Black Hole Heart

by LadyNyxRavus

Summary

By all accounts, Sakura is dead for the first five minutes of her life.

Yet, she continues. If she occasionally has too many, too sharp teeth then that's their business.

Notes

Now with bonus art!
Chapter 1

Sakura’s mother gives birth at home, in the big bathtub off the master-bedroom, with just Sakura’s grandmother and one of her female cousins acting as nurse in attendance. The labour is long and gruelling and she strains and strains and eventually Sakura spills bloody and still – so frightfully still – into the warm water.

“No,” Mebuki says, then louder and furious, “No! You save her, right now!” She cradles her daughter’s head above water and holds tight enough to bruise if Sakura weren’t still and unbreathing, no pulse to speak of.

By all accounts, Sakura is dead for the first five minutes of her life. Then she bursts into movement with a huge inhale at the same time Mebuki sags unconscious. Sakura screams and writhes in the bloody water until her grandmother fishes her out and wraps her in a soft towel. “Hush now,” she says, “it’ll all be fine. Just breathe.”

Sakura’s green eyes flash and flick-flick-flicker the palest white before settling and she quiets. Her grandmother smiles and brings her out to show Kizashi his lovely new daughter.

She’s five and she listens to her friend Ino-chan from the park explaining what it means to be a kunoichi and protect the village. Inner Sakura – that rasping voice that’s been in her head as long as she can remember – stirs and perks up and listens. Sakura’s spine straightens and her eyes gleam and she commits every word to memory. Ino-chan’s kunoichi sound fierce and mighty and Sakura is only very small and the other children are cruel and make fun of her. Civilian children, she thinks with a vicious satisfaction that curls in her chest, would not dare.

When Sakura asks Mebuki that night if she can go to the Shinobi Academy instead, her voice comes out lower and her eyes look filmed over but it is still Sakura that asks. If Inner feels like she’s pushing forth then that’s just because they’re both excited.

Mebuki agrees immediately, though Kizashi cautions his daughter that they’ll still have to talk about it first. Inner curls content in her head and Sakura knows the way Inner knows that her mother will definitely let them do what they want.

They’re enrolled the next day and Mebuki looks strangely unbothered by her civilian daughter standing amidst the shinobi children who already know how to strike to hurt and handle weapons.

She’s eight and she falls down a steep hill on the cliff they’re hiking for one of their overnight survival excursions. Iruka-sensei doesn’t notice at first until Ino-chan’s shriek of alarm draws his attention to the tumbling pink-haired child. The rocks are sharp and there are sticks and dirt and even old weapons (these are shinobi excursions and even Academy students aren’t immune to the
childish inability to lose a few things accidentally).

Sakura skids to a stop and feels her arm *crack!* It hurts – a sharp pain that radiates impossible heat – and when she looks down she can see the white of her bone poking out amidst the bright red outpouring of blood. Inner hisses sympathy and then she *reaches*.

The worst of the cuts smooth over as if they never were. The bone snaps back into place and Sakura whines at the pain while Inner shushes her *It’s fine don’t worry see? All better.* The skin seals over and by the time Iruka-sensei reaches her, Inner is exhausted but all Sakura has left to show for the fall are some mild bruises and a couple scrapes that don’t even bleed, not really.

“*You were very lucky, Sakura-chan,*” sensei tells her as he inspects her carefully and helps her to her feet. “Watch your balance on these paths – a shinobi must never lose their footing or they could jeopardize the mission.”

Inner thinks uncharitably that *she* wouldn’t have lost their balance. Sakura ignores her and smiles tentatively at Iruka-sensei, flushed with embarrassment at the mistake, “*Sorry sensei.*”

“*It’s fine Sakura-chan,*” he says. “*Everyone makes mistakes.*”

The next time Sakura starts to lose her balance, Inner plants their feet and says *Steady now, not so far back*. Sakura adjusts her hold on the cliff wall they’re climbing so she’s further forward and when she lunges for the next handhold she makes it with ease. Inner preens proudly in the back of her mind and Sakura grins in exuberant satisfaction.

Sakura is eleven and Ino-chan says they can’t be friends anymore because she has to focus on being the perfect girl for Sasuke-kun. Sakura thinks that it’s a pretty stupid reason to stop being friends and then, angrily, that she doesn’t want to be Ino-pig’s friend *anyway* if she’s willing to just toss them aside like that. Inner growls and curls her hands into fists and paces angrily.

**He’s not even interesting,** Inner hisses and alternates glaring daggers at Ino-pig and staring intently at the back of Sasuke-kun’s head. Sakura lets her because she already knows this lesson so missing out on the lecture doesn’t really matter.

*He’s the last one left of the Uchiha after the Massacre,* Sakura reminds her. *One of the founding clans of Konohagakure.*

**He’s a brat no matter how delicious his rage is,** Inner retorts and settles into their limbs, stretching and indolent and *angry.* Always angry. *Let’s give him something real to sulk about.*

Sakura may not have a crush on Sasuke the way Ino-pig does, but she also doesn’t want to hurt him. Luckily, Sakura is still annoyed about Ino-pig abandoning them and she doesn’t mind taking out her anger on her.

When they have their taijutsu lesson, Sakura makes Ino-pig *bleed* and Iruka-sensei has to separate them. Ino-pig goes to the nurse to have her split lip seen to while Sakura is told to run laps for not stopping the spar when she was told to. Inner licks the blood and abrasions off their knuckles before anyone sees and purrs contentment. Sakura breathes through the ache in her lungs and feels
Kakashi-sensei gives Team 7 – Sakura, Sasuke, and Naruto – a final test before they can be full genin. She watches Naruto and Sasuke charge their very famous jounin-sensei and prods at Inner in mingled horror and disbelief.

Inner grins sharply when both boys are deflected with ease. Morons, she says.

“We aren’t much better,” Sakura mutters out loud – too busy trying to keep track of both her wayward teammates and Kakashi-sensei to bother speaking in their head.

She can feel Inner roll her eyes and glares into the middle distance. “What?”

None of us are, she says and even though her voice is pointed Sakura can feel the ever-present anger crest at the admission. But genin teams are always three so…

Teamwork. Of course.

Kakashi-sensei drops a genjutsu on them while Sakura is searching for Sasuke. Ideally she convinces him to work with her first because Sasuke-kun will never agree to work with Naruto but she’s pretty sure she can get him to let Naruto help after the fact. It’s a subtle genjutsu – so light and careful she’s sure none of her teammates would notice. But Sakura has chakra control in the 90th percentile as a genin; to slip foreign chakra past her own takes a proper genjutsu master and Kakashi-sensei isn’t coming at them seriously.

Inner laughs hysterically at the image of Sasuke bleeding to death. Sakura kneels down and brushes a hand through the ‘blood’ with mild interest. Inner continues to laugh while Sakura sighs and mutters, “It doesn’t even have a smell.”

Good thing, Inner says and manages to get her giggling under control, or I couldn’t tell you he’s over there – fifty yards.

When they practically trip over Sasuke’s head where he’s buried up to his neck, even Sakura has to stifle laughter. “Oh, Sasuke-kun,” she says on a sigh and shoves the crying hysterics that is Inner’s laughter to the back of their mind to focus on the problem at hand.

They do manage to eventually work together but it isn’t until Inner grabs the other bento and offers it to Naruto that Kakashi-sensei pronounces their teamwork satisfactory and passes them. Sakura seethes, as if teamwork is our only problem, and Inner gets to be the calm one for once. She smiles at their new sensei with perhaps too many teeth with too many points but when he does a visible double-take Sakura is the one grinning instead.

Catching Tora the cat is easy when all Inner has to do is growl from where she curls in Sakura’s
chest and throat and vocal cords. The cat freezes every time and if they get a whole bunch of side-eyes from the mission desk nin, well. That’s hardly her fault they fail at catching a cat, isn’t it?

Naruto tells Kakashi-sensei that Sakura has always been scary when she wants – he’s not surprised Tora is smart enough to stay put rather than face her wrath. Even Sasuke nods a little at that, taking the practically docile cat from Sakura’s arms when she makes a face at the cat hair all over her dress.

After the fifth time, Tora actually leaps into Madame Shijimi’s arms. Naruto complains and Team 7 gets their first C-rank mission.

Tazuna is drunk but he’s not a drunk. Inner inhales and rumbles, his liver is perfectly healthy. We should eat it for lying.

Sakura isn’t exactly opposed to the idea – but more so in the sense that she doesn’t like being lied to than the eating organs part. Let’s wait and see, she says. Inner sulks and curls and uncurls their fists, claws out and deadly, until Sakura catches Naruto looking sideways at her. She grins at him and he grins back.

“He’s not a real drunk,” Naruto whispers conspiratorially. “I know that.”

Naruto lives in the poor part of town so he would know and even Inner knows there’s something dangerous in his belly. They haven’t figured out what yet, but they both agree that if even Naruto knows something’s up that they need to be on their guard. “Teamwork, right?” she says and holds out a hand for a low-five.

Naruto laughs quietly and slaps his palm to hers, ignoring the dark claws still extended, and his grin is just a touch toothier than usual. “Teamwork,” he agrees firmly.

When the Demon Brothers come at them with the acrid stench of poison Inner!, she and Naruto tag-team while Sasuke keeps Tazuna back. Between the sudden uptick of fear and rage, and the wash of hot blood between their claws, Sakura feels Inner retreat with a hum of satisfaction and leaving her with a mouthful of throat from where they’d sunk in their teeth and ripped.

She has blood on her face and Sasuke looks mildly disgusted (though that may be more with the pool of vomit from Tazuna retching near his feet) but Naruto is quick to offer a cloth and his canteen. She swallows the flesh in her mouth and tries not to think about it. Kakashi hovers awkwardly nearby and she glances at him warily. “Sorry,” she says, “I just…” she trembles a little and Inner flutters anxiously even if she doesn’t feel an ounce of shame.

Kakashi softens and helps her clean up. “We’re shinobi,” he says quietly, reassuring, and Sakura remembers that his family was always associated with wolves, wasn’t it? “You’re not hurt? Then as long as you’re keeping yourself and your teammates safe, that’s all that matters.”

Inner smiles hesitantly, too many too sharp teeth, and says, “thank you, Kakashi-sensei.”

“Now,” he says louder, and turns a reprimanding stare at Naruto, “I know Sakura-chan caught on to the poison but what about you?”
Naruto squawks alarm and paws frantically for any cuts. Sasuke huffs a disbelieving sigh and shares an exasperated look with Sakura; she shrugs at him. Naruto went through their poison resistance regime same as Sakura – absolutely no reaction from even the highest doses when even kids like Ino-pig (with her family’s long history of poison masters and her minor dosing since she was a baby) were sick and miserable.

He might not have known that the poison resistance doses were anything but boosters, Inner offers. If I hadn’t told you I was filtering out our blood, you wouldn’t have noticed until we were puking.

The Academy primes all students to withstand most common poisons from the Land of Fire in a semester-long of increasing doses disguised as booster shots. Parents all sign consent forms and students come out with stronger immunities and a warning to never just trust someone giving you unknown substances.

They shuffle over to Sasuke’s side and wrinkle their nose at the smell of vomit. “Okay?” Sakura asks and nudges him carefully. This is perhaps the first time they’ve allowed themselves to just react in public like that.

“You’re the one who had all the fun,” he says finally. “Next time, you guard the client.”

Even if it galls her and makes Inner writhe and strain under her skin, Sakura honours his request and stays out of it when Zabuza attacks.

The kid – Inari – yells at Naruto about heroes and going to die and Inner cackles because all that fuss sounds like fun compared to sitting around and just waiting for thugs to beat them up.

Kakashi tries to divert the boys’ attention from that by teaching them how to climb trees. Inner, of course, doesn’t need chakra to climb so Sakura has to scold her away from helping. I can do this, she says and focuses on letting her chakra cling and seep into the bark the way Inner would. It’s easy and she climbs to the first branch big enough to hold her weight just so she’s still in plain view to gloat over her teammates. Kakashi-sensei smiles at her from behind his mask and tells the boys they’ll just have to try harder to catch up. Then he takes her aside and says, “Now try that on water.”

It’s mildly more difficult but her control is perfect and she manages it after just a moment. Kakashi-sensei sighs a little and mumbles, “I was hoping that would be more difficult…”


The worrisome gleam in his eye makes Inner stir.

In retrospect, she should have anticipated being relegated to guard duty.

Smug jounin, Inner grumbles from where she’s settled heavily in Sakura’s shoulders. Sakura looks down the length of the bridge shrouded in fog and listens to the uneasy muttering of the workers and the lapping of waves at the base and sighs.
So it turns out that the hunter-nin is actually a boy named Haku and Naruto – because of course he did – has befriended him in the meantime. They obey Kakashi-sensei when he says to guard Tazuna but the fog that spills unnaturally thick is aggravating and their eyes turn milky white as Inner lends her vision to peer through it all.

They watch Sasuke fall and watch the thing inside Naruto come roaring out of his chakra – red and furious – and then Tazuna is saying gently that they should go over. The gentleness throws her because…

He’s got a pulse still, right? I’m not imagining that? She peers down at Sasuke and nudges him with the toe of her sandal. “Wake up.” Tazuna seems to be trying to pull her away as if he’s dead and not just being lazy.

Like we’d leave that boy alive if he didn’t, Inner scoffs. The possessive black-hole of a heart they share has already swallowed Team 7 into its depths and neither of them are keen on letting anyone threaten what is theirs. Sakura thinks Tazuna is being dramatic when Sasuke coughs himself awake and flicks Naruto in the forehead for being worried for even a second.

“He’s got a pulse still, right? I’m not imagining that? She peers down at Sasuke and nudges him with the toe of her sandal. “Wake up.” Tazuna seems to be trying to pull her away as if he’s dead and not just being lazy.

“Hey!” the blonde says and swats at her hand. She reaches out and pinches unerringly at the soft side of his hip and he yelps.

“Of course he’s alive, idiot,” she says, “Like Sasuke-kun would just let himself get killed.” She holds out a hand to haul him up and gives him a stern look while Naruto is busy being offended in general. It was close and she does not approve.

He makes a soft noise of assent and assurance both and lets his hand linger in hers long enough to squeeze tightly before withdrawing and turning back to watch Kakashi square off against Zabuza. It’s not really a competition – Kakashi-sensei is definitely going to win. When lightning sparks and pools in his hand and a sound like the chirping of a thousand birds fills the air Sakura knows – Inner hisses and writhes and screams agony and Sakura clutches at her chest and then her ears and wants to run but she can’t. Naruto makes an alarmed sound and draws her into his chest and she burrows in – feels Sasuke come up behind her and hears him asking harshly what the hell is wrong and Naruto snapping back that he doesn’t know – trying desperately to escape that noise.

Sasuke makes the connection first and the boys box her in until there’s a pained cry and the noise vanishes as if it never was. Sakura is dizzy with sensation, Inner a messy puddle and weighing down her every limb, but she turns to see the boy, Haku, slide off their sensei’s hand where it’s buried wrist-deep in his chest. She thinks Kakashi might look surprised or horrified but her eyes are bright green and she can’t make out the details.

When it turns out Gato was always planning to betray Zabuza and his apparently beloved apprentice, Inner finally stirs. He what, she says flatly. I had to hear that and it turns out they could have been on our side the entire time?

When Naruto and Kakashi form up a small army of clones, when Sasuke’s sharingan gleams crimson, and when Zabuza clenches a knife in his teeth and charges with a feral sort of snarl. Sakura takes one step, then another, then Inner creeps over her skin – inky black and streaked with
white. Her jaws have too many teeth and open too wide and they don’t care. They almost died and this man, this scum, this prey, deserves nothing less than screaming death.

In the chaos no one really notices a small black and white blur tearing apart grown men with her bare hands and ripping out throats with her teeth. One poor soul actually loses his entire head to their rage and by the time Inari and the townsfolk show up to scare off the rest of them, Inner has settled heavy and full in the general vicinity of her stomach. Sakura’s free of blood this time, because Inner absorbed every drop, but she’s fiercely, avidly, and viciously satisfied at the carnage.

Zabuza sidles up to her and offers her a high-five. He kind of has to flop his arm about to do it and he collapses almost immediately after he manages a “Good job kid, maybe Konoha-nin aren’t so useless after all huh?”

She’s sad when he dies and insists that they leave his sword as a grave-marker even if protocol dictates they take it with them. Kakashi-sensei ruffles her hair affectionately and tells her it’s a kind gesture.

Naruto tells them in whispers about the Kyuubi sealed in his stomach; Sasuke admits he’s one of the last two people in the world with natural sharingan and that he wants to kill his brother for the slaughter of their family; Sakura and Inner say they’ve always been like this and that Sakura is pretty sure she wouldn’t have been had she not decided to be a kunoichi.

“We’re glad you did though, Sakura-chan,” Naruto whispers on her left as they huddle together by the fire and Kakashi keeps careful watch. “Wouldn’t be the same without you.”

“You know what rage feels like,” Sasuke says on her right. It isn’t a confession or an admission but Inner does know rage and she preens at the acceptance implied.

“We’re a team,” she says firmly. “We watch each other’s backs – no matter what.”
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sakura has heard of the chunin exams, of course, but it seems a tiny bit crazy that Kakashi-sensei is willing to nominate them on their first go-around. Inner mulls over the application form while Sakura peers up at their eerily cheerful teacher suspiciously. “What’s this?”

“I’m nominating you three for the chunin exams,” he says with a wide grin behind his mask.

Naruto lets out a loud ‘whoop!’ of excitement but Sasuke picks up on her tension and ups his resting angry-face into resting scowl-face. “What’s the catch?” he demands.

Kakashi falters and sulks at the two unhappy genin on his team. “I was being nice,” he complains.

“The catch, sensei,” Sakura demands and sets her hands on her hips and gives her best version of Mebuki’s disappointed face. Being that Inner remembers intimately how she does it, Sakura’s is very effective.

“If even one of you doesn’t show up, then the rest of the team can’t participate,” he says finally and makes a face at her. She makes a mocking one in return and they share a flat stare before she capitulates and looks to her teammates.

“So we’re going, right?”

The genin from Suna are Suspicious with a capital S. Even if Sakura hadn’t been able to smell the blood all over the youngest of the trio, the way they’d been picking fights despite the exams’ ceasefire would have given them away.

I pick fights too, Inner protests mildly.

Not the same way, Sakura returns while she waits for her teammates to show up. This was testing – not for fun.

Sasuke shows up first, nudges her gently with his shoulder, and then leans back against the wall of the administration building. She’s just nervous enough to appreciate the warm press of him up against her side. Inner preens under the attention. “Any idea how this exam is going to go?” he murmurs to her.

“Written and practical, at least,” she says promptly. Then she winces a little.

Sasuke must see the expression because he sighs.

“Naruto,” they say in unison.

“Yeah?” They turn to look at their confused teammate, share a brief look, and then Sakura steps forward to pull Naruto forward by his collar until her mouth is almost pressing against his ear.
“There’s going to be a written test so you need to cheat as if your life depends on it because if you’re the reason we don’t pass your life will be on the line.”

“Maaaah,” he whines at her and leans back in her grip until his collar is stretched out and pressing lines into the back of his neck. “Sakura-chan, ease up, I’m not going to blow our chance, promise!”

The written exam is a joke and not just because Sakura could have answered those questions in her sleep. It takes all of the first ten seconds of the test to realize it’s not about the test but about information gathering. Then the last question turns into a question of determination of all things.

Never mind that Kabuto-san with his impossible schedule of failed tests; in order to fail that many times, he’d have had to take the test in countries they haven’t gone to since before the war.

Everything about it is aggravating and Sakura is thrilled when the second part of the exam turns out to be survival. Between Inner and Kyuubi, both Sakura and Naruto excel at surviving harsh conditions. Sasuke is a genius and too vicious by half – anything between him and promotion to chunin doesn’t stand a chance.

“Are we prepared for three days in there?” she asks while Inner peers into the Forest of Death and reaches out with whisper-thin strands of chakra to suss out what to expect.

Naruto yawns. “Sure, I usually carry extra equipment in case…” his expression shutters. “Well, in case.”

Sasuke’s lip curls in a silent snarl. Knowing about Kyuubi means they’ve all become very sensitive and aware of his mistreatment by their village. “You’ll come to mine next in case.”

The soft little smile lights up Naruto’s expression like the sun. Inner croons softly and Sakura draws him into a tight sideways hug. “It’s not long enough to need provisions, so we can scavenge if it comes to it; our biggest problem is getting another scroll.”

“Are we going to wait or go hunting?” Sasuke drawls. His eyes flash crimson and he peers up at them with a sly, hungry smirk. “I know which I’d prefer.”

“Naruto!” Sakura yells and when she reaches to grab him Inner reaches too. Inky black falls just short and he goes flying beyond their reach but they can still snag Sasuke. They tumble out of the path of the wind ninjutsu and immediately reach out with all their senses to find their wayward teammate.

The creepy kusa-nin that finds them next is...

“That is not a genin,” she hisses at Sasuke. He nods ever so slightly and remains silent while the kusa-nin taunts them by swallowing her scroll whole.
He reaches out to them immediately when the killing intent pierces in their direction. Inner snarls and keeps them standing through sheer unadulterated rage. I'm going to eat this bitch, she snaps and spikes their chakra through to Sasuke so he can use his sharingan to shunshin them both out of there as fast as possible.

“Snakes!” he snaps when they’re immediately assaulted by one. “Sakura there’s only…!”

“Naruto has them!” she snaps back and fishes out ninja-wire and kunai while he slides into a ready stance.

The kusa-nin turns boneless and stretches and twines around the branch in a relentless forward attack at her teammate. Before she gets close, a handful of shuriken come flying out of nowhere and halt her in her tracts. Those bored hungry eyes flick up and flash vague interest at the sight of their third.

“Sorry, I was eaten by a snake the size of my house,” he calls while crouching on his branch. “What’s up?”

“I need the signals,” she says and shunshins to his side while Sasuke activates his sharingan, “and you’re going to need help.”

“Yeah?” he says and his eyes are bleeding blood-red when he turns to face the kusa-nin. “Let’s do this then.”

The other nin is fast and Sasuke’s the only one who can keep up. The boys tag-team and when there’s suddenly an absolutely gargantuan snake filling the clearing and thrashing about, Sakura has to move to a new perch.

“Watch it!” she snaps while continuing to wire every single one of Naruto’s extensive collection of fireworks and signal-markers together.

“You try fighting a giant snake!” Naruto growls – ringed with palpably angry red chakra, with his whisker marks wide and black, and claws at the tips of his fingers instead of nails. He ricochets back into the fray and slices the beast into ragged strips while Sasuke spits fire and flings shuriken and ninja-wire around.

"Why fight it when you could eat it?" Inner says waspishly and uses her sharp teeth to snap off the last bit of excess wire.

With the explosion of fire and screaming of the kusa-nin as background noise, Sakura flings the whole bundle up as high as she can. The bundle goes off in a cascading explosion of lights and shrill screeching whistles. The explosions drive it high – hopefully past the treetops. It’s noisy and loud and completely useless as a tactic but there’s absolutely no way it doesn’t attract attention from the proctors.

“Sakura, any second now!” Sasuke strains with his wire while the kusa-nin reveals her…himself as an oto-nin. She can’t make out what they’re saying from where she is but she definitely sees the way they lunge forward with a snake-like neck that stretches an impossible distance.

She doesn’t even think about it. They kawarimi into Sasuke’s place and then they open wide.

“Tastes like death,” they whine to Sasuke while Naruto rubs a gentle hand up and down their back. They can feel the strange nin struggling inside the inky black embrace of their gullet. They hold it as long as they can and then they wretch. All that comes out is sludge and they spit and spit to get
“A clone made with actual dead flesh,” they report to their team, bitterly disappointed. Then they gag up a scroll and pause. Oh. Neat.

Above, the whirling dervish of their signal continues. Sakura tilts her head back and heaves an exhausted sigh, slumping down against Sasuke. Inner curls quiet and miserable in her stomach and Sasuke starts winding bandages around the places his wire cut into his hands with the force holding their enemy back required.

Only Naruto is standing when Kakashi-sensei and a whole team of harried looking ANBU report to the scene. Their sensei is wild-eyed and radiating killing intent. All three relax immediately and lean into his hands when he pats them down and susses out all their injuries. “What was it?” he asks seriously. There wasn’t a chance in hell he let his precious students go off into their first exam without promising to come to their aid and to bring backup if they set off all their signals. Not after their disaster of a first C-rank. Not after what happened to his own genin team.

Naruto shrugs and Sasuke just tips his head back to exhale shakily. Sakura clenches her fists until even her normal nails bite into the skin. “Orochimaru disguised as a shinobi from Kusagakure. He tried to do something to Sasuke.”

After a debriefing with ANBU – during which Kakashi-sensei paces like a caged tiger and stares at every black-ops member until even the most hardened start to shiver under his barely restrained killing intent – they’re allowed into the tower with their two scrolls. The Suna team is already there and they pay them a wide berth while finding showers and a place to bed down.

“What did that man want with you anyway, Sasuke?” Sakura asks while letting him trim her hair to her shoulders. She got bits of dead-flesh-sludge on the ends and the smell wouldn’t fade even after a shower. He hums and measures out a new section of hair and compares it to the already cut strands.

“Wanted to see how strong I was,” he says.

“He was a creep,” Naruto grumbles from where he’d taken up residence at the one door to this room. The red of the fox’s chakra may have faded but the marks on his cheeks still take up most of his face, and there are still fangs in his mouth and claws on his hands. His eyes are blue though, which is something.

“I’m going to eat him,” she says firmly. Naruto barks a satisfied laugh and Sasuke gently squeezes her shoulder. “The next person to threaten our team is getting their throat ripped out.”

“Only if you get there first,” Naruto growls.

Sasuke sighs. “Can we at least wait until after dinner before you two talk cannibalism?”
Apparently twenty-one genin made it through the forest. This means that there’s too many of them left so there’s to be a preliminary exam. She prods Sasuke pointedly and raises her eyebrows. He scowls at her and hisses, “This does not prove eating the competition was a valid strategy.”

“Wouldn’t have hurt though,” Naruto says in a quiet mutter and she leans into his side with a pointedly smug expression while Sasuke’s scowl deepens.

They watch that weirdly suspicious Kabuto-san drop out of the exam with some flimsy excuse and give wary side-eyes to the Oto-nin’s sensei. Orochimaru was wearing one of their hitai-ate after all. Even having Kakashi-sensei up there with the Hokage isn’t enough to put any of them off their guard – though it is comforting.

Sasuke has the first match and she unabashedly cheers him on as he twines the other nin in ninja-wire with the judicious application of shuriken to hold him steady and then plunges a kunai deep into his thigh. “I’ve hit your femoral artery,” he says conversationally while the other nin freezes abruptly. “If you take out that kunai, you’ll bleed out before you can defeat me.”

It takes almost no time and barely even leaves a mess – just a steady drip of blood sliding down his opponent’s leg. The proctor calls the match off and declares Sasuke the winner since if Yoroi doesn’t get medical attention ASAP he’ll be dead on arrival at the hospital. Three med-nin appear; two to carry him away on a stretcher and one to sit on it and begin treatment immediately.

“Easy,” Sasuke drawls and lets both his teammates crowd him in to both congratulate him and complain that he didn’t even try to show off.

“I, for one, am pleased that at least one of you can keep a tidy fight,” Kakashi says and ignores them when they all shoot him skeptical looks.

They watch Shino beat an oto-nin, which Naruto declares was obvious since, “he’s got all those bugs remember?” Which Sakura admits was probably why she didn’t know much about him. After that is one of the suna-nin; a puppeteer by the looks of the bundle strapped to his back.

“That’s so disturbing,” Sasuke mutters when they watch Misumi stretch and wind about Kankuro like a snake. Sakura nods agreement and even Inner makes retching noises in their head. Like that stupid snake guy, she complains. Sakura thinks it’s a bit rich that the formless mass of inky black goo considers anything like that gross, all things considered. Inner blows a raspberry at her and goes back to curling in her chest restlessy.

Then it’s Sakura’s turn and oh.

Ino-pig.

“Bad luck there, Sakura-chan,” Kakashi-sensei says, leaning forward to curl a palm over her shoulder. “You have a plan?”

Let her try to come into our mind, Inner cackles delight. I’ll show her for ditching us over
lame old Sasuke-kun.

You like him just fine, Sakura scolds and makes their way down after flashing a sly toothy grin at their sensei. But we used to be good friends so let's make this quick and painless.

The moment the proctor starts the match Ino comes at them in a flurry of taijutsu. They dodge as gracefully as physically possible and Sakura relies heavily on Inner to keep their face as placid and calm as they can. It pisses Ino off and Inner slides up Sakura’s temples, settles behind her eyes and down through her neck and shoulders. Ready.

“How are you better than me?!” Ino screams at them in frustration.

“Well for starters,” Sakura drawls and leans back on her heels with her cockiest smile, “I don’t spend hours taking care of my hair instead of training.”

Ino falters and then slices through her long ponytail with a couple pointed furious words and throws the long blonde strands at them. They scatter all across the ground and Ino sets her hands into her signature jutsu sign despite a warning that if she misses she’s screwed.

Sakura goes to move and stops suddenly before glancing down. “Clever,” she says as chakra highlights the special conductive wire holding them in place. Ino gloats and completes the jutsu – dropping to the ground in a slump.

Why hello Ino-chan, Inner purrs before dragging the pulsing bit of chakra that is Ino’s consciousness into the black depths of their mind. It feels wrong to have another mind in there with them but Inner blocks most of the discomfort while Sakura deals with their body.

“Ino-pig, that was a terrible plan,” she says out loud and blinks rapidly back to awareness. Naruto’s laughter is delighted and Sasuke looks smug even as Ino’s team shoot them uncertain looks – still operating under the belief that Ino succeeded.

It’s the matter of a few feet to haul Ino up by the stubby end of her sliced off ponytail and hold a kunai to her throat. She looks over at the proctor who stares for a long moment.

I think we need her back in her body, she murmurs gently to a thrashing Inner. They won’t declare the match otherwise.

Fine, Inner sulks. But we’re not sorry!

Ino jerks in their grasp with an ear-piercing scream. They’re stronger than most humans now that their attention isn’t split. Luckily, it seems like Ino is too frightened to do more than shake and cry around hoarse panting for breath. Her team jolts in alarm while Naruto runs a one-man cheering section under the amused gaze of Kakashi and with Sasuke leaning forward on the railing and giving his not-smiling version of a pleased smile.

It’s in the eyes, really.

“Haruno Sakura is the winner,” the proctor declares. Sakura releases Ino who scrambles back.

“What was that?” she shrills. “What are you?”

Sakura smiles down and offers her a hand up. “The same Sakura you’ve always known,” she says gently. “Just with more experience now, is all.”
Kakashi hauls her into his side the minute she comes near. “Just ‘more experience now’ huh?” he says in fond chastisement.

“It’s not a *lie*, sensei,” she complains.

“Not the whole truth either,” he gives her a stern look for a moment before his eye creases and his mask shifts in an undeniably proud smile. “My little kunoichi all grown up!” he wipes away a fake tear and she tries to pinch him but he steps back neatly before she even moves.

The three genin take bets on the next match and Sasuke smugly collects his earnings when Temari trounces Tenten with visibly little effort. “She’s a master of her weapon,” he scolds their dejected grumbles, “Better a master of one than just good with an entire arsenal.”

“Hear that, Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura says snippily – still not over the way he dodged her pinch earlier. Their sensei visibly deflates and peers at her with a dramatically sad hang-dog expression. She ignores him and adds a brutal, “Or should I say *Copy-nin Kakashi*?”

She makes her money back betting on Shikamaru in the next match. His grades had always been suspiciously just enough to pass and not be the dead-last in their class. Naruto – who actually hung out with him – groans and whines about hiding behind laziness. Sasuke admits quietly and grudgingly that he never really paid attention to anyone in their class outside the top five students. Kakashi holds out a hand for a subtle low-five and he palms his half of the winnings while she palms a signed promissory note to procure her a pair of jounin-grade armoured gloves.

Ah, the joys of gambling. She grins down at the slip and hums in pleasure. Naruto suddenly bursts out with “Oh man, not *Kiba*. Now I’m gonna feel bad when I win.”

There’s general alarm when Naruto snarls Akamaru into submission. Sakura figures the crimson haze just barely visible contributes some, especially when combined with fangs and claws and red pupils. She can practically feel all attention turn to Kakashi-sensei to see how he’s reacting to this apparent rising of the fox’s power.

Kakashi idly flips a page in his book, raises one finger in the air and swirls it into a circle, then declares in his most uninterested voice, “Go Naruto, go.”

Without his partner, most of Kiba’s best techniques are benched. In straight taijutsu, with Naruto’s kage bunshin, and almost limitless stamina, there’s really no contest. Kiba tries a handful of techniques but is obviously crippled with Akamaru cowering in his hood and refusing to come out.

It’s not pretty but it *is* effective and Naruto is eventually declared the winner when he manages to get a handful of clones holding Kiba down and stands above him with exploding tag in one hand and kunai in the other, face turned expectantly toward the proctor.

**You think anyone else will figure it out?** Inner muses fondly. She’s pressed just under the skin all along the side of their body where Naruto settles with a soft version of his pleased expression.
after she hugged him tightly and Sasuke nudged up against side to press in as he leaned against the railing beside him to watch the rest of the matches. It feels like Inner is trying to absorb the lingering warmth of the burning rage-filled chakra that had all but faded by the time Naruto made it back.

Not unless they read a lot of history books, Sakura returns and indulges Inner’s urging to press up against her blonde teammate until he’s snugly bracketed by her and Sasuke on his other side. Sakura thinks he’s been starved of affection based on the way he melts into them every time so she and Sasuke have been trying to smother him in as much love as they can manage.

(For the record, she thinks the same of Sasuke too, but he’s easier to manage when he thinks it’s his idea)

“You kids are going to be the death of me,” Kakashi murmurs and hovers closer while eyeing the other jounin warily. “Did you have to be so vicious? I’m going to get told off for encouraging bad behaviour.”

“We didn’t even spill any blood,” Sasuke says immediately.

Naruto wiggles a hand and says, “hardly, at least.”

“I didn’t even eat anyone,” Sakura adds quietly through a wide smile.

Kakashi heaves a sigh. “The other senseis are going to skin me alive,” he says to the ceiling in resignation. Then, “That was figurative, before you three get any ideas.”

Chapter End Notes

thanks everyone for the lovely reviews also for some of the amazing comments/tags on the bookmarks

at least one of you probably wrote a better summary for this fic than I did so I'm thrilled
Chapter Three

Naruto gets Hyuuga Neji. “He deserves a thrashing for what he did to Hinata-chan,” Naruto rumbles darkly. Hinata had always been kind to him and, now that both Sakura and Sasuke get to claim him as their own, his teammates retroactively adore her if they hadn’t already. They all understand not getting to choose your family – Sasuke goes dark and silent at that – but Hinata is kind and gentle and there’s no way she deserved what she got. It galls every angry vengeful thing in Sasuke to see someone hurt by their own family and Naruto desperately wants his team happy.

Sasuke gets the Gaara boy that Naruto assures them is: “just like me, only broken somehow.” Even if they weren’t adept at sensing when the fox (whose name is Kurama, apparently, according to a smugly pleased Naruto’s report on how his aggressively-friendly campaign to win over his monstrous tenant is going), they would have known something was off about the suna genin. He’d tried to kill Rock Lee and gossip around the village is that he may never recover to be a shinobi again. Sasuke thinks this is a tragedy considering how skilled their fellow rookie is and wants blood solely for depriving him of the only other genin who can beat him in taijutsu.

Sakura gets paired with the other suna-nin Temari. “Long-range fighter,” she says with a moue of distaste. “And even if I win, I’ll be up against Shikamaru and he’s a legitimate genius – no offence Sasuke-kun.”

“None taken,” he drawls at her from down the counter of Ichiraku’s. They’re having a team planning session while they wait for Kakashi-sensei to show up and go over how they’re going to prepare individually with only one jounin and all of them through to the finals. “You’re assuming that lazy-ass wins though.”

“Nah, Shikamaru will win,” Naruto dismisses as if he hadn’t bet against him in the preliminaries. “Ino-chan didn’t make it through and she’ll nag him to death if he doesn’t at least win one match. He’ll think it’s too troublesome otherwise.”

“Exactly,” she gestures with her chopsticks in agreement at Naruto’s statement. “I’ve got to at least have some sort of plan for both of them. You two just have to worry about one opponent.” She refuses to entertain a world in which they don’t both win their matches. Any match between their team is just going to be a friendly spar to show off – they know their limits so well that even going all-out they know precisely when to pull a blow so it’s not fatal (and ‘fatal’ has varied meanings depending which one of them you’re talking about).

They lapse into eating quietly until Sasuke glances at the clock and furrows his brow ever so slightly. “Kakashi-sensei is late.” A full hour later than his usual two. “You don’t think…” he flicks his gaze over Naruto’s head to meet hers.

Her lips thin. “Naruto, do you think you can break us into the jounin lounge?”

Naruto shows them the loose panel of glass in a hidden corner of the lounge’s roof. “I had to smuggle chemicals out of the Academy labs for weeks to melt down the glue enough to pry it up,” he says. “I had to figure out the patrols through this sector and work around any jounin in a position to notice.”

I can hear sensei’s voice, Inner says and floods through her skull to hear better. I think they’re
blaming him for pushing us too hard?

She relays the information to her teammates and Naruto’s brow furrows while Sasuke’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “The same sensei that reads his hentai while we train on our own and only occasionally calls out advice?” he asks incredulously. “He’s pushing us too hard?”

Naruto scoffs and digs claws into the edge of the panel to gently slide it away. He slips in first and holds out a hand for Sakura next and then Sasuke. He tilts his head and motions for Sakura to go first. Considering she’s got better senses without the obvious use of Kurama, it only makes sense.

**Sounds like Gai-sensei, that kunoichi, and the Hokage’s son,** Inner confirms. **Hold up, let’s just…**

“…he didn’t even flinch at a fatal blow to a fellow konoha-nin!” says the female voice in sharp reproach.

“I agree with the lovely Kurenai-sensei, my eternal rival,” says Gai-sensei seriously. “It was most un-youthful.”

“Are we completely ignoring that boy using That chakra so freely?” they strain to hear to rumble-soft murmur from the Hokage’s son – Asuma-sensei, Sakura remembers finally.

Sakura really doesn’t want to hear what they have to say about her and, more importantly, they can’t take another second of listening to shinobi who don’t even know them disparaging their teammates.

Inner floods into their chest and gently brushes their vocal cords.

“**Kakashi-sensei? Are these people bothering you?**” their voice is low and dangerous – a dark snarl hovering around sweetly gentle edges. They feel the spikes of alarm in the three unfamiliar chakra signatures but Kakashi’s remains steady and calm as the three of them prowl around the lounge to stand arrayed behind their sensei in support.

“You were late,” Sasuke says and his eyes bleed blood-red as his sharingan spins a lazy threat.

Naruto’s pupils are thin vertical slits and his whisker marks are thick and stark against his skin. He pushes forward and only stops when Kakashi sets a gentle hand on his blonde spikes, threading his gloved fingers in and stroking almost absenty, while turning soft eyes on Sakura and Sasuke. There’s a silent **stand-down** implied in that look and, even if it galls them to do so to people who had been verbally harassing their sensei, Inner retreats from their voice and instead stretches out under their skin to protect all their vulnerable bits. Sasuke reaches out to hook a hand around hers and tugs until she’s in the perfect spot to lunge and not get hit if he decides to spit fire.

Kakashi looks at them and smiles fondly behind his mask. “Mah, kids, you don’t need to worry about your old sensei.”

“They were blaming you for something,” Sakura says and eyes the three other jounin with a narrow and knowing look. “They were being rude.”

Their sensei sighs gently. “Nothing to be upset about Sakura-chan,” he soothes.

“You were late,” Sasuke says in a flat tone. His sharingan continues to spin – faster now.

Naruto just growls and his spine hunches over and his stance widens. He looks ready to pounce and the single-minded way he’s staring makes it clear he’s considering the other jounin **prey**.
“Settle,” Kakashi says, clear command, and Naruto snaps but circles round in an obvious retreat until he’s between Sakura and Sasuke and his growl is more irritable than threat. Sasuke puts a hand to press between his shoulders in comfort. Sakura maintains a textbook perfect parade rest but she knows her eyes are flick-flick-flickering palest white. Kakashi turns back to his fellow jounin. “I thank you all for your concern, but I promise my team is just fine and well in hand.”

His voice is friendly but the low simmer of his chakra is dark and vicious and protective. Kurenai flinches and Asuma grips her arm reflexively. Only Gai-sensei stands firm and his dark eyes sweep, assessing, over the way their team presses closer with pleased expressions when they feel the brush of their sensei’s angry chakra. Something in his expression shifts and while he doesn’t smile he does seem easy now.

“It is as you say, eternal rival,” he declares. “We are sorry to have kept your sensei,” he adds to them.

“Don’t do it again,” Naruto says.

Sasuke is very sweet when he tries to refuse to learn chidori because of how badly the noise hurts Sakura and Inner. But they’ve all seen that sand defend Gaara and Sakura can’t think of anything else quick and violent enough to penetrate. Kakashi winces when Sakura ruthlessly squashes her teammate’s complaints.

“If it’s far enough away, the sound won’t be loud enough to hurt,” she had conferred for hours with Inner over their limits and she’s pretty sure they have a handle on it now. “Don’t be an idiot – this is your best chance.”

“It’ll monopolize Kakashi-sensei’s time,” he says stubbornly.

Even Naruto scoffs at that. “So? He’s the only other person in the village with a sharingan; me and Sakura-chan will be fine.”

Sasuke scowls at both of them. “Yeah? And just what are you going to do?”

Naruto grins – sharp and sly, “I found a teacher already, promise.”

Sakura grins at the expectant look Sasuke sends her after grudgingly deciding that Naruto wasn’t lying. “I’ve got a lead on something, don’t worry. Kakashi-sensei even promised to make the introductions.”

The day before Kakashi and Sasuke abscond off for the intense speed and ninjutsu training he’s going to need, he escorts Sakura to Torture and Interrogation where he introduces her to Morino Ibiki.

“Play nice with Ibiki-san, okay Sakura-chan?” he says cheerfully before vanishing in a swirl of leaves.

She beams at the fearsome head of T&I. “I’m working on a new technique and it might kill people before I get the hang of it,” she explains. “If you have any prisoners you don’t care about…?”
He scowls at her. Sakura grins. Then Inner grins too – bright white eyes and flashing fangs too many teeth and long wicked tongue. Ibiki actually pales and then his eyes narrow in an interested and hungry sort of look. “We’ll be doing this properly then, if I’m turning a blind eye to killed prisoners.”

Sakura had just wanted enemy-nin to use as target practice. Getting to learn techniques under the guidance of the God of T&I?

“When do we start?”

The first time Inner gets to peel back the skin off a man’s fingers and slurp up the flesh while inhaling and feeding off the fear and distress sending pheromones up into the air is the best. Sakura doesn’t think they’ve ever slept so well before.

After Ibiki says they’ve got everything off of him, Sakura gets to play. She ends up covered in entrails after the man explodes and when she comes trudging her way out grumbling about using too much force, she actually makes the other junior interrogators shrivel up in fear. Ibiki wrinkles his nose and tells her to shower before she goes to her psychology lesson.

On another day… “You don’t need your eyes to talk,” Inner purrs while tracing deadly claws around the eye sockets of the kunoichi Ibiki gave them to warm up before he began his work. They’ve paralyzed her so all she can do is roll her eyes in horror while Inner smiles.

Sakura doesn’t explode that one, but bursting internal organs and shattering bone – while interesting – is not her actual goal. She files it away for reference and Inner gets a decent meal for once.

Mebuki eyes them where they’ve stretched out indolent and satisfied on the couch. “I take it we aren’t hungry?” she asks dryly.

“Always hungry,” Sakura corrects but grins up at her mother anyway, “Did you ever get a proper meal before?”

“A long time ago, before I met your father,” Mebuki smiles. It’s a dark and satisfied thing. “You take care of each other, alright?”

Always, Inner coils and tightens like a hug around her chest. Never been stronger than we are with you, Sakura-chan. We’ll be invincible.

“Did I see you riding on a giant fox the other day?” Sakura asks Naruto over their twice-weekly dinner out.

He grins at her. “I have an excellent sensei,” he says cheerfully. “Did I see you coming out of T&I HQ?”

They flash him a smile with too many teeth. “I needed test subjects,” she says.

Naruto barks a laugh and nudges into her side affectionately. “Can’t wait,” he says.
In the last week of preparation, somewhere between her tenth and thirteenth time getting to interrogate a prisoner, Sakura figures out her technique. They celebrate by swallowing the subject whole – kicking and screaming. Ibiki scowls at them when they report that there’s nothing left; up until this point, there’s always been something left, even if it was only viscera.

"If you won’t explain where the body went, then I have to fill out paperwork," he says. Everything about him screams danger and every shinobi in the department edges away.

Sakura smiles. "I could do it for you?" she offers.

His scowl deepens and promises unimaginable pain. Inner coos delight. "You don’t have the clearance," he says. "Have you at least finished haunting my department now?"

“All done, boss,” she snaps a salute and preens under the wash of killing intent. Ibiki dismisses her and she heads over to see if Naruto is up for BBQ for dinner today.

The day of the exams arrive. Sakura finds her promised pair of armoured gloves and a good luck note signed with a henohenomoheji. Naruto grins when he spots them and holds out his arms to showcase the long black coat with bright orange-red flames crawling up the hem that’s replaced his usual orange jacket (even if his pants haven’t changed and his shirt has a giant red spiral on it).

Their sensei is the best.

“Excited?” he asks her, tucking her hand into his crooked arm to escort her to the arena.

She squeezes his arm enough to actually bruise and he shoots her a startled but delighted look. They share a sort of wicked laugh and when he meets her eyes fondly, she peers at his slit-pupils curiously.

“You?” she prompts.

There’s a hint of fang to his grin. “Had to stop Gaara from killing Lee at the hospital this morning,” he says. “I’ve been on edge since.”

“Sasuke-kun will be thrilled, I’m sure,” she agrees.

Sasuke and sensei aren’t there. Naruto prowls around angrily and she squeezes her hands into fists until her gloves creak under the strain. The other genin in the crowd shoot them poorly disguised anxious looks until Sakura reaches out to snag her teammate’s sleeve.

“They’ll be here,” she murmurs.

They better, Inner says darkly. We worked hard and... she pauses and Sakura can feel her straining for something.
I can smell them both – recent scents – they've got to be close enough to see the matches.

Naruto’s hand squeezes hers and she pulls out of her internal conversation to stare blankly at him for a moment. “They’re nearby,” she reports.

He falters and then rallies into a sunshine smile. “Good. Means they’ll get to see my match,” he tilts his head toward the viewing platform off to the side. “Cheer for both of them?”

She ends up standing beside Shikamaru. The Nara is stuck waiting to see the outcome of her own match before he knows his own opponent. Apparently that Dosu kid was killed at some point in the last month. “What a drag,” he mutters.

“Don’t worry Shikamaru-kun,” she says cheerfully. She slides her most vicious smile at the suna kunoichi. “I’m going to break that fan of hers; no way she wins.”

Naruto smiles a shark smile at his opponent when the match is started. He doesn’t move but a hot wind whips around them like a cyclone – the wind makes it all the way up to the stands and she can see people flinching away from it. She feels the hints of chakra in the wind and basks in the familiar sensation.

“You shouldn’t have hurt Hinata-chan,” she hears and it's actually clear without Inner to enhance her senses. *They must have some sort of amplifying seals built into the arena,* she says to a confused Inner who settles with a grudging acknowledgement.

Naruto creates at least fifty kage bunshin and charges at the Hyuuga recklessly. The Hyuuga taunts him and streaks a line of destroyed clones through until he declares he’s found the real one – the only one holding back. The remaining clones smirk and then the ‘real’ Naruto goes up in a cloud of smoke as her actual teammate comes flying in a vicious pounce.

She frowns at the spinning chakra-fuelled defense that repels her teammate. “Rude,” she says and Shikamaru snorts incredulously.

The next attack is too fast for her to follow but Naruto goes flying and skids to a stop. Eight Trigrams: 64 Palms would put down most normal genin. “You really shouldn’t act like you’re better than Hinata-chan just because you’re pissed at your family,” Naruto says and licks at the blood trickling out the corner of his mouth.

To be honest, she blacks out in rage a little at the resulting story about a seal and the barbaric practices of the Hyuuga and how somehow that means Hinata is terrible and evil. Naruto grows steadily more furious as the story continues. She watches him curl and uncurl his fists and the claws that lengthen from there. She can’t feel his chakra, blocked as it is, but she sees the way he goes absolutely still when Neji declares that his history has been decided since the match began.

“Oh, really?” he says and his voice is a rasping sort of growl. “My destiny decided? Couldn’t possible understand being burdened with a mark that can’t be wiped off?” He laughs – harsh barking and bitter laughter – and wind picks up again in a slow spiral.

There’s an uneasy murmur going through the stands. Sakura’s lips curl in a smirk.

Crimson chakra sparks and flares, spiralling around Naruto at its epicentre, and her teammate
snarls. “You shouldn’t assume you’re the only one who’s ever suffered in their life,” he says and the marks on his cheeks darken and go thick as he brings his clawed hands up into the beginnings of a seal. She knows his eyes are crimson and that he’s undoubtably bearing fangs at his opponent.

“Why do you fight your destiny?” Neji snaps, backing up a step and betraying his alarm as the chakra around Naruto flicks and becomes visibly waving shadows of nine long tails.

“The irony,” Naruto grins and nips his thumb before slamming his hands to the ground where a seal blooms into existence.

There are actual screams in the stands when a fox roughly the size of a house with nine whipping tails emerges in a bright flare of red-orange flame. It has bright red eyes and huge gleaming fangs dripping with saliva as it snarls and crouches with Naruto perched on its back.

“This is the brat?” The fox rumbles (the amplification seals make it so they can feel the vibrations) and rolls its eyes back as if it can see Naruto where he is.

Naruto sneers down at Neji. “Kurama-san, please, let’s show him why I think his burden is hilarious.”

The Kyuubi – and the terrified hush of the crowd at the first of its voice rises again – roars and red-orange flames of chakra engulf both it and Naruto and the killing intent and pure unadulterated rage radiate out before converging in a rush on Neji when Kyu-Kurama pounces.

Naruto wins the match after Kurama vanishes in a spiral of wind and fire and leaves Neji scratched to hell, singed, and horrified in a ditch in his exact outline. The crowd is horrified silent except for Sakura’s cheers of delight and chants of “Naruto for Hokage!” that echo in the arena.

Kankuro immediately forfeits and Shino looks genuinely disappointed to be declared winner by default. She can understand the sentiment.

Naruto had bundled her up into a victory hug the moment he made his way back and he’s just tall enough to rest his chin on her shoulder and still be able to see without having to release her just yet. He’s a warm buzz of Kurama’s chakra mingled with his own and she leans back into his chest to bask in it with a blissfully pleased purring Inner. They’ve both been ignoring the two ANBU guards that have taken up posts in the back corners of the platform.

Inner thinks it’s hilarious that anyone thinks they could contain their teammate if he really wanted to cause anyone any harm.

When Sasuke’s match is called and he doesn’t show, they strain to find their hiding teammate and sensei. The vague sense of them doesn’t move and they don’t show up. There’s some deliberation but eventually the proctor postpones his match instead of declaring him forfeit.

Everyone is here to see the last loyal Uchiha’s match, after all.

Temari leaps into the arena the minute their match is called. Sakura takes the time to press a kiss to Naruto’s cheek and get in one last squeeze of a hug before she meanders down to take her place opposite the other kunoichi.

She stretches lazily and peers up into the stands to see if this new position allows them to see Sasuke or Kakashi. Peripherally, Inner keeps a sharp eye on their opponent and murmurs, She’s just
The first burst of wind chakra is a huge and slicing maelstrom that tears into skin and cloth alike. Inner plants their feet and refuses to move, letting Sakura save their chakra for their offence when the time comes. White creeps up to consume Sakura’s green eyes as Inner protects them from the flying debris. She pulls back as soon as the dust has settled so Sakura can make a show of yawning and looking around in boredom.

Ibiki always said half the challenge of an interrogation was making your target *think*. The mind is its own worst enemy most times.

It works a charm. “Whatever trick you pulled on your friend won’t work on me!” she says. Temari charges with a vicious snarl and brings down the considerable weight and force of her fan down on an unmoving Sakura.

She smiles and holds out one hand open-palmed. The crowd is already jeering in disappointment at her loss.

Right up until she catches the fan in one hand and it *stops*.

Temari strains for a moment before trying to rip it away to swing again.

Sakura continues to smile, teeth all a shade too jagged to be fully human, and digs her fingers into the metal frame as it bends and shifts like putty in her fist. “Go on,” she says, “take it.”

Temari looks horrified when she finally takes in the damage Sakura is single-handedly (literally!) causing to her weapon. She puts all her weight into swinging it and Sakura lets her turn them so she can get a second hand on it. With two hands on the fan now, Sakura grins and *twists*.

For all that the metal bent under her grip before, now it *snaps* like a dry branch. The paper rips and Sakura takes delight in tossing the remains off to the side.

“Sorry!” she says cheerfully and tugs her gloves tighter, starting a slow prowl forward while the other kunoichi scrambles for a new weapon now that her signature fan is a pile of warped metal and ripped paper. “To be fair, I did say I was going to break it.”

The suna-nin is older, taller, heavier, and more skilled in taijutsu than Sakura. On paper, even discounting the loss of her fan, Temari should come out on top.

Sakura reaches out a casual hand, catches the kunai by virtue of it going *through her hand*, and then uses her spare hand to tap her palm against the centre of her opponent’s chest.

Temari goes *flying* sheer across the entirety of the arena and slams a full foot into the concrete wall. The crowd goes dead silent while Sakura peers at the kunai in her hand curiously.

Thanks for that, she says to Inner who had immediately severed the nerves from responding to the pain.

I’ll *seal it up too if you just pull it out*, Inner says graciously. Sakura pulls it out and watches her skin seal while frowning at the torn fabric of her new gloves.

“These were new, you know?” She calls with a moue of annoyance.

Temari is busy trying to pry her battered body out of the crater it created.
Sakura’s frown is exaggerated and childish and she stomps a foot.

A crack spiders out from where her foot connects with the earth and cuts a jagged line straight toward her struggling opponent. There’s a burst of stone and dirt and dust as the wall partially collapses and dumps a bleeding Temari onto the ground.

The proctor has to take a step back when the edges of the deep fissure Sakura’s stomp created crumble and it widens. He shoots her a look and she smiles at him. “Sorry.” She says and watches Temari struggle for a long moment before offering, “I’m pretty sure I broke her collarbone. Definitely a couple ribs. Maybe ruptured some internal organs? That kunai kind of threw off my concentration a little.”

“...I see.” The proctor says at length and glances up at the Hokage’s box.

“At least I didn’t explode her!” she adds happily. She waves over at a cheering Naruto and a frozen looking Shikamaru. “That happened the first time; Ibiki-san was not impressed.”

“Haruno Sakura is the winner.” The proctor declares immediately. Perhaps to stop her from talking anymore with civilians in the crowd. Perhaps to get medical attention to the Kazekage’s only daughter before she dies in a broken mess.

Either way, Sakura wins and the resulting hug from a suddenly there Sasuke is worth every second of effort reverse-engineering the legendary Tsunade’s super strength.

“You’re here!” she says into his neck and flings her arms around his shoulders until he’s taking her weight entirely.

“Kakashi-sensei wanted an entrance,” he admits in a quietly amused murmur. “You were amazing. Both of you.”

“You’ve got a lot to live up to,” she agrees with a wide teasing smile. She tilts her head up to beam at their sensei. “I hope you were useful for a change.”

“Mah, Sakura-chan, so mean,” he whines and scoops her up until she’s perched on his shoulder. She grips tentatively at his long silver hair but trusts that the wide hand on her thigh won’t let her fall. “Let’s let Sasuke-kun have the arena now, okay?”

Even burdened with a genin on his shoulder, Kakashi’s mere presence in the viewing platform is enough to chase the oppressively hovering ANBU off. Sakura leans into his hold, perfectly content just where she is, and Kakashi doesn’t make any attempt to let her down even when he draws Naruto into a sideways hug with his other free arm.

“My talented little genin,” he says, amused and fond. “Stirring up trouble while poor old sensei is away.”
Hey guess what, this is gonna be longer than anticipated because I'm having so much fun on this little crack-crossover

That said, I've been blown away by all the love this is getting; thank you all so much!!

Please enjoy this chapter and remember I'm playing fast and loose with canon because this is for funsies not for serious

Removed from the immediate delight of having their third back, Sakura takes the time to inspect Sasuke.

Is he honestly wearing…

“Is that a jumpsuit? Did you put Sasuke-kun in a jumpsuit?”

Naruto gives an exaggerated gasp of horror and points dramatically at their sensei while Sakura tries to twist his head back to meet her gaze. She doesn’t try very hard though, just tugs gently at his long hair, and shifts impatiently on his shoulder.

“He said his shirt was ‘unacceptably flappy’ when I asked,” Kakashi says and huffs at them. “Don’t try to blame me for his poor fashion decisions.”

The match begins in a barely visible blur of Sasuke attempting taijutsu against Gaara. The suna-nin is more agitated than usual and the amplification seals on the arena aren’t picking up more than a steady stream of fevered mutterings from the red-head. His sand lashes out to attack and defend both, while Sasuke whirls around like a dervish – eyes spinning bright sharingan crimson.

“That looks like Lee’s style, a little,” Sakura frowns. “If it didn’t work coming from a taijutsu-specialist why would you even bother with it for Sasuke?”

“We thought you’d teach him something helpful Kakashi-sensei,” Naruto prods their sensei who twitches but can’t properly dodge while still allowing Sakura her perch. “At this rate, Sasuke might have done better training with us.”

Sakura hums. “I think he’d have liked Ibiki-san,” she says agreeably.

“How about you trust your sensei, hm?” Kakashi grumbles. “He needed to improve his speed and the easiest way to do that was to do it while learning. I promise I do actually know what I’m doing.”

“I’ve seen your records,” Naruto scoffs. “You haven’t had a single genin team ever.”

Kakashi levels a flat look at the blonde. “You do know those records are sealed to anyone below jounin-level clearance?”
“Then hokage-ojiisan shouldn’t let me poke around his office so often,” Naruto says with absolutely no shame. Sakura has to admit that if she were going around calling the Hokage ‘ojiisan’ then she would probably scoff at things like clearance levels too.

It turns out Sasuke learned all sorts of fun new techniques other than chidori. His favourite ninja-wire trick turns entire sections of sand to shattered glass when he channels bright white lightning down their lengths. Some of his taijutsu strikes send more arcs flying too and Inner shivers distaste mingled with a healthy dose of respect.

(They’ve got earth and water chakra natures, fire is a painful antithesis to everything they are and lightning is uncomfortably similar)

Eventually though it’s clear that Sasuke is going to need chidori. Sakura braces for the pain while Inner shivers and curls into a tight ball in the centre of Sakura’s chest. She feels uncomfortably separate as she never has before and the wrongness of it sets Sakura to trembling. She almost doesn’t notice Kakashi swinging her down to press her against his chest; she’s so rattled and Sasuke hasn’t even started yet.

“I disabled the amplification seals,” Kakashi’s voice is a soothing murmur into the curtain of her hair and she stares blankly at his shoulder for a long moment before the meaning of his words sinks in. “Sasuke can form it faster than I can now so it’ll only be a moment.”

Sakura twists to stare at the arena. A few rough and dirty mental calculations and... “Did he use that useless taijutsu just to get them both as far away from us as possible?” she asks. Inner stirs and their combined gratitude and affection is a bright warmth.

“I did tell you I knew what I was doing,” Kakashi sounds amused instead of grouchy this time. His visible eye crinkles at the corners and his mask shifts in an unmistakable hidden grin. “Now, watch our Sasuke-kun hm?”

“I’m just saying!” Naruto yells as they tear off in pursuit of the Suna genin with one of Kakashi’s summons (Pakkun – he’s adorable and Inner thinks his juxtaposed deep voice is hilarious) and Shikamaru in tow. “Invasion of the village is no excuse for not winning that fight!”

“Why do you think he bolted so quickly, idiot!” she snaps back. “Shikamaru quit jogging back there!”

He grumbles at her but Inner is focussing on following Sasuke’s blood-and-ozone scent with Pakkun to bother help them hear him. They’ve been threading out her chakra too, a fine net of sensing spooling out behind them, and she’s pretty sure they picked up some pursuers along the way.

“Hey! It doesn’t count if he does it while he’s not in the arena!”
“Technically,” Pakkun says blandly from where he’s bounding at her heel, “there is such a thing as field promotions.”

She aims a swift kick at the little pug who growls and swipes at her with his claws. The blood she lets him draw vanishes with a flicker from Inner. “Don’t encourage them!” then, when her sensory net returns a third positive in as many minutes on the presence of the enemy nin behind them, “Someone has to stay behind, we’ve got company.”

Naruto slants her look and they come to an abrupt halt, turning almost in unison to a resigned looking Shikamaru.

“Yeah, yeah,” he sighs a huge exasperated breath. “Go on then, kagemane no jutsu is designed for this, after all.”

They pass a section of forest that looks like it’s been sliced to pieces. She probably had a backup fan, Inner grumbles when they pick up the scent of blood and paper-metal-polish they remember from their match with the suna kunoichi.

“I knew I should have broken more bones,” Sakura says when she relays the information to Naruto.

Further down the way, Naruto hollers a warning and they pause to peer down at an exhausted Shino and a struggling puppeteer encased in insects. “All right, Shino?” Naruto yells.

“I will be...fine...” Shino says through strained breathing. Naruto goes to yell again and then pauses thoughtfully, tilting his head and inhaling deeply.

“Ne, Sakura-chan, is that smell poison? Shino! Have you been poisoned?”

“He’ll be fine,” Sakura says. Inner can already feel his temperature leveling out as his body fights it off and those weird bugs of his return to person. “Good job though! Knew you’d win!” She adds loudly down to their fellow konoha-nin.

“Should we do anything?”

“Nothing to be done,” Pakkun says. “Sakura-chan is right; we need to catch up to Sasuke.”

“Bye Shino, we’ve got to go find Sasuke now!” Naruto has two primary volume settings; loud and louder. He uses the latter.

“If you can signal a clan member with those bugs, it’d be safer than a distress beacon,” Sakura says, mindful of the various shinobi skirting the rather impressively wide net she’s been casting out to sense. “Congrats again!” She flashes a smile filled with fangs and they leap into motion – back on Sasuke’s trail.
“This is going to be amazing,” Naruto says, gazing up at the huge sand construct of a tanuki that looms impressively and swears up a storm as it thrashes. Sasuke has been the cause of much of that swearing – the scattered gleam of glass shattered all over a mark of his passing. Inner thinks it’s almost beautiful and Sakura has to agree.

“You think you can stop it?”

Naruto grins, sharp and delighted behind the rising red haze of Kurama’s chakra, “We’ve got eight tails on Shukaku; it’ll be easy, Sakura-chan.”

All the sand in the air means Inner has turned their eyes flat-white, the abrasions from being hit covered in inky black, and their teeth are out from roaring right back at the half-transformed Gaara earlier. Anyone looking at them now would be hard pressed to admit they recognize Haruno Sakura.

Sasuke slumps into her side when a gleeful Naruto summons Kurama the size of a small mountain and they fling themselves at a screeching transformed-jinchuriki. Doesn’t bat an eye at the way the black of her skin ripples and arches up to rub against him affectionately. Just pats the closest patch and leans harder into their steady presence. “I’ll bet you a new pair of gloves he makes friends with him.”

“No bet,” they scoff. “It’s practically his signature to befriend every dangerous enemy we come across. We give him an hour with Orochimaru and you won’t have a problem anymore.”

“Well I wouldn’t go that far.”

Sasuke watches the trio of suna-nin retreat with a bored expression. Naruto waves happily after a subdued but determined Gaara as he herds his siblings away. “This is starting to get ridiculous.”

Sakura shrugs and twists to watch Inner retreat from a particularly spectacular bruise that would have formed otherwise. “Can’t exactly yell at him for making friends with another jinchuriki.”

“I can,” Sasuke stresses darkly, “what’s he need more friends for anyway?”

Personally, I hope they both make Kage just to shove it in the villages’ faces, Inner declares and simmers under their skin. Teach them to treat children as monsters.

Oh yes, because we’re not monsters.

Matter of opinion, I suppose, Inner sniffs indignantly.

“I think it’s less making friends and more making him realize he has a team waiting for him,” Sakura ventures after musing on it and mulling over Inner’s grumbling. “His brother and sister were pretty fierce and concerned about him all things considered.”

Sasuke grunts and stares long and intense at their blonde teammate. “I guess. As long as he’s happy about it.”
He’s not talking about Gaara.

Naruto comes bounding over, sunny grin at full brightness, and says, “I think he’ll be better now. Just needed someone on his side that wasn’t that useless tanuki is all.”

“Picking up biases from a giant raging chakra-construct, are we?” Sasuke taunts. “Don’t think you should be talking about useless when you barely even did any work in that fight.”

“Oi!” Naruto yelps. “I had to figure out how to summon a demon sealed inside me. All you have is a little light show.”

“Only two people in the world can do the chidori,” Sasuke snarls back while Sakura tips her head back to hide her smile. “Do you even know your chakra nature?”

“Bastard!”

“Dead-last!”

Brats, Inner declares. Sakura laughs and ignores the two mildly mutinous looks her boys send them.

“I reverse-engineered the signature technique of one of the Legendary Sanin; you two have got to catch up.”

Sakura watches Naruto rage around his apartment with Sasuke a silent but steady presence just two steps ahead of her. Their blonde teammate is angry and sad in equally distressed measure but there’s nothing they can do.

He doesn’t even deserve to be eaten, Inner snarls as she stretches and coils in angry impotence in the general vicinity of Sakura’s chest.

Hokage-sama is dead and it’s all Orochimaru’s fault. Sakura won’t pretend her nationalistic loyalty is strong enough to care terribly much but Naruto cared and she cares about him. So, she and Sasuke stand vigil while Naruto snarls and spits and cries and have every intention of remaining right here even if they miss the funeral.

They’ll go when Naruto is ready and not a second earlier.

“I’m going to kill a sannin,” Sasuke murmurs to her. “I’m assuming you’ll help?”

She smiles. It's not a nice smile.

Kakashi shows up with an old man in tow in a rare excited mood. “Kids, I’ve got someone for you to meet.”
Both boys turn immediately to Sakura and she narrows her eyes while Inner rises to increase their senses. It takes a long moment to place the particular scents that cling to the strange man before she recoils a dramatic step back. “Why would we want to meet some pervert?”

“Hey!” The old man complains loudly and glares at her. “I’m a super pervert!”

“That’s not...” Sasuke says in a pained voice. “That’s not any better.”

“Sensei what the hell?!” Naruto yells and hustles her and Sasuke behind him as if to protect them. They allow it because...

Well, to be honest, they really don’t want to deal with it themselves anyway.

Kakashi seems to realize in bits that he’s gone wrong somewhere. “Ah, this is Jiraiya-sama. He’s going to be taking Naruto with him to fetch our new Hokage.”

“I think the fuck not,” Sasuke growls. He’d bundled Naruto off to his apartment the minute the Sandaime’s funeral concluded and hasn’t let the blonde out of his sight since. Sakura only has by virtue of having to leave to check in with her family. The three have spent at least a week piled into Sasuke’s giant bed using each other as pillows.

“Language,” Kakashi complains half-heartedly. Their sensei looks a touch too fond and proud of their immediate closing ranks to scold them for real.

“Give us one good reason, Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura says and crosses their arms as Inner stretches up their forearms like gloves doubling as clawed gauntlets. She can’t feel Inner turn their eyes white but she knows it’s happened.

“Jiraiya taught the Yondaime and is one of a handful of people who know how to manipulate Naruto’s seal?”

They share glances that speak volumes before Sasuke says, extremely grudgingly, “I suppose that’s a reason, at least.”

Without Naruto around...

Sasuke passes her another whoopee-cushion and she sticks it inside the lining of the cushion on the jounin lounge’s couch. They’ve already replaced the coffee supply with decaf and laced all the tea with some particularly subtle herbal laxatives. Konohamaru has been drafted into causing a commotion with paint-bombs nearby. She moves onto the pile of folded blankets and says, “Itching powder.”

“I can’t believe you talked me into this,” Sasuke says but hands over the powder immediately.

“Don’t be tedious,” she says and steps back to let him check that she has the blankets exactly as they were.

Without Naruto, they’ve resorted to some truly depressingly juvenile activities out of sheer boredom. Kakashi-sensei is busy on A and S-rank missions to pick up the slack after the disaster of
the failed invasion and only rarely has time to spend with them. There’s only so much training they can do on their own and the only missions they can take without him or a third teammate are D-ranks.

They’re bored but not D-rank bored.

Sign it, ‘thinking of you’ with a hearts on the ‘i’s, Inner demands when the shop assistant hands them the blank note-card to go with their carefully selected present. Sakura does so with glee while Sasuke leans against the counter beside her and looks pained and long-suffering.

To be fair, they are sending a box of adult novelty paper fans to Suna “care of Sabaku no Temari” with a rigged glitter bomb.

“They just tried to invade us,” he says.

“They tried very hard,” she agrees cheerfully. “They deserve recognition for their efforts.”

“How is NARUTO our impulse control?” he continues in a baffled mutter. “He regularly spends an entire mission’s pay eating at Ichiraku’s instead of buying literally anything else.”

They have singing messenger options! Inner screeches in joy and Sakura says, to the assistant, “Oh! Can you do the valentine’s cupid option any time?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s been stealing my underwear,” Sasuke stresses. “He spends the entire thing on ramen, Sakura. He has a problem.”

“Definitely add the dozen roses,” Sakura agrees to the mildly alarmed but helpful suggestion from the shop assistant and forks over their last mission’s pay.

Sasuke heaves a huge breath and slides down to sit on the floor in defeat as Sakura hums happily.

Sakura and Sasuke slam into Kakashi’s apartment with all the subtlety of a wrecking ball. “What happened?” Sakura and Inner demand at the same time Sasuke asks, “Is he going to be okay?:

Sakura wrestles control and manages to grate out, “It had to be something bad to take out Kakashi-sensei.”

The jounin are all sharing looks but not saying anything which sends Sakura’s mind off in a whirling tangent. Kakashi went up against something the jounin don’t want to share. Something that hurt him. Nothing has hurt Kakashi in the entire time they’ve known him except chakra exhaustion but…

Sasuke is a genius so while he may not be able to follow her exact thoughts he touches her elbow
and says quietly, “His chakra feels off. Low like Wave but twisted.”

Kakashi knows a literal thousand jutsu it could be anything.

Something chakra-intensive. Something the doctors haven’t been able to do anything about.

“His sharingan,” she says. Sasuke goes tense beside her. More importantly, the jounin all give off the sour scent of anxiety. Inner catalogues their reactions and presses her impressions forth for Sakura to come up with… “Sasuke, what reason would your brother come back to Konoha for?”

He sounds like every word has to be pried out of him. “It would have to be something huge. Huge and powerful. He…it was to prove his power. That’s what he said. When. That night.”

She’s watching the jounin like a hawk so when they collectively move when she says, “Kyuubi…”

“Naruto.” Sasuke’s sharingan flares to life. “Fighting the Ichibi on a scale like he did… Where was he going?”

“Gambling dens,” she says and they bolt out of the apartment before the jounin can gather their jaws off the floor long enough to stop them. “Tsunade-sama is a known drunk and gambler, according to Jiraiya.”

“When did you hear that?”

“When Inner eavesdropped Kakashi-sensei interrogating him on his travel plans before he’d agree to let Naruto leave the village.”

Maybe in another world it would have taken interrogating every hotel in town to find Naruto; a circuitous path through every casino and bar and the entirety of the red-light district. In this world, between Inner and Sakura’s enhanced senses and Sasuke’s sharingan picking up trace bits of Naruto’s chakra their path to him is almost a perfect straight line.

“Get your stuff,” Sakura announces and ignores the way Naruto flails and scrambles out of bed in just his boxers. Sasuke is already stuffing things into his pack and peering around as if Itachi is hiding in every corner.

“Sakura-chan!” Naruto yelps but obligingly starts pulling on clothes that Sasuke flings across the room at him. “What…”?

“We’re 90% sure that Sasuke’s brother is coming here to kill you and that he’s the reason Kakashi-sensei is unconscious and won’t wake up.”

“90%?” Sasuke asks sharply.

She scoffs, “Accounting for the possibility of another S-rank missing-nin capable of taking him out or stressing his sharingan enough to cause his status. The number of people interested and capable of taking a jinchuriki is limited but still longer than just your brother.”

He grunts in response and tosses her Naruto’s weapons pouch. She double-checks that his supplies
are mission-ready and swaps out a few of her own spares for a few of his that fail to pass muster. Naruto takes it with red bleeding into the blue of his eyes and his whisker-marks a shade deeper.

“Your brother?” he directs to Sasuke. “How are we playing this?”

It gives Sakura pause because oh, Sasuke-kun would want to be the one to decide what they do. This is personal beyond just a threat to their beloved third.

If we have the element of surprise, I can eat him, Inner says softly. But I don’t think Sasuke-kun would appreciate it.

He can’t win against an S-rank missing nin no matter how skilled he is, Sakura returns as she clenches and unclenches her fists rhythmically. We need Jiraiya. Sasuke won’t be able to step back from a confrontation and Itachi could hurt him just to prove a point.

Hurt? Not kill?

He left him alive for a reason. He’s had eight years since the massacre to finish the job and he hasn’t.

They cast out a net of chakra and recoil when the brush up against what feels like an ocean of chakra. Whoever it is isn’t bothering to mask – or, more terrifyingly, is masking and this is just a fraction – and as they withdraw their probe they’re treated to what feels like a gleeful nudge back.

“We need to go, now,” they say. Their team looks over at the resonance of their shared voice and their expressions are so conflicted. Sakura catches Sasuke’s eye and says, as calmly as she’s capable of, “We’re only genin; you’re still alive but we might not be if we don’t go now and get to Jiraiya.”

Sasuke stares silently. Naruto doesn’t move even to check on him. She meets their gazes and wills them to do the responsible thing.

Plus side, Jiraiya came to us, Inner says as they kawarimi with Sasuke in an almost exact repeat of their move during the exams. Itachi looks momentarily startled, but his eyes are spinning in a three-pointed whirl and suddenly the whole world bleeds crimson.

How did you get in here? Inner says as black spreads out in every place she touches. Itachi – a memory? A thought? – stands before Sakura spread out on a cross. Inner obligingly reaches out and inky black consumes the cross and lets her down ever so gently. Inner scans her – white eyes flickering up and down – and she holds out a clawed hand. Okay, Sakura-chan?

“This…is not supposed to happen,” Itachi says slowly and tilts his wrist to watch the katana in his hand vanish as the blood-red moon sets into a pitch sky filled with bright white stars. White grass
sprawls across their mindscape and shifts in a gentle breeze. Sakura and Itachi are the only spots of
colour – red and purple, pink and green, and flesh – and Inner is huge, towering at least 10 feet
above them.

Then you shouldn’t go flinging yourself into other people’s heads, Inner tells him.

“I did not.”

Inner grins – it’s more a bearing of row upon row of sharp needle-fangs filling her mouth – and
says Well, no, but there’s nowhere I can’t follow Sakura-chan. More importantly, there’s no
one who can take her from me.

You were going to torture Sasuke-kun? Sakura asks. While Inner’s voice echoes and booms around
them like a cavern, Sakura’s sounds like a strange echo. Why? You let him live this long…

Inner is reaching for something, Sakura can feel her shifting in a distant numbed sort of way.
Sakura stares at Itachi as his expression begins to show signs of strain. His sharingan is useless
here in the heart of their mind, so she watches the emotions flickering there (they’ve had so much
practice with Sasuke).

Oh, Itachi-kun, Inner says suddenly, startled. Her eyes are wide white pools and she crouches
down to gently tap his chest. You’re so young, she says softly, I forget sometimes… Ah, Sakura-
chan, we can let him go.

Why? She says suspiciously and clings to their mindscape when Inner tentatively tugs away. Inner
is older than she is, Sakura knows, but they’re so tightly entwined that she sometimes forgets. If
Inner is pulling from her own knowledge instead of their usual shared pool… This better be good.
She says finally and gives Itachi a faint regal nod as she gives up control.

Life-changing, Inner promises. But first, we’re going to need to distract Sasuke-kun…

To hear tell of it, she switched with Sasuke, stared Itachi down for a bare handful of seconds and
then he wrenched away from her as if she’d stabbed him. Jiraiya slammed through the wall of the
inn and Itachi physically hauled his tall blue-skinned partner after him as they burst out the other
side in a wreath of black flames.

That’s about when Inner fully consumed Sakura and keened until Sasuke and Naruto leapt forward
and shouted Jiraiya down from coming near her. Inner had wrapped around Sasuke’s wrist and
pleaded mind-to-mind for him to take Sakura back to the village and not pursue his brother. Inner
had promised Sasuke it was important and just as Sakura had trusted her, so too did Sasuke, even if
it took every ounce of his self-restraint and love for them to do so.

Naruto brought Tsunade-sama back to be hokage, armed with a new signature jutsu and a necklace
worth mountains around his neck. Sasuke had planted himself in the room Sakura and Kakashi
slept in at the hospital and had refused to move. Tsunade woke both of them upon a frantic
Naruto’s request.

The first words out of Sakura’s mouth upon blinking awake to a relieved team are, “Sasuke, it
wasn’t him.”
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the wait on this one. Long story short: my father passed away somewhat abruptly at the beginning of the year so you can imagine how uncreative I felt after that.

Thanks so much for all the reviews and bookmarks and just. Ya'll are so nice and it's meant so much to me so thank you!!

“It was definitely him.”

“Oh, Sakura allows and reaches haltingly for Inner. She’s never been that level of alone before in her head. It’s really hard to knock them unconscious because Inner is always aware; whatever that technique Itachi used has left her a mess of exhaustion the likes of which she hasn’t been since they were a child in the Academy. ‘He definitely did some of it, yes.’

Sasuke hands her a chocolate bar from a basket near her bed filled with them. It’s the good kind too, which means her mother must have been here at some point. Inner stirs sluggishly but Sakura takes the time to remove the foil wrapper before their mouth stretches slightly to take the whole thing in one bite. Inner immediately tries to reach for the basket but Sakura holds fast and refuses to move until the information she needs blooms into her mind.

‘Immediate family,’ she amends and then, hopefully, ‘Did kaasan leave anything else?’

‘She tried to have a boar delivered but the hospital said if it doesn’t fit in a mini-fridge she had to keep it at home,’ Sasuke says shortly but with a tinge of amusement. He’s relaxing in increments even with the tension threading through his voice. ‘Is this a conversation for the hospital?’

Sakura blinks and then glances at the Legendary Tsunade-sama standing with her arms crossed and mildly amused. Kakashi-sensei is a live-wire of chakra just seething under the finest veneer of calm. Even Naruto looks anxious. ‘To be fair,’ she says plaintively. ‘I’m not sure it’s a conversation for Konoha but it does need to happen.’

‘Well then,’ Tsunade-sama says, clapping her hands together and beaming at them, ‘Let me just go get sworn in and then we can take it to the Hokage’s office.’

After Kakashi-sensei shows them a tried and true method to breaking out of the hospital (“This works even when you hit ANBU and get higher ranking med-nin on your case” he assures them), Sakura returns home to find her father arguing her mother down from buying a live cow to go with the dead one she’s apparently renting a second freezer for.

“We’ll get fat if we eat that much, kaasan,” Sakura says while climbing in through the open
kitchen window and braces for the lunging tackle of a hug her mother grants them while Inner complains (We would not). “I heard there was a boar?”

“Yes,” Kizashi says with a relieved sigh. He waits for Mebuki to finish before offering a gentler embrace. “Hard day at work?” he says teasingly.

“Something like that,” Sakura agrees. Kizashi understands more, now, about Mebuki and Sakura and Inner, but for the most part they try to keep it as subtle as possible. So sure, he knows his daughter will eat a whole boar in one sitting, but she’s pretty sure it hasn’t occurred to him that Sakura would also eat a whole live boar in a sitting. Or a live cow. Or anything, really.

Inner is content with their usual diet but hunger is a part of her; Inner will never really be satisfied – not truly.

“Obaasan has been cooking non-stop,” Mebuki says and looks warily over at Sakura. Inner rumbles softly – concern and affection both – and Sakura resolves to make sure to visit her grandmother soon.

Mebuki didn’t hold Inner for nearly so long as obaasan after all. A mere ten years since obaasan retired and Mebuki took up the mantle of host and Sakura’s birth threw everything out of order. Sakura, mortality rates of kunoichi aside, will likely have Inner for the longest in their family’s recorded history. It’s strange to think of Inner as ever existing outside of their body but…

The best I’ve ever had, Inner coils affection and warmth. Like you were made for me. For us. Love you best, Sakura-chan.

It’s hard to not play favourites when you’ve never been without.

“I’ll bring my team to visit,” she says to her mother. “They can help.”

A week later, buried under so many privacy seals it makes Sakura itch, Team Seven, Tsunade-sama and her apprentice Shizune, Nara Shikaku the jounin commander, Ibiki-san, and Jiraiya settle into the Hokage’s office. Sakura sidles up to Ibiki and Inner’s purr is almost audible in their chest.

“I knew you were trouble,” he says but doesn’t make a move to shove them away. Sakura beams adoringly up at the man responsible for teaching them so much and helping them win their match soundly at the exams.

(Kakashi looks sulky and murderous in equal measure and hovers protectively over Sasuke and Naruto whenever anyone so much as looks in their direction.)

(Sakura has never moved faster than when Jiraiya turns a considering look at a cheerfully bragging Naruto explaining how he learned the Rasengan; like hell that pervert is getting anywhere near her teammate.)

(Kakashi is torn between bursting fit to pride at his team and also loyalty to the author of his favourite books – the way Sakura bristles and looks to Ibiki for even a second for assurance is enough to change his mind.)
“So, let’s hear your report then Haruno,” Tsunade-sama says. Her eyes are flinty but her expression serene. “You encountered Uchiha Itachi…?”

“Yes, Tsunade-sama,” she agrees. Sasuke’s hand clenches around her own and she squeezes tightly before settling into parade-rest slightly ahead of her team. “I have a…call it a kekkei genkai, so his attempt to attack me in a mindscape was ineffective.”

“You were out for almost two weeks,” Naruto complains darkly.

“Mostly ineffective,” she amends smoothly. “Some exhaustion is normal, according to my obaasan.”

To be honest, her obaasan had been wildly concerned over anything that could affect Sakura and Inner the way Itachi had. But Sakura and Inner are more tightly mingled than has ever happened before, so there’s really no saying whether or not it’s cause for concern. Inner seems adamant that she couldn’t be caught unawares like that again, and even if Sakura would be inclined to listen to her obaasan’s wisdom in this matter, Sakura *trusts* Inner. If she says it’s not a concern, then she isn’t going to waste time worrying.

Not with so much at stake.

“I was able to glean information from his mind while the attack was made.” Well, Inner was able to which is basically the same thing. “We learned…”

Sasuke stands and starts pacing in sharp turns. Sakura stops immediately and zeroes in on his frenetic energy. Naruto moves to intercept their teammate and bustles him over so that they can squeeze him in between their bodies and keep him still. He still feels like he’s going to vibrate out of his skin but he does stop pacing and presses his face between Sakura’s shoulders in silent appeal for her to continue. She reaches back to tangle their hands together while Naruto drapes himself over the pair of them.

Kakashi touches her hair and tucks it behind her ear. “Go on,” he says.

Like a bandaid then. “The Massacre was ordered by Shimura Danzo and concealed by Sandaime-sama. He was ordered to disband Root but didn’t and he manipulated Itachi-san into believing his only options were to let the Sandaime wipe out the Uchiha if they went through with their planned coup or to do it himself and allow him to spare Sasuke-kun.”

She can feel Sasuke go preternaturally still and forces herself to ignore it. “Itachi-san saw evidence of brutal conditioning on par with brainwashing performed on all the members of Root. What’s more…” she turns to gather Sasuke against her chest and speaks mostly to Kakashi-sensei. “Itachi-san didn’t massacre the clan alone; someone masquerading as Uchiha Madara did and then recruited him to an organization called Akatsuki.”

“Impossible,” Jiraiya says immediately. Tsunade silences him with a sharp look as she crosses her arms and peers at the three huddled genin and their wire-tense sensei. “Tsunade-hime you know…”

“I know,” she says with no small tinge of bitterness, “that you abandoned us for those orphans in Amegakure. I know that Uchiha Madara died over a hundred years ago. I know that Orochimaru worked with Shimura and who knows what they cooked up together. I know Sarutobi-sensei was capable of almost anything if it meant protecting this village and that he had a soft spot a mile wide for his old teammate.” Her hands clench convulsively on her arms. “I know that what I need is more information.”
Sakura hesitantly raises a hand for acknowledgement. “There were files in Itachi-san’s memories. I could tell you the file numbers and last known locations? Also Jiraiya-sama…” she casts a look over at the suddenly tense Sannin. “You should probably stop pretending you don’t know who’s been passing you that information about the attempts on the other Jinchuriki.”

“Oh really,” Tsunade says darkly and turns to her cringing teammate.

Ibiki-san steps up and stops the impending beat down. Inner grumbles in betrayal. “I can have some trusted subordinates fetch those files. I’m sure Anko-san would be pleased to look into whatever it was Orochimaru was up to with Shimura-sama.”

Shikaku-san heaves a huge sigh. “If Kakashi is willing to lend some time, I can look into Root. It’ll be troublesome but if Kakashi can clear some of the existing ANBU…”

“I know some,” Kakashi-sensei says evasively, busy fretting over his team of genin and gathering them up against his sides. “I’ll send them your way.”

“No hard-copies,” Tsunade-sama orders, turning a burning glare off of Jiraiya to address them all. “Strictly off-the-books. Everything goes through me personally, understood?”

“Yes, Hokage-sama,” they all chorus.

Naruto ends up sleeping mostly on top of Sasuke that night while Inner coils around his wrist and Sakura shoves her face into his neck. “I’m not going to do anything,” he grumbles at them. Kakashi’s pack of dogs is curled in a pile just outside the bedroom door and his chakra flits in and out of sensing range as he patrols endlessly.

Naruto snorts and settles more firmly in place. “The only reason I’m not out there is because Sakura would hunt us down,” he says.

“That’s because you’re an impulsive moron,” Sasuke heaves himself up but doesn’t get far under Naruto’s insistent dead-weight.

“Glass houses, Sasuke-kun,” Sakura says and takes her chance to adjust the blankets and pillows. “You heard Tsunade-sama.”

“Yeah, I did,” he says and glares at her.

Inner, coiled as she is around his bare skin, says, She never said we couldn’t hunt Shimura-san down.

“You’re both impossible,” Sakura says out loud. Sasuke’s expression turns sharp as he stares at her. Well, let’s hear his plan then, she turns inward to an eager Inner. Naruto cracks an eye open to peer at them both and, despite his grumbling, rolls over so that Inner can stretch out and reach him too.
“I’m seeing nothing,” Kakashi says as they climb out the window, “I’m certainly not seeing a clear pathway through the north of the village.” He smiles at them under his mask. “And I’m definitely not going to notice I’m being followed while I run recognisance with some old ANBU friends of mine.”

The pair of Root guarding Danzo-san are frozen in the face of the killing intent rising off of Naruto in sinuous ribbons of furious red chakra. It seems even a lifetime of conditioning and brainwashing falls in the face of killing intent from a primordial being of rage.

I could do it too, Inner grouches as they restrain the backup Root that had appeared to the rescue. Sakura glances over as a frustrated but vicious Sasuke succeeds in straight up removing Danzo’s creepy arm of sharingan eyes. Danzo may be older and more experienced but Sasuke-kun is crystalized fury and a genius besides. Given their element of surprise, it didn’t take him much more than a brief glance of the arm to recognize that it needed to be removed post-haste.

“You made my brother into a murderer,” Sasuke says and ignores the old man’s struggles as he binds him with nin-wire sparking with lightning chakra. Naruto clears his throat absently and Sasuke amends smoothly, “A murderer of our immediate family.”

Inner grows irritated enough at the continued struggling that she opens her mouth wide and consumes one of the backup in two tearing bites that spray blood across the room. Sasuke shoots them an annoyed look but Naruto just grins and wipes the spray out of his eyes. “Are we going to continue to be annoying?” Sakura asks the last one in their grasp cheerfully. The young man smiles blandly at them and stops moving entirely. Inner strokes a tendril down his cheek and forms a grinning smile of a thousand dripping needle-teeth just inches from his throat.

“As such,” Sasuke continues in a louder voice, to be heard over Danzo’s threats and calls for aid, “I’m going to need you to give a full accounting of everything you’ve done to undermine this village. No – no, I don’t care what you think it was undermining… Sakura?”

“Yes, Sasuke-kun?” she chirps cheerfully.

“I don’t have the patience; would you do the honours?”

“It would be our pleasure,” Inner purrs and stretches her grinning face over to hover near Danzo’s. “Do cease that racket, Shimura-san,” she says and then stretches over the entirety of his head in one smooth inky hood.

Kakashi-sensei sighs at them and makes a stand-down gesture to the ANBU arrayed behind him. Sasuke is carrying Danzo’s neatly decapitated head and refusing to give it up to anyone but Hokage-sama herself. Naruto and Kurama (currently about the size of a large horse) are escorting
the two now-placid Root members between them while the blandly smiling boy keeps an even pace just two steps behind Sakura.

“I’m keeping this one,” Sakura announces. “He’s redeemable and he recognizes my authority.”

“Sakura-sama is indeed worthy of admiration and fear both,” the boy agrees, “I find myself with a curious desire to work at her side – if she’ll have me, of course.”

“You can’t just…” one of the ANBU says helplessly. Kakashi levels a look and they say, subdued, “Of course, senpai, I will defer to you.”

“These two say Sasuke is in charge since he took out the old man,” Naruto says and thumbs over at the blank-faced pair bracketed up against Kurama’s side with gently swaying nine-tails. “Do you think we have room at the apartment?”

“I don’t want to be insensitive but…Sasuke-kun,” she levels a pointed look at him when he stops glaring long enough to acknowledge her.

Her teammate sighs massively. “I suppose the Compound needs to be used for something,” he agrees grudgingly.

Kakashi smiles at them all behind his mask. “My precious genin,” he says. “Overthrowing shadow-organizations. Aren’t they adorable?” he turns a cheerful look at the uncomfortably resigned ANBU.

“Hokage-sama is going to kill me…” says the one who spoke earlier.

“If the Uchiha brat is willing to house them, I have no complaints,” Tsunade says in an aggrieved drawl. “We don’t have the space otherwise and we can’t just leave them in those…cells.” She wrinkles her nose in distaste.

“Hokage-sama!” several people complain immediately. A swift slam of her fist against the desk sends cracks spider-webbing across it and silences those voices immediately.

Sasuke looks smugly pleased from where he sits cradling Danzo’s head in his lap. The two Root members Naruto escorted kneel one on each side of him. When questioned, they’d deferred solely to Sasuke.

Apparently, Root followed Danzo because he was a strong leader. If he had been defeated by three genin…the Root members had declared that since Sasuke had defeated Danzo, he was the new leader.

“You have to obey Hokage-sama,” Sasuke tells them firmly. They bow their heads to him and he frowns thoughtfully. “They aren’t going to be punished, are they?” he asks.

“They’ve been working counter to the office of Hokage for years,” Ibiki-san points out.

“Because Danzo set himself up as an absolute authority,” Sakura says sharply – threading her arm through the boy’s – Sai, apparently – arm and tugging him to her side. “They were brainwashed.”
“Conditioned, is a more accurate term,” Sai says with another bland smile.

“Stop talking,” Sakura demands. “We’re trying to get you released into our care.”

“We’re what?” Kakashi asks, alarmed.

“Obviously,” Naruto says and nudges up against sensei’s side. “If they’re cleared by ANBU and Ibiki-san they should be given a choice.”

“The Compound has room,” Sasuke agrees. “If they’re willing to be folded into the existing ranks, or consent to having their chakra sealed until their loyalty is proven, I’m willing to take them in. It won’t be easy – but cleaning out the Compound and making it liveable again will at least keep them busy.”

“How do we guarantee they’re being honest about obeying the Uchiha’s word?” Shikaku asks around a yawn.

“Sasuke-sama and his team – Sakura-sama and Naruto-sama – proved Shimura-san was not strong enough to protect the village as he said he swore to do,” says the female Root member at his right. “If Sasuke-sama says we must obey Hokage-sama, then logically he believes she is the one strong enough protect the village. Our loyalty is, of course, to Sasuke-sama first; he was the one to remove Shimura-san and reveal his faults.”

“I like the sound of that,” Sakura says absently.

“You deserve the respect,” Sai says, “Sakura-sama.”

What an adorable child, Inner purrs. We’re definitely keeping him.

Ultimately, there really isn’t room to host all the Root members. ANBU sets up a schedule of guards around the Uchiha Compound, Jiraiya writes up a sealing matrix that’s inked onto each Root member under a eagle-eyed Sasuke’s stare, and then Team 7 escorts over a hundred-odd members ranging in ages from five all the way up to mid-thirties across the village and into Sasuke’s old home.

“It’ll need work,” Sasuke says to the assembled shinobi. “But the furniture should be okay and the Compound is on a separate grid for most utilities anyway so as soon as we get those running again…”

Naruto stretches and summons a thousand clones in a cloud of smoke. “I can take care of that,” he says and gestures at his kage-bunshin. “If anyone needs anything specific just tell one of us and we’ll figure something out.”

“Any heavy lifting,” Sakura grins wide with too-many teeth, “Call me.”

“If you leave the compound you will be hunted down,” Kakashi says warningly and pats his nin-dogs affectionately. “I’m very effective, as I’m sure you all know.”

“This is a terrible idea,” Jiraiya mutters to Tsunade. She punts him out of the compound with one
swift kick.

“Well, I’ve only been Hokage for a week so let’s try not to make me order whole-sale execution, okay?” She’s not joking in the slightest.

Rumours explode across the village in the wake of Danzo’s execution. Tsunade announces that the execution was the result of a thorough investigation (instead of a revenge-fuelled midnight interrogation by three new genin) and ruthlessly squashes any dissenters under both her literal and metaphorical heel.

Team 7 cleans up the Uchiha head’s house and moves in. Sasuke dips into his inheritance and organizes food and clothing deliveries in an almost literal convoy of merchants. The other Clans are alarmed and raise protests but he ignores them with a deliberately childish ignorance.

“I don’t remember any of them helping after that night,” he says while accepting shipping documents and invoices from the two Root members – the woman who asks to be called Yuki and her ‘partner’ who says to call him Haru – who have nominally become something like personal assistants/bodyguards. “So why should I care if they have complaints over what I do with my money and my property?"

Sakura peers over from where she and Sai (her nominal assistant/bodyguard) are working on organizing the younger children on clearing out the overgrown gardens so they can start planting to ease the strain of having to purchase all the food. “Who’s complaining?”

“The Hyuuga, mostly, but the other clans are concerned about whether or not we have some of their members folded into Root,” he says and stares pointedly at a fluffy-haired young boy carefully transplanting bees into a newly built hive-box with nothing more than gentle fluctuations in his chakra and a handful of what look like they might be kikaichu.

“They didn’t care to find them this whole time,” Naruto says mulishly. “Who’s to say they deserve them if they allowed them to be stolen in the first place.”

Naruto has opinions on Clans and orphans. None of them really want to argue with him.

Kakashi has set himself and an ANBU he introduced to them as Yamato at the gate to the compound and has been turning people away with a gleeful sort of obstinance and an increasingly ridiculous repertoire of excuses. Yamato occasionally comes by to report and sounds equal amounts amused and resigned each time. Sakura adores their sensei.

“Do they have a legal standing to take them?” Sakura asks cautiously and goes over to Naruto to enfold him into a pre-emptively calming hug.

Sasuke’s chakra spikes dangerously. “I’ll find out,” he says. Haru bows when he glances over.

“At once, Sasuke-sama.”
Sasuke ends up with a stack of adoption papers and takes Naruto with him to appeal to Tsunade-sama directly. “Sakura is in charge,” he tells Yuki and Haru. “I’ve got work to do.”

Inner stretches out to hand over a list of duties while Sakura focusses on uprooting a dead tree taking up valuable planting-space. “**We need to know if anyone has any skill with sewing, cooking, medicine, or other supporting roles,**” she informs them. Root has accepted Inner as both extension of Sakura and authority both and no one has commented on the strangeness of her inky-black amorphous-self emerging from within Sakura’s skin. “**The Uchiha were a village unto themselves and we can’t continue to function if we aren’t willing to take up non-combative and civilian roles as well.**”

“Yes, Sakura-sama,” they chorus at her.

“Sai, can you find out where all these kids are at academically? According to Konoha standards, not Root,” Sakura tosses the entire tree over the wall surrounding the compound and only narrowly misses a patrolling ANBU team. “Sorry!” she calls.

“Of course, Sakura-sama,” he says. “Where will you be?”

She grins at him. “I hear there are some training grounds that need clearing. Just follow the tremors.”

“Congratulations!” Naruto cheers and presents a cake after dinner a week later. Scrawled in messy characters are the words ‘You’re a dad!’ and his grin is blinding. “The Uchiha officially have twenty new Wards!”

“Is this even legal?” Sakura asks skeptically.

“It’s technically legal,” Sasuke says. “I’m legally an adult since I’m genin, and technically I’m a Clan Head so I’m allowed to take in children as Wards without the more stringent requirements of actual adoption.”

“It was a stretch,” Kakashi says from where he’s lounging on the couch just behind the rest of the team sitting around the low table. “But it’s legal and no one really wanted to make more work after Tsunade-sama threw her third desk out of Hokage Tower.”

“What does this mean for Team 7?” she turns to face their sensei and he cracks his one visible eye open to peer at her. “Can we still take missions or…?”

“Ibiki vetted Haru and Yuki to act as Sasuke’s ‘heirs’ in his absence. They can’t make any changes without his approval but they can act as his authority under ANBU surveillance.” Kakashi makes a face. “Tsunade-sama wasn’t going to keep three of her newest chunin on house-arrest.”

“Whaaaaaat?!” Naruto yelps and leaps for Kakashi who catches him against his chest without looking away from a giggling Sakura. “Chunin!”

“Oops,” Kakashi says blandly. “Did I spoil the surprise?”
Sakura elects to stay behind at the compound when Team 7 (minus Kakashi-sensei who’s busy picking up the slack with A and S-ranked missions post-attempted-invasion) is given a mission to protect some participant in a race that apparently decides which of two gangs will run a town.

“What. The actual. Fuck.” She says flatly when she finishes reading the mission brief.

Sasuke shrugs. “It’s up to you,” he says. “Strictly speaking it doesn’t require three chunin. Tsunade-sama is only sending at least two of us because we’re only recently promoted.”

“Yeah…thanks but no thanks, Sasuke-kun.” She hands the brief back over and picks up her mug of tea again, relaxing back into the chair on the porch out back of the main house. “I’ll hold the fort here – you can go chasing after some civilian.”

Naruto laughs. “You just don’t want to run,” he says teasingly.

“I will neither confirm nor deny,” she says primly. With Inner, she’s frightfully fast, but on her own she’s still only average-chunin fast. Either way, they prefer brute strength and clever tactics over pursuit. “Have fun. I’ll try not to start a revolution while you’re gone.”

Inner thwarts three assassination attempts before the boys return home. Sakura only knows this because she wakes up to arterial spray on the ceiling and a purring Inner curled happily in her belly.

Really, given the size of Root, Sakura’s surprised there haven’t been more. Yuki and Haru look surprisingly murderous when she mentions it absently over organizing the extensive collection of Uchiha scrolls. Sai continues to smile blandly but also spends about an hour inking tigers and serpents and venomous insects and even a bear onto the screens of her room. She’s seen what he can do with ink; if it makes him feel better she’ll let him.

Plus, Inner thinks they look lovely.

The next time someone tries, she wakes up in the morning and emerges from the main house to Yuki, Haru, and Sai stringing up a bleeding, moaning, broken figure between two posts while several other Root members look on with what may be approval.

“Interesting decorating choice,” she says and accepts the morning cup of tea an ink-monkey presses into her hands.

“It’s kinder than Shimura would have been,” Haru tells her reassuringly.

“Well, that’s something I suppose,” Sakura agrees.

“Put coals under their feet.” Inner emerges to leer at the suspended figure. “We should aspire to
be better than that old man.”

“Maybe just makibishi,” Sakura says mildly. “Less labour-intensive than maintaining hot-coals.”

Sasuke returns with the raijin no ken and Tsunade-sama’s approval to keep it. Naruto shrugs at her when she asks, a little incredulously, if they had to fight each other for it.

“Sasuke’s the one with a lightning affinity,” he concedes. “Makes more sense for him to keep it. Oh! You’ll like this; we met Ibiki-san’s little brother.”

“Ibiki-san has a brother?” she demands. “Tell me everything.”

“Why is there a dead body in front of our house?” Sasuke sounds amused more than anything else.

“Funny story, actually,” Sakura says cheerfully and urges her boys inside where their eventual explosion of temper can at least be contained. “So, you know how we were so surprised how well Root was taking the change of leadership? Well turns out…”
Chapter Six

Sakura takes a mission on her own to Suna where she’ll remain to negotiate the peace treaty on Tsunade’s behalf. The Hokage smirks a little when she watches the face Sakura makes while reading the mission brief.

“I don’t really expect much negotiating. Everything is pretty much decided; you’re just there to convince them to sign the damn thing. Which they will, but it’s always a good idea to send an emissary in person. As one of our newest Chunin with a frankly terrifying showing in the exams, I think you’ll send exactly the right message.”

Sakura preens a little. Tsunade had been impressed with her reverse engineering and had gone through a pretty intense demonstration to see if Sakura needed any improvement. The Hokage had conceded that, aside from practical experience, Sakura pretty much had it down. She’d even offered an apprenticeship to learn medical ninjutsu but Sakura had turned her down with only a little regret.

(“No offence, Tsunade-sama, but I can heal anything that happens to me without it and Team 7 is a frontline assault team; I don’t have time to dedicate myself to reaching frontline-medic standards.”)

We’ll get to see that girl again, Inner says excitedly. Do you think she’d be interested in a spar?

I don’t see how she can turn us down, Sakura returns primly. We sent her a present and everything.

Suna is hot and windy and bright and glorious. Sakura loves it even if Inner grumbles a little at the heat. Fire is one of the few things that can hurt them and the desert burns in an unpleasantly similar way.

Don’t be a baby, Sakura chides and borrows several rows of teeth to smile at the chunin looking over their papers at Suna’s main gate.

See if I help when you burst into spontaneous flames, Inner snarls but curls affectionately around their heart when Sakura sends nothing but fondness at her.

“Thank you,” Sakura adds to the suna chunin. “You have a lovely village.”

“Just…don’t cause any trouble,” he mutters and avoids meeting the pale milky white of their eyes.

“You!” Temari snarls at them and lunges. The jounin behind her makes an aborted move to stop her but Sakura just laughs and leans into the punch, spitting blood and grinning as Inner replaces
broken teeth almost instantly. “That fucking present,” she hisses and Sakura holds firmly but gently at the hand trying to strangle them.

“Did you like it?” she asks with a bleeding smile.

“Did I like it?” Temari sputters and stares at them incredulously. The meet her stare evenly for a long time, grinning the whole while, until the other kunoichi growls and drops her roughly.

“It was midnight and I was trying to get home,” she says with what looks like a hint of a grin tugging at her mouth. “I can’t believe you found a service that came all the way out here.”

“It was pretty expensive,” Sakura agrees and spits off to the side. “I dragged my team all over the village to find a place that was willing so soon after that invasion attempt.”

Temari does laugh now. “You’re all right, Konoha,” she says and hauls them over so they can link arms. “You wanna get a drink?”

“We don’t get drunk easily,” Sakura warns her.

“We’ll drink a lot,” Temari promises.

They leave the jounin gaping behind them.

The puppet boy looks horrified to find his sister and the pink-haired genin that broke her sitting at his breakfast table the next morning. They hadn’t succeeded in getting terribly drunk and so they’re having a light breakfast while they wake up. Sakura had enthusiastically been admiring Temari’s many and varied scars while the other girl explained how and where she got each one.

“I’ve had that,” Sakura agrees to a long slice along her ribs, “my teammate, the Uchiha? He got us good in a spar with some wire.”

“Yeah? Let’s see,” Temari prods. Then, casually as an aside, “Morning Kankuro.”

“What the fuck?” he rasps.

“No scar,” she says apologetically. Temari looks curious and she brightens a little. “Oh right, you wouldn’t…check it out.” Sakura grabs a kunai and stabs herself straight through the hand in one swift movement that has Temari uttering an aborted shout and Kankuro practically falling on his ass.

Inner stirs and when Sakura jerks the knife out, she draws their blood back in and seals it up in a deliberately slower manner than they would normally – letting the other kunoichi time to watch and admire.

“What. The. Fuck?!” Kankuro yelps at the same time Temari leans forward and says “So cool!”

“Thanks,” Sakura chirps.

“Does it hurt?” Temari asks while her brother continues chanting ‘what the fuck’ under his breath.
“Oh, loads,” Sakura says assuring. “But we usually block it pretty quick, unless there’s sufficient damage that there isn’t time to worry about it.”

“I’m going to go lie down,” Kankuro announces. “Maybe then I can wake up and this will make sense again.”

Gaara walks in as his brother walks out. He looks over at his sister and Sakura and blinks slowly at them. “Good morning,” he rasps out. “Is that tea?”

“Sakura-chan made it,” Temari agrees and holds out the pot above a third cup questioningly. He nods and settles into a seat at the table, turning his attention immediately to Sakura. Inner bristles a little but Sakura’s smile is easy and not sharp in the slightest.

“It smells like blood?” He says eventually, with a cautious inhale that Sakura recognizes as subtle scenting.

“Check it out,” Temari grins. “Sakura-chan, show him the thing.”

Gaara is both impressed and calm about the entire affair. “We should spar,” he says absently while sipping at his cup. “My sand is too harsh for too much practice with anyone else.”

(Kankuro, in the other room, wails, “What the fuck is my life?”)

The council of Suna enters the assigned meeting room the next day to Sakura chatting cheerfully at a stoic Gaara while Temari grins and doodles little tactics on the back of the day’s itinerary and the three of them examine them thoughtfully. Kankuro sits just beside the trio and meets each council member’s stare flatly unamused.

Gaara flicks a look their way when they hesitate in the door and the sharp furl of killing intent is enough to have them hurrying to their seats even as he turns a far gentler expression on the pink-haired Konoha-nin.

They continue chatting until one of the council members dares to clear their throat pointedly. Gaara goes preternaturally still as sand stirs around him in a sinuous spiral. “Yes?” he asks blankly.

“You’re ready now?” Sakura asks with a grin containing too many teeth. “Excellent. Tsunade-sama has quite a few points to go through before I can return with the completed treaty.”

“We wouldn’t want to inconvenience you, Sakura-chan,” Gaara murmurs silkily, “I’m sure we can get through this quickly.”

Temari doesn’t even attempt subtle. “If the Council knows what’s good for it.”

Kankuro never quite warms to her, but Inner figures healthy fear and respect is good enough.
Temari hugs her goodbye and Gaara presents her with a stumpy little cactus in a pot painted like a tanuki. “Visit soon,” Temari says firmly. “I’ve never seen the council so frightened. It was perfect.”

“Say hello to Naruto for me,” Gaara says and allows a hug, hands hovering awkwardly and sand stirring at their feet. “Don’t overwater that.”

Sakura smiles at them all and then Inner flows over her shoulders and grins at them too. “It’s been lovely,” they say. “We’ll write often if we can’t get out this way.”

Kankuro’s high-pitched whine is drowned out by Temari’s delighted laughter and the low rasp of Gaara’s amused snort as they shoot off towards home in a blur of black and white.

Naruto beams at her and absconds immediately with her cactus to add it to the growing collection of plants dotting the living room. Sasuke drags her down to curl against him on the couch and growls, “they better not get any ideas.”

“I’m not going to leave you boys for some suna-nin,” she says with a laugh. “But they are fun.”

“Who is?” Kakashi says as he passes by, ruffling her hair affectionately, before staring blearily into the fridge. He’s out of uniform, shirtless but for the mask over his face and around his neck, with sweatpants hanging low on his hips. Inner preens happily at his obvious comfort around them. “Welcome back,” he adds with a yawn.

“Sakura’s consorting with the suna team,” Sasuke says and ignores her protests of ‘It’s not consorting’.

Kakashi goes still. “What?”

“I’m not consorting,” Sakura says and succeeds in shoving Sasuke off the couch for his cheek. “Temari is just fun is all. And Naruto was right, Gaara is adorable.”

“Sasuke, you’re going with her next time,” Kakashi says firmly. “Where’s that Yamato? I need to go tell Hokage-sama that Sakura shouldn’t go to Suna alone.”

“Kakashi,” Sakura breathes exasperation, but their sensei ignores her.

“They went drinking together,” Sasuke reports and dodges the kunai she whips at his head. “Inner said goodbye.”

“Naruto!” Kakashi shouts and shunshins away in a swirl of leaves. She can hear Naruto yelp in the other room and then a distant shout from outside. Sai comes in with a tray of tea and a disapproving look on his face that isn’t even fully affected.

“Sakura-sama you aren’t really leaving us are you?”

“Dirty pool, Kakashi-sensei,” Sakura growls and offers a warmer look to her erstwhile assistant. “I’m not leaving; my team is just a bunch of jealous morons.”
Orochimaru tries to kidnap Sasuke in November. Team 7 only knows about it because Root grudgingly turns over the 4 twisted bodies off his minions when ANBU comes by one morning to find out what the surge of chakra in the compound had been about.

“What, were we supposed to just let that Sannin abscond with Sasuke-sama?” Haru asks primly. Yuki folds her arms serenely and bows lowly to Sasuke, ignoring the ANBU team entirely. Inner curls around Sakura’s legs to sniff at the bodies curiously away from prying eyes.

“They’ve got weird marks on their necks,” Naruto says and squints down. “Looks like a seal? Can’t be anything good,” he crouches and inhales deeply, eyes bleeding crimson.

Kakashi curls an arm around Sasuke reflexively while Sakura presses into his other side. “Anything?” he asks Naruto while keeping a single eye steady on the ANBU team captain. The man is, very intelligently, not stepping foot over the line of the Uchiha compound.

“I think it corrupts the chakra,” Naruto says eventually, having reached out to trace the dark marks with a finger and stretching out with his chakra in tentative brushes. “But they’ve already had fully developed systems so it’s like…like a poison. Potential physical changes? Kurama can’t be sure but it definitely feels like whatever he tried during the exam.”

“Get that pervert-jiji to look at it,” Sakura suggests and ignores the plaintive ‘Jiraiya-sama’ from Kakashi. “He’s allegedly a sealing master.”

“He’s something all right,” Sasuke mutters darkly while Kakashi flinches between their combined distaste.

“I can summon up Kurama and ask him to go find him?” Naruto says with his hands already rising to do so.

“No!” The ANBU captain rushes to say, freezing under Sasuke’s spinning sharingan and Sakura’s gleaming-white eyes. Kakashi has gone very still and his chakra seethes. “That is, we’ll tell Hokage-sama,” he says slowly. “And get rid of these bodies?”

“That sounds lovely,” Kakashi says but his voice is threaded with warning. “Yuki and Haru? Can you help them?”

“We live to serve,” they intone solemnly, but their eyes are only on Sasuke. He nods briefly and they dip a bow in unison before they even lift a finger to help the ANBU squad.

Tsunade-sama beams at the sake Sasuke holds up in question. Her apprentice Shizune scowls darkly but Team 7 is entirely immune to such looks so Sasuke just brings it over on a tray alongside the spiced tea Sakura brought back from Suna. She makes grabby hands until he snorts amusement and pours her a cup heavily doctored with milk and sugar. Tsunade murmurs delight, “The Uchiha
has *taste,*” at the first sip of what is apparently Very Good sake.

“So that bastard ex-teammate of mine wants you for your body,” she says and laughs at the look of pained disgust that flickers across Sasuke’s usually impassive face.

“He can *want* all he likes,” Naruto grumbles and it takes Sasuke practically sitting in his lap before he grudgingly relents from seething in wisps of scarlet chakra. Sakura watches with fond amusement as Naruto curls clawed hands around Sasuke’s middle and buries his face in their third’s hair to inhale deeply. Sasuke allows it all with a look that would be long-suffering if not for the way he gently settles his hands atop the blonde’s at his waist.

Sakura leans back so that Kakashi can drape an arm over her shoulders and run fingers gently through her hair. Inner twines around his ankle to burble affection at him and he spares a moment to brush fingers along the inky tendril too.

“That would be because he’s been using poor substitutes for bodies,” Haru says and inclines a questioning look at Sasuke when Tsunade’s gaze sharpens over her sake. “Shimura gave him bodies when he was still here, but none of them held up so well as those with kekkei genkai.”

Sasuke shrugs a little. “It’s no secret that kekkei genkai alter you physically. My brain has to be wired differently if just to account for the increased visual information I have to process when I use the sharingan. It’s probably why it takes so much out of Kakashi-sensei when he uses his – lacking the physical side of the ability to support it.”

Naruto’s eyes are bleeding red when he says, slowly, as though just repeating someone else, “Moving your Self and chakra from one host to another will lead to degradation if they aren’t suited to you. The Uchiha are…ah, I don’t think this translates so well,” he says and tilts his head, eyes squinting thoughtfully. “Kurama says they’re like a universal donor? The bloodline has been so direct since…well, since humans first started using chakra that they’re naturally just *better* for this sort of *jumping souls and bodies garbage* apparently.”

“Kurama?” Tsunade says and then, with a sharp nod, “The fox, yes. Well, supposing he’s not lying he *would* know, wouldn’t he?”

Naruto beams a little, sunshine-bright at someone acknowledging his tenant with anything approaching kindness or trust.

“So that needs to be dealt with,” Kakashi says while surveying his team with a sharp eye. Sakura has read his file (he’d accidentally left it out for his genin to peruse at their leisure and had found his bed invaded by three genin intent on not letting him out of their sight for the last week or so – not that he’s complained in the slightest) so she recognizes the hint of desperation in the way he seamlessly adjusts her into his lap where she’s completely safe from anything less than a sannin themselves attacking him. Inner rumbles an audible purr in their chest – delighted as always that they’ve found such *lovely* and *vicious* family.

“We’re *going to eat him alive,*” they say warmly to their sensei. “*Naruto promised to help.*”

Sasuke coughs a protest and Naruto brushes a soothing hand through his hair. “Yes, we know you will too.” Sasuke settles with a smug look and preens under the attention.

“I *am* the Hokage still, you know?” Tsunade-sama says wryly. “But you’re all right; Orochimaru will have to be dealt with at some point. More important, however, is the assignment I’ve brought you today.” She gestures to Shizune who lays a folder on the table.
Being closest, Sasuke picks it up and opens it. He holds it so that Naruto can read with his chin hooked gently over his shoulder. When he stills and Naruto begins to compulsively stroke up and down his sides, Sakura nudges Kakashi pointedly until he leans over and pulls it carefully from his slack hands. She peers down at the mission brief and Kakashi snorts a laugh.

“Retrieval Mission for Deep-Cover Agent,” he says aloud. “Well, that’s one way of putting it.”

“That guy is huge,” Sakura pulls all the pages relevant away to peer over with Inner stirring delight at them. “I want that sword.”

“Well if you insist,” Kakashi says, all fondness and indulgence as he curls an arm around her. “Team 7 accepts this mission,” he smiles cheerfully at the Hokage who just snorts and watches Yuki when she steps forward to pour more sake into her empty cup.

Of course, it’s one thing to be allowed to find Sasuke’s brother and another thing entirely to actually find him. They traipse around Fire for weeks following leads and stirring up missing-nin around every corner. T&I sends over a beautiful flower arrangement after they drop the fourth live captive off; Ibiki has never been happier, apparently.

“This is getting ridiculous,” Naruto grumbles, throwing himself onto the couch and only huffing out a breath when Sakura drops down on top of him. An arm curls around her waist to keep her steady while he stretches out to let her squeeze between the back cushions and his body. “Oi, bastard, your brother is a pain in the ass.”

Sasuke – equally sick and tired of relentless travel – shoves his face into Kakashi’s chest and growls. Their sensei strokes a soothing hand through his hair and down his back, leaning into the squishy armchair and heaving a heavy sigh. “Don’t blame me,” Sasuke finally manages.

“We need probable cause to enter other countries,” Inner says, flowing up Sakura’s shoulders and manifesting a sleek serpentine face to peer around at their team cautiously. “We could definitely get Gaara to bully the Suna Council for us.”

Naruto’s reflexive snarl tempers quickly – affection for the other Jinchuriki warring with possessiveness over his teammate – and he nuzzles into her neck. “Suppose,” he mutters.

“What about Kiri?” Sasuke asks finally. “Isn’t that blue guy from there? Isn’t that cause?”

“He’s a missing-nin from Kiri,” Sakura sits up to shoot an exasperated look at their teammate. Inner winds her way down to nuzzle at Naruto in her absence. “Ergo, not actually Kiri.”


“What?” Sasuke says.

“How?” asks Naruto, skeptical.
“Oh,” Sakura says, realization dawning. “What are the chances it’s still there?”

As far as bribes go, one of the Seven Swordsman’s swords is a pretty good one to gain permission to visit Kirigakure. Sakura pats the riot of wildflowers blooming on Zabuza’s gravesite apologetically.

“Sorry Zabuza-san,” she says while Kakashi seals the sword away nearby. “It’s for a good cause, I promise.”

“Hey Haku,” Naruto says cheerfully, crouching down beside her, “we promise we won’t let some loser have your Master’s sword.”

“We’ll get proper grave markers,” Sasuke says firmly. “I’m thinking a statue wouldn’t go amiss. Maybe a small shrine?”

“Come on kids,” Kakashi-sensei says warmly, tucking away the scroll with the sealed Kubikiribocho in it. “First thing’s first; we need Tsunade-sama’s permission to go around offering other villages bribery.”

Tsunade agrees with them but puts them on lockdown until she can coordinate with the Mizukage. “This is a bargaining chip of fortuitous good luck,” she says. “If I can work a treaty out of this, then maybe the council will get off my back.”

Naruto stiffens. “Have they been bugging you baa-chan?”

“Nah,” she waves him off with a fond look. The ANBU hovering at her shoulders, watching the crimson bleed into his eyes and the whiskers thicken and darken, don’t look nearly as calm. “Nothing I can’t handle squirt. You lot just enjoy this vacation time.”

Sasuke’s glare is sharp, and the two Root members hovering at his shoulders are just about as calm as the ANBU. He offers a bow to Tsunade and links arms with Naruto and Sakura firmly. “Thank you, Hokage-sama,” he says tightly.

Between Kakashi and their Root escort, they actually get to the compound without being accosted by messengers from the other Clans. It seems, lately, that any time longer than a few minutes in the village has led to being set upon by the Clans who want nothing more than to cement an alliance with Sasuke. It’s a toss-up to whether it’s because of the Clan children under his wing or the Uchiha bloodline.

Naruto is especially touchy about the former, Sasuke the latter, and Sakura herself is pure spite and jealousy that anyone would even consider touching what’s theirs. Every member of Root living in the compound has been swallowed into the swirling mass of possessiveness that is Inner and Sakura’s affection.
Kakashi – deprived of family for so long – seems content just to luxuriate in their midst; though the minute anyone mentions the three of them specifically, he tenses like a wolf who’s caught the scent of prey and practically *seethes* killing intent.

“Sakura-sama,” Sai says with a smile that’s becoming more and more *real* each day. He accepts the way she drapes herself over his shoulders in what can only loosely be called a hug without batting an eye. “There’s a message for you from Hyuuga-sama.”

“What?” Kakashi says flatly while Sakura peers at the invitation curiously.

“Is it from Hinata-chan?”

“No,” Sai says and presents the envelope to Sasuke when he holds out a demanding hand.

“What’s the big deal?” Naruto asks, looking between them all cautiously.

“The Haruno aren’t a ninja clan,” she says, scanning the invitation and frowning thoughtfully. “To be invited personally by one of the founding Clans means…”

“Marriage proposal,” Sasuke says darkly. “And she *can’t* refuse to go.”

“Not without shaming my clan,” she agrees mildly.

“She *can’t*?” Naruto says – and the rasp of his voice is deep and terrible. “Says who?”

Inner trembles in delight at the idea of setting their teammate loose on the Clans for daring to presume. *Oh please, let him,* she begs in a pretty croon.

*Not a chance,* Sakura says. *We can handle scaring them off ourselves.*

**You are absolutely no fun,** Inner says, but sounds mollified at the promise of getting to snarl at someone herself.

“Sounds like fun,” she says finally, smiling at her teammates while they eye her carefully.

“You’ll need an escort,” Kakashi says and his eye creases in a smile that’s just this side of honeyed poison. “Surely no one could object to your commanding officer joining you? Being from an old Clan myself.”

**We do love him,** Inner purrs. **But do we need him?**

“I’d love an escort,” Sakura beams and lets him fold her into an embrace, grinning helplessly at the way his chakra bristles and sparks as it brushes against her senses.

**Those poor Hyuuga,** Inner laughs. **They have no idea what they’re inviting into their midst.**