful gestures in unexpected hours of the day. While Shikamaru possessed those traits, I'd always appreciated them best in the battlefield. Nowhere else.

Living together with him came across to me as an entirely new experience.

"Cook the rice," I whispered. "I'll just get dressed and we can get started with breakfast and work. Deal? What? What's with that creepy look?"

"I've been taken advantage of." He leaned against the doorframe."I worry about you and bother to check if you're alright, organize the fridge so you'll have no problem preparing the food, and all I get is an order to cook the rice and an insult for forgetting to greet you good morning in a flowery way – " tapping his cheek twice" – I believe I won't be moving here until I'm properly recompensed for those offenses."

I held the doorknob. "My kisses are expensive. You don't get to have any today."

"So that leaves me with the privilege of watching you get dressed instead." He yawned. "I told you I'm not leaving this spot until you return that kiss."

_But this was Shikamaru_, I thought. I couldn't recall ever having invaded his personal space except when I had to heal him. Why did I even taunt him to kiss me earlier if this wasn't the response I'd wanted from him? The sudden change in his demeanor meant we'd flirted this way before. Shikamaru wasn't the type to play with girls' emotions anyway.

This was silly! Getting kissed on the cheek and kissing him back shouldn't get me flustered. Husbands and wives did this everyday. The Hokage wouldn't reprimand me for displaying affections for my colleague.

No, he wasn't just my colleague. We were married. This was _normal_. I touched my forehead. "Fuck."

"Okay." He stepped out of the bathroom. "I'm leaving."

"No, no." I caught his wrist. "It's not you. I was just thinking of something and I got sidetracked. What was that again? Oh, a kiss? Sure, no problem!"

I grabbed his head, stood on my toes, and pressed my lips against his. In a flash, I was back inside
the bathroom, fingers on my lips, and cursing myself for ruining our chance for early-morning romance by attacking his mouth. It wasn't even a peck. It was a one second contact that could've cost him his front teeth. I might as well have punched his mouth.

He stood in a state of shock for several moments, gawking at me. As I was about to ask if he was alright, he made a move to massage his jaw. "Wow…that was…powerful."

"I'm sorry!"

"No, no, we can work on it – " faking a laugh and wincing when his jaw hurt " – these things usually take practice. We just lost our touch. And-and you don't have to be so aggressive next time. I'm usually responsive. No. Shit. That came out wrong."

"You're right!" I closed the door halfway and hid behind it. "We just need practice but first I have to put my clothes on and we seriously have to prepare that breakfast or else we'll starve and there won't be any chance to practice because apparently you're right and at this rate we won't – " hitting my forehead against the door " – fuck."

"S-sorry?"

"No! There was a pause! I didn't mean fuck as in - I'm closing this door before I say another embarrassing thing." I slammed the door shut and listened for movement in the corridor. The stillness on the other side unnerved me, and I shouted, "I'll fry the fish!"

"Thanks, Sakura," he said.

I heard him leave.

My mood inclined me to a blue sweater with a loose neckline and a brown skirt. Red became tiring to my sight, all of a sudden. With a nod of approval at my reflection in the mirror, I unlocked the door, checked the corridor, and walked slowly to the kitchen while humming the first tune that approached my memory. Doing so kept my mind away from that embarrassing exchange with Shikamaru. I couldn't believe my lack of sophistication. If Ino saw what I did, she'd strangle me and Lady Tsunade would've considered it justice.

Shikamaru had the rice set and cooking. When I called for him, he said he was moving our bank of scrolls to the living room for its excellent ventilation.

I did not argue with his choice of location. Since we would be spending the next couple of days snooping at those scrolls, we would need all the air available to cool our tempers. Besides, he was very fond of that room with the wooden furniture and the orange curtains.

The oil spat as soon as the fish came in contact with the pan. I put three pieces abreast to save time. Grey scales shriveled to a shade of black, and the slits across their bodies ripened to reveal their tanning flesh.

I found the fizzling of the pan annoying, so I recalled the lyrics of the song I was humming and I sang. Soon, I was drumming the beat on the table.

*Cultivate your hunger before you idealize*

*Motivate your anger to make them more realize*

*Climbing the mountain, never coming down*
Break into the contents, never falling down

I flipped the fish.

My knees still shaking like I was twelve

Sneaking out the backdoor-

A scoff erupted from behind me. I turned and saw Shikamaru pass the kitchen with his lips tightly pursed, stifling a laugh.

I glowered at him until he was out the backdoor. "What are you doing there?"

"Singing – I mean, gathering herbs!"

My ears felt hot. "I hate you, Shikamaru!"

"No, you don't!"

"I will burn the fish!"

He did not respond so I let the fish cook a little longer. Their fins curled and charred. I switched off the stove. A grouse coming from outside made me pause midway clipping the fish with the tongs. I listened closer; the grouse grew louder.

"Shikamaru!" I said. "Everything fine out there?"

He shrieked.

I bolted through the backdoor barefoot. The mud clung to my toes and splashed on my legs as I ran, but I was past caring. The shrieking continued around the curb to the greenhouse.

Lady Tsunade's suspicions could have been truthful, after all. Ryo had accomplices targeting us, and they found Shikamaru first.

A robust man with a rope could be strangling him right now.

Stillness reigned around me. I stopped, panting, and whipped my head in all directions. The shovel beside the garden hose beckoned me. I reached for the handle blindly, and my fingers curled around its wood just in time.

I twisted on my heels, slashing the wind with the shovel. A flash of black hair descended before my eyes. The head of the shovel crashed on the wall to my right before I could stop my arm, and splinters of wood sprayed on me.

"Sakura!" Shikamaru leapt up and seized my wrist. "What's the matter with you?"

I absorbed his presence; the warmth of the living. My chest fell deep when I exhaled. "You're okay!"

"Did something happen?"

"Someone was shouting or-or sounding like he was being chokes!" I glimpsed surroundings. "I thought someone attacked you!"

"No one was choking on something or shouting for help, Sakura. We'd know if someone uninvited came within a ten-mile radius of the house; dad commanded the deer to herd the clearing on that
occasion," he said. "Are you all right? Does anything hurt? How's your head?"

I plucked the shovel out with one tug. "We were bickering, and then you were quiet. I heard a
grouse, and then you were shrieking – you sounded as if someone was choking you!"

Shikamaru's brows drooped. "...I was singing along."

"That's not funny." I stabbed the shovel on the mud. "Is there an emergency? If you do not tell me
what that cry was, I will scout the forest – I am strong enough, Shikamaru."

He looked directly at me, but this time, his frown was uncertain. "I was singing."

Then it hit me. He was serious. "Oh!" I slapped my hand over my mouth.
He shifted his weight to his left leg and bowed his head.

"Oh..."

"...C'mon, your feet are dirtied. Mine too. Let's clean up."

I put my right hand over my left. The urge to laugh was so strong, my body trembled. "I'm sorry!" I
squeaked. "Why – why were you singing?"

He turned to walk away.

"I'm sorry!" I grabbed his arm. "Are you mad? Were you singing because you thought I was serious
when I said I hated you? That I'll burn the fish?"

He remained quiet, dodging me.

"I'm sorry I laughed. Shikamaru?"

Finally, he prodded me forward and said, "It's not the first time. I'm used to the insult. Let's get you
cleaned up. Did you hurt yourself? Hey, is that blood?"

I followed his line of sight and saw the growing red stain on my neckline.

Shikamaru lifted my chin and tucked my hair behind my ear to see it better. "You have a cut on your
collarbone."

"I must have hurt myself." I felt for the cut beneath my sweatshirt, inches above my left breast. The
wound nipped as though something had been plucked out of it. I gasped. My body stiffened.

Shikamaru caught my shoulders. "Sakura?"

I pulled out my hand and stared at my blood-covered palm. "A splinter could have cut me this deep,
but it would also have stuck to my sweatshirt."

He touched the fabric tentatively, careful not to come in contact with my body. "A cut that deep...
everything happened too fast. We can't be sure. C'mon, get in. We'll clean it first."

"Wait." Blood had never scared me even as a child, but a wound on my chest appearing out of
nowhere weakened my knees. I couldn't tell him I was suppressing my shock, because he too, must
only be pretending to be calm for my sake.

"You shouldn't be using that much chakra yet," said Shikamaru. "Let's bandage it instead."
The glow of my chakra soothed the pain, and I pressed my fingers over my wounds to sew my flesh faster.

"Sakura, you shouldn't do that yet!"

I looked up at him. "What can happen to me, huh?"

He was about to admit that he, too, did not know, but chose to help me inside and assure me it was nothing serious.

Since I annoyed him by disregarding his warnings concerning my chakra usage, I sat on the chair inside the kitchen without complaint and let him have his way: Band Aids.

While his face hovered so near to mine, his focus away from our proximity and solely on my injuries, I told myself how lucky I was to have him for a husband. His care radiated in the silence of his concentration. Even his breath on my cheek – despite the sensation lasting only for seconds because he stood too quickly – minimized my frustration.

I patted the Band Aid across my collarbone and said, "Thanks."

"Those should keep them from opening." He grazed his thumb over the same Band Aid. "How do you feel?"

"Still a little shocked. Otherwise, I'm fine."

"Sure?"

"I'm sure."

He closed the first aid kit, walked over to the back door to close it, and pointed at my sweatshirt on his way back. "Better change. I'll set the table."

"You can just tell me, Shikamaru."

"Tell you what?"

"That I shouldn't heal myself like that again unless I have no other choice. I can see it in your face."

"We had a choice." He flapped the covering of the Band Aid he used.

"It wasn't a splinter wound, Shikamaru."

"It wasn't fatal either."

"I'm the medic. I'm the judge on which is serious and which isn't. What happened to me does not qualify for normal which makes the entire thing a serious matter."

"You didn't even give me the chance to inspect it."

"Since when did you become an expert on this?" I said. "It came out of nowhere. And I felt as though something was plucked out from it. How do you explain that?"

He returned to his seat, his gaze steady on me. "Since when did I have to be an expert to have the right to worry about you?"

"Worrying is different from being clever enough to listen to the instincts of a medic."
"Can the medic please explain what happened then?"

"I-It's – why do you think it frustrates me? I don't know how it happened!"

"I surrender – " raising his hands in the air " - It's done. Please, I don't want to fight. I'm sorry. Don't get upset. Do you want me to call the attention of Lady Tsunade for you?"

I glimpsed the dried blood on my sweatshirt. "Do you think something's wrong with me?"

"Now you want my opinion?"

"You wanted to give it.," I said. "Well?"

He leaned forward and put his hands on either side of my chair, beside my thighs. "I think you injured yourself earlier. You were shocked because you didn't notice it beforehand like you used to. Based on what happened to us on our last mission, things like those should be normal. We're not as sharp as we were. Until the next couple of weeks, that'll be expected of us. We weren't in the ICU for nothing. Now if you don't believe me or are even willing to consider my opinion, let's call Lady Tsunade to have her check on you. Would you like that?"

Tip. Tap.

He had a point. I wouldn't have noticed it if he hadn't seen the blood on my sweatshirt. "You're right," I mumbled. "I'm stressed. It must've been a splinter wound. This is crazy. I can't even detect my own injuries."

His hand went to my knee. "It's nothing nobody in the battlefield hasn't experienced. Lady Tsunade must have had bad days like this."

I inhaled his scent. He was too close. I pushed the chair backwards and stood, noting how he pulled his hand from my knee. "Let's clean up. I'll bring out a clean shirt for you."

My anxiety had died down by the time I entered the bathroom across our bedroom to change clothes. We used the one downstairs because it had a functioning light bulb. This one was cramped and not suitable for humans our size. Since I never bothered to ask to whom this was originally created for, I also never bothered to change the light bulb.

Pulling open the door with my foot to allow some light inside, I peeled the Band Aid and examined the cut. Through the mirror, my chest appeared flawless, but when I stared hard enough, I could just make out the thin, brown line of my injury.

After reapplying the Band Aid, I put on the long sleeved, mid-waist leotard I used for taijutsu training.

I hadn't realized Shikamaru had entered our bedroom. He had just heaved his turtleneck over his head when he saw me through the gap of the door and stopped to stare. I viewed him through the mirror.

Muscles outlined the bulk of his abdomen, his biceps, and his triceps. Nothing less should have been expected of an active shinobi our age, but I never imagined his body to be so well…toned. His breathing flexed his chest. The light spilling from the window was shaped like a hand with seven fingers, and they swept back and forth his torso. I traced the outline of every ridge across his body up to his neck, and further up his face. I stumbled on the solemnity of his gaze.
His attention lingered on my bare waist for several moments, and then he slipped on the black shirt I laid on the bed that had laid out for him.

Layering my leotard with a white top, I left the bathroom and poked my head inside our bedroom. "Breakfast, Shikamaru?"

He didn't know, mainly because I refused to let it show, that I was beginning to find his interest in my wellbeing odd. Lady Tsunade had involved me with her affairs in the Intelligence Division quite often in the past three years; I had unconsciously picked up the art of deception.

I hated deceiving him. I hated eating breakfast and smiling at him without the least bit of sincerity. I hated discussing the order in which the scrolls should be deciphered as though the fish had not gone cold. Sometimes I would swallow my food and open my mouth with every intention to ask if he was withholding information about my health, but then I'd cower because if he was not telling, then it must be a fact so critical that a confession would only worsen it.

I hated waking up the next morning to the same thoughts as I watched this sinewy man combat his pillows in his sleep, his mouth open, and his head tipped over the mattress. When Shikamaru awoke, he found me half-sitting, half-lying on the edge of the bed with my eyes open. He mumbled his good morning and placed a soft kiss on my forehead almost on reflex before rolling out of his mattress.

My patience only tipped when he left me in the living room later that afternoon with a lie that he was gathering herbs to make the tea he had boasted would relieve my stress. At first, I was flattered by his thoughtfulness. I carried on with translating the scripts in the scrolls, identifying the unfamiliar figures through the guide Inoichi lent us.

Next, I was fidgeting on my seat until I had to stand. I paced a couple of times and then checked on him in the greenhouse.

It didn't come as a surprise that he wasn't there. That was the only time I acknowledged I had stopped believing his excuses.

I summoned a shadow clone to guard the scrolls and I scouted the forest for him. Beneath the trees I leapt on, the deer herded and followed. They never once let me out of their sight. Maybe this was why Shikamaru was so confident about trespassers.

When they slowed, I concluded Shikamaru must be nearby. They could sense him, and he could sense them.

Even Kakashi would have trouble hiding his presence against a Nara in this forest.

The sparrow had just flung from Shikamaru's arm when I found him.

He watched the bird fly west before he turned to me without a hint of shock in his expression. The branches of the tree shook and the leaves danced. He angled his body towards me.

"What's the message?" I said, feeling the dryness of my throat.

"I can explain, Sakura."

My foot burned enough chakra to cut in half the branch I was standing on. "Who is that bird going to?"

"Lady Tsunade."
"Why?"

"I relayed to her your injury."

"You said it was normal."

"You believed otherwise."

I jumped and landed on the gap between two of the eighteen deer monitoring us. One sniffed me. I ducked and crept between their antlers. Another deer blocked my path.

Leaves shuffled and I heard his footsteps behind me.

"Shikamaru, order them to scram."

His arm thrust past my face and stroked the chin of the deer in front of me. "Sakura, if I had told you then you would have panicked. This is just a precaution. You said it yourself – I'm not a medic. She might need to come here to check it for herself."

"Great! Thanks!" I waved my arms in the air, stepping around him to find another way out. "That mission has left me so handicapped that I can't even bother to be professional about a mysterious injury! It might have shocked me but that doesn't mean I'm any less effective as a medic!"

"You should have seen your face yesterday."

"Really terrified, Shikamaru!"

"You were frightened, and I didn't want you over-thinking things. I analyzed it last night and thought it better to give your speculations a chance."

"So you absorb everything for me like I'm some sort of incompetent shinobi?"

The deer formed three layers of circle around us. I quit searching for an escape and spun to face him. "Or can't you tell me because it's the same reason I was transferred to a containment area?"

"This again, Sakura?"

"Yes, Shikamaru. This again. I may not be as smart as you but I've been hanging around the Hokage long enough not to be easily fooled. What happened to me? Did I catch some sort of disease because of Kana? A virus? Was that injury yesterday a symptom of it?"

"I was put in the containment area too – didn't I tell you that and you claimed to believe me? We were let go because there was no further reason to contain us! We were tasked to decipher these classified codes because we're perfectly fine!" he said. "Sakura, why are you so suspicious of me?"

"I don't know!" I bowed my head. I saw my toes peeping out of my slippers. Mud still dirtied my nails. "I don't know…I just have this feeling."

Shikamaru put his hand on his waist and looked down as well. Our audience bobbed their heads, driving their antlers past each other's. He whistled a two-note tune to stop them, but they were stubborn.

"What do they want?"

"They want us to talk."
"Oh."

"They are sensitive to our heartbeats," he said. "Especially mine. They feel anxiety…they know when we lie. Hitting horns is a challenge to tell the truth."

The deer to my right nodded at me. I groaned. "…It's just that I feel as though something happened to me…to us…while in that mission with Kana, and it's important, but you're not telling me." I said.

"Sakura, there is something."

We stood there, motionless, uncertain if we should continue, if anything more should be expressed, or if an answer would satisfy. I asked myself I this had been the right thing to do. Shikamaru made a point with my tendency to over-think, to over speculate the simple.

He closed the distance between us and whispered, "I know you've been disbanding from your squad after missions to look for Sasuke, and I'm not the least bit happy with your risking your life for him. Lady Tsunade found out, and dad told me, and I've been pleading to degrade your punishment since we arrived in this house."

The wind finished playing with my hair and moved on. I kept quiet.

"Putting you in the containment area was also because I had forced the Hokage that you are not fit for the consequences Danzo had planned for you," he said. "Rogue ninjas are out of our jurisdiction unless we come in contact with them in the field. Pursuing them without consent is an offense. After we're done with this follow-up mission with the scrolls Kana and Ryo left behind, the worst you can expect is a five-month suspension without pay."

I looked at him at last. "That's too much. How can you reduce it to five months? Even Lady Tsunade—"

"The other five months are on me."

"All these time…that's what you've been hiding?"

He let out a long, steady breath. "That's everything."

"Shit." I shook my head. "I'm so stupid."

"It's normal. Sometimes almost everything becomes stupid if we think hard about it."

"No, you've been saving me and I've been accusing you. I've been pinning my own misgivings to you since we came here. I don't know what to say."

Shikamaru sneered, but it was innocent of ridicule. "Mum said it's usually the husbands that accuse and the wives that save…don't you think it will get boring if that's how the cycle goes every time?"

"Shikamaru, I'm sorry."

"It's fine. The Fifth warned me of agitation on your end. And we've been together long enough for me to expect outbursts of intense curiosity from you. Being put in a containment area makes everything and everyone outside suspicious. That's a given and I don't blame you for it. Sometimes, though, I just wish you'd trust me more. Most burdens I take from you don't even deserve a speck of your attention."

I leaned my forehead on his chest. "Sorry. That was an honest mistake on my part."
He ruffled my hair. "I know. You don't have to explain. Not to me, at least."

Our audience, the deer, partnered and rubbed their necks together. Shikamaru pulled away from me. "L-let's go back. You don't have to worry about Danzo." He signaled for them to clear a path. "O-or any secret. You found out the last I had."

"What are they doing?"

He whistled louder. "Damn these...they're mocking us. Don't look at them. They like to make fun of me. Shoo!"

I knelt down.

"Hey, Sakura, you don't-!"

Brushing off the dust beside his feet, I said, "Shikamaru, there's something down here."

We crouched next to each other, pondering the wooden panels hidden underground. Shikamaru admitted having never seen this before, and undid the seal plastered on top. The paper lit and burned and the wind carried its ashes away.

I slipped my fingers between the gaps of the panels and, with his consent, pulled it off.

Sitting inside the underground container was a wooden box, exactly like the one Shikamaru used to store his one hundred rubber bands in. He reached down and picked it up.

The sun shed light to the box's surface, revealing an engraving we had not noticed earlier.

"Shikamaru," we read in chorus.

"Is...is this yours?" I asked.

He opened the box. "No. Mine is in our room."

"Who's is it, then?"

He scooped a handful of the rubber bands inside and showed them to me. "I don't know. But as far as I know, I'm the only Shikamaru of our clan."
Neji Hyuuga arrived in Konoha at exactly 1:13 in the afternoon. He saw me standing by the right-side pillar of the gate, and he excused himself from his teammates - a boy that resembled Guy in a way I wanted to forget and another man that resembled his pet dog. Through closer inspection, I remembered Shikamaru told me the name of the dog was Akamaru, but for some reason, I couldn't recall the name of its owner.

"By your expression, I'm supposing the mission didn't go well?" I said upon coming face to face with this Neji kid. I stood taller and puffed my chest out, putting my hands on my waist to sustain my posture. My clearest memory of him was during his battle with Naruto in the chuunin exams. How long ago had that been to cause such change in this young man? I could be shrinking with age.

"There was a dilemma. However it wasn't a complete failure on our end. How are Shikamaru, Sakura, and Sai?"

"Shikamaru and Sakura woke up a few days back. They're in our family forest now, quarantined for observation. Sakura's under the impression that Shikamaru is her husband and they're currently working on decoding the scrolls left behind by Kana and Ryo."

"I see." He waved for the big-eyed, bushy-browed, shinobi in green tights to proceed without him. "I assume that means Sakura Haruno and your son has been affected by the jutsu?"

"The girl is experiencing the rebirth."

"And Shikamaru?"

"None...and I hope nothing will show, but we need you to check his pathways again tomorrow."

"Of course, sir."

"Right now, we focus on Sai."

We reached the intensive care unit in time to see Sai drift back to sleep as the drug in the syringe was emptied into his system. Lady Tsunade disposed of the needle and relayed that he had been salivating, hitting his head against the pillow, and kicking so wildly that sometimes he fell off the bed. Kazuo nodded at me and moved around the vital sign machine to dispose of the trash bin filled with used needles and syringes.

"Excuse me." Lady Tsunade bit off her rubber gloves, handing them to Isas and swinging the divider apart to enter the nurse's station. "You can observe him while I fetch my hand-picked medics to study this change in Sai's condition. Got a breakthrough in the seal used around the pond, Shikaku?"

I strummed the garter belts tied around the metal bars on either side of the bed. "Broken chemical composition of a certain element was scattered around the totality of the seal."

She lifted her pen off the prognosis she was filing. She wrinkled her nose. "Can't be fire. Which is
"Wind may be specified to oxygen, which is significant for survival," Isas said. "Although if the rebirth is tackling that, it may risk immediate death if it goes wrong in the first few seconds of the jutsu's operation. Highly effective, though. Can't trace that."

Kazuo flicked his finger lightly at the tube connected to the IV. "I'll bet on earth; the pond may have been used to mislead us to thinking it's water, when in truth they've used the soft soil beneath the pond to penetrate the surface of the human body. Isas - " He bobbed his chin, smirking. " - soil has oxygen."

Isas snickered.

Lady Tsunade hit her tablet on the counter. "Thank you for answering the question that wasn't intended for you, boys. Shikaku?"

I glimpsed Isas and Kazuo, who had continued their work with their heads down. "I can't say yet. The scattered elements can refer to wind, water, or earth."

"It can easily be water, Shikaku."

"It's being considered, milady, but I still have my doubts. The seal and the amount of chakra used don't make for a stable execution of a jutsu. Not for a rebirth, at least."

"You're onto something?"

"We have a lead, yes."

"Good. I'm going." The Fifth left.

Neji remained standing on one corner, only watching. Despite his expressionless façade, I knew even he must be shocked. So many changes had occurred in this room while he was away.

"Why not just tie his limbs?" I asked Isas, who was pressing buttons on the machine beside me.

He paused to rethink the numbers he had been muttering to himself, checked the chart in his hand, and gave up. I apologized for interrupting his math.

"His reactions are seizure-like. It would be unhealthy to restrain him by binding his limbs, Mr. Nara," he said.

"His face is red and he's sweating…almost as if he's tired." Neji winced. He raised the blanket and peered at Sai's toes.

"Normal?"

"They look a bit swollen."

Lady Tsunade entered with four senior medics and ordered us to wait outside while they probed him. I went back to Intelligence to supervise the transcribing of ancient scrolls for our research, reviewed the data of the seal around the pond, ate a sandwich, sipped a little liquor, and went back to see the medics gearing to examine Sai for the second time. Inoichi walked with me and somewhere in the conversation, he segued to my assault on Sanae.

"That was unwise, Shikaku. You used Shikamaru as an excuse to vent on her. If she didn't know the meaning of guilt, she could have had reason enough to kill you in defense of herself."
I ignored his remark and asked his opinion on the elements in the seal around the pond. Fortunately, Inoichi relented.

The senior medics finished their work four hours later. They disappointed us of an explanation that could progress the case. Neji was let inside to look at him through his byakugan at last.

I waited in the hallway for two hours, wondering what was happening. Sai was supposed to be recovering; no one suspected anything would change with his condition.

Sitting on the bench with my palms pressed together and my thumbs supporting my chin, I revisited the whole incident in my mind, cutting a few strings of supposition to see things in another light.

This wasn't totally unexpected, was it?

Sakura's rebirth activated an hour after she awoke. Shikamaru was not displaying symptoms of a rebirth – it was somehow unlikely since he was far from Ryo, and it was only Kana who was supposed to be transferred to another body. Sai, however, was in battle with Ryo during the rebirth ceremony, and he was lying directly above Ryo, who, in turn, was lying above the seal.

Could Sai be…?

Just when I was beginning to tackle that prospect, Lady Tsunade came out of intensive care, popping her knuckles. Neji followed closely behind, the nerves around his eyes receding slowly, and he relented to sitting beside me on the bench.

I tapped his back. "Are you alright, son?"

"Son" was an endearment I put into practice after Yoshino scolded me for addressing younger people 'kid'. She resented how it made me sound smug and mighty. Her advice worked, because my underclassmen in Intelligence respected me more. This time, however, I regretted using it on Neji.

That look of disappointment he showed when he saw it was only me and not his father was familiar. It mirrored my own when Michio passed away; his was a replica of the trivial emptiness I adopted since. It had been years ago, but I still missed Michio's heartless bullying.

Lady Tsunade signed a list from one of the resident doctors and shooed him. "Sai's chakra production was extremely low. Neji and I managed to normalize his chakra levels, but we might need a medic from the Hyuuga clan to keep watch over him."

"And what of his behavior while asleep?"

"The instability of his chakra levels may have affected the drugs you injected in his bloodstream and also the chemical distribution in his brain." Neji massaged his temples, easing a protruding nerve. "I'll relay some instructions to the Hyuuga medic you will be getting, because something's not right with what happened. Nothing in his pathways and his pressure points was causing chakra instability."

"Besides, this was too sudden. Sai showed no signs of any abnormalities in his body yesterday. In no instance in my whole medical career have I encountered an affected network of pathways that did not show the slightest symptom beforehand." Lady Tsunade fixed her gaze at the view above my head. She exhaled deeply, her left brow creasing. "Shikaku, Neji, do me a favor and be gentle on the information with Naruto. I can't have him pouring his attention on our medical dilemma when he has the Akatsuki tailing him – or wanting his tails, that is."
Naruto burst from an open window, landing on one foot while kneeing the stack of papers to his chest. Two overlapping sheets of paper inched downwards, and he tightened his embrace on the pile, begging it not to fall, not realizing he was tipping off his flamingo-like pose in an attempt to pursue it.

Lady Tsunade hastened to him and poked his forehead with her pinky, steadying him.

"Grandma! Neji!" He caught the paintbrush that crept from his stack of materials with a 'whoops' and a snicker. "Hey, Mr. Nara. I brought Sai a set of painting materials. You are going to make sure he wakes up tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, right? By the way, grandma, I'll be staying overnight again to watch over Sai, 'kay?"

"You have training with Yamato, Naruto," she said. "You can't be here every night, and you can't enter the hospital through windows every time."

He snorted. "Tell that to Jiraiya, why don't you."

"When he comes back-!"

"He'll surely be upset with the way you look!" Naruto frowned at her appearance.

Lady Tsunade looked down at herself.

"Ah-huh," Naruto made a disapproving click of his tongue. "You've lost weight, grandma, and your skin is sagging. Master Jiraiya said he liked you with a little more fat, especially in your arms. Tsk Tsk, you've been overworking yourself!"

Neji and I turned our heads the other way to avoid the ugly sight of the Hokage beating the kid with the Nine-Tails. She was so much like Sakura Haruno in this respect; both had no fear of men, no matter who they were.

This very thought silenced Naruto's pleading in the background of my consciousness. Perhaps I had taken her femininity too lightly. She didn't have children of her own, but she watched over Sakura and Naruto as though she was the one who carried them in her womb.

If I were in her place, I would trust Naruto to be mature enough to handle the severity of this case and push him to be more responsible. But then, if I were a woman with a love for him like a mother's, I would also consider sparing him for now a good decision.

It wasn't as if the Akatsuki was a group of average rogue ninjas.

Lady Tsunade understood Naruto's dilemma better than I ever would; while she could lose Sakura to the rebirth, she could also lose Naruto to the Akatsuki, and both losses risked great damage to the Hidden-Leaf.

When their bickering died down, I considered Naruto's observation of the Fifth's health.

She was growing old, and she cared too much about this case to notice that the one thing she had been hiding all her life was finally showing.

At last, I thought, she found something worse than aging: the concept of losing children.

Neji stood from the bench and turned. Sensing why, I followed his line of sight to an ANBU crouched on a tree branch. Lady Tsunade ended her squabbling with Naruto and snapped her fingers for the ANBU to approach.
He regarded our group, hesitant to speak. The Fifth urged him to proceed with his report.

"Ino Yamanaka is in your office, Lady Hokage," he said. "She has come with an urgent report from Laboratory Five."

The suspense was ineffable.

We marched to the Hokage's office without so much as a word. Lady Tsunade did not bother to pause upon entering, ordering Ino to report at once as she rounded her desk and plopped on her seat.

Ino made circular motions with her arms to bring out her words. "Kana was cut by two shards of glass – one on her collarbone and the other just above her left breast. After Shizune and I plucked the shards out, she bled, and then the blood receded back to the wound and healed. I can't explain it! Shizune's still there, checking if anything else will happen. But it was freaky that a dead woman healed by herself!"

"Kana healed?" Naruto walked over to her to inspect Ino's face, as though to make sure she wasn't fooling him.

Inoichi arrived, and Ino repeated her report for his sake. He turned to me at once, asking tacitly for a ready explanation, but I had none to give.

"Naruto." Lady Tsunade waved him over to her desk and asked him to stretch out his hand. She seized his wrist and spat a needle on his palm.

Naruto shrieked, wiggling away, but she kept a good hold of him and called on everyone to observe.

"What's wrong with you, old woman?" Naruto tugged the needle out.

The hole where the needle used to be oozed a few drops of blood. It shut close. Lady Tsunade brushed the wound with her thumb, and the blood smeared, but there was no longer a wound.

"Is that how it looked like, Ino?" she said.

"No," Ino unsheathed a kunai, cut across Naruto's palm, and healed it. "That's as close as I can show it. Like it was healed...by a medic."

Naruto stole his hand back. "Do I look like a freakin' experimental pig to all of you? Isn't TonTon hiding behind that desk? Why not use him or eat him, huh?"

Inoichi touched his chin, thinking. "Kana was a medic...but she's long been dead."

"Can she be stealing life force from Sakura?" Ino suggested. "The rebirth jutsu has caused her to become younger; can the defect in the rebirth be allowing her to resurrect herself? I mean, her blood is-"

"But that means Sakura is dying." I caught Naruto staring at me, and I thought I saw his irises sharpen like that of a feline's. "But she isn't! She was in good health the last we checked on her. There's no need to worry over nothing. Shikamaru would have reported any drastic change at once."

He nodded. "Yeah..."

The following afternoon, Shikamaru sent a sparrow to report to us.

Lady Tsunade read the message just as we were preparing to leave for the forest with Neji. We had been answered; Sakura received two cuts around the same time Kana did, at the exact same points in
their bodies, and Sakura healed hers, unknowingly healing Kana's too.

The Fifth returned to her chair, neither happy nor mad. She looked up at Neji, and then at me.

Neji put down the bag of medical apparatuses, realizing we were not leaving any time soon. "First Sai, then Sakura."

Lady Tsunade scraped her chair back and turned it so she was facing Konoha. "Chakra instability… similar wounds…"

"That happened yesterday, at the same time Kana was cut." I flipped the message on her desk to reread the report. Shikamaru's handwriting was clean, yet I could make out the slight meander in his strokes. He thought these wounds emerged out of nowhere.

"We understand that Kana and Sakura are connected through the rebirth, but how can a fresh wound on a dead body reflect on a living being?" She embraced herself and leaned down on the ledge, watching the streets below as though the answer would walk past if she was patient enough.

I opened my mouth to ask if the manner of the rebirth could have caused this unlikely effect, but I already knew the answer: yes. I flashed back to my earlier visit to my team in Intelligence, at their work in breaking down the elements Ryo used to perform the rebirth, and then at the idea I was formulating in the hospital yesterday while waiting for the result of Neji's inspection of Sai.

"What if…” I closed my eyes for five seconds to straighten the concept weaving in my brain. "What if Sai is experiencing the rebirth, too? Put yourself in Ryo's shoes: my wife could die if I don't perform the rebirth successfully. This kid with a paintbrush is defeating me. That other boy is painting a restraining seal over my own seal around the pond. He is rescuing Sakura. My wife would die. I will have to find a way to survive. I have to at least try."

"Yes, I've thought the same, but Shikaku, what rebirth could be done so hastily and still be effective?"

"Perhaps this is the result of another faulty rebirth? Like Sakura's?" Neji said.

She looked hard at him. "And the effect of the faulty rebirth is this behavior from Sai? Chakra instability? That could be. Shikaku, what basis do you have for this theory of yours that Ryo could have used Sai as a rebirth vessel on a last-minute resort?"

"The seal around the pond," I confessed. "The pond itself. Water element. Kazuo and Isas' notions led me to recheck the progress of my team and re-investigate the drafts of all the theories we had thus far. The most prevalent of all was the theory on water; the human body is seventy percent water. It's an imperfect theory considering the other factors involved, but it's the best one I have. The seizure Sakura experienced after Shikamaru pulled her from Kana could be the effect of interrupting the ceremony. Concisely… by using the water element as a means of penetrating the very core of the vessel, the rebirth was aiming for perfection – to rebirth a soul by re-wiring the pathways of the foreign body it has chosen. If that's the aim of the rebirth, water should be the main element."

"To redo your pathway to match mine would be to make your body suitable for my soul." She put her hands on her hips. She dropped her arms to her sides. She put her hands on her face. "The sudden change in a person's network of pathways would cause the body to fight it. To fight it! That would explain Sai's behavior!"

Neji's expression perked. "The chakra instability…Sai is fighting the rebirth, hence the seizures. You might be correct, Mr. Nara!"
"Not yet." Lady Tsunade tapped her foot. The clicking sound reduced this room into box that imprisoned us to the wicked glory of our hypothesis. "Neji, I need you to go to Laboratory Five and memorize the pathways of Kana and Ryo. We will transfer Sai to the containment area tomorrow where you can compare his pathways with Ryo's. Right now, we go to the woods and see if Sakura reflected Kana's wounds because her pathways have began to morph. If anyone would be mimicking anyone's pathways soundly, it would be Sakura."

Neji nodded his head. His movement gradually slowed. The corners of his lips curved down. "What will happen if we're correct and Ryo is being reborn in Sai?"

The subtle hint of an implication made me shift my weight and scowl.

Lady Tsunade said, "We stop it. That's the plan."

Neji hesitated. "By no means do I intend to offend you by questioning your judgment, Lady Hokage, but doesn't the scale of our predicament require the attention of a larger team? By chance that we are caught off-guard by the speed of the rebirth."

"Shut up, Neji." She turned her head to the side, glimpsing him. "Do as I say. We'll require the attention of as much people when I say so. Right now, we are enough. Now go. Come back as fast as you can so we can proceed with the visit in the Nara forest."

"Yes, Fifth." He bowed and retreated.

I let a couple of minutes pass before I cleared my throat to revive our discourse. Even then, the cruelty of her tone still stung. "My lady,"

"Don't try to convince me otherwise, Shikaku."

"Neji was right, ma'am."

Her shoulders rose and slumped. Her arms hung at her sides. "We have a theory with hypothetical evidence. Until we earn the facts, no one besides our group must know. Do you understand, Shikaku?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Only later did I fathom why, the whole duration of our talk, the Hokage was staring Konoha at large. Provided our speculations be proven true, the best we could do was find a cure before Sakura and Sai become a threat to the Hidden-Leaf.

Hidden in the leaves; Shikamaru served as the canopy that shielded Sakura from the rest of the world right now. As heartless as it was, I hoped Ryo chose Sai to be a vessel rather than my own son.

The moment Neji returned, we set out for the visit.
Chapter 14

Shikamaru / Sakura

Shikamaru:

I covered the top of the box with my hand and, after counting to three, peered at the engraving. Shikamaru. Still the same. Try again.

I'd been doing this since we discovered it yesterday in a hope that delusions were a by-product of rebirth jutsu-related injuries. But no matter how patient I was, the name on the box remained unchanging.

It was still my name on it.

The wind rustled the canopy, forcing the forest into movement and showering me with leaves. The doe to my right remained fast asleep, the side of her face pressed against my thigh. She reminded me of Sakura, which diverted my attention back to how confused she’d obviously been about our relationship.

She demanded things like proper morning kisses. Yet whenever I’d comply, she'd put on this bewildered expression as though asking me what right I had to go near her. In spite of that, I tried to be consistent in giving her an absent-minded kiss the soonest I was awake (the more lethargic I was, the better I could pull off being casual about it) and she pretended to like it, although there was always one hand ready to scratch her back afterwards. Whether it was the idea of kissing me or the manner in which I did it that upset her, I couldn't tell.

There was also the matter of catching one another in the middle of undressing. I walked in on her just yesterday and she'd thrown the lamp at me instinctively. By the time I'd stopped seeing stars, I could hardly remember the sight of her left breast. All I could recall was that lamp zooming in on me.

When it was her who caught me shirtless and pulling down my boxers in the bathroom, however, she only hesitated for a second before asking me where she could find a book about deciphering codes. Bent on my waist with my butt crack half exposed, I'd steeled my nerves and turned my head to look at her. "It's in our bedroom. On the desk. I was reading it last night."

Sakura simply rolled her eyes up and said 'oh' before walking out without shutting the door.

She would toss me from husband to casual acquaintance in a blink. Bossing me around one moment and then volunteering to give me massages the next. By the end of the day, I'd always be too worn out to even worry that she'd get intimate with me and attempt to crawl beside me on the bed – or the mattress.

That was another peculiarity, actually.

We didn't share the same bed. That was one thing she never wavered about so far. It was either Sakura's passion for modesty was too saintly for the rebirth to overtake or Kana slept alone even with Ryo around.
I tipped my head back and squinted at the canopy. Through the gaps, I saw the clouds drift past carelessly.

Something about my strategy felt wrong. The friction between my conscious and subconscious indicated a crevice in our plan. I could feel that friction in my fingertips whenever I touched Sakura and forced her to believe I was that devoted psychopath of a husband she loved.

I laughed, and the trembling of my body woke the doe. I apologized to her and said, "I'm going to lose my mind soon if I keep playing house with Sakura. And this box. I've honestly got no logical explanation to this shitty box with my joke of a name on it."

Sakura:

The slanted tip of the green highlighter dried. I capped it.

Retreating from the table, I sank on the couch and stared at the curve leading to the hall. At the end of that hall was the stairs leading to the ground floor, and on the ground floor was the front door, and outside the front door was the path leading to the west side of the forest, and in the west side of the forest was the cache where a replica of Shikamaru's box sat, hidden in the dark...so innocently.

He should be done reconstructing the wooden panels that concealed it; he had been gone for nearly one hundred and twenty-two minutes. We agreed he would be back as soon as he was finished, and while he was working on it, I would continue studying the scrolls.

For the first hour, I had managed to push back my worry and move on with highlighting the passages we marked yesterday evening. Through keen evaluation of the texts as a whole, we saw the interconnected pattern of the scrolls. Shikamaru didn't allow us to rest until we filtered the passages that fit the pattern.

I was just about to highlight my third scroll when anxiety overtook me at last.

Certainly, Shikamaru was not telling me a fact about that box – a fact that shook him to the bones.

Those one hundred rubber bands made of a fiber found only in the Nara forest were instruments of good fortune, as he once explained. More than that - and this was my initial hypothesis to his quiet distress - the one hundred rubber bands symbolized the birthright of the first-born son.

I capped and uncapped the highlighter, finding comfort in the company of the clicking sound reverberating in my eardrums.

Shikamaru did say that Michio was never fond of him or of Shikaku. Given the facts at hand, could it be that Shikaku had another first-born son they were supposed to name Shikamaru but died, and Yoshino never wanted their next son, the Shikamaru with me today, to find out about his deceased brother?

I had heard of mothers too pained by the loss of their child that they relented to never speak of them again. In order to move on properly, Shikaku and Yoshino buried the box meant for the first son and weaved another hundred rubber bands for their second.

I rolled the cap on my palm. My fingers enclosed on the tiny, green plastic, and the sound of a snap roused me from my stupor.
Shikamaru would be devastated if that were the untold story behind that hidden box.

Unless that box wasn't related to him at all.

It could have been hiding there long before he and I were born, and there was nothing about it that could demoralize Shikamaru.

"Zip it, Sakura," I told myself while I made my way back to the table. "There's nothing to worry about. It's too early to worry. Whatever it is - " Taking a deep breath and licking my lips to moisten them " - Whatever it is, Shikamaru needs me to be less of a bother."

A thud downstairs alerted me of his arrival.

My fingers uncurled, setting free the shards of what used to be the highlighter's cap.

Footsteps disturbed the silence of the stairs. A head ascended into view. I swept the green shards off the table and willed my mind back to the script I was supposed to be highlighting. My eyes hovered over the page - at the printed words - only to find I had completely forgotten what I was searching for.

A shadow appeared at the entrance of the living room. My head snapped up in time to see him enter.

Shikamaru twisted his neck side to side, his right arm folded back to hold his nape. Our gazes met. He flicked his eyes down to the scrolls laid across the table. "How is it?"

"What do you mean?"

He moved to my side, studying the scroll beneath my hand. "Any development?"

"Oh!" I cursed myself. "It's...I was distracted by the sound of the front door opening. I lost my train of thoughts. Don't worry, I'm always like this. How is the...were you able to return it to the way it was before we found it?"

He stepped closer to see the fourth passage. Something cracked. Upturning the sole of his shoe, he looked at the highlighter in my hand, and then at me. "Are these little green things on the floor the cap of that green pen?"

"No." I chucked the highlighter into a round container, picked up the tape dispenser and the two scrolls I had finished highlighting beforehand, and walked to the bare wall ahead.

"You can take a break if you're tired," he said. "I can wrap this up, you know."

"Don't be silly, Shikamaru. You underestimate me."

"Nah, I mean, these are more troublesome than I imagined. Ancient shit and all."

"Really? They're rather simple once you get the hang of it." I fingered the rim of the scroll and let it spread downward. The pattern of the highlighted passages demanded this be posted vertically. "You can take it easy for now, if you want. You deserve a break. Hey, I can brew that herbal tea for you. You left the basket of those colored leaves on the kitchen table, and I was curious so I studied them. Lady Tsunade taught me that those kinds of herbs were only as good as the thickness of the powder they emit through their pores. The red ones are the best among the bunch, I guess. The powder clung to my fingers so easily. Although, when I smelled them, the pink ones were the most fragrant. If you let me, maybe I can harvest some and combine them for research. Shizune's been mentoring me on my case studies. My first one had been approved and Suna bought rights to it but of course, the
whole antidote is patented to me. Lady Tsunade was so impressed with my performance that she provided a budget for my research. Oh, you must know about the antidote, Shikamaru! It's concerning the poison Sasori attacked Kankuro with. Using the ingredients Lady Chiyo's team gave me as a present before I left Suna, I improved the antidote to cure poisons raging up to two scales higher than the caliber of Sasori's poison. They're in production in the Sand Village now.

He tapped the pen against the table repeatedly. "...Were you paid for that?"

"Yes - a small sum - but I don't care about the money. Not yet, anyway." I laughed at the idea of leeching money off villages through medical research. "My next case study is a little more difficult, and I would need your opinion. I know, I know, you're not a medic, but you've been through enough trouble with your pathways to comment. It concerns creating a reservoir of chakra at the back of the heart - enough for regeneration. It means that once the body requires it, as adrenaline works its way into our system, the pace of one's heart can trigger the reservoir to permeate the walls of the heart, therefore distributing the chakra throughout the entire body, permitting healing in accordance to the degree of medical treatment infused in the reservoir." I flattened the tape across the edge of the scroll and turned around, half-smirking. "Shikamaru?"

His attention was stuck to his feet. His chest rose and fell slowly, indicating thoughts that brought about exhaustion rather than frustration. Perhaps he'd crossed that stage already and was now too tired to feel the heat of his stress.

I released the tape dispenser from between my waist and my elbow and approached him. He noticed me and motioned for the bank of scrolls we had set aside on a separate armchair.

I scooped them up and put them quietly in front of him.

He unsealed each one, scanned their contents, found what he wanted, and raced to the wall.

"What is it?" I watched him turn the open scrolls in all angles. He pinned the end of the paper above the one I just taped and asked if I could hold it for him. Obeying, I reached up and kept it in place with my finger. I traced the highlighted script on the scroll beneath to the script of the one I was holding. "Shikamaru, the highlighter," I said.

He pressed the side of his face on the wall and tiptoed, not hearing me.

I patted my pockets for any markers, fished a blue pen, and encircled the script that aligned to the ones I highlighted. "Shikamaru, the tape. I need to tape this so I can get the highlighter."

"Hm." He pressed his forehead against the end of the scroll to maintain its alignment. He flicked his ankle to toss upwards another scroll.

"Shikamaru!"

He dropped the scroll and jerked his head towards me, eyebrows raised. "What?"

I dropped my arms to my sides and sighed. "What is this?"

"A map," he said, glancing at the rolls of paper on the wall. "It must be, just look at the-"

"Are you okay?" I reached for his arm, wanting to hold him to assure him he had a friend, but I was too afraid that I withdrew it. "Do you want to talk about the box?"

He stared at me, mouth open. He closed it and shook his head. "...It's nothing important."
"Then why are you acting that way? Like you're disconnected?" I asked. "If — if you're bothered by it, you can always tell me. Maybe I can help?"

"No, Sakura." He shook his head again. "It's not your problem — it's not a problem at all, really." Forcing a smile, he added, "Thanks, anyway."

I shouldn't get pissed off. Another argument right after the one we had in the forest was a sign of a worsening relationship. I rubbed my right hand over my left for the sake of doing something. "I'll make you tea. The herbs you gathered — I think I know how to make the tea you said is supposed to calm the nerves. Do you want one? C'mon, if you don't want to talk about it, that's no problem to me. I only want you to stop pretending to be fine when you're not."

"When Shikaku visits…” He taped the scroll in place and turned to face me again. "…please don't mention anything to him, 'kay?"

No, it wasn't okay. He gave me no hint of what I could do to help him.

I stopped rubbing my hands together. "Yeah, sure."

He patted my shoulder as he walked past me. "Thanks. I'll get you the flower grandma uses as a secret ingredient to that calming tea of hers."

Shikamaru went to the greenhouse by himself, and I waited for him on the kitchen table. I sat between the assortments of colored leaves I had laid out. As hard as I tried, I couldn't drive my thoughts away from that damned box. If Shikamaru was reacting this badly - nearly behaving on autopilot - it meant he knew a fact about the existence of that box that he didn't want to share.

The red leaf sitting between my knees glared at me.

I glared back at it and stuck my tongue out. If only I had not accused him of withholding something from me, then I could force him to tell me the truth about this one.

Shikamaru stepped inside the kitchen through the backdoor, cradling a basket of bulbous flowers. "They're long overdue harvest. There's a recipe hidden in one of the pantry cabinets. Grandma has forty different recipes for these nasty smelling things that are actually delicious when fried."

I reached for one and put it under my nose. "It smells fine."

He rounded the table and put the basket beside me. "Girls like that scent. Be happy I don't."

"Great proof of manhood?"

"Absolutely. Shows you're a true woman, too."

I pitched him the flower. It stuck to his hair. "You doubt my femininity?"

"Only the gender of your strength."

The image of him lying on our bedroom floor beside a broken lampshade returned to me. There were some days I wish I weren't so physically strong. "Speaking of which…how's your bruise?"

"Bruise? The...oh, that. Getting better. Don't think about it."

"I was startled."

"I should have knocked. It's my fault," he said, leaning forward and pointing at the violet leaves
splayed above the red ones. "Can you pass me those? They mix well with these. I'll grind them and show you how to tear the petals."

Gathering them in my hands, I sat back on my heels and swung my arm blindly, my attention already averted to the tiny nectars of the flower that I had failed to notice earlier.

I felt him move behind me, his fingers brushing against mine as they retrieved the flower, and he whispered 'thank you'. His breath on my nape froze me in my place.

I blinked. I was a thirteen year-old girl again, standing on the road leading to the exit of Konoha with leaves raining down around me. Ahead, Sasuke vanished. I would've screamed if I hadn't felt the heat of his body behind mine. He whispered, 'thank you'.

"Shikamaru?"

"Yeah, Sakura?"

I turned around to look at him. He paused from wiping the mortar and pestle to look up at me.

"Nothing," I said. "Just making sure that was you."

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