A Stitch in Time
by Ocean_inthe_Sun

Summary

Kaguya has been defeated, but it’s a shallow victory for Haruno Sakura, who suddenly is sucked into the past without warning. Struggling to find her footing and a way home, she finds something more...a place among legends. And quite possibly, love.

Notes

This is from my FFN and is being cross-posted due to my frustration with the other site’s many problems.
Baptize

Chapter Summary

Minutes after the Fourth Shinobi World War ends, Haruno Sakura is summoned into a strange new world. Fighting to find a way home, Sakura discovers new allies, otherworldly abilities, a fresh take on history, and to her surprise, maybe more than one someone special to share her future with.

Chapter Notes

This is from my FFN and was cross-posted due to my frustration with FFN and their many problems. It is an active, ongoing story that I began back in 2017 when I was at a low point and need some frivolous wish fulfillment but it’s kind of grown into more.

Somehow, they had done it. Ended Kaguya. For good. Sakura smiled at her boys, reunited at last, in exhaustion. The proof of her own labor rested proudly on her forehead. She had entered the war without it, but had gained a seal to match her master's on that day. Not even her sister disciple, Shizune, had a seal. Sakura was happy. She finally had earned a place at their sides.

Everything had been going well, the remaining shinobi were loudly rejoicing and the battered bodies were finally ready to rest, when Ino's alarmed shout broke everyone out of their revelry. She pointed with a shaky finger, Shikamaru steadying her with a hand around her shoulders, and one by one everyone looked up.

In the spot where Kaguya had been recently slain, an oval, sparking hole had appeared. No one said anything, or moved, or even breathed (it seemed). They watched as what appeared to be an eye, decidedly reptilian-like in its green-gold color and one black slit for a pupil, peered down at them. The masses were frozen, and Sakura wondered if the fearsome eye had a paralyzing effect or if they were all just that shocked.

She attempted to force her weary body to prepare for battle, staring challengingly up at the newest assumed threat. It stared back, gaze roving over each shinobi until it landed on her. Sakura felt her breath leave her in a gasp as it started to glow a deep forest green. It was almost like…on the other side she could see a lush world. A forest, green and peaceful, with a river flowing calmly through it. She was hallucinating though. She was sure it was a trick by the strange orb meant to disarm them. But why did she feel like her firmly planting feet were losing traction, like she was sliding forward? Odd.

She thought so at least, until she heard Ino shriek her name, and turned to see her teammates coming out of their stupor to run for her, Naruto in the lead, arm outstretched. "Sakura-chan!"

Even the unmoved Sasuke looked completely caught off guard in that moment.

"What? Naruto?!!" She yelled, but in the panic she wasn't sure if he even heard.
Sakura shrieked herself when she was positive her feet actually left the trodden soil. *She was getting sucked in,* and as much as she kicked and clawed at air, gravity had abandoned her.

"*I claim this one.*" A voice rang clearly over the shinobi. It was a woman's voice, powerful and as deep as time.

*Claimed?* No, Sakura Haruno was not a possession to be claimed! But the force pulling her further into the air disagreed.

Everyone was shouting for her now, and she saw the faces of all her friends looking frantic. Hinata's wide eyes were watery as she watched her helplessly get pulled away from them. Ino looked like she was demanding Shikamaru to do something. Lee did his best to get to his feet and dash to her rescue just like he had that day she acknowledged him. Tsunade bellowed for her, but she was severely weakened from the battle and supported only by her fellow Kage. Kakashi looked completely stunned. Sai had summoned animals to retrieve her, but they had been battered away by the strong, invisible hand pulling her skyward. Naruto was still running for her, but Gaara—

The Kazekage stretched his own hand out, a fierce look glimmering in his eyes. Two tendrils of sand snaked out through the air and wrapped around her wrist and ankle. For a minute, Sakura had an anchor against the pull. There was a shared sigh of relief. Kankuro and Temari cheered next to him. Gaara began attempting to bring her safely to the ground again, and Sakura's chest heaved at being in the center of the gravity-destroying tug-o-war.

"*I claim this one. I will not be denied.*" The voice growled this time, enraged that they had dared to try and stop its wishes.

Gaara's eyes widened. Something was fighting his sand, almost prying it away from Sakura. He quickly sent out two more tendrils to grab her other wrist and ankle, and another around her midsection for good measure. Sakura Haruno was Naruto's treasured teammate, and had become a dear friend of the Kazekage's in her own right.

He would not let her be taken away. He fought with everything left in him to keep Sakura without crushing her limbs or ribs. But he could feel the invisible grip pulling harder the more he pulled back. At this rate he would accidentally kill her trying to save her.

He hated to, but if he didn't… Gaara loosened his sand, only marginally, but it was enough. She was quickly sucked up, flipping through the air until she collided with the monstrosity of an eye—and falling through it with one last scream. The air was suddenly calm again; the redhead knew because there was nothing pulling against his still-animated tendrils of sand. Empty and outstretched, there was laxness. The eye blinked, and, having gotten what it came for, winked out of sight.

Those who had been close enough to see what had happened, those who had known Sakura, mourned her immediately. Screamed for her in vain. Naruto roared his rage, Kyuubi chakra seeping through. And the sky remained the sweet and somber mix of oranges and pinks as the sun began to set on the absence of the pink-haired kunoichi.

Her first moments in her new world were baptized with water. But the burning in her lungs might as well have been flames. *She was sinking!* And she tried bringing herself up, but her limbs were as useless as lead weights. It felt like every ounce of her remaining chakra—dwindling supply though it was—had been depleted.
Of all the ways she was sure she'd die, Sakura had never suspected drowning. Fate was unpredictable. Ripped away from her friends and comrades so suddenly only to be left for dead in at the bottom of a river… At least she thought it was fresh-water.

Almost out of oxygen, she tried to recall her proudest moments. She had finally proven her worth, at least. Maybe…she could be remembered as a strong kunoichi after all.

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His eyes narrowed minutely as he raised a hand, watching as a stream of water rose from the river. Before he could form a jutsu, he paused. A weak chakra signature was nearby. Very nearby. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his sensory perception. The signature was so close it was almost on top of him…or at his feet. There, floating downstream towards him, was a body, face down and wearing ninja garb he had never seen before. He watched with a cocked head, in case this person was feigning injury to wait for his guard to come down, but when the body almost floated by he realized it was no act.

He applied chakra to his feet and easily caught up to the body. Looking down, he could tell it was a woman. He pulled her into his arms, knowing that in her unconscious state she was harmless. He carried her back to the bank and set her down on her back, noticing her clammy skin and pale color. She didn't stir.

She wore a red forehead protector, and he took it out of her wet pink hair to study. Even before he looked at the kanji that simply read "shinobi" he knew she was no Konoha nin he'd ever seen. They currently had no pink-haired kunoichi. Besides that fact, the village was still newly formed, only having been completed for less than a month. He made a point of knowing every shinobi clan and face currently living within village walls.

And she was certainly no civilian, whoever she was. She also wore pants, something no kunoichi he'd ever seen did. All together she made one large oddity from head to toe to origin. While he was known for being the more cautious of the two between his brother and himself, he decided this woman was a mystery that needed unraveling.

Placing a hand above her chest, he willed what water was in her lungs to rise. Her dainty mouth was forced open as an orb of water left her body and she sputtered a deep cough. He continued, making sure all water had been expelled before running a lightly glowing hand over her to revive her. Jade eyes slowly flickered open.

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Chapter End Notes

Again, to reiterate, this is a cross-post directly from my FFN account...I have not edited or changed these chapters in anyway. For now, they will go up "as is" and when I find time and figure out which account I want to stick with, I will try to edit.
Redux

Chapter Summary

Sakura meets a long dead face, and he isn't so happy to see her...

The first thing Sakura registered, was that she wasn't dead, or surrounded in water. She was dazed though, and her mind sluggishly rebooted. Carefully, she sat up. Her eyes slowly came into focus, and she gasped when she saw the man crouched over her. A man in blue armor with red eyes and snow white hair. The Nidaime!

Not long ago she had seen this man engaged in fierce battle with Madara Uchiha and Obito along with the other reanimated Kage. But the man before her wasn't the same as the one she'd seen. His skin was not ashen and cracked. His sclera weren't black.

And as powerful and intimidating as he'd been even in death on the battlefield, the power this man emanated now was very much…different, though currently controlled. He was alive. Jade eyes caught the glint of his happuri and she noticed the familiar emblem of Konoha gleaming proudly. The village. Her home.

It made her heart ache to think of. She wasn't sure what was going on. She hadn't even gotten to truly celebrate with everyone, or mourn the fallen. She hadn't even gotten to see the village they'd fought so hard to defend. She hadn't even gotten to decide if she forgave Sasuke for everything he'd put them through. She just wanted to see the familiar faces of her friends and sensei and maybe hug her parents…

"Kunoichi, who are you?" His deep voice rumbled as soon as he noticed she was awake. "Do not lie to me." He flexed his chakra threateningly, even though there was no need. She had witnessed his power for herself. She couldn't image going up against him when he was alive and in his prime. She didn't want an enemy in Tobirama Senju.

"I…" She started. But where was there to start? Logically, the beginning. But, something deep down told her that the beginning she knew wouldn't make sense to him. But nothing made sense when a dead man was alive again. Only… Madara Uchiha had been dead, then ended up fully alive thanks to Obito's jutsu, and then dead again. Everything in her mind was a jumbled mess.

And Lord Second was getting impatient. "I won't ask again," he said, eyes narrowed. "Tell me who you are. And why you had this?" he held up her headband. Sakura's hand went to her wet hair immediately, brushing through it. Yes, that was definitely hers. She couldn't decide if it was a good or bad thing that it wasn't her usual forehead protector. What would he do if she'd been wearing the mark of the Leaf when he found her?

'Well sorry if I'm a little weak and disoriented, pal! It's kind of been a long day!' Great. Her mouth may have been slow to work, but her subconscious was wide awake and roaring.

"My name is Sakura Haruno." She finally managed to say. "And that's…that's mine." She reached for it, and he grudgingly allowed her to take it back. Filled with a sense of comfort to have her headband back in her possession, even if it wasn't the one that marked her as a Konoha shinobi, she tied it back in place.
"Haruno… I've never heard of that clan." Sakura heard him mutter.

"It's not a traditionally shinobi clan." She replied carefully.

"So how did you come to be one? Assuming the headband isn't for show." he quipped.

Sakura narrowed her eyes. Despite the great amount of respect she had for this man as a relative of her mentor and a founder of the village she loved, she didn't remember him being snarky. Of course in the heat of battle there was little time for snark, and really, he and the other revived Kage of the past had interacted more with Naruto than her.

"How does anyone become one? They're raised and taught from an early age." Sakura quipped right back.

Tobirama glowered. In a second his hand was at her throat and she was lying flat on her back in the grass. "Don't trifle with me girl; you just said you came from civilians." Clearly, the Second Hokage did not appreciate the same level of sarcasm in others that he bestowed on them. At least not from those he considered potential enemies.

"I didn't say both parents were. My mother was a shinobi. She wasn't very active after I was born, but she taught me what she knew." Sakura hoped that story worked. She certainly didn't plan on telling him she learned most of what she knew from another Senju, his grandniece, of all Senju.

"What clan was your mother from? I know of no clans that would impart such a… loud and impractical hair color." His nose crinkled. It was Sakura's turn to glower. Was a guy that was practically an albino really saying he thought her hair was "loud"? She'd spent half her life learning to like herself, "loud" hair and all, thank you very much.

"My loud hair is from my civilian father." Sakura spat. "My mother never talked much about her family. I don't know who she was before she became a Haruno." This time her words were entirely true. She didn't know either of her sets of grandparents and her mother never mentioned why she was compelled to join the academy.

But she couldn't mention her mother attended a ninja academy. Sakura didn't know if allowing regular children from outside clans to become shinobi was very common at this time… The more she spoke to this man, who was undoubtedly the Nidaime, the more she was convinced that somehow, someway, she wasn't in the time she'd left. To be thrown so far back would have been something she'd have a hard time believing, if she hadn't seen so many unbelievable things happen during the war. Legions of undead shinobi from generations past fighting… Kakashi's long-believed dead teammate very much alive and behind the whole war… Sakura was certainly in the business of suspended disbelief if she hadn't been before.

Tobirama's grip loosened. "And all these questions about who I am and where I'm from but I don't even know your name." she reminded him.

Tobirama's eyes held a note of suspicion. Not that long ago, ninja's exchanging names was deadly, because it was hard to say if someone had fought against and killed someone else's clansmen. But this girl claimed she was of a civilian background and her mother was the only other ninja in the family, so it was unlikely the Haruno had clashed with the Senju.

Still, he'd made quite the name for himself even before shocking the world by forming a village with his brother and Madara. Many knew of the aloof Tobirama Senju. White hair and red eyes were very distinct.
"I am Tobirama Senju." he said. Sakura nodded, gesturing slightly to his hand. Cautiously, he removed it and allowed her to get up. Sakura decided in that moment that to do something that would either be utterly stupid or genius. She wasn't sure which yet.

"So does that symbol on your happuri mean you're from the new ninja village I've heard about? Konoha?" Tobirama considered her carefully. There was nothing deceitful in her expression or her eyes. Genuine interest if anything.

Of course news had already spread like wildfire. Even now, all sorts of clans had already come from far and wide, wanting to join the village. Most recently it was the Nara. There were even civilians turning up, wanting to live in the village for shelter from the constant bloodshed on the outside, and make new lives for themselves. His bleeding heart of a brother didn't turn them away. Konoha, while still growing, was becoming quite the melting pot.

"So you've heard."

Sakura nodded, "Yes, and honestly, I was on my way there. I'm not really sure what happened...or how I ended up floating face down in the river. Thank you for reviving me by the way." She dipped her head in genuine respect. Inside she was deeply relieved that it was someone from her own village who was one of the good guys, and not a band of rogues who had discovered her in her weakened state.

"You're thanking someone who could just as soon kill you?" Tobirama raised a brow. It was true he'd saved her but he still wasn't use to gratitude from strangers.

"You didn't." Sakura smiled for the first time. "And I don't think you will."

Feeling suddenly and inexplicably abashed, Tobirama quickly changed the subject. "Why were you looking for the village?"

"I was hoping to join..." Sakura said slowly. "My family is gone. It's just me now, and when I heard about this ninja village I decided I would try to find it."

Tobirama thought about it. The very first time his brother had told him of his dream, he had been doubtful. Ninja were nomadic by nature. They certainly did not live harmoniously together with other clans and non-ninja either. They grew up in dangerous, bloody times where death was ever-present.

But Hashirama, the stubbornly optimistic fool, had made him believe in his dream, and he had fought bitterly by his brother's side to make it happen, even swallowed his pride and worked alongside the Uchiha. Now Konoha was a reality and he saw the beauty in Hashirama's plan. Tobirama knew he'd fight tirelessly to his last breath to keep the village going. It was time to usher in a new era. That meant that when he met strange pink-haired kunoichi in the forest, who asked to join the village, he was annoyingly inclined to oblige and show her the way. In the end, Hashirama would have the final say. Not that he couldn't already guess what his brother's decision would be.

Tobirama stood to his full height. "I assume you're familiar with traveling by trees?"

"Of course," Sakura answered almost indignantly, forgetting herself. "It's...one of the first things I learned." she said coolly.

"Can you keep up?"

Sakura slowly got to her feet, noting that the white-haired man towered over her. "I think so,"
'As long as you don't dart off to lose me.' Sakura wouldn't put it past him. He already seemed reluctant. She supposed living the way he had for so much of his life, it was hard to erase the general distrust of strangers. But the brief amount of time she'd seen his brother interact with Naruto, the First seemed warm and candid. More like Naruto than this man.

Sakura heard a heavy sigh, and looked up into Tobirama's face to notice he appeared displeased. "I don't have time for uncertainty…" Unceremoniously, he stood in front of her, back turned, and crouched slightly. Sakura stared. "Get on," he commanded.

Under any other circumstance she'd laugh. The Second Hokage was going to give her a piggy-back ride? But she decided not to test him anymore, and hopped onto his armored back, wrapping her arms securely around his neck and her legs around his waist. "Thank you, I appreciate—"

Tobirama took off before she could finish and she almost bit her tongue accidentally.

"Do you always go this fast?!" she squealed. She was right. Had she tried to follow him, he would have most definitely left her behind.

"This is the average speed of travel for most ninja."

'Like hell!' she thought.

"We'll get there in no time going this speed!" she said above the whistle of the wind.

"Yes, so you'd better be ready to plead your case to the Hokage."

Sakura lowered her head in thought. She had managed to convince Tobirama to take her back to the village, and his brother seemed like a nice man, but when it came to the village, and allowing a wandering kunoichi of no real origin to enter…would he be welcoming?
Sakura really wasn't sure how to feel when the sight of the familiar gate came into view. Tobirama let her get down as they approached the two sentries on duty. The minute they recognized the white-haired shinobi they bowed in the utmost respect and opened the path into the village. Of course they gave the unfamiliar pink-haired female at his side curious glances, but neither questioned the Senju's second-in-command.

Stepping inside along with the would-be Nidaime, Sakura really didn't need to fake her sense of awe. The village was vibrant and bustling with activity, in many ways just as she remembered it from her own time. However, it was still in its early stages, and so there were key differences. Some buildings were still under construction, for example. There was no Hokage monument in place yet. No Ichiraku ramen on the corner. And the most notable difference, no familiar faces. That thought caused Sakura to whither inside. Was this really even still her home? In a way it was but in another way it wouldn't be the Konoha she knew and loved for many, many years. Still, seeing the village in its infancy with her own eyes was pretty amazing.

Doing her best to ignore all the stares—of course there would be stares, she was walking side by side with the respected brother of the village's leader—Sakura followed Tobirama to the Hokage mansion. She tried to steel her courage, and prepare herself for what she would tell the Hokage. Obviously, the same story she'd told Tobirama. Anything else would make the man more suspicious of her than he already was. She just hoped she could confidently and effectively make a case for herself. Hopefully the First was a reasonable man…

"You seem at a loss." Tobirama said suddenly. Sakura was honestly surprised he'd even bothered to comment on it.

"Well yes…" Sakura replied slowly. "I'm about to speak to the most powerful man in the nation aside from the daimyo, right? And he'll be the one that decides if I can settle here or not." Truthfully she hadn't even thought of a plan for what she'd do if she was turned away. Maybe sit pitifully outside Konoha's gates like a pink-haired vagabond until she was either let in or chased off? Everything really was riding on this.

"Unnerving from your perspective, I'm sure." He said thoughtfully. They were now standing outside the Hokage's office door. Tobirama knocked swiftly without giving her any more time to prepare.

"Enter!" a voice called back. Sakura thought it sounded fairly cheerful. She mentally bemoaned Tsunade for never having spoken more about her grandfather. Details about what the man was like off the battlefield would have been helpful at the moment!

Tobirama stepped in first with Sakura at his back. She tried standing as close as possible without touching him. She wasn't sure why she was so nervous. This was her home. It was almost like she was coming back…except the home she knew wasn't the way she'd left it, and someone new was living there.

So maybe not exactly like coming home, but close enough. She was forever a Konoha kunoichi in her heart, no matter where or when she found herself, and no one would ever take that sense of pride or the lifetime of memories away.

"Brother!" a loud voice boomed jovially. Wait, what? Was this really the man she'd read about, called a "God of Shinobi"? He sounded almost childishly excited. "You're back from your solo
training earlier than expected—you left in such a huff...was it boring? I could have come with you.” Sakura could just barely see around Tobirama. Should she step forward, or wait to be introduced?

Tobirama scoffed, folding his arms across his chest. The pink-haired kunoichi imagined he had on a petulant expression to go with his body language. "You know you can no longer leave to train whenever you wish. You have new duties, a village to run, requests from clans coming in every day." Tobirama chastised. "And," he added with a grumble. "The point of me training alone is to alleviate some of the burden of wrangling you into line every day. Having you there defeats the purpose."

'Whoa, who exactly is the older brother here?' Sakura was half surprised by their relationship and half amused.

"That isn't very nice, brother..." the Hokage mumbled sulkily.

'Poor guy,' Sakura thought sympathetically. 'The Nidaime sounds like a regular drill sergeant.'

"I am your advisor as well as your brother. I can't always be nice; you'll take advantage and get carried away." Tobirama insisted firmly. "Besides, scolding you isn't why I came." And there it was, the moment of truth! Sakura stood at attention, putting on her bravest face.

Tobirama stepped aside, and the Hokage and Sakura met eyes for the first time. 'That he knows of.' She reminded herself. And really, meeting this man in the flesh wasn't exactly the same as meeting him on the battlefield briefly as a reanimated undead.

"Oh." Hashirama leaned forward, studying her in honest surprise. His tanned skin had a healthy glow and was in perfect contrast to Tobirama's pale complexion, and she could see the warmth behind the curiosity in his brown eyes. Instead of the armor she'd seen him wearing before, he was dressed in the Kage robes the Sandaime had always worn. Right down to the haori. But instead of the Hokage's hat, he had a simple red headband.

Sakura knew the man sitting behind the desk was incredibly powerful; after seeing him fight for herself she knew the legends about his power weren't exaggerated. However, unlike Tobirama, he didn't have the same intimidating aura, and it helped to put her slightly at ease.

"Hello there!" he greeted, smiling kindly. "I'm not sure if Tobirama's mentioned, but I'm his brother, Hashirama Senju." He tilted his head as he took her in, seeming particularly interested in her hair. To be certain he'd probably never seen anyone with a more unusual hair color, Sakura guessed. "I don't think I've ever seen you around the village." Suddenly, his eyes lit up and the two other shinobi in the room could almost see the animated lightbulb over his head. Sakura thought it was laughable and had to hide her smile. "Unless...when you said you wanted to be alone to train you really meant..." Hashirama's grin became sly as he looked back and forth between the two. "I suppose it would happen eventually. Congratulations, brother! I'm very excited for—"

"You fool!" Tobirama roared indignantly. "Why would you assume something so—with her of all...!" He was clearly frustrated, and when Sakura looked up into his face she could see the barest traces of pink on his cheeks. But whether that was from embarrassment or annoyance she didn't know him well enough to say. What she did know, was she was highly offended at his almost violent dismissal of her as if seeing her in a romantic light was beneath him.

Sure, she understood she barely knew the man, and that yes, she was probably damp, bruised and filthy (she had literally just been in a war, she was entitled to look a little rough, damnit!), looking less than desirable, and honestly, why did she even care?
For the most part, her vanity had lessened considerably over the years and she no longer put
daydreaming about boys or making sure her hair was the shiniest in the village above more
important matters, like training to keep up with her prodigy teammates—yes, even Naruto's level of
growth in such a short period was unprecedented, Jinchuriki or no.

But she had also never forgotten she was a woman and, in her opinion she wasn't that ugly. She'd
grown into forehead and everything! So Tobirama had wounded a bit of her feminine pride and a
part of her almost wanted to demand he apologize.

She tamped that down though, and watched the white-haired shinobi struggle to regain his
composure with far more glee than she should have had. She was vindicated in seeing that the
Hokage seemed just as amused by Tobirama's ordeal as she was, and when she met his eyes again,
they were twinkling.

"She and I are not…that." he ground out. "In fact hardly know this woman. I was training as I said
I'd be when she suddenly came floating down the river, appearing nearly dead. I was able to revive
her, and she claimed she hails from a family known as Haruno, mostly civilians, save herself and
her mother, who brought her up as a shinobi. She wants to join the village and claims she was
headed here, but recalls nothing about how she ended up facedown floating downstream."

Hashirama listened intently with wide eyes to his brother's explanation, turning to Sakura when it
was clear Tobirama had no more to say.

"That's quite an incredible story." he said, addressing her for the first time. "I admit, you don't dress
like any kunoichi in these parts, and you do look like you've been through quite the ordeal," His
brows knit with concern as he took in her tattered, dirty clothes and bruised face.

Again, Sakura was hit by a wave of self-consciousness as she imagined how she must look to him.
She supposed she really couldn't be too mad at Tobirama—though she would continue to hold that
offense over him anyway—because she certainly didn't look like she'd stepped from anyone's
fantasy. Treating her wounded comrades had come before seeing to her own needs, which was why
she hadn't bothered healing herself. Then when the fighting had called for her to step up and assist
Sasuke and Naruto in taking on Kaguya, then briefly Madara, she had pushed herself to her limits,
even with her newly found seal.

She was sure she had various bruises beneath her clothing, and every muscle in her body screamed
in pain, now that she bothered to notice. It was amazing she hadn't collapsed already, really. Only
the tough training Tsunade had drilled into her and pure determination kept her upright. Slowly,
Sakura gripped one arm nervously, bowing her head slightly. "It was a long journey..." she said,
"not really one I'd want to repeat anytime soon."

"And you made the journey by yourself? Are you from the Land of Fire originally?" Hashirama
questioned.

"Yes to both, Lord Hokage." Sakura found it much easier to be respectful of this man, who didn't
push her buttons like Tobirama, and who, while clearly possessing a very boisterous personality,
also was capable of compassion and seriousness when the situation called for it.

She was pleased he truly was as reasonable as she'd hoped. It was no wonder why history sang his
praises as a good leader of the Leaf. "My family is gone...we never were really all that big
anyway, and it was only my mother and I to defend everyone. She...said if we were separated or
she fell in battle I should head for Konoha myself and try to start over here." Sakura didn't consider
herself much of an actress but she did everything she could to make her voice and face appear as
earnest as possible.
She didn't want to lie, but even to her ears she knew how the truth would sound. Ridiculous. A kunoichi from Konoha, living in the distant future that had participated in the Fourth Shinobi World War when the first war hadn't even happened yet? All that did was paint her as a suspicious individual...it was bad enough she couldn't tell them how she'd ended up in the river since she really didn't know. Better to make her story as believable as she could on all the other fronts.

'Please believe me!' she begged. Fending for herself indefinitely outside the protection of the village didn't sound at all appealing. She had never had to live that way, and she wasn't all that confident in how she'd survive in the Sengoku Jidai era when she was already beat down and bordering on chakra exhaustion.

Luckily for her, the Hokage's eyes were full of sympathy and understanding. He didn't look inclined to throw her out. "That's...you haven't had it easy, have you?" he asked gently.

"Yes, that's if her story is to even be believed at all." Tobirama mumbled. Sakura wanted to sigh. She was beginning to see how this worked. Tobirama served as the caution and voice of reason Hashirama seemed to inherently lack. Or strongly suppress constantly...

"Tobirama," The Hokage sighed. "I think this woman's been through enough without you questioning her motives. Look at her," Hashirama motioned to her with a hand. "Does she truly look like she's in any state to do harm?"

"Not currently." Tobirama conceded. "But once she's back to full health, it'll be too late. All I'm asking you to do is the same thing I ask you every time a situation like this presents itself—use caution and good judgement."

Hashirama nodded slowly, "And I believe, as I do every time, that I am." He turned his attention back to Sakura, "I'm sorry for my brother's...wariness. It's become ingrained into him to question the motives of almost everyone he meets I'm afraid. But if you say that you'd like to make the village your new home, and you truly don't have any bad intentions...I believe you." Sakura blinked.

'Just like that?! No interrogation? No seal on my tongue to make sure I can't give any secrets away? No...no...ugh, swallowing a senbon?'

She was both relieved and a little concerned that gaining admission into the newly formed Hidden Leaf Village seemed so simple. In her time, she knew that there was a rather lengthy process for anyone that wished to immigrate.

A process that could take months sometimes and typically included proper vetting papers, a summary of the immigrating party or parties' intentions, a report in good standing that they hadn't left their village for any unsavory reasons, signed by their Kage or whoever served as village head, along with Tsunade, and reviewed by the council, and much more.

Of course every situation was handled differently, but Sakura had never paid too much attention because Konoha had always been her home since birth and she never had any intentions of living elsewhere. The Leaf was where she'd blossomed into the person she was today, where her friends and family were. She was proud to be Sakura Haruno of the Hidden Leaf.

"I know Tobirama said that your surname was Haruno, but would you mind telling me your first name? I make it a point to try and learn everyone's names in the village." Hashirama continued.

"It's Sakura," she was able to say with more confidence than she had previously.
"Sakura?" The Hokage repeated. Then his eyes flew to her hair and he grinned brightly. "Ah, Sakura! I see!" he chuckled. "How fitting."

"Hmph…" Tobirama grunted, clearly not finding it anywhere near as fascinating as his brother.

"Don't be like that, brother." Hashirama chided lightly. "If you've got the time to spare why don't you show Sakura-san the village and to her living quarters." The brown-haired man rubbed his neck. "I'm afraid the homes don't have much in the way of furnishing but we can have someone help you with that as well."

Sakura bowed graciously. "Thank you, Hokage-sama. It's more than I could have asked for." She meant it.

Hashirama sheepishly waved off her bow, looking uncomfortable. "Oh nonsense, Sakura-san. You're going to be a part of the village and we're, well, I like to think of the village as one big family!" he smiled goofily, and Sakura found her heart warming to this man, who in that moment reminded her of her blonde teammate.

And as soon as her heart warmed, it sank, thinking about Naruto and everyone else she'd left behind. They probably thought she was dead. Her parents would be devastated when she didn't come home with everyone else. 'No, I can't dwell on that now. Not in front of them!' Sakura quickly shook herself out of it before her thoughts took a turn for the gloomy.

"I hope that won't be a problem," she told Tobirama, trying to be at least civil.

Tobirama didn't answer. He turned to leave his brother's office. "Follow me."

Sakura bristled but then told herself to relax and go with the flow. She'd just have to get use to this curt man.

Sakura looked over her shoulder and Hashirama waved, his eyes closed as he smiled. "Welcome to the Leaf!" he called after her.

In her mind she added emptily, 'Welcome home.'
"I advise you try to remain close." Tobirama said as soon as they exited. "The village is active this time of day and I have no time to find you should you get lost."

Sakura huffed, nodding. Honestly she didn't think she needed the tour. She navigated her Konoha all the time, and this one wasn't even as developed as the village she'd grown up in.

Still, she remained quiet about this and let the Senju lead her through the admittedly busy streets of the village. "That is the market. Many merchants have set up shop there and if you ever need something, be it clothes or fresh produce that would be the place to find it." Sakura mentally filed this away. The selection wasn't as varied as it had been in her own time, when Konoha had several trading agreements arranged with other Hidden Villages, but it was still enough that she thought she would be able to find what she needed.

They continued the tour, and Tobirama pointed out the next spot worth noting. "That is the shop where you can purchase more munitions, should you need." Sakura turned her attention to a building that looked as new as it likely was. Of course in a ninja village one of the first necessities would be a place where shinobi could buy their weapons.

In her time, she remembered that TenTen was always there eagerly whenever new shipments came in. The older kunoichi had once told her that if she ever retired from active shinobi life she would open a weapons shop. Yet another memory from a lifetime ago.

Tobirama took note of the girl's expression as he told her about the village she would now call home. She seemed to be taking everything in, listening intently, until suddenly her eyes took on a faraway look and he knew she was thinking about the past.

In Tobirama's opinion a ninja hardly had time to look back; looking forward was what kept one vigilant and alive. Of course a village setting meant they no longer had to constantly keep looking over their shoulders, or so Hashirama kept telling him. But his brother forgot that this was only the first step.

That was why Tobirama maintained the position he did. To keep his brother focused. He was the realism to Hashirama's idealistic views of the world. And if that painted him as harsh, so be it. Like his caution toward the girl, who was only a few years younger than them by the looks of her, and yet she looked just as seasoned as he had at that age.

He turned, expecting to see the girl, Sakura, still at his side. But the distinct pink hair and strange clothes were nowhere to be seen. He cursed quietly to himself. He'd told her to stick close, and now she had been swept away…

As he had warned her, he didn't have time to scour the village for her. However, if he let her continue to wander, lost, she may become an inconvenience for whoever stumbled upon her. Worst still was the thought that word would get back to Hashirama and he would have to listen to his elder brother scold him about purposely leaving Sakura on her own. Looks like he had no choice but to find the troublesome woman.

Sakura blinked in surprise. One minute she was sure she was following behind Tobirama and the next minute, she was standing…somewhere that was not the front of the weapons shop. Lost in thoughts of the past—or were they thoughts of the future?—Sakura had allowed her feet to travel
with the crowd in no particular direction.  

And now where was she? Maybe it would be best if she got on a roof to gain a better vantage point. The sooner she found Tobirama the less miffed he'd be—hopefully. She had a feeling she wouldn't be his favorite person of the hour no matter what she did, short of pulling him from a burning building.  

She turned around and squinted into the distance to see if she could spot a flash of white hair. What she didn't expect, was to catch sight of a very familiar clan symbol. Her heart raced, and she took off without thinking, shoving her way through the crowd as she ran after the back with the red and white fan on it. She'd have time to contemplate the irony of it all later, she told herself vaguely, right now she needed—

Too late, she realized she'd acted foolishly. Her hand had fisted itself into the high-collared shirt of who, for a second she thought had been Sasuke. But honestly that was impossible. Unless he had been thrown back like she was.

The man turned quickly, as expected of someone with ninja reflexes, and looking into his face, he most definitely was not Sasuke. Sakura wasn't as disappointed by that fact as she wanted herself to be. Really, was Sasuke Uchiha her first choice of person to be mysteriously sucked into the past with? Resoundingly no.

It was clear by the guarded expression on the handsome definitely Uchiha face that the man most certainly didn't know her and Sakura averted her gaze bashfully.

"I…I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else." she told him truthfully.

The unknown Uchiha studied her cautiously, trying to discern if this strange woman who had the audacity to grab him was a threat. They were still standing in the middle of path, both being jostled by people walking by.

"We should move elsewhere." Sakura stared at him in honest surprise. What she wasn't surprised by, was the deep voice. All the Uchiha she'd ever met seemed to have rich baritones.

"R-Right," she agreed quietly, and together they leapt to the roof of a nearby shop. She stood slowly, studying the man she'd chased down. He did look a lot like Sasuke, even from the front, except, he also vaguely reminded her of someone else, too.

"Now, you say you thought I was someone else. Do you have business with another member of my clan?" he asked.

The kunoichi was a little taken aback at the calm of this Uchiha. Sasuke had always been so cold to her, even as children. It had somewhat shaped her imaginings of what an encounter with another Uchiha would be like. Not to mention fighting that crazy madman Madara. Apparently the Uchiha had two sides: aloof or unbalanced.

Sakura shook her head. "N-No. I only just arrived here today. I was separated from my guide…and I wasn't thinking…from behind, you looked like someone I knew from back home. I'm sorry."

He appraised her, taking her in. "Home must be a long way. Forgive me but I've never seen a kunoichi dressed like that."

Sakura chuckled. "So I keep hearing." The women of this time likely mainly wore battle kimonos. She would have to get use to a different style of attire if she had any hope of blending in. The pink hair was already enough to set her apart as it was. "I'm Sakura Haruno,"
The man gave her a small smile. If she wasn't caught off guard before she most definitely was now. It wasn't one of Naruto's wide grins, but it also wasn't a smirk—the only thing close to smiling she'd ever seen Sasuke do—and it wasn't the maniacal, debauched grin of a psychopath she'd seen on Madara's face either.

Suddenly, he was standing close to her, and her hand was in his larger one. He brought it to his lips, and Sakura felt her face go red all the way to her roots. Had—had an Uchiha just put his lips on her skin?! Now she knew she was a long way from home. "I am Izuna Uchiha." The name meant nothing to her. She'd never heard of this Uchiha in the history books, so maybe he was a relatively insignificant individual in the grand scheme of things?

"I-It's nice to meet you," she mumbled. That's really all she could do when faced with this situation.

"Likewise." he replied. For a minute Sakura just took in and marveled about what it would have been like for there to be Uchiha like this in the present. Sasuke wouldn't have gotten a passing glance from her. But now wasn't the time to be thinking about all that, the what if's. She still needed to make her way back to Tobirama.

"W-Well, I should probably go." she said politely. "I need to find my guide and...he's not very patient." At least he wasn't with her.

"I understand." Izuna replied, "I should also return to my business. Maybe we'll meet again soon, Sakura-san." He leapt to the next roof, and then the next, until he was nearly out of sight. Sakura watched him go, still not really sure what to make of the encounter.

Sakura prepared to leap off the roof and search the streets again, but a hand on her arm stopped her. There was Tobirama looking highly indignant as he glared at her with sharp red eyes.

"I told you to stay close." He immediately scolded. "What sort of shinobi allows themselves to be taken by their own thoughts in unfamiliar territory?"

"The kind that misses home!" Sakura snatched her arm away. She had responded without thinking, and when she realized what she'd said, she recoiled with a gasp. Well. It was really no secret. And it definitely wasn't a lie.

Tobirama's eyes softened almost imperceptibly.

Great. Now the scorn was being replaced by pity. Sakura just wanted to be alone by this point. To privately mourn for what she had lost in the blink of an eye. What she may never get back if she couldn't think of a plan. She still wasn't even sure there was anyone in this time she could entrust the truth to. So for now she was on her own.

"Come, I'll show you to the house that's been prepared. I imagine you'd like rest."

"But you haven't finished showing me the village." Sakura found herself insisting. She was sure he was only dumping her off because she had gotten mopey. And no she didn't really need the tour but it didn't hurt—maybe there was something different in this version of the Leaf.

"That can be done another time." He took off, this time by way of rooftop, in the opposite direction Izuna had gone, and Sakura had no choice but to follow. She tried to note the location of as many of the notable places as possible, for when she was out by herself.

Most were in the same places she'd remembered. A few minor things were different or absent but for the most part she'd be able to get the essentials while she was here at least.
The house Tobirama landed in front of was quaint, but Sakura immediately found it charming. "Hashirama for once had the mind to think ahead. Instead of building houses as new arrivals come to the village, he prepared several rows of homes in expectance that we'd gain more shinobi over time." he explained. That meant the Shodai had used his Mokuton, which she'd read about. It truly was a very useful, multi-purpose talent.

They walked in and Sakura surveyed the home. There was already a futon, and a tidy little kitchen with sunlight dappling the floor from a window above the sink… She was already envisioning where she'd put in a small table for studying. It would do just fine for the time being. She didn't plan to make this her permanent residence. But until she knew how to get home, she had a roof over her head, and she was grateful.

She turned around and told Tobirama as much. Well, the part about her gratitude.

Strangely, he looked away when she gave him an earnest smile. Maybe he just felt bad about earlier? It was embarrassing to blurt out that she missed home so suddenly. Even if she knew there was no shame in it.

"I'll leave you to get settled," he grumbled, not even bothering to use the door to exit.

'Wow, it's like he couldn't get out quick enough.' Sakura was determined not to let Tobirama and his attitude bother her.

She stood in the middle of the room, hands on hips, trying to process the events of the day. The battle had ended just before sunset in her world. Here, it looked like it was just barely reaching high noon, so she likely arrived early morning. Was it even still October here, as it had been for her before? It certainly didn't feel like the crisp falls in the Fire Country she had come to know.

Just as she was debating whether she should bathe or go shop for some clothes with the meager amount of money she happened to have, she got a knock at the door.

Honestly she wasn't sure who to expect. Really, no more than two people could know where she was. 'I've only been in the neighborhood for a few minutes and I'm already getting visits?' she mentally laughed.

A tall woman she'd never seen before stood on the other side of the door. She had a long, narrow face; dark eyes, and dark brown hair in a short ponytail that stood straight up with a bang that bore a striking resemblance to Ino's covering one eye. She wore a simple light blue yukata. "Are you Sakura-san?" She asked before Sakura could even get a word in.

"Y-Yes?" Sakura leaned her weight against the door. She was tempted to add "Who's asking?" but thought better of it.

"I am Toka Senju. Lord Hashirama sent me, with a fresh change of clothes." The woman bowed slightly, holding the folded garments out in front of her like a peace offering. Sakura smiled awkwardly. It was very thoughtful of Hashirama; he was a kind man to his core.

"Oh, then please come in," she offered, inviting the older woman into the meagerly furnished home.

Toka stepped in without reservation, walking to the futon and setting the clean clothes down. "I will stay, in case you need assistance. Lord Hashirama said that you may not be accustomed to wearing the clothes I brought."

Sakura scratched her hair, which she would gladly take the opportunity to wash. "H-He's not
wrong." she chuckled weakly.

Toka nodded, her solemn expression never wavering. She stepped forward, walking by Sakura toward the back of the house, where Sakura guessed the bathroom was. "I will help you draw your bath." She stated more than offered. Not wanting to offend the woman, Sakura silently accepted. She was completely drained and not too proud to take the help.

Twenty minutes later saw Sakura still relishing the steaming water of a hot bath. She sank down to her shoulders, having already scrubbed until her skin was nearly pink. Apparently, Toka knew some Suton.

Nothing as impressive as Tobirama's she assured her, but Sakura thought the Senju woman was a goddess at the moment. She'd even changed the water so Sakura wouldn't have to soak in her own filth. When she was satisfied, she carefully slipped out of the wooden tub and grabbed a nearby towel that had been brought with the clothes. "I'm ready," she called through the door, and Toka entered, doing several hand signs that made the water evaporate.

Feeling clean from head to toe, it was time to look at the clothes she had to choose from and decide what to wear. Toka had brought several neutrally colored yukata, for everyday use, as well as two battle kimonos, similar to the style Temari wore.

The one she gravitated toward was, ironically, red—or had Hashirama insisted on it?—and sleeveless with white trimming. It came to her mid-thigh for easy mobility. The other had sleeves and was a light green with a sunflower design. Sakura decided she'd save the kimono and had Toka help her into an emerald yukata instead. She put her zori back on, but left her headband under the stack of clothes still folded on the futon.

Toka nodded in approval. "Very nice. I chose well." Ah, so the clothes were Hashirama's idea but Toka's choosing. Sakura was relieved she hadn't been brought anything outlandish. Of course even if the clothes hadn't been to her tastes, she would have sucked it up and graciously worn it anyway, if only to be out of her dirty uniform. "Now, I've been instructed to take you to market to find furnishings for your house."

Sakura began to stammer out a protest but Toka was having none of it. "I must insist, Sakura-san. Lord Hashirama requested it and, given the choice, I would rather go against your wishes than his." Sakura sighed. The Senju woman was only trying to help as she'd been told to do. Obviously she had a great deal of pride in the level of trust Hashirama bestowed on her. She could understand. She felt the same about Tsunade's trust, even when it was the most menial of tasks.

That was how the two ended up back at the market Tobirama had shown her earlier, selecting furnishings for her home. Sakura tried to be inconspicuous in carefully selecting the cheapest things she could.

A hand carved stool or two, the small but spacious desk she needed, blank scrolls and a few brushes with an ink well. Sakura was ready to tell the Senju she had made her selections when the woman gave her a stern, almost disapproving face. It sort of reminded her of Yamato-sensei's "spooky" face. Sakura flinched.

"Lord Hashirama insisted you also get more personal affects to make your home your own space." Well. Hashirama had spoken, apparently, and through Toka his will would be carried out. With a woman who took her duty this seriously there was really no point in arguing.

Sakura reluctantly moved on to pick out a few more things. A pot to cook, some decorative scrolls, a nice painting of a wheat field at dusk, and…an ink portrait of five cats, an adult with four kittens.
Oddly, when she looked at the painting, she saw Team Seven…

The large cat watching over the kittens looked wise as it squinted, and she could almost imagine its silver fur. One kitten was on its belly, rear in the air and ready to play. It would have golden fur, she thought. The kitten in the middle was looking up at the older cat eagerly, waiting to learn. A white kitten with green eyes. The cat next to her looked sullen, bored. A dark kitten with coal eyes, she decided. And lastly, one kitten lay sprawled out with a Cheshire grin, not a care in the world. Another dark kitten…

Overcome with emotion suddenly, Sakura looked away as her purchases were sealed in a scroll for easy transportation. Smiling wanly at the Senju woman in thanks, she tried not to dwell on her thoughts as they moved on, Sakura getting several sets of kunai, shuriken and senbon.

Toka pointed out a beautifully crafted black blade she thought Sakura needed, but the younger kunoichi sheepishly explained she wasn't very well versed in kenjutsu and relied heavily on her taijutsu. The last necessities Sakura was made to get were basically groceries. Some fruits and vegetables, and some rice she could make into onigiri when she returned.

That was enough for the minimalist in Sakura, who had been used to living on the battlefield without anything extravagant for what felt like years, in reality it was several weeks of non-stop fighting and twist after twist.

By the time Toka escorted her back to her new house and left her, Sakura was famished and decided lunch and a nap was in order.

She set the rice to boil, sorted through as many of the purchases as she could, and then collapsed on the futon, sighing heavily. 'What a long, strange day!' It wasn't over yet, though. There was another knock! Dragging herself back up with great effort, Sakura returned to the door and this time got a true shock.

Hashirama Senju stood on the other side, waiting patiently, a sunny smile already in place. She blinked. Oh. She definitely wasn't expecting him! She'd only seen him earlier that morning, but compared to then it seemed so much had already happened.

"Hello Sakura-san!" he greeted with no small amount of exuberance. "I came to see how you were settling in." He took in her appearance and his smile grew. "That yukata really brings out your eyes. Toka chose well." He acknowledged that it was Toka who had chosen, but he preened as if he'd picked the outfit for her.

'Where does he get the energy?! He's as bad as Naruto!'

"H-Hello Lord Hokage…" By comparison Sakura couldn't keep up. She wasn't even going to try.

"Oh, I know that's my title, but I'm still not that use to hearing it." He rubbed his head with one hand, the other still hidden behind his back.

"Well, you definitely deserve it!" Sakura smiled kindly. "It was very nice of you to send Toka-san to help me. To tell you the truth I'm a little overwhelmed by all the things I got today though…w-was it really necessary for me to get decorations too?"

Hashirama peered around her, an easy feat considering the height difference. Sakura was beneath his shoulders. The Hokage laughed good-naturedly. "Toka told me she had to insist! And still you hardly got more than you needed."

Sakura shrugged bashfully. "$-Would you like to come in, Hokage-sama?" Normally she'd be
more confident, but this man was the First Hokage and a founder of the village! She couldn't show him anything but the utmost deference. Any self-respecting Leaf nin would likely be just as humble in her shoes. Well…except Naruto.

Hashirama looked over his shoulder. "I guess I should. It wouldn't be good for me if Tobirama saw me outside the office. He doesn't really know I'm gone," Sakura's eyes widened at his admission.

The First was ballsier than she thought if he really was willing to duck out on Tobirama and face his wrath. If she let him in, would she be harboring a fugitive? Would Tobirama come after her too? She mentally groaned.

Like she needed to give the Second Hokage more reason to hate her. He may have been a paranoid pain in the ass but he was still a future Hokage and she respected him too. It was too late to take back the offer though, because the First was gently squeezing by her and with slumped shoulders she shut the door behind him.

"I know I haven't made it look like much, but—"

"No, Sakura-san, it's great!" He said sincerely.

That was when she remembered the rice; she should probably check on that…

"Oh, excuse me…I was just making rice balls for lunch…" she bowed slightly.

Hashirama waved that off. "Do you need help?"

"No Hokage-sama! I couldn't ask you to do that! Y-you're still wearing your robes and everything!"

Not that Sakura would tell the man he could help if he was wearing civilian clothes. Shishou's grandfather, helping her make lunch. How could she possibly—

"Could I help if I offered? Technically, you wouldn't be asking me then." He was already moving toward her as she took the pot of rice off the small fire.

She looked into his face and saw clear determination to do as he wanted. "Is this stubbornness a Senju trait?" she grumbled under her breath. She gasped, covering her mouth. Hashirama wasn't the least bit offended, thankfully. He boomed with deep laughter. Sakura nervously joined in with a few weak chuckles.

And that was how Sakura made lunch with the First Hokage. She was glad when they were done. He hadn't complained even once, merrily patting the rice into the perfect triangles as if he did it every day. Sakura was frustrated, and bit her lip to keep from complaining as the rice she was trying to mold refused to cooperate.

It was easy to tell whose were whose. The lumpy ones sat next to perfectly shaped onigiri. Sakura figured it was almost poetic. Because she was a lumpy rice ball in comparison to him, a rice ball without a grain out of place.

"There, all done." Hashirama patted his hands.

"Thanks for your help. I finished twice as fast as I would have by myself." Sakura told him in appreciation. "If there's any way I can repay you for this, or the clothes and things from the market—" A loud, low noise filled the air and Sakura nearly jumped, expecting some snarling beast to come bursting in.

"Since you mention it, if I could try one of these rice balls it'd be a pretty big help! I haven't eaten
since breakfast," He laughed again, and she smiled, laughing with him without hesitation this time.

"That I can do."

And that was how Sakura had lunch with the First Hokage. He asked her if she thought she'd be able to adjust to life in the village, and Sakura assured him honestly that she'd get the hang of it, with time.

Sakura even found the courage to ask him a few small questions only he would know, to sate the curious scholar inside her. Getting to know a legend was the chance of a lifetime. Who knew how long she'd be stuck here? Finally, when they'd finished off all the rice balls, Hashirama sat back with a contented sigh. "Well, that was a good meal Sakura-san. Food is always better with good company of course," he added charmingly, winking. "If Tobi had his way, I'd take all my meals alone, in my office."

He pouted. Honestly pouted. She found it endearing and hid a small smile. "Yes, this was nice Hokage-sama. I really can't thank you enough for all your help."

"You're a member of this village now. It's my job to help my people, no matter how small the act."

Sakura wouldn't say going out of his way to make sure she got settled in was small but the fact that he thought so told a lot about the kind of person he was.

"Oh! Before I forget…there's another reason I came."

Sakura perked in interest. "Oh? Not just to help me make lunch then?" She was feeling comfortable enough to crack small jokes. Hashirama seemed to have the ability to put people at ease with a smile. Not unlike someone else she knew.

He shook his head with a chuckle, reaching into his robes. "Tobi said I was rushing it—that we should wait until you'd been in the village longer. But after talking and having lunch with you, I can tell that you definitely deserve this." He produced a strip of cloth with a metal glint—oh! A headband!

He held it out to her proudly, taking in her wide eyes and awed expression. Sakura carefully took it from him with great reverence, running her thumbs across the cool, curved surface, feeling the familiar engraving of the leaf insignia in the center.

Sakura tried to fight it, she really did. But…

"T-thank you…" she choked out, her eyes watering.

Hashirama was definitely pleased by her reaction, though his smile was more sober now. "Hey now, it's okay. I know it's been rough for you, but you've got the Village now." Gently, he reached up to brush away a tear from just under her eye.

She managed to push back the tears and the crazy emotions after that, securing her new headband in place of her old one. She would always have her Allied Shinobi headband, but the new one now held sentiment too.

Hashirama looked like he wanted to say more, but his eyes suddenly grew wide, and a terrified expression passed over his face. "W-What?" Sakura became panicked, thinking somehow he sensed a threat. "Should I get ready for battle?"

"No. It's him." he said shakily. "I'm sorry Sakura-san but I have to go. Now!"
Sakura watched in confusion as the Hokage abruptly poofed away. That was until another familiar face poofed in suddenly.

A livid Tobirama was standing in the middle of the room, red eyes narrowed. "Hashirama!" he seethed. Unfortunately, when he couldn't find his brother, his eyes locked on her. "You!" he snapped. "He was here, wasn't he? How long ago? Which direction?"

Sakura slowly shook her head back and forth, eyes wide. She'd almost forgotten he was a sensory ninja. He could track down a chakra signature as well as any nin dog. Direction, distance, location…the redheaded girl Sasuke had recruited, had the same ability.

He kneeled on the floor, touching it with his index finger. Sakura watched in fascination as his eyes squinted in concentration. "You think hiding there will save you?!"

In a poof he was gone as fast as he'd come. Sakura sat in stunned silence. She was honestly bewildered. And then it struck her just how comical it all was, and she laughed in earnest. For the moment, all her worries were out of mind.
Encounter

Naruto had never known a single week could be so long. And even after losing Jiraiya, he had never known the void left by someone's absence could be so crushing. That was how it felt, returning to the village without Sakura. A hollow victory.

She was there one minute, ripped away from them— from him— the next. Sucked into a damn lizard's eyeball. It had almost sent Naruto on the warpath again, but Kurama's insistent voice in his head, telling him he had to calm himself, had brought him out of it. All he'd been able to do after that was sink to his knees in despair and punch the ground.

He vaguely remembered Gaara joining him, apologizing, and Hinata's feeble attempt to get him to pick himself up. But losing one of his teammates again right after they'd fought so hard together… it was just too much. It gave him a new perspective on what it meant to be helpless. So close! They were so close to having Team Seven reunited at last.

The blonde couldn't even remember the sequence of events that had come afterwards. It was one long string of blurs. He'd ended up back home somehow, and the village had begun the process of grieving for the fallen. Neji's death was compounded sadness, something he did his best to support Hinata through, despite his own grief over losing Sakura. She wasn't dead though. He refused to believe she even could be—wherever she was, she was alive and fighting to get back to them.

In the meantime, Naruto left no stone unturned looking for answers. He had seen a lot during and before the war, so he wasn't about to disregard any possibility. It could be some crazy genjutsu.

A powerful enough genjutsu could literally bend reality, as everyone who had dealt with Obito and Madara were well aware. But Sasuke had been standing right there, Rinne-Sharingan activated, and he'd told his old teammate if it was genjutsu it was the likes of which not even his eyes could get through.

Naruto asked Kurama, but all the fox had been able to tell him was that the eye was most likely a portal leading to another dimension and that he'd briefly caught wind of a very powerful, very ancient presence. Too bad it disappeared when the eye did and the Kyuubi couldn't answer any more about it.

So Naruto spent the next week going from angry to sad, helpless to determined. He didn't interact much with his friends; in fact he hardly left his apartment. Tsunade had told everyone it was best to give him space. For the most part everyone did. They were missing Sakura just as much as her team was, but life had to continue, somehow.

It was on the seventh day of Naruto's descent into solitude that he got an unexpected visitor. "How long do you plan to go on like this?" Naruto half-turned to see his estranged teammate standing there, regarding him coolly.

"Oh great, I should have known if I stayed cooped up in here too long they'd send in an expert. Being depressing is your department. Sorry if I stole your thunder." Naruto replied, hands folded behind his head.

He heard the quiet scoff as Sasuke said, "No one sent me. I came to see when you planned to get off your ass. This isn't like the reckless, impatient dobe I know."

Naruto sat up at his words. "Know? How long's it been since we knew each other Sasuke?"
Sasuke didn't bother to deny the quiet accusation of his question, simply looked around at the small space that was quickly slipping into disarray. Naruto wasn't the neatest even when he wasn't sulking. But a week of neglect had his apartment almost in shambles—like he'd left it the way it was before the war, and added new messes on top of the old.

The layers of dust he could see accumulating made Sasuke believe it'd been a while since Naruto had been home prior to the return to Konoha. At least the ramen cups scattered across what served as his breakfast table meant he was eating. Eating junk and not much else. Probably drinking expired milk, too.

"All I know is, if you want to see Sakura again you won't be able to do it like this."

"Don't you think I know that?!" Naruto snapped, his eyes suddenly flashing with fighting spirit. "But what the hell am I supposed to do? I don't even know where she is! No one does!" Naruto dropped his head into his hands with a deep sigh.

When he raised it again, Sasuke could see the bags beneath his eyes and the tiredness radiating from his whole being. It wasn't just from a lack of sleep either. How long had the dobe been playing everyone's hero?

"Since when do you care about Sakura anyway?" the blonde spat resentfully.

"...I never said I didn't care."

"You've got a hell of a way of showing it, Sasuke." Naruto chuckled mirthlessly. He collapsed back on his unmade bed, staring at the ceiling quietly.

"I came here for a reason, Naruto. I've been thinking of a way to at least find out what dimension Sakura's in, but I'm going to need your cooperation. Or are you not up for the task?" Sasuke wasn't sure if it was the proposal itself or the hint of mocking that got Naruto to look at him.

Naruto sighed, reluctantly giving the Uchiha his attention. "Keep talking, asshole."

A week. She had been in the past for a whole week, and if it was some elaborate genjutsu, the caster had spared no expense to make her believe it was real.

She knew genjutsu tricked the senses, but Sakura was almost positive it had to be real. Only someone with extensive knowledge of history could have made a world so immersive around a time period when there were still so many mysteries left out of texts.

Sakura was slowly but surely taking it all in, trying to get used to living without the comforts of modern technology. She missed what she'd taken for granted. Showers, for instance.

She was now taking baths instead, and getting water to boil from a small spring that had mysteriously appeared behind her house. Toka had appeared twice after their initial meeting, making sure Sakura's food supplies were kept well-stocked.

The worst part was feeling a bit disoriented in terms of her routine. Before the war she'd had a solid one. Mostly, she was at the hospital keeping her medical ninjutsu skills sharp. But with no hospital and nothing to really do here but attempt unsuccessfully to find a way home, she was, for lack of a better term, bored out of her skull.

Sakura didn't work her ass off enduring Tsunade's rigorous training regime for years just to let it go to waste now. If nothing else, she at least wanted to spar with someone—anyone!
She'd become so paranoid about her skills getting dull (even though she'd barely been off the battlefield a week) and so desperate to keep that from happening, she'd almost barged in on a spar between two kids that couldn't have been older than academy age to ask if she could join.

Something had to be done soon, or she'd eventually return to her own time a drooling vegetable, her sanity lost to boredom.

As she sat in her house meditating, her consciousness being pulled further from the world around her, an image flashed through her mindscape. The haunting image of a reptilian, green-gold eye.

"Why do you resist?" It was the same voice she'd heard on the battlefield. "I am giving you the chance to become so much more than you are. I am making you my own!"

Slowly, the shape of a woman formed. Someone she had never seen, wearing an emerald kimono with a gold obi, with impossibly long black hair to her feet, similar to Kaguya's save for the color. Her features were hard to discern beyond that. She wore a wide-brimmed straw hat reminiscent to the ones the Akatsuki had dawned, and it hid much of her face. She saw the dainty ruby red mouth frowning shallowly though.

Sakura's consciousness tensed away, but she bravely continued her meditation. 'And you are?' Sakura thought.

"Someone you likely would not know even if I told you…I, unlike the foolish, vain Rabbit Goddess, am not someone who seeks to rule through fear. Someone so insecure I feel the need to manipulate from the shadows."

Sakura's felt like cold flames had been lit inside her heart. She knew about Kaguya. But she had called her "foolish" and "vain"…as if the terrifying Mother of Chakra were insignificant. Was this a new threat?

'What do you want, then?' The kunoichi asked cautiously.

"Haven't I told you? I want to give you everything, sweetling. In time, you will ascend to the position you belong. The first step…was placing you where you were needed most."

'Is that why you brought me here?' Sakura asked, unable to contain her anger. This woman claimed she didn't believe in meddling, but exactly what did she think ripping Sakura from her time and dumping her here, in the distant past, was doing?

"Yes." The mysterious deity said simply. No remorse. No understanding of the magnitude her actions had already had on Sakura's life. "You have already encountered Kaguya's descendants."

She meant Hashirama and Tobirama…and the Uchiha, Izuna. Naruto had briefly told her, as best as he could explain it—it was Naruto after all—about what he'd been told regarding his ancient heritage by the Sage of Six Paths.

Hashirama and Madara were reincarnations. And subsequently all members of the Senju and Uchiha respectively, were direct descendants of the Sage's sons, thus making them direct descendants of Kaguya's.

"I have no descendants. I had no children. But I have chosen you, darling girl, to be my progeny."

That left Sakura speechless. 'I'm not sure I follow...you brought me back in time to...' Even as Sakura tried to wrap her head around it, she found it impossible. Here was this ancient deity who scoffed at Kaguya's attempts to bring the world to its knees—an attempt that had very nearly
succeeded—but who also seemed to have chosen Sakura to carry on her own line.

"From the moment I claimed you, my blood flowed through your veins, child. You are as much a descendant of the Otsutsuki clan as if you were born so."

'Otsutsuki?! You are like Kaguya.'

The woman lifted her chin proudly, slowly removing her hat to reveal golden-green, reptilian eyes and a face that was certainly befitting a goddess. Porcelain smooth and expertly composed. Even Sasuke would probably be impressed by her poker-face.

'I am Mizuchi no Megami, the Dragon Goddess."

'O, hell no.' Sakura couldn't help the curse that flickered through her mind. One goddess had been cataclysmic, and even with Team Seven's combined strength they had barely managed to seal her away. Now, here was another goddess that came from who knows where. And she had her sights firmly set on Sakura.

"For so long, it was my younger sister's descendants who molded history, all for the sake of preparing for her arrival. But I am not like Kaguya. I do not seek the subjugation of humanity. I am content to observe, as I have for many millennia. I now simply wish to observe through you."

Yes, and that was exactly what bothered Sakura. This goddess wasn't sealed. Nothing was able to stop her from doing as she pleased. Sakura alone knew she certainly wasn't enough.

"For now I depart and leave you to your ruminations." Mizuchi, after casually dropping that bombshell, had the gall to say she was leaving. How the hell was Sakura supposed to meditate now? There was no getting her mind to a calmer place and there likely wouldn't be for a while.

As soon as she felt the goddess' presence leave her mind, her eyes were wide open and she was on her feet, looking around wildly. But she was alone. In every sense. The only evidence of the goddess' "visit" was the searing pain on the inside of her wrist in the shape of a crescent moon with a small circle situated inside the curve. The pink-haired kunoichi grit her teeth, quickly using a henge to cover it.

Sakura's mind raced as if pure adrenaline had been injected into her veins.

The blood of the Otsutsuki.

She was like Naruto and Sasuke now… Sakura wasn't sure how that was possible; she also wasn't sure how she felt about having god-blood. What would that mean for her in the long run?

Sure, she had always strived to catch up to Naruto and Sasuke, but not for a minute did she want their inheritance. She was proud that even without a shinobi pedigree, she had still risen to exceed the expectations of herself, and everyone around her.

Her normalcy was what had always set her apart on Team Seven. At first she had seen it as a hindrance. Overtime she had made it a strength. She didn't want to change into someone she couldn't recognize.

The longer she thought about it the more overwhelmed she felt.

Now she really needed a good spar. Dressing herself in the red battle kimono and securing her shiny hitai-ate, Sakura took the weapons she'd gotten on her first day in the past and set out looking for somewhere to train.
There were several individuals she could think of who would be the perfect opponent, but she wasn't bold enough to ask them when she'd barely seen either of the Senju since their last encounter, when Hashirama was running away from his brother in terror.

The thought of it still had her choking down a laugh. The two were something of an unwitting comedy duo. And yet she had seen for herself that they were a force to be reckoned with on the battlefield.

While she was just fine not seeing a battlefield again anytime soon, she had been a shinobi for most of her young life and wanting to train was practically ingrained in her now.

It was only after she'd made it into the crowded village streets that she realized with dismay she didn't know where to train. Maybe if she was lucky, her team's training grounds would be there.

Sakura knew the way by heart, and the whole walk there she crossed her fingers that the clearing would be as she'd remembered it.

'I wonder if I could talk to the Hokage about doing missions... The village is accepting mission requests, aren't they?' Sakura needed something to take her mind off what had happened during her meditation. The mark she'd managed to hide felt like it was exposed for the world to see, and she unconsciously rubbed her wrist.

Since she didn't want to do anything to draw suspicion to herself, it was better to keep the symbol Mizuchi had callously branded her with hidden at all times. 'Maybe I should start wearing a bandage on my wrist, just in case?'

Sakura was preoccupied finding ways to make sure the Otsutsuki symbol was never uncovered. And then there was the question of what it did. She wasn't naïve enough to think it was simply for decoration. She continued to stare blankly at her wrist as she walked, though the henge was holding fine.

'I guess there's nothing I can do about it right now. Better find someplace to train—' She stopped abruptly as she bumped into an armored chest.

"Again, I find you unaware of your surroundings... I question your abilities as a shinobi more with each meeting."

She stared up into the blank face of Tobirama, who had appeared from nowhere. Given his reputation as the fastest shinobi of his time, it was quite possible he had.

"I guess that's what passes as a hello around here." Sakura huffed.

Tobirama dipped his head slightly in a mocking show of greeting.

Sakura rolled her eyes.

Tobirama plowed on. "My brother requests you. A matter of importance, or so he claims."

Sakura's brow furrowed. "And for this he sent you and not a messenger hawk?"

Tobirama gave her a wry sort of smirk. "My sentiments exactly." Clearly, he wasn't amused that his brother was sending him on paltry errands.

'Well so much for training... I wonder what the Hokage could want to see me about. He's not going to ask for my headband back, is he?' Sakura's heart thudded painfully at the thought. Or
maybe they'd discovered something that made her a suspicious person. Though, if that were the case she was almost positive Tobirama would have attacked her outright.

"Alright, let's go." Tobirama seemed satisfied she would come without argument, taking to the rooftops with Sakura right behind him. Every now and then Sakura noticed he glanced back as if to see if she was still there, and the kunoichi thought he almost seemed amused she could keep up.

'This guy really doesn't think much of my skills, does he? Though to be fair I guess he's never seen me in action.' Sakura smirked at the back of his head. 'Better watch out! Looks are deceiving.'

As if he sensed her gave, Tobirama glanced over his shoulder on cue, his face still expressionless. Sakura sobered up after that. When the Hokage residence came into view, Sakura was half-surprised Tobirama led her in through the open window behind the Hokage's desk. Nevertheless she followed, greeted by the sight of a sulking Hashirama at his desk, sorting through new requests. Toka stood at his side, arms folded with a stern look on her face.

"Toka, can't you ease up a little?" he whined, apparently he hadn't noticed them yet. "We're old friends! You don't have watch me just because Tobirama told you to."

"Lord Hashirama, even if Lord Tobirama hadn't requested I keep you from running off, I'm well aware of your tendency to become distracted in my own right. As you said, we are old friends."

Toka smirked slightly.

"Brother," Tobirama cleared his throat, and Hashirama stiffened as he looked up.

His expression only brightened when he noticed Sakura standing at his brother's side. Presumably because he saw her as the one person in the room who wouldn't gang up on him.

"Sakura-san!" The Hokage greeted happily, an audible sigh of relief following the exclamation.

Toka nodded politely. "We meet again, Sakura-san."

"She isn't here to save you from your duty, Hashirama." Tobirama reminded. "She's here at your request, which you led me to believe was important."

"Ah!" Hashirama seemed to remember suddenly as he nodded in agreement. "I know this is short notice, and you're still getting accustomed to the village, but how would you feel about taking a mission?"

"Yes!" Sakura all but screamed without hesitation. Anything was preferable to languishing in the village over her predicament.

"Brother, how is that wise?" Tobirama questioned. "We know nothing of her skill or competency."

Sakura's eager expression fell into a scowl. Tobirama had a habit of talking about her like she wasn't in the room. And he was always so blunt with his skepticism.

Hashirama's smile didn't fade. "That's true, but if she made such a difficult journey here, then I believe in her abilities." He looked to Sakura with his usual sincerity. Sakura understood the Hokage was a man that believed in his judgement when it came to having faith in others. How he had ever been close friends with a man like Madara alluded her.

"I should inform you that you'd be going on this mission with Toka." Again, Sakura met eyes with the brown-haired woman. As far as Sakura was concerned, the Senju woman seemed like a reliable ally.
"It'll be nice to work with you Toka-san!" Sakura said amiably.

"Likewise." A ghost of a smile appeared on her normally solemn face.

"What kind of mission is this brother?" Tobirama asked, his eyes going from glaring at Sakura in suspicion to eyeing Hashirama doubtfully.

"Well, actually…" he chuckled slightly. "I'm not the one with the details. A request came early that one of the clans could use some help from outsiders, preferably two women. I decided to send Toka, and she actually requested that you also be assigned this mission, Sakura-san."

Toka nodded in agreement. "Yes. I can't explain it but, I feel a kinship towards you Sakura-san. We will work well together, of that I'm sure."

Sakura's mouth opened slightly to voice her confusion.

A cold look overtook Tobirama's face as he glared toward the Hokage's door. "This mission request came from him."

"Him who?" Sakura couldn't stop herself from asking.

"You can come in now!" Hashirama called, and as the door opened Sakura felt her heart seize up.
Ambivalence

There he was. The man who had caused so much destruction on the battlefield. He wasn't sneering coldly, and his Sharingan wasn't activated, but Sakura so him as no less of a threat. He wasn't clad in his armor, but a deep blue kimono with a crimson obi. Apparently this was his civilian wear. Still, this was Madara Uchiha, without a doubt. Worse, he was alive again. Worst still, she was the outsider in this time period to which he rightfully belonged.

Sakura's fists clenched tightly and she felt her seal itching to be unleashed, a physical tingling on her forehead.

Madara surveyed everyone in the room and his gaze landed on the only person he didn't recognize. A new kunoichi. A new kunoichi with pink hair staring at him with an impressive amount of hostility. "I can't imagine what I could have possibly done to deserve such a look of hatred from you, kunoichi." And her killing intent wasn't lost on the others, either.

Hashirama had grown tense, his face sobering considerably as he looked between his old friend and the young kunoichi cautiously. Tobirama also observed the display keenly. Clearly, she either knew Madara personally, or she'd encountered the Uchiha clan before. By her reaction she wasn't happy to see him either way. He remembered her story of being the last member of her family, and wondered if the Uchiha had anything to do with it, Madara most of all.

"You," Sakura seethed. 'Stay in control!' She told herself. Yet her fist was already glowing blue. A direct hit and she could potentially do some real damage.

"I don't believe we've met." Madara continued, seemingly unaffected by her extreme anger. "On the battlefield or otherwise. That hair is rather memorable, if nothing else."

"Madara…this is Sakura Haruno. She's recently joined the village." Hashirama smiled weakly. The intensity between the two hadn't wavered even slightly.

"Sakura," Madara said musingly, the name rolling smoothly off his tongue. "I don't think I've ever slaughtered any Haruno," he said nonchalantly.

Sakura's temper was dangerously close to winning. 'You may have never killed my family but it doesn't mean you didn't kill hundreds of comrades! Including you almost killing Tsunade-shishou and Gaara and the other Kages!'

"M-Madara, please!" Hashirama all but begged. "Could you…tell us all what this mission is?"

"Back during my father's time as head of the clan, we had a shaky alliance with the Kaguya clan." Sakura stiffened at the word, doing her best to hide the visceral reaction the name "Kaguya" incited in her. "They were fierce and barbaric and thrived in the chaos of constant war." Madara's face showed clear disdain.

Cold terror and righteous anger warred for dominance as Sakura thought of the most fearsome opponent she'd ever faced down with her team. Her threat level to the world has easily trumped Madara and Obito's combined…

By the look Tobirama was giving her, she knew she'd let some of her emotions slip across her face in some way. Of course, if he questioned her, she could easily say that it was due to encountering this Kaguya clan, being that the Warring States era was such a bloody, brutal period. If they were in league with the Uchiha at any point they were likely a strong shinobi clan. Maybe they even had
a connection to the goddess...

"You never mentioned anything about this to me." Hashirama suddenly interrupted, sounding very much hurt.

Madara shrugged. "What need was there?"

Hashirama continued to sulk regardless.

"Honestly brother," Tobirama looked wholly exasperated with his brother's change in mood. "Do you not remember what our father told us? About a clan that had briefly allied with the Uchiha—warriors wielding weapons made of their own bones. He called it devilish."

Toka, who had been listening quietly, nodded. "Yes. I remember once as a child I saw such warriors on the battlefield. Shooting bones from their bodies as if they were kunai. And even when one of their own fell…they reveled in it. They were ghastly."

Now, Hashirama really seemed to have kicked his brooding into high gear at the news. If Sakura had to guess, she'd say it was because he felt left out of the loop. He wasn't the only one though. She was just as clueless about this Kaguya clan of horror, though also morbidly curious now. It sounded like a kekkei genkai. What other way would they use bones as projectiles? Bones served a purpose; as a medic she knew this well. But that purpose was not impaling your enemies.

Hashirama now wore a downcast expression as the Uchiha continued.

"An accurate description." Madara agreed. "Their bloodline ability is jarring, but combined with their insatiable appetite for battle it makes them overwhelming to most opponents. Naturally, my father wanted to utilize this for as long as possible, though there was never any official signing of a treaty."

"And," Tobirama remarked, "I suppose that when you became clan head you maintained the unofficial alliance."

"It seemed the most diplomatic option at the time, yes. I wasn't quite convinced Hashirama's village proposal would pan out." Madara answered, unapologetic.

Sakura could clearly see the proverbial stone drop down on the poor Hokage's head.

Madara noticed too, and rolled his eyes. "When it did I told the Kaguya it would be the end of our alliance. Naturally, you can imagine how that went over with them. Which leads me to my request,"

'Finally!' Sakura thought. She didn't trust this Madara, regardless of the fact that he hadn't done any of the things the one on from the Fourth War had. One day he still might. He had it in him. She had blindly accepted the offer of a mission, not knowing he would be the client. Her caution was firing on all cylinders. It could be a trap.

"I need two shinobi capable of retrieving my Gunbai."

Hashirama's eyes widened. "Y-Your fan is gone?"

Madara sighed. "I've been searching of course. Shortly after we agreed to the treaty, before moving to the village, it was stolen from the compound. Uchiha spies have been in the fields looking, as I knew it would turn up eventually. The Gunbai is not something that can be effectively wielded by just anyone, and a large battle fan is far from inconspicuous. I've received conformation that it's in
Sakura's own eyes widened in shock. Now she remembered! It was that horrible giant fan Obito had, and subsequently returned to Madara. She was seriously expected to put such a powerful weapon back into the hands of a murderer?

There was a quiet sound that could've been a snicker, carefully disguised as a cough. She peered at the white-haired man at her side. Madara had heard it too, narrowing his eyes at the younger Senju brother. "You find this amusing?"

"Frankly, yes." Tobirama said. Blunt as ever. "That fan was your pride. And you allowed it to be taken from under your nose. I thought there was nothing the Sharingan didn't see?" Sakura had to choke back a snicker of her own. She may not have been on the best terms with Tobirama, but hearing him fearlessly taunt Madara was entertaining.

"Would you perhaps like to face my Sharingan for yourself?" Madara asked. Sakura froze, the hostility between Tobirama and Madara palpable and smothering. It hadn't quite risen to the level of what would be considered killing intent, but it was getting there.

"Tobirama. Madara. Peace!" Hashirama had apparently snapped out of his funk. For the first time she saw the First Hokage's face become stern as he issued a silent command for both of them to stand down.

As Sakura and the other two Senju looked on, the two calmed themselves reluctantly.

Once it was clear there wouldn't be a brawl—that would likely level the building flat—in the Hokage's office, Hashirama was back to being all smiles. Sakura sweat dropped at his quick turn around. 'That's some resilience he's got.'

It was so strange that this man who would come to be revered as a legendary shinobi, was so far either a seemingly unassuming man child or a commanding leader. "Now! Of course we'll help you retrieve your weapon, Madara." Hashirama nodded in reassurance.

"Brother, hold on!" Tobirama quickly interceded. "You know nothing of the enemy's current location, their numbers, or if they are expecting someone to come for the fan. How can you so easily go along with this?"

"Well…" Hashirama frowned, thoroughly chastised.

"And why is this not a matter your own clan could handle?" Tobirama continued, this time directing the question at Madara.

"You should be smart enough to realize that they would expect an Uchiha to come for the fan. They took my Gunbai partially for what they feel is retribution and also likely to draw me into a confrontation. While I certainly do not balk from the challenge, I'd just as soon not walk into what is so obviously a trap designed specifically for me." Madara sounded very patronizing as he explained. "Which is why I need two unassuming shinobi, kunoichi preferably, to infiltrate and retrieve it."

"Why kunoichi?" Sakura asked sharply. She was sure her mistrust was clear in her eyes.

Madara crossed his arms as he looked at her like her presence wasn't needed. It made Sakura's blood boil. She had spent years fighting to earn her place on the battlefield fighting alongside and not behind her boys, and she would not be dismissed!
"There's been word as of late that the Kaguya want fresh shinobi blood in their folds. They've taken many women from smaller clans to keep as spoils of war. They were never as large a clan as we are, and too many constant battles has caused their ranks to dwindle. Repopulating as soon as possible seems their best option to avoid extinction."

Sakura's face took on a look of disgust, and when she saw Toka she saw the older woman's expression was much the same. Hashirama looked troubled as he realized what Madara was saying and Tobirama stared coldly.

"As you might imagine, an Uchiha would be easily recognized, and they are not foolish enough to believe an Uchiha woman would go to the enemy willingly as a deserter."

"So we're supposed to offer ourselves up?"

Madara eyed the young girl skeptically. "Who said anything about this mission pertaining to you?"

"I agreed to take the mission before you entered! You're the one that needs help getting your stupid fan back!"

"Quite the mouth on this one," Madara remarked, suddenly looming over her. Yes, his speed was just like she remembered it.

"Madara!" Hashirama rose from his seat, looking concerned.

Sakura stepped away, glaring, but he grabbed her jaw firmly in his strong grasp. "Urk!" She stared as defiantly as she could, channeling her kill intent.

"Oh?" Clearly Madara sensed it. He looked...intrigued. "Maybe you are a true kunoichi after all. Very well." Sakura clamped down on the hand holding her jaw and applied pressure. Without her chakra, she easily began to leave a bruise around his wrist. Something flashed in his dark eyes and then he abruptly let go. Seemingly satisfied with himself, his hands disappeared into the sleeves of his kimono as he folded his arms. One reappeared, and he carelessly tossed a scroll in Tobirama's direction. The white-haired shinobi caught it with ease.

"You'll find the location and design of the Kaguya stronghold my strategist drew up," Madara explained nonchalantly. "Use it wisely."

He brought his sleeves together and his hands disappeared again, standing there like an emperor. Poised liked that, he looked regal and untouchable, and Sakura loathed him for it. He might as well have had a crown on his head! In his casual disregard for everyone in the room, especially her, she saw arrogance.

"I look forward to the return of my Gunbai." he said, seeing himself out.

Sakura and the three Senju watched him go with various expressions on their faces from anger to worry. Hashirama, on the latter end of the spectrum, turned to her, his brows pinched in apology. "I'm sorry, I'm not sure what's gotten into him." he sputtered. "If you'd rather not accept the mission, I'd understand. I can—"

"No." Sakura was determined to get that fan. She would accept his unspoken challenge.

"Show me you are significant enough to acknowledge." His eyes had said.

"With all respect Hokage-sama, I'd like to go."
Hashirama's expression remained concerned. Not because he doubted her personally, but more because, he could see something about the interaction with the Uchiha leader had upset her.

"Don't think you can accomplish this mission with bluster." Tobirama said sternly, looking up from surveying the mapped details. "It would be foolish and you would be forfeiting your life."

"My answer's the same." The pink-haired kunoichi said coolly. "I want to go on this mission."

'So shut up and tell me when I'm leaving!' Her irritation with Madara was bleeding through, and she wanted to be excused before her temper was unleashed.

"Brother…" Hashirama said quietly. "Sakura-san seems to be confident. We owe it to her to match her confidence with our own belief in the success of her first mission as a shinobi of Konohagakure."

Tobirama eyed his brother's pleading eyes, and then the clearly wound-up younger kunoichi who was staring off into space. Walking over to hand Toka the scroll, he closed his eyes in acquiesce. If she was to earn her keep in serve the village, she'd have to prove herself eventually anyway. "Do as you see fit."

"Right. Then I'd like you to pack for departure and convene at the village gate within the hour." Hashirama instructed the two women. "And, for my own peace of mind, I'd like to send additional aid. N-Not because I doubt you!" he added quickly, "But, they will shadow you and in the event it's needed, intervene if problems occur. I'll catch them up to speed and they can also meet you at the gates."

Toka turned to her mission partner. "Alright, Sakura-san. Let's both prepare ourselves to the fullest. By the looks of this map, we've got a day or more of traveling ahead."

Sakura nodded solemnly. "Yes!" She'd rather not have had her first mission in this time be helping the likes of Madara, but now that she'd agreed she was determined to see it through. That should take the smug look off his face!

'Get ready to taste defeat. Shannaro!'

"Madara, welcome back." The clan head looked up from his calligraphy to see his brother standing in the opened rice paper door, his hair ruffled slightly by a light breeze. "Did Hashirama find someone suitable to retrieve your Gunbai? I could go—"

"No," the elder brother interrupted. "Toka Senju, and a rather interesting girl have accepted the mission and I'm wholly looking forward to the results."

Izuna's silky ponytail spilled over his shoulder as he cocked his head in curiosity. "Oh? You've found someone whose strength you'd like to watch."

"I'm not sure. It would please me if her strength matched her fire. She seemed to despise me on sight."

"A jilted lover?" Izuna joked, taking a seat across from his brother.

"Hardly." Madara just barely resisted rolling his eyes. His hand was sure as he continued his smooth strokes of the brush. Not many would guess that calligraphy was a pass time for the feared Uchiha leader.

After all, what interest would he have in a slip of a girl with curiously pink hair?
Sakura ran to the gates, her pack slung over shoulder and determination in her eyes. Her heart was pumping hard, both with adrenaline and excitement. After fighting so hard in the war, one would think she'd want a break.

Some time to simply enjoy the peace they'd won.

But she was denied that the minute the Dragon Goddess interfered. Now she was in a strange time, facing new obstacles, and if she stayed in the village she'd go crazy, trying to figure out what to do with herself. Throwing herself into this mission had two main benefits—a distraction and a way to prove Madara and Tobirama wrong.

As she noticed the large gates looming up ahead she quickly hopped down from the rooftops and made the rest of the way to them running across the dirt. She stopped, panting lightly and looking up to the procession gathered with a smile. True to his word, Hashirama had sent reinforcements who were all sporting packs.

The first person to speak was a young girl roughly Sakura's age, her dark hair in spiky pigtails sitting high on her head, and a familiar look of intelligence in her drooping gray eyes. "Well, I guess it's important to start with introductions, eh? I'm Shikamarin Nara." She gave a short wave.

Sakura blinked as she took in the girl standing there. She wore the Konoha headband on her forehead, a long-sleeved mesh top covered by a cropped dark green jacket with her clan crest on the sleeve, and a green battle skirt that came to her knees. She really did look like a female Shikamaru. Well, with more feminine facial features. "Not sure why Lord Hokage chose me for this, I have to say. My clan's only been here a few weeks and it sounds pretty bothersome, doing all this for a weapon. But I'll pull my weight."

Sakura blinked as she took in the girl standing there. She wore the Konoha headband on her forehead, a long-sleeved mesh top covered by a cropped dark green jacket with her clan crest on the sleeve, and a green battle skirt that came to her knees. She really did look like a female Shikamaru. Well, with more feminine facial features. "Not sure why Lord Hokage chose me for this, I have to say. My clan's only been here a few weeks and it sounds pretty bothersome, doing all this for a weapon. But I'll pull my weight."

The man standing by Toka looked skeptical. "Are all the Nara this relaxed?" he scoffed. Then he smiled slightly, "I'm Sasuke Sarutobi."

Sakura did a double take. Sasuke? Well, she supposed it wasn't an unheard of name but really! A Sasuke in this time period, from the Sarutobi clan. What were the odds she'd leave one Sasuke only to encounter another one? He was tanned, with dark hair tied in a topknot, and an equally dark beard. His blue eyes seemed friendly enough and he looked to be the oldest person there, maybe in his mid-thirties.

The last unfamiliar person had long, straight purple hair to the shoulders with expressive brown eyes, and in Sakura's unvoiced opinion, was rather androgynous-looking. "Hello, it's a pleasure to meet all of you. I am Susumu Fuma. I was requested primarily for my abilities as a healer, so my
fighting may be subpar in comparison to you all. But, I will support you to whatever end. I hope we all work well together." Susumu ended with a polite bow. Sakura smiled, but inwardly she was no closer to deciding if this person was male or female and it made her brain itch. Another time.

Toka decided to go next. "Toka Senju. This promises to be a treacherous mission into enemy territory. So let's all keep our wits about us." Sakura immediately noticed her forehead protector was absent from its place on her forehead, and guessed it was likely the same reason she didn't have hers on her. They were going into enemy territory as women supposedly seeking a new life in the Kaguya clan. They couldn't afford to be connected to Konoha, which already had garnered a lot of attention. It would immediately blow their cover and put them in unnecessary danger. Of course the others would be hiding, so wearing their headbands or not wouldn't be as risky.

"And you, young lady?" Sasuke Sarutobi smiled kindly at her. "Looks like it might be your turn."

"Well, I'm Sakura Haruno, and I haven't been in Konoha very long...but, I'm determined to make this mission a successful one!" She said with passion, slamming one fist into her open palm, an old habit. Then, realizing that was an unusual gesture for a girl in this time period, she dropped her hands, blushing.

Sarutobi chuckled, and some of the tension eased from Sakura's shoulders. "It looks like we're all ready then."

Toka took the lead. "Yes, our destination is right in the heart of the Kaguya territory, at the foot of the mountainous region to the far east. It has the nickname the Land of the Dead for good reason."

'Wow,' Sakura thought. 'This Kaguya clan really knows how to sell it!' And Sakura had no doubt they lived up to all the rumors; she had to take this seriously.

"I still don't know how they just let you walk around..." Naruto grumbled, eyeing the Uchiha skeptically. They were walking through the thick brush of the forest on the outskirts of the village, Sasuke leading the way. The Uchiha seemed to know where he was going. He'd kept up a deliberate pace since they'd stepped out of the village.

"The perks of being the last of a valued bloodline, from what I'm told." Sasuke responded dryly. "I'm still pending my hearing with the village's shinobi council, but the Hokage convinced them there was no need to restrict my movements."

Naruto's sharp eyes shifted to a deeper shade of blue. "Does that mean you aren't running?"

Sasuke kept his pace, glancing at his companion only once with a blank expression. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Naruto stopped following. "But now Sakura's not."

"I do." The dark-haired shinobi hissed quietly. "But it'll only work if you focus. It's just up ahead now."

"What is?" Naruto asked tiredly. "Why exactly is the plan out here anyway?"

Sasuke took out Kusanagi and cleanly sliced through the brush, to reveal a decrepit looking building sitting just downhill. Naruto walked up behind him, staring at the rundown place Sasuke had brought them to in bewilderment.
Naruto's mouth twisted into an annoyed frown, and he resisted the urge to shove Sasuke downhill. "Are you joking—"

"No!" Sasuke snapped. "Now shut up and let's go!"

Muttering under his breath the whole way there, Naruto followed Sasuke down the slope and across the dry earth to what had probably once been some kind of temple—at least Naruto thought so—that had seen better days.

His eyes slowly took in the dilapidated state, worn by time and neglect, until his eyes landed on a familiar symbol carved into the wood, just under the slant of the roof. "That's...the Uzumaki—what is this place?"

"It belongs to your clan." Sasuke explained vaguely as he stepped through the doorway, Naruto now hot on his heels. "It's a storage temple."

"And nobody ever bothered to tell me?" The blonde's temper began to flare as he stepped into a room that was lined with...masks of all things.

Sasuke sighed. "You can take it up with the Hokage later, right now you need to clear your mind."

Naruto was still agitated as he watched Sasuke take a seat on the dusty floor after picking up two masks from the wall. He handed one over to the bemused blond before placing one over his own face.

"Sit." Sasuke's muffled voice said. "And meditate."

Naruto stared at the snarling red face of the mask in his hand. The eye holes were glaring slants; it had bared teeth and oni horns. Why the hell did the Uzumaki have to keep such creepy masks? Why couldn't they just leave him some scrolls? He looked at Sasuke, who already seemed pretty deep in his meditation as he sat there completely still. Naruto guessed if the teme was taking this seriously, then he should to. Out in the middle of the woods in an old building full of creepy masks, no one would bother them while they were vulnerable...he hoped.

With a heavy sigh, Naruto carefully placed the ugly mask over his face and sat down, trying to clear his head. He'd done something like this on Mt. Myoboku and at the temple when he was learning how to connect with Kurama.

Naruto was honestly clueless about what the Uchiha could possibly have in mind. Like he was tuned into the blonde's thoughts, the dark-haired ninja spoke.

"Now we're going to link our chakras..." Sasuke spoke suddenly. "And summon the Sage of Six Paths."

"We are making good time. The Kaguya stronghold will be upon us in three days." Toka told their group.

"We should make plans to camp here for the evening." Sarutobi announced, his muscular arms folded over his chest as he surveyed the area. "I'll look for food." He withdrew a kunai from his pouch with a smirk. "I hope no one minds game meat."

"Anything that'll keep us going," Shikamarin drawled. "It's not really the time to be choosy anyway, is it?"

"Good to see you're a sensible one. No one else has a sensitive stomach, do they?" Sarutobi's eyes
drifted to the delicate-looking purple-haired healer.

"Oh n-no," Susumu quickly replied. "Don't worry about me. As long as I don't have to see it gutted I'll manage just fine."

Sarutobi gave an affirmative nod. "I'm off then." Sakura watched him go off into the brush.

"What should we do then?" Shikamarin asked, blinking slowly.

"Susumu-san, would you be willing to gather the wood?" Toka asked.

Susumu smiled in relief. "Yes, that's a task I could definitely do."

"And Shikamarin-san, I hear you're skilled with traps. It never hurts to be cautious."

"I get it. Make some around the camp grounds, right? On it." She stretched her arms above her head lazily.

"Sakura-san, you and I will get water from the stream."

Sakura shrugged inwardly. She could've had worse than canteen filling as a task, so she wasn't complaining.

As she walked beside the brown-haired woman, she began to wonder what else Toka could do, besides Suiton. Maybe when they got back, she'd be willing to be her sparring partner in the future.

"So, you've been up against the Kaguya before?" Sakura asked casually.

"Yes, just the once though. I remember it vividly," Toka's eyes hardened.

"Doesn't that mean there's a chance they might remember you, too?"

"Doubtful. It was fifteen years ago now. Many of them that were fighting that day died. Struck down by the Senju, or their own…"

"W-What?" Sakura gasped.

"When they become bloodlusted, many can't distinguish friend from foe. Killing is all that matters." Toka explained coolly. "That being said, what we're doing is essentially espionage. If we're discovered, or can't escape undetected, we'll fight our way out, or die. Are you prepared for that?" Sakura met Toka's intense eyes determinedly.

"Yes, once I get a mission I follow through."

Toka tilted her head curiously, pushing some branches away as they continued for the stream. "I may understand…why Hashirama chose to have faith in you. I admit I was curious about the kind of kunoichi you truly were. I've known both Hashirama and Tobirama since we were children. I saw them as younger brothers…and as you may have guessed, Hashirama is always quick to trust, and just as quick to forgive." Toka smiled fondly. "Tobirama airs on the side of caution, always. He may seem distant at times, but he cares for his comrades, and the village."

Sakura hummed in thought. She could see the white-haired man making himself the "bad guy" so his brother didn't have to be. Despite the strictness he'd displayed so far, clearly he cared for his brother if no one else.

Toka went on after more silence. "This dream of Hashirama's…partnering with the Uchiha's…I
was skeptical. I doubted his judgment and whether he truly understood what he was asking of all of us…” she admitted quietly. "We had been fighting for so long and endless blood was spilled on both sides. My younger sister, my older brother…" Toka broke off with a deep sigh. "But I also wanted to believe in the future Hashirama was trying to create, for their sakes. So I staked everything on following him down the path he chose for our clan. We all did."

Sakura felt her admiration and respect growing by the minute. Toka had devotion strong enough to overpower her own fears and lingering animosity. "I think Hokage-sama is lucky to have your loyalty."

Toka gave Sakura a small, humble smile. "We're luckier to have his leadership. I was right to believe in the impossible…and now I would gladly give my life in defense of the village."

Sakura nodded in understanding. To some, a shinobi sacrificing themselves to defend their homestead was one of the greatest honors. "All the same, I think I'd like it better if you were around for a while. I could really use a sparring partner." Sakura joked, lightening the mood.

"A partner…” Toka repeated thoughtfully. "Yes, it's been sometime since I've trained with anyone outside of the clan. A change of pace would be…nice." She agreed. "But first, the mission."

"The mission." Sakura repeated. They had found the stream, and Toka handed her two empty deer-skin canteens to fill, while she filled three others. "How do you feel about it?"

Toka looked up, capping the first canteen she'd filled. "It doesn't surprise me Madara Uchiha has made many enemies for himself." She replied evenly. "Unfortunate perhaps that we're taking his place in a trap."

'So she's not exactly happy to be helping him either.' Sakura reasoned.

"By the way, I hope you don't mind me asking, Sakura-san…what is your history with Madara?"

Sakura groaned quietly. She should have known the confrontation with Madara wouldn't go unnoticed. "It's not him…” she lied. "In the past, an Uchiha hurt a lot of people who were close to me. I think seeing one so suddenly caused that reaction. He reminded me of the one from back then."

"I see. The Uchiha have hurt many, it's true. But so have the Senju…” Toka hung her head. "It's difficult to truly move forward. Generations of bitterness aren't so easily erased by a piece of paper." She stood, arms holding the three full canteens.

Sakura realized she still was holding the first canteen in the stream and quickly finished filling it before doing the second one. "I promise I won't let my feelings jeopardize the mission or endanger anyone. I want to prove that bast—I mean I know I'm up for this."

Toka cocked her head. "And just what are your specialties in combat? Mine as you may have guessed are Suiton techniques. I also employ poisons."

Sakura was surprised and impressed by the news. Her eyes gleamed with curiosity. "Really? Would you um, be willing to show me?"

Toka chuckled. "If I show you, then it means a truly tough battle is underway."

Sakura sighed. "Fair enough. Well, I think I told you before, but I use a lot of taijutsu. Oh, and I know medical jutsu too. So um, if Susumu-san needs help, I can back…” Sakura trailed off, not sure what the correct pronoun was. "I can back up a fellow medic."
Toka's brow arched, "You're a healer? I haven't met many outside our clan that are skilled in combat and healing. Your skills may become a very valuable asset on this mission, if any of us is wounded. For that reason, take care not to allow yourself not to become incapacitated."

"Don't worry about me, I can hold my o—"

"AIYEEEEEERE!" Sakura's declaration was cut off by the sound of a shrill scream that made both her and Toka jolt in alarm.

"That came from the area where we set up camp!" Sakura exclaimed.

"Let's go! Prepare yourself." The Senju warned, already taking off. Sakura was right behind her, mentally gearing herself towards what could be the first battle she had in this time.

When they broke through the foliage, what they found wasn't exactly what they were expecting.

Susumu was kneeling beside the prone body of Shikamarin Nara, who was sprawled on the ground, unmoving. A bundle of sticks the healer had been sent to gather laid discarded haphazardly by the way side.

"Did you see what happened?" Toka demanded, walking over to stand above the body of the young Nara and the frazzled medic.

"N-No!" The healer's head shook frantically. "I came back and she was out cold! I can't find any injuries or anything."

Toka's eyes narrowed in thought. "Well Sakura-san, this is your opportunity to assist. I will make sure there are no hidden enemies. If Sarutobi-san returns—"

"Right here…" The buff man walked calmly into the clearing, several small animals he'd managed to catch tied up and slung lifelessly on his back. "Figured I should head back and see what the issue was. Besides, that scream scared away all the game for miles." He tilted his neck, cracking it.

Susumu's head ducked in shame. "I-I'm sorry. Maybe I'm not cut out for life outside the temple after all…"

"Hey now, none of that." Sarutobi shook his head. "You're on this mission with us, so that means we're trusting you to watch our backs. And we'll watch yours."

"I'll be back as soon as I've confirmed the area is secure." Toka announced, taking off into the trees.

Sakura studied the body of the unconscious girl carefully. If she didn't know better, she'd say she just looked like she was in a deep sleep…

"Hey kid, now's not nap time," Sarutobi set the animals aside and bent down to shake the girl's shoulder.

The Nara didn't so much as stir. "P-Please wake up, Nara-san!" Susumu shouted, in very close proximity to her ear. There was a trail of drool starting to leak from the corner of the girl's mouth…

"SHIKAMARIN NARA!" Sakura's scream didn't make the girl so much as twitch, but her two teammates stepped back from her with a wince.

Sakura quickly lifted her arm and checked her wrist for a pulse. It was strong and steady. Carefully
putting her hand over the girl's body, she activated her medical ninjutsu for the first time in over a week, ignoring the noises of surprise from her comrades as she worked.

She probed Shikamarin's system until there wasn't a single cell she hadn't scanned. There were no toxins she could detect, no internal injuries, though she had figured that wasn't the case to start off with. She was just…out cold. Shikamarin had looked alert enough when she'd gone off to set traps, but then, she was a Nara. Was this some sort of medical condition? Had she accidentally inhaled something?

"I don't get it!" Sakura huffed. "Physically she's fine. But it's like she's in a coma…"

"I wish there was some clue to tell us how she got this way…" Susumu muttered sadly.

Sarutobi sighed heavily. "This is a problem. If we can't wake her up—"

A ferocious growl filled the air, and the group looked between themselves in shock. "W-What was that?" Susumu whispered.

"It didn't come from these guys," Sarutobi said dryly, motioning with his thumb at the pile of dead animals.

Suddenly, Sakura remembered back to the day she had lunch with the Hokage. "Don't tell me…"

Cautiously, she dropped her head to the girl's stomach and waited.

"Sakura-san…?" Susumu trailed curiously.

Sure enough, seconds later a louder noise that vibrated against her cheek followed the first one.

"Quick! Do either of you have any snacks?"

"Eating at a time like this…?" Sarutobi scratched his head. "No, I don't have anything on me but some energy pills."

"Susumu-san, what about you?"

The timid purple-haired medic began to fidget. "Oh, yes! I packed some sweet buns! Just a minute…" Susumu began fishing through a pack, coming back with some pretty looking buns that looked like white peaches.

Sakura took one with a nod of thanks, carefully prying Shikamarin's mouth open. She broke a piece of the bun off and made her chew it, hoping her hunch was right. Shikamarin's reflexes kicked in and she swallowed. The team watched anxiously, bewildered but intrigued.

Without warning, Shikamarin's gray eyes flew open and she sat up, looking completely calm.

"Izanagi above, kid!" Sarutobi exclaimed. "What was that about? That was pretty scary."

Shikamarin took the bun from Sakura and continued eating, as if nothing had happened. "I set up the traps," she said between bites.

"Th-that's not…what happened?" Susumu squeaked.

Shikamarin looked around. "I don't really know what you mean. I set the traps and came back to camp."

"Yes, and then Susumu-san found you passed out cold." Sakura pressed. "You don't remember
fainting?"

"Hm? No, not really…" Shikamarin sucked her fingers thoughtfully after finishing off the bun. "But you know…I think kaa-san said something about it once. Something about me getting knocked out the minute I get hungry. It's not like I ever remember."

Sakura's brow twitched. "So you fall asleep randomly the minute your stomach's empty?"

'What kind of shinobi does that?!' She inwardly screamed.

On the other hand, a part of her wanted to unravel the medical mystery behind such a strange condition. She'd never seen or heard of anything like it. Sure, shinobi and civilians came to the hospital dealing with sleep issues. She'd even once treated a little boy with narcolepsy who would constantly hurt himself when he fell asleep in the middle of activities. Was this a strange new form of that?

Shikamarin shrugged. "Like I said, it's not like I remember much." She looked expectantly at Susumu. "Do you have any more of those buns?"

Sarutobi rubbed at his forehead. "…It's barely started and already this is a doozy of a mission."

Sakura, now wondering if the biggest threat to her safety were her enemies or the quirks of her teammates, sat down heavily on a nearby rock. 'You can say that again….'

Chapter End Notes

So hey, I wouldn't mind putting up some stories here too, but I don't really know if that's worth the hassle if no one comments...please consider doing so if you'd like me to keep importing works to AO3.
Chapter Summary

Sakura's new celestial benefactor may be asking more of her than she can possibly give...

Sakura nibbled at the freshly cooked game meat they were having for dinner. Despite Susumu scaring away the prey with the commotion, Sarutobi had managed to catch three rabbits and two quails. He then cleaned and gutted the animals by himself, performing the fire jutsu necessary to cook them. Clearly, the man had survival skills.

After the earlier scare and the revelation of the female Nara apparently having some form of narcolepsy, Sakura was feeling slightly better that an adept ninja was watching her back. Then there was Toka, who had firmly volunteered herself for first watch. Sakura had caught a glimpse of a devoted, softer side to the other kunoichi at the stream, but now the Senju's focus was entirely on a mission.

'I've gotta get my head right for this too.' Sakura thought. Thinking about the fearsome clan she'd be up against, the inside of her wrist suddenly felt hot, and she rubbed it against her thigh with a gasp. Hoping no one had seen, she glanced up. Luckily, the others were engrossed in their meals.

"Before we reach the Kaguya's land, you will leave us, and find a hidden area to make camp for the duration of the mission. Should we need you in anyway, I will send word by means of my summon." Toka was explaining to Sarutobi.

Susumu, head tucked, picked at the sleeve of the thick lavender kimono, eating daintily with one hand. Sakura squinted. Such delicate mannerisms led her to believe Susumu may be female after all. Vaguely, she was reminded of Hinata.

Shikamarin on the other hand ate with much less care, with more energy than Sakura would expect to see from a Nara. So far, the only thing that seemed to get her going was food.

Sarutobi also ate heartily, tearing into his quail meat and wiping the juices away with the back of his hand, the other arm planted on his muscular thigh as he listened to Toka's plan. The scars littering his exposed arms told of a life of many battles, especially the prominent scar running down his bicep. His built physique told of training from a young age, and the seasoned look in his eyes spoke to his experience. Overall, out of all of them on the mission, Sarutobi could easily be captain, if Toka hadn't already taken up the position.

"So another day and a half, huh?" Sakura mumbled.

Her comrades looked at her, their faces illuminated by the firelight.

"You aren't getting jitters, are you kid?" Sarutobi asked.

"Well, I know what I'm up against, so I know to be cautious, but I think a mission like this is almost a relief." In comparison to fighting a war, went unsaid.

Toka, Sarutobi and Susumu gave her strange looks, Shikamarin too absorbed in her meat to care.
"Well you know, I haven't taken a mission since I came to the village. I was afraid I'd get out of practice." Sakura explained carefully.

"Huh. This mission, fighting a bunch of barbarians is a relief, is it? A little bit of a thrill-seeker?" Sarutobi smirked. "I like your style, and that was some quick thinking back there. Hell if I knew what was wrong. You seem like you have a decent head on your shoulders. Just keep your wits about you and it'll stay there."

Sakura sighed, staring into the glow of the fire. "Believe me, I've had plenty of practice with dangerous enemies."

"We all have." Toka replied solemnly, standing. "Try to rest, everyone. We set out again at dawn."

Sarutobi stretched his legs out with a sigh, swallowing the remains of his meat. "Diligent, that one." He nodded to Toka's back as she left to patrol. "That's good news for you, though." He told Sakura. "Whose watching your back can make or break a mission." His eyes trailed to Shikamarin lazily. "Of course…I'm sure you're well aware of that." The man scratched at his beard, stood and began rummaging through his pack, to set up his sleeping area.

He turned to Shikamarin and Susumu. "Let's go you two. I want you both on alert tomorrow morning." He told the other two shinobi.

Susumu stood suddenly, bowing. "Y-Yes!" Sakura watched the other medic rummage through a nearby pack and set out a light travel bedroll.

"Time to sleep? You don't have to tell me twice…" Shikamarin grinned happily, rolling out her own bedroll.

"You sleep when you're full…you sleep when you're hungry." Sarutobi shook his head half-heartedly. "I just hope you'll be able to put that kekkei genkai of yours I've heard rumors about to good use when the time comes."

"Hey…" Shikamarin climbed onto her bedroll, lying flat on her back with her arms behind her head. "I always get the job done, old timer…"

"Old ti— I'm thirty-five!" Sarutobi huffed good-naturedly. "Of course, I guess that is old for us shinobi." He chuckled sardonically.

Sakura quietly took out and set up her own bedroll, still deep in thought. The first test in this new time period was upon her. Madara's smug expression flashed through her mind, and she squeezed her eyes shut in anger before slowly opening them, more determined than ever to see the mission through.

The last thing she heard as she closed her eyes, was the Nara on her left wondering what they'd have for breakfast.

She was surprised to open her eyes and find that she wasn't in the forest by the campfire. None of her companions were anywhere to be found, and there was an eerie fog that blanketed everything. "What the hell is going on?" the bewildered kunoichi demanded. Sakura let herself wander, on high alert for a possible threat. "Hello? Toka-san?" she called warily. Silence. "Shikamarin…? Sarutobi-san…?"

"You won't find them here." A familiar voice answered coolly.
Sakura's head turned sharply to the right, and there, standing elegantly in her emerald kimono, was the goddess she had met before during meditation.

"I-It's you again…!" the kunoichi swallowed thickly.

"Indeed." The Dragon Goddess smirked gently.

Sakura took in the woman's appearance, and her eyes immediately drifted to the two appendages curled on either side of her head. "You…look different." She said quietly.

Sprouting from Mizuchi's long hair were two curved ebony horns. The goddess looked pleased with herself at the comment. "Being connected to a mortal with an exceptionally potent life-force has made me stronger. As I gain strength, my appearance may alter, but do not be alarmed." Mizuchi explained nonchalantly. "I will continue to grow as my connection to you deepens. Think of yourself as my tether to the mortal realm. For now, I am corporeal only in this realm. But soon…that will no longer be the case."

Sakura looked down at her wrist, where the mark of the Otsutsuki was fully visible once again. "Please…tell me what your intentions are." Sakura looked the goddess directly in the eyes, willing herself to be brave. "My last experience with a goddess wasn't the best…"

Mizuchi seemed to consider the pink-haired mortal. Her aristocratic face scrunched slightly. "Dear Sakura, please. I am not the fool Kaguya was. I told you all I can about my intentions. I simply wish to observe through my progeny."

Sakura tensed as Mizuchi stepped forward, extending two long fingers toward her chest. "You." Sakura felt the lightest tap between her breasts, and her body tingled.

"W-What's going to happen to me?" Sakura questioned. "I mean, I've seen some of Kaguya's descendants. Their tier of power is beyond anything I can do now."

Mizuchi frowned crisply. "You doubt yourself? That won't do. You won't complete the tasks I've prepared for you full of doubt."

Sakura's eyes widened. "Tasks?! You just said—"

"I want to observe, yes. But things must be set in motion, all the same." The goddess answered, almost sounding bored. She cocked her head, and some of her long ebony hair spilled over one shoulder. "Many were fated to die before your arrival. And some would never live."

Sakura was beyond frustrated by the goddess' cryptic statement. "What's that supposed to mean? Any way I look at this…it sounds like you're asking me to change things." The pink-haired medic shook her head slowly as she tried to process that. "A-And I know I'm in no position to refuse you, but changing history…has consequences."

Mizuchi's brow rose. "Oh? The uncertainty of the outcome perturbs you?"

Sakura nodded hesitantly.

"I have seen you fight in spite of your fear. Even when you believed Kaguya was an opponent you could not beat, you battled valiantly. That is the reason you were the one I chose…"

Mizuchi said calmly. "You won't deny me, will you?"

Sakura saw the hard glint in those golden-green eyes and knew better than to argue against a
goddess. If she was understanding correctly, the longer Mizuchi attached herself to Sakura, the stronger she was able to manifest on the mortal plane.

If she wanted to get rid of this goddess before she could become a threat, while she had yet to gain her full strength would be the best time. But was that even a good idea? Mizuchi was the reason she was in this time...if she found a way to destroy or seal the Dragon Goddess, what would happen to her, a girl already in a time she didn't belong to?

Would she fade from existence? Or be stranded here, in the past forever... Right now, whatever the goddess had planned, it was likely best to keep appeasing her. In time, maybe the whimsical deity would decide Sakura's mission was complete, and return her to her own time.

'I'll just...think of this as a long-term mission. And the sooner I finish the sooner I go home.' Sakura told herself.

"A wise decision." Of course, Sakura wasn't sure how she felt about this telepathic link..."Of course, I am a benevolent goddess to those who have curried my favor." Mizuchi's eyes closed and she looked particularly pleased with herself. "For your success, you will be rewarded. Your first challenge...a triumph against my sister's progeny...Ohoho...prove that my bloodline is superior. I have already given you the power."

Sakura's eyes opened wide, startled. Above her was a clear sky full of stars. A dream...it was all a dream. But that didn't mean Mizuchi hadn't really made contact. She glanced down at the spot where the mark on her wrist would be in the dark. She was beginning to understand that the mark was a direct link to Mizuchi.

When the goddess wanted to make contact, it burned hot. Could tapping into it be the key to unlocking the power she'd been given?

"I need to study this as soon as we get back..." she whispered to herself. She glanced around, but everyone seemed to be sleeping peacefully. She could hear Sarutobi's deep snores from somewhere nearby.

Toka, though... She wasn't around, but Sakura could feel a chakra signature close by. She wasn't a sensor, but there was no killing intent in the presence and she figured it was just Toka patrolling.

'Maybe I should help her...she's been up all this time, and it's not like I ever get back to sleep after that anyway.' Sakura stood up with a stretch.

She turned up out of the blue. She had a questionable origin. And most intriguing of all, she seemed to despise Madara nearly as much as he did... Some things were bothering him about the mysterious girl, Sakura Haruno.

And yet... "Hashirama..." Across the table, his brother was happily slurping up a bowl of hot udon. Because Hashirama insisted that though he now lived in the Hokage Manor and Tobirama the Senju compound, they should eat dinner together regularly.

Hearing his name, the Hokage looked up. "Hm?" Noodles hung from his lips, and with his brown eyes innocently wide he looked ridiculous. Definitely not like a man strong enough to be the leader of a shinobi village.

Ignoring his brother's undignified table manners for the moment, Tobirama pressed on. "I've been thinking about Sakura Haruno..." He stared into his bowl of hardly touched food.
Hashirama messily slurped the noodles into his mouth. "What about her? She seems fairly reliable, and I think if Toka seems to trust her, then that says a lot. We both know how Toka is with outsiders—" A thought seemed to dawn on the brown-haired man and his eyes lit up. "Oh, unless it's not about her skills at all." Tobirama's brow arched. He stared blankly as his older brother leaned forward with a sly grin. "Is it...like I first thought after all? Are you thinking of courting Sakura-san?! You have my full blessings, of course. I mean I was truthfully a little worried you'd ever find someone who wouldn't mind your attitude."

Tobirama grit his teeth as his brother rambled, and at the dig to his personality. "For the last time, idiot, I have no interest in that woman." He saw a curious pair of eyes that belonged to one of the women who routinely cooked meals, watching them as she passed by. "And I would advise you not to spout such nonsense."

The last thing he needed was the headache of rumors about his purported love life spreading around the compound. As it were, he fended off quite a few advances from Senju women already. Settling down could wait until the village had reached true prosperity. And when he chose a wife, it would not be a short-tempered, pink-haired girl who was nearly as snarky as he was.

"Oh..." Hashirama deflated from all his previous excitement at the prospect of seeing his brother married off soon. "Then it is about her competency?"

"Since she's taken the mission, questions about her competence in battle will be answered soon enough. Either she'll successfully survive the Land of the Dead. Or Toka and the others will return without her." Hashirama frowned slightly, but Tobirama saw it as something that was just that simple. Those who took things lightly or will ill-prepared for the harsh realities of shinobi life, died. It was a fact in their world. While the thought of a young girl dying on her first mission for the village clearly bothered Hashirama, he saw it strictly as a test. Was the girl worth keeping around, or was she dead weight?

"Then..." Hashirama trailed off, his eyebrows puckered in confusion.

"Did you not notice the intense animosity she held for Madara during their first meeting? Although she said 'you' as if she'd known him from before."

Hashirama scratched the side of his head, shoveling more noodles into his mouth at the same time. Tobirama impatiently waited for his brother to finish chewing. "Well, I guess it's true they didn't hit it off well..."

Tobirama felt his eyes roll. That was an understatement. The killing intent was enough to prove that she was at bare minimum, a kunoichi.

"But," Hashirama continued. "These are bloody times we live in. There are many people would have had the same reaction to seeing either one of us. The Senju are not without their own enemies." He waved his chopsticks at his younger brother, before eating a piece of aburaage.

"I'm aware of that," Tobirama said flatly. "It's unavoidable. But in regards to this Haruno girl, I can't help but wonder how her feelings toward the Uchiha will affect her placement in the village. If she truly holds a vendetta..."

"It doesn't effect yours much." Hashirama smirked playfully. "Besides, Madara is capable of handling hostility. He understands that some rifts won't be repaired easily."

Tobirama gave a snort as he lifted his cup of sake to his mouth. As if Madara was so forgiving...
Holding grudges was an official Uchiha pastime, if someone were to ask Tobirama.

"If you're so concerned about her intentions, why don't you get to know her when they return?" Hashirama laughed. "You could see how she's acclimating to the village and observe her daily life for suspicious activity."

"Perhaps…I will." Tobirama nodded solemnly.

"Huh?" The Hokage blinked. "I…I was only joking!"

Tobirama stood. "Usually sitting through your obnoxious table manners is a chore. But I feel like I've actually gained something from this dinner. Unusually, I may have you to thank for that, brother."

Hashirama continued gaping, too surprised to respond to Tobirama's backhanded compliment.

"It's growing late. You should return to the Manor." Tobirama tossed over his shoulder as he left the kitchen.

"Well, I could always stay here for the night…" the Hokage mumbled meekly. "I did have a room in the compound before moving into the Manor."

A white head of hair popped back around the door frame briefly. "Not anymore. I've converted your bedroom into my own study. To avoid cluttering my own room."

Hashirama wilted. "How could you be so cruel? It's like you don't want me here…"

He received silence as an answer.

"Well, this is it…" Toka announced.

Sakura stared up at the imposing fortress at the foot of the mountain that they could see off in the distance. "Wow…" she breathed. For barbarians, they had a handle on how to make a sturdy enough looking fortress, that was for sure.

The Kaguya stronghold, where she assumed the entire clan was based, was surrounded by a thick stone wall on all four sides, the back of the base was literally built into the foot of the mountain for added protection. Sakura could just barely make out a large compound behind the barrier. Due to the region, there was a thick layer of fog that added an ominous touch. And since they were close to the mountains, it was chilly.

"Starting today, we aren't kunoichi of Konohagakure. We are wandering shinobi with no home, looking to settle with the Kaguya."

Sakura nodded in affirmation. It was important that they both kept the aliases they were going to use at the forefront of their minds.

"You will use your medical jutsu to impress them, and I will have my Suiton techniques." Toka continued. She reached up, pulling at her small ponytail until her hair had fallen to touch her shoulders. Her bang she kept covering her eye. "I am no longer Toka Senju. I am Tomoko Sawada."

"Should I change my name too?" Sakura whispered.

"I highly doubt they'd remember a civilian clan, but hell maybe it's better to air on the side of
caution." Sarutobi said, arms crossed as he leaned against a tree. He chewed restlessly on a senbon he had gotten from Toka, claiming that his wife often used them, and that chewing them helped him redirect nervous energy.

Sakura looked thoughtfully up at the stone wall they'd be penetrating soon.

"Um, what about...Sakuya Haruna?" Shikamarin drawled.

"That's hardly a change..." Susumu sighed.

"Oka..." Toka muttered.

Sakura smiled brightly. "I like it. Oka Takahashi seems plain enough."

"But Sakura-san... what about your hair?" Susumu fretted.

Sakura bit her lip. "Well...I guess maybe..." She quickly formed the correct hand signs and in a puff of smoke, in place of the pink-haired and green-eyed Sakura Haruno, there was the honey blond, brown-eyed Oka Takahashi.

"Now's the hard part. We have to get them to trust us, or we'll never get them to let their guard down long enough to get the fan." Sakura said, rubbing her chin.

"This mission may take some time. I will send you updates on our progress periodically through my summon. But they will be watching us carefully, so it will be tricky. Not many people have joined the Kaguya willingly. Most of the women brought as concubines are captives." Toka said, a hard edge to her voice. "Set up camp in this area."

Sarutobi nodded. "Understood. I'll cover our tracks so well, they'll be none the wiser the enemy is living under their nose." He winked. "So you two had better do a good job fulling them on the inside."

"Don't worry." Toka smirked. "I have plenty of experience in espionage."

"Please be careful..." Susumu told them, brown eyes looking watery. Sakura wondered if she—for now she was operating under the assumption that Susumu was a girl—had ever done anything like this. A part of her felt that Susumu must have come from a civilian background and lucked onto a path as a shinobi.

"That's right...or this'll turn into a rescue." Shikamarin added.

"Idiot," Sarutobi lightly flicked her forehead. "You've got some nerve."

"Alright, the fog at the foot of the mountain is lifting...we make our move." Toka and Sakura looked at their comrades one more time and headed for the Kaguya's settlement.

The remaining three ninja quickly hid themselves without a trace.
Sakura and Toka are on their own in the Kaguya clan. Madara's vivid dream reminds him of the cryptic message attached to it.

Despite Toka's declaration that the fog had lifted, to Sakura it still was unnervingly dense. She had to rely entirely on her honed shinobi senses to detect any possible threats. She could feel Toka nearby more than she could see her, but the hairs on the back of her neck still stood on end. Fighting blind was not exactly a specialty of hers.

"Unnervingly quiet…” Toka muttered.

"This close to their compound…there's no way they don't know we're here." Sakura whispered back.

As if her words were the trigger, Sakura's shinobi senses kicked in and she suddenly found herself ducking as Toka yelled to get down. Not that she hadn't planned to. Projectiles were shooting at them through the fog, one coming so close it cut her across the cheek as she rolled to dodge another. The air whistled as more projectiles rained down on them and one landed precariously close to the kunoichi's foot.

Curious and irritated, Sakura bent quickly and pulled it from the earth. Her eyes narrowed in scrutiny. 'What the hell? Is this...a humerus?' Hundreds of hours of medical training had made her especially familiar with the human anatomy. And Sakura knew she was holding a human bone in her hand. What threw her was the unusually sharp point the bone ended in. Normally, because the humerus connected to the ulna and radius, it functioned more as a socket. 'Ugh, this isn't the time to nerd out!'

Standing up at the ready, Sakura watched as Toka spit several senbon from her mouth that knocked some of the smaller bones flying at them from the air. There was a grunt of pain through the fog as one of the redirected projectiles apparently connected with a target. Then it was a short pause, and what sounded like indistinct murmuring. Not ready to drop their guard, the two kunoichi wordlessly maneuvered themselves so that they were back to back. Toka pulled more senbon from her pouch and Sakura held the humerus like a short sword. "We are not here to fight. We wish to seek asylum with the Kaguya!" Toka's voice rang out clearly through the valley.

Sakura felt a bead of sweat trickle down behind her ear as she held her breath. She was ready to fend off another attack, either way.

After a considerable tense silence, a gravelly voice began speaking. "...Asylum, eh?" Several voices chuckled.

"...Sure, we'll think about that. If you survive!"

Feeling more bones coming her way, Sakura narrowed her eyes in focus. *There, there and there...!* Each one of the metacarpals she expertly deflected found its target through the mist, judging by the hisses.
Sakura was fully prepared for the assault from above as a man came flying towards her, a bone extended from his palm and a crazed smile on his face. She quickly blocked with her own makeshift weapon, digging her heels into the dirt and using her strength to force him back. Not letting up, she followed with a flurry of punches while he was off-guard, mindful of the fact that the enemy could use bone projectiles at will.

Already battered by the girl's herculean strength, the nameless Kaguya was gasping for air, bones protruding from his body like the quills of a porcupine. But there was one area he hadn't covered...

The last thing the Kaguya saw was the fist flying for his face, slamming into his eye. He dropped solidly to the ground, unconscious. Sakura dusted her hands and turned to see Toka had immobilized three other members by utilizing the moisture in the air for her Suiton technique. She'd trapped them all in a water prism, forcing them to hold their breaths until they lost consciousness. The minute they stopped resisting, Toka dispelled her jutsu with a flick of her wrist and the Kaguya slumped to the ground.

The two kunoichi met eyes and nodded at their handiwork.

A low chuckle of approval sent an eerie chill up Sakura's spine, and she saw Toka stiffen. "Well, well...two competent kunoichi."

"That's right." Sakura said determinedly.

"And you came all this way, hm? Are you aware why it's called the Land of the Dead?"

"We've proven ourselves and we seek asylum." Toka said, ignoring the amusement in the man's voice. "Are we allowed to join you inside?"

The heavy sound of hoof beats across the dirt filled the air as the fog lifted further. An imposing man sitting atop a menacing black horse sneered down at them from several yards away. "Those you defeated are hardly a challenge compared to me." he boasted. "But, at the very least you've got ninjutsu and taijutsu skills...that's very advantageous if we could add that into our own lines." He rode a little closer, sizing them both up.

"What are your names?" he asked gruffly.

"Tomoko Sawada." Toka said.

"And I'm Oka Takahashi."

"And you expect me to believe you've come of your own volition? The women we bring back come kicking and screaming, or pleading. Few offer themselves up." He chuckled quietly.

"Our village was lost to battle, and we're the sole survivors. Your clan is the most powerful for miles. If it means sanctuary, we're willing to sacrifice ourselves, body and soul."

Sakura had to admire the way the other kunoichi handled herself. Toka was smooth as rich sake, calmly speaking without a hint of hesitation or fear, no tells in her body language either.

The man studying them had tanned skin, calculating black eyes, and equally black hair, parted down the middle and half up in a bun. His thick beard hung long down his neck, and his frame was beefy, large hands tightly gripping the reign as he steered the horse to circle them. "I don't exactly have the final say, but..." his thick tongue came out to lick at his dry lips. "Our leader should be pleased with you two. Who knows, one of you may even get the honor of bearing his grandchildren. No women worthy of his only son have come along yet..." he laughed loudly to
himself, turning the horse back toward the fortress. "Follow."

Sakura and Toka exchanged looks with each other, and then looked back to the bodies still laying unconscious on the ground outside the compound. The man on the horse glanced back and scoffed. "Why are you hanging back now? Not thinking of turning tail, eh?" he grinned coldly. "Or if you're worried about those worms, don't. They'll drag themselves from the dirt and get to plead for their lives later."

The kunoichi slowly followed behind the powerful flanks of the big black horse. "Plead?" Sakura questioned.

"We're a proud warrior clan. We have no use for those who fall in battle." He explained. "If the enemy doesn't cut you down and you can't get back up, then you don't deserve the honor of carrying the Kaguya name."

Hearing him so nonchalantly talk of slaughtering their own clan members horrified Sakura, but it also made her secretly roll her eyes. 'If that's how they operate it's no wonder their population is dwindling. They're getting killed or killing each other faster than they can repopulate.' So far, everything she'd heard of the Kaguya rang true. They were battle-obsessed and barbaric.

"If you're allowed to join us here, it'll be the same for you…" he continued. "Prove yourselves useful, or you'll be practice for the young ones to perfect their aim."

This time, when they approached the fortress, the man on the horse lifted his arm in signal and the gates rolled open for them. Sakura took a deep breath quietly, following behind Toka into a whole new world.

Sakura's expression soured when she thought of the reason behind all this. That bastard probably wouldn't even be grateful, with how arrogant and entitled he'd seemed in the Hokage's office. It was only her proud that allowed her to stay the course. Sakura didn't care less if the Uchiha and his weapon were ever reunited. 'Madara had better appreciate the lengths we're both going to in order to get back this damn fan. We're literally putting our lives on the line!'

"Madara…" the voice rattled, "I…want you to have…my eyes. Use them to protect…our clan."

Izuna panted with no small amount of effort. It was clear he was in a great deal of pain.

Madara frowned. "You'll need them more. When you recover, I'll need a second pair of eyes fighting at my side."

"Brother…you can't protect me from the inevitable." The chuckle Izuna tried to make stopped as he coughed wetly, eerily.

In a rare display of emotion, Madara's arm shook as he reached for his brother, laying prone and injured on the cot, clan healers frantically trying to treat his wounds. He remembered the moment Izuna fell in front of him, and how alarmed he'd been, terror gripping him at the thought of losing his last immediate family. Then, with the absurd sense of timing he always had, Hashirama had suggested that they cease the endless fighting once and for all. And Madara, so broken from the constant skirmishes that left his proud clan so depleted, had almost agreed.

Until Izuna's feeble voice had stopped him, and his eyes hardened again. What had he been thinking? Izuna wasn't even cold yet, and he was ready to give in to those damned Senju! Hashirama may have been his friend once, but things had changed for both of them. And childish dreams were just that—childish. His clan came first. His brother came first.
He watched Izuna take ragged breaths as a healer woman dabbed at his forehead with a cool cloth. They were keeping the wound clean and wrapped, staunched it to the best of their ability. But that damned bastard, that Tobirama...

Damn those Senju!

And with great bitterness Madara thought about how if his clan had healers that knew the technique the Senju did, Izuna may have already been healed. Instead it was touch and go for the last week, and his brother wasn’t getting better. "Lord Madara," A healer shakily rose to his feet after so long on his knees tending to his brother. "May I have a word?"

Grimly, Madara nodded, leading the man outside Izuna's room. "Speak plainly, will my brother recover from this?"

The man, a healer who had been treating their wounds since he was a young child, wrung his hands, avoiding his heavy gaze. "I…I don’t think so milord. Lord Izuna's will is keeping him alive, but only just. His chances…of succumbing to his wounds before the week is through are high." After delivering such horrible news the man swallowed, ducking his head in sympathy. No one wanted to face the ruthless temper of their leader.

Madara's mouth twisted into a cold sneer. His anger at the Senju, at the situation and even at himself for ever believing there could be peace, was mounting. "Go." He ground out, "Return to Izuna." The man bowed, his eyes full of sympathy as he left Madara alone with his thoughts. The Uchiha leader exited the compound building to step outside, a slight breeze moving his hair.

But immediately, sounds of a commotion came to him on the wind.

"Who are you?! We won't ask again!"

"She may be sent by the Senju, after Lords Izuna and Madara! Kill her if she takes another step!"

Knowing that someone unfamiliar had arrived, Madara was quick to shunshin in the direction of the compound's entrance. Instead of any Senju he'd ever seen, what he found were a group of Uchiha in a tense face off with a woman in a dark green kimono. Black hair past her hips spilled out from under the tassled takuhatsugasa that covered her eyes and nose. All he could see was her smooth skin and a pert ruby mouth.

"My sister treats her descendants with such little care." She murmured, laughing quietly.

Madara's Sharingan was activated immediately. "Not another step!" he growled, placing himself between the woman and the entrance to the compound.

Her head turned, and she breezed right by the other Uchiha.

"What the hell is happening? I can't feel anything!" he heard one shout in horror.

"What did she do? We're paralyzed."

Madara ignored them, drawing his gunbai in preparation for battle. He could not afford to let an intruder attack them with Izuna in such a critical state.

"You dare attack the Uchiha on our own territory?" Madara scoffed.

"Calm yourself, Uchiha." She sighed, seemingly unconcerned. "This is not an attack. I came to save one of your own. His life force is weakening by the day, is it not?"
Madara stiffened. How did she know about Izuna? Had word spread so quickly? "Are you claiming to be a healer with the power to save my brother?" Despite the prospect of that possibility making him the tiniest bit hopeful, he remained guarded.

"I only ever state what is within my power to do." She replied coolly. "However, my time on this plane fades. I don't have a tether here. If you truly wish to save your brother, then you will take me to him with no more delay."

Madara studied the woman. She was tall and poised, her pale hands clasped gently in front of her. Her posture and the expensive looking fabric of her kimono suggested she was some sort of nobility. However, her aura was unlike anything he'd ever felt. He was far from a sensor-type, so he couldn't pin down exactly what type of chakra was emanating from her, but it was monstrous. Greater than his, or even Hashirama's.

Without looking directly into her eyes, it was hard to see the intentions in them, or trap her with his Sharingan. He had to rely on his intuition. A war raged inside Madara. Regardless of where she came from, if she could restore Izuna to health, then Madara would make her do so. Even if she was not willing, he wasn't above coercing her. However, if it was trap... he would be a fool to allow her into their stronghold.

"My lord, please, be careful!" one of the Uchiha cried out. Madara had almost forgotten about them in his intense face-off with the strange woman. The Uchiha that shouted the warning was the young Kou, one of the promising young members of his guard.

"Quiet!" he heard another Uchiha hiss at Kou. Hikkaku. "Lord Madara is no fool. His judgement is sound." Hikkaku strained against the woman's power to meet Madara's eyes with a look that said he respected any decision his leader chose to make.

"What will you gain by saving Izuna? Are you hoping my clan will be indebted to you?" That would be the most plausible. Perhaps she wanted an alliance and had heard of Izuna's condition, deciding to seize on the opportunity.

After all, Izuna would be the clan leader in his absence, or should he fall in battle. Madara didn't want to think about who'd inherit the clan if he and Izuna were both gone. Neither of them had heirs, or had thought of settling, despite mounting pressure from the Uchiha council for both of them to take wives. Likely, should they both die young and without a chosen successor, the clan would be split into factions all vying for the position of the next clan leader.

Madara was pulled from his thoughts by the quiet voice. "It's not what I'll gain. Your mortal lives are so brief, after all." The Uchiha leader wondered if he'd misheard. "But, helping to save him from death will be in the benefit of not only your clan, but her as well."

Now Madara was truly confused. Her? Before he could demand an answer, the medic who had been overseeing Izuna came running out, looking frantic. "My lord! Please come quickly... Lord Izuna...!" he swallowed thickly. "I believe... it's time..."

No!

The shock caused Madara's eyes to involuntarily deactivate for the first time since childhood.

"Well, what is your decision?" asked the woman.

Gritting his teeth, Madara dropped his head in frustration. "If you can truly do what you say you can—"
He stopped and pivoted on his heel, marching back into the compound with the woman practically gliding behind him. His men were released from their bind and as they got their bearings, Madara's pace increased until he was darting through the Uchiha compound at high speed. Surprisingly, he felt that the kimono-clad woman was still at his side.

He threw open the door to Izuna's room and the medics scrambled out of his way. No one questioned the presence of the mysterious figure at his side, as she settled herself on one side of the dying young man. Kneeling gracefully, she began unraveling the blood soaked bandages without pause, even as Izuna took drawn out, ragged breaths. Madara wiped the sweat from his brother's brow, willing this to work.

"I see..." She murmured, eyeing the ugly wound in his side. "This is no ordinary death wound...but then, when my foolish imouto wants to be spiteful, she is always thorough." Saying that, she brought one slender, long fingered hand over the weeping, bloody hole in Izuna's side, her focus entirely on her task.

Madara sat silently, jaw clenched, as he watched. It didn't look like she was doing much of anything. The wound continued to sap away Izuna's life. Losing his patience, Madara heard himself snarl.

"Well?" he snapped. "Will you heal him or will you die for deceiving me?"

She ignored him, holding her palm upward. Under her breath she murmured words he couldn't hear in a steady mantra. The Uchiha wondered if she was some sort of priestess who thought she could pray Izuna back to life.

That was when the most remarkable thing happened. Black ichor rose from the wound, floating above her palm. She clasped it in both hands, and when she opened them...

It was a butterfly, dark as midnight, fluttering serenely. Madara wondered what trick, what genjutsu he was under. She'd drawn something out... The butterfly alighted in her hands, and with a soft smile she brought it gently to her face. "A blight. The minute my sister marks those she deems unnecessary for death, they are blighted. It does not matter how they die, or by whose hands, she blights them, when she does not need them." Madara didn't understand any of what she said; he only cared if his brother would live to see another sunrise.

He chanced a peek at Izuna's face, and to his internal amazement, he had already slightly regained some of his color. He was pale anyway, as were all Uchiha, but now he no longer had the sickly hue of a cooled corpse.

When he heard the strangled gasp of one of the medics in the room, he looked up in time to see the woman, the healer who had possibly saved his brother, had raised the butterfly to her lips...and eaten it.

Disgusted and unnerved, Madara watched as the last of the twitching wings disappeared into her pretty red mouth. She swallowed daintily, a charming smile on her lips, despite her eyes still being covered. "A blight cannot be allowed to return into the air. It will just fly back if it does." She explained. "Now, I can begin healed him." Her hands ghosted over the weak Uchiha until she pressed both palms to the wound and applied pressure. Izuna, still unconscious, whined in pain.

Unable to do anything more than watch, Madara grit his teeth. He stared as her feminine hands grew dark with his brother's blood, an eerie golden light pouring out of her hands and into his body. He had never seen that.
Once, he had seen Hashirama heal the wound of another Senju after a fierce battle. His chakra had been a deep shade of green. But Madara knew next to nothing about how healing worked, so he couldn't say for sure if the technique the woman was performing was normal. Clearly, she was not.

He was sure that his face was betraying his emotions as he watched the infected wound that had been painfully killing his brother begin to close before his eyes. The quickened breaths Izuna was taking were slowly starting to even, and even more of his healthy color had been restored. The only noises in the room were the small whimpers from Izuna, but even those were gradually lessening the longer the healer worked. Madara was so completely transfixed by the sight of his brother coming back to life, he almost missed the woman slowly lifting her blood-stained hands from the now healed flesh. The skin bubbled briefly, and then finished pulling itself together. Aside from the mess of dried blood there, no evidence of the injury remained.

Madara realized he'd been holding his breath, and expelled a large gush of air. Izuna…Izuna would… He raised a hand to touch his brother's hair.

"Incredible!" One of the medics exclaimed, breaking the spell.

"In all my days, I've never seen such an astounding technique..." the same healer, who'd only recently told him Izuna wouldn't make it, was staring at the kneeling woman in awe and curiosity. "Please, you must teach me."

"Would you consider joining the Uchiha, as a medic?" another healer piped up. "We have so much we could learn from you. We'd finally be on par with the Senju's healers!"

Madara's brow rose at the forwardness of the medics extending an invitation without so much as asking him. But it was a thought. She had effortlessly saved Izuna. She could save many more Uchiha.

"I suppose...given the situation, it is an offer I will formally extend. You have proven your medical skills invaluable." Madara spoke.

The woman lifted her head, and for the first time, he caught sight of her eyes. They were an odd mixture of liquid gold and forest green. A unique shade somewhere in between. "I care little for that. I only do what I must to prepare."

"You're also quite skilled in speaking in riddles. Clearly, there is more to you than a wandering healer." Madara stated.

She laughed sweetly. "You comprehend the obvious." Rising slowly to her feet, she clasped her hands together again, unbothered by the blood on them. "My work is done. He will live, and I will go." Madara and the other Uchiha watched as she made her way to the open door, her long hair like black silk behind her.

"What would make you reconsider?" One of the healers asked mournfully.

"Nothing was being considered to begin with. I simply did what I felt needed to be done." She stated carelessly, not turning. Before she crossed the threshold of the door, she turned slightly, and smiled. As beautiful as it was, there was also something chilling in it.

"Look for me in the arrival of the blossom that blows among the leaves."

She was out the door then, despite the cries of the head healer, begging her to return. Madara stared silently, his mind working to absorb everything he'd witnessed.
Several healers had gotten up to chase after her, but he remained at his place by his brother's side. He heard confused shouts of "She's gone!" from outside, but his eyes were all for his brother, who was starting to stir.

With considerable effort, black eyes opened, looking dazed at first. Madara watched in relief as Izuna seemed to finally return to the world of the living, slowly turning his head to meet his gaze. "Madara...?" he asked, clearly confused.

Madara felt his lips twitch into a rare smile.

He yawned loudly, not bothering to hide it. Since that day, Madara had questioned what he'd seen many times. Regardless of the fact that there were other witnesses, and the proof was in Izuna being alive. It was like a lurid dream, something so detailed yet so surreal.

"That yawn wasn't very noble, Lord Madara," the warm breath against his naked back made him half turn, only to see the amused smirk and lovely eyes that he'd expected.

"I see no need to keep up airs, given my company." He replied, sitting up.

"I consider myself lucky," The voice laughed airily. "I'm one of the few privy to such unguarded moments." Madara shuffled himself so he was facing the front of Naoko. Only to see she had propped herself up on an elbow, watching him with hooded eyes. She used the tip of her finger to trace a lazy pattern against his hip bone.

"So you presume to know when I'm being unguarded?" he asked challengingly.

The satisfied smirk never left her mouth. "I believe besides your dear brother, and perhaps our charming Hokage, I am one of the few who could make that presumption, yes."

He gently caught her wrist as her hand drifted further from his hip, and she laughed brightly. "Not up for more?" A pout he knew all too well. With anyone else, she might have been able to get her way. "You allowed me to stay through the night. That's rare as of late." Her mood turned suddenly serious as she rolled away to stretch her lithe body out. "Something must be on your mind."

Madara scoffed. "Again, you presume to know me so well."

"Years of being around you has afforded me that privilege." She shrugged leisurely. "I at least know when you try to hide your true thoughts."

Deciding the only way to through her was with candidness, he said. "I dreamt of Izuna...of the time I almost lost him."

She nodded with a hum, placing her warm palms on his broad shoulders and kneading the taut muscles soothingly.

"But you didn't. He's out in the training yard right now," Naoko reminded. "Most likely cursing your name."

Madara glanced over his shoulder with furrowed brows. "And why would he do that?"

"Because it's long past the time you were due to help him train the young ones." She smiled coyly, like a cat who'd had her fill of cream.

Madara stood abruptly and she rolled off the bed with a squeak.
She was ignored as Madara left to clean himself, most likely hoping Izuna wouldn't be too upset. Izuna was normally mild-mannered, not as intense as his brother. His was a quiet sort of anger, but one equally as bad as Madara's, when provoked.

Forgetting his commitment to help with the training of their clan's promising young shinobi to spend a morning romp with her was likely not an excuse Izuna would want to hear, or accept.

Naoko lazily stared at the ceiling, wondering what she could do to make her day less dull. Clearly, she wouldn't be getting more of Madara's attention anytime soon. Picking herself up, she found her scattered clothes and nonchalantly dressed herself as Madara got himself ready in another room. "I suppose I'll just...see if some lucky man would like to have a late breakfast with me." She sighed loudly, making sure he heard.

"My regards," he called back, disinterested. "Make sure he's aware you eat your weight in food before the meal. It's only fair."

Scunching her face in disdain, Naoko marched herself across the bedroom just as he returned from the bathroom, his hair still wet as he began slipping on his clothes, before securing his armor.

"For the record," she said, eyes narrowed. "I pity the woman who weds you. That bedside manner will make you a horrible husband."

Madara chuckled quietly to himself as she left his house.

As he made his way out onto the training grounds, he saw a row of young children, all practicing kenjutsu techniques Izuna was demonstrating. He stood back, leaning against a tree to watch as his brother corrected several of the children who'd performed sloppy strokes, complimenting their star pupil, Kagami, as he flawlessly imitated the move Izuna had shown them.

The Uchiha prided themselves on being proficient in several areas they felt were key to raising exceptional shinobi. One of those areas was the use of a variety of weapons. And Izuna was by and large the most skilled swordsman of their clan. There was only one opponent he had ever lost a draw to: that damnable Tobirama.

Aside from that, his kenjutsu ability was a great asset in teaching the next generation. Kagami especially, both brothers had agreed, was a gem that had would it took to possibly be their successor. The boy was barely ten, but he was the child of his generation blessed with the natural talent of the Uchiha more than any other.

"Enough with swords, for now." Izuna instructed, and all the children sheathed the short swords they were holding. "Everyone here has mastered the basics of fire jutsu, correct?" The children nodded obediently. "Then you're all ready to learn more of our clan's signature bukijutsu."

A small cheer went up among the children, and it was at that moment Madara decided to make himself known. He pushed off the tree, sauntering casually toward his brother. Izuna seemed to be in a fairly good mood, but there was no guarantee that would last the moment they met eyes.

Despite their propensity for fire, Izuna was more than capable of freezing someone out quite effectively when they angered him. Instead of lashing out in rage as Madara did, he allowed others to stew in his silent anger.

Izuna heard his footsteps and all the children quieted down the minute they noticed the frozen expression on their teacher's face. "I'm sorry, everyone. I'll have to show you more after I speak to my brother." A few of the children looked disappointed, but no one was brave enough to object as
they scampered off, far enough down the training field where they wouldn't get caught up between the brothers.

"Izuna—"

"It's nice of you to finally grace us with your presence, Lord Madara. I wondered when you'd descend from the throne."

"Obviously you're unhappy with me…" he laughed quietly.

The scowl on Izuna's face made that pretty plain.

"A bit, maybe." He took out his sword and sliced cleanly through a three inch thick wooden target. "I don't object to how you spend your time or with whom, only when it runs into—"

"Clan matters," Madara finished. "Yes, you've only said so over a hundred times." He added flatly. He squinted at the unamused look on his brother's face. "You're more like Mother than you realize…"

Suddenly Madara found himself blocking the sword that came flying for his armored chest. He knew that Izuna had struck, knowing he'd be able to parry, and he spent a minute admiring the speed and power in that one stroke as he fought his brother off in a stalemate. "If I was anyone else, I'd be dead." He mused. "You came at me with true killing intent…"

"I would be disrespecting you to come at you with anything less." Izuna replied blankly. He flicked his wrist, able to push Madara's sword aside enough so that he had a clean shut at an upward thrust. The elder brother grunted. His armor absorbed most of that blow, but it further proved Izuna wasn't playing around, and that he intended to fight his brother until his anger had subsided.

"The real question though, is are you disrespecting me?" the younger brother asked, taking the hilt in both hands and going in for the crescent slash he'd just been showing his students. Madara successfully moved, and then parried when Izuna followed it up with a downward stroke that had sparks flying from their blades.

"…That was pretty personal. Had that follow up hit landed, I very much doubt I'd ever have heirs." He gave his brother a dubious look, and Izuna grinned wolfishly. Both their swords were pointed down, as they both fought to disarm the other. "Your point has been made little brother, I assure you. Now stow your blade and your anger."

Izuna huffed, pushing up on Madara's sword at an angle the minute he loosened his hold so that it went flying into the air and landed in his left hand.

Izuna stabbed both blades into the ground.

"Please don't insult me with a half-spun apology, Madara." Izuna spat.

Madara sighed quietly in relief. His brother was finally ready to listen. "You know I wouldn't. Your work with them," he nodded toward the group of children practicing on the far fringe of the training ground, Kagami helping a young girl grip her tanto correctly, "is very important for the future of the clan. I know you take the duty seriously. I should try to support you better." The tension started to flow from Izuna's shoulders. It wasn't necessarily an apology but it was at least sincere, by Madara-standards anyway.

Izuna took a long look at his brother. "You're troubled." He said suddenly.
Now Madara fought the urge to roll his eyes as Naoko's words came back to him. "It's no excuse, but I had the dream."

Izuna sobered, immediately knowing what he was referring to. Madara had never fully told his brother what transpired on that day. And he'd forbade any of the healers who were there from saying anything either. His brother's life had been saved through mystical means. He was almost certain of that, no matter how many times he tried to convince himself otherwise. Many nights Madara had mulled her words over in his head, and they'd never made much sense. They remained as cryptic as they had been on that day.

Until Sakura Haruno had appeared.

A girl with pink hair and the name of a blossom, turning up in Konohagakure, a village he'd personally named. *Hidden in the Leaves.* At the time, he'd thought it was just a whimsical thought that had crossed his mind due to the falling leaf.

Was there a connection or was his mind just grasping at straws to solve something that had been bothering him for months?

"I'm alive." Izuna grasped him by the shoulders, peering into his eyes. He even pulled up his shirt so Madara could see the unblemished skin. "That healer brought me back from the brink, and I promise not to let myself be put in that situation again."

"Don't make foolish promises, little brother." Madara said absently. "Dying is something we shinobi are born to do."

"That's true," Izuna agreed slowly. "But I won't die anytime soon." He stubbornly stated. "And that would be nice, because I doubt I'll find that odd woman again." Madara conceded drily. "But there's something I never told you, the last words she said to me."

Izuna cocked his head.

Sakura discreetly glanced around, trying to memorize the layout of the compound. They'd passed many houses, all as drab as the others. Young children sparring fiercely, people haggling with each other for food, and most unnerving of all, young women with dead eyes who were clearly not born members of the Kaguya clan, trailing listlessly around men who tugged them around like property.

Some of them held newborns, so clearly the Kaguya had already successfully used some of them as broodmares. Sakura vowed to do what she could for them before their mission was through. Of course, proving themselves useful and biding their time was the primary purpose of them being there, until they could find and recover the fan.

Intel gathering for future use against the Kaguya was secondary, and realistically, helping the women being held captive was last. The man had led them to a stone building bigger and more imposing than any of the other smaller houses they'd seen.

He dismounted his horse, grabbing the arm of some passing boy who also looked like he wasn't a Kaguya, and barking at him to take his horse for feed at the stables. Sakura's heart ached for the cowering young boy, who nervously grabbed the big horse's reigns, trying to avoid the nasty snap of its teeth as he led it away.

"We are about to enter the presence of Lord Yoshiro. If he deems you worthy, we will find places for you amongst us, until suitable matches are made. If not, you die. And I get the honor of killing
you." The second option seemed to please the big man greatly.

"We should at least know the name of our executioner." Sakura said dryly.

"Call me Kento." He grinned broadly, looking even more menacing. "Now go," He had led them to a long hall with ornate, heavy wooden doors, and when they were closed he shoved them through.

They fell to their knees in what Sakura could only describe as the throne room of their leader. She peered through her blonde hair to see long legs up on a dias in front of them. "I've brought two new ones, my lord."

"Have you? Well I hope for your sake they last longer than the others." The man turned, an imposing man with the same tanned features and dark hair, long and down his back. He had two small red marks, just above his eyebrows, and for some reason, he was eerily fixated on Sakura, before his eyes slowly roamed over Toka beside her.

"They put up quite a fight and believe it or not, they want to join the Kaguya willingly, my lord."

"You are either confident or you are fools." Yoshiro said. "Which is it?"

"We are simply in need of asylum, my lord." Toka said. "We have no more village and we are strong kunoichi. We could be of benefit if you allow us to join your clan."

"Benefit?" Yoshiro slowly descended from his platform, looking down at them from the part in his hair. The way it hung, long and lank, reminded Sakura sickeningly of Orochimaru. "I'll be the judge of that. You say they took out some greenhorns, Kento?"

"Yes my lord. The little blonde she-devil there pounded them with her fists. And the other seems capable of water ninjutsu. They should be sturdy."

Sakura wanted to gag at the way he said 'sturdy', knowing what he meant.

"Rise." Yoshiro commanded. Sakura and Toka slowly got to their feet. "One of you may very well be the woman I give to my son. Only the strongest will do to continue our lines." That made sense, of course. Strong genes bred strong children who would usually go on to be strong shinobi. But the Kaguya had such a disgusting way of going about it.

"Should I get the young lord, then?" Kento asked.

Yoshiro nodded solemnly. "Yes, bring my daughters too. They should all meet the new arrivals." He leered.
Pretenses

Chapter Summary

It's hard to tell if they're guests or captives in the walls of the Kaguya compound, and Sakura finds herself with the daunting task of trying to get close to the solemn heir of the clan.

Sakura blinked at the three children standing by their father's side, who were observing them with open scrutiny. As Yoshiro had said, he had two daughters and one son, who was hardly anymore a child than Sakura. One child, clearly the youngest, watched with curiosity on her face, while her older sister looked cautious. Both were tanned and dark-haired like the other Kaguya.

Yoshiro's son and heir, however, was a different matter. Although he shared the bronze skin and dark eyes of his relatives, the hair banded on either side of his face was white, just like the clan's namesake. He wore a periwinkle blue yukata, opening so far that a considerable amount of his muscular chest was exposed.

Sakura wasn't sure what she'd been expecting, but a small part of her was relieved she wasn't staring into the face of some grimy man with wandering eyes. Yoshiro's son didn't look much older than her, and he certainly didn't seem interested in her or Toka.

"Jun'ichi." The young man slowly looked at his father, dark eyes blank. "What do you think of these two?"

Jun'ichi stared at the both of them, his eyes alternating. "They're new concubines." His tone gave nothing away. He looked almost dismissive. His sisters looked more interested in the meeting than he was.

"That's not what I asked." Yoshiro pressed. "They are not like the others. Kento tells me they are decent kunoichi. Sturdy enough. You are my heir, and soon you will need heirs. I've allowed you to continue rejecting all the women I've sent you, but now is the time to choose."

Jun'ichi gave a barely audible sigh. "Are you sure, tou-san? With all due respect they appear… frail." He was looking at the disguised Sakura as he said it.

Without warning, he walked into her personal space, looming over her by a little less than a head. His long index finger reached out, and he none too gently pressed it to the cut running down the girl's face. Inwardly, Sakura winced as his finger jabbing into the cut made it throb and begin to bleed again.

On autopilot she lifted her hand and brushed aside the offending digit, keeping his gaze as she easily healed her small injury. There was silence, and she wondered if she'd done the right thing in revealing her skills so soon.

But, she reminded herself that she wanted to impress them. Give them a reason to keep her around. Odds were it would be easy to find and get into their weapon cache if she stayed close to the clan head and his family. Even if she already missed Konoha.
"...Did you see that?" the smallest girl whispered loudly, tugging at her sister's sleeve. Her hair was cut in a simple bob that didn't even reach her shoulders. The black hair swished as she glanced at Sakura again. "She healed herself!"

"Yes, she's clearly a healer." The older girl said back, shaking her sleeve from her younger sister's grasp. Her own dark hair was twisted into an elegant bun at the top of her head, some of it banded on either side of her face. "Now be quiet, Kikue."

"You know healing techniques." Yoshiro stated quickly, walking into Sakura's personal space too. She wanted to lean away, both from the man and his son. Yoshiro turned to his son, who was suddenly staring at Sakura with narrowed eyes.

It seemed like her demonstration had ignited at least a spark in the apathetic young man. Now he watched her like she was a loaded trap ready to spring, unsure of what else she could do. "You're the one." Sakura's eyes snapped back to Yoshiro, trying to hide her surprise. His dark eyes were shining with a strange greed. "Jun'ichi. This is the woman I've chosen for you. Do you object?" Sakura's eyes slowly trailed to Yoshiro's son. Jun'ichi. He seemed resigned to the notion this was happening. With or without his consent.

"And if I did? Would it matter?" He muttered under his breath. The white-haired Kaguya nodded mutely.

Yoshiro ignored it, his attention back on Sakura. "Our clan has never had a healer. Can you do more?"

Hesitantly, Sakura nodded.

"How much more?"

"I have an extensive knowledge of the human anatomy. I've performed countless successful procedures. Resetting broken bones, suturing battle wounds, detecting the onset of illnesses..." Sakura began listing a small amount of what she could do. She felt more confident now, more in her element. The Kaguya seemed more interested in her with every word. This had to be a good thing, right? Part of the success of this mission depended on her proving her usefulness.

"It's easy to say you can do more than heal cuts. But how do we know?" All eyes looked to the older Kaguya girl, who was scowling with her arms crossed.

"Harihane. Do not speak out of turn." Yoshiro growled. Surprisingly, the girl held her father's gaze defiantly. "But, my daughter has a point. I think I'd like a demonstration." Sakura was slightly confused. She glanced at Toka but any traces of the camaraderie she'd seen in her at the stream was gone. Her face was stone. She had entered a single-minded state where only the mission mattered.

"Kento, go and fetch your stable hand."

"Yes, milord." Kento moved surprisingly quickly for his mountainous size. Sakura was feeling an increasing sense of discomfort. Not for herself. She was sure she could handle whatever the Kaguya threw her way. But she was lost in the midst of their brusque ways and heavy-handed culture.

She wished desperately she could slip away and discuss everything they'd seen so far with Toka. If only to be assured somewhat. She glanced at the older woman again, and this time, Toka spared her a small glance. She was sure in that one look she saw a look of steely calm. Toka wasn't scared or even apprehensive. She was alert and ready. Sakura had to try to be the same.
No sooner had she thought this than Kento returned. His large hand was wrapped around the scrawny arm of a small boy he was dragging along. Sakura held in a gasp as they got closer. It was the boy who had taken Kento's horse to the stable.

He was quivering, eyes wide in fear and confusion. His face and clothes were streaked with dirt, like he'd been doing something laborious outside before Kento had come and whisked him away.

"Alright. If you can heal the boy than I'll have seen all I need to." Yoshiro declared.

Sakura's eyes scanned the young boy from head to toe. He was dirty and scared but he didn't look hurt. Was there something she wasn't get—

"Kento, if you will."

In a flash, the boy was whining like a wounded animal as Kento squeezed harder on his arm. By the time Sakura realized what he was doing the protestation was half stuck in her throat. "Wait—"

The child's agonized scream drowned out her words. The big man dropped his small arm harshly and it hung limply at his side. His eyes overflowed with tears as he weakly lifted his other arm up to cradle his limp one. Shock and horror dominated her features as Sakura rushed to the boy that had fallen to his knees, bawling.

"It's rare for a Kaguya to break bones." Yoshiro continued explaining calmly. Sakura felt a small tremor of anger as she reached for the boy's arm, her hand glowing. "Thanks to our kekkei genkai our bones are perhaps the most indestructible thing about us." Sakura ignored him, gingerly lowering the arm the boy was using to protect his broken one so she could better examine him.

"I imagine his bones have been thoroughly shattered. Under normal conditions without treatment he wouldn't last long. We've seen it often enough with the servants we keep here." Yoshiro stated.

'Servants? More like slaves!' Sakura grit her teeth in a consolidated effort to keep ignoring the man.

"However, if you're truly a competent healer, then the boy has no need to worry. And neither do you." Sakura chanced a look at the man's face and almost lost it at the highly amused smirk he wore.

Sakura swore under her breath as she continued her diagnosis. It was a fracture for sure. If Kento had truly splintered the bone into pieces like he'd likely aimed to, without a hospital she'd have much more serious problems. But Tsunade had prepared her to work around adverse conditions in the field, so she was confident she could still help the poor boy.

She was, however, worried about the strength of his bones. It had been a while since she'd worked with a patient so obviously malnourished. His bones probably didn't have as much calcium as a young boy's should, and that could be a problem if they proved to be brittle.

"Don't worry. I'm here to help you." she whispered to the sobbing child. He seemed startled from his crying when she used her unoccupied hand to brush some tears from his face. His crying quieted minutely, hiccups interspersed through the tears. "What's your name?"

That got his attention. He blinked teary eyes, trying to gauge if the woman was truly safe. Biting his lip, he whimpered, sniffling loudly. Sakura didn't think he'd answer. Then he spoke with considerable effort. "Y-Yu-Yuuta." Sakura smiled comfortingly. She was aware that Toka and the Kaguya were watching her every move. It was now or never.

"I'm going to heal you, Yuuta. I'll try to make it as quick as possible."
She turned back to the family, who were watching her as if viewing a spectacle. Her eyes were cold. "I'll need something to splint this."

The amused expression never left Yoshiro's face. "Of course. Kento can get you anything you'll need." He motioned to the man that seemed to be Yoshiro's right hand, and he exited. If it weren't for Yuuta's sake Sakura would want him to take his time coming back. Any man that could so easily injure a defenseless child without remorse was a lowlife in her eyes. She imagined if Yoshiro commanded it Kento would do more than injure a child. But if she thought about that, she'd be too angry to focus, and right now a patient needed her.

Tsunade had taught her they could use their chakra to hold a patient's fractured bones in place, when surgical screws weren't available. Now would be one of those times. She sent chakra into Yuuta's arm, numbing it. Her chakra searched out the break, and she found two places. She was silently relieved it hadn't been much worse.

A man like Kento could have turned Yuuta's arm to pulp. She carefully brought one finger to the spot where she felt the break and pushed the pad of it to Yuuta's skin. He flinched instinctively but didn't cry out, so she pressed on. She used her chakra to hold the fracture together, and did the same for the other spot.

For good measure she ran her whole hand down his arm, using her soothing healing chakra to make sure her work would hold. Yuuta had almost stopped crying when Kento got back, but one look at the man looked like he was going to start up again. Sakura didn't blame him. She roughly took the materials he offered to her with a thinly veiled look of disgust and set to work splinting Yuuta's arm. The boy watched her work in silent awe.

She was careful not to jostle his arm too much, and when she'd tied the cloth up at his shoulder she sat back on her heels, satisfied. Yuuta looked down at his arm, then into her face, surprised. The boy had literally thought he was going to die. That much had been obvious. Without her medical expertise he just might have. "There," she smiled slightly. "Just try not to do too much with that arm, now."

"B-But…my chores…" he began meekly.

Sakura turned back to Yoshiro, her eyes hard. "This boy doesn't need to be doing heavy labor while he heals. My chakra will speed it up, but that arm still needs time to finish healing."

"Are you making demands now?" Kento glared at her. "We have a shortage of able-bodied servants as it is."

"Because I'm sure you overwork them." Sakura challenged boldly.

"Why you, sniveling—"

Surprisingly, it was Yoshiro's son who held up a hand to silence the bodyguard.

"You've proven yourself." He stated, his voice flat. "Father, I'd ask the servant boy be given lighter chores as the healer states."

Yoshiro's brow rose, his thin lips pressed together as he mulled over his son's request. "Very well…" Yuuta looked shocked. "Return to your quarters." He bowed clumsily, darting out of the room, but not before giving Sakura a large, teary smile.

Kento was clearly fuming, and Sakura had to hide a satisfied smirk.
"I've decided that you may have the potential to carry on the Kaguya name and give my son heirs. And a healer is something we're in need of anyway." Yoshiro eyed Sakura up and down. "What's your name, girl?"

"Oka Takahashi, milord." Sakura bowed, revolted as she was.

"That sounds like a civilian name..." Kento muttered bitterly.

"No matter." Yoshiro dismissed. "All the better, actually. A strong shinobi bloodline could possibly dilute ours. Whatever children my son has will need to have the bloodline of the Kaguya, and they shall."

Kento remained silent, though he glared venomously at Sakura.

"Harihane." The scowling young girl looked at her father. "Take Takahashi to your rooms." Sakura didn't think the girl could get more annoyed, but she was wrong. "And what's your name."

"Tomoko Sawada." Toka responded.

"You'll go to the servant quarters. Tomorrow you'll start working the fields for your keep."

Sakura was disappointed she and Toka wouldn't be in the same room, but maybe that was by design on the Kaguya's part. They'd just have to be sneaky about meeting up later.

Harihane decided it was time to interrupt. "But Father," she practically growled. "She," She pointed at Sakura, "is going to be Junji's bride. Shouldn't she stay with him? Or even Kikue!"

The youngest perked up at the sound of her name. "Kikue wants to see more!" She looked at Sakura with shining black eyes that were slightly unnerving, grinning toothily. "You can do more, right?"

"O-Only if someone's injured." Sakura forced on an awkward smile. The little girl puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

"Maybe someone will get hurt soon then," she mumbled quietly. "Kikue will bring them to you so she can watch." She said it so innocently. Like she didn't understand what was wrong with the statement. Sakura felt a chill go through her.

"Of course, you won't be allowed to have anything dangerous." Yoshiro smiled mockingly. "Kento, search her pack." Before the burly man could reach for her backpack, Sakura took it off and tossed it at his feet. She watched as he searched it thoroughly, hiding her thoughts behind a blank expression. 'The most dangerous things I have are my fists and my mind.' She chuckled quietly. 'They won't find those in there.'

Grunting, Kento threw the pack back at her. Sakura caught it easily.

"Let's go," Harihane marched over and grabbed Sakura's wrist, tugging. She had a surprisingly strong grip and Sakura could feel her wrist bruising. Even though she could have pulled away from the girl, she let herself be led away with one last glance back in Toka's direction. Kento was snatching her backpack away to search it.

Sakura was looking back at her as they were led in opposite directions. Toka had half-expected this. But she wasn't overly concerned. It worked in their favor.
If Sakura stayed close to the clan head and his family, and she herself could get information from the servant quarters, then they had a higher chance of not only discovering the location of the weapons cache, but Kaguya secrets.

As she walked behind the burly Kento she was taking in every detail, memorizing where she could see Kaguya guards lingering around, and devising a plan to come and go as she pleased. The clan was stretched thin. So all she had to do was find the chink in security, and exploit it.

Tonight, she would slip away and send a message to Konoha. Promising regular updates was the only way she'd been able to get the Hokage to agree to her request. Of course, Hashirama didn't know the full extent of it. He would have raised strong objections if he did, without a doubt. He was as soft-hearted as he was strong, and that's what made him such a beloved leader. It's why the Senju would follow him to the ends of the earth, herself included.

But, it also meant that sometimes he was blinded by his generosity. That was where others close to him such as herself and Tobirama came in. He was more than capable on the battlefield, but his tendency to seek out the best in everyone left him vulnerable. For this reason Toka would gladly make herself the tool that protected not only Lord Hashirama and the clan from more subtle threats, but now the village as well.

Sakura Haruno...Toka couldn't say if she was a threat. If she could be trusted, she'd be invaluable to the village.

When Lord Hashirama had sent her to help a new arrival several weeks earlier, he had been vague about details. Toka half expected the door to open to the face of some wide-eyed and haggard civilian. Instead, she was met by the cautious green gaze of a clearly battle-hardened young kunoichi.

Immediately Toka's guard was up. Many shinobi had started to enter the village from all over, and the scars of battle marred them all in some way or another. It was the steeled glint in their eyes when they passed by a member of a clan they had once lost someone to.

It was the physical wounds just starting to heal. It was the look of disbelief when they wandered the village, clearly in awe such a place existed. Toka understood all of this. What she didn't quite understand was Sakura. As she helped her under Hashirama's instructions, she observed closely.

She was never as open in voicing her mistrust or showing hostility like Tobirama. But even when Sakura kept up a harmless façade, Toka was sure never to completely lower her own guard. The girl looked so jaded at times as they walked the streets together, and yet Toka was sure she had yet to reach her second full decade of life. Compared to Toka's twenty-five years, she was just a child. And yet...

Sakura Haruno had clearly seen more than her years. It wasn't so uncommon in the war torn era they lived in. Children grew up on the battlefield and by Sakura's age, any vestige of innocence had been stripped away. If they lived that long.

The strange thing was that Sakura didn't strike her as someone who had led a particularly hard life. The wariness she'd seen was caused by something fresh, something that hadn't happened long ago. Hashirama had told her she'd claimed to have lost her only family and village not long before Tobirama found her, but Toka was sure there was more than that.

At times she felt bad, essentially spying on the girl, when Sakura wasn't aware she was around. Using the excuse of helping her get acclimated to watch her closely.
She seemed to be a genuinely good kunoichi, but the Senju refused to take chances. When she had seen Sakura in her house alone one day meditating, she hadn't thought much of it. But then something strange had happened. An immense chakra was suddenly surrounding the house, something almost unearthly…

Shortly after that, Hashirama told her he'd like for her to go on a mission, and Toka knew what she had to do.

"I'd like for Sakura Haruno to come with me."

Hashirama's smile had fallen slightly. "I don't understand…have you seen Sakura-san in combat?"

"No. But I'd still like her to come. I will take full responsibility if she gets in the way."

Hashirama stroked his chin in thought. "I'm not entirely sure about the nature of this mission. I only know that Madara has requested it and needs two competent kunoichi that have proven themselves. It could be risky. Tobirama certainly won't agree." He sighed. "If it's all the same, I'd rather send another Senju you've worked with before."

Toka understood Hashirama's concerns. She also understood what she was asking for could be seen as reckless and irrational. Two things normally not associated with the level-headed kunoichi.

But she had her reasons. Reasons she couldn't tell the Hokage or he'd never agree. "Please, Lord Hashirama, trust my judgement. No harm will come to Sakura-san. I'm willing to protect her if necessary." Toka didn't particularly enjoy lying to Hashirama. But it was for the good of everyone, she told herself. And, so long as Sakura didn't give her a reason not to, Toka would have her back.

"It's a large weight to put on your shoulders, Toka." Hashirama still didn't look too convinced. "Taking an untested kunoichi into battle…well, you've never done anything without reason for as long as I've known you." A slow smile spread across his face. Toka nodded, bowing in respect, even though they were long past such formalities.

"I won't let you down, Lord Hashirama." That, at least, was not a lie.

Hashirama had Sakura called into his office later that same day and explained Toka wanted her to accompany her on a mission. The pink-haired kunoichi had been all too eager to accept. Of course, her mood soured quickly when Madara Uchiha entered the room. Despite that, Sakura had decided to stay the course, and Toka was secretly pleased. It would derail things if Sakura had chosen to back out.

Hashirama had done his part in defending Sakura's participation in the mission to Tobirama, who she had known would raise the strongest objection. Madara was unconcerned with who accomplished the mission, so long as he could get his fan back. Toka knew that trusting his instinct and vouching for Sakura came from the kindness of his heart. But she also knew that it was because of their old friendship that Hashirama was really allowing Sakura to go. Maybe he had a good feeling about the kunoichi. If he said he did, then he was likely being truthful. Then again, Hashirama tended to have a good feeling about most people. But what he hadn't said was more than anything, he was placing his trust in her. In Toka. She had no intention of betraying that trust.

Sakura seemed like a good kunoichi. She had the skills and she seemed to have the drive. Toka wanted to trust in her completely. But she believed in being thorough if nothing else. After what she'd felt when Sakura was meditating, she was sure there was more to the mysterious kunoichi
than met the eye.

"This is where you're gonna stay." Kento announced, smirking as they stopped in front of a shabby stone building. It was far removed from the opulence inside the clan head's own home. "Nothing fancy. Not like you servants deserve it." He burst into the building, almost taking the wooden door down with a shove of his shoulder.

There were roughly twenty women inside, sitting at wooden tables and hunched over a pitiful amount of food. They'd interrupted their meal time. Instantly, all the women were at attention, practically trembling at the sight of the tall man.

"Fall forward!" Kento barked. They lined up obediently. "This one is new. Show her the ropes." He glanced around. "Where's Yuhi?"

"Right here, milord." Toka watched as a young woman stepped forward, not looking as intimidated as the rest. In fact, despite the cowering females around her, she held herself with a certain poise that was admirable. Her honey colored hair was tied in a high ponytail, loose strands falling into her face.

"You're personally in charge of making sure this one falls in line. If you fail you know what'll happen."

"Of course, milord." The girl bowed, a polite smile on her face.

Kento sneered at the women who were trying to avoid his eyes, delighting in their fear. He brushed them out of the way on his way to the table and looked down at the rations. Thin soup, half-stale bread and some cheese. He snatched up the closest bowl of soup and downed it in one gulp, throwing the bowl on the ground. It shattered loudly and shards scattered everywhere. Some of the girls yelped as they jumped to avoid the flying porcelain.

"Pig piss would taste better." Kento laughed, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. "Glad I'm not one of you. Enjoy your meal, ladies." He swaggered out of the quarters, slamming the door on his way out. Toka watched as shoulders slumped in relief all across the room as he left.

"I-I was scared he was here to take one of us away…" someone whispered off to the right.

"He wouldn't have wasted time taunting us if that were the case." Another voice sighed.

"Well, we're all here together for the moment. That's what's important." said the girl Kento had called "Yuhi". She turned to Toka, and this time her smile reached her alluring red eyes.

"You must be exhausted. We don't have anything grand but you're welcome to it," She gestured behind her at the table of food. "I'll show you our sleeping area after the meal. But first, I'll need to clean this up." She bent down with a sigh, carefully beginning to pick up the scattered shards.

One of the young girls gasped. "Oh! I'll get a broom!" She scampered off carefully.

"And I'll get a trash bin…" another girl volunteered.

Yuhi smiled as she continued to pick up the bigger shards. "They're all so helpful." She blinked when she noticed Toka was on the ground, picking up shards with a blank expression. The Senju had decided she'd need to ingratiate herself with this girl, who seemed to be something of a leader among the female servants.

"No, you don't have to—"
"I know." Toka interrupted. Yuhi nodded in understanding.

"Thank you…"

"Tomoko Sawada."

"Thank you, Tomoko. I'm Yurine Yuhi." She smiled slightly.
Life with the Kaguya is far from easy, and Sakura has her work cut out for her, not that she expected any different. Meanwhile, Naruto and the others scheme new ways to learn her whereabouts.

Sakura watched as the young girl undid her hair from its bun, letting it fall down loose past her shoulders. She looked up at Sakura, who stood awkwardly by the door, and glared. "That's where you can sleep." She scoffed. "Don't come near my side."

Sakura arched a brow when the girl's back was turned. She had been given what amounted to a small corner of the Kaguya's room. It was obvious just how keen the little Kaguya was on showing Sakura how unwelcome her presence was. Harihane wasn't very old, and yet she had a considerable amount of contempt. It couldn't all be for Sakura.

As she got out her bedroll and began setting up her area, Sakura mulled over everything that had happened that day. They'd successfully infiltrated the Kaguya clan. However, she wasn't stupid enough to believe eyes and ears wouldn't be on her and Toka for a while. Hopefully, with any luck it wouldn't matter. They'd find out where the fan was, get it, and be gone by the time the Kaguya caught wind of anything suspicious happening under their noses. And they would definitely be gone before any wedding.

Personally, Sakura felt the sooner the better. She didn't know Toka very well, but she had to feel similar after what they'd seen, right? The way they treated the people they'd taken as servants was horrible. With the brutal reputation they had, it shouldn't have been a surprise. But Sakura kept remembering how Kento had broken Yuuta's arm without a second thought. She worried for the boy, and all the other young children who had to grow up here, fearful of what would happen if they placed even a toe out of line.

She glanced at Harihane, who was brushing her hair out with a comb, looking intensely into the mirror. Sakura couldn't help but wonder if the child slaves were the only victims who'd grown up inside the compound. Something had to make the girl so terse.

"How old are you, Harihane?"

She watched the girl glance at her slightly. "We won't be friends, okay? No use making small talk with me. You may have impressed Father, but that doesn't mean I'll ever accept you."

Sakura was getting impatient herself. She didn't want to be there any more than the young girl wanted her to be. It would be a long mission if she had to spend every night sleeping in the same room as such a bitter little girl. Maybe she'd stay with Toka and the other servants after all. Less likely to wake up with a sharp bone pressed against her jugular. "I'm not trying to be friends. I get that you don't want me here. Just trying to make conversation."

"I'm twelve," Harihane lifted her chin proudly. "I've seen plenty of battles, too. I'm not a baby like Kikue. And I'm smarter than Junji." She pulled the comb roughly through a tangle and hissed. "But…” her dark eyes narrowed on Sakura's reflection in the mirror. "You come along and
Sakura glared back. "I didn't come here to marry your brother. I just wanted asylum—"

"Hah!" Harihane waved her hand dismissively. "Do you think you're the first woman to say that?" Sakura was careful to conceal her surprise. Was Harihane…onto her? "I mean you're the first one that might actually be useful though. But still…my brother may wed you, but I bet he won't even bed you." Harihane stated smugly.

Sakura couldn't help but let her mouth fall open slightly. The Kaguya turned, her arms crossed and a satisfied look on her face. "You may have passed my Father's test, but you'll never pass my brother's. He's not interested in anything. Not marrying. Not being the heir. Nothing."

"Everyone's interested in something." Sakura insisted. "Even you, I'm sure."

Harihane turned around on her stool and stared at Sakura coldly. "I am interested in something. But it's Jun'ichi's birthright, not mine. Never mine." The girl stood from her stool, slamming her brush back down and stomping across the room. She glared at Sakura so venomously that the disguised kunoichi actually considered getting ready for battle.

Harihane's anger was slowly turning into killing intent. She looked Sakura up and down with disdain. "Father will ask me to acquaint you with the compound and help you adjust to life here. But I won't. I refuse. Let Junji or Kikue do it." She left then, making a grand exit and leaving Sakura alone in the large, cold room.

'Was I like that at twelve?' Sakura thought to herself.

She was moody and boy-obsessed and quick-tempered, but she was hoping she'd never been that bitter. But maybe…there was a reason behind Harihane's attitude besides just rebellion. If she were born into a family like the Kaguya, Sakura thought she just might be angry at the world, too. Especially if she was a young girl who was constantly overlooked.

Clearly Yoshiro's older daughter had some derision with her family. And it was spilling over into how she saw Sakura, who she thought would become her brother's wife. Sakura couldn't say why she was really there, so she'd just have to deal with Harihane hating her and hope it didn't cause any problems to the mission. 'Hopefully Toka's having an easier time than me…'

But Toka, collected and focused as she was, would probably take anything she encountered with ease. She would be getting ready to send the first report back to Konoha soon…That was what they'd agreed on before separating from the team. Toka had a summon that was inconspicuous and could quickly correspond with the village if necessary.

Sakura wasn't sure if she should even attempt to summon Katsuyu. Who knew how time-travel effected summoning contracts? She wouldn't want to strand the gentle slug like she was. Plus, the Hokage was familiar with Toka's summon. No one would know what to make of Katsuyu.

Sakura rubbed at her temple in exhaustion. The mission had barely begun and she was ready to leave. At this point she didn't care which Konoha she returned to, hers or the one she'd just left. Either was preferable to the Kaguya's den. She slouched down onto her bedroll, figuring she was safely alone. Sakura found herself wondering what her loved ones were up to in that moment. Naruto. Kakashi. Sai. Tsunade. Yamato. Her parents. Ino. Hell, even Sasuke, who treated her like a nuisance. Were they looking for a way to bring her home? 'It's weird. I'm so close to home, but so far away…'
Naruto wasn't sure what he was supposed to be feeling, but he was almost sure Sasuke's plan wasn't working. 'Stupid teme. He's so vague. How the hell do we summon that Sage geezer?' Connecting their chakras, even if Naruto did understand that plan (which he didn't), seemed like a pretty desperate attempt.

Sasuke was grasping at straws, as far as he could tell. The more he thought, the more frustrated he became. Just as he was about to demand Sasuke clarify, a loud creek filled the dusty shrine. Alert, Naruto pushed the mask back up, his hands already prepared to start forming signs. He was half-surprised to see Sasuke was sitting there with his mask also raised, looking bored. "Typical..." the Uchiha muttered.

Confused, Naruto turned to the shrine entrance, wanting to question him, when suddenly he heard voices, bickering loudly.

"Suigetsu you made us late! You are so utterly useless!" screamed a shrill female voice.

There was a scoff. "I made us late, eh? I'm not the one who held us up, trying to find the right outfit for her little reunion with Sasuke-kun." Sasuke's name came out mockingly high from the decidedly male voice.

"What...what is—" Naruto's question was cut off as two people appeared, a red-haired woman and a smirking man with silver-blue hair. "Hey! You're—"


Suigetsu shrugged nonchalantly. "Eh. Big guy's traveling the world alone, taking a sabbatical to 'find himself', whatever that means." He rolled his eyes. "Anyway, we're here now."

"Can somebody explain what the hell's going on?" Naruto asked impatiently.

The red-haired woman stepped closer as if noticing the blond for the first time, squinting at him. "We're here to help with the ritual obviously. Sasuke-kun filled us in. Since you're both reincarnations of the Sage's sons, he thinks there might be a way to pull his spirit temporarily back to the land of living by syncing up your chakra. But that'd take an expert in chakra like me," Karin puffed out her chest. "Plus, it's experimental at best. All I've got to go on is some hypothetical theory, unfinished notes from Kabuto."

Naruto blinked slowly. Half of what she'd said was in one ear and out the other. Karin seemed to realize that, because she rolled her eyes and adjusted her glasses. "Sasuke-kun wasn't kidding when he said you were a dense one. Look, all you need to know is that if this thing works a portal will open and the Sage'll appear. He might know how to track your little girlfriend."

He glanced over and met Sasuke's eyes. The Uchiha's face was as blank as ever, save for an arched brow. "Well?"

Naruto rubbed a hand across his forehead with a sigh. "This sounds...like a weird plan. I don't even know if I get it...but well, if it means we might be able to get Sakura back, then yeah, I guess I'm in."

Suigetsu grinned, his sharp teeth glinting. "Alrighty, then you're gonna wanna try harder to clear your mind." He was looking directly at Naruto. "From what Sasuke says that shouldn't be too hard for you, eh?"

Naruto at first thought he was being complimented, then his lips fell into a frown. "Teme," he seethed, gritting his teeth.
"Stop agitating people, Suigetsu!" Karin smacked him, and Naruto watched as he exploded into water. "You'll make this whole process that much harder if either of them are restless." Suigetsu reformed fairly quickly though. Sasuke really knew how to pick 'em… A screeching banshee of a fan girl and some snarky guy that turned into a puddle…

"You both need to stop fooling around. Suigetsu, draw the circle, exactly like I showed it to you." Sasuke ordered.

Suigetsu pulled a face. "Ya know Sasuke, you're lucky you're stronger than me now. Still, with you guys all vulnerable during the ritual I might be tempted to…" he pulled a finger across his throat. "Kill ya~"

"Suigetsu, if you lay a hand on Sasuke-kun…" Karin growled, raising an open palm.

"Yeah, yeah…" Suigetsu waved her off. "Just a joke." He pulled out a kunai and started twirling it. "Time to get to work." With that he slit his palm and began drawing on the floor in blood.

Tobirama stared at the steaming food in front of him. Across the table, his brother sat grinning like a fool, his eyes shining as he sniffed the air deeply. There was enough food between the two to feed a family, at least. Dishes of fresh caught fish, bowls of rice, edamame, and even some of the honey wine his brother adored. "This looks wonderful, doesn't it brother?" Hashirama didn't wait for him to respond as he turned to an older woman standing just over his shoulder. "You've outdone yourself, Mei-san!" he complimented.

The woman giggled, placing a hand against her flushed cheek. "Oh no, dear. It's always a pleasure." She replied courteously. "Let me know if there's anything else you'd like."

Hashirama only smiled. "You've done more than enough here for tonight."

The white-haired shinobi found himself resisting the urge to roll his eyes as the woman old enough to be their mother almost skipped out of the room. The clan truly loved Hashirama. Whenever he visited the compound, they bent over backwards to accommodate him. His brother always insisted it was unnecessary, but their clansmen did it not out of obligation to serve their leader, but genuine respect and affection.

He was a fair, kind leader. His way of leading the clan was much different from their late father's, who was stern, firm-handed and stubborn. He'd been a strong leader, but not the most approachable. Their people respected Butsuma Senju, but Tobirama always suspected that it was the position they respected, and the man they feared.

"Itadakimasu!" Hashirama said quickly, chopsticks already in hand. He immediately began helping himself, chewing loudly.

Tobirama wrinkled his nose. His brother's table manners were, as usual, lacking. He hid it well enough when they ate with potential allies, shinobi coming to align themselves with the village. But at home in private, his brother lacked all etiquette and simply dug in.

"Have some brother!" Hashirama urged, fish flakes sticking to the side of his mouth. Tobirama eyed him blankly before fixing himself a plate of fish and vegetables with a bowl of rice. He said his own quick thanks for the food before eating slowly.

For a while, neither talked, and Tobirama was just fine with that. Besides the fact that he wished there was something to drown out Hashirama's grotesque chewing. Hashirama looked like he was itching to start up a conversation. His normally chatty brother couldn't stay quiet for long.
Tobirama silently thanked the gods he so seldom bothered praying to when a clan advisor walked into the dining area, a familiar bird on his arm. "My lords," he said quickly, "My deepest apologies for interrupting. I just thought you should know Lady Toka's summon has arrived." Hashirama quickly cleaned his mouth, having the decency to look embarrassed.

"No need for apologies. Thank you for bringing him." He clicked his tongue at the large, gray owl. "Fukuro, to me." Tobirama withheld a snort. It was an incredibly unoriginal name, but, it was to be expected from Toka.

The owl spread his great wings and glided smoothly across the room to land on the brown-haired man's shoulder. Tobirama watched as the intelligent bird turned its head completely around and pulled out the scroll attached to the leather sling on its back. Toka had trained it well from a hatchling, and he delivered scrolls for her loyally. Hashirama took the scroll and brushed the back of his hand against the owl's chest in thanks. "I don't have a kunai..." his brother muttered.

Wordlessly, Tobirama produced one from his holster and handed it across the table. He ignored the disapproving look his brother gave him. Tobirama knew Hashirama wanted to scold him. Weapons at the table in the compound were rude, because it could be interpreted as a lack of trust in their clansmen. Tobirama was less sentimental on the matter. It was about vigilance, not propriety, their clan's feelings be damned.

Hashirama proceeded to carefully slice his finger and press it to the scroll. Toka was inherently cautious. Instead of leaving things to chance, she relied on the fierceness with which Fukuro protected any scrolls entrusted to him, and the sealing she placed on her scrolls. Tobirama had to admit, he found it clever.

There was a prick of envy he hadn't thought of it himself, using blood seals to secure messages. Only Senju blood would open a scroll. He waited patiently while Hashirama's eyes skimmed the scroll, which he could imagine was meticulously written in a careful hand, knowing their long-time friend.

Tobirama pulled the scroll away from his face, blinking, and then his brother's hearty laughter filled the air.

"I can't imagine anything particularly funny about a mission report..."

Hashirama grinned. From his place on the Hokage's shoulder, the owl began impatiently chewing the man's hair. "I disagree. The team we sent did their job as escorts. Although...there was an... incident with Shikamarin Nara."

Tobirama tilted his head slightly to show he was listening. He doubted it was anything morbid, because his brother wouldn't be smiling if anything had happened to the Nara heiress. "Toka writes about a strange condition where Shikamarin fell asleep without remembering. It was caused by..." he paused. "An empty stomach, or so Sakura-san hypothesized."

Tobirama stared. And stared. And stared. "You must be joking."

Hashirama laughed nervously. "We'll have to keep that filed...other than that, it seems the mission is going incredibly well so far."

"Care to elaborate?" Tobirama finally returned to his food, chewing his fish.

"Well, the infiltration went as planned. The Kaguya have taken both Sakura-san and Toka in and given them roles. Toka is going to gather as much information as possible from the other
servants…and Sakura-san…" A strange look passed over Hashirama's face. "The Kaguya have apparently become so impressed with her talents as a healer that Yoshiro Kaguya is intent on marrying her to his son and heir."

Tobirama poured himself some honey wine and drank it down in one go. "That girl? A bride?"

Hashirama nodded. "Healers are invaluable, now more than ever. You know that. The Kaguya are facing a crisis with their clan's resources constantly being depleted. Their clan's skill range has never been as balanced as ours, or even the Uchiha's. They rely heavily on offensive abilities and value brute strength above all else, to the point of brutality against their own when one of them fails. Marrying the heir to a woman who is both capable on the battlefield and according to Toka, a very skilled medic, is actually a good match on this Yoshiro Kaguya's part…"

Tobirama grunted. His food was all but forgotten, but he still held his chopsticks. He supposed from that standpoint, the girl did hold value, her temper aside. It made him more determined to unravel the mystery behind Sakura Haruno. He knew Toka wasn't one to embellish someone's abilities. If the girl was a liability, she would have said so. But somehow, Sakura Haruno had turned into something of an unexpected asset if she truly had the Kaguya so captivated.

His brother was back to eating and talking with his mouthful. "We'll let Fukuro rest for the night and send him back to Toka in the morning." He offered the owl a piece of fish and the bird snapped it from his fingers without hesitation. Hashirama stood up and walked to a window, opening it. Fukuro flew out with a strong hoot, likely to go rest up in the Senju aviary.

"That way he'll arrive around nightfall, and have cover." Tobirama concluded. For once it seemed like his brother was thinking sensibly without prompting. It was a sound plan. Toka had likely timed when she'd sent him out so that he'd arrive to them in the evening. Owls were nocturnal after all, so it wouldn't draw attention if one was active, unlike during the day.

"I think this team should be home before we know it." Hashirama said cheerfully.

Tobirama only sighed. "The mission isn't over yet, brother."

The sun was barely on the horizon, the sky still dark, when Toka felt a hand on her shoulder. Her dark eyes snapped open immediately. She'd never been a heavy sleeper. A life where the treat of death was ever-present made it hard for her to ever truly let her guard down. Definitely not in enemy territory. It was only Yuhi, she realized, smiling kindly and pressing a bowl into her hands.

"Good morning," the blonde whispered. "Sorry to wake you, but it's time to get up." Toka didn't complain as she rose; she was a disciplined kunoichi and had been trained to rise with the sun from childhood. "It's not much but you should eat the porridge." She continued. "The day will be long and it'll be hard to work the fields when you're hungry."

Toka nodded in thanks, taking the spoon stuck into the lumpy substance and eating silently. It was tasteless and half cold. She would have almost preferred rations, but she wasn't one to complain. Nutrients were nutrients, and it would be naïve to expect the comforts of home here.

In the servant quarters, everyone slept on cots lined on both sides of a long room. It was cramped, humid and uncomfortable, but the Kaguya had hardly proved to be accommodating captors so far. Idly, she wondered how Sakura's experience was going. Undoubtedly better, if only slightly. After all, she was to stay with Yoshiro and his family, the way she understood it. And it was clear the head made sure he and his children lived in luxury, even if no one else in the compound did. Yuhi waited patiently for her to finish, and when she swallowed down the last horrible bite, the girl
noded. "Now I'll show you where we go to work the fields."
Toka stood, setting the bowl aside. "What exactly are they growing?"

"Vegetables in this season." Yuhi answered. "The Kaguya feel it's beneath them to sow the fields."
She explained. "They often take able-bodied, young men and women from farming villages to do
that for them. There's also less resistance." There was a wry lift of her lips.

"I'm guessing the Kaguya don't share much of the crops with the harvesters either."

Yuhi sighed. "We get...what's left, and that's never much. But we shouldn't waste time talking, let's
go." Toka followed Yuhi out of the room. The small servant quarters were bustling with girls
getting ready to go work the fields. Everyone was marching single file out of the quarters and
towards a field at the edge of the compound. They picked up shovels, plows and hoes and started
working silently. The Kaguya had them trained well, and the guards watching them closely didn't
help. "You'll need this." Yuhi handed her a plow. "You can work with me today. Just follow my
lead."

"Of course," Toka replied.

"Hey, sis!" Toka looked up, watching as men marched into the field from the opposite direction
the women had. By their clothes and the tools they carried, she could easily see it was the male
servant population. There was a young man with windswept blonde hair, a strong jaw and red eyes
that looked strikingly like Yuhi. He walked over to them, and when he noticed Toka he smiled
dashingly. "Hello," he took Toka's hand and brought it to his lips. "You're clearly new, so allow me
to introduce myself—Kureno Yuhi, protector of maidens everywhere and—"

"Argh!" Toka was genuinely surprised by the war cry from Yurine Yuhi, who delivered an
uppercut that knocked the young man flat on his back. The kind look and demure nature was gone
and replaced by agitation as the girl stood over the downed blonde. "Brother!" she hissed, "Must
you hit on every woman you encounter?! Did it ever occur to you that you're a nuisance?!" She was
breathing heavily, worked up.

Her brother didn't even attempt to pick himself up from the ground. "M-My...bad..." Kureno
muttered.

"Yuhi One! Yuhi Two! What do you think you're doing?!!" A Kaguya guard barked. "Stop messing
around or it's the Dark Cells for both of you!" Toka watched both siblings stiffen. Kureno quickly
got to his feet and picked up his shovel.

"Apologies." He bowed to the guard. He smiled weakly at Toka and his sister. "Nice meeting you,
then. Farewell for now, sister."

When he ran across the field to take his spot with the other men, Yurine sighed, rubbing at her
neck. She was frowning in concern as she took a trowel and knelt in the dirt. Toka knelt beside her.
"I may have gone too far...he never seems to worry about anything, and that annoys me. And he's
too flirtatious with women!" Her face reddened in anger. "But...he's the only family I have left
now." Her tone softened as she showed Toka how to move the dirt aside. "D-do you...do you have
siblings?"

"A brother and a sister."

"Oh!" Yurine's face lit up.

Toka could see she wanted to ask if they were there with her. "They're both long dead."
She watched Yuhi's red eyes widen in horror. "I'm...how awful of me!"

Toka shrugged. "You couldn't have known. Show me where to plant." She didn't want to dwell on them or what she'd lost. She wanted to throw herself into the present. As always, it was the only way she could keep going.

Yurine grateful took the opportunity to change the subject. "R-Right...its carrots today."

Sakura's eyes slowly opened, and when she stared back into curious black eyes, she scooted back with a gasp. The tanned face hovering over hers stretched into a gap-toothed smile. "Are you awake now nee-san?" It was the youngest Kaguya from yesterday. The one who had eagerly watched her heal the stable boy. What was her name? "Kikue's here to help you get ready for breakfast!" she cheered, raising her arms.

Right. Kikue. How could she forget when the little girl spoke in the third person? Sakura rubbed at one eye and offered the cheerful child a small smile.

"That's nice of you..." She glanced around, noticing a certain grumpy someone was missing. "Um...where's—"

"Harihane-neesan?" she guessed. "Gone. She trains early every morning." Nonchalantly, she pushed a bone from her wrist and swung it around in mock aggression to demonstrate. Sakura leaned away from the sharp white bone dangerously close to her throat. "She scolds Kikue for not training enough." Kikue pouted.

Sakura thought about the face of the twelve-year old, pinched in a scowl. 'No one can say she isn't dedicated I guess...'. At least there was drive to match all that anger and intensity. "S-So breakfast, huh?"

Kikue perked up, nodding energetically. "Yosh! Servants already drew you a bath, neesan! Let's go, let's go!" Sakura was almost cross-eyed, trying to keep up with all her energy. She looked so much like her sister, but her attitude couldn't be more different. Kikue pulled her up from the futon with surprising strength, hopping around her while Sakura stretched. "This way!" Kikue's high voice chirped as she pushed at Sakura's back.

Still waking up, the kunoichi did her best not to stumble over her feet. Kikue steered her down the hall, chattering the whole time. The topics switched constantly, so Sakura could barely keep up, but the little girl didn't seem to mind.

When they got to the bath chambers, Sakura pushed open the door, surprised to see a large tub full of steaming water. "Like it?" her little escort asked.

Sakura had to admit that her muscles were sore and it was tempting. "It's great," she breathed. Kikue beamed. "Do you want help neesan? Kikue could wash your hair!" she offered innocently.

Sakura smiled awkwardly. "I'm alright. But you've been a lot of help Kikue."

Kikue looked a little disappointed, but she nodded anyway. "Don't take long! Kikue wants to help you pick your kimono!" The little girl skipped out of the bathroom, and Sakura sagged against the tub with a sigh.

Well...for a little girl who came from such a bloodthirsty clan, she was surprisingly normal. Energetic, but normal. Harihane seemed like she had a temper and didn't take well to strangers. She
was a little more like what she'd expect a child from the Kaguya clan to be.

And Yoshiro's only son... Sakura thought about his blank face as she slipped her yukata from her shoulders. She didn't know enough about him to really make an assessment. His thoughts, whatever they were, were carefully guarded. *But...maybe I can get him to talk about his family's battle history. The Kaguya are proud. Then he can show me the weapons cache.* Once she was undressed she slid into the tub carefully, hot water lapping at her skin. The air was sweet with whatever oils had been dumped in the bath, and Sakura gratefully started washing with the new soap cake and cloth waiting for her.

She understood the important position she was in. Close to the head family, she was also privy to very useful information, if she played it right. Even if she didn't see where weapons were kept, all she needed was a location and she and Toka could plot how to break in. Even if Sakura was positive she had less experience in espionage than Toka, she wanted to at least prove herself. *I want it all to go in the mission report.*

That way, maybe she wouldn't have to hear the Hokage's brother doubt her to her face anymore. The fan itself would be proof enough to shut up Madara, wouldn't it? The whole time she bathed, she thought of Konoha, the one in this time and her own. She wanted to go back home, naturally. But if that wasn't an option right now, she at least wanted something remotely familiar.

Even if there was an arrogant Uchiha with murderous tendencies waiting there. Sighing, Sakura got up, fumbling with a towel as the air brushed against her bare skin. She toweled herself and wrapped it tight around her lithe figure. Padding to the bathroom door, she had just pushed it open only to see Kikue waiting on the other side. Sakura gasped, a hand going to her chest.

"Oh, you waited." She smiled weakly.

The excited Kaguya nodded. "Uh-huh. You need help getting dressed, ne?"

Sakura shrugged slowly. "I...guess...?" If she was going to be expected to wear a kimono, which she still hadn't gotten used to, the answer was yes. That was when Sakura noticed two servants waiting with the young girl. Kikue pushed at the small of her back, shoving Sakura back through the door. The servants followed, swarming Sakura.

"H-Hey, wait a minute—" Someone yanked her towel off and Sakura covered her bare chest and clenched her legs together, glaring. She didn't even have time to voice her indignation when a powder blue kimono made of smooth silk was being pulled onto her. It was surprisingly comfortable, to the kunoichi's curiosity.

The sleeves were long enough to hide her hands completely and a white obi was cinched at her trim waist. Instead of her usual zori, she was given high, strapped sandals. Kikue called for a stool, and when she got one, hopped on it to start styling Sakura's currently honey yellow hair. "Hmm...Kikue knows what to do." Sakura heard a sharp noise, and whirled to see Kikue had pushed a bone from her wrist. Sakura quickly grabbed her wrist, anticipating a threat. But the girl only pulled the bone out with her other hand, smiling.

"For your hair!" she explained, taking the brush a servant handed her and running it through the damp locks. She plaited two pieces to hang in Sakura's face, the way the Kaguya seemed to favor, then swept the rest of the loose hair up into a side bun carefully, securing it with the bone. "You look like a Kaguya now." she giggled. "Junji will be happy." Kikue clasped her hands together, and with her bright smile and the strands of black hair falling into her large eyes, she looked peaceful and cherubic.
A relieved sigh that her cover hadn't been blown passed through Sakura's lips. "Thank you," she allowed Kikue to tug her up by the hand.

"Now, to breakfast!" she declared, raising a fist in the air. She pulled Sakura by the hand down the hall, and because she had no idea where the breakfast hall was, the disguised kunoichi let her. Kikue was humming cheerfully under her breath and skipping at her side. Sakura again marveled at how different she seemed from the rest of the family. She was almost like a normal, carefree child.

"Kikue..." she started. It was the second time she said the little girl's name and she noticed it rolled smoothly enough off the tongue. Kikue Kaguya.

Kikue glanced up at her."Haaai?" she sang.

"What's...what's your brother like?" she found herself asking. Sakura decided it'd be easier to know how to act if she had some idea of the heir's normal demeanor. He'd seemed so apathetic. Apathy she could deal with it. She was used to dispassionate males in her life, and she preferred apathy to the cruelty she'd seen in Yoshiro and Kento.

Kikue placed a finger to her chin in thought. "Junji is really strong!" she exclaimed. "Hari-neesan says she's stronger though. Sometimes she's mean. Even when it's pretend fighting she's too rough! Junji's never mean. Not to Kikue. He helps me practice when he can, and takes me for walks in the garden. Once, tou-san made him be mean to servants that made him mad. I don't think Junji-nii liked it."

Sakura absorbed everything. It sounded like Jun'ichi was a decent brother, at least. But how much of that was just Kikue's rose-tinted view? Even the worst monsters could be wonderful in the eyes of their loved ones.

"Why do you think that?" Sakura asked carefully.

"Because Junji isn't tou-san!" Kikue's reply was sure and fervent. "And he's not...he hasn't been happy for a long time." There was a sadness shining in her dark eyes now. "That's why Kikue hoped..."

There was a long pause, and Sakura felt the small hand holding hers squeeze tighter. "Oh, we're here..." she observed.

They stood in the doorway of a spacious room with painted murals of fierce battles featuring the Kaguya slaughtering their opponents covering the walls. The center of the room featured a large rectangular table where Yoshiro and his son were already gathered. Kento stood guard by Yoshiro, and when he laid eyes on the young heiress and her guest, his mouth twitched into a smug smirk. Sakura bit her lip, trying to appear coy while inside she simmered. Some way, somehow, before she left, she'd put the giant brute in his place.

"Kikue brought Oka-neesan!" The little girl exclaimed proudly, letting go of Sakura's hand and running for the table. She quickly found her place two sits down from her brother.

Yoshiro glanced up from the tea a servant had been pouring for him. "So you have." he replied evenly. "Now quiet yourself, girl. Yelling at this hour. Honestly,"

Chastised, the young girl slumped in her chair. With her eyes she motioned for Sakura to take the seat between she and her brother, onyx eyes wide and pleading. Sakura slowly wandered closer to the family, noticing the absence of her less than gracious roommate. "Ohayo," she bowed courteously at Yoshiro, then Jun'ichi.
"You're wearing the kimono prepared for you." Yoshiro nodded, looking pleased. Good. All the better to stay in his good graces. "Sit. Next to my son." Sakura obeyed, circling around the table, a walk that seemed like a mile, and sitting awkwardly beside the boy not much older than her. He didn't say anything to her, but their eyes met and he held her gaze momentarily.

'Okaaay...So I guess that's...something?' Servants began filing into the room, carrying serving trays piled with food. Their arms shook and their eyes darted nervously while not looking at anyone in the family as they set the tray down. Sakura took in the gaunt faces and worn clothing with a frown. It was clear they weren't eating nearly so lavishly as Yoshiro and his children. It made Sakura worry for Toka. Although, she was sure the Senju could take care of herself.

"Where's that insolent girl?" Yoshiro growled. He looked to his guard. "Kento?"

"Training, milord." He said with the insufferable smirk that never fully seemed to leave his face.

"Training." Yoshiro stated blandly. "Regardless, she knows how I feel about tardiness at my table."

"Should I go get her so you can give her the lashing she deserves?" Kento asked, his eyes sparking gleefully. The man was a sadist, Sakura decided. Simple as that.

"No need." Yoshiro said. He motioned to the doorway. Harihane walked in, not in a kimono but a training gi. It was the first time Sakura had seen a kunoichi not wearing a battle kimono in this era, and she stared in slight awe. Harihane's hair was in a quickly deteriorating bun, strands clinging to her sweaty forehead. Sakura could see a few bruises littering her face, but there was a hardness in her eyes that belonged to a shinobi at least twice her years.

The twelve-year old lifted her hands and stretched her fingertips toward Kento, shooting small bones at him with flinching. His own bones shot out defensively to stop her attack, and he laughed deeply. "Nice try, little girl. Your aim is better than its ever been." he said, the bones receding back into his body. "But you've got a ways to go before you're ready to tangle with me."

"Harihane." Yoshiro said sternly. "Sit." The girl scowled at her father before marching to her seat. Sakura glanced at the other two siblings but neither seemed disturbed by their sister's attack of their father's guard. Jun'ichi was eating silently and Kikue was sipping from her cup of tea, holding it between both her small hands.

"When breakfast is finished, Jun'ichi will walk you around the compound." Yoshiro declared. His son barely glanced up.

Sakura forced on a polite smile. "Thank you for the hospitality, milord." It was her chance! A walk alone with the heir to ply him for information!

In that moment, Sakura almost wanted to trade places with Toka. Whatever she was doing had to be better than sitting through the most awkward, tense meal of her life.
The time to act has arrived, but will Toka and Sakura be able to trust each other enough to do so? And the Kaguya children have been surprising Sakura again and again, but in the end, are they friend or foe?

The first thing that happened after breakfast was Kikue begging to come along with her brother and Sakura. Yoshiro quickly put his foot down, claiming Jun'ichi should be alone with her. For once, Sakura didn't mind. Kikue had proven herself harmless so far, but she was distracting with her boundless energy. Jun'ichi escorted her away from his family, and she had to ignore the icy stare of his sister Harihane boring into her back.

The weight of suffocation she'd been feeling while she ate with the Kaguya was almost tangibly lessened the minute they were out of the head family's household. "Where are we going?" she asked quietly. Her hand was rested on his arm as they walked. Servants and Kaguya clan members watched them curiously, but Sakura ignored all the gazes. She kept her eyes focused forward.

"My father wants you to have a full tour of the compound." Jun'ichi said.

"That doesn't answer the question..." Sakura withheld her frustrated sigh. She'd realized her "intended" wasn't much for small talk, but she was determined to pry it out of him if necessary. "Right. I guess if I'm going to live here I'll need to know my way around." Sakura said thinly.

"Hm." he responded, and Sakura took it as a sign of agreement. "That," he pointed to a building as stone and bland as the others, "is where supplies are kept."

"Supplies like what?" Sakura pressed.

"Food. Other things."

"Other things like weapons?" Sakura asked innocently.

"No. Other things like wagons, parts to repair equipment for the horses, and brick. The weapons bunker is underground, beneath the war room." he replied plainly.

Sakura was feeling pretty giddy at that small bit of information. "Underground? Why there?"

"It's the most expansive, I suppose." Jun'ichi didn't seem particularly interested in they why's.

"It's a little odd, I mean I haven't been here long but your clan mainly uses your kekkei genkai right?" This time there was genuine curiosity in her voice. Jun'ichi glanced down at her blankly.

Sakura had to admit, he was fairly handsome. His tanned skin contrasted nicely with his stark white hair, which he had partially up in a bun secured by an emerald brooch, the rest tumbling past his shoulders. Like many of the other Kaguya she'd seen, he wore beads to band his hair on either side of his face in the front. There were two red dots above his eyebrows, and he had very pronounced cheekbones. He was wearing a light green kimono and standard ninja sandals.
"It's a tradition, you could say. Started by my great-grandfather."

"A tradition?" she repeated.

"Taking the most valuable weapons of the enemies we defeat." he explained. "They're trophies from battle more so than anything we actually use."

"That sounds like a waste…" she mumbled, unable to stop herself.

"I agree." he said evenly. "Battles take away everything from the losers. Why take away their dignity by defiling a corpse?"

That…wasn't something she'd expect to hear the Kaguya heir say. Sakura stared up at him and he met her gaze. "You really think that?" she asked slowly.

Jun'ichi stared at her a little quizzically, arching one of his trimmed brows. "What reason would I have to state it if it wasn't how I felt?"

Sakura flushed a little. He had a point. "Well…when you take over after your father you can do things your way."

Sakura felt his arm stiffen under her hand and there was a slight fluctuation in his chakra. It didn't feel dangerous though. "My way…?" he chuckled slightly. "That's where you're wrong. That's not how it works in this clan, as you'll soon find out."

Sakura wanted to press him more, but stopped herself. Instead, she said, "So what else should I see?"

"There's not much to see. The crop fields, the servant quarters, the stables… Not much that's pleasant." He shrugged. "But you'd probably like the gardens…"

Sakura pasted on a smile. "The gardens it is, then."

~ASiT~

It wasn't what she'd been expecting. The gardens were green and lush, with hummingbirds darting between bushes of bright flowers, and trees bearing fruits. The hedges were neatly trimmed and there was a well-kept path that winding through the garden and around a koi pond. Sakura sucked in a breath, surprised by the beauty. Who knew an oasis like this would be tucked away in the Kaguya compound?

Sakura released her escort's arm and stepped further into the gardens, drinking it in. "This is…" she didn't really have words. She'd seen beautiful things before, beautiful places, but the fact that the Kaguya clan kept such a place wasn't adding up.

"It's one of the few truly peaceful places in the compound." Jun'ichi explained quietly.

Sakura smiled slightly as a hummingbird flitted around her head, its tiny wings beating hard. "Who grew all of this?"

"…My mother did."

Sakura turned to him, noting the solemn expression hadn't left his face. The whole time she'd been there she hadn't seen a single trace of Yoshiro's wife, if he had one. When he'd gathered his children, he hadn't mentioned a wife. No one had.
"She seems like she must be pretty talented with plants."

"She was. They reminded her of her old home, she told me." He held out his arm to Sakura, and she slowly walked over and took it. He guided them to a stone bench near the koi pond. "My mother was an outsider to the clan, just like you are. I'm not sure she ever fully got used to it all." Sakura watched silently as Jun'ichi produced a small bag of something from inside his kimono… leftover bread from breakfast.

He broke some off and tossed it into the pond. The fish rushed to nibble at it. "This was the only place she felt a connection to her old life I think. She'd bring my sisters and I here often, and make us listen to the sounds of nature."

She watched his hands as she listened to him. They were large, thin hands with long fingers and they broke the bread gently. Her eyes traveled up to his face next. He was concentrating on the koi, and for the first time Sakura noticed something almost lonely about him.

"That's a good memory to have of her. She sounded like someone who appreciated the little things."

A small smile formed on the Kaguya's formally blank face. "She was indeed. But…in the end she died because she couldn't embrace the spirit of the Kaguya. Or so my father says." The fleeting smile fell away again and his eyes were as cold as flint as they stared into hers. "Tell me about your home."

It was less of a question and more a demand. Softly spoken, but still a demand. Normally, it would have made Sakura bristle, but she sucked in a light breath and began thinking. "It's a lively place." she said. "The people there are like one big, extended family. I grew up with my friends there, and we all learned to be shinobi together. It use to feel like nothing bad could ever happen…but that was just me being naïve at the time."

Jun'ichi quirked a brow, "You speak about it as if your home isn't gone." he said coolly.

"It never will be. In my memories." Sakura replied just as smoothly. Inwardly she cursed for her small slip, but was happy she recovered well enough.

He tilted his head, studying her carefully. "You should hold onto them then." Sakura nodded. He offered her the rest of the bread and she took it, grateful for a small distraction. As she fed the koi, she heard him asking another question. "That bone in your hair…where did you get it?"

Sakura blinked, gingerly touching the bone securing her hair in its bun. "From your sister, Kikue."

He made a noise of understanding. "She's taken a liking to you. Outside members of the clan, she's usually more withdrawn." An image of the spirited little girl she'd met popped into her head, and Sakura had a hard time believing it. "My father has no time for her, and Harihane is more devoted to training than playing these days. I have my responsibilities as heir. She must feel comfortable enough to attach herself to you."

"I'm flattered. She's sweet." Sakura said truthfully.

"Sweetness doesn't win my father's favor." He sighed. "It's saved her in a way."

"What do you mean?" Sakura asked, brushing the last of the crumbs from her palms.

"Kikue isn't as young as she looks and acts. She's nine, but small for her age. My father would've likely sent her to the battlefield long ago, except for the fact that she's never been good with her
Shikotsumyaku. My father sees her as a failure and hasn't sent her into battle yet."

Sakura mentally sighed in relief. "But that'll change soon. He won't wait forever. Whether she's ready or not, he'll send her by her next birthday, if not sooner."

Sakura's lips parted, ready to protest, but she quickly sealed them shut again. Kikue was a Kaguya. They were her family, not Sakura. If her father wanted to use her as a child soldier, what could she really do to stop it? 'Nothing.'

Her anger turned into cold resignation. She felt disgusted with herself for so easily accepting that. People suffered every day, whether she was aware of their pain or not. And as many lives as she'd saved in her shinobi career, people would continue to suffer. It was foolish to think suffering would go away just because she wanted it to.

Jun'ichi sighed. "It's…disturbing from an outsider's view, I'm sure. The way we do things I mean."

Sakura laughed mirthlessly. "Shinobi life is disturbing." The koi swam around in the pond, happy and sated. "So, why do your sisters call you 'Junji'?' she asked abruptly. She didn't want her thoughts to get any darker. She had a front to keep.

"It's…something my mother used to call me." Jun'ichi said. "Harihane remembers that name from then and uses it out of habit. Kikue grew up mimicking her."

Despite his melancholy, there was still a fondness Sakura couldn't help but notice whenever he brought up his sisters. "Do you have them? Siblings?"

"Always an only child." Sakura said, shaking her head. She was glad, now more than ever. Worrying about herself in a strange time and place like this was difficult enough. If she had a brother or sister she was separated from and worrying about, it'd be worse. She felt guilty enough her parents had never gotten to see their daughter after the war.

"And what were your parents like?"

Sakura thought about it. "Well, we were a pretty loving family. My father liked to tell jokes…they weren't always too funny, but…it made him happy I guess. He was kind and energetic. My mother worried a lot. When I became a real kunoichi I thought I knew it all. I'd get annoyed when she tried to tell me what to do. Sometimes we'd argue."

Sakura clearly remember how she'd insisted she was a grown up because she had a headband. That made her a real ninja, a mature young woman. She'd been so blindly naive then. Not a clue about what it truly meant to wear that headband and call herself a kunoichi. But her parents had been patience, even when she'd acted like a brat.

"But they loved you." he stated. Sakura stared into his dark eyes, and he was looking at her expectantly.

Sakura felt slightly guilty that she hadn't thought of her parents as much as she'd thought of her friends, and her own survival. She knew they were likely devastated. Maybe they even thought she was dead by now, but she'd only really giving them passing thoughts. 'Some daughter…'

"Yes, they loved me." she sighed, fisting her hands into the fabric of her kimono tightly. If he noticed the change in her mood he pretended not to.

Silence fell over them then, but it was short lived. They both looked up when they felt a new presence enter the garden. It was a Kaguya from what Sakura could tell, dressed in a plain kimono but with the typical dark features. "Milord," he bowed slightly.
Huh. Sakura mused. So even in a clan like the Kaguya they practiced humility to their superiors.

"My…apologies." He eyed Sakura in suspicion. "I know this is your place of peace, but there's been a great deal of commotion in the fields, and because he's indisposed, Lord Yashiro asks you to be present."

Jun'ichi stood and nodded. "Very well; we'll handle it."

The Kaguya left without a word.

"We?" Sakura repeated in surprise.

He looked back at her and held out his arm. "If you're going to be the lady of this clan someday, you'll need to see how it operates. The good…and the bad." Sakura fought the urge to scowl as she took his arm. She had a bad feeling about whatever she was about to witness.

She wasn't really sure why, but they walked to the fields, through the streets. Jun'ichi didn't seem like he was in a particular hurry. He was calm, like they were still strolling through the gardens. No, Sakura corrected herself, that wasn't quite right.

Outwardly, there was nothing in particular that indicated anything besides apathy. But chakra could feel the slightest tension in the muscles of his arm and feel the fluctuation, small as it was, in his chakra. That didn't say anything about what was going through his head.

The fields were fairly expansive. Not as big as the farmlands outside Konoha where she and Team Seven had done genin missions, but vast enough that it clearly took more than one or two people to maintain it. There were probably fifty servants out in the fields. It was hard to tell, because they'd clustered together. There was a man kneeling in the dirt, supporting a woman who looked like she'd collapsed. Above them, a very angry Kaguya with a whip was glaring down at them.

Sakura found that she was pulling on Jun'ichi's arm to speed him up, trying to get closer.

Jun'ichi found a trembling older man with a balding head and a hunched back and pulled him aside. "You there, what's all this?"

"A woman collapsed, sir. But the supervisor isn't letting her seek treatment. And well, now her husband's kicking up a fuss…the young never know when to quit. It'll just make trouble for the rest of us." he muttered mostly to himself.

"Come." Jun'ichi said, taking Sakura by the arm and stepping into the crowd.

"I've told you, your break won't be until you finish your half of the field! The crops don't harvest and replant themselves!" said the Kaguya sharply.

"My wife can't wait for the break! She's tired and she needs water!" The man on the ground was insisting. "I won't return to work until she's allowed to rest." Sakura could now she the weariness but clear defiance in his eyes. The other servants looked on fearfully at the standoff between servant and supervisor.

The Kaguya brought his whip down in a flash, and the man cried out as it lashed at his arm. Sakura was now close enough to see the harsh welt of reddened skin already bubbling up. The whip had struck him so hard it tore at his sleeve.

"What makes you so special?! You're all replaceable little rats!" the Kaguya sneered. "If I give your wife a break, every last rat in this field will want one, and nothing would ever get done!"
The man, now clutching his injured arm slowly lifted his head. His wife was leaned against him, breathing heavily. Her face looked pale and there was a sheen of sweat across her forehead. Her eyes were barely opened. "P-Please…” he huffed. "At least let her work in the shade…”

The whip came down again, hitting him in the back. He cried out, hunching over, face practically in the mud. The cackle of glee made Sakura snap. She started to charge her way over, when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She looked back to see the solemn face of the Kaguya heir. "Let go. If you won't stop it I will."

"You'd make it worse for them."

Sakura glared, snatching her arm away. "Nothing's worse than this," she hissed.

"That's right, rat!" The Kaguya crowed triumphantly. "Down in the filth! Actually, like this you're less of a rat and more of a worm!" he guffawed, shaking with laughter. "And let this be a lesson to the rest of you worms. You are cowardly," he whipped the man again and he collapsed on the ground beside his wife. "You are lower than muck," he hit the man again, bright red staining his back as Sakura pushed her way forward. "And you are…”

Before he could crack the whip again, Sakura was there, holding her arm up to block it. The thick cord wrapped itself around her wrist, but she ignored the biting sting, using the Kaguya's shock to her advantage. She jerked her arm hard, and he came flying forward, colliding with the fist she had waiting to meet him. When he fell back on the ground, it was clutching his crushed nose tightly, blood dripping through his fingers.

Sakura found she was breathing hard with adrenaline. As much as she wanted to beat him while he was down, the man now whining pitifully as he held his face was neutralized, and she had been raised better than the Kaguya.

Turning away from him, she saw Jun'ichi come up beside her. Still angry at him for not intervening, she glared. "This woman needs shade and water."

He nodded wordlessly, picking the woman up with ease and taking her to where Sakura could see a small hut at the side of the field. Everyone was murmuring amongst themselves, unable to believe what they'd just seen.

"All of you…you're really so afraid for your own skins you won't stand up for one of your own?" she asked. "That's what makes you easy to control! The Kaguya don't need to use whips when they have your fear!"

It wasn't really fair to them and she knew that. They were rightfully scared for their lives and she doubted very many had ever been trained as shinobi before being brought to the compound. Still, they had turned their backs on the man and his wife, who probably worked beside them every day, so easily.

"What are you suggesting we do, then? We can't fight them! We're farmers—defenseless! Those who try to fight never win. It's every man, woman and child for themselves!" It was the same older man from before.

"It doesn't have to be!" Sakura snapped. "When people stand together even the weak can be strong. But, it's up to all of you to decide." She unwrapped the whip from her wrist and held it in her hands. Just the sight of it made several servants near her recoil. Sakura tested the elasticity a few times, and then unceremoniously tore it in two, dropping the broken pieces at the feet of the Kaguya still whining and holding his nose. "That's broken." she smirked, not sure if she meant his nose or his
weapon.

He climbed to his feet carefully, using one arm to pull himself up. "Y-You..." He tried to glower, but with his ruined nose he hardly looked threatening.

The kunoichi ignored him as she looked at the man who was still down in the dirt, bleeding from the gashes on his back. Sakura bent down, moving to help him up. She carefully tried to support him, letting him wrap an arm around her shoulders. "I-Isamu..." he whispered. "W-Where's Isamu?"

She assumed he meant his wife, and smiled gently. "Resting. You're going to need to get healed up. I'll help you."

"Let me give you both a hand." Sakura looked up to see Toka, who smoothly took her hand and lifted them up. Sakura blinked, feeling something small pushed into her hand. She glanced down at it. A small scrap of paper. Tucking it carefully away inside a small inner pocket of her kimono, they started half-dragging the man to the hut.

His wife was inside, sitting on a cot, Jun'ichi helping her drink water.

"Isamu!" He smiled in relief.

"Easy..." Sakura admonished as he almost fell forward. The two women managed to sit him down next to his wife, and Toka stared at Sakura meaningfully before making her exit.

"If you'll help me get his yukata loosened, I can heal his back."

Jun'ichi complied, helping the groaning man out of his blood-stained, dirty yukata so he was exposed from the waist up.

Sakura felt anger rise in her again when she saw his back, bleeding freely. She instantly put a cool green hand to it and he sighed in relief as the pain started to numb and the wounds closed. When she was done, she healed his arm, and then her own wrist. "You shouldn't be so reckless. What were you going to do if I wasn't a medic?" Sakura couldn't help but scold him slightly.

"I-I'm sorry for the trouble, but thank you..."

He took his wife's hand gently. "Are you better?"

She smiled weakly. "Better." She agreed. "Tired, but I'll be fine." Her weary eyes met Sakura's. "I appreciate what you've done for us. Thank you, both of you."

The man seemed to realize Jun'ichi had been there the whole time. "Wait, aren't you...L-Lord Jun'ichi?" he gulped. "I wouldn't have talked back but my wife needed care. S-She—"

"I am not angry." Jun'ichi interrupted him. "You protected a loved one at great cost to yourself. It was admirable." The man shakily nodded, pulling his tattered yukata back on and securing it. "You should both return to the fields as soon as you can." He gave Sakura a little nod. "I'll be speaking to the supervisor...I know he likely acted on my father's orders, but his actions were excessive. I trust you can see yourself safely back to my sister's rooms. No one should bother you since they saw you with me today."

Sakura stared at Jun'ichi as he left the hut. His actions were more mysterious to her now than ever. But she couldn't worry about that now. She needed to find somewhere alone, to read whatever Toka had given her.
She smiled one last time at the couple, who were looking at her reverently. It reminded her of the way Yuuta had looked at her. These people were so starved for kindness that they latched onto it desperately. "Take care of each other." She waved, stepping out of the hut.

Sakura snuck out of the room when the moon was high in the sky and she was sure everyone was asleep. Her heart pounded dully, but she blocked it out. Her senses were alert for any sudden chakra signatures popping up, but no one stirred.

The room's other occupant hadn't come back again that night, and Sakura was beginning to suspect she slept elsewhere to avoid her. Harihane's room had a window, and she took full advantage of it, working it open slowly and slipping out. Her feet touched down and she glanced around. She was on the side of the compound. Thankful for her memory, Sakura crept through the shadows, feeling like a shinobi from bedtime stories. On a secret mission through enemy territory.

A long shadow stretched across the corner and Sakura slunk out of view, concealing her chakra. But when it wandered by she almost laughed when she saw it was just a cat, trotting by with a rat in its mouse. When it had passed, she continued on her way, feeling satisfied when she reached the meeting point. Toka waited for her inside the small hut by the crop fields. "Alone?" she asked.

"Completely."

"What have you learned?"

Sakura figured that's what this was about. "Enough. The weapons are stored underneath the war room. After Jun'ichi told me that, I got Kikue to show me around their manor. The war room is to the west...it's close to Yoshiro's side. There's a trap door in the room. I'm guessing that's it."

"You've ingratiated yourself to them well," It could have been Sakura's imagination but Toka seemed to be studying her approvingly. "My only concern is that...you aren't getting too attached."

"Attached? To the enemy?" Sakura scoffed.

"Stranger things have happened." Toka said evenly. "However, they can't happen here. This mission will end and we will go home, one way or another. Everyone is an enemy here, and casualties are a possibility. Do you understand?"

Sakura's eyes narrowed. Toka was questioning how well she could do the mission, being close to the head family.

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

Both women tensed at the same time. Someone was there. Toka opened the door in a bold move, the night breeze moving her brown hair. "Show yourselves." Toka said lowly.

Soundlessly, two figures stepped into the room. Sakura stepped forward but the Senju stopped her with an arm. "You followed us."

Two people Sakura had never seen before with sandy blonde hair and red eyes stood side by side. The female looked apologetic. "It was rude, but we had to know..."

"We saw what you did today." The male said, looking at Sakura. He smiled charmingly. "A beautiful, brave woman like you is rare indeed." The female smacked the back of his head without a thought.
"Now is not the time, Kureno!" She looked sheepish as she cleared her throat. "Ignore my brother, please. As we were saying, we know you're shinobi! You must be." She continued excitedly. "There's no other explanation. If either of you were farming folk, you would have broken by now."

"If you intend to inform the Kaguya, you will die where you stand." Toka warned. There was an eerie hardness to her voice. Sakura had a hard time seeing in the darkness, but she could just imagine Toka's blank brown eyes.

Kureno raised his hands in surrender. "What? You misunderstand! My sister and I had made plans for a while now…to get back what the Kaguya took and escape. We tried to get others to join us, but…they're all afraid. Then Yurine told me about how she thought you were a kunoichi." He said to Toka.

"I was going to tell Tomoko about our plans tonight. I waited until everyone was asleep, but I saw her get up to leave…I waited until she was gone and then got Kureno. Please, we truly want to join together! You said when the weak join together even they can be strong. The four of us could do it. We could escape!" Yurine cried.

Sakura went slightly slack-jawed. "Are you serious?"

"Of course," Yurine nodded. "Why would we not want to take back what is ours?"

Toka and Sakura shared a long look.

"What do you want to take back?" Toka asked cautiously.

"Our family heirloom." Kureno replied. "It's all we have left after the Kaguya slaughtered our village and burned it to the ground. We were spared and taken captive…"

Sakura remembered what Jun'ichi had said about the Kaguya custom of taking weapons from their fallen enemies. "Was the heirloom a weapon?" she asked quietly.

Yurine nodded vigorously. "Yes! It's a katana and tanto set. How'd you know?" she gasped. "Did they take a weapon from you too?"

"Er, something like that…?" Sakura paused unsurely.

"Even more reason for all of us to join together then." Kureno grinned.

"Many of the servants here are simply civilians. They had no reason to follow us, and their spirits were broken." Yurine frowned sadly.

"They're scared." Sakura agreed. "In this compound, the Kaguya might as well be gods, controlling life or death for everyone and issuing punishment on a whim."

"Right. So even though they've already lost everything they don't fight back. But…that might change now that the two of you are here." Kureno said, a hint of hope in his voice.

"We can get back what was taken without help. Why should we join with you?" Toka asked.

"You don't have to, of course. We could forget this meeting ever occurred. But we think the information we have is invaluable." Kureno's handsome face became smug.

"In three nights, the Kaguya are having one of their revelries." Yurine clasped her hands together. Sakura paled. She hated to know what that entailed.
"Lord Yoshiro always oversees the battles and then the Kaguya feast. It's the perfect opportunity." Kureno explained.

"You're just...telling us all this? What's the catch?" Sakura asked skeptically.

Yurine giggled as Kureno chuckled. "They truly are shinobi." He told his sister. "Nothing to worry about fair flower." He moved and took Sakura's hand in his, trying to bring it to his mouth. Sakura snatched it away, eyeing him warily.

He sighed in dejection. "My sister and I think you can be trusted." He looked at Toka and held out a hand. "Can you trust us?"

Sakura didn't sense any ill intentions. She looked to Toka. "That remains to be seen." said the Senju. Kureno slowly lowered his hand.

"We're shinobi too, you know," Yurine said. "The last of the Yuhi clan after the Kaguya came... My brother and I both excel at genjutsu and sword fighting."

"Fine." Toka glanced around. "In three nights, with your help, we strike. But betray us and—"

"We know. So we have a deal." Kureno interrupted.

"We should all be returning before anyone suspects anything." Toka told Sakura.

"Wait!" Both Konoha nin turned. "There's one more thing..." Kureno said.

"You've got someplace to return to, don't you...?" Yurine sighed. "If you'll have us, we'd like to come. The Yuhi are a small clan so we had few enemies, and we'd work for our keep—"

Toka held up a hand. "Prove yourselves, and we will take you."

Sakura felt her breath catch in her throat. She was witnessing history. If they succeeded, the Yuhi siblings would return to Konoha with them. 'One of them must be Kurenai-san's direct ancestor.'

It dawned on her then how much influence she had on the past, and how that could affect her own time. The Dragon Goddess knew that too.

Sakura snuck back to the manor, feeling more foreboding than she had the entire mission.

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Shikamarin sighed, her face cradled between her palms as she stared listlessly at the fire. The sun was getting low. There would be a dark sky twinkling with stars hanging over them soon.

A rabbit roasted on a spit above the flames. The scent of smoked meat filled the air. Shikamarin thought that the sunset had some of the same colors as the fire. That pretty burnt shade, so defiantly bright. "Game meat...again." It slipped out before she could stop it.

Sarutobi, who had been concentrated on turning the animal, arched a brow. "I'm sorry, is there something else you're in the mood for? Takoyaki perhaps?"

"I know you're teasing me..." she grumbled. "You don't have takoyaki." It didn't stop her from wishing he did. She'd never had it, but her clan had always been forest-dwellers. Better to raise their herd of deer. "Game meat every night is...boring."

"I know this might be your first mission for the village, but it's not your first time outdoors, is it?" he chuckled. Deciding the rabbit was done, he pulled it off the open flame, humming in
satisfaction. "And Susumu never complains, do you?"

The timid healer looked up quickly, fingers poking together as was her habit. It meant she didn't want to be a part of the conversation. "W-Well...I know you're doing your best to provide for us, Sarutobi-san." she said softly. Truthfully, Susumu said everything softly. The only time Shikamarin had her really make a lot of noise was when a large caterpillar had dropped down on her head from a tree one day.

"We're pretty close in age, right? You're supposed to be on my side," Shikamarin worried her lip, but she wasn't really worried. She wasn't really upset with Susumu either. Both of those emotions took up too much energy.

"Sorry!"

"She's messing with you, I'm sure." Sarutobi assured calmly. He cut up the rabbit meat and handed it out on some large, heavy leaves he'd found.

Shikamarin chewed hers lazily. Sarutobi was a good hunter, and not once did any of them go to bed hungry. She should be grateful for that. Still, she wondered when they'd hear from either of the two who were with the Kaguya. That stern Senju or Sakura. They were both okay, weren't they?

She popped another piece of meat in her mouth. "Not in the mood to complain anymore?" Sarutobi asked from the other side of the fire, smirking.

"You're an alright cook." Shikamarin conceded. There was always good-natured teasing between them. He looked out for her and Susumu like a reliable uncle.

"Hmph!" He bit into his own piece and swallowed. "What about you Susumu?"

"I'm grateful." Susumu smiled. The healer was demure, almost skittish, and quick to fluster. It made Shikamarin think her life before Konoha wasn't a pleasant one.

"I'm glad someone is." Sarutobi boasted, lifting his rabbit to take another bite. Shikamarin watched the food disappear from his hands, a screech piercing the night air.

"What the hell?" Sarutobi cried, shocked. He stood, taking out a kunai. Shikamarin didn't see the need. The culprit hadn't gone far. A small screech owl sat on a low hanging branch, greedily eating its stolen catch. Sarutobi moved towards it deliberately, noticing it had something strapped to its back. The owl paid him no attention. Shikamarin thought the bird looked smug.

"Come here, you!" Sarutobi swiped at the bird but it easily lifted itself into the air to avoid him. He growled in frustration as the owl squawked.

This time Shikamarin was sure it was mocking him. The owl hovered in place before swooping low over Susumu's head, causing the medic to squeal and cover her head. Shikamarin stuffed the last piece of rabbit into her mouth before the bird could reach her. She held out an arm tentatively, and the little bird alighted on it.

"Foul little thing..." she heard Sarutobi mutter as she took the scroll of the owl's back. "What is it?"

"Not sure," The Nara shrugged, unfurling it. Her eyes quickly skimmed over the careful script. "From Toka. Says they're going to be going after the fan soon. They found help. But we're supposed to meet them in the compound...that's all it says." She tossed the scroll at Sarutobi and he read it himself.
"M-Meet them inside the compound?" Susumu's teeth were practically chattering. She wasn't meant for frontline combat that was for sure.

"Don't worry, kid. You'll stay out here and we'll meet up with you. The two of us should be enough back-up. I have a feeling we're just diversions anyway." Sarutobi explained.

"Maybe she thought you'd be a good diversion." Shikamarin told him. "You're the slowest and the oldest after all."

"No wonder that little beast likes you," Sarutobi smirked wryly. The owl had moved up her arm to nuzzle at her cheek. "You're both cheeky things."

The days leading up to the break-in of the weapon's room trickled by. She continued to eat with the Kaguya, and play with Kikue when she could. The little girl always looked at her with such adoring eyes, following her like a lost duckling.

It made her feel almost sad that she'd be leaving her here. As for her brother, Jun'ichi brought her to the garden every day and they'd feed the koi. They had developed a quiet understanding of each other.

Even Harihane, to Sakura's great surprise, didn't seem as hostile towards her. Ever since the night Yoshiro had announced rather casually he'd heard about what she did to the Kaguya in the crop fields, Harihane seemed acutely interested in watching Sakura from a distance. It wasn't with the anger from their first meeting. Now Harihane looked almost curious. 'Like she's waiting to see me break someone else's nose.' Sakura realized, smirking lazily to herself.

The night of the feast was a bustling time for the clan, just like she'd expected it would be. The Kaguya fought each other in a melee style tournament. Then, they'd take to servants and make them fight, promising extra food rations to the winner. It made Sakura sick.

She stayed by Jun'ichi's side, dressed in a purple silk kimono with her hair done up in another style by Kikue, smiling prettily like a good little future bride. It was hard, keeping up the front. But she continuously told herself it would all be over soon. She'd be going back to Konoha, and maybe get some revenge on the Kaguya on her way out.

At dinner, she sat beside Jun'ichi near the head of the table. The Kaguya reveled the way they battled. Wildly. Servants constantly were coming to the table to refill cups and clear away plates to make room for the next course. Meanwhile, Sakura imagined they were subsiding on mere scraps. The thought made her push her food around, but whenever she caught Yoshiro's eye she made sure to take a few bites, so it didn't seem too suspicious. Yoshiro. She'd be glad to leave his household. He wasn't a brute like his guard, but no doubt he was just as cruel.

She'd never openly admit it, but Toka might have been onto something. Sakura did feel badly for his children. Even Harihane. As she'd spent time with the older and youngest of Yoshiro's three children, she'd discovered maybe not every Kaguya was black-hearted.

The sound of silver chiming against pewter drew everyone's attention to the head of the table, where Yoshiro sat, looking deceptively well-mannered in his mauve kimono. "A toast..." he said, raising his cup with a sly smile. "To my son, and the woman he has finally agreed to marry. May he lead our clan to even greater heights than ever before!"

The other Kaguya lifted their glasses at the table with roars of excitement. Harihane rolled her eyes and halfheartedly lifted her cup before gulping it down while Kikue raised her glass of juice high
above her head, beaming. "To Junji and Oka-neesan!" she squeaked happily. Sakura smiled fondly.

The feasting continued, but Sakura became increasingly antsy as time passed. It would be time for the second event of the evening, the melee battles, and that's when she'd slip away.

"You know," Harihane muttered over the noisy room, glaring sourly, "You could do a better job of not showing you wanna be anywhere but here." Sakura had long since stopped taking the girl's glares and brusque way of speaking personally. It was just how she was. Young and perpetually pissed off.

"Oh, no, it's not that..."

"Yeah, it is. Why would it not be?" Harihane stabbed at a piece of chicken with her chopsticks roughly and ate it. "These feasts are stupid. People get drunk, handsy and loud. Even the women are no better. After the melee fights I'm going to put Kikue to bed."

Harihane ignored the small voice mumbling, "Kikue wants to stay with nee-san and Junji!" in the background.

"You don't stay for the servant fights afterwards?" Sakura asked curiously. The only time Harihane seemed to be close to happy was when Sakura had seen her training. She was good, well beyond Sakura's own skills at twelve. Of course, Harihane had the benefit of a kekkei genkai, and she was perfectly adapt at utilizing it.

She'd taken down opponents twice her size with relative ease. Sakura learned that the bruises she sometimes had on her face were small when she left her sparring partners bloody heaps on the floor. They lived though, and sometimes Sakura had healed them herself.

"Those are even stupider than this feast! They're just half-starved commoners..." Harihane said, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. "Making them fight is pointless. It's not even entertaining... The Kaguya who participate in the melee choose to, and it's a chance to show how strong your Shikotsumyaku is. But commoners are fighting because they think they'll die if they don't. It's not for fun. It's for their survival...that's...not entertaining." her voice was quieter, and Sakura wondered if she was implying that she found the fights cruel. Harihane wouldn't say it outright, but it was the impression Sakura got.

Sakura smiled into her cup as she took a sip. She'd insisted on juice, because she wanted to be alert for tonight.

"What?" Harihane snapped. "You've got a stupid look on your face like I said something funny."

Sakura laughed. "It's nothing. I was just thinking you're sort of nice when you let yourself be."

Harihane's cheeks puffed out indignantly. "You're weird," she hissed, angrily eating her food.

Sakura had no denial for that, so she merely shrugged.

The melee was just starting when she told Jun’ichi she was starting to feel heavy-headed and wanted to go for a walk to clear her head. He offered to escort her, but she assured him she'd memorized the compound and would be fine on her own. There was some reluctance in his eyes, but he didn't stop her. Sakura kept up a calm front as she left the sparring hall.

It was a free for all. Kaguya tearing into each other to see who'd be the last one standing. Somewhere in that mess, was a small girl with something to prove who was cutting down foes with
a vengeance. Sakura half-wished she could stay to silently cheer on Harihane, but the mission was what came above all.

Toka was waiting for her just outside the hall. No one was paying much attention to what the servants did now. They had to seize the window of opportunity. They walked silently, back toward the manor. Now that everyone knew that Sakura was meant to be the young lord's bride, no one questioned her presence. They'd just think Toka and the Yuhi siblings were assisting her.

Yurine and Kureno smiled when they saw them coming. "This is it!" Yurine whispered.

"Let's not let excitement get the best of us. The hardest part is still ahead." Toka reminded.

She took the lead, and Kureno turned to Sakura, whispering. "She always like that?"

"If you've got time to whisper, you've got time to walk." Toka called.

Kureno laughed sheepishly, and Sakura blushed, both of them quickly catching up to Toka.

Sakura had never actually been to the west side of the manor. Jun'ichi told her it had once belonged to both his parents, but now his father lived there alone, while the children occupied the east side. It was where Yoshiro's bedroom and war room were. It was also where Jun'ichi's late mother had her library. Apparently she'd been an avid reader as well as a gardener.

They traipsed the halls carefully, Yurine quietly explaining she'd once been summoned to this side of the manor with a handful of other servants. It was to move everything belonging to the late lady of the clan to another area. Yoshiro had wanted it out of his sight. Yurine had been in the war room then, noticed the trap door, and from the drunken lips of Kento one night, had learned it was where the Kaguya kept their store of confiscated weapons.

Sakura wasn't sure how Toka felt about the Yuhi siblings, but she was glad for the information.

"So this is it," Toka said, pushing at the door to the infamous room. "Quickly, let's-"

"Nee-san?" a small voice asked sleepily. Sakura felt cold dread settle in her heart. Everyone turned, surprised to see Kikue, rubbing at her eyes, stumbling forward in her oversized slip.

"Kikue!" She crouched, and the little girl shuffled toward her. Sakura placed a steadying hand on her shoulder.

"I didn't sense that child..." Toka said, clearly disturbed. "I didn't sense her at all. I can't sense her now!"

Sakura blinked, she looked at Kikue with new eyes, realizing that Toka was right. She was standing right in front of her, breathing, blinking at her with innocent eyes, clearly alive and well. But there was no trace of a chakra signature.

"That's not right...is this some kind of trap?" Kureno asked, glaring at the little girl.

"Kikue..." Sakura said slowly. "Are you..."

"She's a sensor-type." Yurine realized. "A good one."

Toka nodded. "Yes, it makes sense."

'That's why I couldn't sense her at all those two times. She suppressed her chakra.' Sakura remembered. Then she thought of something else. "Kikue, how'd you know exactly where to find..."
me?"

She beamed, her flat chest puffed out. "Kikue always knows where to find nee-san! Because Kikue knows what nee-san's chakra feels like. She can see it!"

"Definitely a sensor..." Sakura concluded.

"Sens...or?" Kikue repeated. "What's that mean? Tell Kikue!" she cried, a little more animated as she looked at the faces surrounding her curiously.

"No way, are you trying to tell us you didn't know you're a sensor?"

"It takes training to perfect sensor abilities. The fact that she's achieved this level with apparently no knowledge of her status is impressive." Toka said genuinely. "It stands to reason she hasn't been trained. Her family may not even realize the asset they have right under their noses. She's likely been tapping into it unconsciously. A strong desire to see you," she nodded at Sakura, "And her abilities activate. Wanting to remain quiet out of curtesy, and she suppresses her chakra. It's all just a guess, of course. At any rate, it's dangerous for her to have seen us. Her abilities could ruin everything." She took a step toward Kikue.

Sakura felt her hand clench around Kikue's thin shoulder. "Toka..." she glared. "She's still just a child."

"Children are the most dangerous of all." Toka said, still advancing. Kikue started to back away cautiously. "They are weapons of war as much as any adult shinobi."

Toka's fingers twitched and Kikue's eyes glazed, before she slumped forward.

"You put her in a genjutsu..." Sakura breathed in relief. She gently laid the tiny body in the hallway outside the war room.

Toka's lips curved wryly. "I am a kunoichi. I am no monster. She'll awaken thinking she's dreamt it all." They looked at Kikue, head rolled to the side, her eyes were open and her lips were parted slightly. She was deeply ensnared in Toka's genjutsu, whatever it was.

"What if someone finds her like that?" Kureno asked.

"She still won't remember she's seen us. She'll think she was having a lucid dream and left her room. That's what she'll tell them. Hopefully, we'll be long gone before then." Toka stepped into the war room with the others behind her, and opened the trap door with a hard tug.

"Sakura, you go first, we'll take point."

She could hear Yurine speaking as she stepped into the dreary staircase that spiraled down into the dark, miles underground. "Sakura? Then your name isn't Tomoko either, is it?"

"Call me Toka." the Senju was saying.

Sakura felt like her body was buzzing. Her heartbeat was quick with excitement more than fear. This was what the week and a half they'd spent on this mission was for. She could feel Toka and the others around her, and it gave her a sense of security as they crept further into the bunker.

The walls were gradually widening, and torches lined them periodically, kept burning with oil. It was eerily beautiful. The ceilings arched surprisingly high the further down they went, and gleaming marble columns looked untouched by time. There was a haunting quality in the air, like
the'd stepped into a forgotten sepulcher. Sakura's eyes widened when they stepped into what had to be the main room, the cache itself.

It was lined with weapons of all shapes and sizes. The walls were gilded in gold and encrusted with rubies, delicately carved hooks to hold some of the heavier weapons. Ornate swords, maces, battle axes, and bo staffs hung decoratively. Sakura vaguely thought this would be something out of TenTen's dreams.

"The spoils of their raids." Kureno growled from somewhere behind her. "When they destroy small ninja communities, they take weapons as their trophies. Weapons that have been passed down for generations."

Sakura understood his anger, but she was just grateful the Kaguya didn't take heads to display.

"Save your anger." Yurine said. "We're getting what's ours back." The Yuhi siblings stepped around Sakura and began surveying the weapons.

"Sakura," Toka whispered urgently from right beside her, "The fan." Sakura vaguely noted Toka had dropped the honorific.

In her awe, she had somehow missed what should have been obvious. Above all the other weapons, sitting there in all its glory, was Madara Uchiha's gunbai. Sakura ran toward it, her fingers wrapping around the bandaged handle as she pulled it down. She couldn't help but admire it. It was weightier than a normal fan but for its size that was expected. Sakura didn't know weapons that well, but she knew this one was special. She ran her hand over the tomoe marks and it almost felt like it thrummed.

"Let's go!" Toka hissed urgently. "I feel company coming on."

Sakura did too, and cursed silently. She'd thought they'd have more time. In her peripheral vision, she could see the Yuhi siblings had reclaimed their weapons too and were ready.

Sakura took off running with her comrades right behind her. She knew there was a fight waiting for them and she was more than ready.

The first five Kaguya to meet them fired on them immediately. The group split to avoid them, but the barrage was endless. Frustrated, Sakura swung the fan hoping to repel the attacks. It did more than that. The Kaguya went flying through the air as if they were insects, the bone projectiles impaled them before they hit the ground.

Sakura's eyes widened and she looked at the weapon in her hands. Kureno gave a low whistle. "That's sure something. Where'd you get a thing like that?"

"No time— keep moving!" Toka barked. "The more the path widens the more enemies." They stepped over the downed bodies of the groaning Kaguya.

The tunnels widened but no more enemies came at them. Sakura was suspicious. Something was wrong. It happened suddenly just as they reached the incline leading back up to the trap door. Dozens of chakra signatures were everywhere. Sakura skidded to a stop, yards away from a small army of Kaguya led by Yoshiro. Kento stood at his side.

"Well, well...it seems Kento was right about you. Something was off." Yoshiro drawled. "My son will be disappointed. I'm told he was actually interested in you. My daughters too. A pity I'll have to break the hearts of my children." Yoshiro's bones protruded from his arms and shoulders, and the other Kaguya followed his lead, extending their bones. Sakura tensed, knowing that Toka and...
the two Yuhi were all prepared to fight to the death.

"Take out Yoshiro." Toka murmured. "We can handle the others."

Then a wave of Kaguya descended on them with sharp battle cries and Sakura met the ruthless smile of Kento. "Not gonna make it that easy on you, girly. You want to get to Lord Yoshiro, then take me on."

Sakura carefully set the fan aside, cracking her knuckles. "Gladly."

The hulking man came at her and she readied a fist meant for his solar plexus. He stopped it with a meaty palm, smirking. "Weak," he chuckled.

Sakura tilted her head. "Really?" He was so busy underestimating her, he failed to see the fist she drove into his chin until it was too late. His jaw made a sickening crack as it collided. The arrogance seemed to fade from him as he gripped at his broken jaw, glaring at her.

To his credit, he recovered more quickly than she was expecting, swinging an arm spiked with bones at her left. Sakura narrowly dodged in the enclosed space. And when he swung at her from the right it managed to gash her side. Hissing, the kunoichi silently promised herself retribution.

When he made a grab for her she met him head-on and they grappled for control. The protrusions from his palms dug into her own, and she ignored the pain, pushing back hard and squeezing his hands tightly.

She could see discomfort start to flicker in his eyes, as much as he was trying to hide it. She used her super strength until she felt every one of the fat fingers on his left hand break. The dark thrill she felt at the look of agony on his face sent a chill up her spine. 'Look who doesn't have a high pain threshold.' He let go of her other hand immediately, grabbing her by the throat faster than she could react. He squeezed, his fingers easily encompassing her entire neck.

Sakura sputtered, reaching up to pry his hands away. But the minute her hand touched his metacarpal bones began digging into her throat. The threat was clear. Try to break her fingers and he'd puncture her neck. Sakura dropped her hands and started swinging her legs. She heard Kento's garbled laugh and knew he thought she was futilely struggling, but she kept desperately swinging her lower torso while her air continued to run out.

Closing her eyes, she wrapped her legs around his broad waist and swung up, using her strength to flip him over her head. She spun in the air to land on her feet, but with his monstrous size, he wasn't as lucky. He crashed down and the floor underneath him splintered with the sheer force, making a sizable dent. He sprawled on the floor, unmoving. Sakura panted, rubbing her neck. That had been too close.

She glanced around to see half of the other Kaguya her team had been fighting either dead or unconscious. Yoshiro clapped slowly, stepping around his kinsmen with disregard. "Brilliant. Now killing you really does seem like a shame." He tisked. "Return the weapons you've taken and I may yet see you as my son's wife."

"I'll pass." Sakura huffed. Her throat still burned, but she wasn't going to waste her energy healing herself until after the battle. She was confident she didn't need to unleash the Byakugo seal to beat Yoshiro, which would probably break her henge.

Yoshiro smiled thinly. His eyes said he knew that'd be her answer. "I'll tell my son you died fighting, then." Sakura eyed him warily. No doubt he'd be faster than Kento, but just as strong, if
not stronger.

Sakura went with a right-left hook combo, testing the water. Yoshiro easily blocked it with an arm, using his bones to defend himself from damage. She hopped back, narrowly missing as he took the opportunity to thrust at her abdomen with a bone sticking from his arm. As they fought she mentally analyzed what she knew about their fighting technique.

They were taijutsu specialists, excelling in close-range combat. But they could also be mid-range fighters due to firing their weaponized bones. And speed...Sakura decided to assume Yoshiro had that too.

She ran through five familiar signs and her hands glowed a sharp blue.

"Full of surprises." Yoshiro grinned. "I'm excited to see what that does."

"You won't be as excited when you find out, I promise." Sakura said.

He rushed her, as fast as she expected him to be, and slashed at her with a sharpened bone, swinging it widely like a sword. Sakura ducked once but the second swing caught her in the right shoulder. She caught it with her right hand and snapped it in half with her chakra scalpel. He didn't stop, pulling a long bone, sharpened to a point from his side and swinging it down. Sakura blocked it by crossing her arms in an "x" over her head, but Yoshiro kept pushing down. She exerted force and flung it away, not wasting time to touch her glowing hand to his side.

He grunted. "So a paralysis effect. Interesting."

"Not through yet," she mumbled.

"Likewise," he chuckled darkly, the bones from his back protruding, and then growing to lengths the bones in a human body normally never could. Sakura was fascinated, but kept herself focused as he jumped and began rotating midair. Sakura backflipped, cursing the limited space and trying not to trip over the bodies of the fallen Kaguya. She reared back her fist and slammed it into the nearest wall, smirking as it crumbled. 'That should open up the room some,' she thought smugly.

Yoshiro momentarily paused his assault to watch. Sakura was quick to take advantage, hitting his leg with her chakra scalpel, and then the dominate arm he'd been using to attack her. He wobbled unsteadily, but had an impressive amount of control over his body, even with the muscles not responding correctly.

He shot a flurry of bones from his rib cage and Sakura found herself back flipping again, rolling hard to the right on her injured shoulder with a hiss when she landed to get out of the way of another attack. 'That's it! I'm done with this!' She felt like a snake peeling back its skin as the Byakugo appeared through the henge.

Yoshiro slammed his hand into the ground and bones sprouted through the floor, causing Sakura to launch herself into the air again. Deciding not to waste the airspace, she turned the dodge into a heavy drop-kick that caught the Kaguya on the crown of his head. She was pleased to see he looked dazed. It was likely only the density of his bones that kept him from fainting. Anyone else would have at least developed a concussion on the spot.

Taking advantage, Sakura quickly dove under his guard, driving her glowing blue fist into his stomach so hard it pulled him off his feet and into the air; she brought him back to earth with a slam that had the floor flying up with debris.

She heard someone cry out as debris was flung across the room. There was blood dripping from
Yoshiro's lips as he stared at her from the crater with half-lidded eyes. "I...you...you aren't natural."
Sakura huffed, stumbling before righting herself and collecting the fan. She smoothed her hand down the surface and smiled. It hadn't taken any damage at all from her attack. Interesting. Maybe she wouldn't give it back to Madara. Maybe she'd keep it for herself.

She turned around to see all three of her companions were staring at her in disbelief. Even the normally composed Toka seemed like she was seeing Sakura for the first time.

Sakura blinked innocently, forgetting that these weren't the people she had battled beside for years. They weren't used to her "monster strength" as Naruto called it. "What?" she asked sheepishly.

~ASiT~

Everyone was breathing hard when they climbed back up into the war room. No one was waiting for them, but it would only be a matter of time before more Kaguya came after them. Frustrated, Sakura didn't bother with finding a safe exit route. "Get back!" she warned the others.

She took one look at the wall, reared back her fist, and with an impassioned cry, the wall was rubble and a cool night breeze was flowing into the damaged room.

She heard a squeak she thought came from one of the Yuhi siblings, but ignored it as she carefully climbed over the mess she'd made, fan secured. Toka was right behind her, and Kureno and Yurine followed soon enough.

They ran through the streets of the compound, but by then word had spread and more Kaguya were quickly on their heels. They were all ready to fire on them, and Sakura suddenly cursed. It felt like they wouldn't make it, after everything they'd been through.

"Need some help? The cavalries here. *Katon: Haisekishō!*"

'**That voice! That technique...**' Sakura knew it was the escort team.

Smog washed down onto the bewildered Kaguya, and Sakura could hear them coughing and shouting in confusion. She knew what came next. "Keep moving!" she urged Yurine and Kureno, who had stopped to look back. "He's going to...!"

The fire was so close, Sakura could feel the heat of it at her back. It singed the ends of her hair as it collided with the smog and created a tall column of flame that successfully cut off the Kaguya chasing them.

"Get the fan out of here, we'll be behind you!" Sarutobi shouted. Sakura figured the best thing she could do was listen. Toka and the others ran behind her, and the front gates were almost in sight. Until two figures suddenly sprang out. Sakura skidded to a stop, slightly surprised to see Kikue (wide-eyed and awake) and Harihane blocking their path.

"We're supposed to be stopping you." Harihane said irritably. "But-

Toka stepped forward. "Then see if you can."

"Lady, do you even listen?! Did it sound like I was done talking?" Harihane went on, throwing up her arms. "I said we're *supposed* to be stopping you! Father figured you'd try storming the front gate. Go east, Junji's got horses waiting for you through a side-gate. We'll throw the rest of 'em off your trail for a little while."

"Why are you doing this?" Toka asked sharply. "You're betraying your own clan."
Harihane glared. "I don't like you. It's like I'm arguing with my reflection or something. Just take the horses if you don't wanna get caught, now go!"

"We should leave, Toka." Sakura sighed. "I think we can trust this." The Senju looked disgruntled but didn't protest. "Thank you, Harihane." Sakura smiled.

She couldn't be sure, but it looked like her tanned cheeks were a little flushed. "Tch..." she said, not meeting Sakura's eyes. Kikue ran over and latched onto the kunoichi's leg.

"Don't leave! Take Kikue too!" she cried, tears streaming down her face. Sakura picked the little girl up and hugged her before setting her back down.

"Be brave, Kikue. I know you can." Kikue took her hand in a death grip, shaking her head.

"B-But..."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Harihane exclaimed, hitting her sister on the head and dragging her away from Sakura. "You're such a baby!"

"We should go," Yurine urged, casting a nervous glance behind them. "How long until they find away around the fire?"

"Right," Sakura agreed, and the group took off running, leaving the sisters behind.

As promised, they came to the east wall of the compound to see Jun'ichi standing tall in the moonlight, holding the reins of a horse in each hand. The boy Sakura remembered helping, Yuuta, had the reins of two more. He lit up when he saw her. "Hi miss!" he greeted cheerfully. "I never did thank you."

"It's fine, Yuuta." Sakura panted, ready for the whole night to be over. Yuuta shook his head. "When m'lord said he wanted mah help wranglin' some horses you could use, I was so happy! Here!" he handed her a reign. "She's fast n' strong and really sweet, so she won't throw ya."

"Um..." Sakura fidgeted slightly with the fan. The whole time she'd kept it in a death grip. It was almost sort of comforting to hold onto. Maybe because she'd worked so hard to get it.

"You can't ride holding that. Here," Jun'ichi suddenly produced a thin chain, attaching it to the small hole Sakura hadn't noticed in the bottom of the fan's handle. Jun'ichi's arms briefly circled her waist as he wound the chain there, taking the fan and pressing it against her back before securing it.

Sakura blushed lightly. "Thank you."

To her surprise, he smiled lightly. "Get on," he inclined his head at the mare patiently waiting.

Toka, Yurine and Kureno were already on their horses. Sakura, not wanting to be outdone, put one foot in the stirrup and tried to clumsily pull herself up by the horn of the saddle. She'd never ridden a horse. It wasn't a skill she'd ever thought she would need. She tried to vault on to the tan mare, but overshot the mark and almost fell over the other side.

Her cheeks were bright red as she scrambled to correct herself, knowing she'd already made a fool in front of everyone. A sigh tickled the hair near her neck as she felt herself being yanked up and sat correctly in the saddle. Jun'ichi was watching her with barely masked amusement.
"Should I be worried about this arrangement?" he asked.

"We'll help her," Toka said, looking like the elegant lady-warrior she was, sitting on her horse.

"You did the right thing. Thank you...Junji." His eyes widened, and Sakura wondered if she'd made a mistake, but he bowed his head slightly. "Uh, I still think you could change the Kaguya. You and your sisters. You can see that your father's way isn't the right way and that's the first step. Step out of his shadow, show the rest of the clan the right way."

He nodded solemnly.

"Leaving without us?" Sarutobi came strolling up, Shikamarin trailing lazily at his side. He hopped on Sakura's horse behind her, and she was mentally a little relieved someone who probably had more experience handling horses would be riding with her. Shikamarin climbed on with Yurine, not even questioning who she was. Kureno pouted slightly.

"Have a nice journey miss!" Yuuta smiled.

Jun'ichi slapped her horse's side and it bolted into the narrow tunnel leading back into the woods, the other horses following. Sakura glanced behind her, feeling tired but triumphant.

Jun'ichi watched his father pace angrily, his hair looking unkept and dark circles beneath his eyes. Yoshiro Kaguya had most definitely known better days. He hadn't taken the decimation of his war room, and the deceit of his son's bride-to-be well.

She had not only defeated him but struck a tremendous blow to his pride. Jun'ichi was familiar enough with his father to know he wouldn't let it go. He supposed he himself should be angrier about how she'd fooled him, but he wasn't. She was a kunoichi, and undercover missions fell into the job description from time to time.

He wanted to believe, though, that her genuine care for everyone she'd encountered hadn't been faked. It had felt like she was truly someone he could open up to. "That girl...and her companions, they'll pay!" his father hissed, repeating the same thing he'd been repeating for days. "I'd hunt them down myself!" He stopped pacing momentarily, looking his son squarely in the eyes. Jun'ichi met the slightly manic gaze straight on. "That's what I'd like to say...but I'm need here. The servants have grown restless, we've had to quash several small riots just this week alone. It seems that girl's inspired them." he sneered. "So, you will hunt her down in my place. Bring her back here alive, though it's not necessarily a bad thing if she's been damaged."

"You want me to waste my time, tracking down a woman who's likely long gone."

"Yes!" Yoshiro barked. "And you will obey, do you understand? Pack immediately. I want you gone before sundown."

Jun'ichi knew that was his dismissal. He left his father to his manic pacing and returned to his own chambers. Lately, he'd been thinking a lot about what she'd said. He wasn't his father. He didn't have to be trapped in the deadly shadow of Yoshiro Kaguya. He could do things his own way, make the Kaguya clan better. That was impossible as long as his father lived though. And patricide...well, it was a possibility, but did he truly want to lead a bloodthirsty bunch of clansmen loyal to his father? They'd see him as weak, weaker than they already did, if he suggested his new way of thinking. Still, he felt she was right. He had to do something to restore his family's soiled name...

"Going somewhere, brother?" he pushed his doors opened, and there were his sisters, both standing
there with their bags packed for a long journey. Harihane had her battle armor on. And little Kikue...was sporting armor too, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

"It seems I'm not the only one." he muttered.

"Got that right!" Harihane pointed at him accusingly. "Take us or else!"

"Hari-nee-san, stop being bossy!" Kikue complained. "She means, we want to see nee-san too. So please Junji-nii!"

Jun'ichi raised a brow. "Who told you I was going to find her?"

Harihane rolled her eyes, flicking her jet black hair from her face. "Oh, please. We know Father just as well as you. Of course he'd send you to drag her back here. So count us in. It's about time I got out of this crap hole for a while, and Kikue needs to see the world at some point. Maybe she'd finally grow up."

"Kikue is growned up!"

Harihane made a flourishing gesture as if to say 'see?'

"You both miss her too, then."

"Yes," Kikue said immediately.

Harihane blushed, shaking her head. "Like hell! I just wanna see what else is out there, okay? Maybe somewhere, there's a place that appreciates strong women and let's them lead their clans."

"There's no changing your minds I presume."

"No~" Kikue sang.

"Does father know?"

"Does he need to?" Harihane retorted.

Jun'ichi closed his eyes, smiling. "It looks like we all changed, at least a little..."

Kikue eagerly looped her arm with her sister's "H-Hey! What're you doing?"

The youngest sibling ignored her, waddling to her brother awkwardly in her armor and dragging Harihane along. When she reached him, she took his arm too. "An adventure! Kikue thinks this'll be a fun trip!"

Jun'ichi ruffled her hair. "I agree."
Tobirama peered into the Hokage's office to see Hashirama diligently working through a stack of papers in need of his approval. The village was ever expanding. Two more new clans had joined them, and Hashirama had again built more homes for the new arrivals.

Admittedly, when he was serious and focused on the task at hand, Hashirama hardly needed his help, except for advice. But there were too many times when he complained that Tobirama's methods of supervision were heavy-handed. That he need a break, or he'd collapse.

Tobirama hardly worried about that. His brother's stamina greatly surpassed that of any normal shinobi. It was, however, closing in on lunch time. And as much as he'd have him skip it, Hashirama had made plans for lunch with a certain Uchiha clan head.

He sighed, mentally bidding farewell to the image of the focused Hashirama sitting behind his desk. "Brother," he called, pushing the door open slightly.

"Hm…" Hashirama didn't look up. He was reading over some document. "It's been unseasonably warm this year, especially for fall…the farmers are saying it's going to effect the harvest. They're requesting a shift of their fields, but I already gave the area they're proposing to the Nara clan, so —" Tobirama cleared his throat. It was good that Hashirama was thinking seriously about how to best solve the problems of his people, both shinobi and farmers alike, but if he didn't stop him, he'd go on talking to himself forever.

Hashirama finally took notice of his brother standing right in front of him, putting down his quill and smiling. "Oh, Tobirama, when did you get here?"

The white-haired shinobi bit back the sharp retort that would include berating his brother for not sensing him. "Never mind that." he dismissed. "Aren't you going to be late?"

"Late?" Hashirama asked in confusion. "For…? Oh, right. Lunch with Madara." he laughed easily, putting the papers aside. "You're right, I should get going." He stood up, stretching. "On the other hand…" Hashirama began, a devilish smile forming, "If I happen to take a detour, and it causes me to be late, that vein on his forehead will bulge out and his nostrils will flare."

Tobirama quirked a brow. He certainly didn't understand the closeness his brother shared with Madara, but he did understood the appeal in provoking him. Madara's expressions could be amusing when the right buttons were pushed.

"You shouldn't provoke someone right before you attempt to discuss policy with them. It's in poor form." Tobirama said it, but he wasn't sure if he meant it. At least not when it came to that damn Uchiha.

Hashirama shot him an accusing look. "Yet you can't be trusted to remain civil with either brother
for an entire conversation. *You're* allowed fun at Madara's expense, but I have to show restraint? That, dear brother, is quite the hypocritical rule."

Tobirama wasn't moved. "I'm not Hokage." he said flatly.

"Feh..." Hashirama muttered. "Anyway, I think I'd like to walk through the village today. It's good to show my face to the people every now and then. Why don't you come with me?"

Tobirama looked hesitant. "Must I?"

"Oh, what do you have to do that's more important?" He raised a hand as Tobirama opened his mouth to speak. "Those experimental jutsu? Perfecting the bunshin technique, isn't it? You can do that any time. Join me, brother." Hashirama strolled through his office door, glancing back expectantly.

Tobirama grumbled something inaudible.

"Was that a yes?" Hashirama asked.

*Only* until you reach the restaurant. I refuse to be in the presence of Madara for an entire meal."

He easily fell into step with his brother.

**ASiT**

The bright sunshine on their faces as they exited the Tower felt almost out of place. It was offset by the chill of an autumn breeze, and that brought Hashirama some comfort. It wasn't just the farmers who had been concerned. He'd caught whispers around the village from some villagers that it was a bad omen. Something had thrown nature out of balance and upset the gods.

Hashirama, choosing to see the brighter side, simply chose to treat it as if spring had come early. He liked spring, because he liked rebirth and new beginnings. Flowers, trees and plants blooming also fascinated him. Cherry blossoms especially.

*Who doesn't like cherry blossoms?* he thought. *They epitomize everything wonderful about spring.* He wondered if they'd bloom out of season, the way the weather was going.

"You should be more mindful. You'll end up walking into someone." Tobirama advised. Hashirama blinked, realizing his brother was right; he was walking and thinking, not really paying attention.

"It's alright," Hashirama smiled. "You warned me in time so I didn't—" The Hokage nearly tripped over something that felt too large to be a rock.

"Ow!"

"And what did I just finish saying?" Tobirama clucked.

"I'm sorry," Hashirama rubbed his neck, realizing he'd nearly fallen on a child that had been crouching on the ground. "Here," he helped the boy up, watching as he dusted himself off, inspecting his body for bruises.

"Are you alright? What were you doing down there?" Hashirama asked, bemused.

The boy heaved a sigh, still looking down. "Um..." He seemed reluctant to answer.

"Oh, I know you." The boy looked up at him, realizing he was the Hokage. A wide-eyed look of
awe took over the child's face. "You're Sasuke's son, aren't you?"

He looked a lot like Sasuke, with his tanned skin and the shape of his dark eyes. His hair was sandy brown, lighter than his father's, but this was Sasuke Sarutobi's son.

The boy nodded. "I'm—"

"Don't tell me." Hashirama interrupted, stroking his chin. "I want to guess. You're..." He prided himself on remembering almost all the faces and names of his villagers. He was almost positive he could remember the boy's name if he tried. "You're..." he fumbled, drawing a blank. One glance at Tobirama and he knew his brother wouldn't be helping him. "You're...Little...Saru..." he finished weakly, patting the boy's head.

The boy's face looked appalled. "S-Saru? With all due respect, Lord Hokage, it's sort of rude to compare somebody to a monkey the first time you meet them!" he huffed. "I'm Hiruzen!"

Hashirama deflated, embarrassed. "Hiruzen."

"It might not be your given name, but it is your family name, correct?" Now Tobirama decided to step in. After he'd made a fool of himself. Typical Tobirama. "In the future, it's unwise to crouch in the street, no matter the reason. Remember that, Saru." Tobirama brushed by the boy and Hashirama took that as his cue to follow.

The Sarutobi boy was pouting and he gave him an apologetic look.

"It's Hiruzen," Hashirama heard him saying to himself.

He was already late, so little Saru likely wasn't the only one who would be mad at him before the end of the day.

He focused on the smiling faces of the villagers and shinobi who waved and greeted them respectfully when they walked by. It was nice to see everyone in good spirits. It made him feel as if they were on the right path, finally. Tobirama was constantly reminding them they had a long ways to go towards completing village infrastructure. His brother, ever the pragmatist.

They had almost made it to the restaurant, and Hashirama could swear he saw that proud posture and long black mane through the throng of people passing by.

He was about to attempt to shoo Tobirama off, hopefully avoiding a confrontation right in front of the restaurant. His brother wasn't looking at him though, instead tilting his head in focus.

The Hokage was very familiar with that, and it meant Tobirama had a chakra signature he recognized in his cross-hairs. "Who is it?" he whispered, desperately praying it wasn't an Uchiha.

As much as he tried to explain to his younger brother that the Uchiha were their allies now, Tobirama's hostility and natural suspicion intensified whenever he caught sight of an Uchiha. Any Uchiha.

"I feel—"

"Haashiiii-niiii!" He recognized that voice instantly, turning in time to catch the girl leaping at his back. He sighed as he lowered the giggling girl to her feet. 'Well, it's not an Uchiha.'

"Hello, Reira. You're in high spirits, as always." It was true, whenever he saw the brunette she was wearing a sunny attitude, running around the village looking for adventure.
"'Course!" the girl said proudly, rubbing the bridge of her nose. "You foiled my sneak attack again today."

Tobirama shook his head at Reira. "That was horrible. A sneak attack usually consists of a much quieter approach. Unless you're trying to alert the enemy that you're ambushing them. In which case, that attempt went smoothly."

Reira looked up at Tobirama, grinning. "You're serious as always, sourpuss. It's like Tobaa never left." She blinked, suddenly remembering something. "Oh! I got this from one of her owls today!" she proudly brandished an opened scroll from somewhere inside her training gi, waving it around.

"She's coming home!" she squealed, spinning around and almost bumping into a passing civilian. "Tomorrow!"

"I've already received one of her owls myself." Hashirama explained. "I know."

"You're always the first to know...since you're Hokage an' all." she mumbled, putting the scroll safely away again. "Anyway, where are you headed? Wanna have lunch together? I would've had dinner with you last time you were at the compound, but..." she sighed. "I got in trouble again."

Hashirama chuckled in amusement as Reira skipped beside them. "Oh? Another prank gone wrong?"

"It wasn't supposed to be a prank!" The little girl noticed Tobirama didn't look convinced. "Really!" she insisted. "The beetle wasn't supposed to drop into Mei-san's tea...I was just trying to show it to her."

Hashirama laughed brightly. "Unfortunately, I can't have lunch today. I'm meeting with Madara. You remember him, don't you?"

Reira's tanned face creased. "Sure do. He's that Uchiha with the face like this," she said, pulling her face down into a grim countenance. "And sometimes, he makes faces like this." She once again rearranged her face into an angry snarl.

Tobirama nodded in approval. "Exactly the one."

"Tobi, please..." Hashirama felt the need to defend his friend. Even if it was true that on occasion, Madara's face had unintentionally caused babies to cry.

"Why're you meeting with him?" Reira asked curiously, her long braid swinging behind her as she glanced to her side. The quaint sushi restaurant where Hashirama was having lunch with the Uchiha head was only yards away, and standing in front of it were patrons doing their best to enter and exit the building while maintaining a wide berth from an irritable man waiting outside.

"Well, we have some things to discuss." Reira held up a finger to indicate she had more questions. "Boring grown-up things."

Sighing, she rolled her eyes. "Okay, I get it. I'm out of the loop then, huh? Well, when you're finished discussing boring grown-up things with an Uchiha that has a face like an oni mask, come by the compound and play with me, okay? I made a new friend I want you to meet!"

She darted off, back into the crowd, the familiar brown braid bouncing behind her. Along with the yellow gi, Reira Senju was easy to pick out in a crowd.

The Hokage waved at her back, despite knowing she couldn't see it.
"Does she remind you of anyone?" Hashirama asked.

"Yes," Tobirama sighed. "A ghost that's long gone." His eyes narrowed as he saw Madara slowly turn in their direction, likely sensing Hashirama was near. "Have fun." he spat, streaking away.

Hashirama wondered if he'd ever live to see the day his brother and childhood friend would get along. He supposed he shouldn't hold his breath.

"Madara," he greeted evenly.

"You are late." he rumbled, surveying Hashirama's sheepish smile and Hokage robes. The vein on his temple was throbbing irritably, and his nostrils flared when he huffed. Inside, Hashirama allowed himself to snicker. He knew Madara well.

"I am, and I don't have any excuses for that." The Hokage stated humbly. 'None you'd accept, anyway.'

"Well, don't make it a habit." Madara walked into the restaurant dismissively. Hashirama knew he'd gotten off easy so he didn't push the fact that Madara was ordering him around like he was the Hokage.

They entered the restaurant and eyes instantly fell on the two formidable men. Together he was sure they made quite a sight. Madara was dressed simply in a navy yukata with the Uchiha crest on the back, and Hashirama fidgeted with the end of his own robes. Maybe he should've changed. Coming out wearing his Hokage attire always drew attention, intentionally or not. But stopping to change would have made him even later. And Madara would have likely chewed him out properly when he'd arrived.

A young woman that Hashirama recognized as the owners' daughter came over to them, though her steps faltered when she caught sight of Madara's scowling face. "Welcome Hokage-sama," she bowed. "And you too, Uchiha-sama..." She awkwardly tried to smile, hiding her anxiety. Hashirama had to commend her for her bravery.

"Is there a table?" Madara asked.

"Yes, we've saved one." She swallowed, wiping her hands on her apron. "This way, please..."

As she seated them, Hashirama smiled gratefully. "We'll have whatever's fresh caught for today with a side of rice. And sweet bean soup. And some green tea!" Hashirama said after thinking about it.

The dark-haired woman looked only too happy to have a reason to leave the table. "You're scaring people." Hashirama whispered. "When you make that face, everyone gets the wrong idea."

"I am an Uchiha," Madara said. "They don't need any other reason to get the 'wrong idea'." His dark eyes glared into Hashirama's. "And I'm not a child. I am perfectly capable of deciding what I want for myself."

Hashirama sighed heavily, "Madara...that's not..." Was that true? He had a reputation that proceeded him. Not many people understood that Madara was a good man the way Hashirama did. He was proud, aloof and not always forthright in expressing his emotions. Due to that, people were sometimes wary. They didn't have the benefit of knowing Madara had another side. The side that loved his clan (especially Izuna) fiercely, was too shy to relieve himself when someone was watching and was secretly kind to children. Hashirama saw a lot of hidden good in him. He just wished the world could see what he did. "Hey, I wasn't treating you like a child! You would have
"Then you were treating me like a child!" The Uchiha said accusingly. "One that couldn't make up his mind!"

"No..." Hashirama stubbornly denied. It had been reflex to order for the both of them. He didn't mean to offend Madara's pride. He shook his head. "Listen, we're here for a reason. You've thought over my proposal haven't you? Even without the constant threat of being sent into war, the youth of the village still need training. I know conventionally each clan has trained their children according to traditions passed down through generations, but I truly feel if we're going to foster an attitude of village above clan, this is a step in that direction."

Madara crossed his arms, looking down at the table top for a moment. "I've thought of it...and while I wouldn't be opposed to the idea... I have to ask, how do you plan to go about this? This... academy you're proposing. There are a few important things to consider. Such as the entry age and specifications, how long children will be taught, and by whom. Then, you'd have to consider how to make accommodations for child prodigies who progress faster than their peers."

When Madara paused, there was a small smile on Hashirama's face. "What?" the Uchiha asked suspiciously.

"You've given this a lot of that. I was honestly a little afraid you wouldn't agree at all. But now that I have you on board, things will go a lot smoother." The Hokage said cheerfully.

"I had a hand in creating this village too." Madara reminded. "Infrastructure and expansion should be a joint effort."

"Of course!" Hashirama said excitedly. "You know, Tobirama's been thinking of an idea to rank the ninja of the village according to ability and experience. The young ones would be at the bottom naturally, and as they improve, they could progress their way through the ranks. Each rank would have requirements that would need to be met before promotion."

"I assume the breakdown would be to help missions to be assigned accordingly."

Hashirama nodded, about to explain further, when the serving girl came back with both her parents. All three of them carried trays of food and tea which they sat down in the middle of the table. Steam hit both men in the face and Hashirama smiled pleasantly.

"Will you be needing anything else?" the restaurant's female owner asked kindly.

It was clear she was speaking mainly to Hashirama, but the Hokage looked across the table at his friend.

"No." he said, picking up and breaking his chopsticks. "What about you?"

Madara eyed the food briefly before shaking his head. "No...thank you." To his credit, the Uchiha seemed to have taken Hashirama's words to heart, because he made an attempt to soften his facial expression.

The family seemed surprised, but quickly pasted smiles on their faces. "It's always a privilege to have you as customers." The male owner bowed humbly. "Both of you." He nodded at Madara.

"Please enjoy your meal!" the young woman chirped, dragging both of her awestruck parents away by the arm.
"See?" Hashirama asked. "Was that really so hard?"

Madara picked up his own chopsticks, pulling a bowl of rice closer. "Incredibly." he said sardonically. He took a few small fish, grilled sardines, but made a face at the bowl of small orange-red orb clusters in the middle of the table.

"What's that sour look for?" Hashirama asked curiously. "It's only roe. Salmon roe, by the looks of it! This is a high-quality spread." To demonstrate, the Hokage lifted a spoonful of the roe to his mouth and chewed thoughtfully.

Madara's eyes were full of disdain. "Only roe? Those are the eggs of a fish!" He turned up his nose, pointedly ignoring his friend munching on the fish eggs. Hashirama wanted to tell him that for all his protesting earlier, Madara really did resemble a petulant child at the moment.

"Exactly! It's a good source of nutrients." Hashirama explained. "You shouldn't be so picky. What's the difference between eating the eggs of a chicken and the eggs of a fish?"

Madara looked incredulous as he gestured to the bowl of eggs. "Eggs of a fish! You said it yourself. That's the difference. They're slimy, uncooked fish spawn. Fish is meant to be eaten grilled over an open flame. Sometimes raw, but never in egg form." He said it with such bitter finality that Hashirama couldn't help but laugh. At some point in time, roe had traumatized Madara, apparently.

A particularly horrible idea crossed Hashirama's mind suddenly. Horrible for Madara, anyway. "In that case, would you care for a friendly wager?" he asked innocently.

Madara drank his tea and then stared at Hashirama blankly. "You know I'm not one for wagers." He took a bite of his fish. "You have a problem and I'm not encouraging it."

Tobirama had told him almost the exact same thing, on more than one occasion. When it came to bets, the Hokage could never turn them down. The gods of fortune had always seemed to smile on him favorably, and so he figured wasting that favor would be an insult to the gods.

"I understand...the idea of betting against me must be daunting." Hashirama frowned, picking at his own food sadly. From the corner of his eye, he saw Madara freeze mid-bite.

"Daunting?" he scoffed in disbelief. "An Uchiha is daunted by nothing." Madara countered.

'Except peeing in front of people.' Hashirama mentally added.

"Then why won't you make a bet with me?"

Hashirama could see he'd successfully chosen the right words.

"A bet about what?" Madara asked irritably. "What could there possibly be, right now, in this moment, that I would choose to wager against you for?"

"Nothing much." The Hokage said, shrugging his broad shoulders. "Just the return of your fan."

"My fan?" The Senju was now mentally patting his own back. "What about my fan? Come to think of it, you've told me nothing about how that mission has been progressing. Have they been caught? If anyone would be, I'd assume it's the pink one with the big mouth. What she lacks in personality Toka at least makes up for in skill."

Hashirama bit his tongue from defending his old friend. Toka was also misunderstood. "Everyone's
fine, the last I heard. *The pink one* is Sakura-san."

"The one from civilians who hates me."

"She doesn't hate you." Hashirama said breezily. She *did* and they both knew it. "But back to our wager. If they are able to successfully retrieve the fan. Well, if Sakura-san specifically successfully retrieves the fan, you'll have to eat an entire bowl of roe by yourself. But if Toka writes to tell me she completed the mission herself and Sakura-san was a hindrance, I'll cut my hair to the length it was when we were boys."

Madara calmly put a bite of rice in his mouth. "I'd like to see that. You'd look even more ridiculous than you did then."

"Then, do we have our wager?" Hashirama warmly stuck his hand out across the table. Madara eyed it briefly, seemingly weighing his odds, before shaking hands. "Excellent!"

"Now, back to this ranking system you mentioned—"

"Hold on!" Hashirama held up a hand, carefully reaching into his inner robes with another hand. "I have something I want you to read." He produced a scroll he'd been keeping since the night before. He had planned to show it to Madara at some point during the meeting. He truly had. But then the opportunity in front of him had presented itself, and he'd withheld.

Madara took the scroll from him, likely thinking it was details about plans for the academy. There was a flicker of guilt there, but then it was quashed by the mischief Hashirama constantly had to tamp down.

"Participating in pranks with a ten-year old girl isn't becoming of a Hokage." Tobirama's voice said in his head. Meh. He swatted it away. Tobirama wasn't here now. He wasn't pulling a prank with Reira. And he was the Hokage; he was *allowed* to have fun sometimes.

He watched, his face remaining oblivious as he let Madara take his time reading the report. Toka's mission report. The one that expressly stated that Sakura Haruno had been instrumental in the retrieval of the fan, using amazing strength to defeat the clan leader.

Madara's eyes hardened as he read it, but his face began looking sickly. When he locked eyes with Hashirama again, the Uchiha looked furious.

"How long have you had this?" he hissed.

"Only since last night. Toka's owls always arrive late, you see—"

"Last night means you had prior knowledge when we placed our wager minutes ago, did you not?"

"I thought you'd be happier about this." Hashirama feigned shock at Madara's reaction. He knew full well it wasn't the news but the deceit that had the Uchiha fuming. "You're getting your gunbai back. With just that scythe you look like a death god, so, this is an improvement."

"You made a fool of me." Madara growled, his knuckles clenching at the table so hard it began to crack. "I refuse to honor this wager. I should win by default!"

Hashirama rolled his eyes. "You never pressed me to specify any conditions. It's your own fault." Madara didn't look any less livid. "Sleep with one eye open." he warned.
A bead of sweat involuntarily trickled down the back of the Hokage's neck. "You lost," he gulped. "You're eating this bowl of roe." He pushed it towards Madara, a sly grin appearing. "Now you have two opponents you can't beat. Me, and this ro—" Hashirama blinked as Madara suddenly snatched the bowl away, picking up his spoon and looking into the bowl with utter contempt.

If his eyes burned red with the Sharingan, it wouldn't surprise the Hokage. He watched his friend begin shoveling fish eggs into his mouth, his eyes never breaking contact.

Hashirama wouldn't be sleeping with just one eye open. Because he wouldn't be sleeping at all.

It had been days since they'd successfully retrieved the fan, and Konoha was closer than ever. Sakura was ecstatic. It felt like a lifetime since she'd seen either version of the village. She was sure the others were happy too, from the way they all talked. Shikamarin wanted her mother's home-cooked meals. Sarutobi wanted to see his wife and son. Susumu wanted to stop having bugs drop on her from overhead. Yurine and Kureno were just happy to be free of the Kaguya, and Toka was solemn as ever, but Sakura felt like she'd learned to read her better since the start of the mission; the Senju seemed more at peace now that they were going home.

The pink-haired kunoichi sighed, splashing her face in the cool waters of the river where they'd stopped for a short break. After nearly two days of nonstop riding, Sarutobi had decided they should turn the horses loose and go the rest of the journey on foot. So that's what they'd done, sending the animals in another direction in case anyone was still chasing them.

She reached into her kimono and took out the bone that had once held her hair in a bun, fingering it carefully. Her thoughts drifted to the three Kaguya siblings that had risked everything to help them. Had their father discovered their deceit? How were they doing now? Kikue's tear-stained face flashed through her mind. She wished she could have invited all three to come back with them, but it wasn't possible. Toka was team leader, and she knew full well that the Senju wouldn't agree to bring Kaguya back to Konoha.

'And,' Sakura thought, dipping her fingers in the cool stream again. 'It's really a good thing they didn't come. Who knows how that would've effected history.' She glanced behind her, seeing the large fan that never left her sight was propped on the rock where she'd left it. That was what she'd worked towards. Maybe not everything about the mission had gone as planned, but it was a success nonetheless.

Sakura pushed herself up onto her feet, walking slowly to the weapon she'd become strangely fascinated by. Her fingers traced the red border thoughtfully. Madara Uchiha was only getting his fan back due to a technicality. If she kept it, she wouldn't have truly completed the mission, which was the retrieval and return of the gunbai to its rightful owner. That didn't mean there wasn't a large part of her that itched to delve into the secrets behind the gunbai.

Clearly, it had certain properties beyond that of just a normal weapon. It was wooden, but no tree was sturdy enough to withstand the things she'd seen that fan withstand. If it belonged to almost anyone else but Madara, she'd be asking questions to sate the curious twelve-year old starving for knowledge that lived inside her head. However, she wanted nothing to do with a madman that was probably one temper tantrum away from becoming the traitor from the history books. 'Oh well, I'll enjoy having the fan around while I can.'

Sakura stopped fondling the weapon, feeling a non-threatening chakra signature nearby. "It's a nice one, isn't it?"

Toka Senju was walking towards her, her angular face less reserved than usual.
"I've never seen a weapon like this." Sakura admitted. She remembered how Madara had even effortlessly deflected one of Naruto's beast bombs or whatever they were, back at him during the war. So she knew it didn't just block physical attacks like the bone projectiles. Temari's fan could've blocked those.

"May I join you," Toka asked.

Sakura glanced her way curiously before nodding. "I'm pretty sure you technically outrank me," she smirked slightly. "You're team leader."

"True enough." The brown-haired kunoichi rolled her shoulders. Sakura was slightly surprised when Toka sat down on the grass, against the rock she'd placed the fan on. The Senju tilted her head up towards the sky, which had become harder to see as they ran into the denser forests closer to Konoha. "Tomorrow it will all be over."

"It was a long mission, but I feel like I learned a lot. I want to thank you," Sakura smiled. "For letting me come in the first place. I'm pretty sure if it was up to the Nid—to Tobirama-san, I wouldn't have been able to."

"Actually," Toka said, "That's what I want to talk to you about. Your performance on the mission."

Toka looked her right in the eye, the stern expression she normally wore back on her face. Sakura found herself becoming slightly nervous. There was something about those chocolate eyes that reminded her a little of another Senju woman, a lifetime away. They were eyes that commanded respect. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No," Toka shook her head. "Nothing like that. If anyone did, I fear it was me."

Sakura didn't bother to hide her shock this time. "I'm not following…"

"I requested you be allowed to come along, yes. But I'm not sure my suspicion of you wasn't the sole reason. I didn't know anything about you skills. I could have jeopardized everything. Especially your life. Yet I told myself for the village, I would. If I thought you were dead weight, I could cut the rope."

Sakura's mind was drinking and processing everything. "You mean, you expected me to die?"

"Expected?" Toka sighed. "It was…I was prepared to use whatever means necessary. It's how I've always been. Up until recently I've only had to rely on my own clan. I knew everyone I've ever gone on a mission with. Trusting in Lord Hashirama's dream meant my loyalty to the clan would have to be overridden by a willingness to strive for unity with everyone in the village. I told myself long ago I was prepared for that. Yet when it happened…" Toka grunted in frustration.

"I fell back into my old ways all too easily. Loyalty to clan. Loyalty to mission. Loyalty to teammates…? That's where things became blurred. I started asking myself questions. Things like how much loyalty did I really owe to a kunoichi I had no history with? We were comrades, bound by what? A symbol of the Leaf, but no shared history or blood. But that's not the way Lord Hashirama envisioned. All Konoha shinobi are his family." She bowed her head. "I was always prepared, somewhere in the back of my mind, to sacrifice you for the mission if it came to that. If it had been a choice to stay and help you, or get the fan and leave. The choice would have been obvious."

Sakura couldn't deny she felt angry. Toka was admitting that her life would have been forfeit had she run into trouble that jeopardized the completion of the mission. She'd been prepared to
deliberately abandon Sakura, or worse, push her into harm's way.

The pink-haired kunoichi had been taught the exact opposite. Kakashi had drilled into them that a shinobi who would leave their teammate to die and prioritize a mission was nothing.

But Toka was from a different time. She'd lived a hard life where a shinobi owed loyalty to nothing and no one but themselves and their family. Now, that mentality was being made to shift suddenly, and she was having trouble adjusting.

"But Sakura," Toka stood up and faced her. "I want to make it clear I don't feel that way now. I saw the way you were fighting. You trusted in me to have your back. You didn't hesitate to have mine. We could have all died, but I don't think you once thought of leaving me, or even the two we'd only just met, to save yourself. I have much to learn from you."

The Senju bowed deeply. "If you'll have me. I'd like for us to be comrades. And if you'll accept it, I'd like to offer my apology." Sakura stared at her, the head bowed in humility, waiting to be forgiven or condemned. The longer she stared, the more her anger melted away. The young kunoichi took a deep breath and let it go.

"Could you look at me?" she laughed awkwardly. "It might be easier to see eye to eye." A poor attempt at a joke, but it made Toka look up at least.

"Toka," she sighed. "You and I lived very different lives before we met. Where I came from was a lot like Konoha. An extended family. I can't say I understand the way you see things, just like you probably don't understand me all the time either. But the important thing is, we have shared history now. We survived the Kaguya together. So I'd like it if we could be comrades going forward, if that's what you want." She stuck out her hand slowly. It was now or never. "But I'd like it even more if we could be friends. There's a lot I could learn from you, too."

Toka looked genuinely stunned. Her hand remained awkwardly extended as Toka snapped out of her stupor. A smile slowly graced the Senju's somber face. "Thank you, Sakura," she said, taking the pale hand in her calloused one.

She paced restlessly. Lately she had begun testing the boundaries of the realm between spirits and mortals, feeling the energies on the other side become easier to read as the wall separating her from them grew thinner.

It was the triumph of her progeny over her sister's that did it. At last, she could come and go as she wanted again. As long as her selected scion grew strong and prospered, there would be no weakening of her hold. She would be restored. Fully and truly.

Though, before she went forth, she felt she should reach into the girl's mind and make contact. She had been obedient thus far, and that deserved praise. While she slept with her retinue, the deity extended her aura and stroked at the edges of the sweet child's subconscious. "Sakura," she reached out. "Answer my calls."

It wasn't long before Sakura had connected with her, eyeing her own mindscape with a note of resignation. She had become used to the goddess playing in her mind when it suited her. "It's been a while..." she said lightly. "I haven't seen you since before the Kaguya."

"Mortal moments are but brief flickers for an eternal being, dear one." Mizuchi admonished. "Surely by now you must have come to realize that much."
"I know you're the real deal, but that's pretty much it." Her shoulders slumped, but her bright green eyes shone with curiosity. Fear and caution had waned slightly, but the curiosity had grown stronger. Interesting.

"I have to admit I still don't really think I get it." Sakura said quietly.

"In time, all will be clear. I simply wished to thank you, for the moment. Due to your actions, I am restored." She spread her arms wide, smiling grandly.

The verdant eyes widening up at her were almost child-like as they clashed between shock and fear. Still, that curiosity didn't leave. Oh, that wonderful curiosity.

"You did say something about that before. That I was your…link to the mortal world." Sakura said slowly in acknowledgement.

A long-fingered hand came down, fingerling the pink locks fondly. "Yes, and that link has been strengthened adequately now. I am free to move about the mortal plane as I wish."

Sakura's head jerked away in alarm. Mizuchi let the hair slip through her fingers, soft as silk. "I freed you…” she whispered. Realization was now settling over her features, so many emotions and thoughts shared by the link, warring for dominance.

Mizuchi smiled gently. "Yes, but there is one thing you did not do…" she sighed.

Sakura blinked as the hand once again found its way to her, knuckles skimming her cheeks.

"You did not kill." Mizuchi grasped Sakura's face, looking deep into her round eyes.

"Kill? T-The Kaguya? That wasn't the miss—" She stopped talking when Mizuchi squeezed her face. It was only a mindscape, but the link made every touch real.

"It was my mission. Sakura, you must learn there is a difference between a task set forth by your shinobi ruler and the will of a goddess. You cannot deny that the world would be best served by the erasure of those savages?"

"You never said that triumphing meant killing." Sakura sputtered.

Mizuchi let go of her face abruptly. "How very naïve of you to assume otherwise. You could have unleashed power the likes of which they had never seen. Instead you ignored my gift and relied on your own power. And when the time came to deal the final blow and erase them from history…” her serpentine eyes narrowed, "You gave mercy."

"I just…it wasn't the mis—"

"A goddess only grants mercy to those who are deserving. Those who have earned her mercy, those who have use. That is how balance is made and kept. Do you understand? You are my progeny. You carry out my will."

She could feel the confusion and fear giving way to another emotion. One Mizuchi had always found particularly amusing in the various ways mortals expressed it. Anger. "What happened to observing? If you force your will on me, isn't that the same as what Kagu—"

"Never speak of my sister as though we are the same." She hissed, exerting mental pressure that brought Sakura to her knees.
"I'm sorry!" she cried. "I'm sorry!" Mizuchi realized what she was doing, and immediately stopped. Any comparison to Kaguya always brought the caged darkness to the fore. Kaguya was a tyrant. She was a benevolent goddess who loved her kin. She was!

"Oh, dear Sakura, forgive me." Sakura warily got to her feet. Mizuchi hated the mistrust plainly visible on her face now. "Perhaps I was not clear... and a true deity always strives to set examples for which their worshippers can follow."

"An example..." Sakura rubbed her arm, eyes flickering in thought. "Going forward it would help to know what you want."

"Yes. And next we meet it will be in your world and not your mind. Until then." Mizuchi placed a motherly kiss to the crown of her head, withdrawing completely from Sakura's mind. From there, transposing herself into the physical world was a simple matter. She had been existing in a half-state for some time. She had not been back into the mortal world since saving her sister's descendent, the male from the Uchiha.

Stepping back into existence was exhilarating. She felt, she saw, she heard. All of it through her own senses. The deity ended up far enough off from where her progeny was, finding herself ankle-deep in desert sands; but when one fell through a barrier instead of using worm-holes, it was never an exact.

Mizuchi got her bearings quickly, able to remember the location of the compound from Sakura's mind. It was a matter of using her powers to jump there, and there she stood. She looked up at the fortress' stone walls, so inconsequential for a goddess. She glided through the gates, unbothered.

As usual, her arrival stirred the inhabitants into a stupor, and then an uproar. She was quickly surrounded by the very brutes she was hoping to encounter. Tanned faces were bared in snarls as they closed in on her.

"Ah, you Kaguya are an uncivilized bunch indeed. When in the presence of a goddess, you kneel."

"What's this one babbling about? And is that a horned headdress she's got on? Awful fancy looking to be wandering around by yourself." snorted one. Mizuchi didn't trifle herself with guessing which. They were all the same.

"Are you lost?" A Kaguya woman asked sweetly. "You must be, thinking you can stroll through our gates without consequences. I say we kill the bitch slow."

Mizuchi was undaunted. They'd find if they tried that bones didn't pierce the scales of a dragon. "Before all that, I'd like to meet the one who presumes to lead you."

"What's she saying?"

"I think she wants to see Lord Yoshiro."

"You've got a lot of nerve!"

Mizuchi sighed. Not ten minutes in the mortal world and she was already tired of the games they played. "I will escort myself then. Stand aside." They pressed closer instead. She glared, feeling her ancient power bubbling up at their defiance.

"We give the orders here."
"Perhaps you do, to those pitiful men and women you control. But a deity takes no orders." Her chin lifted and her gold-green eyes flashed angrily. If they were smarter, they would have taken heed to the signs. Alas, Kaguya's ilk it seemed were as reckless as she had been.

Something pressed against the nape of her neck, barely touching her skin through the long pool of jet hair. It only touched her because she let it.

"Walk," someone growled.

Mizuchi turned nonchalantly. "One of you oafs start leading, and I will." The bone jabbed harder into her neck, but it didn't pierce the ivory skin as she shuffled along, her green kimono dragging through the dirt.

People in the street stopped and stared. They were truly pitiable with their sallow, dirty faces and haunted eyes. They wore rags compared to the Kaguya's kimonos. The goddess found the whole procession dull. They wanted to make a show of their might, parading her through the compound as their "prisoner".

Once, she had been honored as she was meant to be. Mortals weren't insolent and they bowed when they were told to. There were sacrifices made in her name and offerings of fine wines and fruit so ripe it burst on the tongue. That was once though, before her silly sister had dared to proclaim herself a goddess. Before she'd been weakened and forgotten altogether by man, left out of history.

Now mere insects presumed to have control over a dragon. It was laughable. The last laugh would be hers, in the end.

The Kaguya chattered about her fate, making sure to mention the possibility she could become Lord Yoshiro's concubine. They were deliberately lewd, though it was unlikely they knew any other way to be. She maybe a new wife gifted to his son, when the young lord returned. Yet one wouldn't rule out the possibility that she'd be given to them, the guards… On it went. Mizuchi likened their talk to the dull whine of cicadas.

They pushed her toward a stone manor that would have been imposing if not for the gaping hole in the side, currently being repaired by cowering servants. Pleasure curled through her that her Sakura had managed to cause such destruction without her assistance. With her help, she'd be unstoppable.

"Stop gaping and keep traipsing!" A feminine voiced hissed, shoving her into the manor's entry. "Kneel," Large hands pushed at her shoulders, forcing her to her knees. She allowed it, waiting impatiently for the leader of the insects to show himself.

"Fetch Lord Yoshiro. If he asks, tell him we've brought him something of interest." The Kaguya at her back fisted her hair roughly. "Pretty wench." he laughed. "Are you nobility?"

Mizuchi didn't answer.

"Finally decided to shut that mouth and save energy. You'll be screaming before long." Fingers ghosted across her lips, and she resisted the urge to sever them from the hand they belonged to. "Careful. It's unwise to put those near the maw of a dragon." Her tongue ran over her teeth. It had been too long…

"What is all this about?" someone asked angrily. "I gave orders not to be disturbed unless it was word of my son." Out strolled a man who could only be this Lord Yoshiro they'd been speaking of. He looked worn and irritated, a prodded snake that had just barely slithered away from the hawk to nurse its wounds.
"My lord! This woman is delusional. She strolled through our gates demanding an audience with you. She babbles about dragons and goddesses, but hasn't given us much fight so far."

"More than enough mouth though…" another grumbled.

"Not nearly enough mouth!" someone jested lewdly. They all guffawed, but Yoshiro held up a hand, walking closer.

"You must either be confident or foolish. Which is it?" Mizuchi easily brushed away the hands on her shoulder and stood to her full height. She was long-bodied and graceful, standing taller than even Yoshiro.

"Confident? Foolish?" she chuckled. "Those are traits ascribed to mortals and lesser gods. And I am neither. I am the Dragon Goddess."

"And what, pre tell, has brought a goddess to our midst?" Yoshiro asked. The fool didn't believe her.

"Many things, Yoshiro Kaguya." Mizuchi glanced around her. A room of roughly twenty Kaguya. Hardly worth the effort. "You are among the countless clans descended from the Rabbit Goddess. You even share her name." She was feeling gracious enough to let them process that.

"Did you hear that?" Yoshiro asked his clansmen coyly. "We're the kin of the Rabbit Goddess!" The Kaguya all got another good laugh at Mizuchi's expense. "I do like the sound of that though." He mused. "Kin of a goddess."

"Yes," Mizuchi moved closer to the man. "Kin of a goddess. But not kin of this goddess." She looked at the smirking faces with disdain. "And I'm eternally glad for that. If my descendants ran amok like barbarians, it would shame my name. My sister cannot right this wrong. So I intend to in her place."

Her hand shot out without warning, gripping Yoshiro by his throat and lifting him into the air. Alarmed, the Kaguya immediately shot out their bones, hoping to skewer her. She laughed as she batted them all away with a flick sending them through the throats of their owners, manipulating the bones slowly so that the deaths were agonizing. Each dying gasp was more tantalizing than the one before.

Mizuchi kept her hand firm but careful around Yoshiro's throat. "You see, you've become a blight on this world, even among shinobi-kind. By nature those of you wielding your ninjutsu and taijutsu and styling yourselves as ninja are chaotic. I revel in chaos. However, your chaos I find crude and savage."

She tilted her head and stopped to watch as life left the eyes of a woman who, ironically, had wanted to kill her slowly. The Kaguya reached for Mizuchi, reached for help pleadingly. "You ask for the mercy you've never shown another? How very selfish you are in your time of dying." The goddess decided she was bored of watching them die, and she ended it suddenly. She grinned dangerously at Yoshiro, who was looking on with wide eyes.

"Am I squeezing your throat too tightly?" she asked, shaking him. "Speak."

"My…my son will avege m—"

Mizuchi couldn't restrain the undignified snort. "Your son has forsaken you. All three of your children have. They've left this place, never to return. They have the favor of my progeny, so they will not know my wrath."
"W-What?"

"So fixated on revenge, so blinded..." Mizuchi said, walking from the room with Yoshiro dangling from her grip. "When was it you last saw your daughters? They are gone. In your darkest hour, no one will come to your aid, Yoshiro Kaguya. You have made sure of that."

On her way down the hall, she passed a servant, who looked on with wide eyes of terror. "You there, gather everyone to the courtyard at once. Every man, woman and child you see."

The cowardly servant continued to tremble, her hands wringing together.

"Do it with haste!" Mizuchi said, losing her patience. The scrawny weakling ran away from her.

The goddess sighed ruefully. "Oh, to be feared again..." She looked at Yoshiro, bringing him to eye level. "You understand the thrill that brings, do you not? You understand so well you've gone mad with the feeling."

The Kaguya grunted. "Whatever you want, take it. Then leave."

"You amuse me, bartering with a goddess..." She pushed her way into the dining area, where it looked like the Kaguya were in the middle of a grand feast. They ripped through the meat of a pheasant like animals, laughing drunkenly as they drank from cups sloshing with wine. Several servant women sat quivering in the laps of their captors.

All the festivities stopped the minute they caught sight of their leader in the clutches of a mysterious woman.

One brave soul stood, eyeing him suspiciously. "Lord Yoshiro? What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Yoshiro angrily glowered. "What do you think is the meaning? Kill her!" he squeaked as she tightened her hold on him.

"And with that, you let them die." Mizuchi told him.

She threw him to side as if she were discarding a broken toy. Her arms spread wide in welcome as the Kaguya men and women all rushed her, several drawing bones from their bodies as long as blades to wield against her. Mizuchi let them get within striking distance before she snatched away one of their weapons and stuck it through the eye of the Kaguya who attacked her. Their speed could never match hers. She could coil and strike, coil and strike repeatedly.

It came out through the other side of his skull and he fell with a heavy thump. The others cried angrily, attempting to overwhelm her with sheer numbers. The talons of her fingers extended and she caught a Kaguya fool enough to leap at her from over the table, driving her hand easily through his chest and pulling out his still beating heart with one hand.

She marveled at it—the veiny, fleshy mass of muscle—before crushing it in her hand and letting the body drop. A woman who came charging at her with all the bones of her back, arms and chest extended attempted to spin and slice her to ribbons. Mizuchi sighed, taking two protruding rib bones and pulling them in opposite directions with her bare hands.

The female Kaguya screamed as the goddess pulled her body until it started to rip at the seams. From under the table, the servants who had scrambled away from the bloodshed watched on in awe. There was almost an art to the way the woman killed, her hands and face now stained in blood splatters. She continued until every Kaguya in the room was dead, except one... cowardly
"The fun is only just beginning." She held out her hand and with force Yoshiro was jerked back into her. She caught him by the throat, dangling him like a caught cat once again. "You may come out," she told the quivering servants.

They glanced between themselves, timidly crawling forward on their knees. "Spread the word that the Kaguya are no longer your captors. You are free."

She left the room before they could stir, in search of more enemies. She dragged Yoshiro along by the hair now, like a child with a blanket.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked after a while.

"I'm doing what Sakura could not. Meting out the justice that only a goddess can."

"S-Sakura?" She yanked him sharply.

"That name is too sweet for your tongue." Mizuchi declared. "Do not utter it again." She exited the manor, only to find an amassing of Kaguya and servants alike awaiting her outside. The enslaved people took one look at her blood-stained features and shied away. The Kaguya were no strangers to bloodshed, and they prepared for battle. Persistent to the last.

"Release Lord Yoshiro!" A bulking man rumbled. He looked as if his face had been recently been beaten like dough, and his jaw reset.

"Who are you?"

"Kento. Captain of Lord Yoshiro's guard, and your executioner."

"A pleasure," Mizuchi bowed. "However, you are confused about who will be whose executioner. Are these the entirety of your forces?"

"Every man, woman and Kaguya child." Kento smirked, his bones beginning to lengthen.

Mizuchi smiled fiercely. "How courteous. You've gathered everyone for me." The world erupted into chaos. The servants fled away as thousands of bones rained down from the sky like a storm of blades. The goddess once again let Yoshiro go, holding her palm out. The bones disintegrated in green flames, ash falling to the earth instead.

She looked at the faces of the young and old. The realization dawned all at once. "Oh? Do you understand now?" Her features began to warp, face lengthening into a black maw and a tail rippling from under kimono.

They ran in fear and she rose into the air, her scales glimmering like obsidian. Kento she caught first, diving down and trapping him under her talons. He grunted, attempting to throw her off. She purred, her foot coming down to crush his spine. Her tongue flickered out to taste the copper on the air.

Mizuchi left him there to suffer, breathing thin jets of green flame that burned any Kaguya who attempted to escape and caught buildings on fire. She was careful to avoid any innocents, her long, thin body wriggling through the air like a snake's. The compound burned, and countless perished. Carnage and wreckage had engulfed the compound by the time she alighted, taking the form of a woman once again.
She was streaked in blood and eyes peered at her in fear from all directions. Mizuchi felt sated. She had punished evil and gotten to fly after being confined for so long.

Surprisingly, Yoshiro remained where she'd left him. Sitting in the dirt and staring off at nothing. The goddess had wanted him to know the despair of seeing everything burn before his eyes, and it had worked.

She pulled him up by his hair, walking him through the streets. He stumbled over the bodies of his fallen clansmen. When they stopped, it was in the courtyard. Mizuchi had decided to let him look upon her face. In the past, countless mortals had found her beautiful. She decided her visage could bring him peace he didn't deserve.

"What are you?" Yoshiro asked. His face was that of someone who had already given themselves over to death.

The goddess gently clasped the back of his neck, bringing his face closer as she leaned in. Her breath stirred the hair near his ear. She felt his breathing speed up and then hitch. The skin at the nape of his neck rose.

"Your reckoning." Those were the last words he would ever hear. She drove her clawed hand through his stomach and thrust upward, cleaving him neatly in half.

Entrails splattered at her feet, and the crowd that had been lurking watched in silence, staring at the bloody pieces of corpse. The man who had been their tormentor. "Behold," Mizuchi bellowed. "Your goddess has delivered salvation to you!"

ASiT

Sakura's eyes flashed open. She suppressed a scream of panic, placing a hand to her chest and trying to make sure she was truly awake. That had been the strangest thing she'd ever dreamed. It was like she wasn't herself, but someone else.

Someone who had apparently taken great pleasure in slaughtering the Kaguya. She wanted to believe it was just a strange, bloody dream, but she knew better.

'Mizuchi...she showed me by example, just like she said she would.' Sakura ran a shaking hand down her face. It was one thing to be a ninja and kill, but that was a slaughter. Granted, the Kaguya deserved every bit of it. Her mind remembered three distinct faces who'd been missing.

Where were Jun'ichi, Harihane and Kikue? Hopefully far, far away and somewhere safe. Sakura collapsed back against her bedroll with a groan. The sun was starting to appear on the horizon, and it'd be time to move out soon. The homeward stretch was close, and everyone was too anxious to rest for long. She felt the same way. It was too long since she'd seen Konoha's gates.

She looked around camp. Everyone was starting to stir from their own bedrolls, instincts telling them to rise with the sun.

Sarutobi was nowhere to be found, which meant he was on the hunt. She felt a friendly presence somewhere above her, and knew it was Toka, standing guard from the trees. She watched Susumu sleepily reach into her pack and take out an apple. She turned on her side and pressed it to Shikamarin's mouth.

The strange Nara would sleep indefinitely, if food wasn't presented to her first thing in the morning. 'I need to study that...' Sakura thought. Her mind was preoccupied by the vivid images the goddess had shown her. Somewhere far away, most of the Kaguya clan were dead. It further
solidified her reasons to be wary of Mizuchi.

Sakura felt like she was toeing the line. She was no match for someone who could single-handedly dispatch a whole clan as brutal as the Kaguya. What choice did she have though, but to continue playing Mizuchi's game until the goddess got bored?

Sakura found her things and decided to find some privacy to relieve herself and then wash her face up in the stream. If they kept a consistent pace, they'd arrive by midday, by Toka's estimations.

As she made her way to the stream, Sakura kneeled on the bank and stretched to cup water in her hands. But that wasn't a simple nightmare she'd had. She needed something more than splashing. She inhaled as much air as possible and thrust her head underwater. She came back up, water sliding down her face, and pushed her hands through her wet pink hair.

No. It wasn't enough yet. Sakura repeated the action, dunking her head underwater again. Some of it got into her mouth that time, and she came back up sputtering. It was icy, but the discomfort only vaguely registered. 'One more time.' Sakura held her head under as long as she could. Why was she doing this to herself? It wouldn't make her feel any cleaner. And why should she feel dirty to begin with? Mizuchi's actions were not hers. The Kaguya were horrible, beyond horrible.

She felt a hand in her hair wrenching her up, and when she spit out water and turned to the person behind her, there was Toka, staring at her sharply.

"What were you doing?" the Senju asked sternly.

"Washing my face," Sakura said nonchalantly, moving her sopping hair from her eyes.

The hand in her hair fell away into Toka's lap. "You looked like you were trying to wash your soul." Sakura eyed her strangely. "I once had to do the same. I was young, and I thought if I tried hard enough, I could wash the blood away from my soul. I wanted to stop remembering every time I closed my eyes."

"Did it work?" Sakura asked, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear.

Toka laughed emptily. "Of course not. We're shinobi. Some scars never heal, on our bodies or our hearts."

Sakura stood up, hiding the way her knees buckled momentarily. "Well, my face is clean. So I'm headed to breakfast." She walked over and got the fan, heading back to camp.

She knew Toka was watching her, but she ignored it. She could stow the disturbing vision away, at least for a while.

It turned out the desire for home was a powerful thing. The team arrived in Konoha several hours before midday. The large green gates had never been a more welcome sight.

If she were more dramatic, Sakura might have sank to her knees in the dirt and put her cheek against the ground. She half-expected to see Izumo and Kotetsu nodding off or chatting animatedly, before she remembered this was years before even their parents were born.

Whoever they were, they recognized Toka and greeted the team, the gates slowly opening up to reveal the village inside. Sakura took a deep breath of air as she walked in with everyone else. It even smelled like home.
"Look at the size of it!" Yurine exclaimed.

"Look at all the beautiful women!" Kureno said to himself, following behind a group of random women going by. Yurine was quick to tug him back by his ear. Sakura rolled her eyes. She had learned pretty quickly what a flirt Kureno was on the journey home. After a day or so, everyone ignored him, much to his dismay. Whenever he got out of hand, his sister was there to smack him silly.

"No time for detours. It's straight to the Hokage Tower." Toka reminded. "They're expecting us."

"Yeah, yeah..." Shikamarin stared longingly at a stand selling steamed buns.

"Better listen to our team captain," Sarutobi ran a hand through his hair. "Mission's not technically over until that's in the client's hands." he nodded at the fan strapped to Sakura's back. Everyone had unanimously agreed that Sakura should be in charge of the weapon until it made it back to Madara.

Its retrieval had been a team effort, but Toka insisted the Uchiha should see her with the fan. Sakura didn't try to be humble and decline. She wanted to see the look on the smug bastard's face more than she'd admit.

Sarutobi was right though. She'd have to give up the fan. It didn't mean she had to like it.

"Does it seem more crowded than normal?" Susumu asked quietly as someone jostled by her.

"It looks like there are even more people since we left..." Shikamarin agreed, munching on a pear.

"Oh, w-where'd you get that?" Susumu said, surprised.

The Nara looked down at the fruit in her hand. "Where did I get this?" she shrugged, biting into it again.

Sakura sweat dropped. For some reason, she felt like she was attracting a lot of stares in particular. That was probably all in her head, though. 'Maybe it's not...if they're new then they've probably never seen anybody with pink hair. And I'm carrying a giant gunbai.'

The more she looked around, the more she realized she was being watched. By random Uchiha. They whispered behind their hands, not doing a very good job of hiding their surprise.

"Make way," Toka pushed her way through the noisy crowd of villagers, some of them outright gawking. Sakura and the others gratefully followed the path she made.

The pink-haired kunoichi squared her shoulders back. She started shoving her own way through when people stood in the way. "That's Lord Madara's gunbai!" someone was saying.

"They really brought it back..."

"No way! Her? Look at her! I bet it was the Senju who got it, and she's just carrying it."

They were almost at the Tower, Sakura grit her teeth. Practically at the steps. She just had to ignore them a little longer.

"Sakura-san?" A hand touched her shoulder.

Sakura was about to flip someone over her shoulder, until she realized the voice was familiar. It was the Uchiha she'd met the day she'd come to Konoha. The one that looked like Sasuke with a ponytail.
"I remember you," she said lightly. "You're Izuna-san!"

She was rewarded with a charming smile. "Impressive. You managed to remember a face as dull as mine."

'Dull? Is he serious? Who's he comparing himself to?' If Izuna thought he was dull looking it was pretty unfair to any average person.

"You're on your way to report the success of your mission, aren't you?"

"That's the plan." she agreed.

"Would you mind if I joined you then? There's something I'd like to discuss with him myself."

Sakura glanced back at her team. Surprisingly, Toka, who she thought would put up some kind of objection, shrugged. 'Well, he's an Uchiha. This belongs to an Uchiha. So I guess it's fine.'

"Alright,"

Izuna gestured for her to walk in front of him, opening the heavy wood doors for her. As soon as she'd walked through, Izuna followed, the door shutting behind them.

Shikamarin glanced at the rest of them. "So...are we gizzards?"

Sarutobi raised his brows in amusement. "Apparently, we're in the way." he winked.

"Who was that guy? That was pretty smooth." Kureno nodded in approval. "It looks like I've got serious competition here." He produced a pad and quill, jotting notes.

"Wh-where'd he get that?" Susumu asked incredulously.

Toka sighed, rubbing her head as she walked into the Tower.

Izuna knocked on the door politely.

It sounded like there was an animated discussion happening on the other side.

"Enter!" By now, Sakura recognized the Hokage's voice.

The pair walked through at the same time, only to find the Hokage leaning over his desk and arguing with a very irate Madara.

"That is stupid! Almost stupider than the time you-"

"Lord Hokage," Izuna cleared his throat. Madara and Hashirama looked up to see Izuna and Sakura watching them. Behind them, the rest of the retrieval team were finally making their way up the stairs.

"Ah, come in please," Hashirama greeted jovially. "Welcome back everyone! Congratulations," Sakura eyed him oddly. She was pretty sure he'd just been having a heated screaming match with Madara Uchiha.

Sakura stepped forward. "Thank you, Hokage-sama." She purposely ignored Madara.

"Toka's told me all about your bravery. I'm impressed! It was a wise choice, having you on the
mission."

There was a derisive grunt that had Sakura's head turning sharply. She glared at Madara. "Got something to say?"

"Congratulations on not dying." He held out a hand, "I believe that belongs to me." Sakura felt her face reddening angrily.

"Madara, I think you can be more gracious than that." Hashirama sighed. "They risked their lives to return your gunbai."

"Brother, I agree," Izuna interrupted. "Why are you so rude to Sakura-san?"

"Wait! Brother?" Sakura said. "No way in hell..." Izuna, the kind Uchiha, was the brother of Madara, the evil one.

"Yes," Izuna chuckled slightly. "Madara is my older brother."

"Please don't repeat it..." Sakura mumbled. "It was hard enough to get my head around when you said it the first time..."

"I'm not the rude one. She's hated me since our first meeting. Isn't that right?" Madara asked snidely. Sakura bit her lip so she wouldn't rise to the bait.

Izuna blinked. "That's the girl?"

"What do you mean, 'that's the girl'?" Sakura demanded, hands on her hips.

"Madara did mention something about an ill-fated meeting when he requested the mission. But I wouldn't have thought..." Izuna looked confused.

"If I may..." Toka held up a hand. Sakura looked back and blushed. She'd forgotten all about the others. "Here is the mission report I wrote up this morning. And these are the two I mentioned. Kureno and Yurine Yuhi."

Hashirama tilted his head, forcing himself to look at Toka. He'd been watching Sakura and the Uchiha brothers intently. Everyone had. "Thank you," he took the scroll and set it aside. "And welcome," he told the Yuhi. "Thank you for your assistance. As soon as we get all this sorted out Toka can show you to your living arrangements." He took two shiny headbands sitting on his desk, holding them out. Yurine and Kureno shared a wide-eyed stare, moving to accept the gifts eagerly.

The Hokage looked expectantly at Sakura. "All that's needed now is the exchange."

Glowering, Sakura removed the fan from her back. She tossed it hard, discreetly using a little more strength than necessary and making sure it was a sloppy throw. It sailed at Madara and he managed to grab the end of the handle awkwardly. Clearly he hadn't been expecting the amount of force in her throw, because the edge of the fan smacked him in the face.

'That's what you get for underestimating me.'

Sakura made sure to display the appropriate amount of shock. "Sorry..."

Hashirama put a fisted hand to his mouth, trying to hide a giggle. "Now Madara..."

The Uchiha took his time examining the fan as if he expected to find it damaged. Satisfied, he took out a scroll and bit his thumb before setting it on the Hokage's desk. Several hefty pouches
appeared. Sakura watched as he tossed them at Sarutobi, Toka, Shikamarin, Susumu and even one bag for each Yuhi. "Mission pay."

Sakura gaped. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

Madara eyed her lazily. "Do you want to charge me a fee for having the biggest mouth on the mission?"

Sakura stomped her foot and the room shook. Hashirama peered down at the floor in shock, then at Toka, who smirked at him. "No! I want you to acknowledge I helped get your fan back as much as anyone else in this room," she hissed. "I could have kept it!"

"Taking credit for the work of others, and being dishonest?" Madara mocked.

"Dishonest?! You're holding the damn fan again, aren't you?" Sakura threw up her hands. Everyone was getting whiplash as they watched the argument go back and forth.

"Brother, please stop taunting her..." Izuna scolded. "Sakura-san completed the mission and returned the gunbai to you, as she said."

"What a peculiar kunoichi," he smirked. Reaching inside his kimono, Madara produced a bag bulging so much it looked ready to burst. Sakura held out her hands, ready to catch it. But he surprised her by actually walking over to place it in her hands. "Your pay."

Sakura stared down at the weighty bag, sitting in her palms. Her eyes instinctively searched the bag for an explosive tag, or some other trap. Madara Uchiha didn't just carefully place a bag of money in her hand without being up to something.

Hashirama sighed in relief. "I think you've all earned a rest. Why don't you go and let your families know you're back?"

Sakura suddenly felt subdued. 'Family... My family's not here. Or my teammates. No one I know, really... ' No one seemed to notice her sudden change in mood. She didn't blame them. They all had families and friends to return to, and they were excited.

"Good idea." Sarutobi grinned. "I can surprise Hiruzen." he poofed away.

"Susumu...you look hungry..." Shikamarin said suddenly.

"W-What? No I..." A low growl sounded from the timid girl's stomach. She blushed prettily.

"So you can have dinner at my house. Only one plate though. The rest is for me," Shikamarin guided the purple-haired medic out by her shoulders.

"Reira's been waiting for you Toka." Hashirama told her. "Why don't you show our new friends around and then head home. You'll do a better job keeping her out of trouble than I could."

Sakura could have been imagining it, but it looked like Toka hustled the Yuhi duo out of the Hokage's office the minute he mentioned "Reira".

It was left between Sakura and the Uchiha...brothers. 'I refuse to get use to that. There's no way.'

"I should be getting home too, Lord Hokage," Sakura bowed. She eyed Madara disdainfully as she left the office. Izuna glanced between his brother and the Hokage. "Did you need something, Izuna?" Madara asked.
"No, not really..." Izuna's eyes were staring anxiously at the door. "I'll see you at home later." He practically sprinted down the hall to catch up with the kunoichi who had left.

Hashirama placed his head in his palms with a heavy sigh. "I'm not sure what he finds so special about that pink girl..." Madara grunted.

He glanced up to see Hashirama fighting a sly grin. "Remove that look from your face." he commanded.

"Izuna's not the only one who thinks Sakura-san is interesting." he looked at his friend pointedly. "Do you think I didn't notice that bag you gave her had double the amount as the others?"
Chapter Summary

Over the revelation that Izuna is indeed related to Madara, Sakura has a nice chat with the younger Uchiha brother.
Tobirama attempts some information gathering of his own, but it goes...awry.

He wasn't sure what compelled him to follow her, but since their initial meeting on the streets of Konoha, he had found the mysterious kunoichi interesting, to say the least.

And after Madara's revelation about how he'd been saved from death, it made Izuna even more curious. Truthfully, he remembered nothing. He was waning in and out of consciousness and his state of mind had been...jumbled, at best.

Had it happened to anyone else, Izuna would have thought it sounded a bit like a legend. A woman like the one Madara had said saved him couldn't be human. She ate a butterfly that she'd pulled from his wound. And the parting words...none of it made much sense. Madara had been brooding about it for a while, but it hadn't particularly crossed Izuna's mind since he'd found out.

Then he had been out relaxing on a day when he wasn't training the children, and there was that distinct shade of hair he remembered from weeks ago. Even more surprising was his brother's weapon on her back. Izuna had vaguely wondered if he'd ever see the kunoichi again; the village was steadily growing and it could be easy to miss someone. He hadn't run into her since that day he'd seen her wearing strange clothes and covered in bruises. But there she was! Or her back, at least.

He wove his way through the streets, following the team until he got close enough to touch her shoulder. Her green eyes were guarded when she spun around, but then something had made her relax slightly. Sakura Haruno, with her mysterious origins and unique features, was intriguing to him.

Maybe that was why his feet led him to go after her when she left the Hokage's office, seeming a little sad. His brother and Hashirama probably found his behavior strange, but he didn't care when he called her name and she turned to him with curious green eyes.

"Um, something wrong?" she asked unsurely.

"No," he sighed. "I just wanted to apologize for my brother..." Sakura blinked. "And, I wanted to ask if..." Suddenly, he felt nervous, and he cursed himself. "Would you mind if I walk with you?"

Sakura cocked her head to the side, rubbing her arm. "I'm going home..." she said. His face must have looked more disappointed than he wanted it to, because she quickly added, "But you know, company might not be bad."

Izuna understood it was likely a pity offer, but he could put the inherent pride of the Uchiha aside and accept. Anything to help sate his curiosity.

"Then please lead the way," he gestured with his arm as they made it to the narrow set of winding
stairs that led back down to the bottom of the Hokage Tower. Sakura smiled slightly, walking in front of him and carefully going down the stairs, her hand braced against one wall. The other clutched the bulging pouch of money close to her bosom. He followed, trying to keep a respectable distance while studying her vibrant hair and slightly rumpled kimono.

The minute they were back outside, Sakura took a deep breath of air and sighed contentedly. "I'll never get tired of that smell."

Izuna discreetly smelled the air too. All he got was the scent of sunshine, and from somewhere downwind, roasting meat. "What smell is that?"

"Home," she said absently, walking off in the opposite of the Uchiha compound. He mentally noted that as he easily kept pace at her side. She was a woman of petite stature, but she carried herself like she was much taller.

Home. She called it home. "You've gotten used to the village quickly then." he mused.

Sakura looked up at him and blinked slowly. "Oh, yeah," she trailed off. "And I guess spending so much time with a clan like the Kaguya makes it even easier to appreciate something like this. There's no tension in the air. Everyone looks happy to be here,"

Everywhere around them, ninja streaked across rooftops, and children played in the streets. Merchants sold their goods at the markets and housewives gossiped together as they ran their errands. Izuna had to agree that compared to a clan as unbalanced as the Kaguya, Konoha was an oasis of safety and stability. "I was young when my father made his alliance with Yoshiro Kaguya. He brought some of them to the Uchiha compound. I don't remember very much about them, except that Yoshiro was a man with chilling eyes."

Sakura nodded. "Don't forget the cunning streak a mile long," she said under her breath.

Izuna didn't seem to hear her. "His son was only a little younger than me. We played, but whenever he could, he'd be at his mother's side. She was heavily pregnant and he was protective of her."

"Jun'ichi. I met him; Yoshiro actually planned to make me marry him," Sakura said wryly. "He helped us escape though. I can't imagine that going over well with his father."

Izuna puzzled over her words. "That's interesting. I remember a quiet boy more interested in books than people who loved his mother deeply. I can't imagine him growing up to defy his father and betray his clan. Something about you must be special to spurn even a Kaguya's heart to action."

Sakura blushed, surprised by his comment. "Not…really. I'm not sure why he helped us, but I doubt it had anything to do with me." She sincerely believed that too. Izuna wasn't so sure.

"Were the Kaguya as fierce as I remember?" he asked.

"Fierce is one word, but I think I'd use cruel." She muttered said angrily. "They had so many people they'd taken away from their homes and they treated them like animals! I saw them break a little boy's arm just so I could heal it. There were women there who were forced to have their captors' children. And even though we didn't take much, the weapon storage was full of weapons they claimed from battles. A lot of them looked pretty valuable." She'd said it all in one breath, and when she was done, her chest heaved slightly. "Sorry, I get angry just remembering."

"I understand. The Kaguya have built a legacy through brutality. I'm not naïve enough to think the Uchiha don't have the blood of innocents on our hands, though I'd like to think it was more for necessity at the time, and not intentional cruelty."
Sakura looked up at him, her green eyes seemingly searching, "We're all shinobi, and we're all killers…I trained hard so I could have the power to protect what was important to me with my own two hands. I don't think I can say I take pride killing though; it's just a part of the life that I had to accept. Maybe there's even a little part of me that likes being a medic because I can tell myself it balances out. For every life I take, I can save another one." There was a wry tilt to her lips and she wrung her hands together before dropping them.

Izuna's interest was further piqued. Her honesty was refreshing, but so was the fact that she knew healing. "You know medical ninjutsu?"

Sakura, who had been looking ahead, turned to him again. She looked surprised he'd been listening. "I started training to learn it when I was about fourteen."

"The Uchiha clan doesn't have many who know healing ninjutsu. Most of the practices they use are more traditional. I don't like admitting it, but when it comes to medical prowess, the Senju clan is far and away superior in that regard."

He noticed that she started smiling and her eyes got brighter. "Oh yeah? I bet training under a Senju medic would be hell, though. Come to think of it, I noticed the Senju seem to have a lot of general skills. The Hokage has Wood Release, but I've heard Tobirama Senju primarily uses Suiton. And from fighting on the mission with her, I know Toka has a lot of versatile abilities." Sakura tilted her head back and stroked her chin in thought. "It's pretty impressive."

"That's because they pride themselves on being the 'clan of a thousand skills'. They think it brings more balance to their fighting." Izuna explained. His father had taught them that in order to best their enemies, they had to study them. By the time Tajima had died, Izuna and Madara, his only remaining sons, knew the Senju's battle techniques inside and out. But Butsuma Senju apparently shared a similar mindset as his rival, because the Senju had become just as wise to Uchiha battle tactics.

"But the Uchiha have their fire jutsu and their weapon techniques."

"That's right," Izuna agreed. "I have my sword, and Madara has his fan. Speaking of the gunbai, it didn't seem like you wanted to part with it."

Sakura whirled around, walking backwards, her eyes wide as pink dusted her cheeks. "Er…I've never seen anything like it, so I may have been a little curious, but—"

"It's alright," Izuna chuckled. "An interesting weapon would be a commodity and something worth studying. The fan has special properties, like you might have guessed. It's not meant for just anyone to wield."

They had entered the neighborhood where Sakura was living, all the wooden homes more or less identical. Izuna watched as Sakura stopped in front of the third house in the row, glancing up at it absently. "Well, this is me. Home sweet home," she rubbed her arm, glancing between the front door and him. It could have been his own wishful thinking, but she looked a little reluctant to part.

"Uh," she stared at her feet contemplatively. "It's not really much inside. I didn't do too much to it before I left…but I've got a box of tea leaves and some honey. If…if you want to come in, making tea wouldn't take long."

Izuna blinked in surprise. He truly wasn't expecting an invitation. Maybe Sakura was more foreword than he'd thought.
Her voice brought him back to reality before he could get too deep into his head, "I mean, you were talking about the fan, and I really was curious," she continued.

And instantly, he tossed the absurd thought that her request had anything to do with liking his company. She was intrigued by the gunbai and wanted to know more. From their exchange in the Hokage's office, he highly doubted she and Madara would be sitting down for civil talks soon.

'So that's it then. I'm a source of otherwise unattainable information.' Attempting a polite smile, Izuna nodded. "Tea sounds nice,"

Sakura beamed eagerly, hitching her pack higher on her shoulders. "Alright!" she exclaimed. Then, realizing her excitement, she cleared her throat sheepishly and tried for a cooler approach. "Alright, just give me a minute." She put her mission pay in her backpack and worked through several hand signs to release the protection seals she'd apparently put around her house.

Izuna followed her into the neat little house, closing the door behind him. Glancing around, he could see the personal touches she had tried to add to her space, scrolls on the walls, and a small desk with an ink well and brushes.

Sakura bent down and took off her zori, and he did the same. "Like I said, not much…" she shrugged out of the backpack and laid it down by the door, fishing the sack of coins Madara had given her out and setting it on her table. Izuna studied it discreetly. He hadn't noticed until then that it looked hefty. He didn't think the others his brother had handed out were as plump. Madara must have prepared the pay well in advance. Curious that he'd purposely give Sakura more…

"Is green tea okay?" she asked, brushing a hand through her hair as she went into the small attached kitchen on one side of the room. "To be honest…it's all I've got right now…" He watched Sakura stand on her bare toes, her hand reaching into the cabinet above her head. The kunoichi really wasn't very tall. A head shorter than him at least, maybe even more.

"Green tea is fine," Izuna walked over and made himself comfortable in one of the chairs at her table.

"So you were saying the fan has special qualities," Sakura urged. "Maybe that's why the Kaguya had to put it away? Besides the fact that, you know, they rely a little too much on their Shikotsu Myaku for everything. I don't think I saw any of them use anything but taijutsu the whole time I was there."

Sakura made a triumphant noise as she got the canister of tea leaves down, glancing over her shoulder at him as she shook them with a smile.

"It's likely that they couldn't have controlled it even if they wanted to. Hiding it away and settling for just having such a rare weapon as a prize was the best thing they could have done," Izuna shrugged. "It's semi-sentient after all."

"So it has its own will?" Sakura asked attentively. The pink-haired woman padded over and took a kettle off a hook on the wall. "I'll be right back!" Izuna watched her nimbly dash down a hall and heard a door opening. It only took her a few minutes to come back. "I get my water from a well outside. It's not the most convenient thing in the world, but it works," she explained when she came back. She used some flint to start up a fire in a small pit before he could offer to do it for her, and set the kettle of water over the flame.

Izuna thought about it, "The fan doesn't quite have its own will. But I suppose you could say the spirit tree it was made from makes it sensitive. It feels out the chakra of its wielder, and if it finds it
suitable, you'll be able to use the gunbai's ability to the fullest. If it doesn't take to the chakra though…” he crossed his arms and tilted his head. "Well, you could say it doesn't cooperate."

"It could backfire on you," Sakura guessed.

"Yes,"

Sakura walked over and sat across from him. "I swung it…" she said quietly. "It was just reflex. But there was so much power in one swing."

"Hmm," Izuna imagined the small, fiery kunoichi wielding his brother's fan. "That doesn't sound like the fan rejected you. You would have been thrown back with the recoil if it had." Madara wouldn't be pleased, knowing Sakura could use his fan. Or worse, Izuna thought, he would be pleased.

"Wow," Sakura said to herself. "I'm…I'm shocked. I've never really trained in bukijutsu beyond the standard handling of kunai and shuriken. Oh, and I learned to use senbon around the same time I started medical training. That's about it, though."

Izuna smiled a little. "Do you know why it's a fan that's passed down, and not some other weapon?"

Sakura shook her head. "No. Why?" she asked inquisitively.

"Fans have always been important to our clan." Izuna explained.

"It is." Izuna said, motioning to his back. The Uchiha fan was proudly stitched onto almost every shirt or yukata he owned. "When my father handed the fan down to Madara, he told him it would create the wind that fans the flames. Our flames. You see my father partnered with Yoshiro for a reason. They were equally ambitious men. His hope was that we could burn out every rival clan that opposed us."

The kunoichi quirked a brow. "Sounds like a standup guy,"

Izuna found himself pleased with her forwardness, baring a grin that showed teeth. "He wasn't known for his charm, our father. He took great pride in his reputation on the battlefield though, and passed everything he knew along to my brothers and I. Madara especially."

Sakura scowled, something that didn't go unnoticed by Izuna. She truly despised Madara, yet she didn't seem to have any issues interacting with him, so her problem couldn't be that she hated Uchiha as a whole. It was just Madara.

The kettle started whistling and she got up, rushing over to take it off the flame and flitting around to finish the tea. Soon the aromatic scent of hot tea filled the air, and she carefully brought him a clay cup of it. "Thank you,"

She nodded, taking some sugar and honey and adding them into her own cup. Sakura blew at it, her cheeks puffing out endearingly as she huffed.

Izuna watched her take a sip and did the same. When he brought the cup from his lips, he looked at Sakura earnestly. "It's apparent to me the way you feel about Madara."

Her pink lips parted.
"I won't ask why or try to defend whatever action that might have led to your feelings. But I think you seem like a good person, Sakura-san, and I know you're bright." Izuna wouldn't deny the masculine pride he felt when she blushed at his compliments. "Madara is...at times a hard person to understand. I know that better than most. He's not without his flaws...but he's not without his good traits, either. I suppose all I'm asking is that you keep that in mind. No more."

Sakura took a deep drink from her cup, and when she set it down, she stared into it pensively. "I see..." That was all she said for a while. "I'll try to remember."

Izuna believed her. He didn't fool himself into trusting that meant his brother and the pinkette wouldn't clash anymore. But it was a start.

Tobirama had made himself busy reworking the formula to his jutsu, kage bunshin—more stable and effective than the normal bunshin jutsu by far. Whispers had begun to travel, whispers that other shinobi were thinking of following their village model. Tobirama decided he needed something that could help with intelligence gathering. After all, he couldn't go off to get intel for long periods at a time when the village still needed so much work.

The idea of being in two places at once had seemed far-fetched at first, but the more he thought it over, the more it had merits. That was when he'd first set to work modifying the existing jutsu that allowed a ninja to make temporary dopplegangers.

Sometimes Hashirama or village affairs managed to side-track him, but he had been making fairly steady progress. Well, with the exception of one small part of the formula he couldn't seem to get worked out.

He was hunched over his desk wondering what was causing the snag in the jutsu's completion. The clones still weren't lasting as long as he wanted them to, and information from them only came back to him about half the time.

His concentration was pulled away by the familiar signatures he sensed entering the village. He knew the exact minute the fan retrieval team came back, even before he heard Reira screaming down the hall outside his door to welcome Toka home. He sensed them all, but it was the signature of Sakura Haruno he honed in on. Hashirama's advice about shadowing her came back to mind, and he thought when she had her guard down would be a good time.

When she left the Hokage's office, he noticed right away that she wasn't alone like he'd been expecting. The presence of a man that revolted him only slightly less than Madara's trailed beside her. A man who should have been dead months before. Izuna.

Tobirama remembered dealing would should have been a death blow. He couldn't imagine how Izuna had survived it when it was common knowledge that Uchiha healers did not possess the medical jutsu that the Senju did. When Madara agreed to sign the peace treaty several weeks after the encounter, it was with a healed Izuna at his side.

Since then, he had been even more wary of the Uchiha's second-in-command. He didn't trust a man who had not only formerly been his enemy but had somehow escaped almost certain death with little explanation.

The fact that Sakura Haruno, who he still wasn't sure what to make of, was associating with Izuna, further raised his suspicion. She'd appeared so mysteriously. And though she held a clear dislike for Madara she got along with his brother well enough. Was it possible he had missed something? Did Sakura have something to do with Izuna?
Hashirama seemed to trust her. It didn't mean he wouldn't err on the side of caution. He easily stayed well out of sight and suppressed his chakra signature to a level that wouldn't be associated with a shinobi of his caliber. He found himself a comfortable and well concealed spot on a neighboring rooftop, in perfect placement so that he could see through one of her windows.

Although the Uchiha entered her house, after nearly a half hour of waiting Tobirama began to suspect nothing truly nefarious was happening—at the moment. He used his chakra to enhance his hearing and listen in. They talked over tea like old friends inside, about the gunbai Madara favored in battle, of all things.

Then she was reenacting the escape from the Kaguya stronghold with animated gesticulating and occasionally noises. Izuna Uchiha seemed enraptured by her tale. 'Fool,' Tobirama thought. To be so easily impressed because a woman with a pretty face could spin an interesting yarn.

After some time, the Uchiha took his leave. Sakura saw him out with a wave. Tobirama thought he had seen enough, until he watched Sakura make her way over to the coin purse and take out a handful of money to count. It was her mission pay, most likely, and it looked like Madara had been surprisingly generous.

The bag hardly seemed to empty even as she took more out. Sakura muttered something to herself, looking at the money on her table in clear shock. There were even some paper notes. 'Is he trying to bribe the girl somehow?' That didn't make sense though. Madara wouldn't have known her skillset or if she'd be an invaluable ally to the Uchiha prior to the mission. It was all even more suspicious that both the leader and the second-in-command of the Uchiha clan seemed to have some sort of vested interest in Sakura.

Tobirama watched her put all but a few pieces of money back into the bag, and then rush over to seal up the purse in a scroll, hiding that scroll in her futon. She was surprisingly fast exiting her house, replacing the seals that he recognized acted as wards against intruders.

Since Sakura was now on the move, he followed, albeit idly. He doubted that she was so brazen as to act out in broad daylight. Her footsteps seemed sure as she roamed the village, like she knew exactly where she was going. She had to possess a decent memory considering she hadn't been in Konoha very long before the mission. 'The market.' he realized.

She was headed straight for the market. Well, it made sense. Being going for over a week, she had to be low on food stuffs and maybe with money in hand, she wanted to get things she couldn't afford before. Tobirama wondered if tracking her during such a mundane activity was even worth his time. Time could be better spent working on his jutsu at home, or even making sure Hashirama wasn't slacking off.

The Senju turned to leave, until he spotted the unmistakable pink-haired head going in the same direction that Reira, and surprisingly Toka were walking.

Sakura sighed to herself. She was tired after traveling all day, and all she wanted was a meal, a bath and a nap. But, she realized after Izuna left that her house was bare and if she wanted any kind of decent meal, she'd need to buy it.

Luckily, with the money she'd gotten from the mission that was hardly a problem. 'Hell, I could splurge and go to a restaurant for dinner tonight and it wouldn't make a dent!' Sakura's mouth started watering when she thought of treating herself to a meal at a barbecue house she'd spotted on the way to the Hokage Tower.
Grudgingly, she had to admit that retrieving the fan had been worth it. After letting her temper out in the Hokage's office, she wasn't exactly sure what kind of impression she'd left on Madara, but she had money to live on for a while and she'd gained the respect of Toka and the others, and that was all that mattered.

Sakura admitted that she felt proud of herself. Covert missions where she was required to conceal her identity weren't her specialty by any stretch. She'd only been on one other mission falling under that category in her entire life. All things considered, she'd done well.

Her stomach growled long and low. Sakura blushed, glancing around nervously. No one in the market seemed to hear it. 'I need to decide on what I'm having for dinner. Or is it early enough to be considered lunch? Doesn't really matter, I could eat almost anything.' Sakura started wandering from stall to stall, inspecting fresh fruit and eying spices, trying to decide if she felt inspired enough to cook her own meal.

Cooking wasn't as fast without the kitchen appliances she was used to. She had to do it all the old-fashioned way. Sakura briefly thought that if she knew Fire Release techniques, the process could go a lot faster. 'Learning some more ninjutsu might be a good idea, actually…I mean, who knows what I'll be up against in the future. I need as many extra skills as I can get.' Without noticing, her hand trailed to the concealed mark on the inside of her wrist.

"Sakura!" The familiar feminine voice brought her back to herself. She looked up, seeing Toka approaching her with a young girl in an eye-catchingly bright yellow gi with a plain green cloth tied around her forehead bouncing at her side.

"Toka," she smiled as the dark-haired woman approach. "Long time no see," she joked.

"Wow," the young girl, who was studying her with curious golden eyes, hopped forward. "Your hair is so pretty!"

Sakura looked down at her, smiling slightly. "Uh, thanks." she replied. "I like your braid."

The girl touched a hand to her brown head, smiling a little bashfully. "It's the only hairstyle I really know how to do," she admitted.

Toka sighed. "I just got back to the compound from showing the Yuhi's to their homes when she insisted we should go to the market." She nodded at the girl who stood with her hands behind her back. "This is Reira, my niece. Reira, meet Sakura. She's one of the kunoichi I went on the mission with."

Reira's eyes lit up and she was immediately leaning into Sakura's face. "No way! You were on the mission with Tobaa? That must mean you're super strong!" she clenched her fists in excitement. "What was it like out there? Was Tobaa mean to you? She fusses at me all the time."

Toka jerked her back by the collar, one hand on her hip. "Reira, that's very rude. I'm sure Sakura is exhausted and wants to finish her shopping in peace,"

"Aw," Reira pouted, although she didn't struggle against Toka's grip. "I just want to talk to your friend…"

"It's alright Toka," Sakura waved a hand in front of her face. "Honestly, I'm just trying to decide what I should get to eat. But now that I've walked all this way, I think I might just turn around and go to that barbeque house."

"Ooh," Reira hummed in approval. "That place has great yakiniku!"
Sakura's stomach growled again at the mention of food, and she clutched it, embarrassed. It didn't help that Reira laughed and poked her above the belly button.

"Whoa, your belly's really talking, huh?" An idea suddenly came over the girl. Sakura could see it in her eyes. "Hey, can we go eat barbeque with Sakura?!” Reira turned to Toka pleadingly. "You're tired from the mission too, right? It's perfect this way. We can eat with Sakura and she can tell me all about the cool moves she knows."

Sakura waved her hands around. "No, no…my move-set isn't anything that special…” she began humbly.

She was surprised when Toka gave an indignant scoff. "I would hardly say punching down an entire wall wasn't anything special."

"You did what?" Reira's eyes got comically wide. "Y-You have to tell me how!" she insisted.

"Reira." Toka said sternly. The little girl groaned.

Sakura felt a little bad. "You know, company during dinner for a change might not be so bad."

Toka looked slightly surprised while Reira grinned from ear to ear. "You mean it?"

"Sure," Sakura shrugged. "I—"

"Yosh!" Reira jumped, running around the two kunoichi with her arms in the air. "I get to hear about the mission!" She ran over to a man selling fresh eggs, peering at the hen sitting in a bamboo cage. "I get to hear about the mission!" she told it.

The bird tilted its head at her. "Cluck?"

Toka covered her face with a long-suffering sigh. "The future of the Senju is bright indeed," she grumbled flatly.

Sakura giggled. "I think it's kind of cute."

"Don't encourage it," Toka replied. "Let's go, Reira," she called as she and Sakura started walking.

Sakura enjoyed the slow breeze that ruffled the hairs at the back of her neck. Walking with the two Senju, Toka's composure balanced by Reira's energy, she thought she could almost come to like this Konoha a little. At least while she was here. Because one way or another, she'd get the Dragon Goddess to tell her how to go home…

"Hey, what's goin' on over there?" Reira ran a little bit ahead of them. "All those ladies are blocking the way…is there a sale or something?"

Curious, Sakura stood on her toes and peered up ahead. Sure enough, there was a crowd of women giggling and swooning over something.

"Weird…” Sakura whispered. "It wasn't like that when I came into the market."

"Let's investigate," Toka decided, already pushing her way through the crowd. Sakura looked down at Reira and the two shared a shrug before following her lead. Sakura glanced around.

"Oh, I already told you, he was looking my way!"
"No, get lost; those bedroom eyes were clearly directed at me!"

"Say what?" Sakura blanched. Were they…fighting over someone?

That was when she noticed that standing in the middle of the commotion was none other than Tobirama, his red eyes full of frustration and annoyance and his mouth pulled into a severe frown. It almost reminded her of a cat that had been given a bath against its will. The women didn't seem to notice or care that he was aggravated. They yelled at each other as they yanked at his shirt sleeves.

"What's the meaning of this?" Toka demanded loudly.

"What does it look like?" one of the women with her face caked in powder snapped. "The Hokage's brother doesn't come here often, and this is our only chance to," she paused to elbow a woman who tried to jump at her back in the face. She fell back into the crowd with a cry of pain. "Get him to choose one of us!"

"Choose one of you?" Sakura gaped. Some of these women looked old enough to be her mother and they were fighting over a man in his twenties like a prime cut of meat.

"Yeah, so you'd better not get any bright ideas, Pinky!" someone shouted.

"Are you threatening me over him?" Sakura guffawed. It was like fighting the other girls in the academy for the right to sit next to Sasuke all over again. The only difference this time was it was a competition she hadn't even been aware she'd entered. Her kunoichi pride didn't allow her to back down though. She cracked her knuckles threateningly and many of the women flinched at the sound.

"All of you should be absolutely ashamed of yourselves!" Toka growled. "What makes any of you think fighting with each other guarantees you the chance to marry him at all?"

The women slowly looked around, considering her words. "Wow," Sakura shook her head. "I suggest you all step away from him and go back to your business now. Or will I need to be more persuasive?"

Looking mortified, the women slowly began giving Tobirama a wider berth. Grumbling, they obviously decided to count their losses and slowly dissipated through the market, shooting Toka and Sakura, as well as each other, hard stares. Tobirama jumped as one brushed by him. She giggled behind her hand and wiggled her fingers.

"Are you okay?" Reira asked worriedly.

"She…she squeezed my…" he looked like he might be sick. Sakura had to hold in a laugh.

"What happened? Those women were civilians. Even Reira could have successfully evaded them." Toka tutted.

"Don't remind me," he grunted. He couldn't tell Toka that he'd been tailing Sakura when suddenly a housewife had spotted him and he'd been ambushed by women all professing their love to him and telling him to choose one of them on the spot.

When he bluntly rejected their attention, they turned on each other, and he was forced to watch. Pissed off he couldn't do anything but stand there as women he'd never even met argued over him.
He'd escaped them several times, determined to keep track of Sakura, but they seemed to find him around every corner.

For women who weren't shinobi, they had surprising tenacity. Tobirama had to eventually give up on Sakura's whereabouts to focus on the problem at hand—getting rid of his own pursuers. But even that had erupted into a fight. It wasn't the highlight of his day, but it was only made tolerable by the fact that his brother hadn't been around to see it—and laugh.

"They were right about you not coming to the market a lot," Reira mused. "What were you up to?" Tobirama yanked her headband down over her eyes. "Hey!" she protested.

"I'm not you, therefore, I don't always have to be up to something." he rolled his eyes.

"I trust you would rather Lord Hashirama not hear about this," Toka had a small amount of mirth flickering in her eyes as her lips curled in a smirk.

Sakura was smiling far from innocently. "I see you've made it back from the mission in one piece." he growled. Her amusement at his expense got under his skin. The least he could do was get under hers in return.

She raised a brow challengingly at him, placing a hand on her hip. "I'm more capable than you realize,"

"I agree," Toka seconded.

Now that Tobirama was slightly surprised to hear her agree to so readily. Very soon, he'd need to see Sakura in action for himself.

"We're going to go have yakiniku now, Tobi-nii~" Reira announced. "Yakiniku!" she repeated it just for emphasis.

"Reira, what have I told you?" Toka chided. "It's Lord Tobirama to you."

"But," Reira's face scrunched in a frown. "I've been around Tobi-nii since I was a baby. That just sounds wrong." An impressive rumble came from Reira's stomach, but she only laughed. "Sorry, but we gotta go!" she grabbed Toka and Sakura both by the wrist and started to run.

"Don't pull us!" Toba was saying, but Reira didn't pay her any attention. He stood there watching them, wondering how Sakura had been clever enough to get even Toka to lower her guard. Somehow he was now alone on this front, that Sakura Haruno couldn't be trusted.

As soon as the thought flitted through his head, the selfsame woman turned and stared at him with quizzical jade eyes. Oddly, she looked like she was trying to parse him out too.

Tobirama smirked at her. They could make it a competition then, seeing who could unravel whose secrets first.
Hashirama's birthday is around the corner and Sakura is roped into attending. Mayhem at the Senju compound ensues...

Persistent knocking like a woodpecker with a vengeance was the first conscious sound she registered. Sakura rolled over with a groan, trying to ignore the sunlight streaming through the bedroom window that the gauzy curtains didn't block out. "Mo away..." she grumbled into the futon her face was pressed flat into. The knocking paused, and Sakura sighed in contentment. That woodpecker clearly knew what was good for it.

Her peace didn't last long when the knocking started up again. 'Okay...clearly the world wants me up.' A hand slowly slithered out from beneath the cozy covers as she reached groggily for her alarm clock, intent on checking the time. Questing fingers absently patted the flat wooden surface of her nightstand a few times before she realized she wouldn't find an alarm clock, because they didn't exist yet. 'There's no way I'm getting a rooster.'

The pounding intensified and Sakura jackknifed upward, an agitated cry leaving her mouth as she got up. It occurred to her that it wasn't a woodpecker outside her window, but someone knocking on her front door. She had no idea what time it was, but she knew it was probably an indecent hour because the sun didn't look like it'd been up long. Whoever was on the other side of the door was going to get an earful.

She didn't bother changing out of what passed for sleepwear in this time, a light yukata, before stomping over to the door. Admittedly, being woken up early wasn't the only thing causing her bad mood. Despite being back in the safety of her own house for the first time in over a week, sleep hadn't come easily to her the night before.

Her mind was plagued with endless thoughts of the dragon goddess, Mizuchi, now corporeal and running wild in the mortal world. She dreamt of the deity, but she didn't know if they were truly dreams or if Mizuchi was letting her see through her eyes again.

Sakura felt frustrated and guilty, not knowing what she'd done to let Mizuchi free in the first place, and struggling with the thought that she might have inadvertently unleashed a force more dangerous than Kaguya on the world.

When she finally opened the door to see a cheerful looking Reira being scolded by Toka, her scowl melted into a confused frown. Rubbing at her tired eyes to make sure she wasn't imagining things, Sakura leaned her hip against the doorframe. "Uh hey, what're you guys doing here...so early?"

"You look awful!" Reira gasped. Sakura's face darkened. The last thing she wanted to know was that she looked as hideous as she thought, and by a little girl no less.

"Reira!" Toka admonished, pulling her by the ear. Reira yelped. "I'm sorry, Sakura," the kunoichi said apologetically. "Entertaining this one's antics aren't important. Clearly you need your rest more."
Sakura was scrambling for an answer, but her brain refused to connect their appearance to any helpful information stored in her head. "What?" she grunted.

"Don't you remember?" Reira asked, tears of pain in her eyes as Toka continued to hold her ear. "Yesterday!"

Verdant eyes blinked, and suddenly a flood of memories came sluggishly churning back.

Sakura glanced around at the patrons of the barbeque house. Everyone was enjoying their yakiniku so much that no one had even glanced up when they'd entered. Except for the portly chefs searing meat on a long griddle at the front of the restaurant, who welcomed them enthusiastically. Sakura was a little surprised to see that everyone working there seemed to be members of the Akamichi clan. 'Since when do the Akamichi run a barbeque place?' That was definitely a new change from her time. Although, if it had been the case Choji would have been elated.

"Back again, Reira? And you've got some company this time."

Toka looked down at her niece skeptically. "Reira…just how often did you come to this restaurant while I was gone?"

Reira pouted innocently, toeing the floor to avoid meeting Toka's eyes. "Once…twice…maybe a few times."

Toka sighed. "Well I suppose that's not so—"

"A week." Reira finished.

"What? You had plenty of food at home, and Mei-san was supposed to prepare all your meals."

"She was!" Reira acknowledged. "But she kept trying to get me to eat icky stuff…so I ran away from dinner and found this place on the day it opened. I've been coming here ever since."

"One of our youngest and best regular customers." A passing Akamichi added. "And for a little thing she puts her meals away just as well as any grown shinobi." He reached down and patted Reira's head with a beefy hand.

"See? They like me around here!" Reira said proudly. "Come on, let's go see if my favorite table is open..." she glanced around the room, and her eyes lit up. "Ah! There it is!" She ran for a table close to the back of the restaurant, near the kitchen.

Toka and Sakura followed and took their seats in the booth. Sakura sat on one side by herself while Toka sat with Reira. Sakura couldn't help but study the griddle built into the table curiously. She doubted it was electric, but it still had to be some of the more advanced kitchenware she'd encountered in this era thus far. It looked like it worked with wood charcoal.

She wondered if it'd be possible to get one installed in her house. 'Or is that being a little vain?'

An Akamichi woman waddled over, grinning when she noticed Reira. "There's our Reira-chan. What'll it be today?"

"Just some rosu for me." she answered without hesitation.

"And for you ladies?" she asked, "We've got quite the selection, so choose away."

"Misuji will be fine." Toka replied.
Three pairs of eyes trailed to Sakura expectantly and she looked around nervously. She'd sometimes be invited for barbeque with Ino and her team, and usually she ate whatever Ino was having.

"Um, chicken I guess?"

"That's sorta boring." Reira sighed, kicking her legs.

"Hush," Toka scolded. To their hostess, she said, "Could you also bring some vegetables?"

"Of course," said the Akamichi. "I'll be right back with your platter." Their hostess smiled pleasantly, heading back into the kitchens.

"Vegetables?!" Reira squawked.

Toka leveled her with an admonishing stare and she instantly quieted. "I have no doubt that while I was gone you got away with quite a bit. But do you really expect me to let you eat all that protein without any vegetables?"

Reira blushed lightly. "Well…I was hoping?" she said quietly.

"I apologize, Sakura." Toka said. "My niece is…more than a handful and can often get out of control. Feel free to reign her in as you see fit should she ever bother you."

Sakura waved it off. "It's fine, actually. Girls need to be a little outspoken sometimes, right?"

Reira eagerly nodded in agreement. "See? See? She gets me!" she told Toka. To Sakura, she grinned approvingly. "I just knew there was a reason I liked you. Besides your hair and that neat looking diamond on your forehead…what is that anyway?"

Sakura lightly tapped the purple seal in the center of her forehead. "It's my Byakugo Seal." Sensing another question coming on, she added, "I store chakra there for my medical jutsu, among other things." Sakura didn't want to over-explain the nature of the mark, afraid it might go over the young girl's head.

Reira studied it for a second in wonder. "That…that means you have Yin Release, right?"

Sakura sat up in surprise. "That's right…how'd you know?"

Reira puffed up. "'Cause Tobaa's got Yin Release too. And Suiton."

"Really?" Sakura directed the question at Toka.

The stoic kunoichi merely shrugged. "Yes. Although, I haven't mastered a technique nearly so advanced as a seal. Mostly, I use Yin Style for my genjutsu. Do you know any other fuinjutsu?"

Sakura rubbed at the back of her neck. "Nah, not really. This is definitely the most fuinjutsu I know right now."

"Still, that's no small feat." Toka continued. "I've heard of only a select few even among the Uzumaki, a clan known for their strong life force and vast chakra reserves, capable of such fuinjutsu."

Sakura scratched her cheek humbly. "Oh uh, look! The food's here." She glanced up at the platters being brought to their table, grateful for any distraction. Receiving praise was always appreciated, but it made her inexplicably bashful. The moment she realized the Byakugo had appeared on her
forehead she had been in a state of disbelief she had managed such a momentous thing. Deep down, that disbelief had never completely left. Looking back to her genin days, when the only thing she really had over either of her teammates were her academy scores and perfect chakra control, it felt a little fated she’d awaken to the seal.

Reira was more than happy to drop all talk of chakra nature transformations and accomplishments the minute she laid eyes on the cuts of raw meat. She insisted her rosu be cooked on the griddle first, and Toka told her that would only happen if she had a portion of the vegetables with it.

Sakura watched them, and couldn’t help but smile to herself a little. Toka was like a stern mother, though her affection for Reira, muted as it may have seemed at a glance, was very obvious. And Reira, loud and tomboyish but surprisingly intuitive, was hard not to like.

"Hmm…." Reira brought her face alarmingly close to the cooking meat. "I hate the waiting part. So let's talk about Sakura!" Her gold eyes sparkled, and Sakura, only having seen that level of worship in the eyes of Naruto or Lee, tried to steer the conversation into another direction.

"I'm really not all that interesting."

"All the interesting people say that!" Reira tittered. "Anyway, Sakura, maybe you can help us out." She took her chopsticks and carefully flipped a piece of meat so it would cook evenly.

"Help with what?" Sakura asked, watching as Toka added her own meat onto the griddle.

"Well ya know, every year it's the same thing whenever it gets close to Hashi-nii's birthday. Tobaa always gets him a boring gift."

Toka huffed indignantly. "My gifts are not boring, they are practical. Lord Hashirama has always been appreciative."

Reira rolled her eyes. "Because he's too nice not to be. But there's only so much one person can do with a thousand hand-crafted kunai."

Sakura was a little amused to see Toka's face flush. "They weren't all just kunai…" she defended faintly. "The sets have also included shuriken and senbon in the past…"

"Like I said Sakura, she's really unoriginal with gifts and it's a problem. This year I wanna get him something special. It's his first birthday as Hokage!" Reira looked down and realized her rosu was cooked. She eagerly took it off the griddle and began dipping it in tare. "So do you want to help us find him a gift?"

Sakura considered that for a minute. So far the Hokage had been accommodating and kind to her. But, compared to Toka and Reira she hardly knew him. "I wouldn't mind helping if I could but I think you know much more about Hokage-sama than I do."

Reira munched thoughtfully on a piece of rosu while Toka tended to the griddle. Sakura began adding her own pieces of chicken onto it distractedly. "That's true I guess…but what if we told you all about Hashi-nii? Then you'd be able to help us pick something, right?"

"I-I'm not really sure it works like that—"

"Please!" Sakura gasped as Reira reached across the table to take one of her hands. "I just know if I rely on Tobaa he'll get a boring gift again, and he's done so much for the clan and the village, I want him to have something nice."
Sakura hesitantly glanced between Reira's pleading face and Toka, who was shaking her head at her niece. "You're being very forward. We will manage fine this year, as we always do—"

Sakura mentally prepared herself. 'I feel like I'm about to get in over my head.'

"When's...when's his birthday?"

Sakura winced as Reira squealed in excitement. "So you'll help?!

"Er, maybe..."

"Great! Did you hear that Tobaa?! If the three of us work together, we can find something better than whatever the rest of the clan gets him!"

"Rest of the clan?" Sakura queried. "Are the Hokage's birthdays a really big deal with the Senju?"

"Well," Toka explained. "They weren't always. But, the Senju are naturally very proud of Lord Hashirama. He is a good leader. Since he took over from his father, it's been custom to have a celebration of sorts for his birthday, yes."

"It's really fun." Reira went on, talking with her mouthful. "The whole compound celebrates. There's a lot of food and even games. Tobi-nii and Tobaa pretend to be grumpy but I know they're always happy to celebrate his birthdays too."

Toka ignored that as well.

"Presenting the gift that becomes Lord Hashirama's favorite that year is also something of an... unofficial clan competition." Toka admitted. "He will say he likes them all equally, but it doesn't stop everyone from trying to be the one that gives the gift he likes best."

Sakura plucked a piece of the cooked chicken off the griddle and blew at it before popping it into her mouth. She had a piece of chopped cabbage and then looked curiously at the two Senju.

"Sounds like this could be pretty intense. How much time do we have?" Time was important. She had to help choose the perfect present for someone she hardly knew.

"I'd say four days, give or take." Reira said nonchalantly.

Toka and Sakura stared at her. "Four days...? October 23 rd cannot be in four days. It's...it should only be—" Toka quickly counted on her fingers. "In four days." She concluded flatly. "I was so preoccupied on the mission I had completely forgotten."

'October 23rd, huh?' Sakura mused. 'At least I know what month it is now.'

"Yep, well, no one told you to leave for over a week and a half!" Reira wagged her finger, spearing yet another piece of rosu with her chopsticks.

"So we don't have a whole lot of time." Sakura sighed. "Alright, when should we start looking?"

"First thing tomorrow!" Reira raised a fist in excitement. "We can meet up at Sakura's house in the morning."

Sakura had a few more bites of food and nodded. "Is that okay with you Toka?"

"If you truly feel like it's not a bother, then yes, having you join us this year might be nice."

Sakura rubbed a hand down her face. "I did agree, didn't I?" she motioned the two Senju inside and
closed the door. "Do you think you could wait for me? I just need to bathe and dress and then we can go."

"Sakura, clearly you're in no shape to—"

"No, I'm fine. Really." Sakura kept her tone perfectly firm as she walked away from them. It was foolish to think she'd be getting rest anyway. Mizuchi would be there to plague her mind as soon as her eyes closed. It was much better to get out of the house and distract herself. 'I wish I had some kind of pick me up though...' Groggily, Sakura trudged into the bathroom, staring woodenly at the empty tub she didn't feel like filling.

"Toka?" she called unsurely. Was she taking advantage of the Senju? Maybe a little…but despite having water as one of her natures she hadn't mastered any Suiton techniques.

"Yes, Sakura?" she heard Toka on the other side of the door.

"Do you mind…helping me fill the tub? I'm sorry, but it'd be quicker…"

"It's alright," her friend answered calmly. She let Toka in and watched as she had the warm water rising in the tub in a matter of minutes. The pinkette sighed in gratitude.

"You really, really have to teach me that sometime."

Approximately twenty minutes later, Sakura had bathed and dressed. "Thanks for waiting." She stepped into the front of the house to see Toka laying food on the table where Sakura generally ate her meals. "Er, you didn't have to cook or anything…you're guests."

"Today promises to be a long one." Toka said solemnly. "It's important we keep our strength up."

That was such Toka logic. She approached everything with steadiness and careful planning. Sakura nodded slowly, taking a seat at the table across from an eager looking Reira. She noticed the child always looked happy whenever food was involved.

"I hope you don't mind me using your supplies…" Toka said as an afterthought.

"Not at all," Sakura said, taking a piece of sliced melon. "I'm just glad I went back and got some things for the house after we parted ways yesterday."

Reira, who had a melon slice stuffed in her mouth, grinned around it, making Sakura laugh. "Mwee twu!"

"Careful or you'll choke on that."

Toka glanced up from the mocha she was arranging to glare. "I see you've forgotten all table manners," she smacked Reira on the back of the head, causing her to spit the melon slice out.

Sakura grinned. "Alright, so tell me a little bit about what the Hokage likes. And what kind of gifts have people given him in the past."

Reira wiped the melon juice dripping down her chin off on the back of her hand. "Hmm…he likes the village, and meeting new people and that scary-looking Uchiha he's friends with, and plants, and—"

"Hold on," Sakura interrupted. "Some of those aren't…exactly tangible things to give. Let's come back to likes and move on to what he already has."
Reira stared at the melon rind in her hands thoughtfully. "I don't think he needs weapons. He always gets those." The brunette girl directed a pointed stare in Toka's direction. Sakura heard the older Senju defiantly grumbling under her breath.

"Right…no weapon sets. Uh, how about a stylish kimono? You can't go wrong with that, right? Something elegant and simple ought to do the trick." Sakura nodded sagely, already imagining the Shodai sporting something that screamed "handsome feudal ruler!" Oddly enough, when she envisioned him in a dark kimono, he was making Lee and Gai-sensei's signature pose, thumbs up and all. 'He could totally pull it off.' she decided. She wasn't sure if she meant the clothes or the pose…possibly both.

"One," Reira drawled, holding up a finger, "problem. He's always dressed in the same clothes 'cause he's Hokage! What's the point of new clothes if nobody sees how pretty they are?!!" she finished with a pout.

"Is that why you wear yellow?" the pinkette asked, staring at the almost too-bright fabric.

Reira nodded eagerly. "Isn't it pretty? Bright colors make me happy. And I'm hard to miss this way!"

"The exact opposite of what a ninja should be." said Toka.

"Let me live!"

"I'd very much like to. It's you trying to get yourself killed insisting on wearing that monstrosity—"

Sakura sighed heavily, massaging her forehead. Toka was right after all; today definitely felt like it would be a long one. "She may have a point, Reira," Sakura decided she had to get them back on track. Reira's face fell. "But you know, I know someone that always wore bright clothes too, and he turned out to be one of the strongest shinobi I know." The downcast expression was replaced by a confident grin. "And," she turned to Toka. "You have to admit it does suit her."

"I suppose, but—"

"We should probably get back to deciding on what you're going to get Lord Hokage though." "Okay!"

"Yes, you're right."

Sakura discretely wiped her brow. 'Attention successfully refocused.'

"Then tell me what you think he needs. You both know him much better."

"Sending away to have something made might have increased our options," Toka rejoined the conversation after finishing her mochi. "But, considering how little time we have left, scouring the market is our only chance now."

'Wow,' Sakura thought, impressed, 'She even makes that sound like its life or death. She could have been a good theater actress in another time.'

Reira raised her hand and waved it around. "I think we should go look what the artisans made today!"

"I thought we were avoiding kunai sets?" Toka reminded grumpily.
"We are. But that's not all they sell!"

Sakura thought it over. She had a point. And something that had been hand-made might be more sentimental. "That actually sounds like a pretty good place to start."

"I…" Toka paused. "Have to admit it's not the worst idea I've ever heard."

"Thanks! Wait, were you just making fun of me?"

"Not at all."

"That means you totally were!"

"I think we have our objective now, ladies. Next is making a plan of attack." Sakura smirked, hitting her palm with a fist.

"We're going to win the best present competition this year!" Reira said gleefully. "I just know it!"

Jun'ichi sighed as he came back to the area where he'd left his sisters, only to find it empty. Of course. How could he have ever expected they'd stay put when all they'd done since leaving home was get into trouble? He, being the oldest and the most sensible, was determined for all of them to keep a low profile.

The Kaguya name came with many enemies, and though he knew he and Harihane combined were more than a match for most who would cross them, he wanted to try a new, more peaceful way.

His temperamental sister hadn't been happy about that. Despite her best intentions, destruction was in her blood. Her very hot blood. The world was a very dangerous place, especially for two seemingly defenseless girls and a young man traveling alone together. More than once, rogue nin had attempted to rob them and worse. More than once, Harihane had mercilessly cut them down.

Jun'ichi knew it came naturally for her, trained to kill from a tender age. At least, he reasoned, she wasn't taking pleasure in it. In her mind it was simply a matter of her or them. And knowing his sister the way he did, he knew she was always going to pick them.

Jun'ichi set down the supplies he'd bought, and decided to look around. In all likelihood they weren't far. That was his sincere hope.

"Kikue? Harihane?" he called, walking along through the woods. Neither answered.

His sisters caused him so much grief every day… and yet they were all he had now. They couldn't go back to their clan, their old lives. Not now. They'd made a pact to band together when they decided not to return. Jun'ichi was determined not to become his father after meeting the mysterious kunoichi who had unceremoniously turned their lives upside down. He only wished he could see her again, and thank her for releasing him from his cowardice.

"…no!" the voice sounded like Harihane. They were close.

Jun'ichi trudged through the woods, occasionally picking twigs out of his hair and trying not to catch his kimono on branches. It was embarrassing to admit, even mentally, but at nineteen, he realized he had seen very little of the world, and despite living under his father's tyranny, he knew very little of hardships.

Inside the compound, he had servants who catered to his every need, the finest silks to dress in and
plenty of food to eat. The only times he'd truly been out of that fortress was to travel with his father. Once to see the Uchiha and arrange an agreement, and the rest of the times were when he was taken on some of his father's bloody campaigns.

Leaving home on a journey of his own free will, traveling with no particular direction, was very new to him. It was new to all of them. Kikue had never once set foot outside the Land of the Dead in her entire life. The whole world was new to her, and she eagerly drank it all in. Harihane was much better at keeping an unimpressed façade, but even she had been flourishing since leaving the compound.

They slept under the stars almost every night, and talked about the constellations. They took turns cooking food, even though he was by far the best at it. They bonded in a way they never had before, learning more about themselves and each other every day.

Collectively, deciding to strike out on their own had been the best thing they could have done for themselves. Maybe one day, they'd face the consequences of turning their backs on their family. No. It was a clan. Jun'ichi knew his only family were right beside him. In front of him, maybe, as it were. It didn't matter, they were close.

He caught sight of Harihane's back up ahead as she loudly scolded their younger sister.

Closer than he thought. He crept up on them—or attempted to—but Kikue, having apparently recently awoken to sensor abilities from what she told them, lifted her head and perked up when she saw him. He noiselessly raised a finger to his lips and she blinked, grinning cutely. Jun'ichi hid in the tree above them and watched.

"What do you think you're smiling about?!" Harihane screeched. "Do you think it's a joke?"

"No…" Kikue looked up at Harihane through her lashes, attempting to make herself look vulnerable. Even if it was a subconscious effort, Jun'ichi thought it might be a good way to catch enemies off guard.

"Every time we go into a town—every time—and you're holding the money, you get pickpocketed!" Harihane made sure to punctuate her speech with jabs to Kikue's arm and chest. "You prance around without a care in the world, and are money walks away." That was true enough. They had all taken as much money as they could carry and pooled it.

Junji carefully calculated that it could last them for a month, if they spent sparingly. However, whenever they sent Kikue into town for supplies—she was by far the most inconspicuous—she made an easy target for thieves. The money was always retrieved, because they were never far away, and when the thief tried to turn a corner, Harihane would be there lurking.

"So no," Harihane finished with her hands on her hips, "you can't go into town to buy fruit."

"B-But—" Kikue stammered. Her head lowered and she started to sniffle.

"Cut that out!"

Jun'ichi jumped down, landing between his sisters.

"I'll take her with me into town. We'll get the fruit."

Kikue smiled, wiping the moisture that had been building behind her eyes.

Harihane scowled. "No! You're spoiling her. And!" she held up a finger, "You'll just draw
attention. You think people won't remember seeing you? You stand out too much. And we don't need fruit. It'll spoil fast anyway with the way the weather's been."

Jun'iichi quickly reached out and seized Harihane's cheek, pinching firmly.

"Ouch, damnit!"

"When did you become so frugal?" he wondered.

"Someone has to be! …Now let go of my face!" she hissed angrily.

His fingers released the soft skin of her cheek, and she rubbed at the reddened mark it left. "I hate you sometimes." She grumbled.

"Well then some things never change." Jun'iichi ruffled her hair a little, just because he knew she'd hate it.

She growled in warning, like a feral dog and Jun'iichi laughed. The growling didn't stop. In fact it got louder and more realistic. He tilted his head quizzically, studying his sister. Harihane was glaring menacingly at him, but she wasn't growling. Kikue suddenly started whining.

"Kikue feels something scary…"

They both stilled, listening to the long growls in the quiet air.
"Kikue." Harihane's bones began extending from her forearms. Jun'iichi felt his bones slide up and out as his body reacted to the tension suddenly thick in the air. "Get behind us."

Kikue started to shuffle behind them as he and Harihane moved to guard her. Then she suddenly stood beside them, clutching small fists to her chest and shaking her head. "Kikue, what do you think you're doing?!"

"Kikue doesn't want to hide anymore! Nee-san told Kikue to be strong, so she will be!" Jun'iichi stared as his youngest sister struggled to make her bones extend. That had always been why their father saw Kikue as failure. She struggled to use her Shikotsumyaku and could never make use of the bones anywhere but on her forearms and wrists. A defective kekkei genkai, their father called it. A disgrace. Part of why Harihane had been cold to Kikue in the last few years was for their father's approval, he knew.

But she was trying so hard. Maybe their father would never see that, but he could. In her own time, with encouragement and some training, Kikue could catch up.

"Look, it's great you don't wanna be a cry-baby anymore, but seriously, just stay behind—"

A large shadow passed over them as something leapt through the air with a snarl. Everything after that happened almost too fast. Jun'iichi felt the air rush out of his lungs as something big, hairy and muscular charged him, knocking him to the side effortlessly. Harihane fired wildly, but the giant beast didn't seem fazed.

Head spinning, he climbed to his feet and started joining Harihane in an effort to repel the creature. It dodged all their bones, heading straight for Kikue. There was a shrill cry for help, and then he watched Kikue being picked up by a large canine-like creature that bounded away with her. She was struggling and screamed as they disappeared back into the forest.

Harihane looked at him, bewildered. "What the hell was that?! Kikue just got taken by a…a wolf-dog thing!"
"That was bigger than any dog I've ever seen to be sure. Either way, let's go!"

"If that crybaby lets herself get eaten I'm going to cut her out of that thing's belly and kill her myself!"

Junji smiled slightly. To almost anyone, it sounded like Harihane was seething. The days they'd spent traveling together gave him better insight into her feelings. Inside, she was worried for Kikue.

If there was any doubt, the fact that she took the lead in chasing after the beast that had abducted their sister erased it.

"What about these?" Reira was gesturing to a very fine set of china when Sakura looked up. "Hashi-nii likes to eat."

She was referring to pearl plates with a pattern of blue and green peacock feathers decorating the edges. It was beautiful, and likely pricey, but that wasn't the issue..."That's wedding china." Sakura giggled.

Reira turned back around so quickly her braid smacked her across the face. "Huh?! Ooh. This is harder than I thought."

"We've only just begun." Toka reminded her, "And this was your idea. With that kind of defeatist attitude I suppose a kunai set is the best we can hope to muster."

"No!" There was a vehement head shake and a crossing of arms. "We are not get him a kunai set again this year. Nuh-uh." Sakura watched her look around frantically. "We haven't tried that one yet!" she pointed at a nearby artisan shop, already walking towards it. The two women had no choice but to follow. Sakura didn't think either of them wanted to find out what would happen if Reira was left to her own devices in a place full of highly breakable craft pieces. This thought was reaffirmed the minute she set foot in the shop.

'Crystal glass!' she gasped at all the ornate pieces both finished and being worked on. Shelves lined with finished pieces of glass chalices, figurines, vases and bowls were everywhere. Reira started to dash toward something that caught her eye, but Toka grabbed her with almost frightening speed.

"Don't be rude!" Toka shook her slightly.

The shopkeeper didn't seem offended. On the contrary, Sakura thought he looked amused. "Oh, is that so? And what's the occasion?"

"The Hokage's birthday!"

The man's eyes grew large, and he wiped his palms against his apron. "The Hokage, you say?"

"That's right. It's in only a few short days. We're..." Toka fumbled for the right word.
"Gift hunting." Sakura finished.

"Yes,"

Stroking his chin, the shop's owner turned and surveyed all his sparkling glass pieces. "I've got a nice variety here. Any one of these pieces would make a fine gift fit for the Hokage, and I would be honored to sell you anything in the shop. But...if I may be so bold, if you'd like something truly memorable, perhaps I can make a custom piece?"

"How long would that take?" Sakura asked shrewdly. "We've only got three days."

"I should be able to complete an order in that time." The owner said confidently. "Just tell me what you'd like and I'll get started right away."

Toka glanced down at Reira. "This was your idea, ultimately. Do you think he'll be satisfied with something like this?"

Reira gave her aunt a thumb's up. "Look at this stuff! It's all sparkly. Who doesn't like something shiny?"

Toka quietly snorted into her fist. "He is a man, not a crow. At any rate, yes, I think we'll take something."

"Wonderful!" he beamed.

"What do you think it should be? A glass animal?" Reira hummed in thought. "Oh no! No! A sake set!"

Sakura stared at the young Senju in curiosity. "Why a sake set?"

"Hashi-nii loves honey wine!"

A Senju Hokage with a taste for alcohol? That sounded suspiciously familiar.

"You don't...say..."

Was he as bad as his granddaughter? Was alcoholism hereditary in the Senju line? Every time she'd interacted with the Hokage, he seemed sober. Then again, Tsunade had been a functioning alcoholic for most of her adult life. Maybe he hid it well too.

"It's true that he enjoys his cups." Not even Toka was denying it! "Perhaps a sake set would be a gift that's both practical and decorative."

"Ya see? Perfect balance. Now um, can...can you let go of my gi?" Toka reluctantly let the white-knuckled grip on Reira's collar loosen.

"A sake set is a fine choice. I've got several different types of glass..."

Sakura watched absently as the glassmaker started talking to Toka in depth about different options. She was glad they'd been able to settle on a gift. Truthfully, it didn't seem like she'd really been much help, besides mediating some of their bickering...

'Birthdays...I wonder how old he'll be.' He was definitely young. Or at least she assumed he was. She knew enough to know Hashirama Senju possessed legendary restorative power in his cells, which is exactly why they were so coveted in her time.
She imagined that same innate regeneration would keep him from looking his age. At the moment, she'd place him as a man in his early twenties. Now that she thought of it…shouldn't Madara and the Second Hokage be roughly the same age range too? And Izuna…he was Madara's younger brother, so how old did that make him? Curiosity was growing in her. After all, she'd known the legendary Hashirama Senju as a long-dead relic of the past. For him to be alive, young and vibrant was still something surreal.

Madara not being hell-bent on the world's destruction was also something she continued to have a hard time wrapping her head around. Maybe, it would have been easier to give him the benefit of the doubt if she'd had prior experience with him before he had stabbed her and tried to plunge the world into an endless genjutsu.

Sasuke had attempted to kill her too, but she couldn't bring herself to see him the way she saw Madara. They had history as teammates, and no matter what Sasuke felt, there was a bond there that would forever link them all. She had no bond with Madara, just an image of him smirking as he cut through Allied Shinobi Forces. If figuring all of that out wasn't enough of a headache, the eerie eyes of the Dragon Goddess flitted through her thoughts whenever she allowed her mind to be idle. Mizuchi wasn't just haunting her dreams anymore. She was real and tangible and capable of truly frightening things.

"Whatcha thinkin' about?"

Sakura looked down to see Reira eyeing her. "Hm? A little of everything. Don't mind me." Toka was still explaining to the glassmaker what she wanted. Reira had probably gotten bored.

"So your mind's running in circles?"

"Huh?" Sakura was surprised; she hadn't thought she was being so transparent.

"Tobaa gets that face sometimes, when she says her mind can't be still."

"That's one way to put it…"

Reira gave her a sympathetic little grin. "You know what, Sakura? I'm glad you're friends with Tobaa."

Sakura glanced over at Toka. She was pointing to the kind of glass she wanted the sake set to be made out of. "Why's that?"

Reira started dragging her foot back and forth across the floor, watching it. "Well, she can be really scary and hard to get close to. But I know she wants friends, because she's a good person, and all good people want friends." She nodded at her own logic. "If she had friends who understood her like I do, I'd be happy Tobaa was happy."

Sakura patted her head gently. "You're really a good kid."

Flustered, she rubbed the back of her neck. "Ehehe! Would you mind telling Tobaa sometime?"

"Oh, I'm sure she already knows." Sakura winked.

"Ahem," They turned when they heard someone clearing their throat.

"Are you two finished?" Toka asked, not unkindly. "We'll pick up the sake set on the morning of Lord Hashirama's birthday, before the celebration gets underway."
Reira spun around excitedly. "He's gonna love this!"

"For the price, he most certainly should." Toka whispered to herself. They all exited the shop.

"I'm glad you both found something to give in time," Sakura smiled.

"Thank you for your help, Sakura."

"I-I didn't really do much. It was Reira's idea..."

"Nevertheless, if nothing else your company today was appreciated." Sakura's smile became a little more shy. "It may be somewhat short notice, but...maybe you'd like to be our guest at Lord Hashirama's birthday celebration."

Well. She definitely wasn't expecting that. 'I've never been to a Hokage's birthday party.' She didn't really think Tsunade's counted. It was more of a one-woman party and it tended to be a little embarrassing. She'd been invited the year she'd become the Godaime's apprentice. It... hadn't been what she was expecting. Shizune baked a cake, and agreed that for the special occasion, she would allow the Hokage to imbibe without scolding her.

It turned into Tsunade greedily hogging most of the cake while drunkenly crying over men being too intimidated by her to ask her out. "And what's wrong with a woman holding her ground? I keep myself in good shape and I'm the fucking Hokage...!"

And so it went, every year after that. Sakura always found herself reluctantly dragged into it, if for no other reason than solidarity with Shizune. Both understood what it meant to be the long-suffering pupils of the stubborn Fifth Hokage.

Being that Sakura now knew where Tsunade may have gotten her drinking habits from, she wasn't sure she wanted to put herself through that again. Of course she had to be polite about it.

"A-Are you sure that'd be okay? I mean it's supposed to be a private event, isn't it?" Mentally, the pinkette patted herself on the back. There. Toka was a woman of reason. She wouldn't want to risk upsetting the balance by bringing in an outsider when—

"It will be fine. Ours is a sizable clan. No one will truly notice or mind you being there."

Sakura wanted to object. She could think of one red-eyed, white-haired someone who most certainly would notice and mind.

Reira tugged one of her hands urgently. "Come on, Sakura! It's so fun, you won't regret it."

Fun wasn't the problem. She didn't have a problem with fun or parties or even with Hokages who liked wine a little too much. She didn't have a problem at all. The would-be Nidaime seemed to have one with her, though.

'I can see it now...' The whole time she'd be standing there awkwardly, trying to be inconspicuous while being all too aware of Tobirama Senju scowling a hole into the back of her head.

"I don't think I should...it really just seems like a family affair, you know?"

Reira frowned. "Friends can be family!" she protested.

The pink-haired kunoichi's resolve started to crumble. What could she say to that.

'Why am I so soft?' she groaned.
"Yeah," Sakura relented. "They can be...and I guess I can stop by. I might not be able to stay long though." she quickly added when Reira started beaming at her. The addition didn't make the girl's smile any less bright.

"I should warn you that the clan can be a lively bunch," Toka brushed some hair behind an ear. "Also, you do not have to worry about getting a gift, since you are a guest."

"I can't show up empty-handed!" Sakura gaped. "Especially not for the Hokage's birthday. It just seems really rude."

"He will understand." Toka assured.

"Maybe so, but I'd still feel better if I brought something."

"I think he'd like that. Everyone likes gifts."

"No one was asking you, Reira."

"But Tobaa...!"

"It's settled." Sakura decided. "I'll find something; don't worry about me." she found herself grinning with a thumb pointed at herself the way Naruto often did when he made a proclamation.

'Eh, it must have rubbed off...'

Sakura didn't mind though because she supposed there were worse habits her teammates could have given her.

His brother's brats were causing too much noise. Hot-blooded spars were one thing, but they screeched like angry monkeys, ready to face off for dominance. When Madara stepped out of his home and onto the porch, he was treated with a rather strange situation. Kagami was standing protectively over some small lump sprawled on the ground, in a battle ready stance.

There were two other children that Izuna was training, glaring menacingly at him.

"What's all this?"

The minute they saw him standing there, all three snapped to attention. "L-Lord Madara!"

They bent awkwardly at the waist in an improvised bow. All but Kagami, who continued to stand ready to attack. Kagami, who was usually respectful to his superiors and never caused trouble. "I believe I asked a question."

Gulping hard, the two boys looked between each other, seemingly trying to decide which one of them would speak. "W-we were just playing, and then Kagami g-got serious, and–"

"They attacked it!" Kagami hissed.

Madara was a little surprise at the heat in his voice. "Attacked what?"

"The stray that's been coming around for scraps. It was minding its own business, and they threw kunai at it. Then, they singed it with a fireball." Looking closer, Madara realized the disheveled lump on the ground Kagami was so determined to protect, had fur. Though it was hard to discern from its charred skin, he could see white fur patched with gray. It was the same cat he'd been attempting to chase away from the compound for quite a while.
'So, the rabbit-tailed nuisance finally met its match...' Grudgingly, he had to admit that the annoying creature was far more cunning than it looked. It was disarmingly charming in appearance, with its tall triangular ears and a tail more reminiscent of a jackrabbit's than a cat.

Be that as it may, Madara didn't very much care for the way it hung around idly on porch steps soaking in sunshine as if it had the right. He'd even caught it hanging around his own door more than once, and was agitated to see Naoko had left cream for it there, likely because she knew it would bother him. The woman was a good bedfellow, but she could be insufferable.

Izuna had a soft spot for the pest, adding further insult to injury. He'd even absurdly suggested he was considering keeping it, but training the next generation of Uchiha kept him busy.

While Madara considered how to deal with his furry nemesis, it would watch him smugly with mismatched eyes, mewing innocently as if it didn't understand that it was in the way. More than once, Madara had considered setting his falcon loose on it. It would serve it right. That was unnecessary now though, because from the looks of it...

"She needs help, or she'll die." Kagami moved to slowly gather the cat in his arms, and it meowed pitifully.

One of the boys apparently responsible ribbed the other playfully. "How soft-hearted can you be? Are you sure you're even an Uchiha?"

Madara's steely gaze fell on the two snickering boys, and they instantly shut up.

"I want the both of you out of my sight. And come tomorrow, rise early. I'll inform Izuna that you'll be training with me."

Their eyes widened, and then in unison their heads dropped. "Yes, Lord Madara..."

He watched them go with feint disdain. Foolish, reckless children. That's all they were. But if he allowed them to think it was acceptable to maim animals and one day they used a fireball against some civilian's yapping dog, it would reflect poorly on the whole clan. Some of the village was still equally fearful as they were awed of the Uchiha. It was natural to be wary of such a powerful clan. The actions of a few stupid children could give rise to further distrust. They would think the Uchiha raised vicious offspring that attacked defenseless animals.

"Hand it here, Kagami," Madara held out his gloved hands, and Kagami moved closer, sadness in his eyes.

"Are you going to give it to the healers?" he asked quietly.

A long sigh passed his lips. He couldn't help it. For all his skill, the boy was still so naïve. "No. I'm going to give it the painless death it deserves."

The curly-haired boy's steps drew short as he stopped and pressed the wounded cat closer to his chest. "You can't!"

"It's the most merciful thing given the circumstances. It will die suffering horribly otherwise."

"But the healers could--"

"Now you're simply being foolish," Madara scoffed. "Tell me, do you think the healers have time to tend to this pitiful cat that's clinging to life by a hair? Do you expect them to put our own clansmen aside to oversee it's recovery?"
Kagami looked ashamed. "No, I'm sorry..."

Madara felt a small amount of pity. The boy was kind-hearted, and he couldn't fault him for that. "Even if the healers took it in...it may still not work." he reasoned softly, "It may still end up succumbing to its injuries." Like Izuna almost did. Blocking out the memory, he extended his hands once again. This time, Kagami slowly started to give him the cat.

The minute it was in his arms, the vile little thing seemed to find some hidden strength, as he heard it starting to hiss quietly. Ah, yes. The feelings between he and his adversary were mutual. The cat resented that he chased it off as much as Madara resented that it kept coming back. "Don't even think about it." he warned as the cat started to open its mouth, as if it had resolved to use the last of its life force biting him.

Kagami gently stroked its head one last time and then shuffled backwards, forcing himself to look away. "I'm sorry..." he mumbled. "I should go home now..." He watched the young prodigy dart off. Yes, the boy really was far too kind.

"What did you do now? He looks like he was fleeing a demon." Madara glanced nonchalantly over his shoulder to see Izuna had finally arrived.

"He's not the only one of your students I've scared off today." he informed him.

"No? That would explain the two boys I saw not long ago. They looked like the Shinigami was coming for their souls."

Madara couldn't help but smirk proudly. If he could put half as much fear in people as the Reaper could, it had been a good day. "After they've trained with me tomorrow, they might wish he had." He turned, allowing Izuna to see the half-dead feline in his arms.

Izuna, expectedly, was shocked. "What happened to it?"

"Your students, according to Kagami. They decided to make a game of maiming the thing. Unfortunately for this mangy sack of fur, its nine lives weren't quite handy enough to save it. I told Kagami I'd give it a clean death."

Madara expected that to be the end of it. Izuna would nod grimly, say his goodbyes, and let him dispose of the cat. He was even willing to bury it somewhere afterwards, because he wasn't heartless enough to toss it out to the vultures. More than anything, though, he didn't want the smell lingering anywhere near the compound. A rotting carcass, no matter what type, smelled revolting.

All thoughts of how he was about to do a good deed by humanely putting the animal out of its misery ground to a halt when Izuna spoke. "You can't." The exact same words Kagami had said. And they weren't the desperate, high-pitch that his disciple's voice had been, but the determined, grounded voice of an adult with conviction. His brother truly meant to spare the cat.

Only, Izuna should know better. He wasn't a child. He wasn't naïve. He had seen death. He had courted it and, most recently, death had almost claimed him as its own. It was one cat. One. Cat. Why was everyone turning him into the villain? At the moment he was the only one being sensible.

"You can't possibly mean that. As you can see, this cat is dying." He lifted it up and allowed Izuna to see its burnt back, fur now missing and skin blackened. It had a laceration on the inside of one of its legs where the kunai had clearly struck it. "Prolonging the inevitable is cruelty I'm not willing to be held responsible for."
"But it can be healed."

Madara felt his nostrils flare and the vein on his forehead twitch. It was the same face he made when Hashirama said something stupid. "You and your pupil clearly have some unspoken connection. His words keep coming out of your mouth."

"He's right. And so am I. Give it here,"

Madara was beyond fed up. Now his words were coming out of his brother's mouth. "The healers won't be able to do anything for this."

"Maybe not the ones you know. But I think I know someone who can. ...I'll rephrase; I'm sure I do." How cryptic. Izuna knew a healer he didn't? Was he bluffing so he could hide the cat away somewhere? No. That would be childish, and more to the point, it wouldn't help the cat anyway. It would be letting it suffer, and between the two of them, Izuna cared more about preventing its suffering than he did.

His brother held his arms out, just like he had done with Kagami. Madara found himself reluctantly transferring the cat once again. And the animal, who had been hissing under its breath since the moment Madara picked it up, weakly started purring for Izuna. "If this mysterious healer is capable of performing the miracles you seem to think they are, perhaps I should come and see this in person."

"I don't think that'd be wise," Izuna sounded a little smug. "You'd likely aggravate the situation."

Madara was left feeling bewildered as he watched his brother poof away.

"I can't believe I said that..." Sakura complained to herself. Who else was there to complain to? Toka and Reira had gone home, and she was walking back to her own house, empty-handed. Despite her best efforts, and the list of things Toka and Reira had said he'd enjoy, Sakura was struggling to come up with an appropriate gift for the Shodai.

"He's not shishou...I can't show up with a bottle of cheap sake...and I'm pretty sure his clan's got all the good ideas covered. They know him much better..." Frazzled nerves had reduced her to this. Talking out the dilemma with herself in the middle of the streets.

Sakura wanted to leave a good impression. The Hokage was, after all, the Hokage. A good-natured and fair leader. If she was going to do it, she didn't want to do it in halves. That was why she had to find something...something that could express the gratitude for all the help and kindness he'd shown her so far, without making it too intimate and leading to a very awkward situation.

It couldn't be anything that family, friends, or a lover would give. It had to be something more...professional. Something an acquaintance could safely give. That ruled a few things out immediately.

Truthfully, she was still hesitant to show up at all. But Toka had already told her that they would walk her to the Senju compound on the day of the party. No way out of it now.

Tomorrow was another day. She could get up early, go to the market, and find something acceptable to present to the Hokage. At the party, she'd ignore and avoid Tobirama like a plague. *I can pretend he's an enemy nin and practice my evasion skills.* Applying it to some form of training made her feel less like a coward. Shoulders slumped, she dragged herself the rest of the way to her street. By now, she'd gotten neighbors. Some were civilians, but others were shinobi. A blended neighborhood. Maybe that's where Tobirama thought she'd be most comfortable. Not like he cared
about her comfort...

'Wait...isn't that...my door?' Leaned back against the door with his head tilted toward the sky, was Izuna Uchiha, with what looked like a bloody rag in his lap.

She approached in confusion and true to his shinobi instincts, he turned to her immediately before she was even within arm's distance. "Izuna-san?"

"Sakura-san," sighed Izuna. A short quiver went through her at the way he breathed her name with so much relief, like she was the only thing he'd been wanting to see all day.

"What's...what's that?" she stopped right in front of him and then crouched. A hand flew to her mouth as squinted eyes stared up at her.

"Mew..."

Izuna soothed the animal with gentle words, standing to his full height. Sakura followed, getting back to her feet. "It's in bad shape...I know it might be asking for a lot, but...would you have a look?"

Sakura didn't even think as she deactivated the seals around her house and gestured for him to enter first. Sakura ran into her bedroom, and found the trunk at the foot of her bed. In it, she kept the few items she'd arrived with. Precious things she couldn't part with that reminded her where she came from, and where she wanted to go back to. Among those things, was her tattered black shirt.

When she got back, Izuna was kneeling in the middle of the floor with the animal, cooing reassurances to it. "These are bad burns..." Sakura murmured, placing the shirt down for the Uchiha to lay the cat on. He gingerly set the poor feline down and it mewed in protest. Sakura got a flashback to her early days of training under Tsunade, when she'd be given animals to heal.

Even on days when she wasn't supervised under Tsunade, Sakura would seek out Hana Inuzuka and ask if she could help with some of her less severe patients. Soon, people in her neighborhood were bringing their pained pets to her, much to the astonishment of her parents. Sakura would even coax injured strays into letting her practice her healing techniques on them.

"Don't worry, I can heal these." She laid a glowing green hand down on the cat, pumping the soothing chakra into its system. The whining animal went comfortably lax as she got to work.

"Is she yours?" Sakura asked, never taking her eyes off the patient. If she had, she would have noticed the look of wonder Izuna gave her as he watched her at work.

"A stray that was born somewhere near the compound," Izuna explained. "When we first started building, there was a mother cat nursing her kittens that would sometimes come around. The children would feed her scraps and play with the kittens sometimes, so they became somewhat friendly. When she finished weaning them, they all disappeared, except this one. That was weeks ago now. I think this little one has been left behind."

"Hmm...so this is a really young one then. It's practically still a kitten." Sakura kept a controlled and steady flow of chakra. She was pleased to see the animal was starting to breath a little better. It even lifted its head slightly to sniff at her hand.

"Yes. I thought of taking her in...but I train the children of the clan, and it takes a lot of my attention away. I could also be called away on a mission at any time."

"And it looks like the poor thing's overstayed its welcome." He didn't bother denying it was a fire
jutsu that put the kitten in the state it was.

"Madara would just as soon see it gone. I'd hate to turn it out onto the streets and hope it fairs better outside the compound."

"Well..." Sakura cleared her throat as she brought her hand away from the now mostly healed cat. Now, where the nasty burns had been was only freshly healed, pink flesh. It still would like strange until its fur grew back, but it was out of harms way now. "I think it should make it, but the little thing's probably going to be exhausted for a day or two. I'll keep it here. That way, it has a safe place until it's ready to get back on its feet. Oh!" Sakura looked at her lap to see the cat had rested its head on one of her available thighs and was purring softly.

"It certainly seems content with that." Izuna chuckled, brushing a hand across its head. "Thank you," he attempted a courteous smile, but she was looking at him strangely.

"What happened to your face?"

He looked a little bemused. "It's hereditary unfortunately, so there's no helping it."

"No," Sakura rolled her eyes with a snort. He was doing it again, as if implying being blessed with Uchiha features was a terrible thing. "I mean..." she tentatively placed a hand to his cheek and turned his face to the side. A long gash marred the pale skin. She clucked under her breath, pressing a thumb against it. Izuna flinched lightly. "You didn't feel this?"

"Apparently not..." Sakura ignored the way his warm breath tickled the heel of her palm as she pulled it away from him. "On the way here, there were dogs, and their barking scared the cat...she tried to climb to my shoulders for safety, so that might have resulted in an accidental knick." he shrugged nonchalantly. "It'll heal in a days time or two."

Sakura pressed a hand to the injured cheek again. "Or it'll heal now." Once again she concentrated healing chakra to her hand. Izuna stared into her face with clear surprise, and she smirked in amusement. "There," she pulled her hand away, and it was like the scratch had never happened. Izuna's face could go on to be unblemished another day.

He felt the skin. "Amazing."

"Don't exaggerate. That was hardly life-threatening."

"Still, I find it amazing that these hands," He gingerly picked up the hand that hadn't been idly petting the sleeping cat to study. "Can do so much good. I admire your skills, Sakura-san."

Reflexively, she hit his arm, probably a little harder than intended, because he clutched it instantly, a betrayed look on his face. "That's your reaction to a compliment?"

She laughed earnestly. It was meant to be a playful hit. "Sorry. I forget my strength sometimes."

It was Izuna's turn to smirk. "If you'll use your healing chakra again, feel free to hit me anytime."

Sakura felt her cheeks coloring prettily. "Ehe..."

Izuna smiled, looking down at the cat again. "It's a funny looking thing."

Sakura looked too. "Now that you mention it...what's with the tail? It looks like...a bunny's? And the ears are pretty long for a cat's too..."
"I'm not sure, really. It seems like I remember the mother looking the same way."

"Huh." Sakura scratched behind its ears and it nuzzled even closer, its damp little nose tickling her bare flesh.

"I have to thank you once again," said Izuna. "I'm glad this little one's now in safe hands."

"The safest," Sakura nodded.

"I should take my leave then."

Sakura waved to him as he left, unable to get up with the purring cat snuggled against her leg. 'Did I just get a rabbit cat?'

Three days passed by uneventfully, with Sakura tending to the as-of-yet unnamed cat (she had bought it a wicker basket to sleep in and raw meat to eat). It seemed perfectly content to be with her. The first thing it did when it felt ready to get back up was follow her around the house. It was sort of nice, having the company. Not that she'd felt lonely before...she wasn't! But her new "helper" was still nice to have around.

Izuna had come back two days later to check up on the former stray from the Uchiha district to find how smitten it had become with her, and had stated that he'd have a hard time finding it a new home, when she seemed to have already decided she was staying where she was. Sakura had been reluctant at first. Her parents never allowed her to have a pet growing up, and when she got older, ninja duties kept her too busy. The closest she'd come was pet-sitting for her neighbors once or twice.

An animal was a big responsibility...but, being the soft-touch she was, it was one she took on.

There was only one issue and it had nothing to do with her new responsibility of pet ownership...

Namely, that she still hadn't found an appropriate gift and the party was a day away.

Sakura wandered the village, frustrated with herself. 'This shouldn't be so hard. I wish Ino was here...'. Her friend would know exactly how to remedy her situation. Ino was excellent with these things. But, Sakura knew she was on her own. Wait...if she just thought like Ino, maybe she'd find some inspiration.

Ino would pick a gift that fit the receiver's personality, but also spelled out "Ino got this" in glittering lettering. Sakura wasn't sure about the flair, but she knew enough about the Hokage to know the defining traits that had won him the respect and adoration of the village were patience, generosity and fairness.

'Alright,' she thought, fist clenched in determination. 'I can work with this...'

"Come on Forehead, use that big brain!" Ino would jab her in the middle of the forehead. "You can't go wrong with flowers...or plants in this case I guess."

Plants...

An idea struck like lightning. Sakura lit up as she ran the streets, looking for any sort of store selling plants and flowers. Normally, she'd just head right over to Ino's but she was almost positive the Yamanaka Flower Shop wasn't an option. She didn't even know if the Yamanaka clan had moved to Konoha yet.
There had to be a shop somewhere though, Yamanaka-owned or not. If she looked hard enough she'd find it.

It wasn't the most effective way, but so be it. That was when she spotted a familiar face, holding a small hand basket. "Susumu?" she walked over to her fellow medic, smiling in relief.

"O-Oh, Sakura-san?" Susumu returned it with a timid but sincere smile in return. Sakura admired the long eyelashes that Ino would die for as the other nin blinked. She had been called Susumu a girl in her head, but really, looking at the person in front of her, she still couldn't be sure.

"You look flushed. Are you alright?"

"Huh?" Sakura patted her cheeks. "Oh yeah, totally fine. I'm just...sort of looking for something. You wouldn't know where to get plants and flowers around here, would you?"

Susumu's purple head canted to the side in thought.

"Actually I do,"

"Really?" Sakura asked in excitement. "I ran into the right person then!"

"There's a nice little nursery. It's just around the corner there, the first stop on your right."

Sakura took off at a sprint, waving behind her. "Thanks Susumu."

She wasn't even sure if the purple-haired medic had heard her. But just like she'd been told, there was a nursery, right there. If she felt like being dramatic, Sakura might start tearing up.

Luckily, she managed to keep herself composed as she walked in. A middle aged couple looked up as the chime above the door rang, greeting her.

"Hello, dear, need help or just browsing?"

"I'd love some help. I'm looking for a hardy houseplant. Something that flowers if you have it."

"Sounds like you're wanting a bonsai. We've got a couple of different varieties." The man behind the counter said. "My wife can show you the few we have right now."

Sakura followed the stout woman to the back of the nursery, where a shelf of five different bonsai sat in their pots. "Wow, they all look so different. Which one do you think is the best?"

"Well, they all bloom beautifully, you know." She nodded to herself. "But it's all up to preference. Although, some are harder to take care of than others."

"What's this one's name?" Sakura pointed to the first bonsai. There was an element of grace about it.

"We call that one a Fukien Tea bonsai, my dear. Not an easy one. Especially not for someone who doesn't have a green thumb."

Sakura didn't know if the Hokage had a green thumb, or the time to take care of a high maintenance plant. "Uh, what about the next one? It's really pretty already."

"That's the cherry bonsai. Not to be confused with the cherry blossom bonsai of course," the woman winked. "Although, we sell that species too."
"Interesting," The bonsai had delicate looking white blooms and thin branches. It was so elegant, and a touch feminine, like something out of a painting.

"Yes, they're some of our most popular. As long as you use the right soil and a large pot they'll grow like weeds."

Sakura thought about the pretty tree sitting somewhere the Hokage could admire. It seemed like it'd add a nice aesthetic to any room it was sat in.

"Oh! This one's got little bulbs on it." Sakura poked at the small ruddy bulbs hanging from another bonsai.

"They're not bulbs dear." The woman laughed. "That's actually an apple bonsai. They can bear fruit. Those will get a little bigger and ripen up. Makes a nice snack if you like the tartness. Not to mention, it'll flower in the summer and spring."

A tree that did both! Any plant enthusiast would be happy with a tree that looked pretty and produced fruit.

"And this other one? I like these gold leaves." Sakura lightly touched one of said leaves, admiring the rich autumnal shade.

"Oh, that's a maple bonsai." said the older woman, "easy to take care of, changes colors in the falls months, and really brightens up the room. Can't go wrong with that species."

Sakura stepped back and surveyed all the trees again. She hadn't really thought about just how many different species of bonsai existed. Now that she got a sampling, it was almost overwhelming. But, if it was enough to impress her, someone with minimal knowledge on gardening, it should definitely impress someone who had a Wood affinity, shouldn't it? Sakura was mentally crossing her fingers.

"It's hard to pick, but I think I'll take this one..." Sakura picked up the tree with pretty green leaves and healthy pink blossoms.

"Ooh, that's the cherry blossom bonsai. A very nice choice for you. It'll match your hair." Sakura looked down at the plant, laughing nervously.

"It's for someone else, actually, but I hope he likes it. Thanks for your help."

"Of course. Come back and pick out some more for yourself anytime you like."

Sakura paid for the bonsai, admiring it as she took it back to her house and set it down on her kitchen table. Until the big day, it could brighten up her room a little. "Now I don't have to be worried about being the laughing stock of the party...showing up empty-handed." She was proud of herself. She'd diverted a disaster, as far as she was concerned. Out of nowhere, a gray and white blur jumped onto the table, walking curiously over to the new occupant.

"Hey, get down," Sakura laughed and put the inquisitive cat back on the floor. The last thing she needed was for it to bite the plant or knock it over.

"Brawwr?"

"This," Sakura pointed to the cherry blossom bonsai. "Is off limits,"

Yeah right, like that'd stop her rambunctious little friend.
Sakura carefully picked it up and decided it'd be safest in her bedroom. Unfortunately that meant her kitten would be sleeping out in the hall, but it was only for one night.

She'd worked too hard finding the perfect thing to let it become a cat chew toy.

~ASiT~

"Ooh, that's pretty," The first thing the two Senju caught sight of as Sakura opened the door was the vibrant plant she had carefully tucked under one arm.

"Thanks," Sakura looked down nervously at the plant for what felt like the hundredth time. She had spent the night hoping she'd made the right choice. Either way, she was out of time.

"Mrawr..."

The kitten came slinking its way past Sakura's leg and she scooted it back with a foot, quickly closing the door. "Was that a kitty? When did you get a kitty?" Reira gasped.

"Sort of a long story," Sakura chuckled. "Lead the way."

"Of course," Toka took the lead and Reira skipped at her side. "I've picked up the sake set." she held up a wrapped bundle. "And I see you've found your gift as well. It's a nice one. I'm sure Lord Hashirama will find it very charming."

"Here's to hoping, right?"

"Your kimono's really pretty too, Sakura~"

Sakura looked down at herself. Today she'd decided on a turquoise kimono that left her shoulders exposed, and clipped her hair up. Not because she was trying to impress, but because it had been warmer than she was expecting for a fall day.

"I like yours more."

Somehow, Reira had managed to pull off a kimono just as yellow as her usual gi.

"I'm a little surprised to see you wearing one though,"

"It was Toba's idea...but at least it's comfy!"

"Better still, it fits the occasion. If allowing you to wear that...color...was the price paid for compromise, then it's one I can accept."

The entirety of the Senju clan, however, seemed to be happily clustered into the compound. As they passed different members, people gave Toka greetings and waved at an excitable Reira. Sakura got the curious stares she was expecting but at least they didn't seem unfriendly.

The celebrations will eventually spill into the courtyard for the games, but they always start inside." Toka explained.

Sakura clutched the little bonsai and followed her friend into a very elegant traditional building. The Senju clan symbol hung on banners in the hallway they walked, and naturally, it was on the
backs of many Senju they passed. Even Reira and Toka, she realized, had their clan symbol on their back and sleeve respectively.

There was excited chattering as Sakura pushed her way into the crowded room after Toka slid the doors open. "Lord Hashirama must have already arrived." Toka said over the din.

"Did you see who he had with him?" a gossiping Senju was telling another.

"Yes, the Uchiha clan leader!"

"No!"

"Yes, I saw him myself."

"I can't imagine Lord Tobirama's too pleased."

"I'd call his expression the opposite of pleased."

"Tobaa?" Reira pulled on Toka's sleeve. "Did Hashi-nii really invite the Uchiha with the oni mask face?"

Toka sighed long and hard. "Yes, Reira, I'm afraid he's a big enough fool that it's entirely likely."

Sakura's jaw had dropped the moment she heard Madara Uchiha was on the premises. 'Fool doesn't cover it! It's going to be a battle ground the minute Madara and the Nidaime lay eyes on each other. They hate each other! Even I know that!'

Sakura seriously considered leaving, courtesies be damned. 'I'll give him this bonsai so all my efforts weren't in vain, and then I'll slip out.'

"Where should I set this Toka?"

"Well, normally we would line up and each present the gifts to Lord Hashirama ourselves."

Sakura blanched. "There are at least a hundred people here...that's going to take a while."

"These tend to be all day affairs."

Her soul started to slip out past her lips. 'An all day birthday party for a grown man? This whole clan is nuts.'

That was when she heard the boisterous laughter she had come to know well. 'And the birthday boy himself...' Through the hall full of people, Sakura could see Hashirama, his body bent almost in half as he leaned down for an older woman to pinch at his cheeks. He seemed to be enjoying the attention, laughing good-naturedly. Beside him, was a very uncomfortable looking Madara in a navy kimono.

And quickly surging his way through the crowd was the epitome of a very irate Tobirama. The crowd was practically tossing themselves out of the way as he made his way over to Hashirama, jerking him up by the back of his olive kimono and then dragging him away by the ear, but not before giving Madara a scathing look that was gladly returned.

"Enjoy the food everyone!" Hashirama called, even as he was pulled from the room like a child. "Oh, but save me some honey wine!" Everyone laughed.

"Will they be alright?" Sakura asked with genuine concern.
"Lord Hashirama is very resilient. Whatever Lord Tobirama throws at him, I'm sure he'll recover from it." Toka guided Reira off to the other children by the shoulders.

'That doesn't answer my question! And I hope she doesn't mean throws at him in a literal sense. In this case, it's pretty possible.'

Sakura had a feeling this whole event was already gearing up to be a hell of a night, and it was only lunchtime.

Speaking of...

Sakura wasn't normally a person guided by her stomach, but she hadn't really had breakfast. Bonsai plant still in tow, she made her way to the table containing a wide assortment of foods. The Senju clan had truly gone all out. Sakura found herself a plate and a pair of chopsticks, careful not to drop the bonsai. As her chopsticks reached for some inari-zushi, they were intercepted by another pair. Sakura pouted, going for another piece, when her chopsticks were blocked again. That was when she felt her temper starting to boil. "Hey, what gives? There's a table full of food! Do you really need to eat all the inari-zushi?"

Glares, she was surprised when bored obsidian eyes stared back into hers. Madara Uchiha put the piece he'd stolen from right under her nose into his mouth, chewing mockingly slow. "Yes," he said after finishing. "And, in case you weren't aware, this celebration required an invitation to enter."

Sakura felt her cheeks redden angrily. How was it that this man got under her skin the way he did? Even when he wasn't being homicidal, she wanted to rearrange his face. "I. Was. Invited!"

"Really now?" Madara smirked. "By whom?"

"By a friend. You know, the same way you got in. I hope the Ni...Tobirama Senju throws you out!"

"It maybe true that Tobirama and I don't see eye to eye, but in all likelihood, you'll be thrown out long before me."

Glares, Sakura snatched the inari-zushi roll from his plate, cramming into her mouth defiantly and storming off. Backpedaling on an afterthought, Sakura turned and took the whole platter of inari-zushi Madara had been about to eat from, satisfied by the glare she received.

Her hands were full between the plate and the bonsai she was carrying, but as soon as she found a spot to sit she could remedy that.

She didn't really know where she was going. She'd completely lost sight of Toka and Reira in the crowded room, so the best she could hope for was making her way into the hall without bumping anyone with the platter tray. She didn't count on almost running right into a scowling Tobirama. He looked down at her, and his left cheek twitched. "You."

"Me." Sakura sighed. This was already old.

"What do you think you're..."

"Toka invited me." Sakura said, dragging out each word. "And if the Uchiha doesn't have to leave, neither do I." Okay, so she was being a little bolder than usual, considering the Nidaime technically outranked her on several fronts.

"You'll both be leaving if I have anything to say about it,"
"Well if you did, neither of us would be here to begin with."

Tobirama's scowl could have curdled fresh milk.

"The clan indulges far too many of my brother's antics," he grumbled.

"Well, even if you don't want me here, Toka invited me as a guest, so until either she or Hokage-sama tell me I have to go, I'm staying." Purely out of defiance. Minutes before, she was contemplating leaving voluntarily. The minute Tobirama tried to force her out was the minute she knew she would stay. Quite frankly she'd had enough of men in this time period trying to steamroll her.

She had definitely not made a friend of Tobirama Senju with her attitude. But then again, as patient as she'd try to be with him out of deference for his role as a future Hokage and a founder of the village, he definitely hadn't impressed her with his attitude either, for all his exceptional feats as a shinobi.

It was funny when she thought of it. With both the Senju and Uchiha brothers. There were two brothers she got along fine with, and two she always knocked heads with. He just so happened to belong to the latter set.

"You're incredibly insolent for a guest," he snarled. "And what're you doing with that platter. It's for everyone."

"I know that!" Sakura snapped. "Tell that to Madara Uchiha."

Tobirama raised a brow. "What does he have to do with your stealing the inari-zushi from the other guests?"

"He tried to steal it all first...! So I..." Sakura paused, a blush sweeping over her face as she realized how incredibly immature she must seem. She'd taken an entire platter of food from the table, just so Madara couldn't eat it. "I...took it away so he couldn't have any."

Tobirama's face was too neutral to read, but...Sakura could swear she caught a glimpse of amusement?

"Tobi!" They both looked behind them to see Hashirama had come bursting out into the hall, looking frantic. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry for not telling you...but you know how you get about anything involving Madara. You won't even hear it. So I knew you'd explode, which you did, and I forgive you for that, but...oh, hello Sakura-san!" Hashirama smiled, waving cheerfully at her. He began talking to his brother again, then blinked, doing a double take. "Sakura-san?" he stared between the two curiously, and they watched in confusion as a slow smile formed and he...blushed. "Oh...Oh. I'm interrupting aren't I? Clearly, you had something on your mind you want to confess...so please, don't mind me."

"Lord Hokage..." Sakura began. "Um. I think you might have...the wrong..."

"I've told you repeatedly, you fool! I'm not courting this woman!"

"Tobi, you say that, but every time I see you with Sakura-san, you both look so passionate. What else am I supposed to think?"

Sakura blushed again, darker than the last few times. 'That's because we're always in the middle of arguing! But I guess...I could see how he'd walk in and get the wrong idea.'
"I-It's really not like that Hokage-sama," the weak voice that came out only made her sound all the more like she was hiding something. Damn it!

"Well, if you say so Sakura-san, I'll believe you." Hashirama grinned goofily. "I didn't know you were coming though, but it's nice to see you here! I see you're enjoying the food."

Sakura, ashamed, hid the tray behind her back. "That's not what it looks like either...a-and Toka invited me, I hope that's alright."

"Of course!" Hashirama nodded. "I would have invited the whole village, but it would have been a little too crowded, thinking about it in hindsight." he sighed wistfully. "Maybe next year."

Sakura's mood lightened at his easygoing candor. The brothers really were like night and day. "Before next year, I want to say happy birthday for this one." Carefully maneuvering, Sakura set the inari-zushi down on a nearby piece of furniture that...probably wasn't for sitting platters of stolen food on.

"T-This is for you..." she presented him with the bonsai she'd been protecting for the last day and a half. Her heart beat dully in her ears the longer he just stared at the small flowered tree. She was starting to feel like a fool. Tobirama was watching, and the Hokage didn't seem as enthused about the gift as she was hoping he'd be. It was such a bad reaction, he was speechless.

"T-That's..." Wait, he was speaking! "That's for me?" he pointed to himself innocently.

Sakura smiled unsurely. "Y-Yes?" It came out more like a question, but that was alright. "I know it's not the right order. Toka told me you're supposed to all line up and present the gifts one by one...s-so I can just wait my turn."

Hashirama stepped forward, reaching for the pot. "It's so...beautiful. It's a cherry blossom bonsai, isn't it?"

"It is. I wasn't really sure what kind of gift would be appropriate, I'm sorry."

To her surprise, Hashirama's hands reached out and completely covered hers as they both held the bonsai pot together. She hadn't really been expecting that. At all. His hands were so large! And warm, and calloused...and...was there sniffling.

"Brother. Don't." Tobirama said from somewhere off to the side.

"I c-can't help it. It's so beautiful and sweet-smelling, and it has such a resilient spirit." Hashirama gently took it from her, holding it up to his face. She wasn't really sure what to make of the bizarreness of the situation, which got stranger with every minute. One minute he was silent and now he was...weeping. Over a bonsai. At least he liked it.

"I'll cherish this. And every time I look at it, I'll remember who gave it to me," Sakura found herself forced to look away when Hashirama tried making eye contact. The amount of earnest emotion was so intense it was embarrassing. Sort of like when Lee and Gai embraced and cried, but somehow a weepy First Hokage holding a bonsai made for a more endearing picture. Sakura found herself blinking back a few tears too. *This makes no sense! What am I even crying for?! Ugh. Earnest emotions. Who needs them."

"W-Well I'm glad you liked it," What else could she say.

"I love it." Hashirama suddenly swept her into a hug, and for a few minutes she was pressed embarrassingly close to his chest.
He hardly realized how uncomfortable she was. Interacting with the First Hokage, she'd noticed what a tactile person he was. Touching was second nature. Sakura turned, her lips quivering in embarrassment and her face hot, to see Tobirama standing there with a gleeful twinkle in his eyes.

'\textit{That asshole's enjoying this!}' He wouldn't be for much longer. Before the night was over, she'd get him back.
Incipient

Chapter Summary

The party continues and Sakura finds herself having more fun than she expected, but when Mizuchi later reveals her hand, it could spell trouble...
The Kaguya children learn the importance of sticking together.

Sakura thoughtfully chewed on the inari-zushi. The rice inside was neither too firm nor too mushy and the crispness of the fried tofu shell was a perfect contrast in texture. 'Hmm... this is some of the best inari-zushi I've ever had. No wonder Madara was trying to hoard this stuff.' Actually taking the time to taste what she was eating was a different experience than cramming it down in anger. She glanced at the platter sitting beside her. 'But there's no way I can eat all this by myself...'

She wandered back over to the spread of food and returned the tray to where it had been. She didn't see any signs of a certain obnoxious Uchiha around, and with any luck, the remaining inari-zushi would be eaten up by the time he returned for food.

Feeling sated, she glanced around, hoping to catch sight of Reira or Toka. Instead, she spotted Hashirama through the crowd, gently hugging a child that had run up to him and wrapped himself around the Hokage's legs.

Sakura found her face warming up involuntarily. She remembered the tight hug from earlier, and how awkward it had been for her. The man had no sense of boundaries. When he'd finally released her and thanked her again, Sakura was still feeling flushed. Hashirama practically skipped back into the party, bonsai in tow, with Tobirama trailing behind him, giving her one wary glance from over his shoulder.

Alone once more, she watched everyone mingling, trying to stay out of the way. As expected, she felt like an outsider. It wasn't necessarily that the Senju seemed unwelcoming. But before all this had happened— becoming a time-traveler—the only Senju she'd interacted with was Tsunade. Then suddenly, she was meeting the village Founders, and Toka, and even Reira. Now, there were even more Senju. An entire roomful.

While Sakura didn't consider herself shy, she also didn't think she could be the life of the party. Watching Hashirama, it was easy to see why everyone gravitated towards him. He exuded charisma. 'So that's the man that even befriended Madara Uchiha...'. Not for the first time, she was impressed with him.

"Alright everyone, gather around!" An older woman yelled over the din. Cheers went up from the assembled clan. "In an orderly fashion, you may present your—oof!" Sakura gaped as everyone went rushing up to Hashirama, swarming him and shoving wrapped parcels in his face. She could even see Reira and Toka being pushed around in the crowd—Toka looked ready to put a poisoned senbon into the throat of the next person who touched her.

"I said orderly!" the woman cried, indignant. Everyone kept clambering over themselves to present their gifts.

Tobirama inserted himself between his brother and their excited relatives, his eyes daring anyone to
test his patience. "I believe Mei-san told you all to line up." Just like that, Sakura saw everyone take several steps back, quickly complying.

Even holding a cute little bonsai—something she recalled the Hokage asking him to guard with his life—the man had a very daunting aura that others naturally submitted to. 'Speaking of dark auras…I don't see…ah—' Madara stood off in a corner with his arms crossed and a mildly disinterested look on his face.

Sakura turned back to the line of Senju. Under the supervision of Tobirama and the older woman apparently called Mei-san, everyone was behaving nicely. Hashirama took the time to thank each person by name, and comment on how he'd be sure to put their gift to good use.

Sakura wondered what his actual thoughts about each gift were. It was hard to tell with the kind smile plastered to his face, and he was steadily amassing a pile. She didn't see a single plant among his other gifts, and a sense of relief washed over her. At least her idea was original.

Toka and Reira finally made it to the front of the line together. The first thing Reira did was pull Hashirama into what looked like a strong hug. 'Urk! The death-grip hug is hereditary!' Sakura thought. Anyone else's face would have been turning blue, but Hashirama took it in stride, ruffling her hair.

"Ah! If it isn't Toka and Reira with my yearly kunai set!" The Hokage said as he accepted the wrapped box Toka gave him. "Thank you both, I will put it to—"

"NO!" Reira protested. "It's not a kunai set this time!"

Hashirama looked baffled, staring down at the package. "No?" he shook it curiously.

"Don't do that!" Reira snapped, putting her hands over his with a glare. "Just…just open it."

Heeding Reira's words, Sakura watched Hashirama place the package down on his lap and carefully unwrap it. When he lifted the lid of the box and saw the glass crystal sake set in all its sparkling glory, a slow smile appeared on his face. "A sake set?" he wondered aloud.

"For your honey wine?" Reira mimed sipping from a sake cup, giggling.

Toka, who had been silent, began fidgeting. "Does it not please you, milord?"

"It's great!" Hashirama announced. He picked up one of the delicate cups from the set to admire. "Look at the craftsmanship!" Sakura almost snorted when he leaned back to hold the glass under Tobirama's nose. His brother peered down at it, nearly going cross-eyed. Sakura laughed harder.

"And for the last time, Toka, Hashirama is fine. You know I'm not much for titles when it comes to friends."

Toka frowned stubbornly. "Given your positions as both Hokage and clan head, calling you so familiarly seems inappropriate now."

Hashirama rolled his eyes, setting the cup back in the box. "I should break these in!" A cheerful glint shone in his brown eyes. "Who wants to have a toast with me?"

The entire room shook under the force of all the Senju cheering. Tobirama, of course, looked as long-suffering as ever, like every one of his brother's antics was a new headache. Sakura chanced a peek at Madara, who was still standing off by himself, and noticed him looking around cautiously. No surprise there, Sakura imagined. From what she knew about Uchiha, she couldn't imagine
celebrations ever getting this lively. More than likely they were solemn and dignified. Coupled
with the fact that Hashirama was likely the only Senju Madara was on openly friendly terms with,
she could easily guess why it made him feel so out of his element.

‘Well,’ Sakura thought uncharitably, ‘At least I know I’m not the only one.’ It was wrong to be
pleased by someone else sharing in her discomfort, but she didn’t care. If she had to endure through
the duration of the party, he could too.

Any thoughts of glee over Madara being uncomfortable in a room full of Senju evaporated when
someone passed her a cup of honey wine. Sakura studied it, taking a hesitant sniff. ‘It smells…
really good.’

“A toast to Lord Hashirama’s good health and the prosperity of the Senju and the village under his
rule!” someone yelled. Everyone else raised their cups, so Sakura raised hers too.

"A toast!” they cried.

"A toast…” she repeated, taking a small sip.

The sweet headiness burst on her tongue and Sakura licked her lips. It was rich, with only the
slightest burn as it reached the back of her throat. Having Tsunade as a teacher meant she was no
stranger to drinking on occasion under special circumstances.

It was never much, and never as delicious as the honey wine she’d just sampled. Sakura knocked
back the rest of her cup, almost instantly craving more. When the second round was served, she
eagerly held her cup up without hesitation. ‘Not such a bad party after all,’ she decided.

Harihane was getting steadily more frustrated. They had been searching for over a day and a half,
and there was no sign of Kikue anywhere. No sign of Kikue meant no signs of remains…and that
was a good thing, wasn't it?

’Unless it ate her—bones and all.’ The cynical voice in the back of her head whispered. Her mind
kept showing her Kikue’s face, on the verge of tears, the way it always was when she was scolded.
When she closed her eyes for too long, she saw Kikue reaching for them and screaming for help.

She was raised not to feel fear. Not when she stared down an enemy three times her size, and not
when she lost someone. In a way, she guessed she'd always taken her siblings for granted. Her
brother was the obstacle that kept her from achieving her true dream.

And her sister was the clingy little tag-along that was always crying. She hated them. She hated
their father. She hated that because she was born second and a girl, she would never have the
coveted title of clan head, something Jun’ichi didn't seem to want in the first place.

All of that was before, though…

A strange woman came to them and just like that everything changed. Jun’ichi and Kikue gravitated
towards her instantly. Harihane wasn’t going to let her guard down. Weeks went by, and Oka was
still there.

It was obvious she felt disdain for the Kaguya and their traditions, and Harihane didn’t blame her.
She hated her own family. So she didn't expect an outsider to find them anymore bearable.

But Harihane hadn't expected to see such defiance in Oka's eyes. Everyone always cracked and
cowered. Except the girl intended to be her brother's fiancé. She wasn't cowed by the cruelty
surrounding her, by Harihane's insults, by how bleak everything seemed.

Secretly, Harihane envied her. Her entire life, it had felt suffocating. It was shameful; a Kaguya who was a spare, not the heir, overwhelmed and so angry at herself and the world that she wore it like armor every day.

By the time Jun'ichi had come and told them their father wanted them to stop spies from escaping, and Oka was one of them, Harihane had been thinking for weeks. If changing was possible, it was something she desperately wanted to do. Being closer to her siblings, the only family she had left, as far as she was concerned, was a good place to start...

Kikue...

For some reason, no matter how much she had been keeping her sister at a distance, Kikue always had the same adoration in her eyes, and it made her feel a little ill. No one should be looking up to her. At least, she didn't think so. But if she couldn't get her little sister to stop idolizing her, she could at least become someone worthy of the admiration. The thought that she'd finally made up her mind but might never get the chance to truly reconcile with Kikue, filled her with rage.

She stopped abruptly, no longer focusing on Jun'ichi's back up ahead. Her vision blurred, and she blinked to clear it. When that didn't work she squatted right there in the dirt, put her hands over her ears, and screamed.

It might have been the most childish thing she'd ever done since their mother died. Life wasn't supposed to be a mess of rage and sadness and loss and regret. She was a fully-trained shinobi with plenty of kills, but she was also twelve. And shouldn't that negate the worst of it? Even sometimes? Shouldn't some deity take pity, see her struggling, and fix it? Or was pity not meant for Kaguya? If there was even one small exception, it should be for Kikue. Kikue had never hurt anyone.

"...Hari...hane!" Someone was calling her. Shaking her shoulders. Pulling her into their arms. She kept screaming, squeezing her eyes together as tight as she could. "Harihane, I'm here! You're here!"

"Kikue!" she heard herself wail. "I'm sorry, Kikue! I...I—"

"Kikue, is out there," the voice soothed. A steady hand smoothed her hair. It must have been horrible looking. The bun she had so painstakingly put it in was long gone. The small sectioned braid on the right side of her face pressed to the hot, sticky skin there. Sweat or tears. Tears or sweat. Both, maybe. "She's waiting for us."

"I let it take her!" Harihane sobbed, clutching the fabric of the kimono beneath her fingers. "I...I should have pro-protected her!" she hiccupped.

"You did," The hand came to rest on the crown of her head. "Just breathe." It took a while for her world to center itself again. The clothed shoulder she was leaning against belonged to her brother.

'Who else would it be?' she asked herself bitterly.

His scent washed over her, like pine, wild berries and a new leather saddle. Memories of how he would hold her close when she was barely more than an infant came back to her, and she went slack. How could she not see that while she was busy hating him, Jun'ichi was bearing the brunt of their father's expectations, shielding her all the while.

She pulled her face away from his shoulder and looked up at him with teary eyes. She was crying and there was no point in denying it. Jun'ichi stared back wordlessly, just waiting. She sniffled,
sucked in a deep breath, and pushed out of his arms. Her knees shook as she got to her feet, but she ignored it.

"I can keep going now…" she told him, swiping at her face. "I'm ready to get Kikue back."

Junji nodded, standing and brushing at his kimono. He licked his thumb and tried to wipe something from her face, but she dodged it. "Ew, Junji, that's gross."

Her brother only smiled warmly. "So you are back to normal after all."

Harihane felt her face slipping back into its default expression—annoyed. "Completely good to go."

"Out of all of us, you always have been the most resilient." He agreed. "But Harihane, always remember," he bent so that he was eye-level with her. "Whenever you aren't good to go, whenever it's too much, I am here to confide in."

Harihane laughed shakily, trying to hide her embarrassment by turning away. "Y-You're too earnest. Seriously! T-Try being more indirect sometimes, got it?! Like cooler and more mysterious! Not all mushy…"

"My apologies," he laughed, mussing her hair. "Shall we get going now?"

"I'm ready when you are," Harihane huffed, "but don't you ever tell anyone about this. Ever!"

"I wouldn't dare." Jun'ichi replied solemnly.

"Not even if you were tortured?" she snarked.

"Not even if I were tortured."

Harihane rubbed her arm self-consciously. "H-Hey Junji?"

He paused, "Hm?"

"I wanna find Kikue, so I can tell her I'm sorry. But," she swallowed, hoping for courage, "I want to tell you I'm sorry, too. You're...you're a good brother, and I was so angry, I didn't see it, and I know I was a mess, and I just—I don't hate you!"

"I know, little sister." he reassured. "I've always known." He offered her a hand and she reached for it without hesitation. Her chest, no, her whole spirit was lighter now.

~ASiT~

"Huh,"

Harihane stopped beside him as he examined the markings in the bark of the tree. They very much resembled claw marks…

"What's the huh for, huh?" she asked impatiently. She seemed to have recovered from whatever had caused her to shut down only hours ago.

"I almost believe these were meant to mark territory."

Harihane studied the marks for herself. "These look like they came from an animal…" she grumbled. "And not even like the one we're looking for."
"If I didn't know any better, I would say we were close to a settlement of some kind."

"A settlement?" Harihane repeated. "No way!"

Growling echoed her protestation. The siblings quickly stood back to back, readying their Shikotsumyaku in case of an attack. But they quickly saw they had been surrounded by large, snarling canines. Trapped in a circle, the beasts pressed ever closer. Harihane attempted to attack one, but it dodged quickly. Neither brother or sister had a chance to think of a counter as they watched the large creature begin spinning itself, twisting through the air before attempting to crash into them. The Kaguya jumped out of the way, revealing a deep trench where they had been standing.

"Tch…these are no ordinary beasts…the reflexes and skills suggest that they are ninken." Junji whispered.

"Ninken?" Harihane gaped. "Since when could they do that?" she pointed at the ground where the attack had landed.

"I'm not sure…but clearly these are not wild dogs. I can only hope the one that took Kikue belongs to this pack, too."

"Why would you hope that?" she screeched. The dogs circling them continued to press in closer and closer, their teeth still bared threateningly.

"Because, I think we might be next."

"What?!" Sure enough, the largest of the pack let out a deep bark, and the others began shoving at the Kaguya siblings, urging them deeper into the woods.

"Are we being abducted? By dogs?" Harihane hissed.

"It would appear so." Jun'ichi looked around at the intimidating, well-muscled animals surrounding them.

"Why are you so calm then?"

"I don't think they mean us any harm. If they wanted to kill us, overwhelming us and then tearing us apart would have been simple for a pack this size. Let's just see where they take us."

Harihane stared at him in disbelief, slowly shaking her head. "You'd better know what you're doing..." She glared at the dog shoving at the backs of her calves. "And if we do get eaten, I'll tell them to try you first."

"Noted."

As always, the clan had left nothing to chance. They threw him another wonderful birthday party. Hashirama mused that it may have been the best yet. Madara had even come, despite insisting that he wouldn't be welcome.

He was both surprised and pleased to see Toka had invited along Sakura Haruno. Toka had never had many friends outside the clan, so to see she had befriended Sakura made him happy for his old friend. Sakura had even thoughtfully brought him a gift. A young bonsai that he already found himself fond of. Tobirama was holding onto it for him—grudgingly—while the party continued.
Since childhood, he had always been a little enamored with plants. Despite this, no one had ever given him a plant to care for. Before today. He mentally vowed to make sure the bonsai would thrive with him.

The other gifts were nice too. A new set of armor from Tobirama, a sake set from Reira and Toka. Even Madara had brought him something—a new sword with the Senju crest engraved on the metal. That made him chuckle.

He couldn't imagine what he'd told the blacksmith as he made his request. Madara was so very clearly an Uchiha in every way, so to want a sword with a mark representing the Senju must have been baffling to the crafter.

Speaking of the Uchiha, though he wasn't exactly engaging anyone in conversation, there hadn't been a bloodbath, and so Hashirama felt he could safely call it a success. Or he hoped so. The biggest challenge to his birthday passing peacefully was still to come. The friendly competition of the melee event.

Nothing brought Madara's hot-blooded nature to the fore quite like "a good dance" as he called it. This particular event was more a friendly spar in the nature of entertainment. If he wanted to participate, Madara would need to curb his enthusiasm for battle by a considerable amount. Even sparring, he tended to get carried away. Hashirama knew from experience. Occasionally, he could be the same way. It was why they were a perfect match as sparring partners.

The evening went on without incident, and before he knew it, it was time for the event he'd been both dreading and anticipating.

"Everyone, it is that time again!" Toka announced, catching everyone's attention. He could see Sakura, who had been talking to Reira and some other children, pause and look up curiously. "Whoever wishes to take place in our friendly competition, please step forward."

Hashirama looked at Madara, expecting him to be one of the first to participate. Instead, his friend watched as others scurried over. Frowning in confusion, Hashirama made his way over to the Uchiha. "What's wrong? This seems like something you would have been waiting all night."

Madara glanced at him. "If someone of the appropriate skill were to participate, then it would be. However, I'm already the least liked guest. I can't imagine that improving if I accidentally harmed anyone."

Hashirama sighed. "Fair enough, I guess…"

His clansmen were all strong and competent fighters, but only he and Tobirama were on Madara's level, and he'd rather not see Tobirama and Madara "forget" the "friendly" side of the competition and try to destroy each other—and in the process everything around them.

Instead he cupped his hands around his mouth, shouting encouragingly. "Have fun in my place, brother!" Tobirama looked at him like he was a lunatic. In all fairness though, it was far from the first time Tobirama had given him that look. And it wouldn't be the last. Hashirama knew he could have taken part, of course. It was his birthday. Who was going to deny him? But as it was for Madara, it only seemed fun if someone on his skill level was competing.

"No," Tobirama said flatly.

"You're not going to defend my honor?" he asked, feeling slightly disappointed.

"From who?" Tobirama asked, annoyed. "Defend it yourself."
"Lord Tobirama, please take part!" one of their clansmen begged.

"Yes! It's been a while since any of us has had a shot at you!"

Hashirama bit his lip to stifle a grin as the crowd began chanting Tobirama's name.

Even his taciturn brother could see when he was backed into a wall, and he handed the bonsai off to Toka as he stepped forward. Several whoops of excitement went up.

Tobirama closed one eye, crossing his arms. "For the record, I find this all to be foolishness…"

No one seemed to mind as several challengers prepared to take him on all at once. Normally, it would have been unfair. But with his brother's skills being what they were, Hashirama found himself wondering if the dozen or so fighters challenging him would be enough.

Toka waved her arm. "Begin!"

There seemed to be some coordination to their combined assault, at least. Several people were using Doton from four different sides, trying to block Tobirama in with a mud wall. Just as the top of the dome began to close, Tobirama rode through on a crest of water, landing unharmed.

"Just like we expected from you, Lord Tobirama!" Even though the maneuver hadn't worked, the opponents seemed pleased and proud.

"I see." Tobirama quickly flashed through hand signs. "Then were you expecting this? Suichutotsu!" Water materialized under the feet of several opponents before forming a pillar that thrust them into the air. Hashirama winced as they landed hard, all in a neat pile on top of each other.

The remaining seven opponents chose a different tactic, choosing to overwhelm Tobirama with their strongest techniques.

One fired a relatively weak lightning attack that was clearly a diversion, and Tobirama used a sharp Futon attack to blow the ball of electricity back, knocking down the attacker in the process. "Urrgh…the wind is strong. I think I’m pinned." he moaned, struggling to get back to his feet.

"You should stay down." Tobirama advised. "Getting back up will only give me more reason to knock you over again."

"Got ya!" A giant Doton mud hand flew at Tobirama, smashing into him. Everyone gasped and Hashirama leaned forward. He grinned when the body the hand hit turned out to be a water clone.

"Interesting move, brother," He glanced around. "Though it begs the question where the real Tobirama went."

"That puddle is highly suspicious." Madara remarked. Hashirama noticed it just as another water clone popped up from said puddle, grasping the ninja who had turned the majority of his body to mud by the shoulders. The real Tobirama suddenly appeared in the clone's shadow.

"Hah! Tobirama's stealth is unparalleled!" Hashirama boasted, nudging Madara playfully.

The Uchiha made a face. "I unfortunately…have no choice but to agree with you. In a blink he went from concealing himself behind the ninja using Doton to his own clone, almost before it had finished materializing."
Hashirama watched as his brother punched through the clone, "Raiton: Hiraishin!" The water clone burst, conducting the electricity from Tobirama's attack and strengthening it. The shock made the mud armor crack, and by the time it had all fallen away, the ninja inside lay on the ground, unconscious.

Before Tobirama had even pulled his hand away, mud wrapped around his ankles and hardened. He looked down at it, unconcerned. "What's this? A decent strategy."

Hashirama watched it climb up his brother's body like ivy, until he was encased up to his shoulders. They wasted no time with another coordinated attack.

"Katon: Endan!"

"Futon: Kudon!"

The air technique hit the flame bullets and made the fire expand into a contained explosion. The light of the flames illuminated the faces of the stunned spectators.

"T-They didn't actually hit him, did they?" someone close to Hashirama breathed in disbelief.

Madara laughed a little. "This may just be the best party yet."

He managed a withering glare, but remained silent as he willed his brother to pop up from the ground or a puddle... Even floating down from the sky was acceptable.

A tense few minutes past and all that remained were the crumbled pieces of the earth cocoon Tobirama had been locked in.

"N-No way? We didn't really kill Lord Tobirama?!

"Please tell me we didn't kill him!"

"I...I don't know! I thought he would escape..."

"No, you didn't kill me. But thinking you did made you fools let your guard down. Now it's my turn."

Pools of water appeared at the feet of all remaining opponents. They scrambled to escape, but Tobirama was faster, trapping them in whirlpools up to their waists.

"W-We lost..."

"Good one...I guess we should have known we couldn't take on Lord Tobirama."

"That sly dog," Hashirama placed a hand to his chest and laughed in relief. It would have been alarming had his brother been seriously harmed, to say the least. Not only were the attacks not strong enough, but his speed made him nearly untouchable.

"How disappointingly brief." Madara mumbled. Hashirama had to silently agree. Maybe he should fight after all.

"It appears Lord Tobirama wins. Is there anyone else who wants to try?" Toka asked. The spectators took several large steps back.

"I guess that's that." Hashirama hummed. "Thank you everyone, that was very—"
"Wait!" Reira shouted, pushing her way to the front of the crowd, dragging Sakura along. "Sakura does!"

"Reira, no!" Toka snapped.

"But she does! Sakura wants to challenge him. Don't you?" the young kunoichi gave Sakura large, pleading eyes. Sakura looked uncomfortable as she attempted to glance elsewhere.

"I…guess so?"

"Another challenger?" Mei-san squinted at the pink-haired kunoichi. "I don't believe I've ever seen this one around before."

"She's Toka's guest." Hashirama informed her.

"My interest has been piqued." Madara admitted. "I'd like to see this play out."

"Something about Sakura-san must have gotten under your skin." Hashirama laughed.

Sakura slowly stepped up to stand opposite Tobirama. The defeated opponents hobbled out of the way, making room for the next match-up.

"Are you certain about this?" Tobirama asked. He looked bored more than concerned.

"Sure, why not?" Sakura shrugged. "If it's all in good fun, I'm game."

Hashirama watched a smirk appear, her grin eyes glinting.

"Very well. I accept this challenge."

Her job done, Reira came skipping over to Hashirama. "I'm gonna cheer for Sakura, okay?"

"O-Okay?"

"Little girl, have you seen the Haruno fight?"

Reira froze when Madara started speaking to her, before putting on a brave face. "N-No…" she stammered. "But I've got a good feeling about it, okay?" she asked a little defensively.

"A feeling…" Madara smirked. "Let's see whether that feeling is right."

"Begin!" Toka called.

"You may deal the first blow," Tobirama offered.

Sakura stared at him oddly. "Um,"

"Hey! Don't take it easy on her because she's a woman! Don't be rude, Tobi-nii!" Reira screamed, waving her closed fist.

"Stay out of this, Reira," Toka fuzzed. Everyone laughed as Reira blushed, trying to hide behind Hashirama.

Sakura decided that if he was going to take her lightly, she would just have to show him why that was a mistake. She charged forward, her fist raised, and Tobirama tried to block. The hit still managed to push him back several feet.
Tobirama swung, and instead of attempting to catch or block, Sakura dodged. He followed up with an uppercut, and she narrowly avoided it. Tales of his speed weren't exaggerated. The two traded punches, neither managing to hit the other with anything more than a glancing blow.

Sakura found herself doubling down with her four-hit combo, grinning when she managed to deal several direct blows to his abdomen. Her excitement turned into frustration when last hit made the body explode into water, getting her soaked for her efforts.

"Nice try, but unfortunately I'm over here." Sakura looked up in time to see Tobirama above her, shooting water bullets from his mouth. She back-flipped out of the way, charging in again for the split second before he used another jutsu.

"Take….this!" She could tell within inches of his face that the punch was unexpected, and that allowed it to connect. Sakura watched the future Second Hokage go flying, although he managed to land on his feet.

Excited screams went up from the crowd.

"She got a hit in!"

"Whoever she is, she's pretty good!"

Cracking his neck, Tobirama narrowed his eyes. He refused to be beaten by the likes of a pink-haired kunoichi.

Water appeared under his feet, carrying him toward her on the crest of a wave. Sakura managed to block, but the force of the wave crashing down on her pushed her back several yards. Her clothes were getting heavier, making them somewhat uncomfortable to move in. She jumped, back-flipping twice and striking the ground with a fist.

A fissure formed in the earth and a large chunk of debris collided with Tobirama's wave, knocking him off. He landed on his feet, but Sakura wasn't done. She quickly picked up another big piece of rubble and round-house kicked it in his direction. The clone exploded into a puddle on impact.

"Looking for someone?" She turned, but it was too late.

His punch was a solid hit to her cheek, and for a second her teeth rattled. He didn't give her any time to recover before delivering a spinning kick that knocked her into the air. Winded, Sakura wheezed, attempting to change her trajectory so she'd at least land safely. But Tobirama was right there, kicking her along with two of his clones, sending her plummeting down. The next thing she saw was his Suiton attack, pushing her into the ground with force.

The amount of pressure and the water up her nose and in her mouth made her sputter as she laid on the ground, panting.

'H-He's too fast. And his Suiton's too strong.' Sakura shakily sat up, coughing out water.

"I think we're done here." She heard Tobirama saying.

For some reason, that ignited a fuse that sparked her determination, and she got to her feet.

"I'm still ready to go if you are…"

Tobirama raised a brow, looking her over from head to toe. She didn't need his judgmental gaze to know she probably looked like a half-drowned cat.
"You have tenacity, at least. Fine, let this be what decides the match."

They flash-stepped simultaneously, knocking into each with force and landing on their feet before launching together again. The crowd watched them clash, enthralled. They looked like two blurs, ricocheting together in midair. When they both landed again, neither looked ready to give in yet.

She threw a right hook and he stopped it with a kick. Grunting, Sakura grabbed his shoulders, surprising everyone watching when she easily lifted him over her head before slamming him into the ground, then flinging him across the courtyard. The impact of his body threw up dust and dirt. The sound of everyone’s jaw dropping was almost audible. Louder than the silence, was the sound of Madara Uchiha’s bellowing laughter.

Tobirama lifted himself from the shallow crater, his chin raised as he brushed himself off, trying to maintain some of his lost dignity.

Sakura took up a defensive stance again. However, instead of charging her, she watched the white-haired Senju slam both palms into the ground.

'What did he just—?' Sakura got her answer as a pillar of water sent her sky high. 'Not again!' She managed to change her direction so that she was torpedoing at the ground, fist first. Predictably, her strength didn't fail her, and the ground buckled and flew apart.

Tobirama, unprepared, went flying, a piece of earth smacking him in the torso. "Oops…” she whispered. The hit had made a mess of the courtyard.

'What the hell are you doing?! You just destroyed the Hokage's freaking backyard!' she inwardly berated herself.

Sakura nervously looked back at the crowd, expecting to see the Hokage looking livid. Hashirama's eyes were as wide as she'd ever seen them, tears steadily leaking from his eyes. When he managed to snap out of it, his expression was even more awed.

"Amazing!" he cheered. "Sakura-san, that raw strength is amazing!"

"Shouldn't you be rooting for your brother?" Madara asked.

Hashirama looked ashamed. "Oh, y-yes…” Clearing his throat, he began cheering again, "Tobi, if you're still alive, good luck to you too!"

Sakura pitied Tobirama in that moment. 'If he was near death I think that comment would kill him.'

"Still, that's impressive power packed into such an ordinary-looking kunoichi." Madara muttered to himself. "This party truly has become the best one I've ever attended." Sakura was sure it had absolutely nothing to do with Tobirama being flung across the battlefield.

"Whoooo, Sakura! Yay!" Reira was happy to chant incoherently, stars in her eyes. Sakura wondered with worry if it was normal for a child to be foaming at the mouth.

The rest of the crowd was awed into silence.

Sakura started scanning the rubble, and spotted an arm hanging out. Gasping, she ran over to it, watching as it started to move and white hair poked out. Tobirama Senju looked dazed when he first reappeared, and she crossed her fingers she hadn't given him a concussion.

"S-Sorry…” Sakura rubbed the back of her neck.
Tobirama spat out a mouthful of dirt, his mouth firming into what she could only describe as the most dignified pout she had ever witnessed.

"Sakura is the winner!" Toka declared.

The entire courtyard was silent, everyone looking at each other in disbelief. No one had expected for a stranger to last so long against one of the Senju's strongest, let alone to win a spar. Sakura nervously rubbed her arm, anticipating some sort of blowback. The sound of everyone cheering and chanting her name was an unexpected turn.

Hashirama was clapping along with the rest while Reira was jumping around, ecstatic. "I know her! I know her!" she told anyone who would listen.

Sighing, Sakura soaked it in. That had been more than she bargained for when she agreed to come to the party. But it was a good spar nonetheless.

Slowly making her way over, Sakura glanced down at the brooding white-haired man still in the dirt. "Here, let me help,"

Tobirama stared up at the pinkette kneeling next to him, noticing she was beginning to reach for him with a glowing green hand. "I can…heal myself just fine," he panted, brushing her hand aside as he lifted himself up. Sakura glared at his stubbornness, but allowed the man to activate his own medical ninjutsu.

"You truly weren't bluffing." "Bluffing isn't really me," Sakura grinned. "Maybe next time, you'll take me seriously from the start." "Already assuming there'll be a next time?" he shook his head, sighing heavily. "You may find that my best is more than you bargained for." "I won't know until I try," she winked, cracking her knuckles.

Grudgingly, Tobirama had to admit that while he could have kept going, she had done better than he was expecting. He had allowed himself to underestimate his opponent, and it had cost him the match and more than an ounce of his pride. Next time, he'd be prepared. He looked on as Sakura stood up and walked back over to Toka and Reira, who were congratulating her. His fool of an older brother was still gushing, complimenting her strength. Even Madara Uchiha, the snake, looked interested.

Tobirama squinted at her soft pink hair. An enigma. Sakura Haruno was truly an enigma.

The Kaguya siblings glanced around. The dogs had guided them to a settlement, just as Jun'ichi predicted. People stopped and watched warily as the large canines seemed to be leading them to the tent in the center of the sizable area.

"This is…getting weird. Those people have crazy eyes." Harihane stated.

"And excellent hearing as well." They glanced up to see a woman standing proudly covered in furs, her wild mane of hair spilling past her shoulders and her dark eyes sharp. On each cheek, a bright red triangle in the shape of a fang stood starkly against her tanned skin. "Greetings. We've been expecting you."
"What do you mean, expecting us?" Harihane asked before Jun'ichi could stop her. "And for what, dinner?"

The woman's nose wrinkled, and then an impressive set of fangs appeared as she smiled lightly. "You're just as she said you'd be. And no, we're not savages, contrary to popular belief."

"Who are you though?" Jun'ichi asked this time.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Tsuba Inuzuka, head of the Inuzuka clan." She gestured behind her to the people and dogs who were going about their business, occasionally giving the newcomers furtive glances.

"Those are your dogs, then…" Jun'ichi nodded. "Why did they bring us here?"

"You've been wandering closer and closer within the last day or two. They were given orders to bring you to me, should you get far enough in."

Harihane put her hands on her hips and squared her shoulders. "Lady listen, we don't have time. We're looking for—"

"A young girl. Your sister, correct?"

"You have Kikue?!" Harihane shouted. "Where is she? You'd better not have fed her to your dogs, or—"

Tsuba beckoned them with a hand, walking to the large tent behind her. Harihane and Jun'ichi exchanged cautious glances, following her. The Inuzuka lifted the flap, and there, rolling on the floor with a litter of pups, was Kikue.

They watched as she laughed when one of the puppies licked her cheek.

"That tickles!" she squealed in delight.

"Kikue?!!" Harihane rushed inside and Junji followed.

Startled, Kikue looked up, her face going from surprise to joy when she saw her siblings. Hopping up, she rushed into her sister's arms. "Hari-neesan!" Overcome with emotion, Harihane held her tightly.

"What are you doing?"

Kikue stepped out of her arms, grinning. "The scary doggy took Kikue, and she thought she would die, but…She brought her here instead!"

Tsuba nodded in agreement. "Miku didn't mean any harm. She's very protective of children, and it seems she thought your sister was in danger, so she brought her here. Imagine my surprise when she came back from her hunt with a child in her mouth," Tsuba chuckled. "Kikue has been staying with Miku and her pups while she waited on you."

"Miku?" Harihane glanced around. "That big freaky wolf-thing?" A warm puff of air hit her cheek and she looked up to see the large gray dog staring down at her with amused eyes.

"E-Ergh…I mean that in the nicest possible way," Harihane assured, stepping closer to her brother.

"Thank you for keeping Kikue safe," Junji patted the large beast on the head, and it growled in approval. "And thank you for allowing her to stay." he told Tsuba. "Now that we've been reunited,
"I think we should be on our way."

Kikue looked up at him and frowned. "Already? Kikue will miss the puppies…" She knelt, and instantly the five pups came running up to her and yipping excitedly.

"They'll miss you too." Tsuba agreed. "You're quite a natural with them."

"Kikue, you know we've got to get going," Harihane began tugging her by the arm.

Miku growled, walking over to the girls and nudging Harihane away from Kikue protectively.

"O-Or not…" Harihane lifted her hands helplessly.

"Miku, she's found her pack again. It's time to say goodbye." Tsuba rubbed her partner's ear.

The big dog whined, nuzzling Kikue.

"This…could be a problem." Junji mused.

"You think?" Harihane rolled her eyes.

The tent flap opened again, and everyone watched as a young girl with a boy cut walked in, carrying a large book under one arm. "Mother, Kohaku says he's ready, as soon as you—oh…hello."

"Yoyo-chan!" Kikue ran over and hugged the girl happily.

Tsuba cleared her throat. "This is my daughter, Yoku." The resemblance was clear. They had the same eyes and nose, and Yoku's cheek markings were slightly smaller but just as prominent against her equally bronze skin. "She's been keeping Kikue company,"

Yoku smiled politely. "A pleasure to meet you," she bowed lightly. "Kikue was shy at first, but she mentioned you two often. She was very worried you wouldn't find her."

Harihane eyed the short-haired girl skeptically. "How old are you? You talk like an adult."

Yoku rubbed the back of her head, blushing. "Do I? I'm actually twelve, but small for my age I suppose."

"Harihane is twelve too," Junji said.

"Yoku here's always been mature for her age." Tsuba rubbed her daughter's head affectionately. "She was reading everything she could get her hands on almost before she could stand!"

"M-Mother, please…they don't want to hear about that. I'm sure they have a lot of traveling ahead of them. Although, it'll be dark soon. Maybe you all should stay the night." Yoku looked at her mother for permission.

Tsuba looked the three siblings over before shrugging. "Should be fine. We'll be breaking down camp and heading out in the morning,"

"You're on the move?" Junji asked.

"Sure are." Tsuba said proudly. "The Inuzuka clan's been invited to Konohagakure. We'll be permanently settling down there. We were originally gonna get moving yesterday, but when Miku brought Kikue, we thought it would be better to stay put until you came to get her. I sent the pack
out to help guide you in the right direction, just in case."

"What's Kono…Konohanaga….What's that?" Kikue asked eagerly.

"A new ninja village." Yoku explained. "It's a place where different clans have come together and are living in peace," She had sat down on the floor of the tent, ignoring the pups who were pawing at her for attention and instead opening her book.

"That's impossible!" Harihane scoffed. "Shinobi from different clans don't just live together. They'll be at each other's throats in no time."

"This era has been filled with endless bloodshed long before any of you were born," Tsuba explained. "It's unfortunate, but…for a long time that was just the way of things. Now people are tired of that, and maybe it's the hope that there can be another way that's made shinobi take a chance."

Junji remembered his own secret dreams of leading the Kaguya another way. "I think you're right, Tsuba-san."

Harihane was unconvinced. "I'm not sure I buy it, but I am exhausted, so I guess I don't mind staying around for a night."

"Then Yoku can show you to a tent." Tsuba eyed her daughter pointedly.

Yoku glanced up from her book, marking her page with a pout. "Alright, this way then,"

Kikue was the first to bounce after her as she exited the tent. The two older Kaguya took their time, mulling over the idea that a place where shinobi lived together was possible.

Sakura woke up with a tired groan. She'd had the strangest dream, one where she had beaten the Second Hokage in a spar.

She stretched her arms over her head, and noted the soreness of her right cheek. Tenderly, she touched her face and winced when she felt the bruise. "That wasn't a dream..." she whispered, healing it. Something soft and warm brushed just under her chin, and she peered down to see the cat on her chest was waking up.

Smiling, she gently stroked its head. "You're gonna need a name soon." she told it. She sat up, and the sleepy cat rolled off her chest and into her lap.

Sakura couldn't help but laugh as the annoyed feeling struggled to right itself, back legs in the air. "Mrwaar!"

She picked it up and sat it on its feet. The feline looked relieved as it hopped off the futon and onto the large trunk in the room. "Rwrr..." It stretched out and then plopped down on the wooden surface. Sakura glanced out her window and saw the sun was high in the sky.

"Did I sleep in?" she wondered aloud. "Well...I guess I was out pretty late last night." Kicking her feet out of the futon, she stood up slowly, scrubbing a hand down her face. "At least I wasn't too tired to get out of those wet clothes..."

She slowly shuffled around, stripping out of her sleepwear and getting bathed and ready for the day. By the time she made it into her kitchen for a late breakfast, Sakura was feeling much more awake. Sakura sat down with her natto rice when there was a knock at the door. Sighing, she got up
to answer it, expecting to see a familiar face, like Reira or Toka or maybe even Izuna. Though the figure at the door was decidedly more…intense. It was a child she'd never seen before, with choppy dark hair that completely covered her eyes and two cowlicks that reminded Sakura of an insect's antenna. She wore a jacket with a high collar, buttoned up past her throat and a knee-length black battle skirt. "Uh..." Sakura cleared her throat. "Can I...help you?"

"..." The girl looked up at Sakura, but didn't say anything.

'This is...getting creepy. Who is this kid?" Sakura's eye twitched and she slowly started to shut the door. "I'm just...gonna..."

A small hand caught the edge of the doorframe just before it shut. "Don't." She said in a soft voice.

"I...I think you have the wrong house, so..."

"Sakura!" Reira's voice practically sang. "Sakura, Sakura, Sakuraaa~!" The small Senju came running down the road, waving happily. Sakura opened the door again to lean out and look, and the strange girl wordlessly entered the house.

Sakura turned to scold her, "H-Hey, you can't just walk in like you live he-"

"Huh?" Reira had appeared at the door and looked in. "Chisa-chan! I told you to wait for me so I could introduce you! Popping up uninvited is creepy."

"Sorry..." "Chisa-chan" had sat herself down at the table and was reaching for Sakura's bowl of natto rice. Sakura hurried over and snatched it away.

"Reira, do you know her?"

Reira beamed, skipping into the house and closing the door behind herself. "Mm-hm, she's my friend. Her name is..."


'An Aburame!' Sakura blinked. She supposed that explained the covered eyes and quiet but intense presence.

"Anyway, sorry if she scared you, Sakura. She's harmless! Sort of..."

"I am not harmless. I have three species of deadly beetles living in my body." Chisato informed them.

Reira rolled her eyes. "I did say sort of...

"Mrwr!" Sakura had sat down to once again attempt to eat her breakfast, when the cat came bounding onto the table.

"Oooh, that's right!" Reira clapped. "You have a kitty now~ What's her name?" she asked, leaning forward to scratch the cat under its chin.

"He...she...it uh, doesn't have one...I don't even know what it is." Sakura explained, chewing her food.

"I think it's a girl!" Reira exclaimed. "And you should name her Usagi!" she pointed at the cat's
rear as it walked across the table to sniff at Chisato. "Cause of it's tail, see?"

"Usagi..." Sakura pondered. Truthfully, it reminded her a little too much of Kaguya.

"Except that...this cat is not a girl." Chisato stated.

"Huh? How do you know that?" Sakura asked, surprised.

Chisato looked sheepish, but it was hard to tell without being able to see her eyes. "I can...always spot a male. This cat is male. I'm sure of it."

"Uh, okaaay..."

"Chisa-chan, you're so cool~!"

"If you're a boy," Sakura picked the cat up and sat it in her lap. "Then how about, Usamaro?"

The cat stood on his back paws and rubbed his nose against her cheek, purring.

"I think he likes it~!" Reira fist pumped.

"Usamaro it is." Sakura threw a sardine to the happy feline, and he caught it in his mouth, rolling around on the floor in bliss. Reira and Sakura burst out laughing, while Chisato tittered quietly.

"So what made you stop by today?" Sakura asked, continuing to eat and feed Usamaro pieces of sardine.

"Oh, I almost forgot! I wanted you to meet Chisa-chan, but I really wanted to tell you that you kicked butt! Tobi-nii was like 'hn' and then you were like 'bam' so then he was like 'argh' and...and...I never thought I'd meet anybody as cool as Tobaa," Reira grabbed Sakura's hands, pulling them close and putting them on her face. "Maybe some of your coolness can rub off on me!"

Sakura gently pulled her hands back. "I'm really not cool, I promise. And if he hadn't underestimated me, I would have been paste."

"I think you should train with me and Tobaa sometimes, we could all get even stronger together!"

"As long as it's alright with, Toka!"

"It will be, trust me!" Reira pounded her chest a little.

"She was impressed about last night. Everybody's still talking about it."

'Everybody, huh? He hates me now. Definitely.' Sakura couldn't deny that regular sparring partners wouldn't be a bad idea, though. She wouldn't have to worry about finding ways to stay sharp. She and Toka were on friendly terms now, and if Reira was right and Toka found it amenable, then why not take advantage? Toka likely had skills that she didn't. 'Maybe she can even teach me some new jutsu!'

She might have been getting a little ahead of herself though. Agreeing to train with someone didn't necessarily mean agreeing to teach them. But, Sakura had come to accept that she was stuck in the past indefinitely, and recently, she felt she needed more skills. More than taijutsu and the ability to determine when a genjutsu was in use. It was risky, but there was someone she could ask, someone she knew could help her.
She'd wandered deep into the forest, wanting to be as far away from the village as she could. Eventually, she stopped at the river. Glancing down at the inside of her wrist, she hesitantly looked around. "Hopefully this works..." Closing her eyes, she willed the goddess to her.

'Mizuchi...I'm calling you.' When she cracked an eye open, the deity was standing there calmly, looking as radiant as ever. Her lustrous black hair spilled to her feet and her green-gold eyes gleamed with pride. Sakura noted the horns on her head were so dark and shiny they looked almost polished.

"It worked..." she breathed.

The goddess laughed slightly, turning and walking to the river bank, where she sat down on a shiny rock, daintily crossing her legs.

"Oh Sakura, whenever you're in need of me you have only to seek me out." Mizuchi patted the spot beside her, smiling. "Won't you join me?"

Sakura could only stare. Here was a deity, in the flesh, wanting to sit down and have a talk with her. If her encounter with Kaguya had been as cordial, maybe the world wouldn't have almost ended.

Mizuchi watched the river, a serene smile on her painted lips. Sakura slowly approached and sat herself down. "Why so tense?" the deity asked. "This is a quiet place, meant for contemplation. You don't have to be on edge here." Bare feet appeared from under her kimono and Mizuchi dangled them in the water. "It's been so long since I've felt this sort of tranquility. I thank you for being discreet when calling for me, and for choosing to do so near a body of a water. I am a river deity, you see."

Sakura swallowed. "I'm glad you like it. I...I actually wanted to talk to you."

"Oh...?" The deity looked amused. "About?"

"I just wanted you to know that I'm still not sure I'm okay with this. You yanked me from my time and you've got some big plans," Sakura waved her hands around for emphasis. "You want me to do...all the while you're dangling all kinds of vague promises in my face. Still..." Sakura looked down at the mark in determination. "I want to know as much about this as I can." She held her wrist out for Mizuchi to see. "What's it do...and...and how do I use it?"

The goddess' eyes grew bright. "You're finally ready? You want to learn how to use my gift?" she purred.

Sakura tried to maintain a brave face, but she was positive it faltered. "I want to have the best chance at getting home possible, and I think in order to do that, I need to get even stronger than ever."

"Are you sure?" Mizuchi questioned. "You may be my progeny, but you're far from immortal. The training will be rigorous to prepare you. If you even have what it takes in the end, that is."

"H-Have what it takes for what?" Sakura had a feeling she didn't truly want to know.

Mizuchi threw her head back and laughed, long and low. Sakura fidgeted uncomfortably beside her as she waited for her to finish. Anyone else laughing at her outright would have incurred her temper. But this was a goddess, an immortal being of incredible destructive power. Mizuchi finally
quieted down, reaching out and touching the tips of her cool fingers to Sakura's cheek. "To be a Godslayer, of course."
Sakura's training under Mizuchi is brutal, and threatens to take everything. Meanwhile, Hashirama has an important request of her that could impact the future of the village, and her absence from her on time is felt by those she's closest to.

Tobirama entered his brother's office, expecting to see him hard at work. Instead, Hashirama was tending to the bonsai on his desk, cooing under his breath at it.

"Is this really the time for that?" Tobirama grumbled, closing the door behind him.

Hashirama glanced up from sprinkling the bonsai with water, smiling pleasantly. His smile dropped under Tobirama's stern gaze. "Bukkai is very sensitive to negativity. Could you try not to let your sour mood effect my plant?"

"Bukkai?" He couldn't help but sneer at his older brother's usual foolishness. "You're treating it like a pet. It doesn't need a name."

Hashirama sighed, leaning back against his desk. "How many times do I have to tell you that plants are living things? They have their own—"

"Feelings. Yes, so you keep saying," Tobirama rolled his eyes. "But why do I have a feeling you haven't even viewed the amendments to the academy proposal yet?"

And instantly, Hashirama's jovial mood was back. He closed his eyes, folding his arms across his chest. "Ah, that's where you're mistaken, brother. I've been hard at work until just recently." Tobirama watched as Hashirama shifted around his desk and patted at a sizable stack of papers. Some of his ire began to cool. Hashirama was indeed an idiot, on the whole. But when he put his mind to a task, he was more than capable.

"I think it's ready to present to the clan heads!" Hashirama's excitement was almost palpable. "Just think, the next generation of young shinobi getting to learn with peers from outside their clans! We truly are ushering in a new era, aren't we?"

Tobirama rolled his neck, considering. "It's unprecedented. If this works out, it certainly is one step closer to raising ninja that value the village over affiliation to their own clans. But, as usual, you seem to be oblivious to an oversight."

Hashirama's mouth fell open in surprise. "I…I am?"

"Yes. Selection of the instructors. Have you even put any thought into who you'll ask? It's very important."

The Hokage fidgeted, his cheeks turning pink under his brother's expectant stare. "W-Well, I'd been so busy doing revisions," Hashirama laughed sheepishly. "I guess it slipped my mind?"

"As expected." Tobirama produced several files. "And this is why I've taken the liberty of gathering information on all shinobi I feel are eligible to be instructors. I've talked to them about
their strengths, and what they feel they could bring to an academy setting. These are the files who
made it past the first screening."

Hashirama accepted the files in awe, beginning to skim through them and nod approvingly. "You're
always so on top of things, Tobirama! I'm impressed. I think I've found the perfect spot to build it
too. So if the clan leaders are all in agreement about sending batches of children as our first class of
students, we can begin construction."

Tobirama shook his head as Hashirama practically flew to the door. "And where do you think
you're going?"

"To show these to Madara! He told me he wanted to be clued into all infrastructure plans so—"

"Ugh." Tobirama grimaced at the name. The thought of the Uchiha brought even more displeasure
than usual. He hadn't seen the man since the night of Hashirama's birthday, and he didn't relish the
snug comments he was sure he would make about losing to a pink-haired brat that had come out of
nowhere. Hashirama had given him no end of grief for almost five days straight. Of course, his
elder brother was half-charmed after her gift, and sang her praises whenever his eyes fell on the
bonsai.

"S-So, you'll stay until I return?" he pleaded, his brown eyes widening pitifully. Refusing to meet
his eyes, Tobirama scowled, his shoulders lifting minimally.

Beaming, Hashirama waved goodbye. "I won't be long!" No sooner had Tobirama settled himself
behind the desk than his brother stuck his head back through the door. "Be good to Bukkai while
I'm out!"

"Leave," Tobirama demanded.

Hashirama raised his hands in surrender, backing out of the office slowly. "Alright! Alright!"

Tobirama turned back to the bonsai innocently sitting there, its pink petals looking healthy and its
leaves green. Hashirama had been tenderly caring for it since it came into his possession.
Fleetingly, he couldn't help but wonder if maybe…Hashirama was projecting his newfound
infatuation onto it.

The thought made him scoff. Of course he was. Well, at least partially. Hashirama truly did like
plants. And that was why Tobirama made sure never to give him any. He got carried away—not
that he needed a reason to do that, really—more than usual when it came to gardening. If he began
shirking his Hokage duties in favor of fawning over a plant, Tobirama knew exactly who to blame.

Still, he supposed he grudgingly owed her a certain amount of respect. She had bested him in a
spar. Even when he wasn't fighting at full capacity, very few had managed that. Really, only
Hashirama and on some occasions, Toka.

So, even if it was only to himself at present, Tobirama could admit that Sakura Haruno was more
than she appeared. Some part of him had known that for a while, but it was hard not to be
suspicious. In defense of himself, he had every right to be. He stood by his belief that she was still
a highly unusual individual that required monitoring. At least he now had a better idea of her
skillset. 'A taijutsu fighter…and fairly quick on her feet. A little too reliant on brute strength, but…'
His thoughts continued circulating in that manner.

Hashirama's solution to his dilemma was simple—"you should just talk to her". Talking might
alleviate some of his suspicion and his curiosity, but…
He glared stubbornly at Bukkai the Bonsai. It sat, mocking him. It was possible that Hashirama wasn't the only one with a problem that involved pink-haired girls.

~ASiT~

Hashirama watched eagerly as Madara read through each file. "Well?"

"These…are decent choices." he conceded.

Hashirama tilted his head. "Then why do I sense a but coming on?"

The Uchiha cleared his throat. "Because there is one." Hashirama groaned out loud. "None of that. Now, how do you plan to get the clan heads on board? As it stands now, I am willing to send a group of children from the Uchiha clan for the first batch. I suspect you'll be doing the same with taking promising children from the Senju."

Hashirama nodded. "Yes! I feel that since we're spearheading this, it would only be right if we had children from our own clans, as a show of good faith, you know?"

"That I can agree with. And as I've said, the amendments to the curriculum, admittance age and the candidates to be sensei are all in order. But what do you plan to do with children who aren't from clans?"

Hashirama blinked, bemused. "Is that even a problem? Can't they just…attend too?"

Madara smirked, amused by Hashirama's naiveté. "Some of the more traditional clans won't want the children of their own clans to go to an academy alongside the children of simple merchants and blacksmiths. For generations, those with kekkei genkai believed themselves to be superior to those without. Telling them that a child must now learn alongside a peer who has no remarkable bloodlines, no natural talent, is going to be perceived as an affront to their pride."

"But none of that matters now!" Hashirama insisted. "Everyone is bound by the Will of Fire, linked by—"

"You mean," Madara interrupted. "None of that should matter. But it will. You can't erase centuries of prejudice with the empowering words of an ideal. Having others who were willing to follow us in creating this village was only the beginning."

Hashirama's shoulders slumped. Although, he would be hard-pressed to tell either of them to their faces, but both Madara and Tobirama could be startlingly similar in the way they thought. Maybe the day they saw that in each other, would be the day they could finally make peace… Here and now, though, he could see that Madara had a good point.

"So what do you suggest…? You're telling me that I have to change their hearts somehow, and get them to start believing in the village more than clan. I thought that's why they were here."

"Perhaps some," The Uchiha crossed his arms over his chest. "But not all. The Shimura, for one, are staunch traditionalists. And if you plan to follow through on your invitation to the Hyuga you should know they're the same."

"Then I'll give them proof!"

Madara's brow furrowed in intrigue. "What proof can you offer that a civilian-born child is just as worthy of being a shinobi as one from a large clan?"
"Oh," Hashirama's eyes glinted with pride. "I'm going to introduce them to Sakura-san."

The smell of earth and sweat filled her nose. Sprawled out by the stream, the kunoichi allowed herself to catch her breath, ignoring the fact that she was likely dirty in favor of enjoying the gentle sound of the wildlife in her ears. Mizuchi had promised to turn her into what she called a Godslayer, and indeed she had been. For the better part of a week, Sakura found time to meet her in the seclusion of the forest, and the goddess would instruct her in the same task—creating blights. It was one she hadn't been keen on at first.

"Blight?" Sakura repeated.

"Yes," Mizuchi nodded shortly. "I will teach you how to utilize them when needed, and also how to treat them."

"But what are they, exactly?"

Mizuchi watched as some curious fish in the stream began to nibble at her toes. "Humanity has believed for a long time that when the gods are displeased, bad omens follow. And, they are right. We possess the ability to place curses on mankind. A manifestation of emotions like hatred, envy, sorrow and—we call these blights."

Sakura's mouth formed an "O" in understanding. "And you really think I need to know how to make them?"

The goddess eyed her strangely. "Naturally,"

Sakura nervously bit at her bottom lip. "But what's grounds to...you know, blight someone?"

"Grounds?" Mizuchi held her middle and laughed. "What grounds does a goddess need?" she asked rhetorically.

Sakura opened her mouth to reply, but wisely closed it. "Well, I suppose your ignorance is understandable, Sakura. So, I shall explain. To an immortal being, the lives of men are but things to amuse ourselves with. A blight does not always have to be delivered righteously. Some of us have been known to spurn humans with blights for inconsequential reasons. A goddess may cast a blight on a human woman's entire lineage out of jealousy for her beauty. Sometimes, we have even used them to cull the population of nations." Mizuchi smiled proudly. "Famines, illness? We spread those in the hopes of separating wheat from chaff."

"You mean gods can curse people just because they can? That's...that's cruel!"

"Call it what you will...but what humanity calls cruel means little to a god or goddess. Our rules are not the same as yours, after all."

Sakura huffed. "I think we can agree on that."

"Your human sensibilities aside, you cannot deny the usefulness of this ability." Sakura felt like the goddess was wheedling her.

"This is what it takes to be a Godslayer?" Sakura grumbled.

"Of course," Mizuchi reassured, reaching out and smoothing down some of the pink hair on her head. It was an almost motherly gesture that the deity seemed fond of. Although, thinking of Mizuchi in a motherly capacity was strange in itself.
"Fine...if it's what I need to do." To get home. It went unsaid, but that was the unspoken knowledge that passed between them. Sakura would listen and learn, all in an effort to be sent back to her own time. Whether Mizuchi intended to uphold her end or was simply allowing her to think she was, worried Sakura.

She wasn't stupid. Mizuchi had already shown herself to be as whimsical as she was powerful. Sakura didn't really like being led around, but for now she had no choice.

"You will need to reach out and grab hold of all the negative intent that you can. Pull it inside you and then release it, quickly, before it takes hold."

"Sounds simple," Sakura rolled her eyes. "How do I get started?"

Mizuchi stood fluidly, taking the long ends of her kimono in both hands and gliding toward Sakura, something threatening suddenly in her eyes.

Cautiously, the kunoichi slowly began to retreat backwards. Her right hand instinctively reached for her kunai pouch, and she was holding her weapon out defensively, despite knowing it would do her very little good.

"You won't need that," Mizuchi smiled warmly, despite the danger still reflected in her orbs. She smacked the kunai out of the pinkette's hand with a flick of her wrist. Her other hand came up, hovering briefly over Sakura's frozen face. "Relax..." she cooed. "If you are worthy to be a Godslayer, my Godslayer, then this will all be worth it."

The reservations were on the tip of her tongue. Sakura suddenly felt the brunt of what she was about to do, bearing down on her with full force. She was listening to a capricious goddess who, for all she knew, had some dark intentions, in spite of her words.

"Too late to question it." Mizuchi chuckled.

A cool hand seized her face, obstructing her vision. Sakura felt the deity's grip tighten gradually, pulse picking up as she thrashed to get away. Mizuchi released her, and she fell backwards, startled. Collapsing on her back, Sakura was immediately aware that something was wrong. The world was unnaturally still.

She couldn't smell the forest pine, or hear the river and forest animals. The loss of her senses only registered after the shock of discovering her eyes were wide open, and yet, her world was dark. Frantically, Sakura blinked, determine that her sight would return to her. Minutes passed, but there was no clear river, no green grass, nothing. "Mizuchi!" she called hoarsely. "What did you do?" Her mind echoed her anguish. What did you do?!

"If this is enough to unsettle you, then going further with this...training is unnecessary." Mizuchi's voice in her head inspired an odd mix of alarm and relief.

"What's wrong with me?" her voice cracked.

"You are focusing on what you can't do, and not on what you can, for one."

"Really?!" Sakura cried, exasperated. "Riddles right now?"

"I did not rob you of your senses out of cruelty. You still have two remaining. Use them, and tell me what you feel."

Sakura inhaled a deep breath of crisp air, and noticed for the first time that she could still feel the
coolness of it whistling in her lungs, if not hear it. Tentatively, she stuck her hands out in front of her, stumbling forward until she touched the rough bark of a tree. She felt the uneven bumps and ridges of the wood, pressing her cheek against it, so overwhelmed she could cry. She still had touch. And she could still taste the forest on her lips, just not like before. The taste of the wood, the grass, the river, the energy from them all, was heavy on her tongue. It was like she was tasting on a spiritual level.

"Feel the energy now? Try looking for hatred. It will take time, but to start, try sensing the energy of just one person. Anyone from that village you cherish so."

Skeptically, Sakura used the connection she now felt to the forest, its inhabitants, and to Mizuchi, looking for someone to test her new skills on. It was difficult, at first. She kept finding that the invisible tether stopped just short of the village. She didn't have the push needed to reach it. Each time she tried, she would recoil back, and all she could sense were Mizuchi and the woods.

Tutting lightly, the goddess gave her senses back as abruptly as she had taken them away. Sakura, strangely, found herself almost disappointed. When her senses returned, the spiritual connection between herself and everything around her evaporated. For the next few days, Sakura found herself returning to the woods. Mizuchi would take away her senses, and she would spend time wobbling around uncertainly like a newborn foal, frustrated by her inability to latch onto even a single person, while Mizuchi laughed in her head.

On the fifth day, she walked further than she had before, her bare feet snapping twigs and getting cut by stray rocks in her path. Sakura knew she was at the very edges of the forest, but maybe she could finally feel what she couldn't touch. All her previous training with the goddess was deeper in, more secluded.

Settling herself on her knees, Sakura spread her palms wide and breathed in the life force of the trees, the woodland creatures, the...the villagers! Slowly at first, and then steadily faster, the energies of Konoha's occupants flared to life in her mind's eye.

"Very good." Mizuchi congratulated. "At last, a connection."

Determined now, Sakura pressed on, setting her figurative sights on one of the sentries. In her state, she didn't sense much more than the hazy form of energy they represented. It was different than feeling for chakra. Instead, she dug, following the darkness Mizuchi told her existed buried in every creature's heart. It was a thread, leading back to the spool, her unwitting target laid bare to her probing.

It was indistinct and sudden when the surge of emotion hit her. Air pushed from her lungs. Sakura had finally struck center, finding the hatred buried inside, just as Mizuchi told her she would. What she hadn't been prepared her, was how suddenly it seized her, mind and body, like quick sand, trying to swallow her the harder she fought. Sakura could feel herself sinking, unable to stop all the darkness she was sucking in.

"Release!" Mizuchi kept repeating. "Release!"

Can't, Sakura's mind sputtered. Can't. She clawed at her arms, at her throat, black veins crawling up her sides, her legs, her neck, across her face. Sakura felt her eyes roll hard into the back of her head as she lay vulnerable and prone, spasming with the effort to expel the negativity she'd just consumed. She was going to die. The sheer monstrosity that was the negativity she'd captured was killing her.

"Spit the damn thing out." Mizuchi snarled.
Sakura weakly rolled onto her stomach, still blind, envisioning her burden taking flight. At first, she was sure it was feathered and black, like a crow. But, she decided, it would feel lighter than that. Her lips fell open, and she coughed, something scaly tickling the roof of her mouth as it exited.

Sakura felt tears pooling in the edges of her sightless eyes. A hand pulled at her hair, and she lifted her chin from the dirt, smiling, somehow sated. Mizuchi returned her sight, and the first thing her green eyes found, was an obsidian butterfly, perched on the tip of the goddess' long finger.

"I told you to be quick, you silly girl." The deity admonished. Her full lips widened in a smile all the same. The butterfly slowly moved its wings, and Sakura watched, captivated as Mizuchi brought it to eye level. Then her painted lips parted as she quickly shoved the insect into her mouth, swallowing it behind a slim hand.

Sakura, too dazed to register what she had just seen, smiled tiredly, and then collapsed.

Creating blights was only the start. Sakura understood now what Mizuchi had warned her about. Either she would survive the training, or she wouldn't. That was the price to learn things meant for immortals. Sakura was reminded frequently that Mizuchi's lessons would be pushing her very human body to the edge of its limits in new ways.

It was dangerous, and reckless. Desperation overruled a great deal of her concern. When she managed to pick herself up, stand on bruised feet, and walk out of the forest, she felt at peace in spite of the increasing amount of risk she was taking, and in spite of the familiar eyes she knew were watching her.

Shikamaru walked into the Yamanaka family's flower shop, expecting to see Ino or her mother helping customers, or minding the front counter. He stopped short at how quiet it was, despite the fact that it was still the middle of day, when the shop got the most foot traffic. In the days and weeks after the war, he had noticed a change in Ino. Of course, that was stupid to expect she'd be the same. There had been a change in all of them. Choji, right behind him, nearly stumbled into his back.

"Um, Shikamaru?" Choji whispered.

"Yeah…" They walked around the store until Choji passed the glass doors to the back patio, stopping to nudge his friend. Shikamaru saw Ino sitting there listlessly, knees drawn to her chest, watering a vase of flowers sitting next to her. He and Choji wordlessly went out and sat down on either side of her. Ino didn't even look up to acknowledge him until he moved the flowers to make room for himself.

"Those are mine," she hissed.

Shikamaru noticed the flowers were wilted, clearly overwatered, even to his untrained eye. "These? They don't look too thirsty right now."

"Well, what do you know?" Ino snatched them away, cradling them vase to her chest.

Choji, who had always been considerate of Ino during her moods, placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "We just thought you might wanna go out and get some barbeque with us? Shikamaru's buying!"

The blonde stared down at the flowers she was clutching tightly, looking for answers in.

Shikamaru watched her watch the flowers, feigning disinterest. His sharp eyes took in her long hair,
lacking its usual luster, the fact that her nails, usually painted and trimmed neatly, looked chipped with dirt underneath, and the bags that had settled in under her dull eyes.

"Come on," he nudged her shoulder. "Won't be long."

Shikamaru carefully placed a hand on her bicep, preparing to help her stand, but she shrugged away. "I'm not hungry. You guys should go and eat without me," she mumbled.

"Ino, you know you can't keep—"

"I'm fine," she said shortly. "Sort of been busy around here lately, that's all. We've sold a lot of flowers for a lot of graves." Ino tiredly rested her forehead on her knees.

Choji and Shikamaru met eyes, the Nara motioning toward Ino with his head. Choji pointed to himself in surprise, shaking his head.

Shikamaru rolled his eyes. 'Coward.'

"So what kind of flowers are those?" Ino lifted her head slightly, peering at him.

"What, these?" she held up the vase. "They're cosmos."

"Really pretty," Choji added. "What do they mean?"

Ino's blue eyes stared deeply at the cosmos. "Modesty…peacefulness…wh-wholeness."

"And Sakura," Shikamaru said gently.

The lost look in Ino's eyes was replaced by a sudden defiance. "I just like cosmos. I always have. It doesn't have to be about Sakura. Not everything has to be about…Sakura." she spat.

Shikamaru could see past the defensiveness. At first, he'd convinced himself he was fine when he lost Asuma. Then his father had prompted him to cry, and all the emotions he hadn't even known he'd been damming up came flooding out. After the war, when things had calmed, he didn't bother hiding his grief. He missed his father, but he had at least been coping. Ino, on the other hand… Losing her father and Sakura in quick succession was taking its toll, and she was fading fast.

"We're here," he heard Choji telling her. "You know, we get it."

Shikamaru lifted her chin. "You don't really think this is helping. I know you don't. And you haven't really given up on finding her. Her parents…" he sighed. "They're not shinobi, so they don't really understand."

"I'm not saying I'm hung up over it, because I'm not. I made my peace at the funeral, Shikamaru. So whatever this is…it's hopeless." Ino finally lifted herself up on numb legs that shook. They watched her reenter the shop, putting the wilted flowers on a shelf.

Shikamaru stood, brushed off his pants, and followed her. Choji was right behind him, reluctantly. He could understand the sentiment. He didn't exactly want to be around when Ino's time bomb wound down and she exploded. But, she needed them. And if taking the lashing meant it helped her cope, then he could at least offer a shoulder.

Ino was busying herself inside the shop, or maybe she was just going through the motions. "Here, let us help," he and Choji walked over and took away the large bag of mulch she was trying to haul to the other side of the store.
"Thanks…"

"It's not too late. You can lock up shop, come with us?" he offered.

Ino rubbed at her arms, glancing around the shop. "What if customers come while I'm gone?"

"They'll come back later." Choji said. "If it's important enough."

"Well…"

"Are you really gonna dash Choji's hopes like that? You know how long he's been whining about lunch with the team?"

Choji quickly played along, and Shikamaru was grateful. "Food always tastes better when I get to steal the last bite out from under your noses!"

It wasn't much, but Shikamaru thought he saw a thin smile. "Alright…Mom's resting upstairs. Let me just tell her I'm going…"

Shikamaru leaned against the counter, watching Ino's ponytail bounce behind her as she climbed the stairs to the second floor.

"I'm surprised we finally got her to cave." Choji said as soon as she was out of earshot. "She's been blowing us off for a while now."

"Yeah" Shikamaru agreed. "She's been shaken up, you know. The whole thing with Sakura hit her hard. We don't have any proof she's dead…but when her parents decided to have a funeral anyway, she really went from bad to worse."

Choji's eyes lowered. He walked over to the shelf, frowning at the vase of cosmos. "Is this really okay?"

"She'll throw 'em out soon."

"Not the flowers," Choji groaned. "I mean…is handling it this way really okay?"

"We've tried giving her space, and it's obvious she's not getting better on her own. This is…a compromise. We're trying to get her to remember that we're not letting her do this alone, without cornering her."

"It's Ino, not a wild animal, man." Choji joked.

Shikamaru half-smiled. When Ino was incensed, he didn't think there was much difference, but he'd keep it to himself. Choji picked up the vase to examine the flowers. "Ino's usually so good with flowers…this just doesn't make sen—"

"Choji!" Ino yelled suddenly.

Surprised, Choji jumped, dropping the vase. He fumbled to catch it, and Shikamaru groaned as it slipped through his hands and crashed on the floor.

Silence fell over the shop. Choji was staring at the puddle of water and broken ceramic in horror. "I-I'm sorry!" he yelped.

Shikamaru spared Ino a glance. She was studying the mess with an unreadable expression, arms stiffly at her sides. "You broke…it."
"Hey, Ino, you okay? We'll clean this up, alright? Get you a new vase." Shikamaru placated, raising his hands in an attempt to pacify her.

"N-New?" she repeated. "No. I don't need a new…" she paused midsentence. "It's just gone." she laughed emptily. "Just like she's…gone."

"S-she?" Choji whispered.

"I lost…Dad. It happened so fast." Shikamaru watched in concern as she rambled to herself. He was positive that she wasn't fully aware of their presence anymore. "Then Sakura…left me. I needed her, and she left me too."

Shikamaru cautiously stepped over the broken glass, arms still raised non-threateningly. "Ino, we can help you get through this…"

"That's not the same." she insisted, her voice rising. "Sakura…it's just like her to run away. I…I hate her. I hate her." Even as she declared it, her voice shook, and tears rolled down her face.

"You don't mean that," Choji frowned. "Sakura's one of your best friends."

Ino shook, placing a hand to her chest. "If I don't hate her, then why do I feel so angry?"

"That's normal," Shikamaru soothed, stepping closer. "So is feeling helpless."

Ino looked at him wearily, "This is exhausting, Shikamaru. I don't know what I feel anymore. I don't know…" Shikamaru hesitantly pulled her into his arms, and she leaned against him bonelessly. He patted her back as she quietly sobbed into his shoulder, her grip white-knuckling his shirt. Choji shuffled over, joining the hug. Ino cried harder.

"We'll get her back," she hiccupped, "Right?"

Shikamaru squeezed his teammates in closer. "If she's out there, then there's a way."

Sakura shook her head as Usamaro trotted into the house with a live squirrel in his mouth. It squeaked angrily, struggling to get away. Sakura crouched, patting the cat's head. "You're not keeping that," she laughed. Usamaro lifted his head so she could rub his chin. Sakura looked into the squirrel's beady eyes, prying it from the feline's mouth. Ignoring his whines of protests, she carefully rubbed the rodent's head, sending small amounts of chakra into it to calm it. It worked, and the squirrel curled into her palm, content. Sakura walked it to the backdoor, finding a tree she deemed tall enough and watching as the little creature happily scampered into the safety of its branches. "Sorry about that!" she called.

The minute she walked back into her house, Usamaro rushed over to rub at her ankle, making pitiful noises. "I had to do it," she told the cat, bending down and poking his pink nose. "I wasn't about to let you kill it in front of me." That squirrel had been one of the lucky ones.

Whenever she let the young cat out into the yard to play and enjoy some fresh air, he would revert back to his time as a stray and chase after some small creature that caught his interest. It was amusing to watch him climb and stumble around—Usamaro was sometimes clumsy in his excitement—a hunter after his prey.

Sometimes, he managed to catch something. A lizard he'd caught off guard, or a bird that was too slow to fly away. He'd quickly dart off with his prey, and later bury the remains of whatever he
hadn't eaten in the yard somewhere. Sakura mentally called it "the graveyard". She couldn't imagine how many half-eaten squirrel corpses were fertilizing the soil.

Usamaro looked unconvinced as he slinked away, looking for a spot to sunbathe. Sakura smiled. Having company in the house, even if it was as simple as a cat's, brightened up her routine. And especially when he was always good for a laugh. 'Speaking of sun...' It was a nice fall day, a sunny one, but cool enough that it felt like the weather had finally settled.

Mizuchi had told her they wouldn't train that day. Apparently the mysterious goddess had other engagements.

While she shuddered to think what they might be, she told herself she might as well enjoy the downtime while she could. Whatever else she may have been, the deity was a strict instructor. Sakura could still only produce a blight roughly half the time, and it was difficult to regulate. More than once she'd almost been consumed by it instead.

Mizuchi was determined that it was something she would have to learn to control before they could move on to the next step of actually learning how to remove blights. Sakura found the concept of removing a curse much more appealing than inflicting it, and so she persisted in her efforts.

It was a necessary evil to have a chance to get home. Every day she pulled out her old headband to give her a boost of determination. It helped ease the homesickness whenever she felt it starting to bubble up. All things considered, it seemed to have helped with the adjustment.

Little by little, she was getting use to the differences in this unfamiliar Konoha she temporarily called home. The only part of it she couldn't say she'd gotten use to was the ease with which guests showed up at her door...if they even bothered using the door.

As if on queue, she felt two chakra signatures enter her home, and rushed up the hall into the front of the house. Her jaw dropped in surprise to see the Hokage and his reluctant brother, looking around and inspecting things.

"Look, isn't this cute?" The Hokage exclaimed, motioning to Usamaro's whicker basket and the half-unspun ball of yarn he'd brought home one day. Sakura was well aware there was a disgruntled housewife somewhere in the village who was missing it (because coincidentally she had seen the woman in the market, complaining to a friend that all her yarn had vanished one day), but when Usamaro saw an open window, he would climb right through and explore. "It looks like she may have a cat."

"You're already becoming distracted," Tobirama said. He turned his attention to the spot where she stood, half hidden in the shadows of the hall. "And you can come out now. We've come to discuss something important."

Sakura stepped forward, still bemused, but putting on a polite smile—at least for the Hokage. "Hello," she rubbed her palms anxiously on her thighs. "I wasn't expecting any company today."

"It's not a problem," The Hokage smiled sunnily. "We apologize for imposing suddenly. But...well, do you mind if we all sit?"

Sakura shrugged, motioning to the table. She awkwardly waited as the two men seated themselves, and then took the spot across from them, criss-crossing her legs and then placing her hands in her lap.

She couldn't imagine what they came by for, and a small twinge of paranoia suddenly made her
gulp. It was unlikely…but what if they had discovered her connection to Mizuchi? Surely, someone tied to a goddess would be a danger to the village. The Hokage's genial attitude might be a ruse to lower her guard. Sakura discreetly breathed in through her nose. She was being ridiculous.

"Before I impose on you any further with my request, I want to thank you once again for Bukkai." Hashirama beamed. "It really does brighten the office."

"Bukkai?" Sakura asked quizzically.

"He named it." Tobirama explained, looking unamused by the whole affair.

Sakura nodded slowly. "O-oh."

"But we aren't here to talk about my brother's issues."

Hashirama glanced at his brother with a frown, then turned back to Sakura. "I…it's about…" he scratched at the back of his head. "I have a request. It's a bit short notice, so I understand if you can't but—"

Tobirama, tired of the stalling, interjected, "You will serve as the representative for civilian children being able to enter the academy."

"Tobirama," Hashirama laughed a little, slapping his brother's shoulder several times. "Don't make it sound like she doesn't have a choice. You see, Sakura-san, we are opening an academy, so that children in the village can still learn the art of being shinobi, but with the benefit of learning from and with those outside their clans. We would also like to allow children who aren't from clans to attend, of course. But…we're anticipating pushback from some of the more traditionalist families, and so—"

"You will serve as the representative for civilian children being able to enter the academy."

"Tobirama, stop that!" Hashirama cleared his throat, flushing as he gave Sakura a hopeful smile.

"What he means is, if you're willing, I can't think of anyone better suited to present the case of why civilian-born children can make exceptional shinobi, than you."

Sakura sat back, absorbing what they had just asked of her. At some point, Usamaro had crept into the room, and head-butted her hand persistently. She rubbed behind his ears absently. "I see…I don't know what to say. I'm flattered." she stammered. "I'd love for children like me to get the chance to be ninja. It's just…I've never actually had any experience with negotiating with clans or anything like that."

"You can leave that to us. All I'd really like for you to do is speak from the heart," Hashirama explained. "I feel confident that'll be enough."

"Heh…" Tobirama smirked wryly. "Of course you do. Your bleeding heart is all you ever speak from."

"I have you to balance out my idealism, don't I?" the Hokage said optimistically. "At any rate, Sakura-san, would you consider it? I'm willing to let you smack Tobirama around again, if it'll convince you."

"Oi!"

Sakura giggled at Tobirama's indignant face. "I'd be honored to be the representative. A rematch
with your brother would be added incentive."

Hashirama perked up. "You agree?!" he launched forward, taking her hands and squeezing them in
gratitude. "Thank you! This is going to shape the future of the village for the better."

'No pressure then.' Sakura blushed, staring down at their hands and then glancing off to the side.
She had told herself since his birthday that she would just have to desensitize herself to the Hokage
being such a tactile person. But easier said than done.

Usamaro chose that moment to hop onto the table, temporarily distracting Hashirama. "Oh, so I
was right." Hashirama reached out to stroke the cat's back. "You do have a cat! What's its name?"

"I call him Usamaro," Sakura said, "He's been with me almost two weeks now."

"Hello Usamaro," Hashirama leaned down into the cat's face. "You know, there's an air of cunning
about him that really reminds me of you, brother."

Tobirama, who had clearly been tuning out the conversation, glared down at the animal, affronted.

"I remind you of a mangy scrap of fur?"

Hashirama stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well I wouldn't word it like that exactly but yes, in many
ways, you do."

"Hey, he does always wear that fur with his armor, doesn't he?" Sakura chimed in, raising her
pointer finger.

"Ah, yes!" Hashirama nodded. "I'd almost forgotten."

Sakura looked down at her cat and then up into the face of the agitated Senju. When he narrowed
his red eyes at them, he resembled a cat that had been dunked in water, and without his happuri, his
spiked hair seemed to bristle.

"Stop staring at me like you're looking for more resemblances!" Tobirama snapped, picking up on
her train of thought.

"But," Sakura bit her lip briefly, wondering if she should voice her thoughts. With Hashirama right
there, egging her on with his eyes, she let the words spill out of her mouth. "But you also have
similar coloring."

The striking pattern of randomly placed silver spots on Usamaro's otherwise white fur almost
paralleled Tobirama's own pale skin and white hair.

Hashirama clapped, laughing. "Another accurate observation!"

A vein on Tobirama's forehead began to throb. "We're done here, brother." He declared, seizing
Hashirama by the back of his robes and standing abruptly. The Hokage coughed in discomfort.

"W-Well, it was nice seeing you again, Sakura-san." He sputtered, trying to escape his brother's
grip. "And meeting Usamaro, of course." The cat meowed in acknowledgement. "Toka will be by
to coach you on clan etiquette before the meeting, and answer any questions."

Sakura barely had time to lift her hand and wave before Tobirama flickered them both away.

"Haah…" she looked at Usamaro, who was staring back. "Whenever they're together it's always
eventful. Must be nice."
Toka came by the next day, and the minute Sakura opened the door for her, she circled. "W-What?" Sakura asked.

"Straighten your back." Toka placed a hand in the middle of her back and one on her shoulder, correcting her posture. "You will have to wear very restrictive clothing."

"More restricting than usual?" Sakura whined.

"Spending hours in a formal kimono will make the lighter yukatas you wear feel like bare skin." Toka smirked as Sakura blushed.

"What else do I need to know?"

"Most, if not all the clan heads will be men. While the Uchiha and the Senju generally view women as equals and allow them to speak freely, I understand there will be other clans attending where that is not the case."

Sakura frowned in understanding. "So they're gonna be blowhards that expect me to keep my mouth shut and look pretty."

"Unfortunately," Toka agreed. "By merit of the fact that you will be a physical representation of something they are firmly against, you may find yourself being talked down to or undermined. But, don't waver. We are warrior, and the equals of any man. Show them how stubborn you can be."

Sakura grinned at Toka's small smile. "Was that a joke?"

"Partially, yes." Toka stepped back, looking her over from head to toe. "You're going to stand out. Your hair makes that inevitable."

Sakura fingered a lock of it. "I know…it's always been like that so I'm use to it, and I forget sometimes other people aren't."

"Don't let it concern you." Toka told her. "One advantage you have, I must say, is you have met Madara and his brother. At least one of them has seen your strength so I don't think you'll have to try to waste time charming your hosts."

Sakura nodded, "Yeah, that's a relief, isn't it? I mean I'm there to—wait, hosts?"

Toka's brow furrowed. "Did Lord Hashirama not inform you?"

"H-hosts?" Sakura repeated lamely, her eyes large.

"I suppose not." Toka muttered. "It's been decided that the Uchiha clan will be the hosts for this meeting."

Sakura's eyes narrowed. "Fucking fantastic."

"Sakura, language!"
Chapter Summary

Tensions run high as Sakura's friends continue to search for a way to bring her home. A second Senju/Uchiha friendship is born, and Sakura makes her debut in front of the clan heads! But not everyone is impressed...

Reira eagerly accepted the scroll, fighting to look composed. "This needs to arrive at the Aburame compound post haste. No detours and no lingering once you get there." Tobirama explained solemnly.

She nodded quickly so he wouldn't see the smile worming its way onto her face. "I'm off!" Reira dashed for the door, anxious to feel the sun on her face.

"Hold on!"

She stopped so abruptly that she started to trip. "Huh?"

"You know to bring their reply to the Hokage Tower."

Reira couldn't help but feel flustered. She knew she wasn't as responsible as...well, Mei-san had told her more than once she was scatterbrained, but that didn't have anything to do with delivering one little message.

"I know Tobi-nii!" she waved, running down the hall and narrowly barreling into Toka.

"Reira, why are you running?"

Jogging in place, she waved the scroll around. "I'm taking this to Chisa-chan's house."

Toka's eyes were piercing as she studied the scroll, slowly lifting her eyes back to Reira's face and nodding. "I see. Don't cause mischief." She passed with a small pat to her head.

Reira gasped dramatically, placing a hand over her heart. "These aren't even the right clothes for that..." She glanced down at the rose-colored yukata with the water lily pattern Mei-san had badgered her into. The yellow obi was the only semblance of familiarity. She longed for her bright gi and the ease of movement it provided. 'The sooner I get back, the sooner I can get out of these clothes!'

With that bit of motivation in mind, she started running again, exiting the main compound and inhaling the fresh air of the courtyard. Fall finally felt like it was in the air. Until only a week ago, the weather had been consistently warm, and even in her gi, training under the hot sun caused sweat to trickle uncomfortably down her neck.

Mei-san had even suggested that she'd be cooler if she were to cut her hair, but that was a thought she wasn't willing to consider. Reira enjoyed her long braid, as simple a hairstyle as it was. Some others clucked their tongues, too. They'd whisper that she'd be such a pretty child, if not for her personality. Some of them marveled at how different she was from Toka at that age. Reira always grinned, pretended not to hear it.
Even if the task was small, she would hold her head high and show everyone she was reliable. That was what she chanted in her head as she wandered away from the Senju compound, ignoring the baffled stares of her clansmen.

There was a lightness to her step the more she ran. Reira could close her eyes, let the wind whip through her braid, and pretend she was flying through treetops, out on a real assignment. She could pretend that she was delivering a top secret missive, and when she completed it, she'd be greeted with praise for her swiftness.

She could—

Her shoulder slammed into someone else's, and the scroll fell from her hands. She watched it land in the dirt, pouting. "Oh,"

"Oh? That's all you got to say?" A dark-haired boy in a high-collared blue shirt sneered at her.

"S-Sorry!" she added. "I was daydreaming. I know I shouldn't do that, but—"

A hand came down on the scroll as she reached for it. "Look at us when you're talkin'!"

Reira's eyes narrowed. "Can you move your hand?"

"What if I don't wanna, huh? Are you gonna take us all on?"

Reira ignored him, crouching and attempting to slide the scroll out from under his foot, shoving at his leg.

"Now she's ignoring you, Manabu." another boy whispered.

"Leave her alone," a new voice whispered, and Reira watched another boy dressed like the first two, crouch beside her and lift Manabu's foot.

Growling, the bully named Manabu snatched it before either of them could, taking the scroll Reira had only just noticed the curly-haired boy was holding. "What're you gonna do now, Kagami?" he goaded, "Gonna go tell Izuna-sama?"

He waved both scrolls at them, and Reira jumped for them, frustrate when she noticed how conveniently long his arms were. "This is almost too easy. You're both a couple of pushovers. Hey Kagami, maybe you finally found the perfect little playmate."

Reira scowled. "I bet your mother doesn't like you."

Manabu stopped laughing abruptly. "You'd better watch it. I could stomp you just like—" She was surprised when he reached for the front of her kimono and Kagami stepped in front of her.

"That's enough."

That was when she noticed the crest on his back. 'He's an Uchiha!'

Face red, Manabu shoved the scrolls at Kagami. "Whatever. You're not even any fun anymore, Kagami. You're always too busy trying to pretend you're a hero. Let us know when you're ready to stop playing make believe."

They watched as Manabu marched off.

Kagami frowned. "You too, huh, Tenma?"
The other Uchiha shrugged. "He's got a point...you're just not as much fun to hang around anymore."

Reira barely resisted the urge to shout taunts as they retreated.

Kagami turned to her with an apologetic smile. "Sorry," he mumbled. "I think this is yours."

It took her a minute to respond. She was too busy committing his face to memory. She had never seen an Uchiha with curly hair, rosy cheeks and long eyelashes. In her mind, she had thought that the Uchiha Hashi-nii was friends with could be handsome, if he wasn't scary. Kagami wasn't really handsome to her though, he was...

"You're sort of...pretty." she blurted absently.

His eyes widened, and Reira clasped a hand over her mouth, embarrassed. She snatched the scroll from his left hand. "That wasn't supposed to...I said that...out loud."

They stood there in awkward silence, neither sure what to say. Kagami rubbed at his arm, "It's fine," he laughed a little, "You say what you're thinking. That's a nice quality."

"Really?" Reira gaped. "Most people I know don't think so."

He nodded. "Really." He confirmed. "Sorry about them. They've been like that a lot lately."

Reira put her hands on her hips, annoyed in a way that she rarely ever was. "Are they *really* your friends?"

Kagami shrugged helplessly. "We all grew up together, and Manabu wasn't always that way..."

Some of Reira's irritation evaporated. "That must be rough. But you know, I still think they're sort of stupid."

"They're only sort of stupid on a good day," he winked. "Any other time, they're very stupid."

Reira laughed, until she remembered she had an errand to do, and the color drained from her face. "Oh! Sorry, I need to go. Tobi-nii will bite my head off..." she cringed, tucking the scroll safely into her obi and darting off.

Kagami smiled lightly, still a little confused. He didn't know her name, but he had a feeling it wouldn't be the last time he saw her, whoever she was.

Karin pushed up her glasses, the folder containing what she'd pilfered from Kabuto's lab tucked safely under her arm as she hopped from one branch to another. Not even the long trek back to the outskirts of Konoha with only Suigetsu for company had dampened her mood.

"What're you all excited about?" Suigetsu asked casually, a half-step behind her.

She rolled her eyes. Suigetsu was always slow on the uptake. Always more about swinging a stupid sword and seeing how much blood he could splatter than thinking rationally. *That.* That right there was why they could never see eye to eye. Karin considered herself a survivor. And she'd manage to do it so long by playing up her cunning, in spite of not really being all that physically strong. Her ninja way was to be a self-preservationist. That was what she did best.

"If you *must* know, I think I made a breakthrough." She informed him, feeling all the more smug when his eyebrows rose in surprise. "The files I found? They talk specifically about linking the
Suigetsu gave a low whistle. "Hehe…"

Karin's eyes narrowed. Suigetsu never failed…to get under her skin. "What's so funny?"

"You're just so gung-ho about all this! You bought into it the moment Sasuke talked about it."

"So what?" Karin challenged. "You were there during the war! What more proof do you need to know all the stories are true?"

Suigetsu tilted his head back to observe the tree line, casually folding his arms behind his head, frowning thoughtfully. "I dunno about all that. I mean yeah, maybe some of it's not bullshit. But c'mon, this whole theory?" he shrugged noncommittally. "You know me," he grinned broadly at her, his pointed teeth on display. "Always been more of a proof's-in-the-pudding kind of guy. And so far, there hasn't been much proof, now has there?"

Karin flushed, turning away from him and speeding up. It hadn't worked the last three times they'd tried the jutsu. Sasuke and Naruto were growing frustrated, Suigetsu was getting more skeptical and voicing his doubts at every opportunity. In the back of her mind, Karin had her own doubts. But it wasn't about her.

"Hey, what's your rush?" Suigetsu called, quickly catching up. She silently cursed him. "Look, let's say all this isn't a huge waste of time. Sasuke's right. You're right. Your little theory works. But then what? If the girl's alive, trapped in another dimension for over a month, she's gonna be pretty messed up, right?" he motioned to his head. "And if she's not, well, maybe that's even worse. If it's all happily ever after, then that means Sasuke's not really gonna need us anymore. The girl's known him a lot longer than we have."

Karin bit her lip, too afraid to speak. Suigetsu knew how to rub salt in the wound. Another annoying, special trait of his. Without warning, she turned and punched him as hard as possible with her free hand. Feeling his face explode into water the minute her knuckles connected didn't feel as cathartic as usual. It didn't erase the sting of his words and their possible truth from her mind.

Karin didn't look back. Suigetsu would be fine. Sadly, he always was. It didn't matter what he said, or that he didn't understand. She knew the minute she'd agreed what it meant if Sakura were to be reunited with Sasuke—and Naruto.

"Fuck!" The former Mist nin appeared beside her quicker than she'd expected. "What was that for?" he rubbed at his cheek.

"We don't need you Suigetsu," she spat. "If you've got something better to do with your precious time, go out and do it. One stooge can easily be replaced by any other, you know."

Her comrade didn't flinch in the face of her harsh words. A slow grin of understanding appeared on his face. "Ah, I get it now…I think. Ya know, Karin, you've come a long way. I woulda thought the chance of losing Sasuke to someone else would throw you into a jealous fit."

"It shows what you know!" Karin scoffed, glad to see that the run down storage temple was finally coming into view through the trees. The sooner she got away from Suigetsu and the thoughts running wild in her head, the better.
She descended from the treetops and Suigetsu followed. The minute they were in close proximity to the ground she felt it, and halted immediately. "What's matter now?" Suigetsu asked lazily.

"Shh!" Karin glared. "Someone's inside and it's not Sasuke or Naruto...it's—" she gasped, jumping back and taking up a fighting stance as the silver-haired jonin she recognized as Sasuke's former sensei popped up, a pasty, dark-haired boy beside him.

"Yo," he greeted affably. "Karin, wasn't it? Long time no see."

"Eh?" Suigetsu was sure to voice his confusion. "You know this geezer?"

"Yeah," Karin muttered, refusing to take her eyes off the man known as Kakashi Hatake. "He's one of the people who brought me back to Konoha." Against her will, she might add!

"I was curious about what my students were up to these days. I thought I'd wait for them here, and we could have a friendly talk in the meantime."

"Tch, like hell." Karin shook her head. "The last time I had a friendly talk with you people, it was from a cell."

"Ancient bygones, really." Kakashi stuffed his hands in his pockets, taking up an infuriatingly laidback slouch.

"Someone going to fill me in?" Suigetsu dug in his ear, eyeing the Konoha nin in disinterest. Karin knew better. He was almost always thirsting for a fight.

"You two are rogue nins who traveled with Sasuke Uchiha, are you not? Are you planning something against the village with Sasuke?" the dark-haired boy suddenly blurted, pulling a scroll from his hip.

"Easy Sai," Kakashi placated. "We're just here to talk, remember? I have a feeling our friends here aren't looking for a confrontation either."

"Friends?" Suigetsu grinned toothily, hands falling to his hips. "Dunno about that. We don't really cozy up to strangers that fast. Right, Karin?"

She nodded. "We don't have anything to say to you. We're not doing anything worth bothering yourself with."

"They're right, Kakashi," Karin felt her heartbeat increase at the sound of his voice. Sasuke! She blinked and there he was. And Naruto too, of course. But Sasuke was the one who was effortlessly staring Kakashi down. "This has nothing to do with either of you."

"Ah, well... You may not be my genin anymore, but I still like to think of us all as a team." Kakashi smiled, his eyes closing. "I'd hate to think my cute little pupils were off getting into trouble somewhere."

Karin gulped, moving closer to Sasuke instinctively. The air was tense. The Copy Nin and his toadie didn't look like they were going away.

"You might think I'm just sticking my nose into things, but I'd like to remind you that not everyone's happy you're roaming free, Sasuke. Don't give the council a reason to change its mind." His dark eyes drifted to her and Karin stiffened. "As for your friends... they're rogues. They can't come and go as they please."
"Karin's family," Naruto protested. "If the Uzumaki clan were supposed to be allies to Konoha then…then she should be allowed to stay if she wants."

She couldn't deny she was surprised to hear him take up for her. Since they'd formally met, she tended to berate him more than a little.

"Naruto," Kakashi sighed.

"This is going nowhere." Sasuke interrupted. "I'm aware of what you're saying, Kakashi, but it doesn't change my plans. We've come too far to turn back."

"Then let's hear it," the masked nin pressured. "If I can't persuade you, maybe you can persuade me." Karin found him a little unnerving, hands in his pockets, looking perfectly at ease even in the tense situation. His chakra suggested the same.

"Are you serious?" Naruto and Suigetsu asked in unison.

Karin couldn't help but echo their sentiments if only in her head. It had all started because she thought that maybe helping Sasuke locate his missing teammate would be the key to seeing the boy from the Chunin Exams.

Now, she was even deeper into a mess thanks to Sasuke. It should have irritated her, at least a little. But, she realized, shifting the files and holding them out to the Uchiha, it didn't. "This is what we got…" she deliberately ignored Kakashi.

Sasuke accepted the files from her. "Good work,"

Those two words were enough to ground her entire world.

"Sasuke, please don't tell me Sai was actually right…you're not thinking of taking action against the village, are you?"

"Not at present, no," he turned to Naruto. "Alright dobe, don't screw this up."

Naruto, predictably, sneered. "Who the hell is the one that's gonna screw up exactly?"

"What's all this sneaking around then?" Kakashi asked sternly.

"We're…" Naruto faltered. "We're looking into ways to get back Sakura, okay?"

Kakashi, clearly shocked, let his eyes sweep over the group of teenagers, looking for any signs of it being a collective joke.

"We'll let you know what we've been up to, but in exchange, you can't get in our way," Sasuke informed him.

Kakashi looked unconvinced, crossing his arms. "I think you know that depends on the details Sasuke."

Kagami knocked, waiting patiently to be told to enter the office. He hoped the Hokage didn't mind that he was running a little late…

"Hokage-sama?" His voice came out meeker than he had hoped, and he cringed. "Hokage-sama?" he repeated louder.
Although it might have been rude, curiosity got the best of him, and he quietly opened the office door, peeking inside. There was a neat, spacious and empty room, shelves of heavy books on one wall, and a large desk in the center of the room with a bonsai and a stack of papers on it. Clearly, the Hokage wasn't around. Kagami knew that meant he should come back again later. But Madara-sama wanted to get the Hokage's response before he continued with the preparations. Waiting might cause a hitch in the plans…

His dark eyes roved the Hokage's desk. Would it be alright if he left it? Kagami wandered closer, fidgeting with the scroll clenched in his hand. The young Uchiha placed the scroll down carefully, frowning when he noticed it looked like it had been dropped in the dirt… Even if it was Manabu's fault, Madara-sama had entrusted him with the responsibility. He was the one who had failed to keep the message safe from abuse.

'I should go,' he warned himself, forcibly turning away from the invitingly fluffy fur. For added measure, he squeezed his eyes shut. The compulsion to stroke the fur at least once didn't disappear, and Kagami slowly cracked an eye open in spite of himself. Inching closer, he reasoned that it wouldn't hurt to give it a small pat before he left. The stray, his friend, was gone…He missed the cat.

Sometimes he would find himself bringing scraps of food outside, expecting to see the friendly kitten trotting toward him. Whenever he imagined what became of his friend, his heart sank. He should have been stronger and stood up to Manabu the minute he first expressed interest in trying his katon skills out on a moving target. He should have protected his friend.

Instead, he'd make do. The fur couldn't purr when he touched it, or nudge his hand, but the thought of feeling something that at least vaguely reminded him of a cat was comforting. Shakily, he reached out with one hand, his fingers sinking into the smooth white hair of the fur collar. Kagami gasped, delighted that it was even softer than he'd hoped for. One pet turned into two, and then many more, until he was standing in the Hokage's office, transfixed with feeling the texture. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, bringing the fur to his face and hugging it.

Making sure the Hokage got the letter was almost the last thing on his mind when the door slammed open and he jumped, releasing the fur and letting it fall to the floor.

"Hashi-niiii!" A familiar voice screamed. Kagami turned, surprised to see the girl he'd helped standing in the doorway. She was breathing hard like she ran all the way across the village, and when her eyes fell on him, she looked just as surprised.

"Er," Kagami swallowed, feeling the need to clarify, "I wasn't going through anything on the Hokage's desk!"

That seemed like the last thing on her mind as she slowly walked into the room. The closer she got, the more he could see that her round eyes, which he'd originally thought were brown, actually were a shade closer to burnt gold. "Is that Tobi-nii's fur?" she asked, pointing at the strip of white fur at his feet.

"U-Uh…" Kagami felt his palms start to sweat.

The mysterious girl bent down and picked it up. "I wonder if he left it here…" she mused aloud.
Then, setting it aside, she beamed at him. "This is yours." In her hand was a scroll, and when he looked carefully, he noticed the Uchiha wax seal, still somehow intact, sealing the parchment.

"How?"

She shrugged. "Maybe they got switched when you helped me." That made as much sense as anything. It was the only thing that made sense, actually. "I got all the way to Chisa-chan's house before I noticed."

Reaching behind him, Kagami grabbed the scroll and presented it to her, taking his own scroll back with the other. "Thank you…um…"

"I'm Reira!" she declared proudly. "And you're Kagami-kun."

"Right," he agreed. Her liveliness had a way of putting him at ease. "I'm glad we switched these back before I gave it to the Hokage." How embarrassing would it have been to deliver the wrong message? What would Madara-sama have said had he found out?

"Mm-hm," Reira hummed. "Speaking of Hashi-nii, it's funny he's not in his office. He usually is this time of day…unless he's hiding from Tobi-nii…" she pouted. "I bet that's it."

Confused, he canted his head. "Are you talking about the Hokage? Y-You're being kind of informal, aren't you?"

"A little," she poked her index fingers together, looking sheepish. "But that's because they're like big brothers to me."

Realization suddenly settled over him. "You're a Senju?" It didn't make sense for any other child to be so familiar with the Hokage and his brother.

Reira grinned. "And you're an Uchiha." To his surprise, she poked his nose. "But I could tell that just by looking at you. Plus, I saw the fan on your back before."

She had him there. "Where was your message supposed to go?" It didn't seem to unnerve her at all that she was speaking to an Uchiha, but he'd never talked to a Senju close to his age before. He hadn't spoken more than a few brief words with any of his clan's once-sworn-enemies at all. Kagami wasn't old enough to actually hold true malice for them.

He understood their bitter history, and that Madara-sama and the Hokage had known each for many years. Aside from that, he was content to let the adults sort out any lingering bitterness they held. Changing the subject was better than dwelling on it.

"To Chisa-chan's house." Noticing his furrowed brow, she quickly explained, "Chisato Aburame. She's my friend. I took a message from Tobi-nii about some big meeting to her family. Well, I tried to. I got to the gates and then I saw the Uchiha crest."

"How'd you know where to find me?" Maybe she was a sensor-type.

"I guessed~"

Kagami sweatdropped. "You…guessed?"

Reira laughed nervously, surprising him as she hoisted herself onto the Hokage's desk with some difficulty, in spite of clearly struggling in her yukata. "Tobi-nii can be kinda mean…I didn't want to tell him," she admitted. "But Hashi-nii always keeps my secrets. I thought if I gave him the scroll,
he'd help me figure out what to do. And he knows that one Uchiha!" she held up a pointer finger. "You know the one? His face looks like this?"

Reira proceeded to cover her left eye with one hand and scowl deeply.

"You mean Madara-sama? He doesn't look like that!"

"If he doesn't, how'd you know who I meant," she wiggled her eyebrows slyly. Kagami blushed. She reached over and picked up the fur he'd been playing with, looping part of it around her neck like a scarf, and then hopping down from the desk, holding the other end out to him.

"It's nice, right?"

"R-Reira-san, are you sure you should—"

"Reira." She corrected. "Just Reira. We're the same age! Probably."

"Reira," Kagami paused. "Are you sure you should do that?" Outwardly, he wanted to be the responsible one. But deep inside, he remembered the plushness of the fur against his cheek, and he thought about how comfortable it would be if he wrapped it around his neck.

"You know you want to do this," she teased, nimbly looping it around his neck several times.

Kagami sputtered, "W-Wait," he protested belatedly.

"Too late," she sighed, snuggling with her end. "I always do this when Tobi-nii's not around and I can get ahold of it. But he watches it way too hard! I don't blame you for trying to sneak a cuddle too, Kagami-kun."

"I wasn't!" His treacherous fingers clutched at the fur, but he couldn't make them unwind it. They held it tighter instead.

Reira made an unconvinced noise. "How much trouble will you be in?" she asked suddenly. "I'll be in lots. I know I was supposed to go home a long time ago…"

Kagami didn't want to think about how fast he got sidetracked from such a simple task. Madara-sama would never trust him with any responsibility again. "I…I…"

"What the hell are you two doing?"

Reira squealed, and Kagami shook as he felt a daunting aura pressing down on him from just over his shoulder. "Run Kagami-kun!" she cried, trying to take off. Unfortunately, the fur around his neck tightened as she started to drag him behind her, as he felt his eyes roll into the back of his head. The soft fur was suddenly choking him out, and what a humiliatedly ridiculous way to go!

"Urk!" he coughed, "R-Reira…"

A strong hand grasped the fur collar and snatched it from them both. Kagami stumbled, falling onto the wooden floor.

"Reira," a stern voice barked. "What are you doing? I told you explicitly not to goof off. Clearly, this was more than you could handle."

Getting over his embarrassment, the Uchiha turned slowly, his eyes starting at the sandaled feet and traveling up into the grim faced of the Hokage's brother, Tobirama Senju.
"T-T-Tobi-nii, I didn't expect…to see you here?"

"I'm sure you didn't." he grunted. "But you were taking far too long, so I tracked you down."

He wasn't positive, but it sounded like Reira muttered "I hate sensors so much" under her breath.

"I can explain, Senju-san," Kagami started. "We met on the way to our destinations, and accidentally took the wrong scrolls. I was supposed to deliver this to the Hokage." Tobirama took the scroll from him and opened it without a second thought, his eyes quickly reading the steady script of Madara's hand.

"Very well," His red eyes drifted to Reira, and she stiffened in place. "Take that to the Aburame's at once. No more delays. Have their response to me in the hour. This is your last chance," he warned.

Reira nodded so hard Kagami was concerned for her neck. "See you around, Kagami-kun!" she waved, scampering out of the room.

That left him and the most intimidating man he'd ever encountered, outside Madara.

"What were you doing with this?" he demanded, pointing to his fur collar. It looked out of place resting on his shoulders against the deep blue fabric of his casual yukata, but he didn't dare voice it.

"It was soft…" he opted for honesty. "…I like soft things. I-I'm sorry. It was wrong to touch it."

Tobirama looked satisfied by that. "You're not as insolent as I'd expect an Uchiha brat to be…but keep your hands off this."

"Y-Yes," Kagami would agree to anything in that moment.

"Then I can look the other way this time."

Relief rushed through his veins. In hindsight, his conduct had been embarrassing, regardless of the reason. If anyone in his clan ever found out, Manabu's taunting would be the least of his worries.

"I'll see to it that my brother receives this. Tell Madara the message was successfully delivered and that he'll get his response shortly."

Somehow, it wasn't what Kagami was expecting. It was almost like…Tobirama was trying to show pity. But the tales of the man's hatred for Uchiha were well known, so maybe it was wishful imagining. Either way, Kagami refused to waste the opportunity to bow out gracefully—literally—giving the man one last flustered apology before running home.

Sakura sucked in a deep breath, wondering if her ribs would be alright. "It's a little tight," she reached for her waist, but Toka's firm fingers brushed hers away.

"It should be," she assured.

"Sakura," Yurine popped up from behind her, holding out two hair ornaments. "Which one do you like more?" The ones in her left hand were wooden, a small oval piece of polished amber inlaid in the wide, flat part, a thin gold chain with white beads dangling from the other end. In Yurine's right hand was a silver comb with a meticulously crafted red blossom decoration attached to it. Both looked too extravagant and delicate to ever be set into her hair.

"The comb, of course." Toka answered for her.
Yurine studied the comb, and then the hair pins, "I would have thought the amber hair pins…"
After shopping for a formal kimono with Toka, they had met Yurine by chance as she wandered
around, buying items to adjust to her new life.

She'd explained that after being with the Kaguya for over a year, she had decided to treat herself to
a new wardrobe. Sakura explaining why she was kimono shopping had piqued the blonde's
interest, and she'd been only too happy to offer her assistance. Apparently any time away from her
brother and his attempts to charm any girl he met, were much appreciated.

The three woman stood, preparing Sakura for the meeting, only a short hour away. Getting into her
kimono required help, and she was grateful to have extra sets of hands. Toka worked on making
sure the soft pink kimono with the slightly darker blossom pattern was immaculate, while Yurine
brushed through her hair.

When she was done, she gathered it up in her hands, and Sakura vaguely noticed that since her time
in the era, it had grown past her shoulders again, brushing her shoulder blades. "There," Yurine
tucked the comb into her pink tresses so that some of her hair was secured in a perfect bun at the
top of her head while the rest was left to hang. "It's beautiful," she sighed wistfully.

"It is a really nice ornament," Sakura agreed.

"That too," Yurine mumbled. "But I meant your hair. The shade and texture are so appealing. Much
nicer than mine." Sakura touched a hand to her hair and blushed.

"I never thought I'd hear anyone say that." It was a far cry from the comments children made about
it during her academy years. Even adults would occasionally whisper behind their hands about
how odd it was.

"Why not?" Yurine gasped, genuinely alarmed. "Anywhere you go, this hair would make you the
talk of town. I can see why you had to conceal it when you infiltrated the Kaguya's compound."

Toka had begun painting her lips with a deep red stainer that served as the lipstick of the period.
Sakura wisely kept her mouth closed during the process, noticing the stern look Toka shot her.
Two days of careful coaching later, she wanted to believe she was ready for whatever any bigoted
clan leader could possibly throw at her.

The truth, however, was that despite the bravado she'd given the Hokage, and despite her desire to
help see young children from humble upbringings allowed in the academy, it was a daunting role
that rested firmly on her shoulders. Who knew what turn history would take from her actions? "Let
that dry." The Senju ordered as she leaned away to inspect her work.

Sakura smoothed her hands down the front of her kimono, discreetly trying to loosen the obi while
nodding. Toka, once again, chased her hands away.

When Sakura felt the stainer was sufficiently dry, she addressed Yurine, who was still perched
behind her, waiting for an answer.

"You'd be surprised that the attention my hair gets isn't always the best kind," she joked wryly.

"Those people were speaking from a place of jealousy then." Yurine said, firm in her resolve to
defend Sakura's hair.

Sakura couldn't deny that Yurine's admiration was sweet and so she smiled in gratitude.

"You should look at yourself in the mirror before you leave, but I believe our work is done." There
was a certain gentleness to Toka's tone that reminded the pinkette of a proud older sister.

Sakura carefully stood from the cushion under her knees, faltering as she got use to the restriction of the kimono. Toka wasn't exaggerating about the yukatas feeling so much lighter in comparison. The layers of fabric she was currently wrapped in made her feel like a well-folded tomago.

Waddling her way across the room with difficulty, Sakura stood in front of the full length mirror, taken aback by the sight of the young woman it reflected. She looked into a face with clear green eyes and lips made to look fuller from Toka's steady application of the lip paint. Yurine had groomed her hair to a shine, leaving long pieces on either side that curled at her cheeks and framed her face. The kimono that had been decided on was a matching shade to her hair and it gave her an air of understated elegance. The patterning was simple and feminine, vibrant.

"Wow," she breathed.

"You agree now, don't you?" Yurine asked, squeezing at her shoulder. "Not just your hair is beautiful. You may find a suitor or two before the meeting ends." Sakura's cheeks pinkened as Yurine winked.

"Yuhi, enough joking," Toka shook her head. "Sakura has her goal in front of her. Something so unimportant as the opinions of a man shouldn't matter."

"They won't." Sakura stated. Since taking an unexpected plunge through time, the whirlwind of evidence around her had left little to no time to think of romance.

"You're right," Yurine pouted slightly. "This wouldn't be the appropriate time, would it?"

"And yet you sound unconvinced," Toka rolled her eyes. "It strikes me that you may be a bit of a romantic."

Sakura stared at her friend curiously, but Yurine had turned away, running both hands through the ends of her ponytail. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Ignore her, and put your best foot forward." Saying that, Toka began to shove her from her bedroom by the shoulders.

"Why am I rushing?" Sakura cried.

"You'll want to be early, to make a good impression."

Toka kept pushing at her until she was at her front door. Yurine opened it, and Usamaro darted in.

"Did I just get kicked out of my own house?"

"We're in your corner." Yurine gave her a quick hug, and Toka lifted her chin when the blonde girl pulled away.

"Remember what we've practiced." Sakura felt something being pressed into her hand, and looked down to see the directions to the Uchiha compound that had been delivered by a hawk.
"I'm surprised you aren't going to be there." Sakura worried her lip. Toka, a strong, poised woman, would have been a wonderful support to have at her side throughout the meeting. As it was, she wasn't sure how many, if any, women would be present. For all she knew, she'd be trapped in a room full of men for an indefinite length of time, and half would be hostile, worst case scenario.

"There will be two Senju there already. If there were anymore, their might be accusations that Lord Hashirama was trying to create bias."

It was reasonable to limit the presence of Senju at the meeting. Any more than necessary, and the other clans might start to suspect.

"Let us walk you," Yurine insisted, pulling Sakura down the street by her hand.

"Do you even know the way?"

Yurine nodded down at the note she was clutching, and Sakura sighed in acquiesce.

"Right…" she sighed. "Right…"

~ASiT~

Standing at the entrance to the Uchiha compound was an incredibly thrilling and nerve-wrecking feeling, Sakura decided. On the one hand, this would be her first time ever setting foot in it. A part of her was curious about what Sasuke's ancestral home was like. There was no telling how close this version of it was to the one in her time period, but it was still the Uchiha compound regardless, and she would get to see it.

"This is where we part," Toka announced.

"I understand. Thank you for keeping me company on the way over."

She directed this mostly at Yurine, who almost looked more anxious than she was. "I'm sorry," the Yuhi said. "Big compounds like this…remind me a little too much of the Kaguya I suppose."

Sakura's heart panged with sympathy. Daily life with the Kaguya for just over a week would sometimes affect her sanity, but it was nothing in comparison to those who had survived months or even years with them. The ordeal clearly caused Yurine trauma.

"I'll take you home," Toka stated. Yurine nodded, grasping the Senju's arm firmly. They walked away slowly after Sakura was given one final look of confidence from Toka and a weak smile from Yurine, who looked almost physically ill.

Sakura made a mental note to check on her later, turning and facing the more immediate challenge: The inevitable confrontation.

The gates were open, presumably to welcome all the visitors who would be attending the meeting. However, two Uchiha were posted at the gate, chatting amicably and not looking the least bit on guard.

'Huh…' Sakura wandered up to them, pasting on a polite, confident smile. "Excuse me..." They both looked up lazily, and then did double takes.

"Yes?" The sentry on the right asked. She was tall and lean, with shiny black hair that fell straight down her back and a high-collared, sleeveless yukata.
"I'm here for the meeting this afternoon?" Sakura resisted the urge to nervously wring her hands.

"Clan affiliation?" the second sentry questioned. An older man with the beginnings of frown lines at his mouth and bags beneath his eyes, hair cropped incredibly close to his ears and wearing the same standard Uchiha garb as the woman, but with sleeves.

"I'm not from a clan, actually. I'm Sakura Haruno and I'm here as the representation for civilian families." The sentries shared a perplexed look, before the woman pulled out a scroll and studied it carefully.

"Her name is here." she muttered, pointing.

"Then you may pass," the man gestured to the opened wood gates, and Sakura nodded as she shuffled through.

Inside, she was greeted with a charming traditional style that was befitting of the Uchiha, in her opinion. The first thing she noticed were the people, the second was the homes seemed to be built close together and connected by the engawa that wrapped around them.

Almost everyone she caught eyes with had black or brown hair and pale skin, dressed in dark clothes that shared the same red and white fan. In her pink kimono and with her equally eye catching hair, she became a commodity the minute she set foot inside. No one looked hostile, at least. But she was getting plenty of long, openly curious gazes.

Sakura glanced at the note she'd received two days prior. It didn't have details about which building to go to, and she'd rather not wander around drawing more attention to herself. Asking for help was always an option. Any one of the Uchiha currently gaping at her could probably point her in the right direction.

"Would you like some assistance?"

"Yes please," Sakura nodded, still looking down at the slip of paper in her hands. "I'm Sakura Haruno, and I'm trying to..." Her words trailed off as she looked up into Izuna's smirking face. "Oh,"

"What an enthusiastic greeting." Izuna teased.

"I didn't expect you!" Sakura defended.

"You're in the Uchiha compound, and the fact that you might see me didn't occur to you?"

Sakura glared, even though she could feel her cheeks getting warmer. "I'm a little preoccupied today."

"Aa. Madara said you'd be attending the meeting today. Representing civilian entry into the academy."

Sakura looked at him curiously. "Does that bother you?"

"Not at all," Izuna offered her his arm. Sakura only paused a second before accepting it. "Since you've arrived early, why don't I show you around?"

She couldn't deny she was curious. "Alright," It was perfect. She could get a tour without having to be pushy. "You weren't...you weren't waiting for me to show up, were you?"
Izuna laughed heartily. "No, no. Nothing like that. I've just always had incredibly convenient timing. Depending on who you ask, that is."

Sakura could feel some of her anxiety easing. Izuna wasn't just a familiar face, but a friendly one. It was nice to have at least one ally in unfamiliar territory.

"I'm afraid that the compound itself is nothing spectacular. It's only been here as long as the village has, so there's no centuries of lore packed away." She listened to the low rumble of his voice and gently leaned against the arm she was gripping. He didn't seem to mind, looking down at the top of her head with a twinkle in his eyes as he kept talking. "We have our own training ground." he pointed out a group of young boys sparring as they walked past, and when they looked up and saw Izuna, all of them stopped mid-fight and ran over.

"Izuna-sama!"

"These are some of my students. I regularly teach the children the techniques passed through generations." Izuna explained.

"So you're a sensei?" she asked, interested. "I guess you probably have the patience for it." Because anyone who was Madara's sibling would have to learn patience, right? Sakura stowed the bitter thoughts, looking down into the questioning young faces.

"I'm Sakura,"

"What clan are you from?" one of the boys immediately questioned. "You have strange hair." He backed away warily.

"That's rude, Manabu." Izuna admonished.

"I'm use to it," Sakura told him. "And to answer your question, I'm not from a well known clan. My last name is Haruno."

"Sakura Haruno...? Is your given name because of your hair?" asked a bright-eyed little girl in pigtails.

"Something like that."

"My name's Miyako, 'cause I was born at night." she introduced herself.

"Miyako's a nice name," Sakura complimented.

"I know, right?" The girl agreed proudly.

Miyako's greeting prompted the other children to lower their guard, because soon they had all circled Sakura and Izuna, eager to talk. "I'm Tenma," said a tall boy with lank hair that covered his eyes almost entirely.

"Manabu." The largest child leered, his nose lifted in the air. "The runt's Kagami." he drawled, fluttering his eyelashes as he clasped his hands under his chin mockingly. Kagami was a cute boy with large eyes framed by sooty lashes, and wavy hair unlike any Sakura had ever seen on an Uchiha.

"I'm not a runt..." Kagami objected. "You're just a little older."

"What's the difference?" Manabu cackled. "Any way I look at it, you're a wimp."
"That's enough out of you, Manabu," Izuna jabbed a thumb back to the training grounds. "Go work on your kata again. Your form's still sloppy." Miyako and Tenma snickered as Manabu's ears turned red.

Glowering, Manabu stomped back to the training field, Tenma and Miyako following him.

"I'm not sure when he got so antagonistic." Izuna shook his head. He placed a hand atop Kagami's mussed hair. "This is my star pupil, Sakura-san."

Kagami tucked his chin to his chest shyly, avoiding their eyes. "I wouldn't say star...I'm just getting the techniques a little faster than the others right now."

"Don't let the humbleness fool you," Izuna continued. "He's got true talent. If anything, I think he's holding himself back."

Sakura carefully leaned forward, smiling kindly. "You know, Kagami, if you don't mind me saying so, I don't think you should hold back just because of a bully."

His dark eyes slowly drifted to her face. "Every time I beat Manabu at anything, he hates me more."

"Speaking from experience, that's usually more about them than it is about you."

"She's right," Izuna chimed in. "You're younger than Manabu, and he sees how much you're progressing and feels threatened. Even if it all has to come to a head before it gets resolved, you should stand your ground."

"It's not just because I beat him in a couple of spars..." Kagami looked up at them imploringly. "Izuna-sama, is it wrong to help others who aren't Uchiha, or to like cats because they're soft?"

"I think you know the answer to that already." Izuna ruffled his curly hair.

"And if you like cats, I have a kitten Izuna-san brought me. Maybe you could visit with him the next time he comes by."

Kagami's eyes bulged and his lips parted minutely. "A k-kitten that Izuna-sama gave you?"

"Did I say something wrong?" Sakura wondered. Kagami suddenly looked like he'd lost his best friend.

"I use to play with a cat who was a stray here...but, it's gone now."

"No it isn't." Izuna removed his hand from Kagami's head and looked at Sakura. "Sakura-san was able to save it, and it lives with her now."

The young Uchiha's face went slack with disbelief, and then lit with joy. "The stray's alive?"

"Not just alive, lively." Sakura explained. "He's always starting trouble."

"I thought...Madara-sama said...how were you able to save him?" he stammered.

"A little medical ninjutsu goes a long way."

"You're a medic?" Kagami's expression was reverent. "Thank you, for saving it."

"All in a day's work. I'm sure if you were friends, then Usamaro would love to see you again."
Kagami looked at Izuna for permission, and he nodded. "If you're sure it's no trouble, then I'd like that."

"Feeling better now?" Izuna asked. "Go on and rejoin the others." The three of them looked over at the training feeling to see the other children pretending not to watch Kagami interact with the adults. They were clearly trying to guess what they had been talking about.

Kagami bowed in gratitude and ran off.

"He's a good kid." Sakura was almost reminded of how upbeat she had seen Sasuke for the brief time she had known him before the Uchiha Massacre.

"Yes." Izuna looked on with fondness as they stood and watched the children start sparring again, Kagami helping Miyako with her kata. "They all are. Even Manabu, when he allows himself to be." Izuna held up his arm again. "We still have time before we're expected at the meeting, would you like to see more."

"Lead the way." Sakura squeezed his arm lightly, and they started walking again.

She noticed as they wandered around that while the compound had an air of distance and dignity, the Uchiha themselves were amicable to each other, stopping to talk, or exchanging polite greetings in passing as they rushed on their separate ways.

This was what the Uchiha were truly like, no less of a family than the Senju or any other clan. Witnessing it almost made her feel guilty. 'So this is what Sasuke got robbed of...'

"Are you getting tired, Sakura-san?" Izuna asked, concern.

"I'm fine. Just lost in thought. But tell me more about the compound. Like that, for example." She pointed at a stand that had quite the line, hoping to redirect Izuna's attention.

"Though we're far from being entirely self-sustaining, some Uchiha who aren't as active as shinobi have shops to support themselves. That's one of them. It sells several kinds of sweet buns."

Sakura's stomach took the opportunity to remind her that she had forgone breakfast. She was mortified by the noise it made, and clutched at her abdomen in horror, but Izuna looked unbothered.

"Excuse me, I'm feeling a little hungry. You don't mind if we stop for a snack, do you Sakura-San?" Sakura couldn't have been more grateful that he was kind enough to allow her to save face.

"If you insist,"

"I do." Izuna pulled her toward the line, which was, to Sakura's pleasure, at least moving.

The smell of fresh pastries tickled her nose as a woman walked by, munching on a bun. Sakura discreetly wiped the drool from her lips when Izuna wasn't looking. She could almost taste the custard filling of a creampan.

The woman noticed her staring and made a show of licking the custard from the corner of her mouth. "What's this? I haven't seen you in so long, and when I do, I find out I've been replaced?" Her disapproval was directed at Izuna, who had taken his eyes from the stand at the sound of her voice.

"Hello to you too, Naoko." Sakura started between them, feeling awkward. She wasn't sure exactly
what was going on, but the beautiful dark-haired woman was studying Izuna with betrayed eyes.

Sakura watched "Naoko" finish the rest of her sweet bun and suck her finger clean. "You're so cruel, pretending nothing's wrong between us."

Izuna stared blankly. "Because there is nothing wrong between us. There's nothing between us at all, and I'd thank you to stop making Sakura-san uncomfortable."

Sakura began loosening her grip on Izuna's arm, worried she may appear too forward in front of this strange woman who was watching them with so much intensity.

Izuna caught her hand as she stepped away and used it to pull her back to his side. "Sakura-san, this is Naoko. An old friend."

Naoko tittered behind a small hand. "I'm sorry, but the thought of embarrassing little Izuna-chan there is just too fun."

Sakura took a side-long glance at Izuna. He looked more annoyed than embarrassed, and she was positive her cheeks were the only ones burning up.

"It's so thrilling to finally meet Izuna's Sakura-san." She cooed suggestively.

"Naoko," he warned, his jaw twitching.

She closed one eye, shaking her head with a sigh. "You never allow me to have any fun. I'll behave, alright?" Her dark eyes glittered as they met Sakura's.

"In all sincerity, Izuna speaks highly of you. If I didn't know better, I'd say you've managed to impress Madara too."

Sakura couldn't keep herself from gaping at that news. "What do you mean?"

Naoko's bottom lip jutted out in confusion. "You haven't figured it out? Well, Madara is a tough one to read, for the most part. Or at least he pretends to be."

"I think what she means to say is, my brother may appear dismissive, but it's clear when you're mentioned that you've gained his respect in at least some regard."

"Y-You really think so?" Sakura blushed.

"Is it true you put Tobirama Senju on his ass?" Naoko asked with an eager gleam in her eye.

Sakura felt the back of her neck and confirmed that it was, indeed, very warm. To be confronted about her spar with Tobirama was something she hadn't planned on.

"It was a spar."

"A spar you won." Izuna was uncharacteristically smug all of a sudden. "Madara came home quite amused about that. I have to say, that's a sight I wouldn't have minded witnessing myself."

"Oh Izu-chan," Naoko sighed. "Have I ever told you how attractive you are when you're being sadistic? Because you are. When you get like this..." she paused, her face flushing madly.

Izuna ignored her, turning to Sakura. "It isn't that I still hold hostility toward the Senju...this is a new era of peace, and as long as the Uchiha are treated with respect, I'm willing to give this alliance a chance. Even Kagami has made friends with a Senju from what I understand. But..." he
grit his teeth.

"But some individuals are harder to forgive than an entire group." Sakura finished knowingly.

"It was awful," Naoko frowned. "That Senju gutted Izuna like a fish and left him to die like it was nothing. Still keeps Madara awake at night."

'How does she know what keeps him awake at night?' Sakura thought. Then, it was as if her subconscious rose up to smack the naivety out of her. 'Oh...' That was an image of a Madara she truly didn't need.

"Next!" Sakura looked up to see the man running the sweet bun stand looking at them expectantly. "You're still buying, aren't you?"

This time, it was Sakura who tugged Izuna along with her.

"See you around Izu-chan. Remember to be the gentleman I expect you to be with Sakura-san." The wink she gave them as she strolled away made it hard to look Izuna in the eye.

"Ignore it. Naoko's always that way." Izuna whispered. "We'll have four anpan, please." he told the vendor.

The man began preparing a small box containing the snacks.

"She seemed to know you really well..."

"Did you think I was lying when I said she was simply an old friend?" Izuna smirked.

Sakura frantically shook her head. "N-no...even if she wasn't, it's none of my business."

"Rest assured, Naoko is a childhood friend to both Madara and I."

He handed the vendor money for their sweet buns and accepted the package before Sakura had time to protest about him paying. "Let's find somewhere quiet to eat these."

Sakura couldn't deny she was still hungry. It wouldn't help her credibility with the clan heads if she went into the meeting on an empty stomach and couldn't concentrate.

~ASYT~

"Somewhere quiet" turned out to be the dock of a man-made lake. Sakura couldn't stop marveling on how big the space the Uchiha lived on was. It was a sizable three acres, at least, if not more.

"Help yourself." Izuna gestured to the box of sweets, and Sakura took an anpan, biting into it slowly. The flavor on her tongue was delicious, and she tried not to shove it into her mouth in one bite.

"They're very good, aren't they? Hatsu makes them fresh every day. He hasn't been able to return to the battlefield since a bad leg injury years ago, and he turned to baking. The whole clan is happy, and a little plumper for it." Izuna explained, taking a bite of his own anpan.

"I haven't had anpan in so long...when I was feeling down or someone was mean to me, my mother would take me to a bakery and we'd talk it out over these..." Those were during her academy days, when her mother was always fussing over her. Sakura always felt a little sad they'd gotten so estranged the more time she had spent advancing her shinobi career.
Mebuki had indulged her daughter entering the academy, but the kunoichi knew in the back of her mind that it was something her mother half expected her to grow out of, retiring from shinobi life to settle down at a young age, like she had.

But Sakura fell further in love with being a ninja every year, and after taking up her apprenticeship under Tsunade, she couldn't imagine retiring only to waste her skills when she could be helping others.

"I'm not sure I have such I have memories like those anymore. My earliest memories are Madara showing me how to hold a sword, helping me back up when our father knocked me down while we trained."

It was hard to reconcile the image of the ruthless man who had single-handedly mowed through ninja during the war, with a kind, reliable brother, but she and Izuna had vastly different experiences involving Madara, so she shouldn't really be surprised.

"I know what you're thinking." Izuna startled her by saying. "That's hard to imagine, but it's true."

"Even if...even if I can't see what you do in him, I don't doubt he cares for you as much as you do him." Sakura nibbled on her anpan.

"I meant what I said back there. Your spar impressed Madara. I think he wouldn't mind facing you himself, the way he was talking."

An image of being impaled by one of his rods during battle flashed in her mind, and she placed a hand on the spot. Without the knowledge she had from Tsunade, she would have been a goner.

"Is what Naoko said true too? That you almost died?"

Izuna's whole mood soured instantly, and Sakura wanted to smack herself. "It was a fatal wound. The healers couldn't save me."

"That can't be true...you're...I mean you're here."

Izuna turned his whole body to face her. "If I told you what Madara told me, you really would call me a liar."

"Pretend I wouldn't," Sakura breathed, her heart hammering.

"I don't remember any of this, mind you...but according to Madara." He shook his head, brow furrowed in consternation. "No. Even repeating it aloud makes it sound far fetched."

"I've seen a lot of far-fetched things." Sakura pressed. And lately even moreso.

"According to Madara, the healers said I would die before the end of the week. That was when a woman no one had ever seen before appeared. She was beautiful, and almost too graceful to be human. She said she could heal me...and she did."

Alarm flashed through her. 'It can't be!'

"Did he say what she looked like?" She was almost afraid to hear the answer. 'Please don't say she had dragon horns!'

"He said she hid her face, but...he caught a glimpse of her eyes, and they looked sharp, cunning. A little like a snake's. The most unbelievable part is the way he says she saved me...by pulling a
black butterfly from my side, and eating it."

The confirmation of what she'd already guessed slammed into her, making her feel light-headed. Mizuchi saved Izuna...why? What was she planning. Sakura hadn't even known Izuna then, had she?

"It sounds ridiculous, but here I am." Izuna laughed, expecting her to laugh too.

Sakura didn't. Her face was drained of color. "It's not ridiculous."

Izuna stopped laughing and gently took her hand. "Sakura-san?" The second anpan she'd started to eat was forgotten as she stared out over the calm lake. Mizuchi was calculating about every move she made. Reviving Izuna from the brink of death couldn't be any different.

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Madara bowed to the next clan head to arrive, Shinpachi Shimura, masking his displeasure with the whole affair under a stone face of indifference. As usual, it was Hashirama's fault. He had insisted that the Uchiha should host the meeting, because other clans were still wary of them, and proving themselves as hosts would raise positive sentiment. It was a nice thought, but hardly worth the hassle. Madara wasn't one to put on airs. He didn't particularly care who felt what about his clan. They had been misunderstood long before he took over as clan head.

"You're glaring again." Hashirama whispered from beside him. Madara proceeded to glare harder in defiance.

Sasuke Sarutobi entered the hall, greeting Hashirama first, and then bowing respectfully at Madara. "We're happy you could make it Sasuke." Hashirama said. "Please have a seat anywhere inside."

"Thank you," The Sarutobi bowed again, walking into the meeting room. So far he was keeping company with Shimura, Akamichi, Aburame, Nara, and Hashirama's rotten little brother. One of many reasons he'd chosen to stand outside the door with Hashirama to greet guests as they arrived. Izuna should have been there, suffering with him.

He stared down the hall impatiently. "What's wrong?" Hashirama asked, looking ridiculously eager, as if getting every one on the same page would be a simple matter. Optimistic fool.

"We're missing Izuna and Haruno."

"Huh? They're right there," He followed the line of Hashirama's finger to see Izuna escorting Sakura Haruno down the hall as if he didn't have a care in the world. Madara decided to ignore how at ease she looked, holding onto Izuna as if they were lovers just getting back from a stroll of leisure.

It was harder to ignore her appearance, however. It was the first time he had seen her dressed formally, her hair styled and her lips painted. The green of her eyes was sharper as she briefly met his stare and then pointedly ignored him.

The snugness of her baby pink kimono made the curves normally hidden by the loose yukatas he always saw her in more pronounced, harder to ignore. Izuna looked proud of himself, to have her hanging from his arm. His brother reminded him of a reckless young samurai who had been designated to escort the daughter of a lord.

Madara decided he was doing a valiant effort in hiding his ire at the two of them. While he had been dreading the start of the meeting, Izuna was off frolicking with Haruno, leaving the stuffy greetings to him.
"Where were you?" he demanded. Madara's glare traveled to her hand resting in the crook of Izuna's arm. Hashirama noticed too, but his eyes suggested he was more disappointed than irritated. Hashirama, being the fool that he was, likely would've escorted Haruno himself if he was given the chance.

"Showing Sakura-san around." Izuna replied evenly. When had his brother become such a big little shit?

"We're ready to begin," Madara cleared his throat. "Unless you're planning to take an afternoon boat ride on the lake?"

"Thank you once again for agreeing to this Sakura-san." Hashirama eased his way into the conversation.

"It's no trouble at all." Sakura grinned. Madara narrowed his eyes at her, and she narrowed hers right back. This was what made her simultaneously amusing and frustrating.

Hashirama sighed loudly as they watched Izuna and Haruno walk into the room together, immediately catching the attention of everyone already inside.

"I didn't realize your brother and Sakura-San had become so close..." he lamented.

"That makes two of us." Madara mumbled to himself.

Sakura knew almost instantly who was who. The rotund man at the farthest end of the table was without a doubt the head of the Akamichi. The lean man with dark hair to his shoulders, an eye patch and a look that said he'd rather be napping, leaning against the table, was the head of the Nara clan.

Sakura was both surprised but a little elated when she noticed a dark haired woman with bangs falling into her eyes and a kimono with a collar that rose to cover her mouth. Something about her presence reminded her of Chisato, and so she decided that the woman was an Aburame.

She didn't recognize the brown-haired man sitting on one side of the Nara with his arms crossed, but there was no mistaking the white hair and piercing red eyes of Tobirama.

Hashirama and Madara followed them into the room, taking seats closer to the head of the table. Sakura found herself sitting between Izuna and the Hokage, Tobirama directly across from her.

"Now, I believe we're ready to begin. Everyone should have received a copy of the proposal for the academy with their invitation."

"Indeed." agreed the Akamichi. "But shouldn't we all begin by introducing ourselves. I'm afraid I'm not familiar with everyone here."

"Good idea Chouto. As our host, maybe we should let Madara begin."

Sakura laughed a little in her head at the not so subtle look of contempt Madara shot him. "Madara Uchiha."

"D-Don't you have a little more to say?" Hashirama urged.

"No." The Uchiha said shortly. "I'll leave the babbling to you."

Most of the table chuckled goodnaturedly, including Hashirama himself. "Fair enough," the
Hokage straightened himself in his seat. "I'll go next. I'm Hashirama Senju. I, along with my brother, will be representing the Senju clan's wishes today."

Sakura couldn't help but notice how handsome he was in his deep green kosode, a tan haori resting over it, and his hair pulled away from his face in a low ponytail.

All eyes trailed to Sakura, the one sitting next to Hashirama, and she squared her shoulders. "I'm Sakura Haruno. I'm here to represent civilian interests in this discussion."

"So you yourself are a civilian?" The man she didn't recognize grunted.

"I'm a kunoichi, actually." She gave him a sweet smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"No first rate shinobi, man or woman, can make it without the proper lineage behind them." Right out of the gate, Sakura knew this man would probably be her biggest detractor the entire meeting.

"I'd have to humbly disagree." Sakura replied. "Maybe you see it as unconventional or improper, but with equal attention, civilian children are more than capable of keeping up with their peers. That's why I'm here."

"Shinpachi...I've seen Sakura in action firsthand. Maybe we oughta just let her speak?" Sarutobi added. The man sent her a wink and she beamed.

"You're all willing to listen to this?" Shinpachi asked incredulously.

"We came all the way here...so why not?" asked the Nara. "No reason to waste a trip."

Shinpachi settled back in his seat, clearly dissatisfied.

"Let's quickly get through the introductions, and then we can each raise our points." Izuna tapped her clenched fist under the table, a silent plea not to use physical violence on the pompous man. "I am Izuna Uchiha. I, along with my brother, will represent the interests of the Uchiha here today. I also work with some of the children in our clan, teaching them katon and bukijutsu techniques."

"I am Chouto Akamichi." The man across from Izuna introduced. The swirls on his cheeks and physical bulk made his clan obvious. "I represent the Akamichi clan here today." He nudged the man sitting next to him, who had started to doze off.

He stretched, not even bothering to disguise his yawn. "I'm Doi Nara." he adjusted his eyepatch. "I represent the Nara here today."

"I'm Sasuke Sarutobi. I'll be representing the Sarutobi clan." Sarutobi hadn't changed at all since she'd seen him last. He still had a thick, neatly trimmed beard, dark hair in a stylish topknot, and a natural casualness. The only different was the deep red kimono he had traded for the armor she had last seen him in.

The gruff man who hadn't stopped scowling since being effectively shut down held his head up until his nose was in the air. "I am Shimpachi Shimura and I represent the interests of the Shimura clan. I look forward to the argument you present to plead your case, kunoichi-san."

Sakura opened her mouth to give him a scathing retort when she felt a foot nudge hers underneath the table. At first, she suspected it to be Izuna, but it was Tobirama who caught her eye and gave her a discreet shake of his head. 'It's what he wants.' his eyes said.

Sakura silently conceded to his point. Shimura had heard her introduce herself, and yet he called
her kunoichi, to mock her. Rising to the bait was exactly what he was hoping she would do.

The small woman with the quiet, knowing air spoke in her soft, clear voice. "I am Ayeka Aburame. I represent the Aburame clan." Sakura noticed with some anger the look of disdain Shimura sent her, but the Aburame only tilted her head in polite greeting.

Last was Tobirama, also looking much different than normal in a teal kimono and deep blue haori. His white hair was free of his happuri, leaving it to fall across his forehead. "I am Tobirama Senju. I, along with my brother, am here to represent the Senju today. I believe we are all clear on the matter of the academy being proposed, and what this means as the next step toward creating unity within the village among the next generation. Of course, not everyone is in agreement on how this should be done. We will each be given time to state our opinions, and explain them."

He looked at Shimura blankly. "Shimura, why don't we get your drivel out of the way first?"

Shimura's face immediately reddened, and Sakura heard the Hokage sputter on a cough beside her. He was an interesting mixture of appalled and shocked by his brother's words.

Sakura did her best not to laugh at Shimura's anger. Who knew there would be something on which she and Tobirama could agree?
Enlightenment

Chapter Summary

Sakura faces strong opposition, but refuses to back down, earning her the Hokage's admiration. Later, a talk with Mizuchi leaves more questions than answers.

Shimura took a minute to compose himself, clearing his throat as he eyed Tobirama sharply. "I thought this was meant to be an open discussion in which we were all free to express our concerns. If mine are not to be taken into consideration, then perhaps the Shimura—" He made to stand, and Tobirama settled back in his seat, calling the bluff. Hashirama, predictably, fell for it.

"No Shimura-san, please stay. My brother is blunt—too blunt—but he didn't mean any disrespect..." Hashirama tried to make eye contact, silently pleading for him to offer some sort of apology. Tobirama turned away stubbornly. Shimura was wasting everyone's time. He refused to offer an apology for making his impatience known. "We would all be happy to let you speak..." Shimura considered the words and sat back down once again.

Clearing his throat, his eyes drifted around the room, landing squarely on Haruno. "As I was saying, it seems quite reckless to place civilian children in that environment. Quite idealistic that those of any background can become shinobi. But I am a realist."

"Shimura, if you don't mind me asking, where exactly are your concerns coming from?" Madara sighed. "Who are they for?"

"For the village, of course." Shimura retorted, looking indignant that anyone could think otherwise. "In the interest of seeing it prosper, I simply don't see allowing anyone who has a strong desire to become shinobi. That seems like a setup for disaster, inevitably. Our kunoichi friend," he gestured to Sakura, "perhaps is one of the few fortunate ones to survive this long, but most children not accustomed to the life of a ninja would have a hard time adapting. Would it not be cruel to let them think they could withstand it, only to see them cut down in their youth? Better to never put the idea in their heads. They can be perfectly satisfied as bakers and blacksmiths, can they not?"

"Shimura-san may have a bit of a point..." Chouto rubbed his chin. "While I'm not adverse to the idea of those without shinobi lineage being allowed to train, it's true that through generations of conditioning, the chakra coils of shinobi have become stronger and larger in comparison to a civilian-born counterpart. That's not to say that there isn't possible talent there."

"Exactly!" Tobirama watched as Haruno seized on the opportunity to take the floor. "When I started training, my chakra coil was nothing impressive. I wasn't physically very strong, either. I had perfect chakra control, but that was because I wasn't working with a large source of it. But I found a mentor willing to take me on, and I learned to play to my strengths. Maybe the conditions of being born civilian sound like an unsurmountable disadvantage to all of you, but it doesn't have to be. Someone like me is bound to have their own hidden strengths." She looked around the table, meeting eyes with all of them. "I think...I think it's impossible to say that you care about the future of the village, if you don't care about the futures of all of its villagers. The civilian child that's not allowed to enter the academy...might be the one who could have become the next Hokage!"

Remembering herself, she turned to Hashirama with a shy smile. "Not that there's anything wrong
with the current Hokage."

Hashirama waved his hand for her to continue.

"What I'm saying is, why place limits on a child? The academy curriculum, if it does its job, should naturally weed out anyone who doesn't feel inclined for shinobi life, or who isn't ready."

The clan heads began to murmur amongst themselves, Shimura sneering at them, disgruntled. "Touching," he spat, "but without anyone to back your claims—"

"I can attest to it!" Sarutobi interjected. "I was on a mission with Sakura not so long ago. She infiltrated the Kaguya stronghold and reigned hell down on them. I'm sure everyone here is aware of the Kaguya clan's reputation."

Shimura looked grudgingly impressed. "The Kaguya clan, you say? What were the specifications of the mission? How can we be truly sure that—"

"My daughter told me about that," Doi Nara confirmed. "She also said you figured out how to help her manage her condition...pretty quick thinking on your part."

Sakura looked away bashfully. "It was a simple solution in the end."

"For what it's worth, Shimura, Haruno did in fact take part in the mission to retrieve my fan." Madara added almost casually. "Handling the gunbai and fending off the Kaguya isn't a task suitable for a shinobi who doesn't have at least passable skills. Even you would admit that much."

Tobirama knew Madara and his pride well enough to understand that acknowledgement was not something he handed out lightly. Sakura recognized it as well, staring at the Uchiha in puzzlement, as if she didn't trust her own ears.

"Be that as it may, while I don't quite believe in luck, circumstances may sometimes permit unlikely things to happen. Such as surviving an encounter with the Kaguya with minimal skills."

Again, Shimura callously dismissed the possibility of Haruno's strength, and Tobirama recognized the temper he had become accustomed to build. Her eyes were an open window to her emotions, which was less than desirable for a shinobi, but convenient in the particular situation, where he found himself yet again giving her a stern look as one of her hands clenched the table, causing a faint mark. Her irritation redirected at him, the one who continued to give her nonverbal warnings to hold back.

'It isn't my fault,' he thought to say, 'That you don't have the temperament for diplomatic situations with the likes of Shimura.' Although, silently he would also agree that the man was grating at his own nerves. A healthy dose of skepticism, Tobirama was perfectly inclined to understand, but now Shimura seemed to be questioning decent logic in spite of himself, if only to spite Haruno.

"What if I could also vouch for Sakura-san's strength, Shimura-san?" Hashirama spoke up.

"Lord Hokage, with all respect, you are a man of fairness. It's why I felt comfortable pledging the Shimura to this village in the first place." Shimura said carefully. "But a woman's pretty words can be compelling...they offer the right...incentive...who is to say you wouldn't testify to something you haven't witnessed?"

The room grew silent. All conversation of the academy had almost become nonexistent in the last few minutes, but everyone was well aware that Shimura had crossed a line, bringing into question not only Hashirama's credibility, but also honesty, not to mention Haruno's virtue.
"Are you suggesting to her face that Sakura-san is immoral enough to seduce the Hokage to further her own agenda?" Izuna asked, his voice low.

"Forgive me if I misspoke, Izuna-san, I only meant—"

"Everyone here is aware of what you meant, Shimura." Madara cut in. "You forget your place."

Hashirama, his cheeks washed in red and no doubt humiliated, attempted to remain on higher ground, and offer Shimura an out he didn't deserve. "Ah…we should take a small intermission and allow ourselves time to…Sakura-san, are you alright?"

The kunoichi was doubled over and shaking, clutching herself tightly as if she was in physical pain. Everyone's eyes curiously settled on her.

"No," she bit out. She lifted her head, and her green eyes had turned such a dark, turbulent shade, it was electrifying. For the first time since the meeting had begun, Tobirama saw a glimpse of the fierce, stubborn girl that refused to yield in their spar behind the elegant wrapping of a polished, poised woman. When she had entered the room, the loathsome Uchiha at her side, he had discreetly stared longer than he would ever admit.

Undeniably, she had done a decent job of polishing herself to a shine. But even as he looked at her red-painted lips and the formal kimono, he saw the sharp-tongued, heavy hitting pink-haired Sakura Haruno, more than the delicately groomed one. Something he preferred more than all the elegance. That was the side that had finally made an appearance.

When she stared across the table, her gaze was hard and biting. Tobirama watched on keenly as she leveled the brunt of her anger at Shimura. "I don't care what insults you use to describe me…you're not the first person to think I'm weak and you won't be the last…but," her jaw clenched. "You should speak to the Hokage with more respect."

"Agreed." came the quiet voice of Ayeka Aburame. "Shimura-san, you have toed the line the entirety of this assembly, but now it seems you've more than crossed it."

Shimura shifted, his eyes darting around the room. The other clan heads gave him pressing looks, and Tobirama enjoyed the discomfort it clearly brought him. He was a fool in over his head to speak so freely.

He scolded Hashirama often, but he never once doubted his commitment to the village, a dream he had been nurturing since childhood. For anyone to suggest that his brother would be stupid enough to jeopardize the hard work they had achieved—were achieving—for the temptation of a woman, didn't understand him at all. "What now, Shimura?" Tobirama asked, "You seem to have misplaced your bluster. Perhaps you aren't done discovering new ways in which to question the integrity of everyone here."

Shimura understood that he had no allies in that moment. Tobirama could see it as he refused to meet anyone's eyes. "My apologies, Lord Hokage."

Hashirama gave a silent nod.

"You know, I have to say I think a small intermission would clear the air." Madara intoned, standing. The clan heads looked amongst themselves, standing too. "Izuna, if you would?"

Izuna rose, smiling pleasantly. "If you'd all like to follow me to the courtyard for some fresh air, you're welcome to."
Haruno made to follow them, purposely avoiding Shimura as she carefully got to her feet.

Tobirama shared a wary look with Madara as he passed by. He didn't particularly want to join the others in the courtyard. Instead, he would stand by the door and wait for the meeting to resume. That would give him the time he needed to think of counterarguments. The others could tip either way, truthfully. He knew Sarutobi was as good as convinced, but it was harder to read Nara and Aburame. Akamichi seemed to have doubts, and Shimura was, of course, the biggest detractor and would likely remain so the entirety of the meeting.

As he mulled how best to convince each individual over in his head, he noticed Hashirama place a hand on Haruno's shoulder as she made to go with the others, motioning for her to follow him in the opposite direction. Izuna nor the clan heads seemed to pay much attention as they kept going straight while Hashirama and Haruno veered down a hall to the left. Tobirama glared. He couldn't imagine what his brother was up to. Shimura had just implied there was something between them that would influence Hashirama's decision, and this would only look more incriminating.

Deciding it was up to him to keep his brother from sabotaging himself, Tobirama followed, stealthy and silent, chakra suppressed as he soundlessly scaled the fusuma and settled above their heads in the wagoya. Their voices were low in the empty hall, as they both began talking at the same time, pausing in shared embarrassment, until Hashirama prompted her to speak first.

"I know what you're going to say," Haruno began. "And you're right."

"About?" Hashirama pressed.

"My behavior back there. I let Shimura get to me, and it probably didn't help the case. I'm sorry." she bowed shortly.

Sighing, Hashirama touched her shoulder, and she lifted her head. "Sakura-san, I actually wanted to apologize. For Shimura's words. They were uncalled for, and after this I plan to speak with him privately. You…You're a respectable woman, you shouldn't be demeaned—"

"Wait," Sakura held up her hands, and Hashirama stopped speaking instantly. "Are you offended on my behalf?"

Hashirama considered her question, slowly nodding. "Yes…I am. You were offended on mine, weren't you?"

"That's different," Haruno defended, "You're the Hokage. He didn't have any right to attack you just because he was arguing with me."

Tobirama knew his brother well enough to anticipate that he wouldn't accept such an answer. Just as expected, Hashirama's face plainly expressed his displeasure at the notion. "Why am I owed more respect than you, because of a title?"

She didn't respond right away, her eyes studied the knots in the hardwood floors instead. "It's just…" Haruno fidgeted with the length of her sleeve. "You earned it—the title and the respect. Without you and the other Founders, Konoha wouldn't be…Konoha."

Hashirama looked at her thoughtfully. "More than me, or Madara, or Tobirama sharing a dream, the village became a reality because others believed in it. Others were willing to take a risk in following us. Including you, Sakura-san. Everyone in the village is a pillar who raises it up, from the smallest child…to the Hokage. We may have different jobs, but in my eyes one title isn't worth any more respect than the next one."
The hidden shinobi could almost see Haruno's eyes shining as she absorbed Hashirama's words.

"Was that a poor choice of words?" Hashirama started to fret. "I can think of another example." He cleared his throat grandly, "We're all the roots that give life to the mighty tree."

Haruno's mouth fell open quietly.

"Ah…I'm sorry. I've been told I have a habit of relating everything back to plants in some way. I can think of another exam—"

Tobirama hung his head. Couldn't the idiot see that she was moved by his speech the first time?

Sakura's sincere laughter seemed to catch Hashirama off guard. "It wasn't meant to be a joke."

"I know," she affirmed. "I know. But, I was just thinking, you remind me a little of someone. And you're right, we've all got our part to play. Instead of feeling sorry for myself, I need to go back in there and show Shimura all the reasons why he shouldn't underestimate civilian born shinobi."

Haruno's eyes fell to her kimono. "That's what I'd like to say, but this kimono is a little hard to actually maneuver in. So I'll settle for explaining why I'm right for now."

"That's the spirit," encouraged Hashirama.

"They should be coming back inside by now, right?" Haruno asked, canting her head. "We should get back."

"After you," Hashirama motioned politely and she slowly made her way past, using the fusuma for balance. Tobirama crouched lower in his spot on the wagoya, willing her not to look up.

"You might wanna go around me," Sakura suggested. "I'm still really slow in this."

It was Hashirama's turn to give a good-natured laugh. "Here, I can help," he offered his arm, and Sakura stared at it in momentary shock, before accepting shyly. There was such an easy candidness to their interactions, he felt like an intruder.

His brother patiently guided her down the hall, their chatter amicable as they turned the corner. Tobirama waited, giving them time to make it back to the room. He was preparing himself to descend to the floor, but the dark, malignant chakra signature coming his way had him tensing instead. He glared through red, slitted eyes as Madara walked by, almost rounding the corner before stopping.

"It's rude for you to lurk there." Not one to back away from the likes of Madara, Tobirama dropped to the floor with a quiet thunk. The Uchiha turned fully, the same intense look of dislike that mirrored his own contorting his face.

One thing that could always be said for their relationship was that neither man bothered to hide his distrust for the other. Without Hashirama serving as the link between them, Tobirama suspected the Uchiha and the Senju would still be doing battle.

Madara gave him a weighing glance, folding his arms. "Am I under suspicion in my own home now?"

"You are under suspicion everywhere you go." Tobirama spat.

One side of Madara's mouth lifted in a smirk. "You, like Shimura, also forget your place. Within these walls, I have the upper-hand. Always." The Uchiha leaned into his personal space, his visible
eye flickering threateningly into the red of the Sharingan. "So maybe it's you who should be more
careful about coming across suspiciously."

Leveling Madara with one last withering glare, Tobirama moved around him, fully intending on
returning to the meeting room. The clan heads would be coming back from the break soon enough.

"A tactical retreat?" Madara contemplated, "How unusually gracious of you. Or is it simply that
you consider your reconnaissance accomplished?"

"I don't know what you're implying," Tobirama retorted, refusing to stop walking. Madara's
footfalls behind him told him he wouldn't be getting away from the conversation easily.

"I doubt that," Madara continued. "Who is it that you mistrust more? Haruno or Hashirama?"

Tobirama hovered just outside the door of the meeting room, drawing his shoulders back. "Being
in the Uchiha compound has you feeling emboldened."

"If it's not mistrust, then why listen to a conversation not meant for your ears?"

"I owe you no explanations." Tobirama entered the room, closing the door on the conversation.

After speaking with the Hokage, Sakura was invigorated with a new sense of purpose, more
determined than ever to prove Shimura wrong.

When the clan heads reentered the room and took their seats, she sat straight and looked her
adversary directly in the eyes. He returned the stare, albeit uncomfortably.

"Now that we've all had time to take a minute and process the arguments that have been brought up
so far, let's get back to it," Izuna declared. "Doi-san, we haven't heard from you, yet."

The Nara's eye drifted to Izuna and he looked like he had swallowed something unpleasant. "Me?
I'm not much for grandiose speeches, you see. So I've just been listening to all the others talk. But
if you'd really like to hear what I have to say, well, I'll start by telling you that my ancestors were
simple folks. They were nomadic and lived off their deer herds. Stumbling into becoming shinobi
as an occupation was coincidental, more or less. So I can't really say if it's right or wrong civilians
get to become shinobi, but at the heart of it all, the Nara didn't start out much differently."

"And you, Ayeka-san? Chouto?" Hashirama prompted.

"In our clan we do not underestimate opponents, regardless of lineage or appearance." Ayeka
explained.

"You know, what Doi says is true. Not all of us here come from strictly shinobi lineages. That's
something we should try to remember," acknowledged Chouto.

"That leaves you, Shimura-san," Sakura took some comfort in how he looked properly chastised
after entering the room. She wondered if anyone had lambasted him over his remarks while they
were gone. "Even if you don't think shinobi life is a job for civilians and don't want anything to do
with the academy, I just want you to know that I'm going to keep fighting to prove you wrong."

"Is that so?" Shimura harrumphed, steepling his hands on the table and leaning back, raising his
chin. "Nothing you said today has convinced me of anything other than the fact that you're a short-
tempered, brash woman who has a great deal of naiveté to spare."
"Then if you don't mind me saying so," Sakura grinned evenly. "You're a dangerously narrow-minded traditionalist who doesn't understand that the world keeps changing, whether you're on board or not."

"She makes a point, Shimura," Izuna added. "Now is the moment where you make your choice. Not allowing children from the Shimura clan to attend is up to you, but, the children who do enter the academy are bound to keep advancing as they learn new things from peers and different instructors that they wouldn't be able to in their clans. In under a generation, the Shimura's fresh blood will be at a disadvantage."

Shinpachi Shimura ground his teeth, dark eyes flashing angrily. Izuna's words had struck something, a sense of pride, maybe.

"Let's put it to a vote," Madara suggested. "All those in favor of civilian entry into the academy?"

Resounding "ayes" from Nara, Aburame, Akamichi and Sarutobi made Sakura's heart soar. The Hokage happily raised his own hand, echoing their "ayes" with his own. Tobirama and Izuna and even Madara lifted their arms as well. Sakura gladly joined them. Only Shimura remained sour-faced, arms stubbornly crossed.

"Are you sure about this, Shinpachi?" Sarutobi questioned.

"You're asking me to choose to allow my son and the other Shimura children to learn with civilians!" he seethed, "Yet you dare to suggest that by not doing so, the Shimura will be left behind?"

"So what is your answer?" Tobirama asked. "You're holding things up."

"I…" Shimura stared venomously at Sakura from across the table. "I do not consent to civilian entry, but I see I am outvoted, so yes, the Shimura will participate in the academy project." Sakura bit her lip, to keep from shouting triumphantly. While it didn't matter to her whether or not the Shimura clan were at the academy, she knew it meant a lot to Hashirama for everyone to participate. And, Shimura was cornered. That alone made her day.

"There we have it then," Hashirama announced. "We can proceed with the academy's construction, and entry will be open to everyone, civilian and clan heirs alike."

A week went by, and preparations were going smoothly. Hashirama lovingly pruned Bukkai, thinking that he should really be thanking Sakura.

He believed her presence had been instrumental to convince the others. Shinpachi was, and would likely remain unsatisfied, but even if everyone's heart hadn't been swayed, it was a start.

"You're really coming into your own." he told the plant. "Your petals are opening up more," Tobirama would never believe him, but the Hokage thought that the bonsai soaked up the praise and grew stronger.

There was something so tranquil about nurturing life, watching it reach its fullest potential. When he stood back from his desk and gazed at the bonsai's strong trunk and healthy leaves, it filled him with more than a little pride. Though he never considered himself one to boast, his green thumb at times impressed even himself! "There, now you brighten up the whole room!"

"This again?" Hashirama, fully expecting the arrival of his brother, turned to see Tobirama entering the office.
"Stop staring at Bukkai like that," he scolded.

"I know you get preoccupied about engagements when it comes to that bonsai, but if this continues to be a distraction, it can't stay in the office with you."

"You wouldn't," Hashirama moved protectively between Bukkai and his brother.

"You and I both know I would." Hashirama did know. "Leave that alone and come with me, or we'll be late."

Hashirama tilted his head back. Late…? Well it sounded vaguely like Tobirama was saying they had somewhere to be, and he'd forgotten.

"You can't honestly mean to tell me you've already forgotten?" his brother reprimanded, "You agreed to take a tour of the Nara Forest today."

Hashirama's eyes lit up and he felt excitement coursing through his veins. "You're right! Doi did say they'd been working on an interesting technique with the trees there."

"It only takes one mention of trees and it all comes back…" Tobirama complained under his breath.

Hashirama ignored him, rushing to place his red headband around his forehead and put the prune sheers aside. A quick straightening of his robes and he strolled by Tobirama, ready to go.

"Well, as guests, it'd be rude to keep the tre—the Nara waiting!"

"You're skipping," his brother shook his head, catching up with him.

"No, I'm not," Hashirama wouldn't have been surprised if he was, but the horticulturist in him was too eager to care.

Sakura answered the front door, only to nearly trip over the prone body face down in the dirt. She bit back a gasp as she noticed the familiar Nara crest on the back of suspicious 'corpse'.

"You're kidding…" she dragged the body inside by the legs with a grunt, flipping it over to reveal the slumbering face of Shikamarin Nara, who had apparently fallen asleep mid-knock. It had been a while since she'd seen the Nara, but the last time was fresh in her mind, and Sakura plucked an apple from a bowl on her table up and crouched beside her, pressing it to her lips. "Bite this."

Shikamarin was unresponsive, so Sakura pried her mouth open and lifted her up, moving her jaw until she heard the crunch of the apple's flesh being pierced. That was all it took before she began to chew and her gray eyes fluttered open. As before, Shikamarin quickly took the apple, eating away, as if there was nothing peculiar about coming to on someone's floor with an apple to her mouth.

"Long time no see," she greeted between bites.

"Uh, yeah..." Sakura rubbed at the back of her neck. "I'm going to have to make you some pills or something...you can't show up and fall asleep on just anyone's doorstep."

"I didn't," Shikamarin munched, juice dribbling down her chin. "I woke up on yours. Thanks for the apple."

"Nooo problem," Sakura stood wearily, but the other girl didn't even bother to try. Eating had become her top priority. "So, did you come by for a reason?" the rose-haired kunoichi stepped
around the Nara and closed her front door. When she turned around, she noticed Usamaro had come slinking out of hiding and was pawing at Shikamarin's hand.

"Thought you'd wanna come for a walk with me in the Nara Forest."

Sakura did a double take. "The Nara Forest? Really?" She had never been, but Tsunade had mentioned on more than one occasion that the antlers from the Nara clan's deer were some of the best for medicine. Top quality, she claimed.

"Mhm...I understand if you wouldn't be interested, but Pops was impressed the other day in the meeting, and my mom says I owe you one for the mission."

"I'd love to come!" Sakura exclaimed, almost bouncing on her heels.

"Alright then..." Shikamarin stood, brushing the front of her skirt off. "We can go now, if you want. Pops has some big creation he's been raving about for days. Wants to show it to the Hokage."

The two girls stepped out into the streets.

"When you say he's been raving about a creation, what do you mean?" Sakura couldn't help asking. The scholar in her was intrigued. She wondered if it had something to do with the deer, or maybe a new jutsu. 'It's more likely to be the former though, right? The Nara are way too smart and too unmotivated to show off clan secrets.'

Shikamarin didn't particularly seem to share her excitement. "It's got something to do with trees and chakra...that's all I really know. Eh, when Pops gets like this it goes in one ear, out the other," she folded her arms behind her head. "You know how it is."

"No I don't!" Sakura muttered. "Don't new discoveries, I don't know, excite you? Even a little bit?"

Shikamarin gave her what she guessed passed for an incredulous expression. "Discoveries? No. Unless it's got something to do with food...I find discovering new things to eat pretty interesting."

'It almost seems like...she was born in the wrong family, now that I think about it.' Sakura kept the thought to herself, as two running children squeezed past them. "By the way, did your dad say anything about the academy? I mean, we're both too old to attend, but do you think that's exciting?"

Shikamarin yawned loudly. "Thinking about lessons makes me sort of tired, you know? It took me a while to learn any of our clan techniques when I was younger, because listening to my parents explain put me to sleep."

'It's sleeping or it's eating with her...I should try to help her find new hobbies. Right now, she'd be a good candidate to be adopted by a family of sloths.'

... 

Sure enough, Doi Nara, the Hokage, and Tobirama Senju were waiting for them at the gates to the Nara Forest. "Good morning," Sakura waved.

"Welcome, young lady." Doi returned, scratching at the rough stubble on his cheek. "I trust my daughter didn't give you any trouble?"

"No, she was-"
"Lay off, Pops." Shikamarin warned languidly.

Doi pulled at one of her pigtails playfully, opening his arms grandly. "You're right on time to join our little tour." Doi nodded at the Hokage. Hashirama was looking up at the gates of the forest with shining eyes, while Tobirama remained cool and unaffected.

"Thank you for having us, Doi." Hashirama looked around as the gates swung open, everyone walking forward together.

"It only seemed right that you and Lord Tobirama be the first to see the properties these trees have." Doi explained as they walked. "I think Lord Tobirama especially will find them interesting."

Sakura noticed Tobirama had been glancing around, hands in his pant pockets, but instantly refocused his attention on Doi. "How so?"

Doi stopped walking, patting the bark of a particularly large, gnarled tree with patches of bark missing sporadically. Doi reached into a pouch at his waist, and Sakura almost thought he'd pull out a weapon. Instead, he pulled out small, thin slips of paper and handed one to each of them. "Recently, we found out the bark of some trees here are malleable to chakra. Concentrating chakra into them can reveal one's chakra nature."

Curiously, Sakura applied a small amount of chakra, watching as the paper crumbled into dirt in her hand before reforming and then instantly becoming a soggy mess in her hands.

Hashirama laughed behind her, and Sakura watched in awe to see his paper go through a total of five chakra nature transformations, Tobirama's doing the same.

Shikamarin's split neatly down the middle. "Huh. Futon..." she mused. "Fitting. It reminds me of napping."

Sakura sighed fondly. "Of course..."

"So I have Doton and Suit-hey!" Tobirama had snatched the paper from her hands, studying it. "Heh..."

"What's so funny?" she snapped.

"I understand Doton, but I would have imagined your second nature would be Katon."

"Why's that?" she asked, forgetting her annoyance.

"The temper of a Katon-user." Tobirama said simply.

"There's nothing wrong with being assertive," she defended, placing her hands on her hips. "Or passionate." she added.

"Are you denying being short-tempered?" Tobirama smirked.

"Actually, brother," Hashirama hummed, popping up between them and throwing an arm around each of their shoulders, "You're the one with the Katon nature, and you have to admit that you've got a temper yourself..."

Tobirama shrugged off his brother's arm. "This isn't about me."

"I think it's fortuitous!" Hashirama chirped. "You know, maybe you and Sakura-san could practice
Sakura coughed, choking on her own saliva. It would be woefully embarrassing for either of the Senju brothers to learn she didn't currently have a single Suiton technique in her arsenal.

"Don't make plans for me," Tobirama hissed.

"I wouldn't want to impose..." Sakura shrugged.

"You wouldn't be...there's not a single person aside from myself or Toka he can get to try going toe to toe with him in Suiton, and I think he's gotten bored with the both of us lately." Hashirama squeezed her shoulder. "Which is where you'd come in. What do you say?"

"I...I..."

"Ah," Doi clicked his tongue several times. "It looks like we've got company." Sakura was never more relieved to see a spindly-legged fawn appear from the treeline, curiously venturing closer and closer. Its mother wasn't far behind, keeping a close eye on her offspring.

"How sweet," Hashirama crouched, unconcerned that his robes hung in the dirt as he held his arm outstretched toward the fawn.

Sakura, Tobirama and Shikamarin watched the fawn look at him, scenting the air quietly before creeping forward. The mother deer made a beeline to Doi, and he rubbed her head affectionately.

The fawn bumped its nose against Hashirama's fingers several times. When it leaned its head toward his palm, Sakura could almost feel the Hokage's elation. He proceeded to rub one of its ears. Sakura didn't have extensive knowledge of deer, but she could tell it was young judging by the white spots on its back. Its fluffy tail twitched and it stumbled back, its nose falling to the dirt before it began nosing at Hashirama's robes.

"Hm?" Hashirama laughed as the fawn circled him, nudging his leg expectantly. "Are you trying to play, little one?"

"Usually, they do that when they're hungry...or smell food. I don't suppose you've got any treats on you?" Doi joked.

"Treats?" Hashirama patted himself down. "You know, maybe she's after these?" He produced a handful of berries and the young fawn leapt around before trying to take them from his hand.

"Why are you carrying those around?" Sakura asked.

"Well, I've been growing a small bayberry shrub and it finally bore fruit." Hashirama offered the berries to the fawn, and it took them right away. "I sometimes grow things I can snack on," he admitted.

"That's well and good," Shikamarin drawled, "But I hope you've got enough for all of them too, Lord Hokage."

Sakura gaped as more deer began making their way from behind trees. It had gone from the fawn and its mother, to a gathering of at least fifteen within minutes.

Doi rubbed at his whiskers. "Hmm...how odd. They must really want to greet our guests."

"En masse?" Shikamarin scoffed. "Come on Pops, they came to eat the Hokage. That's pretty
obvious."

Doi thumped the back of her head. "Don't be stupid."

Tobirama seemed to be oblivious to his brother's plight as he studied the bark samples intently. Sakura watched him take out a concealed kunai and collect several more, murmuring to himself. "I could use these to layer...that would stabilize..."

"Uh," Sakura tapped his arm. "Shouldn't you be concerned about...whatever's happening?"

Tobirama followed her eyes. A large stag, at least sixteen points, had trotted forward and was pawing the ground aggressively.

"If my brother isn't capable of defending himself against herbivorous creatures, maybe the village deserves a better leader." He dropped his head and continued to exam the thin slits of bark in his hands.

"That's a good point, but..."

"Easy boy, easy..." Doi was approaching the stag, arms raised as it continued unperturbed toward Hashirama. The Hokage was attempting to offer it berries as a peace offering, grinning uncertainly.

The deer sniffed at his hand, tasting one of the berries, and Sakura heard the Hokage expel a sigh of relief. "See there?" he patted the buck's neck. "I knew we could be frie-" In one fluid motion it had jammed his head into Hashirama's abdomen and used its thick neck to flip him. Sakura watched the Hokage hanging pitifully across the stag's back as it trotted off, the rest of the herd following.

"I guess...we're friends..." Hashirama wheezed as he was carried off.

Sakura couldn't believe her eyes. "H-He's being taken away!" she cried.

"I've never seen anything like that...deer taking enough of an interest in a person to want to keep them. Huh. Learn something new everyday I guess." Doi thought aloud.

"Shouldn't you be more concerned than impressed? The Hokage was kidnapped by deer."

"I told you they were out for blood," Shikamarin nodded. "But once they realize he isn't actually made of plant matter, I'm sure they'll lose interest."

"It's his own fault, really." Tobirama agreed absently. "Doi, I'd like to get samples from a few different tree species that have these properties and see which one is most resistant."

"Help yourself."

Sakura felt almost guilty that no one was too bothered about the Hokage's fate. 'Well...he is considered a God of Shinobi for a reason. They're probably all right. Deer don't eat meat, and he can get away whenever he wants.'

"Haruno," Sakura was surprised as Tobirama cleared his throat.

"H-Huh?"

"Starting tomorrow, we will meet for Suiton training."

Sakura nodded. "Sure, I'm not doing much tomorrow, so...wait, what?"
"You heard me." his red eyes narrowed impatiently. "Suiton. Tomorrow. I'd like a rematch eventually, but I know the way things stand now, you wouldn't be able to go against me in ninjutsu, otherwise you wouldn't have relied so heavily on taijutsu in our last spar."

'He's right...but when he says it like that it still pisses me off.' she pouted.

"I want our next all out spar to be on fair footing. If I don't hold back, then you shouldn't either."

'Is this his weird way of saying he thinks I have potential to be his equal?" A-Alright...if you're serious, then I'll take you up on it."

"A wise choice." Tobirama put all the bark he'd collected into his yukata and wandered off toward the next tree, back into his analysis.

Shikamarin patted her arm. "You got yourself a really strong teacher. Nice. I wish..." she sighed. "I wish I could lay down, actually..." she rubbed at her eyes.

"You spend too much time laying down as it is." Doi commented. "You know...maybe I really should go and check on Lord Hokage. Shika, you're with me."

The two Nara walked off. Doi did most of the walking, dragging his daughter away by the collar as they ventured deeper into the woods.

Sakura scratched at her head. She could see Tobirama from a distance, scraping bark samples off another tree. "This has been...a really bizarre day." she told herself.

Knowing what she planned to do after leaving the Nara Forest, she had a feeling it was only bound to get stranger. She had questions for a certain goddess that still needed answering, and it was about time to make another call.

Mizuchi examined the bowl of figs that had been brought to her. Fresh picked from a tree in the gardens, brought to her by one of the many adoring followers she had gained as of late.

Mortals...

Such strange, whimsical creatures. Not quite as whimsical as herself, but sometimes they still managed to surprise her.

When given the chance at freedom, they chose a new form of subjugation. Calling her their savior and pledging to worship her, they went as far as erecting a temple of worship in the ruins of the Kaguya. Over the bones of their captors, they rebuilt everything she had burned down, and chose to remain in that settlement. They plodded around dutifully, like ants foraging and bringing spoils back to their queen. Mizuchi was no queen. She was a goddess. But they treated her like royalty all the same, and whenever she would breeze through to check on what had become of those she liberated, fanfare greeted her.

The humans would hold out their babies, hoping she would touch and bless them. Those infants carrying Kaguya blood, whose mothers neither wanted nor accepted them, she would allow to go peacefully in sleep.

They would call her the "Dragon Savior", and offer her fresh-picked fruit and grand meals, or burn incense for her. Mizuchi sat on the throne that had once been Yoshiro Kaguya's and contemplated it all.
A goddess' natural lifespan lasted longer than eternity. In comparison, the lives of mortals were as feeble as candles in the wind. Mizuchi had seen many a man be born and die, his descendants populating the earth, and then one day dying too. The monotony of the cycle amused her less and less as countless centuries passed, locked away in her prison. She watched foolish mortals stray down the same pointless paths and repeat the same pointless mistakes. In particular, she watched Kaguya's descendants.

Imprisonment meant she had plenty of time for that. It began with her sons; one of them had two sons of his own. It was interesting, how much their ideologies grew to differ. Mizuchi supposed she shouldn't have found herself perplexed when Indra and Ashura died, and, their chakra lived on. In the bodies of Madara and Hashirama. A meeting by chance had spawned into a friendship, a bittersweet rivalry, and then what? Ruin. Ruin for them and for the world. Men, Mizuchi ruminated, so predictable.

Time passed, so very much time, and yet, just a pinprick of her everlasting life. One minute she would close her eyes to rest in boredom. When she opened them again, the world was different. Different, but plagued with the same problems. She couldn't imagine what her brethren in the heavens were doing. They seemed content to watch humanity destroy itself every generation and rebuild as best they could. Maybe they found it dull, as she did.

Kaguya populating the earth had far reaching consequences not even she had imagined. So many of those responsible for the world's problems—the one calling themselves shinobi—were her descendants. Not all though.

Just as she lifted the fig to her lips, biting into its skin, Sakura summoned her. The distinct feeling of urgency flowed into her through the link, and she rose. Mizuchi looped her arm through the air and a portal popped into existence, blinking at her with a reptilian eye that mirrored her own.

Two of her followers had pushed open the door to the Receiving Room, as it had been renamed, only to see her stepping through the eye. They froze, the length of silk held between them trailing the ground and their smiles dropping. It was devilishly fun to see the reactions humans had to her fastest mode of transport.

"Lady Dragon, are you leaving already?" one asked as soon as she recovered her voice.

"Yes," she smiled. "As always, I was pleased by your offerings." Their faces flushed and they slipped into bows.

"Safe return!" The farewell echoed in her ears as she slid completely through the eye, instantly appearing before a pacing Sakura, in the forest that bordered her village. For the sake of discretion, this was where her protégé always deemed fit to bring her.

"Sakura," she greeted.

The pink-haired girl barely looked up, her face pinched in thought. "We need to talk."

"Such directness. And here I thought you simply could use the company." The deity lifted the ends of her kimono and waded into the water of the river.

"I…I have questions. I've been doing everything you asked me to. Everything." The kunoichi turned pleading green eyes on her, and Mizuchi softened, but only just.

"Ask then, the questions you keep in your heart make your face drawn. It's unbecoming,"

Sakura sat heavily on the bank, kicking her feet anxiously. "My first question is about blighting.
You said that you can curse someone…but you can remove it too, right?"

"If I so choose, yes. What of it?"

"Did you…did you save a man named Izuna Uchiha?"

Some of the mirth fell away as she studied Sakura's countenance. "One Uchiha looks exactly like all the others. How should I know their names? Why should I be bothered to care, for that matter?"

"Mizuchi, please," she begged. "Did you?"

"I suppose I did pull a blight from one shortly before I placed you in this time. He was slipping so quickly, it was a wonder it worked at all." The goddess opened her hand, and a fish swimming downstream brushed her fingers. She briefly considered catching it, but let it continue on its way.

"So Izuna was supposed to die?" Sakura seemed to be letting that sink in. "Izuna…was supposed to die." She fisted a hand into the fabric near her chest. "It's not that I'm upset you saved him, but what about the consequences?"

"What about them?" Mizuchi challenged. "You're fond enough of the Uchiha,"

"I…I never said that!" Sakura tried unsuccessfully to hide her rosy cheeks.

"And you've lived in a world that bore the consequences of his premature death, whether you realized it or not."

"Consequences like…?" Sakura put a finger to her bottom lip and pushed at it. "Like him not getting to do something important?"

Mizuchi waved her hand. "I am a goddess, Sakura, I am not omnipotent. I myself cannot say if sparing his life will truly make the future brighter, but his death was the catalyst of Madara Uchiha's insanity."

Sakura froze. "It was?"

"Have you not seen how the loss of a family member is enough to radically change an Uchiha?"

Sakura thought of a young Sasuke when they entered the academy, and of older Sasuke, who could never give up on his goal of revenge.

"You're saying that maybe things might be different now? You saved Izuna…to save Madara?"

"Please," Mizuchi denied. "I am not that benevolent nor that optimistic. As I said, I cannot see the outcome of how events may change from here on out. I have found that descendants of my sister in particular seem resolute in seeking their own destruction. That was why it was imperative that you, someone with none of Kaguya's blood, complete this task."

Sakura looked at her slowly. "You said her name…" When the mortal met her eyes, there was… almost compassion there.

"What is your next question?" the goddess found herself uncharacteristically uncomfortable, being on the receiving end of such a pitying look.

Sakura rose, wading deeper into the river toward her. She stopped when the water touched her thighs, her lips drawn in concentration. "I know it's asking for a lot…but can you show me something like you did before when you," she winced. "when you killed the Kaguya. If you
showed me a memory, I think I'd understand better."

"You don't need to understand in order to obey."

"That's true…" Sakura scratched at her neck, lifting some of the hair that had escaped a loose bun. "But I feel like I've just been blindly listening, not really understanding. If I understood why you chose me, even just a little…it would answer so many questions!"

"You seek enlightenment…that is something I never promised you'd gain." Mizuchi frowned, considering. "Come closer," Sakura hesitantly waded even closer, until they were chest to chest. The mortal was correct that she had obeyed, and yet the deity kept her at arm's length, enshrouded herself in secrets. How soon was too soon?

For over a month, Sakura Haruno had been doing what she was told. A glimpse at the inner workings of her mind, might be an apt reward after all. "You might find, Sakura," she whispered, bringing her index finger closer and lightly tapping it to the Yin Seal, "That enlightenment is the last thing you truly want."

The girl's eyes dilated, pupils thinning until they rivaled her own. She swayed, falling backwards into the water with a splash.

Mizuchi had the water toss her back onto the riverbank before she could float away.

Sakura's blank eyes stared up at the tree line, her knuckles clenching the grass underneath her. Her mind had been transported deep into one of Mizuchi's memories.

The one she had picked was a simple but important one. The one that had decided her path.

Settling herself in the grass beside the girl's head, she stroked strands of pink hair back from her face, and concentrated on joining her inside the mindscape. The shift was minute, hardly discernable, but she knew immediately that the forest around them was no longer near Konoha. It was the long-destroyed forest in the Land of Ancestors.

Sakura groaned as she got to her feet. "Where'd all this fog come from?" she mumbled. "Mizuchi, where is this? These don't look like trees from the forest around Konoha."

"Astute as always," Mizuchi sighed. "You are correct. This is the Land of Ancestors, Sakura. A long destroyed region. You are in my memories," she gestured with a sweep of her hand to the kunai embedded in tree trunks and the grass that looked like it had been burnt in places. Sakura wandered forward, grimacing at the dark crimson patch of earth puddled on the ground.

"You may have guessed at the fact that this country was recently invaded. Not unlike the time in which you currently reside, this millennia faced constant skirmishes of all sizes."

The kunoichi glanced at a tree where a piece of cloth was still pinned there by a kunai, a blood splatter not very far down the bark. "No matter what time period it is, people always find ways to hurt each other." Sakura hastily rubbed at her eyes. "Is this what you wanted to show me?"

"Not at all." Mizuchi pushed at her shoulders. "Go forth, and you will get the enlightenment you came for."

Sakura whirled around clumsily as she gaped at Mizuchi. "You keep talking like I'm going to regret this. What's back there?"

The deity placed a finger against the mortal's lips. "Listen…"
In the silence, quiet cries permeated the air. Like a child attempting to muffle their sobs. Sakura heard them too, and the perplexed look wasn't lost on Mizuchi. The kunoichi turned and ran blindly into the fog of the memory, her escort easily following. When Sakura broke through the clearing, she stopped short, nearly tripping. A freshly erected wooden shrine with a small body curled in front of it caught her eyes. Try as she might, the child's body shook with the effort to contain her crying, her incoherent mutterings sounding reminiscent of "nee-san".

"It's a memorial shrine." Sakura guessed. "She's...she's in mourning."

Mizuchi watched on silently as the young girl continued to sob, calling out for a sister who wouldn't return.

"Why do you cry, human?"

The river deity closed her eyes and smiled bitterly. The accursed moment when she lost and gained everything.

The sobs coming from the child took several minutes to dissipate, but she slowly lifted her head in confusion. "Who...who said that?" she hiccuped. "Are you...are you a god?"

"After a fashion, yes."

"I...I don't want to talk to the gods!" Sakura was baffled as the small child placed both hands to her ears and cried louder.

"Humans...they cry for everything, don't they? I cannot imagine. So tell me, why do you cry?"

The little girl got to her knees, rubbing valiantly at her face. Sakura couldn't see her face, but the short white hair, parted jaggedly down the middle was vaguely familiar. "M-My nee-san is gone... She was a healer, but t-they sent her away to f-fight...and she...she's not coming back!"

Mizuchi knew Sakura's heart broke over the child, who had begun bawling in earnest again.

"You cry because her soul has ascended? ...That's a foolish reason. All of you die, in one way or another."

"I just want her back!" the girl wailed. "I want n-nee-san back!"

"Quiet!" barked the sterner voice. "Enough is enough. If her soul is gone then she will not come back!" The young girl continued to cry.

Sakura made to step closer to the scene, but Mizuchi placed a hand on her shoulder. "This is only a memory of events long passed. You cannot affect them even if you wanted to."

"Alright," the voice said after a beat. "Tell me why you cannot accept death as a permanent fixture in the lives of humans?"

The child turned for the first time, leaning her back against the shrine and raising her face from her hands. Sakura's breath hitched in her throat at the sight of large, pearlescent eyes. Tears dripped from her cheeks and between her fingers. Her white kimono showing dirt stains at the knees. "B-Because the gods took someone I loved away. T-They didn't care how much I miss her. The emperor...he says they needed her more, but I know he's wrong. I need her more! She was all I had..."

"...I see. Humans place so much value on things they know cannot last, and then break their hearts
when it is taken away. But...what if I were to grant you a sister once more?"

Her white eyes blinked rapidly. "You can do that? You can bring her back?"

"Me...? No. Souls that have left the mortal plane belong to the Shinigami." There was a flash of light from behind the shrine, brilliant and intense, like a dying star, and then, Sakura watched as what she could only describe as a prepubescent girl who looked startlingly like the graceful Mizuchi appeared.

"S-S-Sena?" The girl ran into her arms, hugging her tightly.

"I am not your sister. I only assumed her form." An unsure hand found the top of the girl's white head, and patted at it hesitantly.

"You really do look just like her," the sniffing girl confirmed. "Except your eyes...and your ears and...those things on your head."

The young deity touched a hand to her horns. She smiled gently as they disappeared. Her distinct eyes and ears, however, remained. "Tell me your name then."

"Kaguya." she replied shyly.

The deity crouched before Kaguya, and Sakura took a step back, looking at Mizuchi in bewilderment as her younger counterpart took a small Kaguya's hand.

"From now on, Kaguya, I will be your sister."

"W-what's your name?" Kaguya ventured.

"I...am called Mizuchi."

"Mizuchi..." Kaguya repeated. "I like it!" she pulled at the river goddess' hand. "I want us to go back to the village together. Y-You can stay with me, okay?"

"Absolutely." Mizuchi agreed.

Sakura and the adult goddess watched as the two wandered off together, hand in hand. The scene blurred and Mizuchi found herself staring back out across the river in Konoha's forest.

Sakura was coming to, and when her eyes regained their focus, she shot up and away, quickly falling again in her disorientation.

"You...you told me you were an Otsutsuki!" Sakura accused, pointing.

"I was..." Mizuchi sighed. "For a time, I assumed the form of Sena Otutsuki, and I lived at Kaguya's side, learning about humans."

"So you were a real goddess all along?" Sakura's face paled. She glanced at her wrist. "What is this? What is it really?" The human shook her arm around wildly.

"My essence." explained the deity, "Just a drop of it, but potent enough to make you formidable, as strong as the Uchiha and the Uzumaki you call friends. Not enough to make you immortal or invulnerable, of course."

"All this time...I've been your pet project, like Kaguya was? You're going to observe through me now?" Sakura whispered heatedly. "What was the point of anything I did? What's the point of me
being here at all?! Send me home!” Mizuchi’s eyes flashed, and her hand seized Sakura by the back of her neck, drawing her close until their eyes met and their noses touched.

"Sakura…” her breath hit the girl's lips, but she continued, "I have appreciated your obedience up until now. I understand that it would be hard for a willful girl like you to blindly follow. My interaction with Kaguya and the far-reaching consequences is my burden to bear and to cherish for eternity."

Sakura trembled, in fear or indignation, Mizuchi couldn't tell. "Why?” she asked helplessly.

"An explanation, a complete one, would take time." Mizuchi released the back of her neck, finger by finger, stepping away in an attempt to compose herself. "You have just witnessed more of my secrets than anyone has in millennia. For now, let that be enough."

There was no doubt in her mind as she disappeared, leaving the girl there to flail for answers, that her stubborn progeny's mind wouldn't settle for that. Sakura would demand to know more. And in time, maybe it would make sense. In the meantime, she didn't have time for a quarrel. What she needed was an obedient Godslayer, and soon.
Sakura filled her lungs with oxygen, rearing back to release a stream of water from her mouth. Compared to the one she had narrowly missed being hit with, her jutsu was nothing special. But, progress was being made. Not enough for her cranky sparring partner. His hands flashed through three seals and a wall of water rose to defend him, tendrils of liquid shooting out and intercepting all of the water bullets she sent his way.

"Those weren't even pressurized enough to do real damage," he commented.

Sakura glared. "I'm only three days into this." She knew it was a feeble defense in Tobirama's eyes. The man was a perfectionist, as she had learned early on into their...lessons, if one could call them that. Unlike him, Sakura needed a water source to perform any Suiton. In hindsight, his agreement to demonstrate basic water jutsu after her reluctant admittance that she knew none at all, was a miracle in itself. She had received a hard, assessing stare and a quiet grunt. Then he was barking at her to watch closely and copy his hand movements.

The fact that he could so easily gather moisture from the air itself and utilize it to create such powerful water-based techniques in battle was indeed as impressive as she expected it to be. But she knew she was nowhere near that level. They started out near the river in the forest, so she could have some hope of learning any Suiton.

Mastering the signs in the correct order was a small feat. Sakura had done that in under a day. What she hadn't expected was how hard it was to control the water in order to attack with it. Tobirama made it look so easy.

The truth was, mastering something as basic as a water whip was anything but. Sakura found that water was an elusive element, hard to consistently keep molded into shape when its natural inclination was to expand. She struggled to pull a stream of water from the river, and when she managed that, controlling it was like trying to keep hold of a wriggling eel. More often than not it splashed harmlessly at her feet before she could so much as send it in Tobirama's direction.

Today, however, Tobirama had said they'd focus on a different technique. One only slightly easier. Water bullets. Sakura managed to learn the proper seals, once again, in no time at all. But expelling the pressurized water with enough force to hit an enemy and hurt them was struggle.

Tobirama demonstrated, and she found herself quickly dodging globs of water that would no doubt break a bone if they made contact. Sakura spat out a bullet no bigger than her fist and was disgusted to find it looked like a thick ball of spit and didn't travel more than a foot before losing speed and crashing. The rose-haired kunoichi wasn't use to not excelling at something she put her mind to, and that was why she was determined to prove to Tobirama she could learn Suiton.

"That's enough," he sighed, the water wall evaporating.

"I feel like I could keep going," Sakura protested.

"Maybe so," he agreed, "but I have my own matters to attend to regardless." He took to the trees, darting off without so much as a goodbye. Sakura made a face.

"Fine," she muttered to herself. "I can practice on my own," Facing the river once again, she studied her reflection on the calm surface. Her pink eyebrows were pulled down and there was a narrowness to her lips that made her annoyance evident.
'If I can take Tsunade-shishou's training...I can take this.' Running through the signs again, she concentrated on the river's surface until she saw it start to ripple. Grasping on with her chakra, Sakura slowly maneuvered her arms to the side, the water following the movements. Breathing in to center herself, she shifted her stance attempting to keep an invisible hold as she thrust the water back out at unseen attacker.

It splattered uselessly into the larger body before so much as crossing the river. Sakura groaned, preparing to do it again. Through the break in the tree line, she caught a glimpse of the sky, growing steadily pinker. The air was crisper now as it approached evening and the forest was quiet except the lazy trill of a distant crow.

That was when the fact that they had been at it since midday dawned on her. Maybe she would return home too. She had a cat to feed, dinner to prepare…

Mizuchi could turn up at any time. The goddess seemed to delight in that. Whenever she insisted Sakura was in need of more training, it took up the entirety of the day, and she crawled home tired to her bones. Living in this new time period, Sakura found more than ever that preparing for a mundane day to turn into something unexpected had become a necessity.

She gave the river one last contemplative glance. Being able to show Tobirama that she had indeed improved her skills in his absence filled her with a sort of smug excitement. But really what good would it do her to practice into the night, only to have to get up and do it again the next day, exhausted? Lately, she had found herself becoming far too reckless for her own liking.

In the end, it was her empty stomach that made the final decision, Sakura turning away from the sight of the calmly flowing water, trekking back to the village.

Toka's eyes drifted from Reira, happily stuffing shabu shabu into her mouth, to Hashirama, filling a bowl for himself. Tobirama's expression mirrored her own. Out of the four sitting around the table, they were the only two with any restraint. Hashirama's etiquette at meals seemed reserved for formal occasions only. Reira didn't even seem to notice anything else but how to get the food to her lips as quickly as possible.

She snatched her chattering niece's wrist at the same time Tobirama grabbed for Hashirama's. Both brunettes looked up in surprise. "Slow down," the jointly issued command had the exuberant duo shrinking back with meek grins and averted eyes.

They acquiesced, eating more carefully under the stern gazes of Tobirama and herself. "So tell me brother," Hashirama started, finding the courage to talk, "How has the training been coming along?"

Tobirama didn't answer right away. He took his time savoring the taste of his food, and then expelled a tired sigh. "She has no previous Suiton jutsu to build off of. I didn't anticipate that, so it's similar to teaching someone on Reira's level."

Reira squawked in indignation, and then began choking on the food in her mouth. Toka hit her back with a solid thump. Eyes watering, Reira gifted her with a pleasant smile. "T-Tobaa…you saved my life."

"I wouldn't need to if you'd only slow down."

"As I was saying," Tobirama interrupted. "Haruno has some hope of getting there. It doesn't change my mind that I feel she would be better suited to Katon given her temperament."
"I disagree," Hashirama ate another slice of mushroom from his bowl. "The element of water suits her well. Earth, too."

"I would be willing to assist Sakura, if she needs a more solid understanding of Suiton," Toka offered evenly.

"If everyone's helping, maybe I could—"

"No," Tobirama shot Hashirama's proposal down before he'd finished making it. "You have the village as your priority. And don't think I can't see through you."

Hashirama pointed at himself. "W-What? What's there to see through?"

"You've been singing Haruno's praises since she gave you that potted weed."

"Bonsai and the common weed don't even share the same genus, let alone species." Hashirama defended. "I'm just glad Bukkai isn't around to hear you."

"Plants. Don't. Hear. Anything." Toka watched Tobirama and Hashirama share the same debate they'd been having ever since Sakura gifted the Hokage with "Bukkai".

"I dunno Tobi-nii..." Reira countered. "I talked to Bukkai for thirty minutes the other day when I watered him for Hashi-nii and I think he grew three centimeters!"

"You see there?" Hashirama's eyes lit up with pride. "He responds best to positivity."

Tobirama looked ready to slump face first into his shabu-shabu, and Toka wasn't convinced joining him in hers wasn't a good idea. Hashirama and Reira kept talking about Bukkai's growth, and their plans to make sure "he" was healthy through winter.

Winter…

If they kept it up through winter, Toka would pray to the kami for snow deep enough that she could bury herself in it until spring.

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Madara gently moved his arm up and down several times, allowing the raptor perched on it to spread his wings and prepare himself for take off. One final thrust and he watched his falcon push off into the air, listing only slightly as he drifted over the treetops, the bell tied to his foot tinkling on the wind.

The bird was newly trained, and with winter approaching in some months, Madara wanted a chance to see if the peregrine falcon he had taken to calling Tama was going to prove a useful hunting partner. He would need a new one before long. Glancing over, he noticed Haia, still ripping through the rabbit he had allowed her to keep. Next year would be time to release her.

Tama needed to be prepared to take over as his primary hunter by then. After allowing the younger bird to observe him working in conjunction with Haia to catch the first three rabbits, he set the falcon off in the hopes he'd find them a fourth. He always allowed the birds to have the first catch for themselves. It was only fair, since they did the work.

Madara merely drove the prey out of the brush once his partner had set eyes on it, and instinct took over as they did the rest, swooping in for the kill. He tracked the outline of Tama easily with his Sharingan. When he saw him start to circle, he began to follow, leaping into the trees to catch up. Tama's piercing cry confirmed he'd found prey, and he watched the falcon dive in. Smirking,
Madara waited to see what kind of animal he'd be flushing out.

Sakura attempted to form the liquid she had raised from the river into a single ball with great exertion. "I...I think I'm getting the hang of this!" she called to no one in particular. Usamaro, sunbathing lazily on a nearby boulder, certainly couldn't care less. He had been inattentive the minute she refused to let him go after fish in the fear he'd be swept away.

The cat had been growing bolder in trying to follow her from the house of late. After being certain he wouldn't leave her side, she had started to let him come with her on small errands. He rode on her shoulders, watching the world from a higher vantage point. This was the first time she had allowed him to accompany her into the woods.

She was training by herself, a crow delivering a message early in the morning that she would have to train alone. Sakura saw it as the opportunity to show him up that she'd been waiting for. Although...progressing faster without Tobirama around to criticize every lift of her arms, wasn't going the way she'd hoped. Still, a spark of triumph filled her when the water jutsu she was attempting to perform held together longer than it had the day before. "Concentrate," she breathed quietly. "Hah!" With a flick, she launched the ball across the river, jumping giddily as it struck a tree on the other side.

"Did you see it, Usamaro?" she asked, turning to the rock. Blinking, she noticed her cat was nowhere to be found. "Usamaro!" she repeated.

A loud, angry wail echoed across the tranquility, and Sakura winced. Usamaro must have gotten himself into trouble. She shouldn't be too surprised, honestly. Immediately starting in the direction the cry had come from, she heard what sounded like some kind of bird, equally angry and surprisingly close.

Sakura paled as two and two came together. She took off at a run, glancing up to see that sure enough some sort of large bird was diving at something up ahead on the ground.

When it went up again, she was able to see the familiar white coat with silver markings and short tail, rolling away, narrowly dodging sharp talons. Usamaro must have gotten scared and ran while her back was turned, the minute he saw the bird coming for him. At least her cat was smart enough to recognize an attempt on his life.

Before she could reach her cat and drag him to safety, she watched him get his bearings and square up to face the bird, his back arched and a threatening hiss escaping him. Sakura frowned. Maybe his intelligence had its limits then. Usamaro, while he had put on weight and lean muscle since living with her, was not fully grown and nowhere near strong enough to take on a bird of prey.

"Usamaro!" Thinking fast, Sakura reached into her hidden weapons pouch and threw a shuriken, hoping to disrupt the bird's focus or scare it away. Instead, a kunai deflected her own projectile, pinning it to a tree near her head.

Gasping in indignation, she turned her gaze up, to a thick branch above her head, and was only further angered when she noticed Sharingan eyes briefly spare her a glance before refocusing on the two animals. They were disappearing fast again, Usamaro zigzagging across the forest floor to lose his persistent attacker. Madara started to follow, and she growled, following right behind him.

"Hey!" she called over the wind in her ears. She chased after man and bird and cat, Madara giving her a nice view of the Uchiha fan as she stared at his back. "Is that your hawk? Call it off!"
He barely spared her a side-eye, his pace never faltering. The Sharingan was deactivated now, deep onyx meeting beryl green. "We're in the middle of a hunt." Sakura had managed to catch up so she was only a branch behind him, but she moved two branches to land beside him on the next hop.

"Not for my cat, you're not!" Sakura screamed, his nonchalance grating at her nerves.

"Cat?" his voice full of consternation, "Why would you bring your cat into the woods? It seems irresponsible."

"Just call off your hawk!" she snapped.

"He's a peregrine falcon," Madara informed her.

Sakura noted they were approaching a clearing down below, another large bird resting on a stump coming into view. The falcon was trying to chase Usamaro back into the open, where he'd have a better chance at catching him.

Madara didn't seem at all concerned, watching Usamaro scamper for his life. "Something about it seems unpleasantly familiar."

Another yowl broke through the trees, and they watched together as Madara's falcon rose into the air again, a panicking Usamaro fighting in his grasp. The squawking bird was clearly struggling to keep its hold, the cat refusing to make it easy as he swiped and bit.

"So it is a cat,"

Sakura almost missed her step as she stared at the Uchiha in disbelief. "Isn't that what I just said?!"

"Running from behind, it looks like any other rabbit. Especially to a raptor."

Sakura ignored him, racing ahead and flinging another shuriken. This time, it successfully startled the bird and he released Usamaro with a screech.

The rose-haired kunoichi all but lunged forward off her tree branch, arms outstretched. From the height he was falling, there was no way for the feline to safely land on his feet. She snagged him just in time as he fell past her, the oomph making her loose her balance and pitch forward, toward the forest floor.

Sakura had barely registered the rookie mistake she made when an arm snagging her around the waist wrenched a wheeze from her throat. The stop in momentum was so fast, her neck cracked, and she turned to see Madara.

Just as fast as it had happened, it was over, the Uchiha releasing her, allowing her to find her own footing. Sakura immediately checked her cat over, frowning when she noted his blown pupils and the fact that he was breathing heavily. Miraculously, he didn't appear injured, only badly shaken. Running a comforting hand over his back, she began cooing reassurances in his ear. Only the weighted stare brought her attention back to the Uchiha watching her.

He was clearly expecting something from her. "Your bird could have killed him," she blurted.

Madara looked unamused, holding out one arm so his winged menace could land on his gloved wrist.

"You truly are an unbelievable woman," he remarked, nothing about his tone suggesting it was a compliment. "Skilled enough to best Tobirama Senju, passionate enough to sway clan heads, and
yet utterly foolish enough to believe that a cat wouldn't become prey to a falcon."

Sakura clutched her cat tighter to her bosom, turning him away from Madara protectively. "Usamaro was minding his own business!"

Madara peered more closely at the cat in her arms, and disdain flashed in his visible eye. "I see…so Izuna truly did manage to save it after all."

Sakura looked down at Usamaro, who seemed content to snuggle into her, keeping a wary eye on Madara's falcon. Blinking in thought, she remembered Izuna's words: "Madara would just as soon see it gone."

"I'm taking him home before that bird gets any funny ideas again." Sakura clenched her fist threateningly and locked eyes with the falcon. The animal shuffled around nervously before wisely turning away to preen.

Madara's low chuckle made her pulse jump. "Be thankful it wasn't Haia," he motioned to the bird watching her warily from the stump. It was a different species, even bigger than the falcon. "She would have broken his back on the first blow. Tama was rattled by all the fuss you made, too clumsy to get a proper grip."

Her green eyes glittered sharply. "If I never see you or that bully with a beak again it'll be too soon."

Sakura headed home early that day, her blood boiling. Usamaro was traumatized and she was pissed. There was a small voice, one she quickly tamped down, that said Madara had at least some right to be there and hunt. But that didn't mean she and Usamaro should be harassed!

The split second where she had been falling and Madara caught her was also something she didn't want to reminisce too long on. Because for just a second, it felt like maybe he wasn't what she thought.

Izuna welcomed him back with a small smile. He was looking over a scroll at the chabudai, setting it aside to address him. "How was the hunt?" Madara held up the two rabbits with a scowl. "Did Tama not do as well as you'd hoped?"

Lowering the rabbits, Madara considered how to answer. Without Haruno and her cat getting in the way, Tama likely would have performed much closer to his expectations. "There was some… interference."

"How so?" his brother asked curiously.

Before he could answer, quick footsteps on the tatami floors alerted him to Naoko, strolling in and giving him a coy smile. "Nice hunt?" she asked, looking at the rabbits. "Oh, I'll take those for you and start skinning," she strutted over and reached for the stringed rabbits, but Madara held them just out of her reach.

"You weren't invited."

Naoko sighed heavily, pressing a hard kiss to his lips and snatching the rabbits away as she stepped back. "I just invited myself then," she smirked. The brothers watched her walk out of the room, whistling merrily.

Madara's eyes drifted to the place where he knew the dimples on her back would be. At times, she
teased him as an older sister would, at other moments, they were insatiably indulging in each other. He never once wished for more. They had seen too much of each other, all the jagged edges the rest of the world didn't. Two wild fires joining together raged into an inferno that destroyed everything, including each other. Their childhood betrothal falling through was for the best, in every way.

"You give her a lot of free reign to boss you around; that's why she thinks she lives here."

"I don't need you to explain that, Izuna,"

Izuna shrugged, leaning his elbow on the table. "So, this interference wouldn't happen to be Sakura-san, would it?"

"You knew," Madara accused.

Izuna stared up at his brother innocently. "I took Kagami to visit Usamaro recently, and she mentioned that she had been practicing Suiton lately. The closest large body of water is the river in the forest. You mentioned going hunting today. I'd hoped you wouldn't see each other, but—"

"Tama mistook that cat of hers for a rabbit," he scoffed, sitting down at the chabudai. "The same cat you apparently gave to her."

"I told you I knew someone who could save it. Sakura-san is a talented medic." Izuna explained. "She's been taking good care of it ever since I brought him to her, and it no longer roams the compound. I thought you'd be pleased by that more than anything."

"I'd be pleased not to get screamed at every time I see that woman." Madara grumbled. "Whatever grudge she's holding seems to intensify with every encounter."

Izuna laughed under his breath. "I can't say I've shared that experience."

"Oh yes," Madara agreed mockingly. "The two of you get along so famously."

"Maybe I'm just doing the right things," Izuna suggested.

"Such as what, following after her like a besotted monkey?"

Izuna eyes shined mischievously. "…Well, not being you, for instance. That alone seems like enough to keep me in her good graces."

Madara tried to keep a firm scowl in place, but the longer he looked at Izuna, the less possible it was. The brothers shared a laugh at Madara's expense.

Not that there wasn't some truth to the joke. He wasn't unused to people being repulsed by him, or by the Uchiha name, but Haruno's repulsion seemed a lot more specific, and…more personal.

It begged the question what had happened between them that he couldn't remember. In all his life, up until just a few short months ago, he had never seen a pink-haired, green eyed girl. The name Haruno itself wasn't distinctly memorable to him either. If she wasn't from a shinobi lineage, then he didn't see his clan having a blood feud with them, as they had with the Senju. Nothing about it added up. "Look for me in the arrival of the blossom that blows among the leaves."

The strange healer.

Sakura, his brother insisted, was also an incredibly capable healer.
The arrival of the blossom.

Could it be…?

The arrival of Sakura.

When she opened the backdoor the next morning and tried to encourage Usamaro to step outside, he refused. Sakura had expected as much. Even carrying him in her arms outside and setting him down near her feet didn't help. He ran back into the house the moment he touched ground.

She wanted to go and train once again, but she'd feel guilty leaving him in his current state.

Giving up, Sakura decided a can of sardines might cheer him up. They were one of his favorite snacks. He followed her more closely than ever, brushing at her ankles for attention and nearly making her trip. Sighing, she opened the can and wiggled one of the slimy little fish in front of his nose. "One minute outside for one fish," she bribed.

Usamaro's round, mismatched eyes were fixated on the tiny herring, and Sakura's grimace lifted into a cautious smile the closer she was able to lure him outside. She crouched in the doorway, holding the sardine just out of reach. The cat tried to scoot himself as close as possible to the edge of the door without his paws actually touching the grass. He sniffed the air, tongue darting out to lick his lips at the scent of fish.

"That's right," Sakura encouraged. "Good boy," One front paw touched grass, and the feline stared at it before cautiously allowing another paw to follow. Humming happily, Sakura let him have the sardine and he devoured it in seconds. Pulling out another, she repeated the process, this time getting him almost entirely out of the house, when a shadow from above fell over the yard.

Sakura and Usamaro shared twin looks of terror for entirely different reasons. Human and cat had a silent agreement, but when the cry of a hawk shattered the tension as one swooped low over Sakura's head, it was all over. Usamaru bolted back through the door, but not before snatching the sardine treat Sakura had been offering.

Frustrated, Sakura threw her arms out. "Are you kidding me?!" The hawk, unperturbed, landed on one of her arms, and she glared at it. It wasn't the bird she'd seen yesterday, thankfully. But it still singlehandedly undone the tentative progress she'd made with her traumatized cat.

It held out its foot, and she took the message attached before sending it on its way. Marching back into the house, she read the note. Her feet came to an abrupt stop when the words registered. She was being summoned to the Hokage's office.

Harihane growled under her breath. If one more tail smacked her in the face, she was on the cusp of losing her temper. Just as she thought this, a cold nose prodded the back of her neck, and she whirled around, ready to tell off the offending mutt. Yoku's inquisitive face stared down at her from atop her mother's imposing ninken. "You seem weary. Would you like to rest on Miku for a while?" she patted the large dog's head. "She can carry both of us easily."

Harihane looked around, noticing no one else seemed to be having the difficulties she was. Kikue was a ways back, walking on all fours as she played with Miku's pups. In the days since they had met the Inuzuka, her younger sister had become infatuated with them, dogs and all.

Junji was having a discussion with Tsuba up ahead, also looking perfectly at peace. She was the only one struggling with all of it. "No," Harihane denied haughtily. "You think some trekking is
enough to wear me out? Growing up in my father's household and marching on campaigns with him was worse than this. So it's nothing."

"Oh," Yoku smiled apologetically. "I didn't mean to offend…I just…" she looked down with a blush, playing with Miku's fur. "D-Do you mind if I walk with you then. Or, um, ride?"

"Aren't you already doing that?" Harihane rolled her eyes.

"I suppose so…sorry for bothering you." Yoku's eyes closed, her fangs nibbling at her bottom lip. "I think I should just fall back…" She started to turn Miku around, but Harihane's answering groan stopped her.

"I didn't say you had to leave. Stay if you want to."

Yoku looked unsure, looking at Miku. The gray dog turned her body and marched in step with Harihane. The Inuzuka breathed a sigh of relief that the dog had made the decision for her.

"I must come across very awkwardly." Yoku ran a tongue over her fangs, "I spend so much time with books and dogs that even with the other kids my age, interacting authentically is hard."

"You just overthink it," Harihane told her. "Say what you want, when you want. Forget what anyone else has to say about it."

"I-Is that what you do?"

Harihane nodded casually, kicking at a stray rock. "All the time,"

"You make it sound so easy…" Yoku stopped to maul it over. "I always worry about who it'll offend if I speak my mind too much."

"That's your problem," Harihane shrugged. "The more you hold back, the more the words choke you. Then one day you'll forget what it means to speak your mind in the first place."

"H-Has that ever happened to you," Yoku asked hesitantly.

Harihane turned to look her in the eyes, still walking. "You act meek but you're pretty nosy. Is it the heightened senses?"

Yoku's mouth fell open as she shook her head. "S-Sorry, I—"

"I didn't mean it," Harihane waved it off. "But I guess there was a time when I was more like you…I'd bow my head and let my words choke me because I was afraid to upset my father. He wanted an heir, and I was a girl. My clan was much different from yours. Females don't get to inherit the position of clan head, not ever. I resented that my entire life. Junji, my brother, never really wanted much the way I did. He went along with everything my father said but I always felt like he got praised because he was the firstborn and a proper heir, not because he actually did anything to deserve it."

Yoku studied her with shining eyes. "You all get along so well now, I just thought…"

"That we were always like that? No. It was only recently, after…well we all decided we'd make our own way. I wanted us to be mercenaries. Then we ran into you, and now your mother's got Junji convinced there could be a place for us in that village you're all going to."

"You don't think so?" Yoku frowned.
Harihane made a face of disapproval. "Of course not. Too many things go against us. Even when I lived with people who were my family, we couldn't get along. Every man, woman and child for themselves. Only coming together when it was time to slaughter the enemy, and then going back to fending only for yourself right after. If blood can't tie people together, there's no way a village can."

Yoku was silent. "Plus, the Kaguya have a reputation." Harihane smiled self-deprecatingly. "We're monsters in every way and always have been. The kind that destroy villages and leave a trail. There's no place left for us, and that's why we're on our own."

Yoku remained quiet, a heavy crease between her eyebrows. "I think it'll be different,"

"Eh?"

"I…I'm just saying. I think my mother is right. People are always going to be cruel to one another, especially shinobi. And it's in our nature to be selfish for the sake of survival. But what would shinobi risk everything to band together in the first place for, if they weren't ready to try a new way?" Yoku noticed the strange look Harihane was giving her and began to blush. "At least…at least that's what I think."

Harihane laughed loudly, drawing the attention of several nearby dogs. "We're total opposites." Somehow, though, she didn't feel as alone.

Hashirama looked up from reading a report of a shinobi who had successfully removed a family of wild boar terrorizing a local farm. He was preparing to sign off on it when the door to his opened without preamble, Madara strolling in. "A mission to where?" he demanded.

It was a sure sign that he had gotten his mission scroll and, was obviously not pleased.

"You're early," Hashirama gestured to the chair in front of his desk. "Have a seat."

Madara defiantly leaned against the desk.

"Alright," Hashirama picked up a scroll that he had set aside. "Down to business then. You're going to the Land of Water to help broker a peace treaty. Between two neighboring island nations that have recently emerged. There's a dispute over who has the right to natural resources that they'd like settled once and for all by an outside party."

"I refuse to be that outside party," Madara crossed his arms, turning away in finalty.

Hashirama feigned pity. "They're already expecting you."

Madara wasn't moved, his scowl deepening. "Send your brother. Doesn't he like playing in puddles?"

"Tobirama's been busy helping me negotiate with the Hyuga clan. They're reluctant to join the village, what with the Uchiha having already settled here." Hashirama looked down at the paperwork on his desk. "Somehow, Tobirama's almost gotten through to them. Or at least it seems so. Him being away at such a crucial time would be bad. You know how the Hyuga can be…"

"What place does a shinobi have in resource disputes between two emergent nations?"

Hashirama picked up another scroll and showed it to him. "As you can see…they sent this request jointly… but then I received two more scrolls, within a day of each other from leaders of both
respective islands. Each wants to…how should I put this…make a more subtle deal."

"You're saying they both intend to bribe Konoha into siding with them privately? What are they promising?" Madara's right eye widened minutely, "A trade route? A cut of the resources they're jealously guarding?"

"Both," Hashirama nodded. "Each leader is offering something different. I was skeptical about all this, but Tobirama believes if we can truly get them on the same page, it could be good for the village, because we'd get access to everything. There's still a lot of work to do and a trade deal isn't an awful thing to consider."

Madara's brows rose. "So I'm the representative you choose to send in delicate diplomatic matters such as this?"

Hashirama grinned cheekily. "I can only have as much faith in you as you have in yourself, Madara. And," he winked, "As long as they don't find out your secret weakness…"

Madara's cheeks darkened to a noticeable pink. "Oi, you keep that to yourself, Senju!"

Hashirama laughed in earnest, clutching his stomach at Madara's horrified face. "Your secret's still safe with me."

"Is it? I wonder about that…" The Uchiha eyed him warily.

"At any rate, your ship leaves from the port in Yumegakure in three days. So you'll need to move out at daybreak."

Over his embarrassment, Madara was back to his prideful self. "Who do you take me for? I'll beat the ship to port easily."

"Good to hear you coming around!" the Hokage beamed. "Oh, but one more thing before I forget…" Hashirama pulled yet another scroll from a sizable pile of them. "This is the last correspondence I received…on top of needing help brokering a peace treaty, the islands have recently been experiencing a mass outbreak of a mysterious virus, and it's decimating the population fairly fast. One island in particular has lost half its population in less than a month…"

"I'm not a healer," Madara muttered. "So why tell me?"

"They'd originally requested a Senju, and I consulted with Toka on who to send but then she suggested someone from outside the clan…either way, you won't be going alone. Although your objectives will be entirely different, you'll be going with Sakura-san while she works to figure out a cause for, and possibly control the outbreak."

Sakura waved goodbye at the small group that had come to see her off. After getting her mission from the Hokage the following day, she had packed well for a long trip, securing her newer headband that marked her as kunoichi of Konoha.

Reira held Usamaro close to her chest, making his paw wave at her. "We'll take good care of Usamaro while you're gone~!" she assured. Kagami and Chisato stood with her, and the trio had volunteered for cat-sitting.

"And I'll take care of any food you don't want to expire before you get back," Shikamarin added.

Susumu timidly clutched at Shikamarin's arm in concern. "D-Doesn't that just mean you plan to eat
it?"

The Nara placed a finger to her own lips.

Toka stood at the front of the group, arms crossed and her usual poker face on.

Yurine fidgeted beside her, hands clasped to her chest. "A mission to an island," The blonde sighed. "Sounds sort of romantic. A moonlit stroll, a clandestine meeting with a local blacksmith and a kunoichi…a passionate—"

"Yuhi, are you finished?" Toka asked.

Startled from her daydreaming, Yurine lowered her head, fingers combing nervously through her long, side ponytail. "Y-Yes,"

"You'd better get going, Sakura. Your ship will be leaving in a matter of days."

"Right," Sakura clasped her bicep and flexed with a grin.

She turned and flash-stepped for the gates, her spirits high. It had been a while since she'd been presented with something that may actually prove a challenge to her medical expertise.

Though she was confident she could figure out the cause of the outbreak, stopping it with only the resources available to her in such an early era of medical ninjutsu would be…interesting.

The tall green gates were well in sight, and she landed in front of them with practiced ease. The sentries had just begun to roll them open, and Sakura wondered if the Hokage had told them to expect her. That was when she spotted crimson armor and long black hair, gunbai secured to his back. Her heart lurched in surprise and a strangled, "Madara?" fell from her lips.

The man in question turned, his face holding none of the shock but all of the exasperation she was currently feeling. "The sentries are waiting to close the gates, Haruno."

"Y-You're my…you're on this mission too?" The shock had far from warn off. The Hokage had mentioned another shinobi would also be traveling to the Land of Water on a different mission, and that they might see each other, but he'd neglected to mention one minute detail.
Sophistry

Logically, Sakura understood that despite the deadline to reach the port, the best way to proceed was to pace herself. It would be foolish to waste energy speeding off, all for the sake of losing her…traveling companion. It didn't stop the cold-blooded ire at the Hokage for not telling her, and at Madara, for everything he'd done up until the mission.

So she alternated between letting revenge fantasies of the Hokage and Madara play through her mind as she leapt stealthily through the treetops.

But they both knew that according to the maps, the path they were on was the most direct one to the portside village of Yumegakure. It didn't mean either of them was happy about it. The small satisfaction the pinkette got was that aside from that brief interaction as they left the village, Madara hadn't been inclined to say anything more to her.

She wouldn't have it any other way. They were essentially stuck together until the time it took them to reach the islands, so the less he had to say to her, the better. Sakura kept fruitlessly wondering what could have ever made the Hokage think it was a good idea to send them out into the field together, alone. The man wasn't that oblivious. He knew their history of butting heads.

The kunoichi supposed that maybe it wasn't that the village leader was unaware, but that he trusted them to be able to put their differences aside for the sake of the mission. Sakura remembered as Madara had watched on, unfazed as his falcon hunted her cat. Despite not having witnessed any of the murderous intentions he'd displayed on the battlefield, his constant state of arrogance and indifference grated at her nerves just the same. Truly, the odds of finishing the mission without clashing seemed more and more unlikely as she thought of it.

The Hokage slumped forward with a heavy sigh, face between his palms. *'Did I do the right thing? Not telling Sakura-san in advance seems…'* He had an inkling of how she'd react to the news. Yet something told him that since she had already been assigned the mission she would feel obligated to complete it out of sheer duty…or maybe sheer stubbornness. Either seemed probable with a woman as feisty and determined as she was.

Sakura and Madara… They certainly had their fair share of…disagreements to work out. Pairing the two of them wasn't ideal from that perspective but both of their skillsets were needed on such an assignment, and choosing anyone else might have been the difference between crucial success and failure. At the very least, they had been gone at least an hour and no one had come rushing into his office to tell him there was a fight in front of the gates.

"Lord Hokage!" His attention immediately fell to one of the sentries that appeared before him, the urgent expression making him anticipate the worst. Perhaps he'd dared to hope too soon.

"Is there a problem?" he asked coolly. Betraying the amount of apprehension he was feeling would be unbecoming, or so his brother would likely say.

"The Inuzuka clan has just arrived, my lord."

"Oh," Hashirama's expression visibly relaxed. "Then I suppose Tsuba-san will be escorted up shortly to see me. For a minute, I was concerned something more serious—"

"There's more, my lord…" The young man straightened, clearing his throat. "The Inuzuka brought
along some unlikely arrivals. Three children from the Kaguya clan.

The Hokage's eyes widened. "Kaguya... in the village?" The fact that they were children didn't necessarily mean they weren't a threat. The Kaguya were a fierce clan; no doubt they would raise formidable children to send into battle. However, it would make no sense to send them up against the might of an entire village of shinobi. Surely their clan head, as unhinged as he may have been, would understand that. "Where are they now?" The sentries wouldn't just allow them through. The Inuzuka were expected and had been in route for weeks. But Kaguya children, not so much.

Hashirama followed the sentry's eyes as they strayed to the door. "There was... a small problem. One of the children refused to go quietly when they were told to come with us, and well, ultimately Lord Tobirama was passing by and stepped in. So they're..."

Tobirama burst in, his eyes cold as he glared down at a wriggling child he gripped tight by the back of her clothing. "Be still. This is the last time I'll warn you." The girl, dark-haired, bronze-skinned and not much older than Reira, growled deeply in agitation.

Another smaller child was hanging limply from under his brother's arm, pouting. Hashirama stood in disbelief, but the door to his office opened before he could pass comment, and in came a woman he could only guess was Tsuba Inuzuka, a white-haired young man and several other Senju taking up the rear.

"Harihane, you're making this worse..." the white-haired young man muttered, his eyes fleetingly landing on the angry child, and then meeting Hashirama's gaze. He lowered his eyes in deference.

"Tobirama, what's..." To ask what was going on would be stupid, when he was already well aware of the situation. "Tsuba-san... we meet... at last."

"Looks that way," the woman responded casually, her sharp teeth briefly visible as she gave him a small, wry smile. "Not the best introduction."

"Didn't it occur to you to send word ahead before allowing three fleas to come along?" Tobirama asked coldly. "Do you even know who these children are?"

"W-We're not fleas!" the smallest one whimpered, not even attempting to escape.

"I told you this would happen!" spat the middle child. He believed she'd been referred to as... Harihane. "I told you we wouldn't be welcome in this stupid place! And you know what? We don't wanna be here anyway—so just let me go!" In a flash, she turned and latched onto Tobirama's arm, sinking her teeth deep into flesh with all the ferocity of a mad dog. Ice froze the stoic Senju's features and he snapped his arm with enough force to not only dislodge her but send her flying. She crashed unceremoniously to the ground at the feet of the boy Hashirama assumed was her brother.

"I can only imagine the brutish ways you were allowed to behave when you were among your own clan. But know this... child or not, you have no allies here. If you are a threat to this village and came here to cause disruptions, you'll be treated accordingly."

The wave of hostility and the dangerous gleam in Tobirama's eyes had Hashirama moving to intercept. "Tobirama, that's enough."

Still seething, Tobirama turned as if to challenge him, face contorted in silent anger.

"You aren't honestly considering letting them go?" The girl Tobirama still held prisoner under one arm whined as he unconsciously squeezed tighter. "Kaguya raze villages to the ground for sport. Every child is trained from birth to know only one thing, a lust for battle and bloodshed. I don't
"It's the Hokage's duty to settle all conflicts," he interrupted, his own chakra flaring powerfully to push back at his brother's. "You aren't wrong, brother. The Kaguya's acts in the past have been atrocious. But so have the Senju's. So has every other clan who's ever pushed another to extinction. Let them speak for themselves, here and now." His tone brooked no argument, and Tobirama, though diffidently, seemed to come back to himself. The white-haired Senju dropped the child to her feet, and she scurried over to her siblings, pressing tightly to her brothers side and looking back at Tobirama with fearful eyes, still quaking. The teenage boy pulled his other sister back onto her own feet, and she fearlessly glowered at the Hokage's brother.

"You can leave us," Hashirama commanded, "Thank you for your vigilance."

The sentry and the other Senju who had come along looked unsure, but one more pointed look from their Hokage and they bowed as they departed.

That left Tsuba, the three Kaguya and Tobirama. The hardest part of the battle was far from over.

The Kaguya boy stepped forward, his sisters still remaining protectively close. "Thank you, for deciding to hear us out," he bowed, unexpectedly mannerly in demeanor and tone. "You're the leader of this village, correct? The one they call...a Hokage." Hashirama found himself being sized up, the way any decent shinobi would in unfamiliar territory.

Hashirama nodded. "And you are...?"

"Jun'ichi," he supplied. "Jun'ichi Kaguya. These are my sisters...Harihane," he pointed at the middle child and she turned away with a scowl, arms folded.

"Hmph!" Her dark hair, cut to her shoulders and partially secured by a bun at the top of head, swayed with the jerk of her neck.

"And,"

"Kikue!" the smallest child poked her head from behind her brother, introducing herself in a high, prepubescent voice. Unlike her brother and sister, she had softer, rounder eyes, just as dark as theirs. The red dots above her thin brows pulled close together as she frowned up at Hashirama in caution, the messy bun secured lopsidedly on her head held in place by a small bone.

If he didn't know any better, he'd never think he was looking at a child from the Kaguya clan. She had a bit of his sympathy. All children should hold the same bright innocence at her age. That firm belief had been what encouraged him to keep pursuing his dreams of making Konoha a reality, to shelter children just like her from losing their innocence—and their lives—too soon on the battlefield.

Putting on his most reassuring smile, Hashirama bent closer to her, lowering himself to appear non-threatening. He was a tall man, and to a small child like herself, probably all the more daunting. She was clearly still rattled by Tobirama's manhandling, looking unwilling to let go of her brother.

"Hello Kikue," he greeted gently. "How old are you?"

"Nine," she whispered, peeking up at him for only an instant.

"What about the two of you?" Hashirama coaxed.

"Why do you need to know?" Harihane snapped.
Jun'ichi nudged her. "I'm nineteen. Harihane is twelve,"

"And you expect us to believe you pose no threats?" Tobirama grumbled.

"I didn't come here with expectations of any kind." Jun'ichi assured. "But it's true that we're Kaguya in name only now. We've left all ties with the clan and its ways behind." He placed a hand atop Kikue's head, looking Hashirama in the eyes. Hashirama could see sincerity there.

"Then why come to Konoha? You could just have easily been mercenaries," Tobirama said unpityingly.

"That's what I said," Harihane threw her arms above her head. "It'd be better than being trapped in a…a village where everyone pretends to believe in peace."

"Pretends?" Hashirama arched a brow.

Harihane leveled a scathing look at him. "Pretends," she said firmly. "Peace between clans? That's not the way shinobi are. They make truces and then they break them."

"Lord Hokage," Tsuba stepped in. "The blame's mine for this one. I convinced them Konoha could spare room for them."

Hashirama stroked his chin, eyeing Tsuba, the siblings and his brother. "My brother does make…valid points. The Kaguya have wronged nearly every clan in the village right now. The Uchiha especially might take issue with them settling here."

Harihane, chest puffed out, began to head for the door. Jun'ichi nonchalantly reached back to grab her, turning her in an about face.

"But," Hashirama continued. "I'm willing to allow you to stay on a trial basis, under surveillance."

"We don't have the shinobi to spare for that…" Tobirama started to protest.

"I'll take care of it," Tsuba volunteered, stepping forward with a nod. "I brought 'em here, I can keep an eye out for them. You've got my word, Hokage-sama."

Hashirama, satisfied with the suggestion, turned to his brother. "Any objections to that Tobirama?"

"I've got one!" Harihane voiced, "I don't want to."

"Harihane," Jun'ichi clamped a hand over her mouth. "Allow me to do the talking." The former Kaguya heir met Tobirama's stern gaze unflinchingly. "We leave ourselves at your mercy. If I or my sisters cause you trouble, then please, by all means…handle it accordingly."

Tension lingered, pulled taut like a bowstring as Tobirama finally turned away. "Do as you please then, Hashirama. But, if for any reason these three prove untrustworthy, expect me to step in."

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Hours into the journey, and Madara was aware of the sun starting to get low in the sky. He could easily keep going, of course. Darkness was the true element of the shinobi, after all. He'd led many raids on enemy clans under the cover of night. But to travel through the night hardly seemed necessary when he—and admittedly the kunoichi—had been making good time.

The prickle of her animosity burning a hole through him from behind had been a constant pressure since they left the village. There were several times when he was sure she would scream at him outright. But no, she'd stayed quiet, stewing wordlessly. The absence of her yelling was welcomed,
but disquieting on its own.

After all, despite what Izuna said, he'd never shared an encounter with Haruno where she wasn't
yelling at him, glaring at him, and generally cursing his existence be it aloud or in her head. That
she could be quiet for so long was a surprise, almost as impressive as the fact that she could match
his pace. She hung back, yes, but it wasn't a matter of keeping up, but of keeping away from him.
The feeling of wariness was mutual.

The Uchiha wasn't thrilled to learn the medic who would be accompanying him would be the short-
tempered, pink-haired woman, but there was no denying the curiosity mixed in with the reluctance.
Izuna was so taken with her, praising her medical skills—skills that made her a true rarity for
someone who didn't even hail from a prominent clan, if Izuna's praises weren't exaggerated.

She'd also gained the confidence of the others she had gone on the mission with, and from reading
Toka Senju's report and witnessing her spar with Tobirama, he knew her to be an absolute brute in
taijutsu. Madara had no doubt that what he'd seen in the Senju's courtyard was far from the extent
of her abilities. Though they weren't assigned the same tasks, there was no doubt that there'd be
points when their missions would intersect. Already they shared a route to Yumegakure and a ship
to the islands. Madara looked forward to seeing how she conducted herself on a mission if nothing
else.

Smirking, he began to descend closer to the forest floor, noticing how Haruno stubbornly continued
to travel in the hire branches, even as the swath of forest they passed through thinned, and the
thicker, taller trees became more sparse, making way for a path that had long been cleared for a
smoother road with fewer places for bandits to ambush caravans.

Soon enough, she'd be forced to the ground to settle for the night, and Madara expected that would
be when they had yet another confrontation. The Uchiha didn't quite understand it himself. Being
almost exclusively on the receiving end of her verbal assault and standoffish attitude for no
discernable reason was frustrating, and yet not since Naoko was there a woman who
simultaneously infuriated but interested him.

She stood her ground against him, unafraid of revealing her temper. Every act of provocation
toward her brought out a magnificence shade to her green eyes and a defiant snarl to her lips. Just
bordering on pure hatred, there was a dark beauty there. Like watching a stormy sky split apart by a
sharp bolt of lightning.

The soft looks and laughter she gave to Izuna, to Hashirama…they were forced to share that side of
her. And she seemed to have worked toward a mutual tolerance of Tobirama as of late, but that was
hardly special.

He was sure that she'd likely come to tolerate a lot of people. Very few people could say they knew
what it was like to be the sole focus of someone's undiluted hatred. But he and he alone got the
brunt of all her blackest emotions, and in that regard, owning that small but unfettered part of her
made him feel triumphant in the dance they'd fallen into.

Chuckling under his breath, Madara saw the flash of pink behind him as the kunoichi came to the
ground, just like he knew she would. She remained a cautious distance from him, standing at the
edge of the copse of trees that created a natural semi-circle just off to the side of the road.

She began to slowly circle the perimeter, no doubt looking for a place to settle as far from him as
possible. But every corner of the small thicket was equidistance from the middle, and so he
spitefully decided that was where he would spend the night.
Haruno noticed, but she did a valiant job of ignoring him as she took off her pack, kneeling and beginning to rummage through it. She produced a bedroll, then provisions he recognized as edibles. Loosening the headband from her hair, she draped it across her knee and let her fingers comb through the pink strands.

Madara could almost read her thoughts as if they were his own. She was looking at him smugly, noticing his own lack of a pack, a bedroll or rations. Truthfully, he was use to traveling lightly. Snuggling down into a bedroll while away from the safety of the compound had always felt… strange. The field wasn't supposed to bring comfort.

Haruno began unwrapping food, dried meat, by the look of it, watching him from the corner of one eye. Madara wouldn't quite call them comrades, village affiliation aside, so he supposed in light of everything, he understood the mistrust. Ignoring her, he wandered from the clearing, a kunai twirling around his finger. Haruno could rely on her carefully packed provisions all she liked, but a true shinobi knew how to gather the resources they needed from the field.

Sakura watched him go, chewing at the jerky in aggravation. "That one is difficult, is he not?"

Sakura snorted, taking a sip from her canteen. "Yeah, tell me about it—" Turning in realization, she choked on her water to notice Mizuchi sitting right beside her. "What are you doing?" she whispered urgently, her green eyes darting between the goddess and the direction Madara had gone. "You can't be here!"

Unbothered, the deity smoothed the creases in her emerald kimono, her legs folded daintily underneath her. "I go where I wish, Sakura."

Bowing her head, Sakura nibbled once again at the food in her hands, appetite all but gone. "I…I know. But I just mean…" she swallowed, "Wouldn't it be bad if he sees you? I mean isn't that why we were being so discreet before?"

Mizuchi cast her gaze upwards to the steadily darkening sky, now a mixture of pink and orange hues. An autumn breeze blew through the clearing, moving strands of the goddess' dark hair. Absently, she reached up to push them behind her ear, and for the first time, Sakura noticed they were pointed, heavy emerald earrings incased in gold hanging from the lobes. "The time for discretion is drawing to a close, I'm afraid. You still are far from ready."

Sakura set the food aside, completely attentive to the goddess's words. "Ready for what?"

"Another test draws near," The deity said instead, evasive as ever. "On the island."

"How'd you know about that?" the kunoichi questioned.

Mizuchi sighed heavily. Something was strange. Mizuchi wasn't exuding her normal confidence, putting the normal amount of distance between them. The goddess seemed almost…jaded somehow, if that were possible. "Sakura, tell me what I've taught you so far. About blighting."

"Right," She dipped her head to indicate she recalled. "Deities use them to…punish humans…control populations. They're the product of humanity's most negative emotions…"

"And the counter?"

Sakura faltered. "T-The counter?"

"Yes. How do you reverse a blight? How do you heal it?" Mizuchi waved her hand idly, urging her
"You pull it out of the victim," she bit at her lip in thought. "And swallow it, which neutralizes the threat."

"Deities made them, so they can handle the brunt of reabsorbing them." Mizuchi continued. "You, as a human, cannot. Creating blights, such as it is, nearly kills you."

Sakura opened her mouth to declare that she had a handle on it now. That blighting was difficult but no longer as painful for her. "I can learn the rever—"

"I know you can." Mizuchi held a palm up, leaning back in the grass. "But at what cost? And, on what scale are you willing to pay?"

Sakura frowned. "Why ask me now? You didn't care about any of that before. That's why I'm here, on a mission with a man that nearly tore the world apart."

"All of that is yet to happen." Mizuchi reminded her. "Though, there's no way to tell if your presence truly changes much in the end. The fates are fickle."

"The gods are fickle, you mean," Sakura quipped flatly.

Mizuchi's eyes brightened, and her ruby lips rose in amusement. "It seems you are finally beginning to understand."

Madara stiffened, almost sure he'd caught a glimpse of a billowing emerald kimono and long hair darker than a starless night…and horns. There had been horns. All of it was gone faster than he could decide if it was an illusion. Instead, Haruno was quietly meditating on her bedroll. Alone. Madara moved by her with the kindling he'd brought back, setting to work on constructing the fire pit necessary to cook his fresh kill. A pheasant unlucky enough to cross his path.

One reproachful green eye opened as the sticks he'd gathered were dropped to the ground with a clatter, Madara sitting in front of them as he began plucking the bird. Haruno slowly closed her eye again, back to her meditating. There was silence for the next twenty minutes, the Uchiha preparing his own meal and the kunoichi clearly struggling to continue ignoring him.

When the bird was ready to roast, Madara blew the fire to life, watching the plucked flesh start to cook on the spit he'd constructed. As it cooked, his eyes slipped once again to the young woman at the edge of the clearing. Try as she might to avoid talking to him, watching the food roast was boring, and she, unfortunately for her, was the only person around to entertain himself with.

"The heat of the fire won't reach you from that distance," Her eyes snapped open immediately. "That'd only matter if I was actually cold." She retorted. "Unlike you, I brought provisions for every scenario."

"Preparedness is important for shinobi." Madara snidely observed her pack, her bedroll, her canteen and the food stuffs laid out. "Especially in the absence of actual survival skills."

The apples of her cheeks reddened, and she leaned forward, green eyes turning to slits. "No one understands survival more than a medic. I have to be prepared so that when arrogant shinobi who think they're invincible fall in battle," Haruno looked him directly in the eyes, "I can be there to heal them. If I thought like you do, counting on finding what I needed by chance, who knows how many people would die."
"You're quite confident in your medical ninjutsu." Madara mused. "Izuna tells me you have reason to be. Although, anyone could save a cat," he remarked offhandedly.

Sakura glanced down at the food she'd set aside, quickly stuffing some crackers into her mouth in an attempt to avoid firing back.

'How ridiculous.' Madara thought. The bulging cheeks and round, angry eyes made her the human counterpart to a disgruntled chipmunk. Noticing his pheasant was nearly done, he lifted it from over the open flame.

"You're exactly the kind of shinobi that I was talking about, you know." He heard her say lowly. "The arrogant, reckless kind. How many lives have you saved?"

"I'm not the kind of shinobi who saves lives, medic." Madara pinched a piece of the cooling pheasant meat off between his fingers, bringing it to his lips. "I'm the kind of shinobi who ends them."

Sakura rose with the sun, glancing over to see Madara was no longer in the center of the clearing. The fire he'd made had burnt out. He was up a tree, apparently resting in one of the lower branches thick enough to support his weight.

She still couldn't believe they were actually on the same side, technically speaking. His mannerisms, his way of thinking…in a child's fable, he'd be the handsome but conniving antagonist, trying to lure the heroine away from her happy ending. But she refused to let him lure her away from her mission.

Everything was packed in short order, and she was ready to head out once again. While the Uchiha rested, she'd get a head start. That was the plan, at least, until he stood, already wearing his armor with the gunbai secured once more on his back. When he turned to smirk down at her, his hitai-ate caught the light of the early morning sun, and it infuriated her. Someone like him shouldn't wear the proud symbol of the Leaf village so well.

Sakura shouldered her pack on, leaping into the trees on the opposite side of the road as the copse they'd spent the night in. Any distance she could create could never be far enough, but it was a start. The kunoichi decided in order to avoid launching Madara into orbit, she'd have almost single-minded focus on the mission ahead. With Madara nearby, that was almost a lost cause.
The sight of Yumegakure on the horizon was, ironically, the oasis in the desert. The minute Sakura caught a whiff of the sea breeze on the wind and saw the small houses that made up the quaint, seaside village, her chest lightened. They had managed to arrive with a half days' worth of time to spare. Sakura smiled to herself, relaxed by the blue sky striped with clouds and the cozy atmosphere surrounding the little village.

Though there was no doubt they stood out, no one looked at them with anything akin to hostility as they walked the cobblestone streets—a considerable distance from each other, for her sanity. A burly man walked by with a net of fish slung over his strong back, whistling an unfamiliar tune. When they nearly bumped shoulders, he took the time to tip his cap at her as he walked by.

The people of Yume were clearly use to travelers passing through, as aside from some curiosity or a few waves in greeting, no one spared them much of a second look. 'There's something about a seaside town,' she thought pleasantly. It brought fond memories of missions to portside towns when she was younger. Missions with her own squad and other rookies over the years. Now, a lifetime later, the serenity of peaceful Yume was tinged with her apprehension. Though that was at least partially due to the Uchiha with her. Sakura glared from the corner of her eyes.

Madara stood up ahead, examining a market area where a blacksmith was hard at work in front of his forge. 'We already stand out like sore thumbs,' Sakura reasoned. 'Somehow though, it's more than just appearance with him...' She studied his profile carefully. His arms were folded across his chest, his face impassive.

In his deep red armor with the gunbai at his back and his kama hanging near his waist, Madara looked battle-ready and fearsome. 'That's just the natural air he gives off. It always feels like it's enough to choke you.' Since beginning training with Mizuchi, Sakura had noticed she was much more attuned to strong auras.

For people who held powerful presences like Madara, it was almost amplified by her acute spiritual senses. Although, hazarding a guess, it wasn't the same experience a sensor-type would have had. Nevertheless, it drove her to seek space when it got too overwhelming, and now felt like one of those times. Their ship wouldn't leave for another half a day, and exploring was an effective way to pass time.

Sakura could do with some good food. While living off berries, dried meats and rations had been well and good, she was hardly going to pass up the opportunity to have something more satisfying. It wasn't a stretch to guess that food options on the ship would be limited, going by previous experiences.

There had been a tantalizing aroma coming from downwind and it spurred her hunger. Attempting to follow the scent to its source, she was instead greeted with an armored chest as Madara suddenly appeared in her path.

Gritting her teeth, she leveled him with a fierce stare. "Move,"

Surprisingly, there was no smirk, no hint of amusement in his eyes. "Be warned that the ship will leave with or without you. Don't hold any illusion that I'll come for you."
"It's not my first time on a mission. I know how to rendezvous." Sakura brushed by him, silently pleased with herself for keeping a tight lid on her temper. She'd made up her mind that whenever possible, she'd deny him what he wanted—her reaction. Giving him little to nothing would hopefully make him lose interest faster. Of course, that was if she was able to continue biting her tongue. After all, she'd promised herself he wouldn't get a rise from her all the other times, and he had.

"Excuse me," Sakura called, managing to get the attention of a young boy running by with a fishing pole. He stopped so quickly he almost tripped on his line, righting himself with a frown. The minute he saw her, though, his annoyance turned into curiosity.

"Who're you?" he asked bluntly.

"Just a traveler." The kunoichi noticed how he looked ready to bolt off again, anxiously gripping the fishing rod. "Sorry, but could you tell me where to go for food?"

The young boy moved the oversized cap on his head to scratch at his russet hair, mouth twisting in concentration. "I like to go to the shop on the corner over there! The obaa-san who runs it gives me extra sometimes." he said finally with a point.

Sakura noticed he was talking about a small, open shop not far away where thick curtains served as a divider between patrons and people on the street. It reminded her of fond times at Ichiraku with Team 7.

"Thank y—" Sakura paused, noticing he was already gone.

Shrugging, she continued her walk, falling in with the locals and slipping under the flap of the shop. There was a sweet, pleasant aroma in the air, and several customers inside, eating steamed buns. Behind the counter, a woman rolling dough hummed softly. "Welcome to—oh my, a new face I see."

"Hi," Sakura waved, looking around. "I'm passing through and—"

"Oh," the shop owner interrupted, "Say no more. Please, come in and have a seat. I'm just about to steam these." She motioned with her shoulder to the dough she was rolling.

Sakura took a seat on a stool, noticing a small girl also behind the corner for the first time.

"Emiko, ask our guest what she'd like to have!" the woman urged, her daughter scrambling to place a scroll listing menu items in front of Sakura.

"It says the mizu manju is your special item, so I'll have that." she decided, handing the scroll back. "This is a strange season for it though..." Not wanting to offend, Sakura kept that thought to herself, giving Emiko a patient smile.

Emiko nodded, shyly avoiding Sakura's gaze and scurrying over to her mother's side.

"I'm sorry, she's very shy with new people." The owner chuckled, "Here, while you're waiting have some taiyaki. It's fresh!"

Emiko stood on the tips of her toes, plating the treats and bringing them to Sakura. The fish-shaped cakes resembled carp, light brown and warm to the touch. "Oh, t-thank you. But is it really okay to just give me this? I don't mind paying..." Even so, Sakura hurriedly wiped at her mouth, which had become moist the minute the fresh sweets were set in front of her.

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"Generosity is our way of life here, so enjoy. Think of it as a reason to visit us again the next time you're passing through," she turned to drop the manju into a steamer with a wink.

Deciding arguing against such a kind offer was pointless, Sakura carefully picked up the warm cake and bit into it head first. The sweet bean paste and the combination of the soft texture was so refreshingly good after days of berries and dried meats, she could have shed a tear. Emiko sat a clay cup in front of her quietly.

"Melon juice," she muttered. Sakura nodded in thanks, taking a sip to wash the cake down.

"So young lady," the amiable shop owner began. "I couldn't help but notice your headband…what brings you to a quiet place like Yume for a mission?"

Sakura took another bite of cake, savoring it. "Actually, I'm here to take a ship to the Land of Water."

An instantly noticeable change in mood settled over the shop. Patrons that had been quietly eating, paused, glancing at Sakura in open surprise?

"Those cursed islands?" a young woman whispered.

"Cursed?" Sakura repeated. "Are you talking about the mysterious illness that's been spreading?"

"No, no! Those islands were cursed long before that…" An older man insisted. "You know, folk there are strange, in a mild manner of speaking. Wary of strangers and known to practice all kinds of things. You be careful there, young lady."

Startled, Sakura tried desperately to process the information. In her time, the Land of Water was home to Kirigakure, a village long since renowned for their bloody civil wars, persecution of anyone possessing a kekkei genkai and the Seven Ninja Swordsman. But she hadn't heard about any of those things yet, and given that Konoha was only just taking off, it was unlikely that Kiri existed. In the academy she'd learned that Konoha had been the first to be established, followed by Sunagakure, and then the other villages. Kiri was second to last…

Then again, she reasoned, with the peaceable nature of people in Yume, it wouldn't be hard to imagine that they would call the gory, sordid way of life in the Land of Water "strange" to put it politely.

The owner cleared her throat, effectively breaking Sakura's concentration. "I think that'll be enough worrying our guest. Here you are; the mizu manju is cool enough to serve now." Sakura took off her pack, digging into it and producing the amount she'd seen on the menu.

Thinking of the kindness she'd been shown, she dug out a few extra yen pieces and snuck them between the paper money, handing both over to little Emiko. The little girl's brows lifted questioningly, but Sakura gently placed a finger to her lips. Three mizu manju were set in front of her, but Sakura found herself too preoccupied to eat.

Hashirama sat down the message Tobirama had given him, stunned speechless. For his part, his brother waited somewhat impatiently. "Well?"

The older Senju read over the beautiful, flowing scrawl for what felt like the dozenth time. 

"After careful consideration, we of the Hyuga clan agree to discuss negotiations with you, Hashirama Senju, Hokage of Konohagakure, provided your brother acts as a witness. Be
forewarned that we have conditions rooted in the traditions of our clan that we are unwilling to compromise about. If the time and date included below is amenable to you, then we can proceed."

If anything, there was clear progress. The Hyuga were finally, after weeks of hard-won political negotiation, willing to discuss the terms in which they would consider relocating to Konoha. Although the budding village would have likely done fine in the long term without their inclusion, Hashirama had been adamant that if Konoha ever became a reality, as many clans as possible should be invited. Some had been easier to court than others, with the Hyuga being among the hardest to convince. "Tobirama, this is incredible! They're finally willing to have talks,"

Tobirama lifted his chin, a touch of annoyance in the firm line of his mouth. "Was there ever doubt that I would prevail?"

Hashirama carried on blithely, "You understand this calls for honey wine. I still haven't broken in the set Toka and Reira gave me."

Tobirama's eyes narrowed. "You're getting far too carried away. I've merely brought them to the table. Between this and the new trade agreement, granted Madara can truly coax them into a treaty, there's still much to be done."

Hashirama straightened his shoulders, his smile falling away. "Right, of course. I didn't assign the task to Madara simply because you were indisposed, you know. Despite your feelings you have to admit he's a skilled negotiator in his own right."

Tobirama turned his burning eyes onto the unlucky bonsai perched at the corner of the desk. "Tch..."

"Fine, fine..." Hashirama waved aside his brother's petulant mood. "It's too early for you to give Madara any sort of credit, even when it's just us here. So we won't talk about that right now...why don't you tell me how you managed to entice the Hyuga?"

Tobirama's eyes darted momentarily to Hashirama's hopeful face and then fell back to Bukkai in boredom. "That's nothing of interest," he grumbled. Truth be told, Hashirama had left the minute details to Tobirama, because when he'd taken over correspondence with the Hyuga, he seemed to get a better reception, curthou the responses may have been. This the Hokage had always simply credited with Tobirama's taciturn personality.

Something about him must have appealed to the Hyuga's sense of traditionalism. After all, even if Tobirama was only conveying his ideas for him, he always managed to do so in a much more level-headed way that didn't come across as radical as when Hashirama spoke them himself. It was the difference in delivery that mattered most during tough political negotiations such as these.

However, after a point in the talks, Tobirama had become more reserved, giving him less and less detail about exactly how it was he was managing to keep the Hyuga's attention, only mentioning things were proceeding accordingly. But now that things were as good as sealed, Hashirama found himself bubbling with curiosity.

The Hokage playfully wiggled his brows. "Being coy now, brother?"

"No," Tobirama denied. "It just isn't a tale that needs reiterating. I've been speaking with Hisoki Hyuga and gradually ingratiating myself to him."

"Mhm," his brother hummed. "Continue,"

Tobirama gave Bukkai an unimpressed stare before rounding on its owner. Sighing, he explained,
"A man like Haruaki isn't hard to understand. But he's hard to court politically, in this instance. The kind of change inherently involved in the process of a functioning ninja village with so many clans and the blending of cultures is, for all intensive perhaps, in staunch opposition to what a traditionalist clan like the Hyuga stand for. Keeping negotiations going meant convincing them they wouldn't lose their identity by joining Konoha. It also meant finding common ground."

"I see," Hashirama muttered to himself. "You've always been so good at understanding what it is someone truly wants from negotiations. But," Here his chin fell to his chest as he peered over the desk suspiciously at his brother. "What common ground do you have with someone like that? The Senju haven't been the most open to changing either, until recently. I'm not sure I'd call our clan one that takes traditionalism to the extent that the Hyuga do, though…"

"It isn't about the similarities of our clans." Tobirama rolled his shoulder, still finding more interest in Bukkai than in looking him in the eyes. "We, as individuals, simply share a few beliefs."

"Well now you've truly piqued my interest," Hashirama was bordering between being inquisitive and concerned. It was unlike his brother to hedge around a conversation so much. Tobirama's personality was as blunt as a stone and cut as sharply as a newly forged blade.

"Are you waiting on me to tell you?" Tobirama scoffed, "What more is there to say?"

"Plenty!" howled the Hokage. "Of all times for you to decide to be more subtle..."

"Our commonality begins and ends with a dislike for a certain person."

"Oh," Hashirama breathed a sigh of relief, "That's reasonable, at least. The enemy of my enemy is— a certain person?"

"I won't repeat myself."

Curiosity quickly became suspicion again. The Hyuga was a prominent clan with a coveted doujutsu. They had many enemies. But more than any other clan, the ones they had a fierce rivalry with were…

"Tobirama, tell me you didn't," Hashirama groaned as his forehead touched the desk.

There was a silence, not so much as a quip to confirm or deny. Peeling his face from the cool wooden surface, Hashirama met his brother's gaze, mortified. "Tell me you didn't... didn't get this far in the negotiation process by sharing your theories on the Uchiha clan!" For quite some time, Tobirama had held firmly to the belief that the Uchiha were cursed to hate. Or, the Curse of Hatred. Despite being unsubstantiated, Tobirama had often claimed if he could study the mind of an Uchiha, he could prove his theory beyond a doubt. It wasn't something he'd talked about since they had signed the Uchiha and Senju treaty, not something he would ever allow his brother to do, even if he miraculously managed to find an Uchiha willing. It didn't stop the cogs of morally ambiguous inquisition from turning.

"Of course not," Tobirama replied, affronted. "I'm not a fool. To discuss discontent in the ranks is to give the enemy an angle to exploit. I wouldn't openly condemn the whole clan to the Hyuga. However, he asked what kind of man I thought Madara Uchiha was, and I gave my honest opinion."

Hashirama sucked in a deep breath and held it. Even when the burning in his lungs started, he held it in a little longer. "...Tobirama... why? Why?" The Hokage's whines were muffled by the sleeve of his robes as he pressed an arm to his face.
"It worked," Tobirama muttered with a defensive edge. "I told them what I felt, which also happened to be what they wanted to hear, and it worked."

"Yes, but," the Shodai rubbed at the bridge of his nose. "Don't you think that expressing your dislike for Madara, the leader of the clan, is the same as expressing dislike for the whole clan?"

"Why would it be?" Tobirama argued. "Madara is a particularly unscrupulous individual, even by Uchiha standards."

"And so you simply made Madara out to be the worst the Uchiha had to offer? I can't believe…"

He blinked at the pale flesh of Tobirama's palm being held in the air.

"I've made it clear the Uchiha are a firm fixture in Konoha. The Hyuga know that we aren't casting one clan aside to accommodate them. Expressing my thoughts about living in the same village as a spastic, dramatic, pompous man such as Madara and promising something unreasonable that would isolate one of the most powerful clans Konoha has are different things."

Hashirama scrubbed a hand down his face, peeking through his fingers hopefully. "So you didn't tell the Hyuga anything truly damaging that would put us in a corner with the Uchiha…but you…gossiped about Madara?"

"It is not gossiping. It's an exchanging of like-minded opinions. What self-respecting man gossips?" Tobirama crossed his arms and glared outright.

"I mean," Giggles erupted before he could bite them back. "I mean apparently you do." It was all he could get out before the giggles overtook him again, making his shoulders bounce. The wood of Tobirama's chair scraping against the floor as he stood alerted him that he'd succeeded in annoying his brother.

"I'll be taking my leave," he growled.

With speed impressive even for a shinobi of his caliber, Tobirama had slammed the door, so hard it rattled scrolls on the wall and caused Bukkai to teeter off the edge of the desk. Hashirama snapped out of his laughing fit long enough to lunge for his beloved bonsai, grinning nervously at it. "He'll be annoyed with me for a while over that," the Hokage whispered, lovingly caressing the sides of the ceramic pot with his thumbs. "But he shouldn't take it out on you."

There were at least ten ships of varying sizes docked at the harbor, many still being loaded for their voyages. Sakura strained to tilt her head back far enough to see the tops of some of the largest ones, which must have been sixty feet across. One in particular made her stop and stare, a beautiful cargo ship. While she was certainly no expert on vessels, Sakura had seen a handful of them in her lifetime.

She knew enough to hazard a guess that the crew kept this one exceptionally maintained. It had to stand at least a hundred feet, hull painted white and The Spiriter embossed across the side in hand-carved script. Even Madara must have been at least mildly impressed, because out of her peripherals he stood off to the side, gazing up at the ship approvingly.

A young man on the deck who had been directing the crew noticed them, and came to peer over the edge. "Beautiful, ain't she?" he called down, the mild breeze carrying his voice.

Surprised, Sakura blinked, a bit abashed at being caught gawking. Nevertheless, she nodded truthfully. "I've never seen a cargo ship shine like that. Your crew puts a lot of time into it."
They watched as the young man smiled in pride, walking across deck and coming down the boarding plank. He had a more graceful gait than she’d expect from a sailor. Then again, he didn't exactly look much like the burly, sea-hardened men behind him. Young and well-tanned with keen green eyes and white blonde hair, when his stare settled on her, Sakura found her cheeks warming rapidly.

Halfway down the plank, he paused, eyes widening slightly. "So...you're the shinobi traveling from Konoha?" It was then that Sakura realized he hadn't been watching her; he'd been studying their headbands.

"The hitai-ate seem to make that obvious." Madara said flatly. Sakura bristled, ready to reprimand him for his rudeness, but the young man hardly seemed bothered.

"That's true enough." He shrugged. "It's my first time ever meeting shinobi, so I'll admit I was hoping to see you before we set sail. Words gotten 'round about a place where shinobi from different clans live, united by a single symbol."

"W-Wait," Sakura's face fell. "Before you set sail? Aren't you...isn't this..." she motioned to The Spiriter, "The ship taking us to the Land of Water?" The Hokage had never told them, or at least not her, the name of the ship or its captain. Simply that it would be there, ready to set sail and take them in three days' time. It was vain, but the minute she saw attractive young man and the proud ship, she had assumed. Dared to hope... Surely, the Hokage would find them the finest accommodations possible. Wouldn't he?

His lips lifted into a wry quirk. "Mm, I'm starting to wish." Then, shaking his head, he thumbed past his own ship. "I think you're actually looking for The Harbinger."

"You could have said so, instead of wasting time," Madara sighed, already making his way to the ship docked next to The Spiriter. The ship Sakura hadn't bothered to take note of when she'd been captivated by the attractive crewman and his pretty ship.

Hesitantly, she made her way around the side of The Spiriter, and her mouth fell in undisguised shock at the sight of a vessel that had seen more than its fair share of storms and looked to be in need of some repair. Aboard, a motley assortment of men and women were loading for their trip too, securing crates and taking things below deck.

Although, unlike the crew of The Spiriter, there didn't seem to be any true order. Sakura watched in disbelief as they loudly bickered, dropping crates of what was probably precious cargo to shove against each other. The next thing she knew, two men were in a full out brawl, with the rest of the crew circling them to chant encouragingly.

Shaking her head, the pink-haired nin took a cautious step away. All things considered, it didn't sit well to board a ship with such an ominous name, the crew's conduct momentarily aside.

"This has to be a mistake," Sakura muttered. "We can't..." Madara turned away from the fight, strolling back toward The Spiriter.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

Madara didn't so much as miss a step. "It doesn't matter where The Spiriter was originally planning to go, its new destination is the Land of Water."

"I don't want to board that any more than you do," Sakura argued, "But you can't make a ship change course. Maybe there's a captain somewhere that can sort it out—"
"Oi!" Craning her neck around, the kunoichi was just in time to see a very angry looking middle-aged woman wielding a ladle march through the crowd on deck, which parted effortlessly for her.

Once she'd gotten herself between the two brawlers, she shoved them away from each other with ease, rearing back to smack the shorter one across the face with her ladle. He stumbled, clutching his jaw.

"What're ya always ruinin' our fun for, Junko?" demanded a grisly red-haired man.

"This is why we're behind schedule! This is why we always get passed up for the big jobs!" she ranted. "You sorry lot spend more time arguin' like brats than anything!"

"Seafolk aren't for tamin'." One of the men who'd been fighting laughed, slinging an arm around her shoulders and drawing her closer. "Salt o' the sea's in our blood! We fight, we sail and we fuc —"

With an impressively precise maneuver, Sakura watched the woman named Junko seize his arm and twist it behind his back, throwing him with an infuriated cry.

The sizable splash as he hit the water made Madara stop and turn around. The Harbinger's crew laughed and the sailor came up sputtering, grumbling about mutiny as he swam his way onto the harbor's dock.

Sakura leaned down, careful not to get any seawater on her exposed toes as he hauled himself up with a grunt. "Are you alright?"

Apparently surprised by her presence, he took a minute longer than she was comfortable with staring into her face while she bent awkwardly.

"Y-You, you're a goddess. You have to be." Sakura's heart leapt in panic.

"What? No, I—"

"Don't mind him!" the woman who had thrown him called down to her. "Tries to sweet talk any decent looking lady he sees!"

Madara was mildly amused by this news. "Decent-looking, you say?" He gave Sakura an appraising stare, as if examining a merchant's wares. "Beauty really is in the eyes of the beholder."

"This close," she snarled in his direction, showing him the space between her thumb and index finger. Clearing her throat, she politely ignored the sopping wet state of the sailor's clothes. "We're looking for the ship traveling to the Land of Water. We—"

"Look!" Another sailor yelled from the ship. "Looka their headbands! They're neenja!" Sakura watched in confusion as everyone aboard dropped whatever they were doing and clambered to the side of ship to get a look at Madara and herself. The crew gave a collective gasp of awe and Sakura shifted uncomfortably. The ogling made her feel like a rare species in the wild that had encountered people.

"Ignore those apes, miss," the dripping crewman did an awkward, clumsy bow, grasping her hand and squeezing, giving her a sincere smile of crooked or missing teeth. "Welcome, we're honored to take ya to the Land of Water. And the boys'll be on their best behavior."

"Then this is our ship?" Madara asked, barely masking his disdain.
"Course! And you just made it. We're all ready to set sail."

Creaking on a ship, he supposed, was normal. Especially a well-aged vessel, which the Harbinger undoubtedly was. But with each step, Madara half-expected his foot to go right through the planks of the deck.

Haruno was traipsing around just as carefully, glancing down at her feet periodically and quietly sucking in her breath with every suspicious groan of the ship. "Sorry you had to see us like that." The hulking sailor that had slipped out of the top half of his jinbei raised a meaty hand in belated greeting. "I captain this sorry crew. You and the little lady can call me Joben."

Haruno spun around, no longer caring where she stepped, her mouth agape. "You're captain?!" she yelped. Realizing her blunder, she covered her mouth, "S-She just threw you overboard, so I thought…" her voice petered off in embarrassment.

Joben gave a hearty guffaw and all the sailors, including the reedy woman who had found the strength to toss him into the sea, followed. "Junko there is our cook! Keeps us fed," he patted at his stomach. "And in line. Uses that damn ladle of hers more to smack us silly than to serve."

Junko, her dulled blonde hair cropped short on one side in a fashion he'd never seen, smirked. "Wouldn't have it any other way, cap'n."

Joben rolled his eyes, scratching at his toned abdomen. "Anyway, these are the men n' women who earn their keep as the crew. And this," he patted at the head of a young boy that had squeezed his way through to stand at his side, eying them in child-like wonderment, "is my boy, Kazu."

"R-Real n-ninja?" he sputtered excitedly.

"I'm Sakura Haruno." Haruno introduced herself.

She was met with a chorus of friendly greetings.

"What about you? You're not the shy sort are ya?" Junko asked him.

The whole crew leaned in expectantly. "Madara Uchiha."

"Uchiha…?" someone repeated. "I know that name. They're real famous shinobi." That got the crew worked up, and everyone was chattering to themselves in low, impressed tones.

He'd never admit it, but the thought of even the simplest of sea men knowing and respecting the Uchiha name made his chest swell.

Apparently his wasn't the only ego boosted. "Important people? On my ship?" Not even Joben's thick beard hid the wide smile. "Call for a celebration if I ever heard one. We'll have sake tonight, boys!" The ship collectively cheered, and everyone animatedly sprang into their positions, ready to set sail. When Joben thundered his way across the deck, bellowing orders to lower the sails, raise the anchor and cut the rope, he resembled a man closer to a true captain. Gone was the smart-mouthed seaman who had allowed a cook to fling him overboard.

No sooner had his confidence in the man's skills raised minutely then the ship lurched as it turned, sending a stumbling Haruno into his arms. Dazed, she stayed pressed against him as she caught her breath, hands to his chest. When she looked up at him with hooded eyes, the green caught the sunlight, and he silently marveled at their seafoam color.
"Oi! What're ya doin' up there?!" Junko screamed, running over to Joben. "Looks like you started drinking early, you no good, second-rate seadog!"

Joben was unfazed, taking one hand off the helm to shoo her away. "Ahaha! Sorry, sorry! Just a small error."

His boisterous laughter was the last note that broke the spell, Haruno violently pushing herself from him with an indignant shriek of "Shannaro!" of all things.

And, with the unnatural amount of strength she'd use to pummel Tobirama into the ground, she sent him skidding across deck, only the chakra he applied to his feet in the nick of time keeping him from taking a humiliating spill. Though he supposed it could have been worse, as everyone was too preoccupied to notice.

Madara watched her storm off, her ever noticeable hair fluttering in the late afternoon breeze. Haruno's sudden bursts of sporadic anger juxtaposed against the nearly docile temperament he'd seen her use when not interacting with him, was much like the finicky nature of the sea itself. Reasoning would follow that her element would be Suiton. Like the Senju bastard's.

Bitterness.

That was the only emotion to describe it. He was born inclined to Katon… a passionate, all-consuming, dominating element. A raging fire against the raging might of the sea. The outcome would seem obvious, but the notion that in a clash she would triumph didn't sit well with him at all. A dance would decide it. When the time came, he would challenge her to a dance.
Voyage

There was something to be said about the amount of energy the crew possessed. It didn't wane at all when the sun started to dip on the horizon. If anything, once the mugs were passed around and the expanse of sky settled into an orange-pink glow, it only amplified.

Sakura found herself pulled into the festivities, handed a tumbler almost overflowing with fizzing amber liquid that smelled nothing like any alcohol she knew of. Joben had called it sake, but this was far from it…

A green-haired woman who had introduced herself not even ten minutes prior as Ai threw a muscled arm around her shoulders, bringing Sakura in closer and singing loudly in her ears. The whole ship was belting the verses of a sea-song unlike anything she’d ever heard. Noticing that everyone else was imbibing, Sakura took a tentative sip of alcohol, managing something she hoped was more akin to a smile and not a grimace to Ai, who had them swaying back and forth.

It wasn't honey wine…that was for sure. Whatever had been offered was more on the sour side with a faint, burning sensation and an aftertaste reminiscent of apples. Unexpected, but after taking a minute to let the taste settle, Sakura decided it wasn't unpalatable and had another sip.

"Good stuff, eh?" Ai's husky voice filled her ear.

"Mmph!" Sakura coughed some of the drink out when Ai delivered a swift smack to the middle of her back, catching her off guard.

Not minding, she continued, "The capt'n's favorite, it is. Nice and strong, but just a lil' sweet enough for ya not to mind the burn much once it goes down."

"He called it sake." Sakura licked at the droplets around her lips after pulling the tumbler away. "But this doesn't taste like it…it doesn't really look like it either."

"Special sake." Ai agreed. "Not like whatcha can get from the mainland, but it's popular far, far away in certain places. Capt'n Joben had it at a tavern an' raved about it for weeks! He got a cravin' for it after that, so now we stockpile barrels of the stuff." Ai snatched a second tumbler from a sailor that already looked tipsy who stumbled by, draining the contents herself and then shoving the empty mug back into the man's hands. "Drink up!" she encouraged. "Long trip ahead. No sense spendin' it dry."

Everyone on deck was certainly following that philosophy at the moment. Sakura was impressed at just how much had already been put away by the rowdy sailors. Joben was one of the loudest. He stood behind the helm, wheel gripped tight in one hand and mug raised high in the other, leading the songs. On a particularly sharp note he chugged hard, the amber liquid that missed his mouth dribbling down his bare chest.

Aside from Junko, who stood off to the side, holding a tumbler on a tray aloft over her head and bending down to speak to the captain's son, it didn't appear anyone had chosen not to partake. At first glance, anyway…

Another perusal of the ship revealed the absence of a certain Uchiha. Sakura gently shrugged away from Ai, doing a full spin, and even craning her head back to squint up at the crow's nest, unlikely as it was that he'd be there.

"Lookin' for your partner?" Junko had come up behind her, a pouting Kazu trailing after her. Up
close, she could finally see the resemblance to Joben, if only slightly. He possessed a softer face, unmarred by the rough life of a seaman, but the red-tinted color to the brown hair that brushed his shoulders was the same shade as the captain's, and he had the same shape to his hazel eyes. "It's not that he has to be here," she was quick to clarify. "Wherever he is, he can stay there."

"Below deck in the cabins." Junko smiled sympathetically. "I'm use ta the ruckus these fools raise when they get drink in their guts. But it ain't for everyone. Don't blame him for wantin' to be away from it. Seems like the type that likes the quiet. Thought I'd bring 'em this just in case, though."

"I said I'd take it!" Kazu stood on the tips of his toes and reached for the tray futilely. Junko's arm span was well out of the boy's reach. She bent down and pinched his cheek firmly, pulling it.

"Boy, you must think I've been drinking seawater." The cook laughed. "I give you this and the first thing you'll do is try n' sneak a sip. Don't think I'm not wise to you."

Kazu's ears turned pink. He avoided Junko's eyes, pouting harder. "Can I…can I at least come with you, then?"

"Only if you're willing to help peel potatoes." she answered, starting on her way again. "Once the drinkin's done, it'll be time to start supper."

Kazu groaned, tugging at his hair. "I just wanna talk to a real ninja!"

Junko turned her head, "There's one right in front of you, isn't there?"

The little boy turned to give Sakura his full attention, eyes bright. "Y-yeah! You're a ninja too!" Sakura didn't have time to be offended that her status as a career shinobi was an afterthought when he began bouncing around her, rattling off questions, "What's it like? Do you really throw stars? How many people did ya kill?" He was so excited, he didn't seem to notice the presence looming behind him, but Sakura immediately saw her.

Ai, who had gone off at some point to refill her tumbler, came up behind Kazu to clap him on the shoulder. "Try givin' our guest some space, Kazu-chan."

Ironically, Sakura thought, it was Ai who had practically been embracing her in drunken revelry not so long ago. She seemed slightly more mellowed, although the pink tint to her cheeks suggested she wasn't completely sober. It wouldn't surprise Sakura in the least to find that the Harbinger was full of barely functioning alcoholics.

"I'm nine now, so don't call me 'chan' anymore!" Kazu complained, flailing to get away. "An' anyways, I just wanted to know what a ninja's really like. I never seen one before." He wandered closer to Sakura again, and she eyed him warily when he leaned toward her.

Being that he was only a child, his head barely came to her stomach, and when he was in a half-crouch, it was even lower than that. Uncomfortably so. When she felt a small hand reach out and ghost against her leg, she acted on impulse, smacking blindly.

"Pervert!" Sakura screamed, vision momentarily clouding. When she blinked away the anger enough to realize who her victim was, she found Ai laughing and Kazu…

Kazu laid sprawled on deck, a fresh red imprint across his right cheek and stars in his eyes. "I just…I just wanted to see how you moved in that." He mumbled.

"Well," Sakura planted her feet as the ship lurched, arms akimbo. "You could do that without touching." Her annoyance devolved to worry as the boy slowly sat up and she noticed his cheek
was quickly swelling. Biting her lip, she reached for him, preparing to heal the injury.

"Ah, boy'll be fine." Sakura stopped and saw Joben sauntering over, attracted by the commotion. A skinny man was at the helm now, idly steering the ship. For a man of his girth, he moved faster than expected. "Sorry if my no-manners son offended ya. He's thick-headed like his father."

The kunoichi shook her head, reaching for Kazu once again. "I overreacted. Here," Predictably, he flinched away.

Kazu raised his arms up to protect his face, peeking at Sakura from the space between. "Y-You gonna smack me again?"

"That really was just reflex." Sakura insisted. "If you let me, I'll heal it."

"How?" he asked, suddenly curious.

Sakura wordlessly activated her technique, bringing a steady hand to the boy's swollen face as Joben and Ai looked on, mesmerized. She couldn't help but laugh a little as Kazu's once apprehensive expression was overcome by a dopey grin.

"Well, blow me down…" Joben exclaimed from behind her. "Ninja sure are mighty impressive!"

"Ya really can use chakra for just about anythin'. Woulda taken a couple of days for that to disappear otherwise," Ai nodded.

Kazu felt his face, poking and prodding. "Feels like it never happened!" Hopping up, he stretched his arms above his head. It wasn't long before he was zipping around the deck, almost crashing into half-drunk sailors several times.

"That boy," Joben shook his head, but there was an undeniable fondness in his voice. "Anyways," he proclaimed, eying Sakura. "It'll be a while yet before Junko's done. Don't 'spose you'd fancy a little test o' strength in the meantime."

"I'm listening…"

"Round here there ain't no better way to wash down a few drinks then with a friendly competition of arm wrestlin'!" Joben flexed, and Sakura had to admit that even for a man that was possibly over forty, the work he did around the ship gave him impressive muscle toning.

"Did I hear right? The captain's challenging the lady ninja?" Startled, Sakura looked up where the shout had come from. Sliding down the ropes of the sails was a bare-footed man with an eager look in his eyes.

"You heard that from all the way up there?" Sakura pointed. "Even with the wind in your ears?"

"My job is to keep my ears to the wind, miss. But I hear nearly everything all the same, especially challenges. I go by Inoue." he saluted. "And I'd like to see how a shinobi goes up against the most rough n' tumble man on the seas."

"What do ya say?" Ai wheedled. "Interestin' huh?"

Sakura placed a finger to her bottom lip. "I don't see the harm." Deep inside, a competitive fuse had been lit, and she flexed her own arm with a steadily widening smirk. "Sure, I'll take you on!"

"Not so fast, little lady!" Inoue wagged a finger. "There's an order to this things, ya see. Challengin'
the captain comes last. Ya gotta go through the other challengers first."

Her brow dipped in skepticism. "Other…challengers? Like who?"

"Like us!" At least ten more sailors in various states of drunkenness were suddenly closing in on them, raring to go. It almost seemed unfair to have the advantage of a clear mind and her raw strength, but, their ship their rules.

"Backin' down?" Joben asked, sounding disappointed.

"Who do I go through first?" Sakura's answer roused cheers from the crew, crates dragged to the middle of the deck along with two stools. She took a seat on one, and Ai, still a little uneasy on her feet, skipped over, settling herself on the other.

"Ai, uh, are you sure?" Sakura could see she still looked a little…impaired, for lack of a better word.

"M'fiiine!" she drawled. "I've handled sword fights after drinking more n' this."

"Ya nearly split yourself open, trying to hold the pointy end!" someone called.

"Oh, drink piss," Ai swore, placing her elbow on the crate, clenching and unclenching her fist. "I may not be the strongest here, but I won't insult ya by givin' you less than my best."

Seeing that her opponent was determined to go through with it, Sakura eased her hand into Ai's before squeezing tight. Admittedly, she was impressed that the hand grasped in hers only buckled for a second before it squeezed back. Hard. Some of the fogginess had left the sailor's eyes.

Inoue hovered close, the unofficial officiator. "Steady now…steady…and…go!"

Suddenly they were grappling one-handed, Sakura silently marveling at the fact that Ai was notably strong, even drunk. But, she had arm-wrestled against the best. Her mentor.

"This is unexpected, although not really." The head of the Inuzuka sighed. "Please, take a seat."

The room Izuna was led into was dimly lit and sparsely furnished. It had only been a few days since they'd settled in the village though.

Izuna sat himself on the tatami mat closest to the door, nodding in appreciation. "Thank you for agreeing to this on such short notice, Tsuba-san."

As acting head in Madara's absence, it fell to Izuna to carry out the will of the clan. And, presently that was investigating what truth there were to the rumors that members of the Kaguya now resided in Konoha. There'd been stirrings of restlessness within the Uchiha, some suggesting taking a complaint to the Hokage. But bringing forth a grievance without fully knowing the situation seemed like a waste of his time. To placate those among the elders who groused the loudest, he agreed to see for himself, if nothing else.

Tobirama Senju had nearly been the death of him.

But the whispers circulating throughout the village also named him as the one in charge of the Kaguya. No doubt wherever the alleged prisoners were being held, it was somewhere under his watchful eye. The trouble was how to confirm anything. Waltzing his way into the Senju compound was problematic for obvious reasons. And though he could ask the Hokage, who would likely be more forthcoming with information and sympathetic to his clan's wariness, it hadn't yet
escalated to the point where Izuna felt he needed to be involved.

There was one other party that was repeatedly mentioned in village gossip. The Inuzuka, who had become involved. Izuna had no idea how he'd be received if he approached them for information. Tales of their barbaric customs were commonplace. He had grown up hearing the Inuzuka ran naked through the woods, could transform into terrible creatures and occasionally stole and ate babies when food was scarce for them.

Of course he knew better than to take those at face value. Rumor still had it that an Uchiha would would kill the person closest to them as a coming of age ritual, in order to take their eyes and obtain a more powerful Sharingan. If that theory was to be believed, eye theft ran rampant in the clan. In short, hearsay was not only unreliable, but outright false.

It was pure chance that he encountered the clan head, walking through the village with her ninzen. The red fangs on her cheeks made her easily distinguishable as an Inuzuka, but it was the deference she was given by the others of her clan who accompanied her that made him suspect she was indeed the clan matriarch.

He had approached and introduced himself. Inwardly, he was embarrassed to be speaking to her on the basis of a rumor. However, it quickly turned to surprise when she not only confirmed it as truth, but agreed to allow him to speak to the Kaguya briefly that same evening. Izuna found her much more gracious and agreeable than he could have ever expected. Still, he wasn't fooled into thinking she was a pushover. There was a contained ferocity in her eyes, just under the surface.

Even as he sat waiting, Izuna knew better than to think he wasn't being closely watched. "Of course. Your concerns are understood. I'll be back with them momentarily."

When she left, Izuna had time to sit and think of who exactly she'd return with. There hadn't been much discussion about specifics, but she'd assured him that the Kaguya she was responsible for meant no harm to the village. Given his history with them, that was hard to believe without speaking to them himself. That was if they would speak at all. He was an Uchiha, and any Kaguya who saw him would know that.

The sound of multiple voices in the hall made him lift his head. They were quickly growing closer, and Izuna thought in bewilderment that they sounded so...young. Were these Kaguya children?

When the rice paper doors slid open and not one, but two young girls stepped through, followed by Tsuba and a white-haired young man who looked vaguely familiar, he got his answer.

While he was still recovering from his surprise, the older girl stepped forward, scrutinizing him with hostile eyes. "Who's he?" she demanded, eyebrows slumped downward.

"He is here to see you," Tsuba said coolly.

Izuna gave the feisty girl a cordial smile, which only made her eyes narrow further. "Hello, my name is—"

"Izuna..."

The Uchiha met eyes with the boy who had uttered his name, confusion morphing into recognition. "Jun'ichi..."

Their acknowledgement of each other came as a surprise to the room's three other occupants. Tsuba and the two girls looked back and forth, the Inuzuka matriarch giving voice to the silent question shared between them. "You've met before?"
"Long ago, as children..." Jun'ichi answered. "It was well before the two of you were born."

I see," Tsuba rubbed her chin. "Fate is a mysterious thing."

Jun'ichi sat next to Izuna, neither speaking. After considering his next words, the Kaguya opened his mouth, "Are you here because of the recent incident between our clans? They say the sins of the father are the sins of the son after all."

"No...The gunbai is back in my brother's possession. Holding grudges over something already resolved would be trivial." He noticed that the stiffness in Jun'ichi's posture lessened.

"So...Oka and the others were really shinobi of Konoha." he whispered. Hair obscured half his face as he rested his chin on his knuckles, deep in thought. Izuna didn't completely understand where Jun'ichi's mind was going, but it seemed to be headed there fast, because when he lifted his face, there was clarity in those brown eyes. Clarity and...hope.

"Kikue can't feel her..." the smallest child pouted.

"It doesn't mean she doesn't live here." her sister replied, "Ninja do leave their villages sometimes."

"Is that what you did?" Izuna couldn't think of any other reason Yoshiro would send his children to Konoha. He could have just as easily sent an army, instead of risking his heir.

"There was nothing left for us there. The way of my father is outdated. It's something we wanted to part with. Our intentions were originally to strike out on our own, living freely for as long as possible. Until father came for us, or..." Whatever else Jun'ichi had expected would happen to them, he left unsaid, instead gently stroking the head of his youngest sister. "...Izuna, I want you to understand that I can't fully atone for what my clan has done. Which is why we've given ourselves over to Konoha willingly. If being prisoners is what comes of it...then I don't mind."

The reactions of his sisters'...varied.

"Exactly. You don't mind."

"Kikue doesn't mind either! Because she gets to play with Yoyo-chan!"

"What made you decide to try? You say you understand that you might never be fully forgiven. But you were so adamant about attempting to distance yourself from your clan, you allowed yourself to become a prisoner." Izuna stared in quiet disbelief. "I think you've changed since we last met."

"Indeed." There was total serenity in the eldest Kaguya's eyes. "To be blunt, I never put much effort into anything before. Changing was...futile to me. No matter what I did, my ancestors left behind a bloody legacy I'd one day inherit, and there was nothing I could do about that. I told myself I felt nothing, I turned a blind eye to every one of my father's atrocities...even...even my own mother's death." Taking a moment to compose himself, Jun'ichi pressed on. "Then she came and...She had so much passion. I could never have such a strong will, but watching her made me want...to be less passive."

"Nee-san believed in us!" Kikue proclaimed. "So...even just a little, we can believe in ourselves."

That took some mulling over. Something had moved these three to leave the comforts of everything the'd known behind and enter hostile territory, motivated by the desire to change.

Sakura had mentioned that Jun'ichi was instrumental in helping them escape, and it had just seemed so unlike the sullen boy he remembered. Yet so many years had passed since then that
such a radical change wasn't outside the realm of possibility. Furthermore, if he recalled correctly, Jun'ichi was only a year younger than himself, making him nineteen to his twenty. They were both young men now. Old enough to shoulder clan responsibilities, to lead raids, to take wives...

When he mentioned this "Oka" something lit up in him, and Izuna couldn't help but wonder if he meant...Sakura. Was it so unreasonable to think that while on a mission she would have used an alias? Or even a full body henge? Pink hair and the small purple diamond seal were rather notable. Concealing them would have been the most prudent thing.

Assuming he was correct in his thinking, it still left something else uncomfortable hanging in the air.

Since childhood, Izuna had always possessed what he considered a healthy dose of curiosity. The world was a vast place, full of knowledge both good and bad. To him, nothing had ever been wrong with wanting to take in as much as possible. His brothers would laugh when his searches for answers led him to getting in trouble with their father. And when his questions were too frequent, Madara would pointedly tell him to shut up. But it was a cathartic sensation to know.

In fact, one of the traits he admired most in Sakura, one of the reasons he deduced talking to her came so easily, was because she was the same. When she asked him about the gunbai he could see it in her eyes.

For the first time he could recall, Izuna wasn't sure he wanted to know. Jun'ichi had shown more emotion in the span of several minutes, in large part due to "Oka" then he could ever remember him showing in the week he'd known him as boys. If Oka was Sakura, then he didn't want to know why Jun'ichi had developed such a fixation on her. The surface level understanding was that she had inspired him. Underneath, however... Did it mean anything else? Was there a reason he should even concern himself with it beyond that?

Funny how he had come to secure some kind of reassurance for his clan, and ended up making things uncomfortable for himself...

Sakura ground her teeth, trying to ignore the clamoring of shouts around them. She'd worked her way through eight opponents so far. Each stronger than the last, but ultimately no match for her grit, strength and latent competitive streak. Now on her ninth, the crew was worked into a fervor, almost no one cheering for the man who sat across from her, straining with all his might, face red in exertion. She felt sorry for him. They should've been cheering for him, but instead...

"SA-KU-RA!"

"SA-KU-RA!"

There was no doubt their screams reverberated below deck. Anyone on the ship not witnessing the competition was participating by proxy. Their hot-blooded enthusiasm must have rubbed off on her, combining with the adrenaline rushing through her veins, because all she wanted in that moment was to keep her streak alive. A bead of sweat trickled down her brow, and with a determined cry, Sakura stood, slamming Gintaki's arm down on the crate.

That had been her intention, at least. But in all the excitement, she'd used too much force, and he crashed through not only the crate they were bracing against, but the deck itself, sending broken wood flying as he fell through the hole with a scream. All the cheering died in an instant, replaced by a collective gasp.
Horrified, Sakura was the first to scramble to the edge of hole and peek down. "S-Sorry!" she called into the void.

"Iss alright!" Gintaki yelled back, sounding winded. "Somethin' down here broke my fall!"

"Someone bring a light!" Joben ordered.

Inoue came with a lantern, dangling it over the deep drop below deck and illuminating the faces gathered around it. The lantern’s reach didn't extend far enough to completely light where Gintaki had fallen. Not enough to see everything, but it was enough to see two glowing red pinpricks in the dark.

"W-What...?" Kazu gasped.

"Get off." Sakura recognized the baritone, heard the quiet but very tangible rage. Gintaki screamed again, this time as he went flying across the cabin. Sakura crawled backwards, a sense of foreboding creeping up her spine as the red pinpricks looked upwards, becoming the unmistakable sight of a blazing Sharingan. "Haruno," he rumbled.

Sakura was unlucky enough to find herself the target of all the enmity. It made sense, although she was reluctant to admit that. They were chanting her name, and then a sailor dropped down on him from above deck after crashing through the ceiling. Madara was smart enough to put two and two together.

Nearly choking on her own saliva, Sakura quickly stood, stumbling away from the hole. It was an accident, but he likely wasn't in the mood to hear it.

The sound of the hatch opening made everyone jump, no doubt expecting it to be Madara, coming to exact revenge. Instead Junko's head popped up. It was obvious by the glare on her face that she'd heard the crash. Nevertheless, the crew didn't move, instead adopting innocent facades that were completely out of place on the faces of such a rough, motley group.

"What the hell is going on up here?!!" That was when she laid eyes on the sight of the gaping hole. "Oi! Are you all hoping I wouldn't see that!" For the first time, Sakura could see why everyone seemed to give Junko so much room. She was brandishing her ladle at them all, her ears flaming red and murder in her eyes.

Realizing everyone was huddled together, petrified, Sakura bravely stepped forward, raising her hand. "Actually...it was...it was me."

Junko lowered her ladle in shock. "You? You seem like such a sensible one. I didn't think these seadogs would get you swept up in their antics." Ashamed, Sakura bowed her head. "Ah, well all can be forgiven if you help me spoon out the stew. Fair enough?" Junko winked.

Perking up, Sakura nodded emphatically. "Yes, thank you!" She wasn't sure what had come over her, but if Junko was willing to let it slide as long as she helped serve food, then Sakura would take the slap on the wrist for what it was. As she began following Junko below deck and to the kitchens, she glanced backwards at the crew. She meant to give them a chastising look, but when she noticed the awed gazes of respect, any feelings of irritation disappeared. They were a lot to handle, easily overwhelming. In the end though, they weren't as bad as they could have been...

Dinner turned out to be meat and potato stew, served with a hunk of bread and more alcohol. As a guest aboard the ship, Sakura tried her best not to cause anymore trouble for Junko, and graciously accepted the food. As a medic, she was growing steadily more concerned for the crew's livers. The
vessel was sailing idly through the waves, and the clear night sky was speckled in stars.

Finally, the excitement had settled after sunset and the crew was enveloped in an odd peace, scattered on deck and making small talk as they ate. The kunoichi joined them, knowing Madara likely wouldn't and not wanting to seem like Konoha nin were ungracious. Strangely, it was nice...there was an appealing atmosphere about it all, a sense of community. The tang of salt in her nose and the soft lapping of the water against the sides of the ship helped her understand why the men and women who lived and sailed on the Harbinger spoke so fondly of the sea.

"So lass, ya ever been ta the Land of Water?" Joben asked, slurping down more stew.

Sakura, knowing full well she couldn't tell them about her disastrous "C-rank" mission as a genin, smiled wanly. Something told her the crew would have been absolutely riveted by the story. "I've heard lots of stories, but...this'll be my first trip there."

Joben slammed down his mug. "Stories, you say?"

There was a collective good-natured groan from the entire crew, including Kazu, who had taken up residence near her feet. "What's wrong with stories?" Sakura asked with caution. Maybe there was a custom to storytelling on ships she was unaware of.

"Our good cap'n loves his tall tales." Ai explained. "Got ones from all over the world. All up here." She lightly tapped the side of her head, Joben nodding proudly in agreement.

"Thas right. Now, this lot o' mine don't always appreciate the finer art of storytellin', but you're a smart lass, ain't cha? You'll listen to an old man's tales."

Sakura could feel curiosity clawing its way free, prompting her to lean forward. "All over the world? Really? Then you probably know stories from Water Country too."

Realizing he held a captive audience, Joben's eyes grew round in delight. "Aye miss, plenty. But none's more famous n' more scary than the tale o' the one that laid the curse upon them islands. Iwanagahime."

"Iwanagahime?" The mark hidden on the inside of her wrist burned hot. Sakura hissed quietly, covering it with a fast hand. A little healing chakra and the mark's burning sensation dulled to a sporadic throb. 'What does that mean...?'

"Don't tell me yer headin' to that place an' ya never heard tell of the goddess." Inoue clucked his tongue.

"Goddess" immediately got her attention.

Sakura tried not to get too offended, nibbling on her all but forgotten bread with a shrug. "I'm ignorant in these things. No one talks about island deities on the mainland."

"Well listen good lil' lady...the tale of Iwanagahime is a bitter one. Once upon o' a time, there was a god named Oyamatsumi. He's even older than Amaterasu, an' he's a god of mountain, seas, an'...war."

"We're seafolk, so we always leave our offerings for safe travels when we come to a place with one of his shrines." Gintaki said around a mouthful of stew.

"But ol' Oyamatsumi ain't the important one to this tale...Iwanagahime is." Joben cleared his throat. "That was his older daughter. He had two of 'em. Iwanagahime and Konohanasakuya-hime. They
say the oldest had a sharp mind but the youngest had undeniable beauty. Oyamatsumi promised Iwanagahime to a young god named Nihongi. But before they could meet, he laid eyes on her sister, and that was that. Fell in love and left Iwanagahime shunned and vengeful. So she laid a curse...instead of the long lives we humans were meant to enjoy if she'd married Nihongi, now our lives are short. We live and die in an instant compared to a god."

Sakura sipped from her mug in silence. Hadn't Mizuchi...said that once?

"But there's more than even that, right chichi?" Kazu was almost rocking in place, and even in the dark, Sakura saw his big eyes sparkling.

"Aye," Joben stroked at his beard. "Like I said, Iwanagahime was the cleverer one. She wasn't gonna take a slight like that spittin'. This is the part that gets interestin'. The part the locals in Water Country tell. She knew her sister loved flowers, so she crafted up some so beautiful, Konohanasakuya-hime couldn't help but touch 'em. They were meant to be blue...at first. But then Konohanasakuya-hime pricked her finger on the sharp stem and bled...the red of 'er blood turned the blue flowers purples." The captain shook his head, resting his arms on his knees. "That's not all it did. It activated the curse. Now...ev'ry rainy season the violacia blooms somewhere in a hidden field on one o' the islands...and when they do, the dead rise up to kill the livin'."

"A more morbid ending than expected. But it's still a wives tale at best..." Several necks, including Sakura's strained to see Madara leaning casually against the side of the ship. With his stealth and the cover of night, there was no telling when he'd joined everyone above deck, or why, but Sakura was more concerned with the fact that she'd been too entranced to sense him.

Junko happily got up and handed him a bowl of stew and bread, pressing a drink into his free hand.

"Ah, come out to join us, eh?" Joben called, swilling down more of the "sake". He drew the mug from his lips and let out a loud belch that felt like it rocked the ship. "Maybe you don't believe, but this is a nice night for a wives tale, in'it?"

Sakura didn't think Madara would answer, but one shoulder rose briefly in a lackluster shrug.

"Not much for stories, are ya?" Junko chuckled. "Well, it's hard ta believe, that's for sure. One thing's true though. Iwanagahime's still important to the people of Water Country. Outside folk like us can only guess at why, but, if ya plan to go pokin' around on the island, ya best stay clear of all that."

There wasn't much of a shift in Madara's facial features as he dipped the piece of bread into his stew and took a bite. "Noted."

Sakura almost thought they would get through dinner in a truce. That he'd forgotten about earlier, when she'd inadvertently dumped a two-hundred pound sailor on him. By chance, their eyes met, and although his weren't currently red, it was very clear that he hadn't forgotten or forgiven anything. "Haruno. A word?"

She was a stubborn one, so he wasn't expecting compliance. The entire day they'd spent on the ship, she preferred the company of slovenly, rambunctious sailors to himself. It suited him just fine. He had time to himself in the cabins to prepare for the task ahead of getting two feuding island leaders to form a treaty, in the hopes that it could open new trade routes for Konoha. The temporary quiet and solitude had convinced him that, despite its state of disrepair and its crew, the ship did in fact have an upside.
And then the chant had started. Gradually the sound grew so loud until he couldn't but notice. They were cheering...for Haruno. Madara did his best to ignore it. A hard task in itself. No sooner had he reclaimed his train of thought than a shrill scream pierced the air, catching him off guard. The next thing he knew, he was being pinned beneath the weight of a sweaty man, and all he could focus on was the timid face of Haruno peeping down from the hole in the ceiling.

Hours later, Haruno climbed down into the belly of the ship, escorted by the cook. "I told your friend earlier...and he said ya'd manage fine, but...about the cabins..."

"We'll be sharing." Madara stepped from the shadows, and Haruno came to a screeching halt just short of bumping into him. Junko looked on worriedly. It didn't seem to be really sinking in. Haruno just stared blankly at his chest, her mouth moving but no words forming. Just as before, she looked up at him from beneath her lashes. Although there was a startlingly different emotion there. Not confusion but outrage.

Sensing the impending explosion, he grabbed her arm and dragged her through the door as she became aware enough of what was going on to dig her heels in. "I'm not sharing a room with you!" she spat, green eyes dark with anger.

The discontent was mutual. Madara wasn't sure whether he trusted himself not to wrap his fingers around the column of her pale neck during the night, or whether his glee at her reaction would keep him sated for the rest of the trip. "You're more than welcome to the floor." Madara was feeling so victorious, he'd even give her the blankets to nest in.

Predictably, that only made her angrier, and in her intensely volatile state, she advanced on him, standing on her tiptoes until her nose was just under his. "You take the floor."

"Were you not the one that told me you prepared for every inevitability? Sleeping in your bedroll shouldn't be difficult. Or, test your luck in the other cabins. I hear they're sleeping three to a bed."

Haruno fumed, but didn't object. He'd successfully used her own words against her, and she turned her back on him, grumbling under her breath. As she took off her pack and began to set up for the night, Madara tugged his shirt over his head and removed his zori.

Haruno removed a scroll with an angry sigh, blowing a stray strand of hair from her eyes and glaring at him from the floor. That was, until she noticed his naked chest. The scroll poofed open, revealing her change of clothes, and she continued gaping at his chest slack-jawed.

"As a medic, should you not have seen a man's anatomy?"

Red-faced, she hurried to turn away, scooping her clothes into her arms and rushing out of the room.

There was a long night ahead of them, and Madara expected it to be more uncomfortable for one of them more than the other. Fortunately, he thought, it wouldn't be him.
The candles mounted on the wall gave the room a soft orange glow, lighting a path across the wooden floor to the bed—crude one that it was—pushed back in the corner of the small cabin. The room's only occupant sat with one knee drawn to his chest, head bent as he looked over a map. One careful footstep at a time, Sakura crossed the cabin to her own bedroll, intent on proving her point.

Though he seemed not to like them, Madara had claimed the cabin for himself much like a cat claiming its territory, daring her to intrude. If she had asked, she was sure Junko or one of the other women aboard the ship would find room for her in their own cabins. They were a welcoming bunch, and as far as Sakura could tell, they liked her.

When she'd found the washroom, where all the women bathed together, she'd gotten more than a few offers to squeeze her in with them for the night. With a smile, she'd refused, because she would be damned if Madara was going to be the one with an entire cabin to himself and the smug satisfaction that came with it.

Sparing him a glance, Sakura found he was still studying the map with an impressive amount of concentration. From such an angle, it was hard to see his expression, even more so with the thick bangs obscuring it. Her fingers found their way into her own hair, which was steadily growing. Heading into the war, it was already touching her shoulders again.

Before long, she could easily grow it back to the length it had been when she was a genin. That wouldn't be so bad, she decided. At times she missed her longer hair. Although, Madara's hair was almost excessively long…and there was so much of it, it was bound to be heavy. Yet from what she'd seen in battle it didn't get in his way or slow him down. What was the appeal of keeping his hair that way?

"Instead of watching me, you could be deciding how to handle your duties once we arrive. Hashirama's entrusted you with saving an entire region. There won't be much need for this treaty if the islands' populations is gone."

Bristling, she moved closer to him, preselected, biting words already hot on her tongue. Madara wasn't concerned, only sparing her minimal eye contact that radiated boredom, and going back to his map. Sakura stopped to contemplate, bitterly finding there was some truth in what he said. It would have been far more helpful if she'd known which islands had suffered the greatest casualties, or at least had a general idea of what symptoms presented themselves before people faded away, or where the first outbreak could be traced back to.

All of that knowledge would save her crucial time. As it stood, she was going into an already critical situation with next to nothing. "I…I want to see the map." She croaked, taking another cautious step, until she was standing right in front of him.

Madara stopped looking at the weathered paper in his hands to grace her with his full attention.
"Then sit."

Sakura balked, on the cusp of refusal. He'd had all that time to read it, to memorize. Why couldn't she get the same courtesy of studying the map by herself?

"Because it's in my possession." he responded, leaning back into the wall. Gasping, Sakura realized she'd ranted out loud.Stubbornly puffing her cheeks out, she sat at the very edge of the cot, a respectable distance from his person, holding her hand out for the map once again. Madara didn't make the slightest effort to give it to her.

Realizing he was going to make it difficult, her eye twitched, and she took a deep, steadying breath through her nose. "Fine!" She moved pointedly closer, all but ripping it from his hands as soon as she was within finger's length. The first thing that stood out to Sakura was the detail, something she couldn't help but appreciate. "This is a good map." she admitted, studying the route he had mapped from Yume to Water Country. They were traversing across the Kāzoku Sea, and if the map was as accurate as she suspected, she approximated their arrival in two days. No wonder he wanted her to have a working strategy to tackle the illness.

"If this is the capitol," Sakura tapped a spot in the middle of the biggest island, marked with the two circles that indicated a capital city, "Then once we reach port it should take a day to get there, right?" The thought caused her some frustration, and her mouth twisted in dissatisfaction. "That's more time lost…"

There was a sound somewhere between a sigh and a laugh from beside her, and a larger hand seized one half of the map. "Is your resolve that easy to shake? How disappointing."

Sakura felt her temper sparking back to life. "There's resolve and then there's realism." she snipped. "I'm determined to save as many lives as possible, and that's why I'm here. But I can't stop time. Once I get there, if I can find and examine just one person experiencing the onset of the symptoms, and compare them to someone at the end of the symptoms, I can try to and at least work out a timeline, then slow or halt whatever's going on. That way there's a little more time to find a cure." She nodded to herself, satisfied.

"At least you've thought out a passable plan." Madara shifted, peering at the map and her. And Sakura was suddenly acutely, painfully aware of the warmth emitting from his naked chest seeping through the thin cloth of her yukata. In her peripheral view, she could see the muscle definition brought about by years of training and hard-fought battles.

When she was focusing on proving her point, it hadn't occurred to her that there was an unwelcoming intimacy in sitting so close when he was half undressed and she was wearing one thin layer. Flushing, Sakura stood quickly. "My plan's more than passable. It'll work." she informed him, making her way back to her bedroll. There. He wanted resolve, and that was hers.

Sakura was settling into her spot before he spoke again, his voice low and amused. "Nothing puts a strategy and its tactician to the task like the ever-changing conditions of the field." She sank down further, squinting up at the spot in the ceiling where boards had been hastily used to repair the human-sized hole made earlier in the day. Madara's fury and the sight of an activated Sharingan coming to mind.

Was it wise to close her eyes and drift to sleep in the same room with a man who was more than capable and had a newly found grudge? 'That would be hard to explain to the Hokage.' She yawned. 'He doesn't have to like me, but he knows this mission takes the both of us…' It was an unfortunate fact she had come to terms with some hours into their traveling; just as she had been the Hokage's selection as the best medic for the job—no doubt with Toka's approval—Madara was
deemed the best person to represent the village and handle negotiations…

'I don't like it, but it makes sense. Damn it.' Sakura rolled onto her side, forcing her eyes to close while maintaining a steady awareness of Madara's presence in the room. It was that awareness that kept her body from relaxing, and she shifted several times, trying to get comfortable. Finding sleep would have been welcome after the long day she'd had, getting acclimated to life onboard the Harbinger.

But it was looking more like a night where she'd have to wait for sleep to find her. The cabin was noiseless, save for the faint creaking of the ship and the rhythmic beat of waves rocking the vessel. Craning her head back, Sakura snuck a peek at the cot, not surprised Madara was still sitting up, still awake. 'I don't have the energy to try talking to him.' Bored, Sakura gave herself the task of mentally reciting the names for human muscles. A mundane ritual that had helped lull her to sleep on nights when her mind was racing. 'Latissimus dorsi…external obliques…internal obliques…rectus abdominus…' Her concentration faltered, the mental image of an anatomical chart crashing down, replaced with the firm torso of her roommate. Outraged at how her own thoughts had betrayed her, Sakura sat up with a yelp, flustered.

Of course she wasn't fortunate enough for Madara to ignore it. "Rats are more afraid of you than you are of them." he said absently.

"It wasn't a rat!" she hissed, flopping back down and rolling onto her stomach, determined to hide her warm face. 'Swallow me,' Sakura silently told the sea. Perhaps responding to her plea, the ship lurched hard to the right in the waves, and the kunoichi clung to her bedroll to keep from lurching with it.

The rocking returned to a more gentle sway, and Sakura sighed under her breath. There wasn't much she could do but lay there in silence, Madara finally getting up and extinguishing the candles, pitching the room into total darkness.

ASiT

Kaguya fidgeted as Mizuchi combed through her growing hair, an unhurried pace to her nimble fingers. The comb's teeth hit a snag and she winced when it was pulled through none too gently. "Be still," the voice above her commanded.

The younger girl sat on her own hands to stop herself from tugging her hair away. "That hurts," The grip on the ends of her white locks tightened in response. "This menial task would have long since been completed, if not for your need to wiggle as you do."

Kaguya didn't deny that she moved restlessly as her sister sat, combing and styling her hair. It was a wonder how Mizuchi, though hardly as delicate, had the same quick fingers Sena did, and took to grooming hair much better than she had been able to manage it herself. Due to its increasing length, having assistance was all but necessary. "I taught this to you," she fussed quietly. She was sure that her guardian could detect the envy present in her tone.

"Indeed," said her sister, "And now, my skill has surpassed your teachings."

Annoyed, Kaguya huffed, tilting her head at an angle she knew would agitate Mizuchi. "Sena would say, a younger sister should try her best to surpass the eldest. The gods make one sibling more blessed than the other, so that the youngest has goals to strive for." she mumbled. "But, when will you teach me like I have taught you? When will I know what you do about blighting?"
The hand in her hair stilled, and the forest with it. Even the babbling brook close enough to dip their toes in froze at her question. Since coming to find Mizuchi, she had been elated, finding solace and comfort for the first time since losing her sister. And just as she had gained family, her new sister gained knowledge, an understanding she often said was impossible to grasp as a deity. Kaguya wondered about that…what made humans and the gods they worshipped so different? Surely there was no singular thing. Rather, they were at odds on every conceivable level.

The lingering awkwardness and peculiarity to her mannerisms sometimes forcibly reminded Kaguya that despite their physical appearances, this was not her true sister, yes. But she found she was growing attached all the same. The same great admiration she'd had for Sena bloomed anew. With it came a deep desire to know all she could know about the new sister the heavens had granted her. Mizuchi showed her once how she created blights, and how she took them away. The village had been wary, but when she stopped a great sickness from spreading, their caution of the stranger lessened. Now she was cherished and revered. Whenever there were injuries great or small, villagers knocked on their door before any other healer. Kaguya wanted the same recognition one day, but Mizuchi refused to impart her secrets. "You do not understand what it means to blight. Or to remove one. It is a heavy responsibility and yet you ask for it. Why?"

Anticipating this question, Kaguya sat straighter against Mizuchi's knees, chest expanding in rebuttal. "I am your sister!"

A solitary leaf fell from the tree giving them shelter and was dropped down into the brook, drifting, drifting… Near the base of another tree, two chipmunks chased each other around, one of them almost scampering right over her foot as it retreated. Her response was the levity nature needed to resume motion again.

Mizuchi laughed warmly. "Because you are the sister of a goddess, you believe you should know all that I know?" Kaguya opened her mouth, readying another defense, but the deity was quicker. "Be grateful. Any human burdened by the knowledge of even the lowest deity would lose their sanity in time." As expected, Mizuchi did not understand. A surge of pain throbbed inside Kaguya's chest, and she gathered the ends of her kimono, standing. "Off already? You hardly asked." Taking up the small basket, she shook her head. "Herbs will not gather themselves. If I cannot take away pain like you do, then I will keep making my remedies!"

Mizuchi's words were full of gentleness and sympathy. "That is what's best. In time, you will see that." She wasn't the one who needed to see…it was the deity she now called sister. Her bare feet were heavy as she walked, willing her lip not to tremble. The hurt of the rejection trying to force tears from her eyes.

A goddess could never understand…how could she, when she was not born human? The blessings and power of godhood had been hers from the start. She looked like Sena, but she did not have her sister's memories or experiences. Kaguya remembered a different life where the faces of her parents had been lost to time, and she had only ever known her kind-hearted sister, the person she cherished more than anyone.

Then she too had been taken, ripped away by a senseless skirmish in an endless line of them. The body…they had not been able to return the body. Not all of it. Beautiful, sweet Sena, with her soft hands unused to the grip of a spear, cut down like a soldier and left there. To their emperor, anyone who could be spared, from healers to bakers to smithies, were expendable on the field.

The despair was too much, eased only when she talked to her, when she visited the shrine. Kaguya
vehemently refused to forget her sister, otherwise it would one day be hard to recall if she had ever existed at all. The heavens never gave her the answers she wanted, but one day they gave her another person to hold dear, and she had grasped tightly to a hand she had been longing to hold just one more time. That hand had so much more strength though, was capable of so much more destruction. The fist gripping her basket clenched. If only—if only she could at least remove a blight!

…!

Sakura dimly became aware of the fact that she was awake when the wind and rain from the storm registered in her ears. Eyes weakly able to trace the slats of the ceiling, nose twitching with the sporadic drops that dripped to fall on her face.

The cabin was still and dark, but up above feet pounded across the deck, Joben's voice faintly distinguishable as he gave orders. A flutter of worry touched her heart, but, Sakura easily quelled it with the thought that for all their silliness, this crew was experienced. A storm wasn't enough to panic over.

Her dream on the other hand… everything about that was alarming. The last time she had seen Kaguya, Mizuchi had induced the memory. Rather, she'd transferred a glimpse of the past to Sakura. Since beginning the journey, the goddess had been quiet. A preferable alternative to her unexpected visits. Despite that, she had dreamt. Of a Kaguya who was slightly older and equal parts enamored and envious of her adoptive sister. If there was any reason she'd seen what she did—and the kunoichi suspected there was—it was lost on her.

All she knew was, Kaguya had left, frustrated and dejected that Mizuchi wouldn't teach her about blights. It was the beginning of the rift, whatever it was that had put the fearsome Rabbit Goddess on her path. Every emotion seared into her heart, felt like it had been seared into Sakura's.

Having insight into how the Mother of Chakra had felt, that she could feel, was a jarring sensation. Sakura had known a deity determined to assimilate the world's chakra. Mizuchi had known a lonely girl.

The vision brought fresh questions…if Mizuchi had refused to show Kaguya what she claimed was the most basic measure of godhood, how had she become all powerful in the first place? Sakura thought about mentally calling for the goddess, so they could talk that way. But…she looked at the cot. It was hard to make out more than the vague shape of a body, but he was definitely there.

Even making mental contact with the goddess was too risky. The flare up of energy would be impossible to miss from so close.

The sea gave the ship a hard toss, and Sakura grunted as she rolled across the floor, using chakra in her fingertips to avoid smacking the wall.

"Trouble sleeping?" came the mocking voice from across the cabin.

Sakura couldn't be bothered to hide her audible groan of irritation. How long had he been awake?

"I've had worse nights." Crawling through the dark, she felt her way back to her bedroll and flopped down without bothering to get inside. If sleep wasn't an option, she'd lay completely still, map out the human anatomy in excruciating detail, and wait for morning. 'I can't wait to see land again.'

Shinobi life had gotten him use to nights with little sleep and rising early. What it hadn't done was
make him as affable in the mornings as the motley crew running around the ship when he joined them on deck.

Despite the storm that had thrown the vessel around like a toy boat at the mercy of a child's splashes, Joben informed them that the *Harbinger* was none the worse for wear, and had managed to stay on course. They'd be able to reach Water Country by tomorrow evening, if all went according to plan. Madara couldn't say he would miss life at sea. The company was louder than he would've liked, there was only so much space, Haruno was sending sailors through decks, and waking up nearly tossed across the cabin didn't make for a restful sleep.

His pride refused to let him voice any of it aloud, if only because no one else was, and an Uchiha was never the first to complain. Yesterday, upon realizing their…accommodations, he'd expected Haruno would voice her disdain at some point. Instead, she had somehow managed to ingratiate herself to the crew, taking their antics in stride. It vaguely had him wondering just what kind of company she usually kept.

"Didn't wake ya, did we?" Joben swaggered his way over. The man was in high spirits even after a night spent steering the ship through a storm, something Madara could admit spoke to his resilience.

"Hardly." Madara shook his head. "Shinobi are used to rising at dawn."

"Good, good!" he laughed jovially. "Well, suspect yer lookin' for the lass, eh?" He wasn't. Foreign territory or not, he wasn't so unsure of himself that he needed to cling to Haruno in every waking moment. Madara bit his tongue, knowing Joben would assume he was regardless. The captain folded his arms and motioned with his head to the other side of the ship. The Uchiha's keen eyes easily made out the bright pink hair through the shades of darker colors. "She's right o'er there, showin' Kazu some ninja…er, what did she call it? Nin…ju…tsu?"

"Ninjutsu." He confirmed, wordlessly excusing himself and ducking under a crate being hoisted by two laughing sailors as he approached the opposite end of the deck, where Haruno stood facing the sea, a soft breeze fluttering through her hair. As Madara approached, he could make out the excitable child, Kazu, perched atop the ship's rail, watching. The kunoichi's green eyes glittered as she moved through several hand signs clearly meant for a Suiton technique.

Her stance was…less refined…but he'd seen the technique many times before on the battlefield. No doubt it was something she'd picked up from Tobirama. Kazu hopped down to peek over the ship's edge, gasping as water burbled and rose into the air, manipulated by Haruno's outstretched hands. Madara watched as her arms shook, and the water plopped back into the sea with a splash, her technique incomplete. She was still clumsy in her movements, determined but all at once unsure, and it was effecting her control. Her audience didn't mind, cheering for more.

"Again!" the child demanded. He mimicked her hand movements—incorrectly—with a bright smile.

Haruno laughed obligingly, getting prepared to make the signs. "Alright, one more time…" she whispered, almost to herself. Louder, she declared, "This time for real!"

Madara's Sharingan was spinning the minute she ran through the seals, letting them sink into his memory.

"Haaah!" Haruno's stance was fiercer, the water rising instantly, more controlled as she shifted weight to her right leg, pulling from the sea. Her technique had managed to trap several fish, wriggling around in a blind search for freedom. It almost looked like she would perform the
technique successfully…but when she bit down on her bottom lip and her legs buckled once, he knew the inevitable outcome. As expected, she botched the attempt, grumbling in frustration.

Kazu pulled away from the railing, his clothes and face damp with the seawater that had sprayed him. "What happened?" he asked, unbothered by the splash.

"I don't know," Haruno muttered. "I don't know what I'm doing wrong, because he never finished telling me how—"

Moving closer, Madara ran through the seals he’d copied, ignoring how they looked on incredulously. Although not nearly as well-versed in Suiton as Tobirama, he did have enough practice in the element to consider himself above average. His technique was stronger than hers, and when the water rose from the sea at his command, a thrashing shark came with it.

Kazu made a noise between a yelp and a cheer, in awe of the creature's massive size and razor sharp jaws.

Haruno was less impressed, spinning to grab his arm in a crushing grip. "You're insane!" she yelled. Madara shook her off, smirking as he sent the suspended shark flying into the distance with his technique. The impact was so large that it sprayed water across deck from thirty feet away, a pillar of liquid shooting up into the air with a *foom*.

"Mastering any form of Suiton requires not only the right amount of control but the surety to guide the water. Without that, it has no true destination, and the user has no hope of mastery. Isn't that something your sensei should have told you?"

Haruno's response to his quip was to gape, wet from head to toe, flustered but unable to offer any rebuff. Kazu was faster, shaking water from his hair and offering the petulant scowl that only a child could give.

"That was really good." he started by nodding in approval. "You're strong just like I knew a ninja'd be. But…you still ruined everything!" Madara's brows rose into his hairline when the boy moved forward and kicked him in the shin before darting off.

His crude manners were likely exacerbated being around Haruno and her temper. "He's right…" Speaking of Haruno, she was eying him as she pushed wet hair from her face, advancing into his personal space. "Yer impossible." The Uchiha blinked, unsure if he'd heard her correctly.

"Yer?" he repeated.

"Oh, now ya think yer can correct 'ow I talk, eh?"

Madara backed away, more unnerved by her sudden change in speech than by her growing anger. "Haruno, listen to yourself," he said flatly. "You sound ridiculous."

She lifted a finger, prepared to continue, when his words seemed to take effect. Instead of advancing, Haruno backed away with a horrified gasp, face clutched in her hands. "What's happening to me?"

"You're absorbing the mannerisms of those you spend the most time around."

"Obviously," she huffed, brushing by him and moving to the edge of the ship again. Her eyes looked far away as she stared out over the sea, wet hair clinging to her face. The expression brought out the youth of her visage. Even when he knew the contrary to be true, she looked so vulnerable that Madara had to blink the image away, setting his mind back to seeing her as Haruno,
the feisty kunoichi with an explicity deep hatred for him. "But..." she said softly, "Kazu wasn't completely wrong."

Madara tilted his head back. What was it the whelp told him? "You still ruined everything!" Ah, Haruno saw it the same way.

"I know I'm not a match for you in ninjutsu." She conceded, turning to face him. "Right now, I still need to be stronger, learn more. That's why I'm gonna master Suiton before the mission's over. I don't need you getting in my way."

There were so many emotions in the green depths of her eyes, Madara wasn't sure if he could put a name to them all. The firestorm blazing just behind them, though, made it clear how serious she was. Again, he had to wonder how far was too far to push, when doing so meant he'd keep being rewarded with such intense reactions. Reactions only he could pull from her. "You're so certain that this mission will end like you want it to. Rather, like you expect it to."

Haruno's narrowed gaze darted all over his face warily. "Why wouldn't it?"

Despite the tone of the question, there was an innocence to it that elicited a deep chuckle. "There are countless outcomes to this journey. One of which is that the ship never reaches its next port, and we and the crew capsize along with it. And in that case, Haruno, I find it wholly satisfying to think that your last waking thoughts would be of me."

Sakura shook her head, a breathless laugh tumbling past her lips in a way that let him know she wasn't sure about the state of his sanity. "And that's supposed to be a win for you somehow?"

"It would be more than winning." Madara explained. "There's no greater satisfaction than knowing that while someone who curses your very existence is being consumed by death, in spite of themselves, they can't help but think of you."

"You..." she spat, eyes wide and furious. "You...!" Coherent speech was lost to her as red filmed her vision. Instead of attempting to toss him into the sea like he half thought she might, Haruno briskly spun on her heel, moving like an encroaching storm, doom befalling the next person to breathe a word she didn't appreciate.

"Almost ready," Naruto announced, poking at the searing meat on the griddle in front of them.

Suigetsu sniffed deeply, sharp teeth bared in a smile. "Mm...no need to cook it anymore. I don't mind eating it a little pink."

"Idiot," Karin hissed. "Maybe that's fine for you, but think about the rest of us." She had to admit, not living as a rogue had its perks. Sure, Konoha's elite weren't thrilled to have them moving around, but the Hokage outranked them, and the woman agreed that they could stay for the foreseeable future, granted they caused no problems. It made research more expedient too. Karin was able to run notes by the Hokage, a woman she grudgingly admitted she'd come to admire.

After all, surprisingly, it was Tsunade-sama who had gotten on board with their plan when Kakashi Hatake was more reserved about it. In the midst of explaining that day, it wasn't long before the Copy Nin threw out a peculiar theory none of them had considered...

"I see...So that's what's been going on." Kakashi rubbed at his masked chin. "Well. It's good to know it's nothing nefarious, but I'm not sure I can let you go on."

"Why not?" Naruto challenged, barely withholding a growl. "Sakura's out there stranded
The older shinobi shrugged, head leaning casually to the side. "Oh? And I guess you know just where to focus looking."

The blonde faltered, biting angrily at his lip.

"That's just what I thought. Listen, it occurs to me maybe Sasuke's been trying to look into dimensions with his Rinne-Sharingan. Am I right?"

Karin followed his eyes to the Uchiha, who unconsciously rubbed at his eye, expression unreadable.

"Hm," Kakashi paused. "So maybe it's not really necessary to say this, but, we don't know what we're dealing with and this is me just hazarding a guess... maybe Kaguya wasn't the only being capable of dimension-hopping. Or whatever portal opened up and sucked in Sakura was a direct result of sealing her. You know, a temporal anomaly."

"A what now?" Suigetsu butt in, hands on his hips. "Anybody else following this?"

"He's saying a time rift." Sasuke voiced what Karin had been starting to suspect. "It's not another dimension she was transported to, it's somewhere in time."

"Right. Which means she may really be lost to us." Kakashi concluded.

"So that's it?" Naruto spat. "We give up on her just like that?"

"I don't believe that's necessarily what Kakashi-sensei means, if I may be so bold." This time it was the quiet, pale boy who'd arrived with the Copy Nin speaking. "Sakura holds a summoning scroll, correct?"

"Yeah!" Naruto pounded a fist into his palm in realization. "Katsuyu!"

"Then," the boy continued, "It may be possible to at least guess which direction she was thrown, by whether or not her name remains on the scroll."

Following the hunch had paid off, in a way. Taking some of the meat with her chopsticks, Karin acknowledged that Konoha nin weren't entirely as useless as she'd thought. "Suigetsu!" she paused to glare at her former teammate. "Save some for when Sasuke-kun comes!"

"Hehe," The Mist nin was nonplussed by the admonishment, stealing more meat. "Maybe he should have been here on time?"

Naruto shrugged. "I have to agree with him. Sasuke's a big boy. He knows nothin's gonna be left if he's late."

Put out, the redhead ignored them as they chewed loudly and talked even louder. Anywhere else, and Karin might be afraid they would all be thrown out. But the Leaf was a far laxer place than the villages she'd known, and restaurants were accustomed to noisy patrons from what she'd observed.

'Can't get too comfortable.' She reminded herself, eating earnestly. 'As soon as this is all over, it'll be time to hit the road.' Now that they were a little more clued in, it was only a matter of time...

Space-time ninjutsu existed, but nothing so powerful it could send a person forward or backwards more than a few seconds. There was only one being who would know how to do that, and it would be the Sage.
Though she offered her help multiple times, Sasuke was stubborn and in the end decided to chase down a jutsu strong enough to call forth the spirit of Hagoromo on his own. Deep down, Karin wondered if he detested the thought of her company that much, or if he was as desperate to escape the loudmouths as she was.

Either way, she had been left behind, stranded in the Leaf with only the Hokage for adequate company. So Karin prepared. Someone had to. Because Naruto and Suigetsu might as well not have been there at all.

Both were hands-on, and by no means good at sitting and searching. Naruto offered, she would admit, but only succeeded in getting in the way with his impatience. 'Sasuke-kun, it's all up to us!'

That was what spurred her to keep going, the crucial role she played in all this. Her own feelings aside, Karin would see it through. She owed him at least that much…

Kagami pushed at the door, tentatively stepping inside Sakura-san's house to a…strange scene. Reira was on her knees attempting to coax Usamaro from the top of a shelf in the kitchen. Chisato stood nearby, wiggling a sardine in the air. "Re-Reira?"

The brunette turned, cheerfully smiling. "Hi, Kagami-kun! Um, c-could you shut the door? Usamaro got out last night, I think when I took him home…I don't want him running again."

Doing as she asked, Kagami walked over to his friends, looking up at the cat in question. If he didn't know any better, he would think the creature was rather smug with himself. That was when he noticed the pouch sitting next to him. "What's that up there? It looks important."

Reira's smile cracked, becoming wobbly around the edges as her eyes darted frantically up to Usamaro. "Tha-that's…it's Hashi-nii's. He gambles and that's his secret pouch."

"Looks kind of…full."

"Reira," Chisato interrupted in her soft, steady voice. "Maybe you should come clean. He is our friend, is he not?"

"B-But!" The girl whined, playing with her braid. "It's not my fault!" Kagami watched curiously as Reira's nose touched the floor, her shoulders shaking. "I want to live! I need to take back that pouch a-and that fur!"

Fur…?

"Look again," Chisato advised, pointing with the hand not holding the sardine. The Uchiha stepped closer so he wouldn't startle the feline, sucking in a breath when he noticed for the first time, a familiar fur half-draped across the cat, muddied where it had once been a pristine white.

"Reira," Suddenly, a bad feeling had settled in his gut. And if there was one thing that training taught him, it was that ninja had such instincts for a reason. "Reira," he repeated solemnly. "You're going to die."

Shamelessly bawling, the Senju lifted her face, and he could see the fat tears streaming down her cheeks. "Kagami-kun, how could you?!"

"He isn't wrong," Chisato added, extending her hand to beckon the mischievous cat. "If you don't replace what Usa-chan took, your family will, at the very least, disown you."

Kagami frowned, shaking his head. "How did he get those anyway? Wasn't he in your room when
you took him home?"

Dramatically, Reira fell back on her rear, wiping at her face with an arm. "F-Funny you ask…"

"She left her door open. And so he got out…and stole. Then came back here."

"Chisa-chan you're supposed to be on my side!" Unbothered by her tears, Chisato sniffed at the fish she'd been holding, offering it to Usamaro once again. She stood on tiptoes as the cat carefully approached the sardine, the trio watching with bated breath.

"Now," The Aburame whispered to herself, the beetles slumbered in her body coming out in a cluster to surround the wayward feline. Spitting, Usamaro backed down the shelf, hair raised on end.

"Your bugs are scaring him…" Reira rubbed at her puffy eyes. "But I guess…this is better than dying today."

"I will catch him." Chisato assured. "You will live."

Reira switched from crying to gushing, smiling up at her friend in adoration. "Chisa-chan…you are so cool!"

"I don't think we should celebrate yet," Kagami mentioned, scratching at his scalp. "He looks like he's about to…" With an impressive battle cry, Usamaro sprang through the air, snatching the fish and evading capture in one swift movement. The minute all four feet touched the ground he was rocketing off, onto the counter and out the window.

"He escaped again!" Reira began to sniffle, tears finding their way back into her eyes. "Why didn't we close that?! I…I just wanted to get some fresh air."

Sighing, Kagami lifted her to her feet, pinching her cheek firmly. "You should get the fur and the pouch and take them home. That…" he tugged the fur down into his hands, examining it woefully. "Is going to need to be washed well." Usamaro had clearly had fun dragging it along the ground on his trip back home. He couldn't help but mourn for the clean, soft fur he'd first encountered in the Hokage's office. "I…" A poke to the back reminded him of Chisato, waiting patiently for orders. "We," he corrected. "Will find Usamaro! All of us can meet here when we're done."

Accepting the fur, the brunette nodded. "Y-You're good friends!" she cried, pulling them both close in an uncomfortably tight hug. Embarrassed, he glanced at Chisato, noticing her making the same face as she patted awkwardly at Reira's head. It took several tries, but they finally got her fingers to let them go, reminding her to collect the pouch on her way out. "Oof…this is pretty heavy…how'd he get it all the way out of the compound?! Never mind, I guess, good luck!"

"I think you might need it more than us," Chisato reminded her.

"Y-You're right!" Reira sprinted out the door, desperate to make it back in time.

Before she was out of sight, the frantic girl had nearly tripped over the fur draped around her and run into small children playing games in the streets. Feeling pity, Kagami thought about going with her. On the chance that she wasn't able to replace the items before they were discovered missing, there was a high possibility she'd at least need moral support.

Chisato made the decision for him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We should go, Kagami-kun." She was right. It was prudent to find Usamaro before he found more mischief. Whatever punishment awaited Reira, if there was any punishment to be faced at all, he was confident she was
Hashirama stepped back, admiring his own handiwork. "There," He had finally finished building the inside of the last classroom, brand new wooden benches waiting to be filled with the next generation of shinobi. "It has the essentials but still, it feels a little empty." he lamented.

"Empty rooms generally feel that way." Tobirama quipped, leaning against the front row. "A more utilitarian approach is best. In this room, they will learn important tactical lessons. There's no need to make it cozy."

"Hm…I suppose you're right." he admitted. "Oh, but outside is fine, isn't it?" Mind made up, he rushed for the yard area they had designated for outdoor lessons. His brother was at his side almost before he'd come to a complete stop.

"What are you about to do?" he demanded.

Hashirama gently pushed him aside, his hands already forming the necessary seals. "Mokuton!"
The ground broke apart, thick branches erupting from it to form a crossed series of bars reminiscent of a domed cage. The Hokage didn't stop there, however, continuing to transform the once barren training ground with wooden structures of various shapes and sizes. The last touch he added were log animal totems that could be climbed with small footholds, or swung on from hand supports.

"Shinobi or not, children should have time to play." Tobirama's face screwed into a skeptical expression. "If there's unstructured activity already in the curriculum…It can easily become a chance to play, and hone their shinobi skills. I'll demonstrate."

"Brot—" Unwilling to hear his brother's usual cynicism, Hashirama jogged over to the barred play structure where children could slip through the spaces to hide inside, or climb their way to the top.

"If I stick my foot through here…"

Tobirama looked torn between outright gaping and turning away in shame. "Hashirama, what the hell are you doing?"

"Showing you how it's done!" he called merrily. "Now, as I was saying…I can put my foot through here…and shimmy the rest of my body if I bend like this…" Although narrating was no trouble, actually forcing his body to comply was another matter. "Hm…that's odd…" Bent precariously, he hung half in and half out of the structure, the ends of his hair brushing the ground. An upside down Tobirama slowly came to stand over him.

"What's odd is you built this intended for use by young children, yet honestly believed that you, a large adult, would fit through."

"In hindsight, it wasn't the most thought through thing I've ever done…" Hashirama conceded. "I could…I could use some help." His feet pushed, trying to free him, but it was his torso that was trapped. "Tobirama," he giggled coyly. "I'm stuck."

Eye twitching, Tobirama snatched his brother's clothes in a white knuckled grip, jerking hard. "Ack! You're choking me."

Loosening his hold, the sneering face of his sibling leaned into his. "Shut up. Or I will leave you like this."

Gulping nervously, Hashirama kept quiet as Tobirama wrenched him loose, leaving him in an
undignified heap on the ground. The elder Senju took his time getting up, patting himself down to make sure everything was as it should be and then climbing onto his feet. "Thank you, brother! It would've been…unfortunate if I'd been here by myself. Onto the next demonstration!"

At his proclamation, his brother's red eyes glazed hotter than any Sharingan. "You can't be serious…!"

"Oh, this one doesn't involve me trying to climb into anything, so I won't need saving." He promised, finding the totems and motioning to them proudly. "Look how much weight these support! They'll be perfect for building upper arm and core strength." The statement was followed by Hashirama easing himself up and slowly turning so that one arm was the only thing supporting him. "See!" The fact that his brother wasn't immediately declaring him a fool meant he was at the very least, listening. "There's another one of these over on that totem, so you can try too."

The white-haired Senju shook his head, scoffing. "You doing something like this is all well and good, and quite frankly, expected." That brought a pout to his lips. "I on the other hand, must be mature enough for the both of us."

"So you're saying I would outlast you?" Hashirama asked innocently.

"What?" Tobirama spat. "I never said anything like that…" His voice had started to rise, and Tobirama must have noticed it too, because he cleared his throat, calm once again. "I know what you're trying to do."

Difficult though it may have been, Hashirama attempted a one-shouldered shrug. "Keep my balance?"

"Bait me. It may work on someone unwise to your games, brother, but I've had years to build up immunity."

Still holding himself up, Hashirama blew a strand of hair that had fallen across his nose out of the way. "You're right. You know better by now. Admit it though, wouldn't training as children have been so much better with these? I can feel myself getting lighter already!"

Ever the skeptic, his brother grunted a response. "Impossible…"

"How would you know? You're not up here." Hashirama snickered. Briefly, a spark flickered behind Tobirama's eyes, the competitive streak he liked to pretend wasn't there at all. Making a show of appearing disinterested, Tobirama climb the other totem and copied his position.

"…"

"The effects are stunning, aren't they?"

"I feel like a fool. I suppose this is how you must feel on a day to day basis, though."

Chuckling, he ignored the remark, as he had learned to do long ago. "Give it time!"

Something jolted through his brother's head; he could see the shift. "You need to go back to your office." Honestly, half of the point of this distraction was hoping he'd forget. The other half was simply because it really was fun.

Hashirama shifted hands when his right one started feeling numb, and his body tipped forward before he righted himself. "Relax, the office is a walk upstairs away."
Tobirama closed his eyes with a grunt, and he didn't mention the fact that he hadn't stopped balancing either. Inside he crowed, triumphant. His little brother was offputtingly blunt with everyone around him, but always so coy with himself.

The road forked off, signaling the end of their shared walk home. "Well," Reira announced, rocking back on her heels. "This was fun today, but I don't wanna do it again tomorrow."

"I think…I will second that for the both of us." It had taken longer than expected to wrangle Usamaro, who had been unusually moody as of late and led them through a wild chase through the market and a civilian district. Reira shivered, remembering the pack of dogs that had chased after all of them when she'd stepped on one's tail.

To say they were all exhausted was an understatement. Covered in just as many cuts and bruises as she was, her friends shared weary smiles, waving as Kagami left for the Uchiha district, and Chisachan the Aburame's, a grumpy Usamaro in tow.

"Shut your doors and windows!" she called to Chisa. In truth, between the two of them, it was obvious to even Reira who was more vigilant. Chisato was the same age as her, yet so much more composed and responsible…she wouldn't be the one who let a cat escape, or had to sneak stolen items back home before anyone noticed they were gone.

To an extent, if she thought about it, perhaps she had gravitated toward the other girl, because something about her reminded her of Tobaa, who she had always aspired to be like when she grew up. Reira grinned wryly to herself, watching her shadow stretch out behind her as the sun stared setting.

As long as she could remember, she had called herself a kunoichi, and no one had ever corrected her. But compared to the people she admired most, there were days when she just didn't feel like one…she felt like a clumsy little girl, pretending just like the tiny children who played ninja with sticks pretended. She didn't want to be like them…and the academy would be what set her apart.

Every day on the walk home, Reira purposely took the long route, all so she could stop for a precious few minutes and admire the academy. Since the announcement that when it opened, she would be in the first group of children to attend, it was all she could think about. Of course she trained with Tobaa, as much as possible, but compared to someone like Kagami-kun, who could use swords, and knew fire techniques, and was a born leader…it felt like she didn't train at all.

Reira could feel her heart speed up as she finally came to the part of the journey she anticipated most. Giddy, she sucked in a large breath, gazing at the new building with misty eyes. It was such a beautiful sight, she desperately wanted someone to share it with in that moment.

Every evening when Hashi-nii came to eat dinner with them, she was filled to the brim with questions to ask about how close it was to being finished. He entertained them with more patience than most adults would have, patting her head and telling her it would be soon. That didn't stop her from coming to see for herself.

Unable to contain herself, she skipped her way into the yard to inspect. She wouldn't dare go inside, wouldn't want to ruin it for herself even if she could, but the newly built structures she'd spotted were crying out to her. Reira jumped onto the bars without hesitation, slipping under the spaces and admiring how roomy it was inside before crawling out again and scaling the top. It was no doubt clever use of the Mokuton, and she was grateful that when it came to having fun, Hashi-nii always thought of everything.
"Oh!" Reira was suddenly reminded that she was expected home for dinner any minute, and Mei-san didn't tolerate tardiness to the table well. Brushing herself off the best that she could, the little Senju soared home on feet that felt as light as feathers. People and stands were a blur. Loose pieces of hair fell into her eyes and across her mouth, but arms pumping, she kept running. The sentries only laughed as she skidded through the gates of the compound with a yelp. "Sorry!"

"Better get home Reira!" one of them warned.

"I'm trying! I'm trying!"

The goal was within sight, just a little more…

The Senju compound was an arrangement of conjoined houses in a long 'U' and separated buildings for celebrations and private council meetings. Her house, down near the end, was unfortunately farther away from the entrance than preferable at times like these, and when she reached it, Reira threw herself through the door, tumbling head over heels as she wrestled her sandals from her feet.

"Reira, you can't keep doing this." Before she could even stand, Toka was there, hauling her up. "You know I don't mind your daily explorations, so long as you come home…"

"Clean, I know. I couldn't help it today though!" she flailed her arms in exclamation. "Usamaro got out, and I had to chase him down with Kagami-kun and Chisa-chan after—"

"After you put back the things the cat was only able to take because you allowed him to roam free last night?" Toka finished with a knowing smirk.

Blushing, she meekly poked her hands together. "Y-You saw me?"

"Unfortunately for you, yes. Although I suppose just this once, I will pretend I didn't." Now that was something she didn't expect her stern, no-nonsense guardian to say. Very rarely was she indulged by Toka when her antics landed her in trouble.

"Tobaa!" she cried, overemotional. "I won't do it again. Er, I mean I didn't do it the first time…Usamaro did, but I'll watch him better, promise!" Her aunt rubbed her back for a minute before grasping her shoulders and wrenching her away.

"That's not the only reason you were held up, was it?" Toka's visible eye bore into hers, and she knew there was no point in lying.

"I um…took the long way. I just wanted to see the academy." Reira confessed, refusing to continue holding eye contact and simultaneously scratching at some dirt on her cheek.

Standing to her full height, Reira guided her further inside by the shoulders in silence. They walked the hall together before she spoke again. "What is this fixation you have with attending the academy? Are you that eager to play with others your age?" There was an edge of concern there, like she was worried she didn't have enough friends. Kagami-kun and Chisa-chan were plenty! And she played with the other children in the Senju clan too, so it wasn't like she was lonely. No, playing had nothing to do with it.

"It's training, not playing."

Toka paused, deep in thought. "I see…do you not train enough here?"

"Not enough to keep up with Chisa-chan and Kagami-kun. I wanna be a real kunoichi, like you were when you were my age!" She was sure Toka would be proud of her answer, maybe even tell
her a little more about her adventures as a child. There wasn't much she knew about her guardian. Only that she had been tasked with raising her when her parents died, and that, by the time she had reached ten, she'd already built quite a reputation as a formidable shinobi who had killed adults.

"Reira…" Toka's grip on her tightened, and once again she was forced to look into her guardian's weighted stare. "Listen to me, when I was your age…" she trailed off, her voice strained. "When I was your age, I would have done almost anything for the life you enjoy now. Don't be so quick to throw that away."

Frustrated, Reira backed out of her hold. "I'm not! I just want to make you proud! I want to be a real Senju!"

"You a—"

"No I'm not. I always goof around, and no one takes me seriously. If I complete the academy, and if I go on real missions, I can be disciplined, like you!"

"That discipline came at a cost!" There was an unfamiliar ice she'd never seen directed at her in Tobaa's eyes, and she edged away, sensing danger. Shoulders shaking and teeth gritting, Toka looked down her nose at her, hand on hip. "The heavens can attest to everything I lost in my childhood. That is not what I want for you. That's not what anyone wants for the children of this village. Join the academy, hone your skills, but know that you will *not* become what I was as a child."

Just like that, Toka had cut through her hope for unwavering support and independence. Reira glared, ignoring the sound of her name as she trekked back the way she'd come.

The room was poorly lit, only a single candle set on the table, and a lone silhouette draped half out the window, blowing smoke into the night air through a kiseru. Toka cut a solemn picture, her body slouched and weighted by too many thoughts, too many responsibilities.

"You haven't touched that in years," Tobirama observed, cutting his way through the white wisps and sitting on his knees at the table. There was no food out, not yet. All the better, since the taste would be ruined by the thickness of kizami in the air. A thought he chose to keep to himself, in light of the kunoichi's state.

The end of the pipe left Toka's lips, and when she started to reply, the remains of the smoke swirled into the room. "There are many things I haven't done as of late. None of them are important now…" Another deep puff of her kiseru. "Tobirama, you and I have always been similar. We have even shared similar experiences. I would trust you'd tell me I were to go astray."

Tobirama rolled his shoulders back, testing the waters. "Have you?"

The older shinobi gave an uncharacteristic grunt, exasperation seeping into her voice, "How is it fair to pose a loaded question to a woman seeking answers?" Unpausing, she continued, her voice lowering. "I have never claimed to be perfect. You and Hashirama have seen me at my worst, so it would be a pointless endeavor to try. Makoto asked that I raise his daughter, his only child, and what could I do but accept? I vowed I'd steer her away from the life I knew. I thought it was my duty as her guardian."

Understanding where the conversation was heading, Tobirama took in first Toka's lost expression, then the ceiling. Through it, he hoped the kami would offer up divine intervention. Anything, even something as minute as lightning striking the ground outside, that would keep him from having the
conversation. His brother was better suited to the job, if her were asked.

However, as Toka had mentioned, they shared many likenesses. Their personalities, their nindo, the loss of siblings…those parallels had bound them in respect and friendship for many years. Never would Tobirama have thought that he would give her counsel for, of all things, handling an unruly child.

He had no children of his own for a reason. This being one of them. Training them was straightforward, easy. Their emotions, their many, many exhausting emotions? Another matter. Tobirama already had an eccentric brother to look after, and he imagined the skill of handling Hashirama every day was so like that of handling a whimsical child, that there was no need to have one and find out how close they really came. "She is a child, Toka. She doesn't see the good of your intentions, because she has no experiences in the true cruelty of living as a child mercenary."

The cool evening breeze blew back Toka's bang, and she wet her lips, undoubtedly dry after countless time spent at the pipe. "And that's by design." Watching Toka succumb to her vice, Tobirama began wishing for one of his own. He never could stand the taste and smell of hers, and gambling didn't hold the sway for him that it did for Hashirama. But honey wine, served at the right temperature, slid down smoothly and quenched the restlessness. So, if choosing a vice were a matter of life and death, that wouldn't be such a bad one.

"At ten, I knew many things I wish I could unlearn even now. I knew how to wedge a senbon through the back of the neck and into my enemy's skull. I had discovered countless uses for poisons; some of which, I'm sure, killed innocents. I took parents from children and children from parents, and I did it all without question, because I loved my clan, and I was taught that love meant sacrifice." He saw her blink rapidly as she brought her head back into the hazy room, and he realized with quiet shock that a lone tear had escaped her eye. "…I don't ever want Reira to think she has to follow my path to be a true Senju."

It wasn't that he expected fanfare upon his arrival. After a day spent in his office, fielding issues and playing at the role of a fair, solemn leader, Hashirama was grateful to stop by and visit his family, eat at the compound and then return to the Hokage estate. Naturally, when he noticed Reira, sneaking her way back to the compound, he had to slow down and take a moment to assess if anything was seriously wrong.

Toka had always been stringent about the curfew she gave her niece. Even in the relative safety of the village, a child roaming around was still a child. Granted, it wasn't impossibly late, but after dark nonetheless.

"Reira!" he called out to her, his long legs carrying him in her direction before she so much as turned around. When she did, he noticed she was filthy, her gi streaked with dirt and her face much the same. "Hashi-nii..." She looked up at him meekly, fidgeting with her hands anxiously. "Hi..."

Caught off guard, Hashirama did his best not to launch into a panicked spiel, placing a hand on her shoulder instead. "Is everything alright? It's a bit...er, past dinner after all. I expected you'd be inside, starting without me like the others."

"I went home." There was a distinctly defensive edge in her young voice. "But then I went back out to Chisa-chan's house."

Relief flooded him at the admission, satisfied that she hadn't been by herself. Some time ago, she'd proudly informed them all she had a new friend in a girl from the Aburame clan. Ayeka's daughter Chisato. "Alright," placing a hand on her shoulder, he gently turned her toward home. "Why don't
we walk in together?" Whatever was going on, it was easy to see Reira was hesitant about going inside.

She scratched at her bare arms with a grimace. "Okay...but I'm gonna take a bath first. I am kind of icky right now."

Patting her head with a laugh, Hashirama motioned grandly at the entrance to the house she shared with Toka. "After you then, milady." That put a smile on her face, and she bobbed in a curtsy, running inside and beelining for the baths. Hashirama took the opposite direction, finding his way to the kitchen.

"Taidama! Oh..." To say the sight that greeted him was a bit...somber...was an understatement. Toka and Tobirama sat around the table with the same stolid expression on both their faces. Mei-san was scolding the kunoichi about the smell of kizami in the air while she set dishes on the table.

Everyone turned at his greeting, but only the older woman made an effort to press a small smile to her face. "Welcome back, Lord Hashirama. I do apologize I'm just now finishing serving dinner. Please do come have a seat."

"It's appreciated, Mei-san, but you know you only have to serve us if you truly want to. We're adults, we can take care of it next ti—"

"Nonsense!" The woman snorted, shaking her head vehemently. "I've known all of you since you were born. And not a single one of you has gotten less reckless over the years! As it is, providing balanced meals in the evenings is the least I can do."

Unwilling to continue arguing, Hashirama sat, grinning at his brother and Toka. Mei-san left the room with her nose in the air, point made.

"After all this time, Mei-san believes we need looking after."

"Hmph..."

"..."

Their responses gave him an idea of what to expect from the rest of dinner, Reira's strange behavior aside... 'Well...' Hashirama thought cheerfully. 'That just means it's up to me to bring some levity!'
The dense fog hung low, obscuring the view of sunrise as the ship ambled through calm waters. It was a dreary sort of morning, the kind that might turn into a rainy afternoon. Sakura climbed up to deck just in time to hear Gintoki shout down from the crow's nest that they were approaching the islands. Although it was hard to see clearly, she could just make out the jutting form of their destination up ahead.

The hairs of her neck stood on end, something ominous curling over her that chilled deeper than the mist. She couldn't have been the only one who felt it. Everyone on deck seemed more...somber than she'd ever seen them. There was none of the usual banter. No laughing or songs or arguments. Sakura tread lightly, feeling caught in some eerie genjutsu. No one greeted her, further indication to the unease in the air.

"You can feel it." Madara's deep voice intoned from her left. "The atmosphere here is smothering. Like the islands themselves are trying to ward off intruders." His form cut through the mist as he approached, though his eyes were trained on the islands. Sakura sucked in a small breath. There already tense relationship was further strained after that day, fresh anger causing any thoughts of civility to dissipate from her mind. Now was the time when that would all inevitably be cast to the side. Faced with such uncertain and potentially dangerous circumstances waiting for them, infighting would only hinder things.

"Okay, I admit it's making me a little anxious," she whispered, "But the sooner we do our jobs here the sooner we'll be leaving. So for now...that should be the priority."

"You really are more disciplined than I first thought."

Although she wasn't oblivious to the backhanded nature of the compliment, Sakura chose to take it in stride, mind focused on a more pressing matter. The ship's bow turned, powering toward the port, and the kunoichi was able to plant her feet in time to avoid being thrown. Several sailors flew past with ropes, moving to secure the vessel as Joben called for his crew to prepare to drop anchor.

~ASiT~

"That's a very ugly face you're making." Naoko told him bluntly. The kunoichi was dressed for combat, hair secured in a high ponytail and guards on her shins and elbows, dainty hands encased in leather gloves. The only thing missing was her armor.

Izuna started, briefly wondering why she was there, waiting at his door, until he remembered what he'd asked her the day before. "We can't all be as uninterested in clan politics as you." He muttered, careful as he maneuvered around the spear balanced on her shoulder. Truthfully, he didn't have the patience for her jaunty attitude at the moment, doubt swirling around in his mind.

Izuna set off at an unrushed pace, and to his mild annoyance, she followed. "Why do you have that? You know you're training children, Naoko."

Laughing, the older Uchiha swung her spear out, thrusting up in mock ferocity before resting it across her shoulder once again, tip pointed to the sky. "I won't harm a hair on their darling heads." she promised. "But if they can learn sword-fighting from you, there's no reason why they wouldn't be interested in seeing a seasoned spear fighter in action. I've even gotten Hikaku to be part of my demonstration." The kunoichi bragged. "When I'm done, the children will want me to be their sensei all the time."
Izuna didn't bother returning her banter, once again thinking of the elders' reactions as he'd given his report on the Kaguya. Despite assurance from him that they were well monitored and posed little threat, they stubbornly insisted that at the very least, the Hokage should give them an apology.

He would've been embarrassed to demand such a thing from Hashirama when he knew Madara never would've entertained the elders to this degree at all, and they knew it too. While his older brother took their counsel into consideration often enough, he'd set himself apart from their father as a leader who followed his own path. This occasionally led him to butt heads with the more headstrong members of the clan council, and they deemed him a black sheep.

"I wouldn't pay a lick of attention to what some war hawk past his prime said to me. If I were you, of course. We both know I don't listen to anything they say now." Naoko jabbed a thumb against the wrinkles between his eyebrows. Izuna moved away, before she got the idea to do it again.

"You only did that to see if you could leave a mark." He accused, and she tittered, indirectly agreeing. In their youth she'd had great fun jamming a finger against his forehead for the sole purpose of making him walk around with a red spot there for the world to see.

She had a point though, in the maddening way she often did. Naoko didn't take heed to anything the council said, which was why Izuna was sure they were glad that her betrothal to Madara had devolved on its own. The untamable, chaotic energy she brought wherever she went wouldn't have been anything like the demure matriarch many on the council still thought a Lady Uchiha should be.

Moreover, there was never a time when she'd seemed truly worried in the tumultuous political climate just before moving to Konoha. He didn't have the luxury of turning a blind eye to such things, always mentally preparing for a day when he'd be forced to permanently fulfill Madara's role and lead the clan in his stead… Naoko, however, lived in the moment. Izuna couldn't say he didn't envy that about her.

"Take the time you need to get away from it all. Whatever hasn't burnt to ash will be here to torment you when you return." she chirped.

Izuna grimaced at her apt way with words. "Thank you, Naoko…for being willing to train with the children for today, at least."

As expected, his friend only shrugged. "You could have asked me much sooner." Her eyes landed on the small figures waiting patiently on the training grounds, and her eyes glinted the way they always did before she went off to battle.

"Naoko." Izuna reminded, "Children."

Her lip dipped into a small pout and she waved him off, sauntering toward his students, spear shining in the sunlight.

"I won't let her overdo it." Izuna spun, finding Hikaku coming over, heavily padded in his own armor and sword at his waist. A wise choice. Regardless of what she said, even in the midst of sparring, Naoko's hits were hard and her spear was sure. "At the very least, I can take the brunt."

"I'm counting on you, Hikaku."

The older man hummed, clapping Izuna's shoulder as he passed.

Well. His students would be looked after for the day, and Izuna was free to have a day to himself,
outside the compound. The clan wouldn't exactly *implode* without him around, he reasoned.

There was no harm in some much needed relaxation…

"Thank you for everything," Sakura bowed courteously to the captain, met with the sounds of light-hearted laughter.

Joben clapped her shoulder when she straightened again. Ai, Junko, Kazu, Gintaki and several of the other sailors she had come to know stood around him with smiling faces. "No need for that sort o' thing. Just be safe out there. We're deliverin' some cargo to a neighborin' island, and I promised the crew we'd stop n' hit a tavern or two. Let's hope they don't get piss drunk." He winked. "We'll be back through in'a week's time."

"A week?" she echoed. In taking the mission, the Hokage was sure to inform her the time of completion could vary a bit, diplomatic negotiations delicate on their own. Coupled with the weight of the outbreak sweeping the islands there was no telling if Sakura would be able to distribute a cure to local medics in such a brief span of time.

"It'll pass before ya know it, lass." Gintaki assured, unaware that was her concern to begin with. "We'll swap tales on the way back to Fire Country."

"For now, yer partner's waitin' for ya." Unsurprisingly, Madara had exited the ship almost before the anchor was dropped. And as Ai had said he was waiting not far down the port's platform, back facing them. Sakura gave them all a brave face as she headed for the steep planking. The second she stepped off the vessel, the mist engulfed her completely, until it was difficult to see a hand in front of her face, let alone where she was going. Only shinobi senses kept her from falling off the platform and into the icy water as she stopped near the Uchiha's side.

"Our lodging is at the Hagakure Inn," Madara pivoted on his heel, "It seems that's where Hashirama arranged for the leaders of Chigiri and Genzai to meet with us, specifically me."

Sakura grunted, remembering back to the night she'd studied the map. Not knowing when she would see it again, she had taken the liberty of committing the islands that made up the Water Country to memory, unsure when the information could prove vital. "This island we're on…it's Sekai, isn't it?"

"Very good." Madara hummed, voice impassive. "Sekai is neutral to the conflict, thus an appropriate spot to hold talks." Of course, this was where their missions split neatly. While Madara's goal was to resolve the conflict and establish trade with one or both islands, Sakura's job was elsewhere, treating and curing the dying and infirmed.

The kunoichi nodded, eyes widening at the sight of mountain peaks rising in the distance as they neared the little village of the island. A steep path wound up its craggy side, what appeared to be a man-made structure of some kind set on top. "I wonder what this island's leader thinks of all this?" she thought aloud. "I mean, even if they're neutral, bringing these disputes to the island *does* involve them in a roundabout way…"

"Sekai has a coalition of villagers, not a single leader." Madara chuckled, and Sakura had a feeling it was at her ignorance. "They've long since declared themselves a neutral territory from the bloody fighting between islands, despite having at least one ninja clan residing here, and the daimyo of Water Country has chosen to honor that for the time being."

She had more questions, more commentary to offer, but the closer they were to arrival at the Inn,
the less sharing her thoughts with Madara appealed. Instead, she was vigilant, ever aware of the constant eyes that followed them from street to street. Somehow, Madara knew where he was going, and she reluctantly followed his lead.

There was no getting around that Madara was well-informed, well-prepared. If only she was half as informed about the specifications of her own mission, maybe she’d be walking with a swagger in her step too. But the Hokage had only been able to share the limited things that he'd been told. The rest it was up to her to gather through investigation.

As they traveled further into the village proper, signs of life slowly emerged. A fish merchant's shack populated nearly every other corner, everyone yelling that their catches were the freshest. Sakura caught eyes with one man and he jumped from his seat to hold out a sizable mackerel just under her nose. The fishy tang made her nose twitch, the fishmonger jumping into his appeal before she could shake her head. "Caught this only an hour ago!" he boasted. "Come taste the best of Sekai!"

"He lies!" Another man shouted him down from across the road. "His fish are only a day from rotten. Mine are the freshest!" The proclamation devolved into an intense shouting match soon after, Sakura moving along while they were preoccupied.

Interspersed through the multitudes of fisherman trying to sell them a meal, there were stalls with impressive art on display, one young girl showing them a bright row of jewelry made from seashells and beach glass, undoubtedly the hard work of beach-combing. "A n-necklace for you miss?" she offered shyly. "It would match your eyes?" Admittedly, the necklace was beautiful, uniform pieces of jade glass making up the length of it, with a single speckled shell sitting as the centerpiece.

Its crafter had true talent, despite the roundness of youth in her face. However, it wasn't her age that caught Sakura off guard, but the patchwork clothes and sunken cheeks, something she had seen plenty of during Team 7's trip to the Land of Waves. In the smooth jade surface of the trinket, she could see her surprised expression, and a pang of sympathy hit her.

"How mu—" She began to reach for the jewelry, one hand already searching for her pouch of money. Stunned, Sakura watched as a larger hand seized the necklace before her fingertips could graze it, the Uchiha inspecting the jewelry carefully.

"Cup your palms together," he instructed the small girl, his tone oddly gentle. Blinking up at them with round eyes, she slowly obeyed, her tiny hands trembling as she held them together. The Uchiha had been so silent during the exchange, Sakura nearly forgot she was following him in the first place, and when he loosened a pouch tied at his waist, she understood what he was doing. Shiny golden coins spilled into her hands from his, so many that some threatened to fall to the ground. "Is this sufficient payment?"

Dazed, she managed to nod stiffly, eyes large and transfixed on the money in her hands, likely more than she'd ever held in her life. "O-Oh, yes!"

Madara turned and dropped the necklace into Sakura's still awkwardly outstretched hand. "No more delays, Haruno."

The man had already moved on by the time Sakura was able to draw her attention from the necklace unceremoniously given to her. "H-Hey, wait!" Tucking it away, she hurried after him.

"One room?" Madara repeated. It had been difficult enough in the less than spacious belly of the
ship. Now, upon arrival, he found he'd once again be sharing close quarters with Haruno indefinitely.

"Yes," The innkeeper's wife wasn't in the mood to argue, clear exhaustion in her eyes despite it being early morning. "That's all we can spare."

Biting down his discontent, Madara slid her the payment, and she slid him the clunky room key.

"Boy, come here!" she bellowed over her shoulder. Her teenage son straightened from lowering food onto an occupied table in the tavern, glancing nervously in their direction. "Quickly!" she snapped, causing him to mumble something to the guests he was serving and stumble over. The child was pitiable, stature and downcast eyes displaying nothing but resignation toward his mother. "See to it they're settled in. Then get out back and fetch the fresh eggs from the chicken coop. That should've been done before dawn."

Refusing to meet her fierce gaze, he instead plucked at a loose thread on his worn gray yukata. "M-Mina said she would...would do it, kaa-san."

That hardly pleased the gruff woman, "Your sister is already doing the washing. She doesn't have time to handle your chores as well, though the foolish girl might try."

"Y-Yes, you're right. I was mistaken." The boy agreed hastily. "Please," he finally turned to himself and Haruno. "Follow me and I'll gladly show you to your accommodations."

It was clear he only wanted to be away from his mother's harsh tongue, and the Uchiha couldn't blame him for that. Allowing him to save face, he filed behind the cowering son and in front of Haruno.

Taking them around the back of the tavern, the boy led them up a narrow set of steps to the inn's second floor, and Madara was pleased to see it wasn't as shabby as he was expecting. Hand-woven rugs decorated the floors and water colored paintings hung from the walls, depicting fisherman on ships and the village itself being overlooked by the mountain at its outskirt.

One image in particular stood out, a small black-haired woman with a fair-skinned face dressed in lavender silk, transparent sleeves and train, looking out over a cliff side that faced the sea. A single tear rolled from her cheek, and a bejeweled headpiece rested against her forehead, blooms the same color of her kimono scattered at her slippered feet. The artist had gone through painstaking lengths to capture the melancholy of the woman's visage, in turn giving the mural and eerie quality. "Who's that?" Haruno asked from behind him, peering over his shoulder in the tight space of the hall.

Turning, the boy's eyes caught on the mural that captured their attention. "I-Iwanagahime..." he explained. "She...she is still sacred here."

Rubbing his palms against his thighs, he politely inclined his head to a door to their immediate right. "This is your room. I or my sister will come by to deliver meals later. Or...or freshen your bedding..." His eyes lingered on the two of them, cheeks flaming up. "S-Should we bring them in or leave them at the door?"

"Inside is fine..." Haruno trailed off expectantly, her own face awash in red.

"My name is Muyo," he confessed, recoiling as if the word physically stung.

And Madara supposed he too would be filled with intense shame, if he were forced to tell strangers he'd been named "useless".
Seemingly unaware, Haruno offered a gracious smile. Muyo hesitantly returned it, backing down the hall like a timid animal. "Enjoy your room." When he turned around, Haruno's face scrunched in displeasure.

"Urgh, I can't believe he thinks we're…" She couldn't bring herself to finish, instead motioning toward the lock. "Alright, let's get this over with."

Briefly, the thought of telling her he'd lost the key crossed his mind, just to see how she'd react. Deciding he would attempt civility for the time being, Madara produced the key and opened the door, even allowing her to enter first.

The room featured a large futon with neatly folded sheets and a trunk to store belongings at the foot of it. A writing desk sat just under a window, and there was a rice paper folding screen painted with peach blossoms, perhaps to give them the option to change around one another and preserve modesty. Haruno shucked off her things, barely giving the room a once over like he'd expected her to.

"I'm heading out," she declared. "The fastest way to find out what's going on is to talk to the villagers. One of them should be able to point me in the direction of wherever they're keeping their sick."

Madara had to admire her dedication; she certainly didn't waste time. "And you believe it would be that easy? Have you not noticed that the people here are incredibly untrusting of foreigners?"

"I've thought about that," she said, taking a fistful of hair in her hand and tying it hastily in a low ponytail, revealing her pale neck. "I can always henge myself if it comes to that."

Clearly, her mind was made up, and even if it hadn't been, Madara saw no point in stopping her. The peace he would receive while she was gone was ideal for him. In the silence of an empty room, there'd be no distractions to keep him from preparing for tomorrow's meeting with the island leaders.

Eying the desk, he decided that after he removed his armor, it would be the perfect place to have some tea and draft notes. "You should be careful not to meddle in anything that would upset the locals here."

Haruno paused by the door, frowning. "I know you're trying to say I stick my nose where it doesn't belong, but I'm not stupid." The heavy door clicked upon her exit, and Madara was able to drink in the sweet silence. It wasn't something that he'd ever admit to her, but even he was a bit curious how she'd handle herself. Whether she was as competent as a medic as others believed her to be, or whether she would soon be in over her head. A foreign nation with its own affairs might as well have been hostile territory. Haruno was young and headstrong, and it could very well be her undoing here...

'This mission might not be as tedious as I'd believed...'

Izuna wasn't sure, but he had the distinct feeling he was missing something. Days spent relaxing weren't supposed to have the opposite effect. That he knew. Yet there he was, restless as he sat in the dango shop, nibbling at the stick of sweets. The drone of the chattering blond sitting next to him made it hard if not impossible to hear himself think, but there was nowhere else to move to, and so he was forced to endure.

"Kureno, how many times does that make this?!" she was saying. Well, seething. "Watching, I feel
embarrassed for you, myself, and every girl you've pestered since we've been here."

"Sister mine, you have to take the initiative in these matters!" The man beside her scoffed. "You'll see that my approach is the right one when I'm happily wedded and you're still waiting for some chivalrous shinobi from a distant land to sweep you off your feet." Izuna saw him pat her head a little roughly, like Madara sometimes would to him when they were young. The slightly aggressive affection had been his brother's way of asserting the authority he'd believed he'd had because he was older when they'd have silly squabbles.

'Definitely siblings...' he thought.

"There isn't anything wrong with dreaming a little!" she fussed. "And I never said he needed to be from some far off land. I may find him right here. There's a whole village full of shinobi and civilians here, and someone's bound to be right. You'll never find a wife, because every woman who could possibly marry you has already seen your face darkening her doorstep far too many times!"

There was a pause after that, and unlikely as it was, Izuna hoped that'd be the end of their ridiculous argument. Surely, the other patrons hoped the same. Tea and sweets were best served without the unpleasant bickering of a sibling argument.

"My smile shines hope and inspiration into the lives of lonely young ladies everywhere." Kureno countered.

"Doubtful." His sister shook her head. "Truth be told, your entire personality is off-putting. You give compliments too easily, so it's hard to tell when you're being genuine. And you aren't nearly so good as wooing women as you think you are. You smile too wide when you're nervous, and for a ninja, you're hopelessly flashy."

Kureno made a strangled noise, his hands clutching the counter tightly for balance.

Izuna winced, suddenly a tad sympathetic toward the male sibling.

"And you believe your personality is so much better?" he spat.

"Well, naturally." she beamed, flicking blonde hair over her shoulders.

"Hah! Since you've been kind enough to point out my faults, allow me to return the courtesy, dear Yurine. You never know when things aren't meant to be a competition, and you daydream at inappropriate times. When you aren't doing that, you're henpecking. You prattle on about romance at every opportunity, and when you do find someone you're attracted to, your palms sweat profusely."

The Uchiha watched as Yurine's face became scarlet, the poor girl glancing around wildly to see if anyone had heard. Of course, Izuna had, so he ducked his head and took a long sip of his now nearly cold tea. "How could you know the last one unless you've been reading my journal?!" She accused. "Kureno, I'm going to end you."

If he was gauging the argument correctly, they were fighting about the best way to pursue love... And their opinions of the matter seemed to differ drastically. Somehow, though, it had turned into insulting the other's personal attributes.

"What we need," Kureno went on as if he hadn't heard, "is a neutral party. Someone who can tell us for sure whose personality is more attractive. Oh, tap that man next to you."
The man...next to her? He lurched, hastily eating his remaining dango. He'd sat there for as long as he could bear to, but if they wanted to drag him into the middle of...whatever it was they were calling it, Izuna decided it was time to go. Unfortunately, shoveling five dumplings down at once didn't have the best effect, and he struggled to avoid choking as someone politely poked at his shoulder.

He knew with dread who it was, even before he turned around. 'Damn...too slow.'

"Excuse me, but my brother and I could use some help." Yurine began.

'Yes, you could. You both could. Just not mine.' Izuna carefully swallowed down the dango.

She was remarkably more polite than she'd been a mere moment earlier, as if the side of her he'd witnessed was reserved for dealing with her brother only.

"What my sister's asking is, what type of person do you find charming? Someone bright and talented, like me," Kureno pointed to himself with a grin. "Or someone moody and controlling, like Yurine?" They both leaned in, their carmine eyes eager.

Though he was able to maintain his composure, on the inside, Izuna was frantic for an out of any kind. "I really don't feel qualified to, uh, settle this." he explained awkwardly.

"We won't be mad with you either way," Yurine said gently. "It's just that this argument would go on for days, otherwise."

"Days?" Now Izuna was downright concerned. Would they really waste that much time debating on something so...pointless?

"Humor them," The shop owner whispered as he passed. "Please!" The clear desperation hidden in the man's tight smile was pitiable. "If you can do it, your order is on me." As if it was to add to the needed incentive, Izuna suddenly found another plate of sweets set before him.

Although he wasn't that adverse to paying his bill and leaving, he felt for the man, who'd probably been waiting for the right time to ask the noisy siblings to go.

"I can't personally say who has the better traits between the two of you..." Izuna said slowly. "But I think intelligence is charming. Someone who can carry a conversation and is a bit inquisitive...Maybe even someone who's assertive and stands up for what they think is right, even when she loses her temper sometimes..."

"Loses her temper, huh?" Kureno repeated. He snapped his fingers, eyes lighting up. "Oh, I see. You're that kind of guy."

"S-So having lots of passion is good. And being confident about your opinions?" Yurine asked, poking her fingers together. "I suppose...I could see that. Oh, you know, that's a bit like Sakura, isn't it?" The blonde turned to her brother. "She's a passionate, assertive type. Remember?"

"Hm," He ran his fingers through his hair. "You're right, you're right! Such a strong force for someone with such a fragile name." he sighed wistfully.

Izuna swallowed, his throat a little dry. Some said that great epiphanies struck like lightning, but for him, it was more of a phantom blow to the head. "It is...isn't it?"
Malignant

The island's atmosphere seemed to have bled to its citizens, because everywhere she turned, Sakura was met with distant, stony faces. Several times, she'd approached villagers and, just as Madara had warned, she was avoided. When she caught the eyes of a toddler, peering at her from over his mother's shoulder with weary eyes and blue-tinted lips, she rushed forward in concern.

"Excuse me," Sakura valiantly fought through the crowd threatening to separate them from her sight, the child's sweaty face etched into her mind. It was possible he was afflicted with the terrible illness ravaging the population, and if that was the case, it was crucial she examine him immediately. "I'm here from—"

Her foot caught suddenly, and Sakura tumbled to the ground with a shriek. Ankle throbbing, she slowly lifted herself up on her knees to see the woman and her child had already disappeared in the rush of people. 'Damn it!'

She'd missed her chance yet again, and on top of it all, she strongly suspected her ankle was no sprained. It was nothing she couldn't heal, but she'd have to get up and find somewhere to rest first. Unfortunately the throng of passersby made that next to impossible. There wasn't even anything to help her stand. Her fingers clenched in frustration, dirt getting under her nails. At least Madara wasn't around, or the situation would have been infinitely more embarrassing.

"Oh my…Would you like a hand?"

"Huh?" Sakura blinked some dirt out of her eye, confused at the figure hovering over her, crouched down to help. Maybe, the island was getting to her too, and she was hallucinating.

That theory proved incorrect when her "hallucination" took hold of her arms and gingerly pulled her to her feet. The good samaritan was slow to release her, concern starkly reflected in the oval face peering down at her.

And what a beautiful face it was… From so close, it was hard not to notice the length of the dark lashes, the fullness of the pink lips, or the sleek earthen hair, tied in a tight bun. If not for the touch of masculinity in the angular jaw, it might have been easy to mistake him for a woman.

She was nearly too mesmerized to protest as he slipped a hand around her back while smoothly guiding her arm to his shoulder, carefully starting down the street. "Oh, I'm fine now. I can heal my—"

"I saw what you were attempting to do." He explained softly, a distinct lilt to his voice she was only just noticing.

Sakura straightened, prepared to defend herself in case she'd given any onlookers the wrong impression. "I'm a medic, and her child—"

"I understand…but even if you'd caught up with her, she wouldn't have listened. You…clearly are no islander. At least not from Sekai. You may have noticed it's much easier to garner suspicion than trust here."

She bowed her head in acknowledgement. "You don't seem as closed off as everyone else I've met so far. You even stopped to help me."

It was the pretty stranger's turn to look away shyly. "It's in a medic's nature to help without
Sakura looked him over with new eyes. 'Medic? Then he has to know…!' She was so excited she almost put weight on her bad ankle. That thought her back to the fact that she didn't know where he was leading her, and despite his help thus far, she knew better than to let her guard down. "Really, I appreciate the help, but I'm...er, I can take care of this myself." She gestured down to her swollen ankle, and he stopped abruptly with a gasp.

"Oh no, it's not very polite of me to lead a lady around without at least giving her an introduction, is it?" Even saying so, he still brought her to a low stone wall in front of a dilapidated house, and helped her sit down. "I'm Kou from the Yuki clan. I, and others of my clan, are the island's only healers."

"I'm Sakura Haruno from Konoha. And I came here because of the outbreak, to assist."

Kou inclined his head with a smile. "It's nice to meet you, though I think that needs attending before we discuss helping anyone else."

Sakura followed his eyes and winced at the purple color her ankle had taken on. "You're right..." Bringing her leg up on the wall, she bent at the waist and brought a glowing hand over it to assess the damage. Torn ligaments and inflammation, as expected, but no breaks. The minute chakra wrapped around the wound, the pain ebbed away, and Sakura closed her eyes, as the swelling came down.

"Amazing," Kou exclaimed from her side.

When she opened them and wiggled her toes, the discoloration was all but gone, fading with every second. "You're no ordinary foreign healer." The male conceded. "And you say you traveled from Konoha? Are you perhaps...the aide?"

Sakura nodded, swinging her leg around to stand. "That's right."

"Then what a fortuitous meeting. It's no wonder you looked so frustrated before. Had I known you were arriving today, I would have set time aside to greet you at the port." Kou bowed apologetically. "Forgive me, but...today has been wearisome and it isn't over yet." The frown was almost out of place on his countenance, and Sakura could see the exhaustion in the faint circles beneath his eyes. It was a look all too familiar to her, the look of a weary medic.

"Kou, please, if you could take me to wherever the sick are, I'd like to do what I can. Maybe I know something from the mainland that you haven't tried yet."

His somber expression lightened ever so slightly, and he regarded her with new hope in his eyes. "Any additional help is appreciated. We haven't seen anything like this before, and there are only so many of us."

The sickly child, whisked away by his mother came to mind again, and Sakura's determination flared to life. She wouldn't let the sickness claim more lives. She refused.

Tobirama hadn't spent years honing his sensor skills to have them abused for such frivolous purposes. When he'd told Toka as much, she'd had the nerve to ask if chasing down his brother wasn't an act of frivolity. That, he assured himself, was a special case. Hashirama needed strict monitoring. Perhaps more than he should, given facts...

Nevertheless, every day, Toka employed his ability to help track down Reira who, had entered a
petulant phase not even Hashirama's amicable approach could smooth out.

Since that night she had come and sat at the table without uttering a word, things had been incredibly strained between Reira and Toka. It annoyed him, if only because he was inadvertently cast into the shepherding role of tracking the girl down and bringing her home.

Tobirama had to admit she was clever enough to choose places they normally wouldn't suspect she'd be, hence why it saved time to have him do the tracking. If this senseless childhood moodiness did nothing else for any of them, it had helped Reira improve her concealment skills.

No sooner had he thought this, than he arrived at the location of the young Senju's latest hiding place. Mild irritation began to teeter on the edge of true hatred even before he'd laid eyes on her. Reira he could never hate. A handful she may have been, but she was also family, and a child. One he had watched grow from infancy at that. Tobirama had no such qualms about directing animosity at the man she was chatting with obliviously. Izuna Uchiha held Haruno's loathsome cat as Reira reached out to rub the creature's ears. Both stood in front of the absent kunoichi's dwelling, Reira in the doorway as if she'd just exited it.

Lately, more troubling than her daily disappearances was the fact that Reira appeared to spend her time in the company of Uchiha more than her own clan. Toka wasn't bothered by her friendship to the Uchiha boy, and he wasn't raising her, so it wasn't something he'd felt the need to speak on. Izuna was another matter.

"Reira," She turned and the smile fell from her face, arms dropping to her side.

"Oh," she choked dumbly, finding the cat a better place to rest her eyes.

The Uchiha watched the exchange, his own face blank as well. Even the feline in his arms was suddenly regarding Tobirama with something akin to hostility, as if it held him in contempt for taking the attention. For the time being, he ignored both the other man and the animal, nearing the girl with his arms crossed.

"You're wanted at home. This is getting old quickly." Reira's head lifted, and a little defiance returned to her eyes. "But—"

Ready for the inevitable, he was quick to cut her off. "Do I look like I'm entertaining a discussion about it?"

"No." she admitted, biting her tongue in case she said more.

"Then go." Visibly sulking, Reira literally dragged her feet, sandals scuffing up dirt as she walked past. "The most direct route." Tobirama added.

This time, Reira turned, mouth agape. "But—"

Fed up, the white-haired Senju presented his sternest glare, and she flinched in submission. Pinching the bridge of his nose, Tobirama found his glare softening. As always, in the end, he was left to fill the role of the villain. Be it by Toka or Hashirama. "I expect you to engage in a conversation with Toka tonight. A real one. This can't go on…it's…troublesome." He tried to explain, not at all accustomed to mincing words.

Reira considered it, biting the inside of her cheek. "No promises…" she sighed, running off. Tobirama watched her go, satisfied she would return to the compound this time.

Now, for the gaze pressing against his back…
Izuna was the same as when he'd seen him with Haruno. The same as when he'd faced him in battle. In their last battle, the one in which he'd fatally wounded his enemy, Tobirama was sure he had rid the world of yet another Uchiha. But by circumstances that remained shrouded in mystery, Izuna had made a full recovery, and now here they were.

"You've strayed far from the compound today." The Senju taunted. "With your brother gone, I would think they'd be keeping you close."

"I'm on reconnaissance." Izuna's lips pulled into a small grin. "Looking for weaknesses in the village we can exploit when we inevitably plan our uprising." Haruno's cat wriggled and jumped down, circling his feet in a loop. The Senju tracked the animal, until it stopped and sat on its haunches, glowering up at him with mismatched orbs.

Tobirama knew it was all to get a rise. It was the same way their encounters would play out on the battlefield. Anything to mentally unbalance the other, to give even the slightest edge. "Playing cute doesn't suit you." he snarled. Hashirama could say what he liked, but...old habits died hard. And usually they died when the person did. Izuna was not dead, as he should be. So what was to say—

"I'm only telling you what you'd like to think." Izuna stated, face unreadable once more. "You and I both know your...apprehension towards my clan, and especially toward Madara and myself, hasn't gone anywhere."

Without Hashirama there, there was no one to stop him. No reason to mince his words. "Likewise, you hold your own grudges I'm sure. We've both missed our chances to end the other."

Izuna laughed emptily. "Trust you to be so bold that you'd admit you're frustrated I'm not dead. Although, you're right about one thing...Not long ago, I lost to you when before, I thought my swordsmanship was peerless. It may have been my own hubris, but that doesn't mean I can let it go."

Closing his eyes, Tobirama smirked. At least he wasn't alone in his unease. "Following that kind of declaration, we'd normally have a rematch, until one of us was truly dead."

"Yes." Haruno's cat scampered up Izuna's body to settle on his shoulder, nudging against his cheek. "But as you said, that opportunity has passed. For the sake of the village, it'd be better to stow away those feelings." He turned his back, signaling the end of the confrontation.

But, there was a niggling sensation just under the surface. A suspicion he'd placed in the back of his mind, but was now revisiting. "Why are you skulking so close to Haruno's residence?"

That stopped Izuna in his tracks, and he could see he'd caught him off guard. One of his hands reached up to rub the cat's head, and the feline eagerly butted against it, purring loudly. "That hardly seems like something you'd find interest in."

Tobirama found himself growing impatient. "I hate repeating myself, Uchiha. Playing cute doesn't suit you."

"I can't say this nosy side suits you any better." he scoffed. "If that's all you wanted, then there's nothing else left to discuss."

After being thoroughly brushed aside, there wasn't much Tobirama could do besides let him go. The fan displayed on the back of his shirt winked mockingly as a flutter of wind moved Izuna's hair. Haruno's cat was still lazily draped across his shoulders, enjoying the ride.

Nothing about whatever relationship she maintained with the Uchiha clan should bother him. After
all, his only interest was facing her in another match, one where he could unleash all his skills against her and win. To that end, it was more beneficial to return home and continue perfecting the kage bunshin jutsu, not speculate on why Haruno insisted on familiarizing herself with such a troubled clan.

Anyone, at any time, could die.

The young.

The old.

The just.

The dishonest.

The innocent.

The corrupt.

Over the years, and especially since becoming a medic that was something Sakura had come to understand, a sobering truth. A good medic was death's worst enemy, able to pull those who otherwise would certainly die, back from the brink. As she followed Kou through a flap that barely kept out the draft, inside the back room of a village meeting hall that was overdue for a painting, that truth was laid out before her like so many cots stretched from wall to wall. Medics huddled at bedsides, wiping sweat from brows or feeding patients liquid from bowls.

A shudder ran up her spine as Sakura was transported back to the tents of the battlefield, sheets blanketing fresh corpses while a team of medics worked tirelessly to piece together those that could still be saved. "It's not much. Certainly not enough," Kou whispered ruefully. "But this is where they're all brought, once they begin showing symptoms. Follow me. I'd like you to meet Erika."

Sakura obeyed wordlessly as they traveled to the back of the room, slipping around healers and the sick alike. She did her best not to let her eyes linger on any one person, afraid she would meet eyes with some of the dying toddlers she'd seen upon entering the hovel.

Fortunately, Kou brought them to a stop near an infirmed man with his upper chest heavily bandaged, being tended to by a very small medic with her back to them as she kneeled at his side. "Erika?" She continued to rummage, the scrape of ceramic bowls filling Sakura's ears, along with the heady scent of a herbal mixture.

"Hmm?" She paused just long enough to awkwardly turn on the stone floor, still on her knees. Sakura was struck by two things. From fingertip to elbow, her arms were coated in a thick caking of fresh blood, appearing more a butcher than a healer. And her face... Well, suddenly it made sense why she was so very small. Erika was a child, no older than she had been at the start of her apprenticeship.

Kou was unperturbed so Sakura did her best to hide her own surprise. True, she had been expecting someone far older spearheading the island's last line of defense against such a terrible illness. But judging would make her a hypocrite, when Sakura clearly remembered Tsunade trusting her to assist in procedures at a far younger age than most would consider. Skill made age irrelevant in matters such as these.

"Oh, hello!" Erika waved both arms at her, heedless of the blood. Her round eyes were dark and
fearless, her dark hair cropped up in a practical bob that appeared longer in the front than the back. And the pert little nose in the center of her face was cutely upturned, very endearing. Even the yukata she wore, spattered a little with dried blood though it was, was far too...cheery. A happy yellow. Nothing about her suggested she was a child up to her elbows in death. If anything, she looked right at home. "Are you the help from the mainland?"

Nodding dumbly, Sakura bowed. "I'm Sakura. It's nice to meet you, Erika..."

"Call me Erika-chan if you'd like." The girl soothed. Then, she plunged both reedy arms into a bucket of water at her side several times, taking a sponge and wiping the remaining blood away. "I've just finished cleaning and applying poultice to this patient's chest wound. With any luck, he'll rest much easier through the night."

"Ah, I'll empty that." Kou offered, already reaching over to take the bucket out of her way while motioning with his free hand for Sakura to step closer. Kou left, and, feeling she was expected to, Sakura crouched at the other side of the patient's cot. She had to admit, Erika had done very well on the bandages, and the man did indeed appear to be stable for the moment. He was sweating less than some of the others in the room and his chest rose and fell with deep, only slightly shaky breaths.

Erika giggled as she toweled her arms dry. Cupping a hand to her mouth conspiratorially, she whispered, "Kou-kun is so attentive, like an older brother. He's been very helpful to me since I arrived."

"Since you arrived?" Sakura echoed, glancing around. She had just assumed...

"Oh yes, I'm not originally from this island, or even Water Country." Erika explained patiently. "I was only visiting to gather ingredients hard to find anywhere else but the mountains here, when the outbreak first occurred. That was nearly four weeks ago now..." she sighed mournfully. "And I wouldn't feel right leaving...when I know I can help."

Unsure how to respond, Sakura perused the room again. It was apparent every medic there was doing their best, but...with the death toll still on the rise with no signs of dropping, Sakura had to wonder if what they'd been trying had any positive effect whatsoever. "This is rather bleak, isn't it? It's alright if you say it. You'd only be stating the truth." Erika coaxed.

Abashed at being so readable, Sakura shook her head. "Oh no. Well, yes. It's horrible. But..."

"Despite what it may seem, we've managed to slow it, if only slightly. At least when we catch the symptoms in time. I was the one that first found out how to do that." Regardless of how mature she made herself out to be, a child was still a child. When Erika puffed out her chest with pride in her big eyes, Sakura tamped down the urge to pat her head dotingly.

"What are the common symptoms? And isn't there a fear that it's contagious? I mean, you..." Sakura gestured vaguely at her arms, though they were now spotless, yukata sleeves rolled back to avoid being soiled.

"It isn't contagious. That's the only good news about it." Erika huffed. "It also seems to strike at random, really. Early symptoms present like a mild illness...Fever, stiff joints, coughing fits. It's when it enters the later stages that it becomes...bizarre. Some come to us with horrible wounds and even those that aren't that have festered with...black ooze. Others ever get wounds, but their skin blottches and their lips go blue...they cough...black ooze too. Sometimes there's hair loss, a tree rot smell, uncontrollable shakes. But there's always ooze. It's like some kind of omen, you know?" She nodded her head at the sleeping man laying between them. "That all sounds farfetched to you, I'm
Every word Erika had spoken caused Sakura's heart to thud a little harder, until it was a crescendo of panicked beats that threatened to rip the organ from her chest cavity. What it sounded like was a blight, in which case, something even more dire was happening than a disease outbreak or contaminated food supply.

"Sometimes, we have even used them to cull the population of nations." Mizuchi smiled proudly.

Sakura pressed a hand to her forehead, feeling dizzy. "What's the matter?" Erika asked.

"Never mind me…" she sighed. "I've got work to do." Standing, Sakura ignored the creak of her knees. "I came all the way here and now that I've got a better picture of what's going on, I think I can help." She didn't intend to tell the younger healer how exactly.

Erika was quiet, her wide eyes unnerving as they stared deep into her own. There was something older than a child there, something almost…otherworldly. Sakura could only guess at what went through her head, what she was going to say.

Kou took that moment to return, his footfalls echoing his approach. Sakura couldn't help but take note of the fact that he wasn't alone, an imposing figure in a white cloak with a drawn hood just behind him. There wasn't much visible, certainly nothing to discern who was hiding underneath. But the broad form suggested a male, and the heavy footsteps had the possibility he wasn't a shinobi.

Hoping to gauge what was happening, her eyes fell on Kou. Unlike when he'd left, the male medic returned with a troubled expression, his hands holding the bucket of clean water tight. "Some fresh water." He handed the bucket over to the girl, who graciously accepted. "And, our visitor's here to collect today's bodies."

Erika straightened, her voice much smaller and less confident, "There are only two today. You know where they are." The cloaked figure thumped a fist to his chest, proceeding to a door Sakura hadn't taken much notice of, near the end of the row of cots. The one splash of color on the white fabric was the large blossom in the center of his back, a purple flower that had become increasingly familiar lately. Recognizing it only took a minute, and Sakura gasped. 'A violacia.'

When he was out of sight and earshot, Sakura spoke, keeping her tone low. "What was that about?"

Erika and Kou shared a worried look, the latter sinking down beside them. "That was one of the acolytes of Iwanagahime. Here to retrieve the bodies of those who couldn't be saved. They'll bury them now. They come every day."

Suspicion rose, the warnings of the strange ways things were done in Water Country resurfacing. "Shouldn't the families be allowed to do that?" she challenged. "I mean, where's he even going to take them?"

"No one questions the authority of those chosen by Iwanagahime." Erika said gently. "Now, Sakura-san, I could use some help making more poultice. It'll be time to apply it again before long, and I'm running low."

Sakura was aware of the abrupt shift in conversation, that all was not what it seemed. But she indulged Erika, understanding why she would be hesitant to question the locals since she too was an outsider, albeit one who'd gained their trust.

Trust was something she might need in order to get to the bottom of what was really going on. "If
you don't mind, could I try another way?"

It was a huge risk she was about to undertake. Fear fought for dominance but determination wrestled it down.

"A method from the mainland?" Kou guessed.

She giggled nervously. "Something you probably haven't seen around the island, at least."

Erika tilted her head. "I'd normally want to see a demonstration at a better time, but we don't have that luxury now. Please, go ahead."

Steeling her resolve, Sakura turned away from the cot with the slumbering man, and toward one with a boy close to Erika's age, who had woken and started to cough wetly. His eyes were wide and shiny with deliria as she scooted closer.

"It's alright," she hushed when he started chattering senselessly. Calling on the power she'd previously used to make blights, Sakura placed a splayed palm to his chest. The concealed mark on her wrist crackled to life, and instead of the usual green hue of her healing chakra, her hand lit with a golden tone. She could vaguely hear Kou and Erika making surprised noises, but the process in front of her had all her concentration.

Sakura searched, fingers brushing lightly across his skin. When the golden light spilled down to his stomach, just above his navel, he whined, jerking from the cot.

"Easy," Kou pushed him back down, and the kunoichi continued her exploration, coaxing what felt like a knot of malevolent energy toward her touch. Again, her patient jerked and Kou restrained him as she guided the malignant coil to unwind and slither toward his throat.

Wheezing, he began scratching at his neck and the pinkette did her best not to falter. 'I'm killing him!'

Horrified, Sakura began to remove her hand, only for a light weight on her shoulder to stop it. "Wait," Erika pointed, and they watched together as the patient began coughing forth black ooze. Horror becoming hope, Sakura continued, reaching out until the shapeless blob had taken on the insectoid form of the butterflies she was so familiar with from training.

In the past, she had only been forming them, and it had never truly occurred that pulling one out of a blighted victim would be just as exhausting. Mizuchi, had always been the only one to bear witness to her attempts before now. More importantly, she was always the one to dispose of the dark curse. With Erika and Kou watching on intently, Sakura knew it all fell to her.

As it turned out, the sensation of swallowing a blight felt as equally disconcerting as producing one. The small consolation was that after only a second the wings stopped brushing against the back of her throat, and she knew it had dissolved completely as her body worked to absorb the malevolent energy, her mark burning with the effort.

Sakura doubled over, holding her stomach and waiting for it to pass. Kou clasped her shoulder, staring at her with open concern. "Are you...are you alright?" he asked cautiously. Unable to answer, she reached for his own shoulder and squeezed. Given enough time, she would be. And what was more, she now knew what she was up against...and that meant, there was a chance to save the people of the islands after all.

When the knocking started, Madara had stopped his preparations for the impending meeting long
ago, switching to the calming pursuit of calligraphy. Earlier in the day, the innkeeper's boy had brought up snacks served with warm tea, and later than that, his sister had come with a fresh ink well. He wondered if it was one or both of them, bringing up the evening meal. It was late enough.

Vaguely, he wondered about Haruno, and if she'd ever managed to even make contact with the group of healers overseeing the illness ravaging the population. She was stubborn, persistent, and bad-tempered. Often, that would spell trouble in an already hostile land such as Water Country. In fact, Madara half-expected it to be some disgruntled merchant or concerned guest from the inn, wanting him to answer for a raging pink-haired woman on the loose.

Somehow, answering the door only to have said woman slump into him hadn't been in the possibilities working through his head. Her head came to rest against his collar bone, breath coming in quick, cool pants that pricked his skin. "Haruno?"

"I know..." she whispered, swaying on her feet. She'd left that morning so determined, so full of passion—now she appeared deflated, keeping herself upright with his aid and sheer power of will. 'How nice,' The Uchiha thought bitterly. At least one of them understood what was currently happening.

Madara never did care for situations in which he was the last to know what was going on, and that certainly applied now. Trying to think rationally, he gave her time to compose herself—and extricate her body from his arms—before taking the liberty of pressing her back by the shoulders. "Pull yourself together."

For the first time he could see her sallow skin and the exhaustion evident in her downcast eyes. She almost looked like she'd joined the legions of half-dead supposedly swarming the island. "I just...need time to recharge." she claimed, voice a little stronger than before. Impatient, Madara proceeded to drag her limp body further into the room, letting the door fall shut behind them. He expected her to offer up at least some token resistance, some biting remark, but she was content to allow herself to be dragged. There wasn't so much as a withering glare.

Madara attempted to set her down on the futon, but she really was just deadweight in his arms, and she landed gracelessly, facedown and unmoving. Haruno emitted a loud groan, unshifting. "This feels good," she mumbled, voice slightly muffled by the fabric.

From the other side of the wall, someone giggled before being hushed by a second voice. "Ah, young love is something else, isn't it?"

Madara glared at the unseen patron in disgust.

Haruno either hadn't heard them, or wasn't capable of caring in her state, instead slowly rolling over onto her side. Half-lidded eyes and a sweaty face became visible as she stared blankly across the room, mumbling lowly to herself. Being a Sharingan user, one of the many upsides was that he had become quite skilled in the art of reading lips. Stepping closer and studying her mouth, he caught every syllable. "This always happened...when I overdid it with my blight training..."
He hated mediating.

Sitting and listening while pretending to care as two fools prattled on about what wasn't even his concern…

If this was what Hashirama's day normally consisted of, then he was glad it hadn't been him saddled with the Hokageship. "The first deposit was found closer to Chigiri's shore than Genzai's! A small fraction may have washed there, but the supply should be ours alone." Yamane concluded, leering from under the hair that hung to his shoulders. The man was unimpressive and reminded Madara faintly of some nameless ronin he'd once encountered—and slain—in the distant past. He too had thought of himself as much higher than his station, and they shared the same greedy shine to their eyes.

"Lies," Awata grumbled, shifting in his seat. "The tides have evenly dispersed the deposits to both our islands lately, but…the source remains at the very middle of the land bridge. If Genzai can't boast superior claim, than it can at least boast equal claim." The scarecrow of a man was, at the very least, more presentable than his counterpart. Stern and dressed in a deep green yukata with calculating eyes hidden behind rounded spectacles, compared to Yamane's near slovenly appearance he at least managed to convey more poise.

One of Madara's eyes was already closed, hidden behind his bangs. The only thing keeping him from dozing was the irritating drawl of their voices, and the spread of food the inn had provided for them, inari-zushi among the treats. Not for the first time, he wondered at the futility of his presence there, of the entire mission.

Across from him sat the leaders of Chigiri and Genzai, both of them insisting they had sole claim to the abundance of rare seafloor mineral deposits washing up onto shore near the small land bridge connecting their islands. Lying on the table between all of them, was a sampling of the, admittedly very alluring mineral deposit. Jutting out of what looked like an unassuming chunk of rock was what they were calling minamatori.

Madara had never seen a clearer, deeper shade of blue, a bottomless sapphire so dark it bordered obsidian. Although, impressive as the mineral was to look at, that was hardly a reason to fight so adamantly for it. There was undoubtedly more to the story than was being disclosed to him. "If I may…" he cleared his throat, catching their attention. "I can understand the need to jealousy guard such a rare mineral, perhaps on principle alone. But as impressive as it is to look at, and as much of a boon as it might be to export, I find it hard to believe that an agreement couldn't be worked out prior based simply because of those things. Both of the messages you sent to Konoha made it clear not even your daimyo wants anything to do with this…petty squabble."

The men bristled, affronted, but neither attempted to interrupt. "Konoha is but an emerging village itself. I simply thought that, Chigiri being in the same position, our villages would both prosper through cooperation." Madara saw right through him. Not that me made it hard with his shifty eyes and oily smile.

"I find it interesting." The Uchiha explained. "The proposal and the notion itself. Water Country is famously known for the savagery of its people and the pervasuviey insular attitude."
"Savagery?" Awata huffed. "You speak as if you yourself don't hail from a clan who fought endless battle after endless battle with the Senju until not long ago. And for what? Not for land nor for resources…for what amounted to boasting rights. Who could drive the other toward extinction faster? You have no grounds to tell us that—"

"Infighting between the islands for resources is nothing new, but everything about the mainland especially is frowned upon here." Madara continued, helping himself to more inari-zushi. "It begs the question why now? If Konoha was a more established village that had been in existence longer, I could understand the clout you'd gain from trade. But whatever we can offer you, aside from the odd commodity manufactured in Fire Country, you can mostly find here. And in your trade offers, neither of you mentioned this…minamatori mineral being on the table." The men shared an apprehensive look, the Uchiha delighting in having the upper-hand. "If it's so precious and you're both so desperate you're willing to let foreign village resolve the dispute, why not dangle the most enticing thing possible?"

"Because it doesn't belong on the mainland, that's why!" Yamane growled. "This island's all but lost. There are more dead here than there are living now. And our islands are next! It's already started…might not be happening as quick as it is here, but in a month's time, we'll all be goners. Wouldn't really concern you mainlanders though, would it?"

"That is to say," Awata sniffed primly. "Whoever receives the full supply of minamatori, will be saved by the purifying properties that legends say it contains."

Sakura dabbed at her face with a damp cloth, blinking sweat from her eyes. Her latest butterfly dissipated, leaving behind an increasing heaviness in her gut. Not late into the afternoon and she knew she had consumed dozens. The woman who had been watching over the process was weeping silently, bending over to press a kiss to her child's brow.

The toddler's eyes fluttered open, and like most of the others she'd helped, he looked dazed and unsure. All apprehension vanished the minute he recognized his mother, reaching his little arms out to her. The mother looked at Sakura as if she'd brought light to the sun, her overwhelmed state stopping her words. Sakura didn't need them; she could feel the woman's relief, and she understood. Mother and child embraced, and despite the weariness settling in her bones, she smiled.

She was reaching her limits. She could easily feel it. Yesterday, after treating those whose afflictions were the most severe, Sakura had been forced to stop and stagger back to the inn. Her body was so exhausted she hardly cared about Madara seeing her in such a state, and after he'd thrown her onto the futon, sleep had deep and, to her knowledge, dreamless. Although…there had been a time where she could have sworn she caught a glimpse of gold-green eyes and felt the press of a cool palm on her forehead.

With each blight she took in, Mizuchi's sharp warning hammered through her head alongside the pain of her headache. Human beings weren't meant to eat concentrations of dark energy, and certainly not in such high volume. Maybe she would live to regret it all later… Her body already regretted it now. But her wellbeing aside, she was a healer above all else. When she saw helpless people dying in front of her eyes and knew she could rescue them, it was alright to be a little reckless.

"I don't believe this!" Kou shouted, speaking to a female healer. "You're saying everyone healed by Sakura yesterday is really…"

Sakura peered over her shoulder, listening quietly.
"Yes. Recovering nicely. Weak and tired of course, but no one died through the night for the first time since the illness struck. Festering wounds that never stopped bleeding are finally closing."

"She's been brought here to do miracles." A third healer joined them. "Whatever dark cloud was hanging over us, I feel as though maybe the storm's finally passing. Is that too optimistic?"

Kou laughed, clapping his shoulder. "No such thing, my friend. We've been at this so long, a little good cheer goes a long way."

Pride surged in her chest. Not only was she saving lives, but lightening the burden on the local medics. And so maybe she was stretching herself thin, pushing limits that had only recently been established with these newfound…powers. But she had an obligation, as far as she was concerned.

"Finished already? We owe you so much." The bell-like voice made her stiffen for a reason she couldn't understand. Erika slid next to her, eyes crinkling. Her palms touched together as she brought her hands in front of her.

Erika was the same as she had been the day before, aside from being less reserved. Attributing the reaction to tiredness, Sakura opted to take the praise in stride. "No, you really don't. At any rate, that should be everyone here, right? I'll be moving on soon to the other islands, but if there's anything you need me to do for you here, now's probably the time to let me know."

Erika appeared surprised, blinking twice before tapping a finger to her lips. "I think you can afford to take a rest. Everyone here is out of danger now. I'm still not sure I've ever seen a technique like that, but…the acolytes have heard about yesterday. According to them, Iwanagahime is pleased."

"Anything to keep a goddess happy." Sakura said, only half-joking.

Erika giggled, reaching out and clasping one of the kunoichi's hands between both of her own, smile still intact. "That's why they'd like to meet with you. Tonight."

Unable to hide her reaction, Sakura sat up straighter, her eyes expecting to find Erika's pleasant smile had become teasing. Instead, the young girl's face was openly pitying.

Carefully slipping her hand from between Erika's, Sakura frowned. "I hope they don't take it the wrong way when I don't show up."

Erika gasped, glancing around before she brought her head closer to Sakura's, cool breath ghosting across the pinkette's cheeks. "You have to! You don't just turn them down. Outsiders like you and I have to be especially careful not to upset the order of things."

Sakura wasn't satisfied with that. "I think if anything, we've restored the order." She gestured around them, at the people who would have been dead without their aid.

"You're right," Erika sighed. "Of course you're right. But from their perspective, they have every right to be…curious." She explained diplomatically. "After all, this is only your second day here, and you've miraculously cured everyone on the island. Well, that we know of… Not to mention the…" Erika hooked her thumbs together and flapped her hands. "Butterflies? They're just trying to get to the bottom of things."

Sakura huffed. "I'm not sure what's going to happen even if they do get their answers. So maybe you can understand from my perspective why this all doesn't sit well."

The younger healer only sat back on her heels, shrugging helplessly. "They'll come for you. And when they do, it's in your best interest to go quietly."
"Erika!" Kou called from across the clinic, oblivious to the tension of their conversation.

Suddenly, what had been a worried face melted into child-like excitement. Erika rose. "Apparently, duty calls!" Leaving her cryptic advice to hang in the air, the child skipped off.

The clinic had felt less somber than the day before, but now there was a new chill hanging in the air. One Sakura suspected only she could feel. There was one fact she knew, and that was that these…devotees considered themselves the chosen of a goddess. Sakura herself now reluctantly counting herself among the "chosen", wondered if they had caught on. Mizuchi described blight creation as something that deities could do with ease, and on a whim.

Those calling themselves followers of Iwanagahime, a goddess legend claimed was out for revenge, likely knew that. The question on her mind was how they felt about what she'd done. Fanatical types could be…unpredictable. A zealot who believed they were serving a higher purpose was doubly so. Ino had once told her about the Akatsuki who'd killed Asuma-sensei, Hidan. She'd explained how he didn't care about anything except the "Way of Jashin"…

Every fiber in her anticipated danger and confrontation. As loathe as she was to admit it, informing Madara might not be such a bad idea. Then again, it almost felt like he'd been avoiding her since the night before. Upon waking up, she'd found him gone. Of course, that could also be attributed to the fact that the mediations were supposed to happen first thing in the morning. Either way, Sakura hadn't seen him since the previous night.

Her memories were blurry but she couldn't imagine doing anything that embarrassing. Collapsing into him wasn't ideal, but it wasn't taboo. The thought that she could have said something strange flitted through her mind. Regardless, if that was the case, it could wait.

'I don't have time to overthink stupid things. I need to get ready for tonight.' Assuming Erika's words rang true, the acolytes knew exactly where to find her. What they wouldn't find her, however, was unprepared.

Madara fought the urge to scoff loudly. Haruno either overestimated her own stealth, or she had somehow forgotten he was also a shinobi with acute senses. She started to exit their room, pausing briefly with a sigh before the creak of the closing door signaled her exit.

He continued to feign sleep until he couldn't hear her footsteps—or the second set obviously following her—before crossing the room to peer out the window. It offered a view of the inn's front side, and though the heavy mist was low to the ground, Madara saw Haruno and a cloaked individual. They talked shortly and the figure pointed toward the mountains on the outskirts of the village. Through investigation, he'd learned that was where the shrine dedicated to Iwanagahime sat. It was a safe bet that was where they'd be headed.

It wasn't long before the two decided to move on, the Uchiha watching as the mist swallowed them whole. Whatever Haruno thought she was about to do, she wouldn't be doing it without him confronting her, then and there. Madara pulled a shirt over his head and found his sandals. When she had uttered that strange sentence the night before, he had granted her some leniency in not questioning her, wanting to wait until the mission was over.

But now she was sneaking away in the dead of night, with one of the shadiest individuals he had ever seen, and he refused to allow her to jeopardize the mission. Whatever she was embroiled in went beyond the scope of what they were there for. That much was clear. Madara secured as many concealed weapons as possible, grabbing up his gunbai and leaping from the window.
Undeniably, the temple was beautiful. Lit inside by a long string of candles mounted in ornamental holsters, the pristine white stone glowed. Unlike any other shrine she'd ever seen, the entire structure was stone, built high into the mountainside and spiraled into different levels.

Sakura let her eyes adjust before setting to work committing her surroundings to memory. The entire floor was a mural that depicted what appeared to be Iwanagahime, along with a man or woman in similarly old-fashioned attire. Going by Joben's story, she deduced it was likely her sister, Konohanasakuya, and the god who spurned her, Nihongi. While Nihongi was kneeling before Konohanasakuya in a proclamation of love, Iwanagahime was further away, eyes downcast. The artist had gone through great lengths to capture the emotions on each other faces, and so Sakura was privy to the anguish etched into every line of the older goddess's countenance.

Circling the entirety of the rounded circumference was a clear wading pool, small strips of floor dividing the water into four equidistance, curving rectangles. In the center of the room, a large stone carving of Iwanagahime looked up to the heavens, a violacia resting in her cupped hands. At the statue's feet, a dozen more cloaked followers prostrated themselves in silent worship. Each one with the lavender blossom in the center of their white-clothed backs.

However, the acolyte she was following didn't so much as pause, Sakura glaring at his back as she climbed the stone steps that brought them to the temple's second floor. Where the first floor's room had been circular, the space of the second was rectangular.

It boasted a long walkway covered by a series of domed arches that brought them to a pair of closed wooden doors behind a marbled throne. On each side of the throne were a set of steps that disappeared into the darkness of a tunneled entrance. Sakura could only guess it would bring them to the highest point of the temple, their true destination. Guard up, Sakura clutched at the kunai concealed at hip, ready to act on a moment's notice.

The sheer brightness of the temple's open top level had her pupils shrinking as she and the acolyte emerged from the dim tunnel. Sakura saw the same white stone from the first floor in arcing pillars that joined to form a dome with an unobscured view of the night sky. Again, a mural under their feet rendered a rather melancholy scene of the all too familiar Iwanagahime, kneeling and surrounding by her violacia. Standing in a circle, still and silent, Sakura found people waiting for them. Unlike the robed acolytes, they were miko, distinguishable by their white haori and red hakama.

The acolyte at her back pushed at her shoulders, urging her forward. Glowering, Sakura took a hesitant step. A man in a thick shishoku and a regal bearing met her halfway, smiling gently. "So, the healer from afar..." he bowed and, unsure what else to do, Sakura returned it. "We've been told of your feats." He continued. "You saved many people since arriving. Is that correct?"

Sakura pressed her lips together, guarded eyes sweeping over the assembly of individuals all watching her passively. She was surrounded, acolytes blocking the stairs at her back. If necessary, she was sure she could fight her way through, but only if it came to that. "I did."

"Hmm..." The priest's thick brows furrowed, a long gray caterpillar that had found a home on his face. His heavy sleeves hid his hands as he brought them together. "Yes. I worried about this."

"Worried?" Sakura felt words lump together in her throat and her heart skip a beat. "I...I don't understand. The people of Sekai were dying by the dozens, weren't they? I stopped that. I saved them."

"Yes you did, and in doing so...you disrupted the balance." His eyes were hard to see, but his mouth had taken on a grave line, eyebrows dipping sternly.
Erika had warned her. In a strange way. The order. The balance. "Healer, for generations we have done what we thought was best, guided by faith in our goddess. Finally, she had a message delivered to us. Before you arrived, we learned...were told that calamity would befall us, and that we were not to interfere. As long as we did not, none of us would be stricken. Such is the will of our deity. We allowed the healers to try healing the villagers. We knew it would all be in vein, after all. She assured us." Pausing, the priest cleared his throat, beckoning toward her. Sakura's shoulders tightened, wondering when she would have to defend herself. Maybe, she should preemptively strike. Would it be blasphemous? He was a priest, a holy man..."And then you arrived."

He came closer, and the ring of miko followed, closing in. Rigid, Sakura withdrew her kunai in warning. "There's no need for it to come to that." He tutted. "We only ask you stop here and now. And all will be forgiven. You planned to travel to the other islands and heal more, yes? There's no need. Rather, that's not what our goddess wills."

"I'm not stopping," Sakura bit out. "I'm not going to stand by and watch. It doesn't matter what a goddess wants, because I follow my own will."

For the first time, some of the miko behind him broke their silence, gasping. "Sacrilege." She heard one murmur, aghast. The mist, even thicker so high in the mountains than it was in the village, curled around her in a damp chill and Sakura's arm twitched.

The priest held up a pacifying hand, although his countenance was still stern. "Your will, you say? I'm not sure I can believe that. Blights are not something human beings can place nor remove on their own...not without...divine help."

When her face slipped into muted horror, something sinister broke over his face, lips curling in a smile that showed all his teeth. "From one humble servant to another, I ask you to join us. If you won't stop, put your blessing to better use. Surely, you can create more blights as easily as you extracted them."

A bead of sweat trickled down from her hairline as the kunoichi bit her lip. 'I wouldn't call it easy. I thought I was dying.'

"Expelling them is in your best interest." One of the miko added. "I can sense the taint inside you. It'll corrode away at you, reduce you to a husk."

The priest extended a hand, his face little more than a polite snarl. "Iwanagahime welcomes followers as talented as yourself."

Desperately, Sakura called on Mizuchi. The mark on her wrist throbbed ruthlessly, and she hissed, pressing it to her thigh while still holding out her kunai. The connection felt thin, the dragon deity's presence faint and unresponsive.

"Before you refuse..." The priest shook his head. "Know that we can be persuasive in ways that may sting." With a wave of his hand, the miko took bows from their backs and notched arrows, all trained at her. "Being chosen by a divine being means you should at least be afforded some measure of protection. Arrows may incapacitate you, but one or two through the heart would hardly prove fatal."

In that instant the odds had shifted. While there was no doubt in Sakura's head she could overpower them singlehandedly, armed with smaller weapons like kunai and senbon left her at a disadvantage. Even super strength wasn't much help when they could fire at her from a distance. A quick look up reminded her of the stone pillars above all their heads that would topple in an instant with a well-
Nevertheless, Sakura refused to go quietly, and fighting at a disadvantage was far from new for her. "I still re—"

"Intruder!" No sooner had the scream rang out than the acolytes standing guard near the stairs were disarmed, falling to the ground. Madara's sudden appearance clearly baffled the priest and miko, but Sakura was sure she'd never been so glad to see him before, as much as she'd never admit it. Their eyes met, the Uchiha advancing toward her. Unsurprisingly, the acolytes that had given chase from previous floors surged up through the opposite stairway, cutting Madara from her sight.

Surrounded, Sakura threw an elbow behind her, managing to catch someone in the throat. Using the momentum, she drove it up until she heard the satisfying crunch of a broken nose. They doze at her in droves, then, attempting to overwhelm her with sheer numbers alone. Though she stumbled onto her back, when the first body tried to pin her she was ready and planted both feet into the chest, pushing.

Four acolytes flew back from the force, and Sakura grabbed another looming over her in a headlock, snapping his neck. Beating them back allowed her the time to get to her feet, and she caught sight of Madara easily dispatching opponents on the other side of the space. "Haruno!" he roared. "I warned you against meddling!"

In the midst of it all, he was blaming her? Sakura pulled a face, about to yell back, only for her throat to be grabbed from behind. Jerking her head to the side to disrupt the hold, her arms flew up, angrily squeezing until she felt them buckling and heard the sharp yelp.

Flipping the attacker over her head, she spun him around as fast as she could, knocking back anyone who got too close. After clearing a path, she tossed him aside, running toward Madara with a cry of frustration.

Finally seeing an opening, the miko loosed dozens of arrows and Madara knew, despite her speed and the ability to hold her own in hand to hand combat, Haruno couldn't possibly dodge all of them. She realized that too, sucking in a deep breath with saucer-wide eyes as the arrows made a downward arc. Unfazed, he deftly wove through seals. A stream of fire incinerated the first wave, turning the deadly projectiles into harmless ashes.

As the second volley came, Madara leapt closer to her, dragging a nearby acolyte attempting to engage him in combat in front of them both and using him as a human shield. Haruno only spared him a surprised blink before she was weaving out of the way of an oncoming sword, evading three consecutive swings before she was able to duck under the blade and drive her fist into the chin of her attacker. The sword flew from his hands and he watched in amusement as she reached up and caught it, though narrowly. "Haah!" she cried, thrusting it into the stomach of yet another cloaked figure combing at her with a sword. Mortally wounded, the acolyte crumpled to the ground, crimson soiling the pristine white of the robes.

"This isn't much of a dance. Not when they're using such uncoordinated moves." Madara murmured.

"You have a point," Haruno admitted, headbutting an enemy who'd tried to wrap her in a tight squeeze to immobilize her. Madara could have snickered when they let go with a whimper. "But they've got the numbers to keep doing this until they think we're tired out."

"Capture them!" The priest shrieked, still protected by his army of miko. "The girl especially must
be contained."

Haruno rolled her eyes. "This is all because—"

"I know." Madara grunted. "It wasn't hard to twist information out of the first fanatic that confronted me." While what they were claiming was beyond the realm of believability for him, there was no denying what Haruno did—possibly even what she was—counted as unnatural. Her possible connection to the healer who had saved Izuna all but proved that.

Rumbling overhead distracted their remaining enemies, who were suddenly fixated above as clear sky shifted ominously. Given how easily distracted they were, Haruno made a break for it, charging right for the priest with steel in her eyes. "Cover me!" she hissed at him.

The miko moved in to circle him protectively with bows drawn, but Madara only had to swing his gunbai once for the concussive blast of air to send them all flying. Haruno latched onto the man's clothing, tackling him to the ground. He moved closer lazily, observing the woman's clenched jaw and hardened eyes. With their leader incapacitated, no acolyte nor miko dared get closer.

Haruno shook him hard. "Since you say you've got a direct line to the gods, tell me why they're blighting the entire country?"

Blight. The same word the woman had used all those months ago. What was it she'd said, exactly?

"A blight. The minute my sister marks those she deems unnecessary for death, she blights them."

Sputtering, the man violently shook his head. "I can't..." he gasped fearfully. "I won't..." The sky shook again with distant thunder, a lone drop of rain hitting Madara's nose. His eye shifted to what had been a calm nighttime sky not long ago. Now, it had all the makings of a rainstorm. Big and sudden.

"I'll tell you a secret," Haruno said, voice chillingly low. "Whatever you think your deity would do to you, whatever divine punishment you have coming won't save you from me. Get it?"

It could have been her tone, or the image of her pink hair messy and falling into her face as she leaned over her captive, but Haruno's performance was arousing. Madara felt his eyes briefly flickering into the Sharingan, his blood pounding in the way it only ever did in the heat of a passionate dance or a passionate bedding.

Refusing to let his mind spiral out of focus, he caged the heat, listening carefully to the man's response. "Balance." He spat. "It's all for balance. The heavens don't like discord. And when a chain reaction causes disorder, it must be righted at any cost."

"You are what has unbalanced the way of the heavens," An acolyte chimed in. "You are what our goddess says must be eradicated." A bright white flash tore the sky and warmed the air. Multiple voices cried out as a hot bolt of lightning darted toward them all. Once again, Madara's eyes activated, this time intentionally.

Miko and acolytes abandoned their priest and fled, the forked branches of electricity turning into the roaring maw of a dragon. Without the Sharingan searing the image into his brain, the shinobi wasn't sure he'd trust his eyes. The dragon struck the pillars so loudly it rocked the very structure of the temple, cracks forming under his feet.

Haruno somehow had managed to ignore it, her voice lost to the sound of the lightning as she continued to scream demands into the hysterical man. He had been slack underneath her strength, but one look upward had him scrambling to break free, scratching at her hands and babbling
hysterically. The pillars overhead broke, large chunks of rubble crashing down around them as wind from nowhere howled at a fever pitch.

"Haruno!" Madara made to grab her, but he was thrown back, swatted away by an invisible hand. It was enough to snap the kunoichi out of her rage as she released her grip on the priest and turned. Her green eyes were large, lips parting but words lost to the wind this time. With his Sharingan, the rock falling toward her came down in slow motion.

Knowing she couldn't hear him, he pointed. She rolled in a half-dodge, pushing to her knees and shattering it to pieces with her fist. The lightning dragon roared audibly, twisting back around through the sky and striking what remained of the crumpling pillars. It was undeniable that the creature was attempting to crush one or both of them under rock.

Haruno attempted to move away, only to fall when a hand grabbed her ankle. The priest was laughing. He could see that much, his face something close to demonic as he held tight through the pinkette's attempts to dislodge his hand. Back on his feet, Madara easily kicked the deranged fanatic away, wrapping an arm around Haruno and flinging her away from the falling debris. He had every intention of holding this over her head, figuratively, into the indefinite future.

Instead of the annoyed face he was expecting, he saw her features pale and her eyes close as she screamed his name into the wind. She looked…worried. And the sharp chunk of stone that pummeled the back of his head explained why. As much as he wanted to pretend he was unaffected, his feet gave out instantly as gravity and the rock slammed him into the ground, the combined weight crushing. Crush…ing... There was no energy left to pick up his head, but he could at least focus on her feet. Her feet were running toward him—she, her, who?

He couldn't tell what came next, whether it was more rocks burying him, or his eyes succumbing to darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Please don’t forget to comment!! I’m still experimenting with this cross-posting thing, and I’m trying to see if people actually enjoy this story on AO3 so comments would definitely help.
Chapter Summary

Sakura finds out a little more about the enemies they’re facing in the fallout of the battle. Word reaches Konoha, prompting unlikely help.

Chapter Notes

Well...this chapter has been over on FFN for a while now so I decided to go ahead and post it here too. I will try to stay more on top of the crossposting, but it’s all still new to me.

The gusts of wind made the downpour soaking her and stinging her skin hard to see through. For a while she was stricken, on her knees and staring at the pile of rock that had collapsed on Madara. None of it was registering like it should have been. Not long ago, they were barely more than enemies themselves, and then he...he...

Despite how biting the rain was, Sakura felt her cheeks steadily growing flush, and it wasn't entirely because of the weather. Crawling forward, she sunk her hand into the pile of rubble and tossed the first chunk aside, seething. What an infuriating man! No one had asked him to do that. It was completely unnecessary.

More stone was flung to the side, her lip gripped tight between her teeth as she dug through. In a way, actually, he was selfish. The next rock she got her hands on disintegrated to dust between her bare hands as she squeezed. Grunting, Sakura pawed at the stone, unsure if she was trying to move them or just needed something to physically slap around. Her fingertips brushed against something that felt suspiciously like a handle and with a jerk, she'd uncovered the unscathed gunbai.

Carefully setting it to the side, she sucked in a deep breath, eyes fluttering shut. She'd need shelter soon. The rain was cold, and too long out in it would get her sick. As if her body agreed, Sakura became vaguely aware that her shoulders were bouncing. A hiccup arose from her throat and, pressing her fingers between the debris and pushing it away, she made contact with something fleshy, which could only mean one thing. Ignoring the way her own hands shook, she reached out, clasping at the still hand to inspect the bruised knuckles. The digits were stiff and the palm clammy.

It didn't make much difference though; not when her own fingers had long ago succumbed to numbness. With no heat to transfer between them, the kunoichi brushed her fingers across the underside of the pale wrist. The pulse she felt there was encouraging, and when Sakura took another shuddering breath, her icy cheeks felt wet all over again.

She gave herself until the count of three to reign it all in, dimly aware that maybe, just like the flush, the wetness streaming down her face wasn't entirely caused by the storm. Leaning over, Sakura cautiously shifted the last of the rock and drew herself closer. Scrambling to the motionless body splayed in front of her, she delicately touched a palm to his back. Internal damage was
surprisingly minimal, and what she found, she healed. But when she lifted both hands up to place on either side of his head…

Her fingers came back with a sticky wetness that couldn't be explained away by the rain. Cursing quietly, Sakura very slowly rolled him onto his back, ignoring the dig of the rubble under her bare knees as she placed Madara's head in her lap. Before she could move him, she had to get an idea of what she was dealing with. The most immediate concern was that he was unconscious and possibly concussed, a combination that never really ended well. She allowed her healing chakra to seep deep into him, to mend the cracks in his skull and bring down the swelling.

The rain at least washed away some of the blood from the spot at the back of his head. And the wound was knitting closed, hard as it was to see with the mess of hair in the way. Pushing him up by his shoulders, Sakura situated herself under him, draping his arms around her neck as she stood. All she could do was get them somewhere dry and safe, wait out the rain, hope that if—when—he woke up, his condition was manageable.

Sakura wasn't naïve. She knew all about what happened when someone was knocked out by a traumatic blow to the head. When they woke up, it was hardly ever like they'd been before. So she had to expect just about anything. Maneuvering around the scattered debris, Sakura caught a glance of the ruined mural as she made for the exit.

In spite of everything, the damage her followers had done…were doing…Iwanagahime wore the same dour expression, as if somehow, the troubles of a goddess would always trump the pain of mortals. A selfish, stupid goddess who threw a temper tantrum like a lovesick girl who couldn't get what she wanted.

The sudden fire that burned deep in her gut was inexplicable, but as she crossed the stone rendering, she let her heel come down with just a little extra force. Immediately the goddess's countenance was further cracked, almost to the point of being unrecognizable. The pinkette smirked, raged sated as she carried Madara the rest of the way into the temple.

Dawn was just breaking, the village bathed in only the slightest glow of sunrise. Hashirama pressed a knuckle to his right eye with a loud yawn. He would have fallen forward onto his desk, if not for the steaming cup of tea suddenly under his nose. "Mm," he grumbled, hoping it was thanks enough. It was scalding, and more on the bitter side than he would have usually taken his tea. But it did its job, and when his lips left the mug's rim he at least felt more awake. "I have to say," Hashirama sat down the cup, staring at the documents his brother had placed in front of him, "I'm not actually against getting an early start on work but this feels…excessive."

Tobirama's blank stare was immovable. "Really? Because I think that you have a lax understanding of urgency at best in most instances. At least make sure the last revision to the academy entrance requirements are satisfactory. You are the Hokage. These need actual approval from you."

Hashirama brought his face closer to the stack of papers, cocking his head and then drawing away with a shudder. "Tobirama, this is a book without a cover. How did the revised list end up longer than the first draft?!"

There was no sympathy in his brother's eyes, and Hashirama was prepared to hunker down and get to work, when a strong gust through the partially opened window displaced nearly everything in front of him.

He grabbed blindly for his bonsai, unable to see with all the hair suddenly in his eyes. Once his hand secured Bukkai's pot and tucked it securely against his side, the Hokage shook the strands
from his vision. "It's...it's a sign!" He gasped, staring at the disarray that had once been neatly stacked papers. The heavens themselves rebuked the paperwork, and that was more than good enough for him.

"No," Tobirama disagreed, "It's a Summon."

Hashirama spun his chair, wondering how he had missed the largest bird he had ever seen perched on the roofing outside the window and attempting to wedge its head underneath. "An eagle?" he gawked. The bird shrilled so loudly it made his ears ring. "An extremely large eagle..."

The Summon's sharp amber eyes flickered to him and, inching forward, Hashirama moved close enough to pry the window all the way open, careful of his fingers so near to the big yellow beak. Making a series of clicking sounds, the eagle hopped forward a half-step and lowered himself, his entire head inside the office. The Senju could see now the bird wore a harness, a scroll held safely to its chest. Tobirama was faster than his dazed brother, who was too busy marveling at the giant creature, plucking the scroll away and opening it without ceremony.

The younger brother hadn't been looking long when his expression soured and he stopped, tossing it to Hashirama. Unsure what to expect, the Hokage examined it for himself. "This is Madara's handwriting..." Leaning against his desk, he started to read, more troubled by every word. By the time he had finished, the atmosphere was sobered, Hashirama delicately setting down the scroll. "Nothing about this sits well with me."

Tobirama stared at the big eagle waiting patiently outside. "There are a number of ways to handle this. All of them call for immediate action though."

Hashirama nodded, listless. "I..." he stumbled into his chair, plucking up some clean parchment and a quill. "I need to see Izuna first."

The temple was abandoned, as far as she could tell. Aside from the storm raging on outside, it was quiet, but Sakura remained vigilant, prepared for confrontation. She knew she had to make a decision about what to do with Madara. He was in a bad way, and she wanted to fully assess the damage, decide where they'd go from here.

The acolytes may have been gone for the timing being, but would they try coming back? And where had they fled to begin with? The village, the inn...were those safe places or would they be vulnerable there? There were so many uncertain factors it made Sakura's head spin.

The lonely echo of her footsteps on stone coupled with Madara's shallow breathing were the only noises keeping her company as she wandered the building's second floor. Miraculously, despite the damage done to the very top of the structure, the floors below seemed mostly unscathed. Although, she didn't miss the lifeless bodies strewn here and there, and she knew without a doubt it was a testament to the carnage Madara had caused on his way to find her.

She shifted him across her shoulder so she could get a stronger grip, the gunbai tight in her other hand. Determined to get them somewhere safe, Sakura tried not to focus on how heavy and wet her clothing was, or that they were still in an incredibly dangerous situation.

Instead, she searched every nook and cranny of the floor, finding a well-hidden hall behind the stairs beyond the throne. There were no torches lighting it, so she relied strongly on her other senses as she carefully picked her way through what could have been a maze, for all she knew.

Managing it was a challenge between carrying a grown man over one shoulder and holding the
large fan with her free hand. But she was nothing if not persistent, and when she came to a dip in
the wall, she pushed with her shoulder on instinct, and it gave.

This time, there was ample lighting in the hidden passage behind the false wall, and she was able
to see every crack in the floor beneath their feet, and every notch in the wood of the doors lining
the opening. Sakura stopped, waited and listened. No sounds from any of the rooms, no shuffling
or hushed whispers. Placing the battle fan against a wall, she checked the door and found it
unlocked, peeking inside to see a small room with bows mounted neatly on the walls and quivers
full of arrows.

There were a few blades, nothing special but sharp nonetheless, and Sakura considered taking one,
despite knowing she was clumsy with a sword at best. Shutting the door back, her next hunt was
for somewhere to rest Madara. Carrying him wasn't really making her feel tired, but her body was
heavy and cold all the same and his added weight and the press of his own sopping clothes was
uncomfortable to the extreme.

Luckily, the next empty room she barged into was clearly meant to be quarters. Maybe for a miko
or for an acolyte. It was sparse, nothing like the opulence in the main levels of the temple, but a
space perfectly accustomed to someone who was supposed to be devoted to pious living. The wood
floors creaked as she walked them, about to deposit Madara on the small, narrow cot and then
remembering his wet clothes and thinking better of it.

Sakura chose to set him down on the floor, propped up with his back to the bed instead. Sighing
quietly, she flexed her now-free arm to alleviate the stiffness, surveying the rest of the modest
room. Nothing else really caught her eyes. It had a wash-basin and a wooden trunk in the corner.

There was a small table with a lamp that was curiously still burning bright, and a plate containing
the remains of someone's dinner. The call to arms prompted by Madara's unexpected arrival may
have disrupted someone's quiet evening dinner. Sakura might have felt more pity if she hadn't
known that whoever lived in this room likely joined the effort to try and kill them.

That made her feel unsympathetic about claiming the room for herself now, deciding the first thing
she needed to do was get them both out of their soaked clothes. Sakura bustled back out into the
hall and brought the gunbai, a small comfort somehow, leaning it up against the desk.

Seeing Madara was still incapacitated, she didn't bother moving him, choosing to search for
something dry and clean to put on instead. The trunk was promising, so she got on her knees and
fiddled with the lock. It was sturdier than it looked, and she blew a persistent wisp of hair from her
face, only studying it a little longer before delivering a well-placed flick to its center and smirking
when it shattered. There wasn't much inside. A small velvet pouch that felt half-full—she put that
aside, mentally claiming its contents as her own—a stack of letters, neatly bound together and—ah!

Sakura triumphantly pulled out what looked like a clean black yukata. Holding it out to inspect, she
figured it would probably fit Madara well enough, and he didn't exactly have anything he could
complain about, given his current state… Chancing a peek at him, still unconscious, the kunoichi
cringed.

Although she had been pushing the thought away, she knew she would have to be the one to
change him. And while she had seen anatomical figures of the human body many times in her
books, had seen the real deal not so long ago while prepping a patient for surgery, this was not the
same, and professionalism be damned, she loathed it.

A chill went through her, reminding Sakura that her own outfit needed changing. There was
nothing else in the trunk, and she wanted to give the yukata to Madara, which meant she was going
to have to hunt down something else for herself. If she'd found one set, she could find more somewhere.

Knowing there was very little chance the Uchiha would wake up soon, she crept back into the hall, searching more rooms and finding various odd possessions she surmised belonged to the followers who lived here. None of them had a spare change of clothes, though.

On the verge of resigning herself to staying in wet clothes, Sakura stepped into one of the few remaining rooms. Unlike the others, this one had some characterization to it, an attempt by its occupant to make it homier. It wasn't much, but the vase of flowers and the brushes and paints strewn on the table did make it at least look lived in.

Curiosity getting the better of her, Sakura inspected some of the canvases stacked near the cot, finding some with mountainside views of the village, and a few of Iwanagahime. There was another with a field in a valley and bright purple flowers in full bloom.

She couldn't say she was much of an artist, but Sakura at least knew when something she was looking at was done by a practiced hand, and each portrait gave her that impression even more than the one before it. It wasn't until she picked up the final picture that the small smile on her lips sank, and her vision started to swim. 'What...what is this?'

There was no mistaking the lithe figure's battle stance, the green-eyed glare, or the pink hair and Byakugo. Sakura was staring at an image of herself standing in the same field from one of the previous paintings. The canvas slipped from her fingers and clattered to the floor in her shock. 'How's that even possible? There's no way there'd be time to do this after the fighting...' It was all too eerie, too unexplainable.

Suddenly wanting out of the room, she resumed her original quest for dry clothing, popping the standard-issue wooden trunk open and ignoring the additional blank canvases and small bottles of incense stashed within. Fortunately, this time the search bore fruit, and Sakura found herself clutching first a white haori, and next a red hakama, the traditional garb of the miko. Inspecting them, the kunoichi was satisfied that they appeared and smelled clean, or at least barely used, deciding they would do for the time being.

Loosening her yukata, Sakura slipped out of it from the shoulders, then eased it to the floor. The air was even cooler on her chilled skin when it was bare, and she momentarily wrapped her arms around herself to protect her sensitive breasts.

Upon adjusting to life in the era, Sakura quickly learned bindings were almost always a hindrance when she was wearing a yukata or a kimono—clothing already awkward for her to wear regularly — and despite her original insistence on trying to preserve her sense of modesty, after the uncomfortable pinch around her chest, she'd stopped. One thing that she had worn uncompromisingly was the susuyoke that served as her lower undergarments, refusing to take the chance of any incidents where her virtue would be...exposed.

But now she realized that the thin wrap was just as soaked through as the rest of her clothing, and she reluctantly took it off. Bending to retrieve the haori first, Sakura slipped it over her head, instantly feeling better that it came as far down her body as it did. The hakama came next, and she stepped in them with a small sense of awe at how surreal it felt to be back in pants once again. It didn't even matter that these weren't the kind of pants she'd ordinarily wear, they were much easier to move in nonetheless. Although she fumbled with tying them securely under her bust, especially the back himo, she managed, feeling proud when it stayed up.

Collecting the wet hair clinging to the back of her neck, Sakura wrung it out and then placed it in a
low ponytail hanging over her shoulder with the white ribbon that had been in the trunk with the rest of the attire.

A quick perusal of herself in the mirror against the wall made her pause. As a child, she marveled at the brave miko in the fairytales her mother read her. But in her mind’s eye, they reminded her a lot of Ino—beautiful, confident and strong.

Regardless, there was no mistaking the striking young woman staring back at her wasn't Ino.

It was the same pink-haired, beryl-eyed, timid little girl from back then, but with much more poise and less of a slouch. Sakura tilted her chin up and stepped back from the mirror, knowing she couldn't put off the inevitable anymore.

She moved down the hall like a shadow, finding Madara exactly as she'd left him. Checking his pulse, she noticed it stronger than before, and checking his head with her probing chakra, she felt how much the swelling had come down. Still, she didn't exactly have the benefit of the high-tech, futuristic benefits of hospitals from her own time.

She couldn't do a head scan and get a clear look at his brain. All she could hope for was that he hadn't slipped into a state where damage would be irreversible. Her prodding at least revealed there was brain activity. That was a good sign. She was confident she'd acted fast enough, but…there was still never a guarantee with such things.

While she and Madara were hardly close, he was in her care at the moment, and moreover, there was a pang in her chest when she thought of Izuna, who loved his (difficult) brother. Not to mention the Hokage, who'd thought highly enough of her skills to allow her to come on this mission in the first place. If she didn't do her utmost to care for Madara, she'd be letting them both down.

Shoring herself up, Sakura sighed, putting a hand to his shoulder. "Let's…let's get this over with."

She announced, already knowing there wouldn't be much of an answer. She reached to remove his shirt, only for her fingers to stop short. If her mentor were there, shishou would no doubt be fussing at her to just get on with it. She'd had to undress incapacitated patients before, and a trained medic with as much experience as she had shouldn't be balking over such a mundane task. Sakura humbly thought there should be an exception made for this scenario. Never in her wildest dreams did she think there'd come a day when she'd have to fully disrobe Madara Uchiha. How did one train for that?!

"This time I mean it!" she warned herself, reaching for his shirt once again and feebly grasping it. Undressing one man shouldn't be this hard. Growling, she gave the shirt a firm tug, exposing the skin up to his navel. There. Nodding, Sakura assured herself she was more than competent enough to do this, and pulled the shirt higher, pulling his arms from the sleeves until Madara Uchiha sat nude from the waist up.

Onboard the ship, she'd gotten a glimpse of his chest, and it was just as taut as it had been then, faint lines of varying lengths visible—old scars. Carrying on, she prepared herself for the hardest part, lifting him onto his feet and hooking her thumbs into the waistband of his pants. Ignoring the fact that her fingertips were grazing his hips, she shimmied them down to his thighs and then sat him on the cot to make it easier to get them the rest of the way off. Without him being awake to support himself, wrestling to keep him upright was unnecessarily tedious.

Madara didn't stir. Sakura briefly considered removing the thin fundoshi that wasn't leaving anything to the imagination anyway—even less was hidden by the dampness of the material—but the whole process was already uncomfortable enough for her, and had it been her, she would have
at least wanted the knowledge that her dignity had been spared.

Redressing him in the yukata was quick and uneventful, thankfully, mostly due to her wanting the experience to be over with. Picking him up, Sakura placed him on the cot, staring deeply into his face. If someone had once told her that a day would come when Madara Uchiha's life would be in her hands, she would have called them a liar and more than doubted the circumstances that could lead to such an occurrence.

Yet the impossible had come to pass somehow, and he rested motionless, oblivious to her inner turmoil. He was the enemy. It didn't matter what time period it was, in her eyes that hadn't changed. If anything, his antagonistic attitude toward her only helped solidify the belief that with or without a war, Madara was an unlikable person. Then he'd saved her—unnecessarily—at great cost to himself, and against her will, she felt responsible.

Emotionally spent, Sakura staggered to her feet, deciding that she needed to secure the area in case anyone returned. She was sure she could locate some trip wire and at least set up a trap that would warn her if someone set foot near the door. And it would give her something to do, some small distraction to avoid mulling over how she'd ended up in such a mess.

There was a sense of urgency to the curt message that had been waiting for him when he woke up, or rather, that had woken him up. Naoko had been an unexpected success with the children—girls more than boys noticeably—and volunteered to teach them for just one more day.

Since she'd promised to be on her best behavior, and Hikkaku was yet again assisting, Izuna hadn't seen the harm. She had a certain expertise with the spear that was both daunting and enthralling. Versatility in learning to handle different weapons could only help the next generation of Uchiha. Knowing that was handled, Izuna had coaxed himself into sleeping in, feeling maybe he'd earned it.

The crow screeching at his bedroom window begged to differ. It didn't leave. Not when he turned over to ignore it. Not when he asked it politely to settle down. And not even when he blindly lobbed a shuriken in its general direction. That was when he understood that it was a summoning. Straight from the Hokage no less, as it turned out.

He dressed and left the compound in record time, not even pausing for the greetings from the other early risers who'd already gotten up to start their day. Figuring it was important, he flickered into the office without so much as a knock, finding Hashirama looking unusually grave, and Tobirama's face was unreadable. Neither of them admonished him for being so informal, instead Hashirama inclined his head to the seat in front of his desk. "Izuna..." he sighed, the weight of the world—or bad news—on his shoulders, "You know you can sit."

He was an Uchiha, and he had plenty of practice concealing his emotions in tense situations, so he declined with a polite shake of the head. "I think I'll stand if it's all the same to you."

"Kreeee!" The cry made his ears ring and his heart drop. Restlessly peering into the window was his late father's Summon, Shinta.

If Izuna's shinobi senses hadn't already been in high drive, just the sight of the giant eagle would have been enough to fill him with a heavy foreboding. 'Madara hates summoning him.' Despite Madara's inheritance of the summoning contract following Tajima's death, the bird barely listened to his brother, or anyone, very much loyal to the ghost of the former Uchiha patriarch.

"If Madara sent Shinta, it had to be with a dire message." He swallowed, bracing himself. "Did
something happen on the mission?"

The Hokage exchanged a brief look with his brother. "I received this not too long ago, and I think you should read it too…"

Izuna wasn't feeling optimistic about whatever message was contained in the scroll Hashirama was offering him, but he still took it, holding his breath as it unfurled. Right away, he recognized not only the handwriting, but the tone itself, "I suspected from the start this would be a fool's errand. I have doubts about a curse, but I do feel something nefarious here. The leaders of Chigiri and Genzai have confirmed the desperation to avoid death that the islanders have, falling back on an old wives tale with little to no credence as their guiding prophecy. Minamatori minerals, they say, can absorb curses. The people are all governed by myth in a way that's absurd. They follow it without question. Haruno continues to embroil herself deeper and deeper into affairs, to a vexing degree. She may possess competency as a medic, but I deeply question her own sense of self-preservation. On a final note…it goes without saying that Izuna is my heir, the next leader of the Uchiha clan, in my absence or otherwise."

When Izuna brought his eyes up from the scroll, gaze darting between the two of them, every emotion going through his head was nakedly displayed. "I can't accept this." he said quietly.

"Can't is a strange way of saying won't." Tobirama snorted. "Regardless, your role in all this is very passive. This is just Hashirama being gracious."

Izuna felt the scroll crumpling in his grip. "Don't treat me like I'm misunderstanding things." he growled. "I know what this means, and that's why I don't plan to accept it." His eyes found Hashirama's and they became almost pleading, "Hashirama…I'm asking you not so much as a Hokage, but Madara's closest friend...Please, I need to go to Sekai."

Hashirama looked reluctant, but considering. "There are a lot of unknown factors, and Madara's made it clear what he wants…sending you wouldn't be—"

"It's out of the question," Tobirama explained bluntly. "Your clan would turn riotous without its leadership. Stop being unreasonable."

Izuna stared over at Shinta, surprised the raptor had stayed beyond delivering the scroll at all. Although he had a slightly better relationship with the eagle than his elder brother, the fact remained that the bird did what he wanted more often than not.

"I'm asking out of formality, and out of respect for you as the Hokage," he grumbled. "But I could go if I wanted." Inwardly, he knew he was acting privileged and immature, possibly throwing his weight as the brother of the Hokage's best friend. But Madara was his only remaining brother, and Sakura-san was…well, a friend. He wouldn't just pretend there wasn't a possibility he'd never see them again.

Tobirama was quicker to react than Hashirama, stepping forward with a deepening look of resentment etched into the hard lines of his face. "You Uchiha," he spat, "Are entirely too comfortable giving ultimatums. Stepping foot out of the village, directly disobeying the Hokage's orders, is tantamount to a defection."

"Tobirama," Hashirama warned. While he didn't look happy about it, the younger Senju quieted. "It's not like neither of us has never done something careless for family. And besides, this is concerning. Under normal circumstances I'd write a letter to Sekai and wait for a response, but it doesn't really seem like there's time for that." Propping his elbows on the desk and placing his head in his hands, Hashirama stared off into the distance.
"Alright." Izuna straightened, realizing the Hokage had made his final decision. "Just this time, I want you to go investigate. Join up with the others, and send word as soon as you do. Then remain on standby."

A small smile fought its way to his lips. "Yes!"

"But this is just a compromise," Hashirama added. "So I hope you understand I can't send you alone."

"You shouldn't send him at all," Tobirama quietly objected. Not for the first time, Izuna was grateful that the Senju brothers were such opposites, and especially that Tobirama didn't have the final say. Life would be hell, doubly so for anyone with the last name Uchiha.

Hashirama gave Tobirama a weary glance, pulling some parchment and a quill close. "Prepare as much as possible. Can you be ready in under an hour?"

The Uchiha lifted his chin proudly. "I can be ready in under thirty minutes." He'd always been efficient when packing for missions, something he considered to be one of his personal strengths as a ninja.

"Good." The Hokage nodded. "You leave as soon as you're done. Your teammates will meet you here and, er," His brown eyes leapt to the agitated raptor that refused to leave the roof. Izuna would have found Hashirama's silent concern amusing in any other situation. Shinta was daunting, naturally. A bird of prey more than capable of hunting down a grown man. Having him perched on the roof outside, where Hashirama could no doubt feel the leer of those eagle-sharp eyes on his back, must have been nerve-wrecking.

"It's alright," Izuna laughed quietly. "Shinta," The Summon lazily looked in his direction. "You're probably hungry. I'll ask Naoko to feed you before the journey." Appeased, the large animal trilled, flapping his massive wings and taking off. With any luck, he'd head straight to the compound without causing trouble.

Hashirama blinked slowly. "You're planning to…to ride the eagle to Water Country?"

"It's risky," Izuna admitted, knowing that in the past the bird only wanted to be ridden by Tajima and according to Madara, their mother. "But I don't have a Summon of my own, and with Shinta's top speed, I could be there in barely an hour. He'd accommodate more than one person too."

Tobirama tilted his head, apparently amused. "Yes, a bird that size must have a large stomach. When they're minced to pieces I'm sure he'd comfortably seat ten." He said sarcastically.

Izuna shot his old rival a look, Hashirama also giving his brother a pointed glance. "Thank you for this. You won't regret it." The Uchiha vowed.

So violently beautiful, those special Rinnegan eyes. When the opportunity came to destroy Obito's eye to keep it from falling into the wrong hands, she couldn't do it. She hesitated, and unsurprisingly Madara had seized it. Ashamed, she looked away with a shudder. Images of Naruto and Sasuke broke her out of her moment of self-pity, the presence of the Byakugo stamped into her forehead inspiring her to be proactive.

Charging, she commanded her teammates to follow. There was no surprise in the pain of Madara stabbing through her with his chakra rod seconds later. She wouldn't die, not with her seal in effect. But if she could damage him…even just a little. Her fist collided against something solid, invisible.
No! The blood in her veins felt like packed snow, burying her in a blizzard. And yet, her emotions sizzled, burning through the snow, burning through her eyes, burning through him. His defensive wall buckled underneath her fist, cracks starting to web outward from her knuckles. Madara's cold gaze, in the span of a blink, started to fall too. That's right, she reminded herself. He was powerful, but he was never a god. Always a man, hiding behind those stupid eyes. Taunting them with those stupid eyes. Controlling them with those stupid eyes. Chipped pieces of the divide fell to the ground where it was weakest, her fist unrelenting.

He was grunting in exertion, unable to hide his surprise any longer. They both knew it shouldn't have been possible. The cool bite of metal wrapped in her clenched hand dragged across the sensitive flesh of his neck, not quite leaving a mark. Piercing flesh was much easier than piercing wall, and that hadn't been any match for her either.

"I'm going to kill you," she told him, "Slowly."

And her kunai buried itself in his shoulder.

Madara hissed, the noise almost pitiful. Almost, but not enough. She wanted to drag the most broken sounds he could make from him, wanted all hope to drain from his eyes as he felt the despair, the pain he inflicted so carelessly on others.

When she yanked her weapon from him, ready to drive it deeper and spill more of his very-human blood, the crimson on the kunai caught the light. Sakura paused, staring in awe as if she was seeing blood spilt for the first time all over again. He really could bleed. She had made him.

More.

More of what? The voice asked gently, a phantom hand ghosting a motherly touch over the crown of her head.

More of his blood. More of his pain. More of the unadulterated freedom that came with every dark desire she kept bottled being unleashed. More of this. More of everything!

Madara's face had changed again. His clothes, too. His eyes weren't open, but closed, and his mouth was twisted in a thin line, like he was uncomfortable. He wasn't in those divine robes. In fact the void of his black yukata was a stark contrast. It was the same with his hair, dark as a starless night once again and fanned around him.

The would-be god from the battlefield and the broken man in a fitful sleep coalesced in her mind, her eyes honing in on the kunai gripped tightly in between her interlocked fingers. It was trembling along with the rest of her, making it impossible for her to sink it into her motionless target.

Sakura sucked in a rasping breath, pulling out of the deep sludge clawing at her cognizance. When the haze cleared, she was back in the temple, still alone with the unconscious body of Madara. Her elbows pressed into the cot as she hunched over him on her knees, fighting to regain lucidity. There was a kunai knuckled in both hands, poised a fraction of an inch above his jugular. Sakura pulled up, letting it drop to the floor with a clatter.

As she tried to regulate her erratic breathing, startled by the realization of what she almost did, she noticed the way her nails poked at her palms as she clenched and unclenched her fingers. Odd, considering they hadn't been that long at all before the mission.

Holding her hands level with her face, the kunoichi got a second jolt of panic, the curved ends of her digits less nails and more talons. Sharp like a hawk's...or a dragon's. Refusing this new reality
she'd found with every fiber of her being, Sakura clenched her eyes shut, waiting several beats and then opening them again, staring accusingly down at her hands. They were normal. The same hands she'd always had, and she reasoned that it was all getting to her. The events of the last five or so hours.

After all, she had no idea what would be waiting for them when she dragged them out of the temple—which she had booby-trapped to the best of her ability after tending to Madara. The people of the island were beholden to the cultish following of Iwanagahime. If the acolytes had fled to wait for them in the village, or if they came by later and demanded they be handed over, she couldn't see the skittish, broken islanders putting up much resistance.

They hadn't even fought over the acolytes removing their dead and whisking the bodies who knew where… Sekai just wasn't safe for them. Unfortunately, just knowing that didn't mean much of anything. Even if the acolytes had put targets on their backs, where would they go? Another island? Would that even make a difference? Iwanagahime could have put roots all over Water Country, her followers throughout. Sakura wished desperately in that moment that she could just use Katsuyu, send a message back to the mainland and ask the Hokage for advice, or even backup.

She bit her thumb, watched a bead of blood drip down the pad and then formed the appropriate seals for a summoning, pressing it down against the floor with quiet hope.

A puff of smoke sent the flutter of excitement through her heart the way it had the first time she brought Katsuyu out. It was a short-lived feeling. There was no little slug when the wisps cleared.

Nothing.
Premonition

Chapter Summary

Help arrives, despite the odds (and bird) against them, but Sakura makes an alarming discovery about Madara that could change everything...

Chapter Notes

This is truly the last completed chapter thus far, so now the story is caught up on AO3 as it is on FFN.

Shinta stamped the ground, fluttering his wings a few times. Neither Yuhi looked too inclined to try getting near him, and Izuna didn't blame them. "He's harmless," he wanted to say, but he couldn't.

The big raptor was a menace on a good day. Naoko had outright laughed when he told her the plan and asked her to cover for him with the clan elders. Then she'd been dubious and finally downright concerned when he requested she feed the Summon while he readied himself for the trip.

"Look at you, Izuna-chan. All grown up." She'd been more nostalgic then than he'd ever seen her. "No stopping you now, is there? …Just be sure to bring 'im back mostly okay." Appreciative, Izuna squeezed her arm in reassurance, and then they'd gone their separate ways.

And she'd kept her word, assuring him Shinta had his fill of as many fish and rabbits as they could spare. Izuna didn't really expect them to fill the eagle up—he could easily devour a few grown deer—but his hope was to appeal to the bird's better nature, get him cooperative.

So far Shinta wasn't acting convinced. Izuna approached with arms outstretched, glancing at the two siblings waiting nervously in the background. What a sense of humor fate had, pairing him up with those two. At least they weren't currently bickering.

"I know you don't like the idea," he murmured, hoping his tone came across soothing and not annoyed, "But I need to help Madara. It's what…it's what Father would have wanted." The eagle considered it for a moment, cocking his head and eying the blondes with uncertainty. Izuna swore he heard their bones snap as they stood at attention. "They're helping me help Madara." he explained, feeling maybe he was getting somewhere.

Shinta's wings didn't lower immediately. He kept his intimidatingly large wingspan on full display as he hopped around them in inspection, occasionally clicking his beak. When he leaned in close to Kuren, sharp beak dangerously close to his nose, Izuna was afraid he might just decide they'd make better snacks than allies. Damn, he should have had Naoko offer him a deer…

But then it was over and the unpredictable bird huffed a little, folding his wings and stooping low. "Wh-what now?" Yurine squeaked, clutching her backpack tight.
"He's willing to let us ride." Izuna sighed, approaching the raptor and gently stroking his neck.

Shinta nipped at his fingers and the Uchiha withdrew them, understanding the message clearly. "Don't get used to this."

Deciding he should board first, Izuna took hold of the harness and climbed atop the bird's back, positioning himself near the shoulders and reaching a hand out to help his comrades. Yurine pointed at herself. "Me first?" she gulped. Her brother nudged hard at her shoulder.

"You'd be fine with it any other time," he taunted, causing her face to redden in anger. Glaring, she hesitantly reached for Izuna, allowing him to haul her up behind him. Her fingers lightly gripped at his shoulders, Yurine's loud sigh right in his ear as she grumbled about how irritating her brother was bound to be throughout the trip.

He genuinely hoped they could at least control themselves; sibling banter was all well and good but he wasn't exactly in the mood to be stuck between their arguments as a mediating party again. It would be easier—and maybe more inconspicuous—if they "fell" from Shinta's back midflight. A last resort, naturally.

"Your turn," Izuna announced, looking over at Kureno. "Do you need help or—"

Puffing out his chest, the older Yuhi swept some of his tussled blonde hair aside and flashed a confident smile, to which he heard Yurine scoff in response. "No, no." he assured, "Unlike my sister, I can manage."

Manage wasn't even close to the word Izuna would use to describe Kureno attempting to vault up onto the bird's back behind his sister, only to have Shinta nonchalantly lift up into the air briefly just long enough for the man to crash into the ground. When they landed, the eagle was keening in a way that could only be laughter.

"Shinta." Izuna reprimanded quietly. He slid from his spot on the bird, ignoring Yurine's startled gasp. Pulling Kureno onto his feet, the blonde rubbed a smudge of dirt from his face, refusing to make eye contact.

"L-Lost my balance..." he muttered. Nevertheless, he didn't protest when Izuna helped get him settled behind Yurine.

"Alright, Shinta." Izuna climbed back into his own spot. "You know where we need to go—take us to Sekai. That's where Madara summoned you."

The eagle trilled, tossing his head around and starting to hop then run across the ground, jostling all three of them. The forest stretched out in front of them, the village gates just behind, and he could imagine the odd looks the sentries were giving them.

Tall trees aside, the bird's wingspan was easily big enough to clear them and get into the air with no problem. Getting a running start wasn't necessary, and Izuna knew that the Summon was having some more fun at their expense.

"We're gonna crash before we get off the ground!" Kureno yelled as Shinta charged for the woods.

"W-We need to jump, Izuna-kun!" Yurine added, briefly squeezing tight at his shoulder. Her voice was high in fear and if he looked back at her, he was sure he'd find her eyes round with panic.

"Shinta, stop fooling around. Now!" the Uchiha barked, frustrated with the bird's antics. Every moment he wasted was a minute it could be too late to save Madara and Sakura-san. He gripped the
harness and pulled up, making sure the Summon understood how serious he was. The proud, self-important creature was just as likely to throw them all off as fall in line.

But something in the bird responded, and they were rocketing up into the air so fast his neck cracked painfully. The Yuhi siblings groaned behind him, just as jolted as he was, but at least they were now in the air.

Izuna peered down at the treetops and the village, watching as both became increasingly smaller with every wingbeat. The forestation was so tiny the expanse of greenery could have been blades of grass. And the village, the homes and people and even the Hokage Tower, already looked like a child's model set.

He couldn't help the breathless laugh that tumbled past his lips. How long had it been since he'd flown? Not since childhood, if he had to guess. Their father had taken him and Madara and their late brother Sanna up to see the battlefield from a bird's eye view, calmly pointing out the carnage as they gazed down in horror at the broken bodies and charred ground.

Only a little boy then, Izuna clung to his brother's back, Madara constantly complaining that he was being squeezed too tight. It didn't take Sanna long to become airsick, and he nearly vomited if not for Tajima's sharp reprimand. Meanwhile, when he finally felt brave enough to do so, Izuna had opened one watery eye and seen that from so high up, it really was as beautiful as it was frightening.

He hadn't expected the sensation of flying to give him the same sense of wonder as it had years ago, and yet Izuna was pleasantly surprised. If not for the urgency of the mission's nature it might have been sort of peaceful up in the morning clouds. Their coolness, despite fall and the corresponding chill weather having settled firmly over Fire Country, was oddly refreshing. Of course, by the silence behind him, he was probably the only one who thought so. Maybe the only one who was enjoying any of it at all?

Fleetricy, he wondered how Sakura-san would feel about flying. Her enjoying herself and them having something else to marvel over and discuss together was a pleasing thought. 'Not right now, Izuna...'

"Are you both okay? Keep hanging on tight." He called, trying and failing to angle himself in a way that he could see his teammates while maintaining a safe grip on the harness. The action would have been easier—doable period, actually—if Yurine wasn't so adamant about keeping her face buried in his back. His command to keep holding on wasn't lost on her whatsoever; her fingernails dug into his shoulders with gusto.

"F-Fine..." Kureno responded first, still full of bravado despite the embarrassing display Izuna had seen with his own two eyes. "But uh, the speed's not helping my hair. I'm all for the windswept look but this is excessive."

Izuna once more wriggled until he was able to dislodge Yurine enough to glance backward. Kureno's confident smile was strained by the wind, his eyes squinted and watering and his perfectly swept hair a tousled mess. The Uchiha was happy for the fact that the high altitude made it hard to hear the undignified snort.

"What about you, Yurine? It's alright to open your eyes if you need to." Izuna glanced down, making sure they were headed in the right direction. Shocked, he had to do a double-take at the quaint seaside town just on the horizon. "Look, we're almost flying over Yumegakure." Shinta truly was amazing, ornery or not. They hadn't been in the air for even half an hour and he'd gotten them to the edge of Fire Country, a feat that would have taken them three days going top-speed on foot.
"Keep it up, Shinta." He encouraged.

Yurine slowly peeled her face from his shirt, taking a minute to do some deep breathing. "We're so high," she yelped.

"It's not flying if you're on the ground, dear sister."

All her previous fear forgotten, Yurine reached behind her to slap blindly at her brother. "Stop acting like you're so incredibly well-adjusted! You've never flown in your life and you know it!" she accused.

Izuna's lips quirked, neither a smile nor a frown. He was beginning to suspect this behavior was something he could expect for the remainder of the mission...

A breathless gasp near his ear alerted him to the fact that Yurine, between bickering with her brother and peering over his shoulder, had finally spotted the view. "So that's the sea..." she whispered.

They sailed right over Yume, his heart expanding at the sight of the twinkling sea. Very rarely had he traveled so far across the Fire Country. But he'd always heard Yume was a peaceful portside, welcoming of all travelers. Time permitted, it might have been nice to have some fresh caught fish, get sea-drunk off the salt air and take a break from the usual responsibilities within the clan.

After all, it was so picturesque and relaxing...blue and sparkling like a jewel caught by the sunlight. So close...he could nearly reach out and touch it.

"I'm not one to tell a captain how to steer his ship...or a man how to fly his bird," Kureno's voice drifted over the calm.

"Pssh!" Yurine exclaimed, clearly disagreeing.

Ignoring her, he leaned around. "But we're sort of...descending pretty fast."

Alarmed, Izuna noticed he was right. Shinta had drifted lower and lower and now his wingtips almost skimmed the water's surface, a light spray of seawater peppering them. "Shinta, what are you doing? We're too low." Izuna tugged at the harness sharply, urging the bird back up.

But the Summon, whimsical and now apparently feeling mightier than before, only listed right, his wing dipping into the water and sending up a spray. Normally, there would have been no concern. With the exception of perhaps a shark, no animal in the water could jump out and challenge the eagle—his size alone was a deterrent. But with the bird's wily attitude, Izuna didn't trust the damn raptor wouldn't simply dump them all off his back into the frigid sea.

The same thought must have passed between the siblings because he felt Yurine's lax grip tightening up again. Shinta trilled triumphantly, not a care in the world, doing exactly what he wanted to do.

Izuna knuckled the worn leather of the harness, concern mingling into his exasperation. Would he really be drowned by his father's Summon before even reaching the islands? "Shinta, no more games!"

Games were exactly what the eagle was in the mood for. His speed suddenly accelerated, despite his low altitude remaining constant, and with no warning he looped, almost bucking them all off.

Yurine screamed, trying to meld into his flesh by how tightly she was hanging on. Kureno's yell
was differentiated by the more masculine pitch, but he was no doubt just as hysterical.

The bird was delighted, letting out a series of raucous sounds that could only be laughter. Not giving them time to catch their collective breath, the eagle spun himself in a spiral, somehow managing to catch fish in the process. While Yurine started to dry heave, the raptor enjoyed his meal.

When they leveled out, all of them were shaken, but Izuna's shoulders were tense with rage, not fear. Two people he cared about were almost undeniably in danger, and here they were wasting precious time because a spoiled bird couldn't behave long enough to get them to dry land.

"Shinta," he snarled through clenched teeth. "Ascend!" The forcefulness of his tone and the flare up of his chakra brooked no argument, and suddenly they were bursting back up into the air so fast his cheeks flapped. The sound of a broken sob that could've been Kureno vaguely registered, but Izuna was too busy basking in the satisfaction that the stubborn bird of prey had finally responded to his authority. Somehow, he knew they'd no longer have to worry about him for the rest of the flight.

"It's over," he announced, a crooked grin on his plump lips. Brow furrowed, he dropped the harness from his right hand and turned, placing it on Yurine's shoulder. "You're both still with me?"

Through the death-grip, the blond kunoichi lifted her eyes to his, tear tracks half-dry down her face and something haunted in her expression. "How…d-do you mean? My body is, but…but…" For a moment he worried she'd pass out and his hands prepared to catch her, but she shook off the daze and closed her eyes. Five consecutive deep breaths later and she appeared centered, focused as if she hadn't just been in a life or death scenario. That was admirable, how quickly she was able to readjust. "I'll live."

"Kureno…?" Izuna asked.

"Mmph! Mmmmmmmpphh!" That…wasn't what he was expecting. Some more false bravado or even quiet crying, yes, but that just sounded like a muffled death scream. Izuna got Shinta to a gentle glide, and then turned himself completely sideways. Despite his previous success, this time he really did laugh at the blonde ninja's expense.

He was attempting to pry a persistent squid off his face but his shaking fingers couldn't get the right grip for it.

"Yu-Yurine…" he wheezed, "Could you help out," Izuna had to clutch the harness or risk falling off as his body was racked with laughter.

"Honestly, Kureno!" Yurine cried, grasping onto two of the squid's arms and ripping it away. She dropped it, watching it fall down, down, down…and then finally land with a splash back in the sea.

How he'd manage to get the thing stuck to him in the brief time he was fighting to get Shinta back under control, was as perplexing as it was absurd.

Of course, Kureno's dramatic howl was instant.

The two of them paused and then Yurine was joining him, doubled over in laughter herself. Nothing about Kureno looked charming, composed or handsome. Only one phrase came to mind: utterly ridiculous.

His once neatly swept hair was poking out at odds and ends Izuna hadn't even known were possible. His red eyes were round and distant, blotted by a mask of ink that gave him an uncanny
resemblance to a tanuki, mouth still hanging open in silent terror. Most tellingly there was an imprint across almost his entire face left behind by the squid's tentacles.

It wasn't a surprise that the male Yuhi wasn't as amused. "It strangled me!" he hissed. "I...I was dying! I saw the light!" Manically, he brushed his hands through his hair until it was...semi-fixed (at least it was flatter), and then clasped both palms to his own neck to massage it. "And you have the audacity to laugh!" As the high of the giggles came down, Izuna was able to understand why from his perspective, their laughter was deeply offensive.

"Sorry," he said with an easy smile. "Ever since I got that letter this morning, everything's been tense and urgent." Izuna resisted telling them that even before the letter, everything with the clan seemed tense and urgent—for no real reason other than the council was old and bitter—trying to keep the mood light. "Believe it or not, I feel better now, and even if it was unintentional, I have you to thank."

Kureno's eyes softened, "Yeah?" he rubbed at his neck. "I guess I do possess a certain composure that's bound to rub off, eh?"

Yurine's eyebrows lifted skeptically. "Hopefully you're joking."

Unfortunately, he wasn't, and her brother folded his arms behind his head and attempted to lean back, forgetting they were very much still in the air and nearly tumbling from the eagle's back with a girlish shriek. Yurine grabbed him just in time, and then when she made sure he was safely back onboard, set to work scolding him.

Shinta barely turned his head, and if eagles could, Izuna had a feeling this one would be rolling his eyes. He cast the Uchiha a glance, silently communicating. "That time, it wasn't my fault."

Izuna stroked his soft neck feathers in understanding. The Yuhi siblings and their endless antics were something they would both have to get use to together.

Sakura had been very, very careful not to doze off again. There was no telling what would happen. What was already happening. The deep bloodlust that nearly overwhelmed her control was like nothing she'd ever experienced, and the thought of killing a defenseless ally—even if that ally was Madara—in a fit of rage horrified her.

She sat and tried to piece together everything that had transpired so far, from the minute they'd stepped foot off the ship until the last few hours that had led them here. The encounter with the acolytes had all but confirmed it was the work of a divine being. A wrathful one who personally had a grudge against her interfering. Balance, they'd chanted at her. Balance.

What warped sense of balance required unleashing a terrible curse on a defenseless population and then watching them die miserably in droves? She'd told Mizuchi once before, but she didn't understand gods...

Mizuchi! Sakura shot concerned eyes at Madara. He was still out cold. Settling herself, she once again tried to reach for the link she knew tethered her to the strange, enigmatic deity.

Before there hadn't been anything, just a faint sense that she was out there somewhere, but far off and unreachable. Now, Sakura had a clearer sense of the invisible connection, and she realized with a start that Mizuchi was...purposely blocking her access. That was the only way to describe the feeling, like yards and yards of invisible barriers had been erected just to keep Sakura from reaching out.
Sakura recalled her dream wherein she'd smashed through Madara's barrier until she reached him. It was a long shot to apply dream logic to the situation—despite it being surreal enough to almost count as a waking dream—but it was worth the attempt. The rose-haired girl formed a mental fist, large and destructive, just like her inner self's use to be.

With all her might she slammed it down against the constructs separating her mind from the goddess's. Again and again and again. She imagined it chipping slowly, more resilient than Madara's shield had been in the dream, but not impervious. It could've all been wishful thinking; for all she knew Mizuchi's walls may have been impenetrable.

Worst still, the thought occurred that this was Mizuchi's way of tossing her out in the cold. Sakura shuddered bodily. She had always been elusive, but never actually abandoned her. That was one thing she'd never even considered could happen. As much as she had wanted the goddess to leave her alone in those early days, she had become a constant, instructing her diligently if not cryptically.

Was this it? Was she stranded out of time with no higher being to rely on for guidance? The fist stopped, Sakura slinking deeper into her depressive thoughts.

"A bit…overly dramatic for my tastes."

She jolted upright, unable to believe she was actually glad to hear that voice.

There she was, regal and radiant…and very solemn. It was all happening in her head, Sakura knew, but she still leaned forward. 'Where!' was all she could say, thoughts fizzling on the where have you been!

"Where I needed to be, in order to avoid them."

Hot, thirsty energy surged through her, looking for a victim. She'd been gone so long and now, again, instead of being straightforward, she fell back on the overplayed allure of mystery.

Sakura curled her hands into fists and then planted her knuckles firmly into the hard floors until it started to hurt, just to have something to distract herself.

Mizuchi moved closer, regarding her almost coldly. "Is this what's become of you? You fell more quickly than I could have ever imagined."

Some of the anger that had started to seize her body abated. 'What?'

"You reek." The goddess said plainly. "Like a festering blight. So that can only mean you've done something utterly foolish in my absence." She kept strutting around her and tutting like a mother who had found their child had dirtied their best clothes while playing outside.

'I did what I needed to.' Sakura returned just as curtly. And who was she to judge? Where had the almighty dragon goddess been in her hour of need, when it felt like the blights would swallow up every part of her?

"Hiding," she sighed. The confusion must have been pretty evident on her face, because for the first time since appearing to her, Mizuchi's face softened. "Sakura, it is imperative that I am not found until my objective is reached. And I still have a ways to go before that is possible. You, I had hoped, would be ready when they came. But you are not."

'Ready for what?' She all but screeched.
"The heavens." Mizuchi said dismissively. "I…and now, I am afraid, you, will be hunted mercilessly." Her eyes were distant, staring off into the expanse of nothingness that was Sakura's mindscape. Mizuchi hadn't bothered to alter it this time around, so it was vast and dark. "I cannot linger. Already, they may know... but trust that in a short time, I will explain more." She paused, suddenly looking almost lost, certainly more vulnerable than Sakura had ever seen her. It was, in a word, terrifying. "No... I will explain all." Mizuchi declared. The ferocity returned to those glimmering, golden-green eyes. "Wake up. Keeping this connection too long will only put you in more danger. Well, more than you are already in... And, get that Uchiha to awaken too. Make him prove useful." To Sakura's mild amusement, Mizuchi rolled her eyes. "I find I care for his dramatics even less than yours. In the span of a second he went from being the hero to being the victim." Sakura was enraptured as her deity continued to mock Madara, wanting to listen all day.

But Mizuchi had other plans, cutting the meeting short, dumping Sakura back into consciousness like a toy doll upended from a box. Green eyes darted around, wondering just how long she'd been in that trance. Probably not as long as it felt like...

Her inner medic nin coming to the fore, she decided it was time to check on Madara again. The rain sounded like it had stopped, and they really needed to move on. It was a risky move, but what choice did they have?

Sakura leaned over into his face, intending to move hair so she could check the pulse of his neck. But her fingers didn't even touch him when the Uchiha groaned low in his throat, twitching restlessly as his eyes eased open.

Dumbfounded, Sakura only sat back on her heels and watched. She had expected he'd be asleep much, much longer. Maybe another day. Maybe more. As always, the man was defiant, beating her expectations and looking around in disorientation.

His bottomless eyes rolled toward the ceiling, lips parting in a false start. She couldn't imagine how dry his mouth was right then. "Where is..." he began roughly, his usual baritone impossibly deeper, "This...?"

"We're... still in the temple." Sakura explained slowly. Quicker than she would have advised, his neck snapped toward her, eyes drinking her in even as his face remained blank. "After you were knocked out, it was raining hard. I wasn't about to drag you back down the mountain in a downpour like that. We could've both fallen to our deaths."

Madara's eyes squinted at her face. "..." Sakura watched his forehead wrinkle and she knew he was thinking hard. His eyes darted between her face and her hair, finally settling on the latter. "Pink."

"Pink?" she repeated, unamused. "You have pink hair." He clarified.

"I always have." She snapped. "Anyway, that's beside the point. We have a lot more serious problems."

Madara began attempting to sit up on his elbows. Knowing he was too stubborn to listen if she told him to rest, Sakura reluctantly assisted. She drew the line, however, when he tried to stand and she had to catch him.

"Why're you always so difficult?" Sakura fought every instinct to toss him back onto the cot, helping him carefully seat himself instead.
"I don't even know what you mean," Madara huffed. "I wake up in some strange room with a pink-haired girl hovering over me, babbling, and now you just want me to stay put?"

Her mouth fell open quietly, and she wanted to ask if he was serious, but there was genuine frustration on his face and he'd crossed his arms with a childish pout. "Madara," she whispered. "How far back do you remember?"

He perked up, making Sakura slightly hopeful it was nothing too serious. He might've been just a little…rattled. Being hit by a fifty pound boulder would do that.

"Madara?" he choked, pronouncing his own name like it was a foreign word. "Who's Madara?"

Sakura fell to her knees. "No…"

Landing was rough. Shinta had been coasting peacefully when, out of the blue, something darted past them in the opposite direction, clipping the bird's wing. The eagle cried out, starting to spiral out of the sky less than a mile over the beach of Sekai island. For all his attempts to get them righted and back in the air, Izuna knew they were going down—hard.

Shinta was flapping desperately with one wing, for once not appearing to be up to his usual tricks. He clung tight to the harness and braced for impact, both siblings clinging tight to him in turn. At their rate of speed, it was impossible not to imagine a painful encounter with the ground.

The wind was so loud in his ears he had a hard time recognizing the screaming—or who was doing it. All he heard clearly was the pounding of his own heart, and the anger roared through his blood that they'd get so, so close, only to die on the shores of Water Country.

A warm gust of wind slammed into them, pushing them along until Shinta was horizontal in the sky again, coasting down, the bird spreading his massive wings and making an awkward landing. Izuna hit the sand and rolled, feeling the grit of it in his mouth, eyes, nose and ears. Two identical thuds signaled that his teammates had the same experience. For a minute the Uchiha was too dizzy to move, laying face-down on the beach, spread-eagle with the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the shore.

Shinta's weak cry made him lift his head, and Izuna got his legs under him and stumbled toward the animal. He collapsed on his knees, stroking over the bird's body with both hands and wishing more than ever that they had Sakura-san. "Shinta, thank you…I mean it." Managing some dignity, the majestic creature raised his head, a gleam of pride in his eyes. "How're your wings?" Izuna hated to think whatever had hit them took the raptor out of commission. After all, he still had to fly himself back to his mountain home.

Shinta stood up, slowly flexing both wings and shaking the sand loose from his feathers. He held up the wing that had been hit and gently flapped it a few times, lowering it with a confident cry. "So it just stung a little?" Izuna felt himself starting to breathe easier. "Shinta's fine!" he announced, turning with a small grin that quickly fell when he saw his comrades.

"Oh," Yurine had crawled to her brother and was trying to dig his head out of the sand with her hands. "Good for him." She dragged Kureno out by the back of his shirt and he immediately started spewing out great mouthfuls of sand.

"T-This is more traumatic than the Kaguya," Izuna watched him try to wipe sand from his eyes, then futilely attempt to fix his hair—again. "Sand's not supposed to go anywhere near my—"

"We're here in one piece and that's what matters." Yurine interrupted, once more impressing Izuna
with her ability to refocus. "Let's go find Sakura…and Izuna-kun's brother."

Izuna smiled in appreciation, glancing over as the eagle started to wander across the beach, toward a tide-pool. "We'll take it from here." He told the bird. "We couldn't have done this without you." To his surprise, when he reached up to touch the eagle's beak, he leaned down to let him. "The next time Madara summons you, I'll make sure you get a nice stag."

The Summon warbled enthusiastically, finally disappearing in a puff of smoke.

"Ugh," The Yuhi siblings walked toward him, Kureno still sandy. "I'll never look at eagles the same way again…" he muttered. "It's a miracle all of us still have our packs…"

Izuna had to agree. Everything he'd packed was somehow safe, including his sword, and, honestly he was happy his ninja tools hadn't dropped into the sea during the erratic flying.

"So where do you think they'd be?" Yurine asked, gently combing both hands through her ponytail.

"According to the information I got from the Hokage, Sakura-san was helping out the healers here, so there's a chance she may be at their clinic. Madara was negotiating at the Hagakure Inn and that's where they were supposed to be staying."

"I say we try the inn first," Kureno announced. "I like, I mean they'd like to get clean after a long day, right?" He lifted his shirt and shook it, more sand falling out.

Yurine placed her hands on her hips, glaring, "Kureno, it's not even noon!"

Cornered by her accusatory glare, Kureno raised his hands in defeat, stepping backward across the beach. "Alright, fine, I want this sand gone before I start chafing. But it doesn't mean I'm wrong! They've got twice as much reason to be at the inn as they do anywhere else!"

Yurine gave him a flat stare, deferring to Izuna. "What do you think, Izuna-kun?"

He shrugged, already heading up the beach toward the village. "I think it makes sense. They'd be hard to miss and the innkeeper would probably remember their faces." His sandals sank into the moist sand, caking between his toes. He wouldn't admit it, but he wouldn't mind getting clean after they made sure his brother and Sakura-san were safe, too.

Sakura stopped, pivoted on her heel for the fourth time, looking behind her. "Walk a little faster,"

Madara's head lifted in surprise, but his expression quickly morphed into a blank look as he continued to drag his feet, ignoring her. Sakura rolled her eyes, marching over and taking his wrist to pull him along.

"H-Hey, stop it! I don't even know where you're taking me." He tried to dig his heels into the ground, but her strength won out and she was literally dragging him. A grown man, Madara Uchiha, being dragged around like a petulant child.

Would anyone ever believe her if she told them? In the state he was in now, maybe…

They hadn't run into anyone after leaving the temple, so Sakura supposed maybe all luck hadn't abandoned her. It didn't mean she wanted to linger on her way back to the village. In the end, there was just nothing to do other than to risk it.

Although, given the choice, the kunoichi was positive she'd rather fight off another enemy ambush
than deal with the reality that was Madara's amnesiac state.

"Are you sure you're even a real miko?" he asked, referring to the outfit she still wore. "You're not very feminine."

Sakura grit her teeth, a prominent vein twitching near her temple. 'He's not himself.' She reasoned. 'You shouldn't hit someone with a head injury.' On the other hand...it was pretty tempting. If she smacked him around enough, maybe he'd finally settle on a personality she liked.

"I'm not a miko..." Sakura grumbled. "I'm a kunoichi—a female ninja. Now be quiet and I'll explain more when we get where we're going."

Clearly, that answer wasn't satisfactory enough. "And where's that?" he snipped.

"Hagakure Inn."

The village was well in sight, the tang of the sea and smoked fish on the air. Madara's nose crinkled and he tried yet another unsuccessful attempt to pull away. "This village is where I live? It's pretty pitiful."

If it wasn't irritating it would be amazing. Even without memories, he seemed to have a natural talent for being difficult. "Neither of us lives here, but it's where we're going, so take it or leave it."

Her snarky response at last prompted him to stop talking, and the rest of the walk into town he followed, grumbling quietly under his breath.

Strangely, those who spotted them appeared much friendlier than before, most noticeably toward Sakura. They smiled, or pointed and then waved. If not for the situation, she'd be puffed with pride that her help was so positively received. More importantly, it meant that the acolytes hadn't been them to the village, or put any sort of orders out for them. Her anxious heartbeat slowed down just a tick.

They passed the booths where villagers were selling their food or crafted items, and remarkably it looked fuller, livelier than before. In a way, the atmosphere of the entire town had shifted; it was less smothering by far. One spot in particular caught her eye, the jewelry stand where they had first encountered the pitiful little girl. Now, there was a small crowd gathered, excitedly viewing her bracelets and necklaces.

She was standing on a stool, smiling as she accepted money from a customer in exchange for a necklace. An older woman with her faded brown hair up in a messy bun and frown lines around her mouth stood nearby, showing off a pretty piece of blue sea glass.

Sakura was happy for them, but she couldn't afford to linger, so she ushered Madara through the crowd. Cutting through the throng, they came out on the other side, near a row of modest homes built from recycled driftwood. Before, there had been an air of emptiness surrounding the houses. Today, children did tricks with a ball and a woman stood and swept in her doorway. Little by little, the island was perking up, and oh how she wanted to believe she had some small part in it.

Madara was being unusually quiet, so Sakura peeked over her shoulder to check on him. He was watching the children play, enthralled like a long-lost memory had resurfaced.

Testing the waters, she tried to give him a patient smile, "What, thinking of joining in?"

She meant it as a small joke, of course, but he turned to her with an utterly serious expression. "Maybe. I think I've played that game before...a long time ago."
No retort to that came to mind. Sakura cleared her throat. "Come on," she said, exhausted. And to think it wasn't even midday… "Hagakure, remember?"

Madara grunted, sounding a little more like his old self. They didn't talk again after that, Sakura silently leading the way with all the thoughts of what she could do about the Uchiha drumming through her head.

A sharp turn she'd almost missed took them past the front of the clinic. Why go in? It was unlikely they could help, and besides, they'd be busy with those still weak and recovering. "This place is an inn?" Madara asked, bewildered about why they'd stopped.

Sakura turned, back to the entrance. "No, it's just I—oof!" She shuffled out of the way, noticing a man with his back to them slowly trying to maneuver his way out, carrying a large crate.

"My apologies…I guess backing out of the door wasn't as smart as it was in my head." He turned, Kou blinking in surprise at the sight of her. "Oh, Sakura? I…I'm surprised you're still here. The… outfit's new I see."

Sakura had almost forgotten about the fact that she was dressed just like a miko. "Kou…" He was just the same as he'd been the last time they spoken, save for the fresh gray yukata he was wearing. There was a little more light in his eyes, though, as if he'd found new energy from somewhere. "That's a little hard to explain right now, but what's this about me being here? Is there a reason why I shouldn't be?"

Kou's mouth popped open, but he glanced at the crate in his arms, shrugging. "No, no… I just thought you'd moved on to treat people on other islands. Like Erika."

"Erika's gone?" Sakura asked, mildly. She could feel Madara's heat at her back as he leaned closer, but she ignored him in favor of gauging the other medic's response.

"Ever since she arrived, she's been here bright and early, treating patients. But you know, now that you've helped us heal everyone and no new cases have been brought in…we all just assumed she'd moved on to where she was most needed, since she never showed up today."

Madara, apparently tired of being ignored, huffed loudly in impatience. "Who's Erika?"

"O-Oh," Kou smiled politely, despite clearly being taken aback. "I don't think we've met. I'm Kou from the Yuki clan and I—"

"I didn't ask who you were," Madara interrupted. "I asked who Erika is."

Sakura was fuming, shoving Madara away from Kou none too gently. "I'm sorry about him!" she apologized. "Absolutely no filter," She snatched his wrist hard enough to bruise, tugging him again. "Sorry we can't stay, but thank you for everything!"

Kou awkwardly tried to wave while balancing the crate against his hip, openly confused. "R-Right…"

Yurine scuttled closer to her brother, feeling uncomfortable. 'What is this… dread I feel…? All her senses felt sharp, ready for danger. People looked at them from out windows and around corners, but not a single face was welcoming.

"It's just the culture here." Izuna whispered, meeting her eyes. "Water Country is pretty closed-off to outsiders, and they can see from our headbands we're from Konoha. That's even more reason not
to trust us." Yurine nodded quietly. He was being so calm, walking without even the slightest hint of intimidation.

That was no surprise, considering how he'd handled the flight over, nonplussed about that horrible bird. Yurine personally found it one of the most terrifying moments of her life, and she was less than enthusiastic about ever getting on the back of any flying animal ever again.

Izuna didn't need to know she was terrified of his Summon, though. She wanted to make a good impression on him. He was the first Leaf shinobi she'd been on a mission with. Couldn't have him reporting to the Hokage that she wasn't strong enough for the field. Of course if she was deemed incompetent on this mission there was truly no hope for Kurenō, who was far less serious in general.

She watched her brother make eyes at a girl with a pink scarf holding back most of her hair. The girl was grinning, oblivious to her brother's flirtations as she held the fish out to them. "Fresh trout!" she chirped.

The way Kurenō's face fell in disappointment was almost worth it. "Not today," Yurine declined, pinching at his arm and moving him along. Izuna hadn't stopped or slowed down once. He was making his way through the market with a purpose, stepping around the children who were underfoot and brushing aside merchants with a disinterested shake of his head.

Handsome, fearless and focused… Yurine had to be careful not to swoon, because loud-mouth Kurenō would most definitely make an issue out of it.

"That's the inn up ahead," Her brother craned his neck to a well-kept building just past the market that stood out in a way none of the others could. He broke into a light sprint to catch up with Izuna, and she followed wordlessly. An uncomfortable prickle down the back of her neck almost broke her stride.

Feeling watched, Yurine turned her head sharply to the left just in time to see a shadow disappear behind slats of wood nailed in front of an alleyway. The blonde skidded to a halt, thoroughly unnerved. There wasn't as much as a stray cat slinking between the boards.

Sakura shut the door, finding Madara sitting at the desk with his face turned toward the sun. A softer expression did him a world of good, and for just that space of time, she could feel her heart crumple up like a wad of paper, then pull taut once again. What was she going to do? Madara was…wasn't even Madara anymore. In any other instance that would have been cause for joyful celebration, but now, in the middle of a mission, was the worst time for him to forget everything.

Aware of her eyes on him, the Uchiha began speaking, "You said you'd explain, since I barely know who you are."

This was the moment she'd been dreading, and Sakura realized that she'd been secretly hoping somewhere between the trip down the mountain and their arrival to the inn, his memory would be miraculously restored.

Inhaling, she wished for strength, stepping closer to him. "I'm Sakura Haruno. And your name is Madara Uchiha,"

He was shaking his head almost before she'd formed the last syllable. "No," he said firmly. "Madara? I don't like it."

Sakura leaned back against the cot, now able to admire how much better it felt than the floor.
"Well, a name's a name." She had to bite back a short laugh.

The Uchiha glared at his clothes, pulled at his own hair, ran a hand down one side of his face. Whatever self-inspection he'd completed must have come away inconclusive, because he crossed his arms tightly. "I don't **look** like a Madara."

That made Sakura scoff outright. If he wasn't a 'Madara', he also wasn't a 'Toshi', a 'Hanzo' or a 'Shin'.

"Actually, I'd say you do. More than you think."

Madara got silent, wordlessly seething. The way he was leering at her right now, it was as if he held her personally responsible for his name. "How sure are you—that it's my name?"

Tired of the conversation, Sakura shut her eyes in aggravation. "Very," she said flatly. "Let's move on. That's really not that important. Now, as I was saying, you're from the Uchiha clan. It's a very powerful family of shinobi."

That drew his attention, and his irate face melted in childlike wonder. "I'm a… a ninja?"

Sakura wanted to mock him in some way, but the way his eyes shined…she just couldn't. "One of the strongest…"

His pleased smirk made her wish she hadn't said anything. Nevertheless, she soldiered on, "We both live in Fire Country…that's… across the sea from where we are now, in Water Country. We're here on different missions," Why was her heart starting to race? Why was it growing harder to look him in the eyes?

"Go on," he urged, all ears.

"You… got hurt protecting me. That's why everything is hard to remember."

"Oh." His face was unreadable as his eyes flickered over her. "So it's all your fault then."

Sakura shot up. "That's not what I'm saying!"

"Well that's what it sounds like…” he grumbled, sticking out his tongue.

The kunoichi blanched, unable to believe this was the same man she had been arguing with only yesterday. Granted, they were still arguing… but now she might as well have been speaking to a five-year old. Had he finished the negotiations? There was no way he could continue on in such a state…

"Hello? Anybody up here?" A voice sang out through the door. Sakure knew it was Mina, the innkeeper's lively daughter. Dragging herself over, she opened the door a crack confused.

"What's wrong, Mina?" Some of her pale hair had escaped the trappings of the intricate hairstyle she had, and her elegant kimono was crooked. More than anything she looked like she'd been running wild outside.

"Nothing sweets and tea can't fix." The girl laughed. "But I didn't come up for that. You have visitors waiting~!"

Sakura was instantly suspicious. "Visitors?"

"Three!" The excitable teenager continued. "They're talking to kaa-san, but they asked for you by
Satisfied that she had weapons safely hidden up both sleeves, Sakura steeled her nerves, clenching the door hard enough to splinter. "Stay right there." She told Madara. "I'll be back."

The Uchiha was busying himself over a piece of parchment, doing something with a quill. He didn't look up.

Fine, whatever... as long as he stayed put.

Sakura slipped into the hall with Mina, observing the girl from head to toe and seeing she really was messy. From what little interaction she'd had with the strict hostess of the inn, she didn't see how her daughter was allowed to do as she pleased, while her son was chastised for even thinking about slouching. It didn't really seem fair...

"So," Mina took the lead, both in the conversation and the hallway. Sakura had to admit, the girl's graceful movements even in the heavy kimono proved she retained at least some of whatever formal training she'd been given. "I like to know about our guests. Kaa-san says nosiness isn't a good trait for a hostess to have, but, the interesting lives people tell me about keep me sane."

"I came here to help with the bl---with the sickness that was going around." Sakura tucked a thick piece of hair behind her ear, "There's nothing that interesting to the story," she lied, smoothly.

"Hm," Mina rubbed at her chin, descending the steps. "Is that really all there is? ...What about the man who came with you? What can you tell me about him? Is everyone from your village so strong and handsome-looking?" Sakura blushed, opening her mouth to object, but Mina wasn't done. "They must be. Because there's another handsome man here just like him."

That threw the pinkette for a loop, but as she followed the hostess-in-training down the steps and to the tavern area, it all made sense. Emotion hummed through her blood at the sight of Izuna, Yurine and Kureno huddled around a small table and eating roasted apples and warm bread.

By the looks of it, Kureno was tucking in more enthusiastically than the other two, who watched on with expressions lingering between disgust and awe. Sakura's mouth opened and closed, unable to get out exactly what she was feeling.

Izuna spotted them first, rising from his seat and staring with reverent eyes, like he was seeing her for the first time. Was she that different now? She hadn't thought so.

The chatter between Yurine and Kureno ceased, both of them offering her sheepish grins. Overcome, Sakura pressed a hand to her lips so she wouldn't blurt out the first intelligible thought that came to mind. Izuna came closer and she met him halfway. He waited patiently, and when Sakura trusted herself, she removed her hand. "You...came..."

Something twitched inside, a fizzy feeling. She wasn't sure about the how or why he was standing in front of her, but just then she really didn't care.

Izuna raised a hand, his knuckles ghosting over her warm cheek. "We did." Then he got a lot at her clothing. "You're a miko now?"

"Oh, this?" For an inexplicable reason, she felt slightly shy. "My clothes... were soaking wet, and this was all I had, so..."

Izuna's eyes brightened with amusement. "It suits you."
Sakura let her shoulders relax. "I thought…" What had she thought? So many things. It settled over her brain like a fresh blanket, how hopeless she had been feeling between Mizuchi’s warning and Madara’s memory loss and the unshakeable feeling that the island was going to be plunged into darkness with them still on it.

But the blissful minute his hand touched her face, she felt grounded, and none of it really mattered as much as it had an hour ago.

Later, when she wasn't half-hysterical with elation, Sakura would wonder who moved first. The end result would have been the same, though.

Sakura sank into the strength of his arms, surprised but not unappreciative of the hug. It felt like he was taking some of the weight away; she wasn't doing it alone anymore. Before they pulled apart, she'd wrapped her arms around his neck, returning the embrace.

"None for me?" Kureno whined. It was followed by Yurine stomping his foot, drawing a pitiful yelp from him.

"Madara's message made me fear the worst for the both of you." Izuna whispered.

"Message…? I don't know anything about him sending a—" Loathe as she was to admit it, regardless of when he had sent it, the result was in their favor. Now more than ever.

"Where is Madara?"

"U-Upstairs, resting…” Izuna's eyes brightened, and he maneuvered around her. Sakura caught his shirt sleeve, biting at her lip. "But he's…not the same right now. He got hurt."

Yurine and Kureno stood from the table, food abandoned, while Izuna took a stunned step back.

"H-How severely?"

Sakura clasped her hands together, unable to meet his eyes. "Physically, he's okay." She said cautiously. "Otherwise…well, you should see for yourself."

Any longer and he would have left the room to see for himself what all the fuss was about. But the pink-haired girl was back, and she'd brought company. There were a man and woman with blonde hair and tanned skin, both wearing matching red and glancing around the room without making eye contact.

The third person though, the dark-haired man who was vaguely, very vaguely familiar, had no such compunctions about walking right up to him. Stopping only a foot short and taking him in with wide, nearly desperate eyes. "Madara," he said, voice a hoarse whimper. That name again. So she hadn't been lying after all… "I know what you're going to say, but I had to come. When I read your message…” To his shock, he was tugged into a firm embrace.

As the stranger held him close, closer than he was comfortable with, everyone else turned away, their faces somber as if it was too emotional to witness. What was going on? Shrugging out of the hug, Madara studied the man carefully. His dark, almond-shaped eyes, pale skin, ruffled hair held back by a ponytail, the dark colors he wore…and that itching sense of familiarity he gave off. "Why are you…looking at me like that?" he asked slowly.

That seemed to make the other man perplexed. "Because you sent such a cryptic message!" he scoffed, "I didn't think you planned on coming home."
"Madara," Sakura Haruno made her way over to them, her eyes flickering nervously. "This is your brother, Izuna…"

Brother. He had a brother. That would explain the affection and concern from a "stranger" then. Though it was highly possible none of these people were actually strangers. He apparently knew the pink-haired woman and of course he'd know his own family…

Izuna, startled, frowned a little after the introduction. "Why wouldn't he know who I am?"

"That's what I…what I wanted to tell you. Madara lost his memory yesterday. We were ambushed at the temple."

"I rescued her and got hurt, so it's really all her fault." Madara added with a shrug.

He almost wished he'd kept quiet when he saw the pained expression on his brother's face. "It's all gone…? You don't remember…either of our lives together?"

Madara was starting to feel uncomfortable.

"It could come back," Sakura was quick to say. "I mean, there's really no telling when, but it's a possibility."

That would be nice, he decided. Being the only one out of the loop was already growing old.

"You said you were ambushed?" The blonde man blinked. He turned to Izuna "I thought you said she was on an assignment involving, uh…" He scratched at his neck, red eyes searching for the word on the tip of his tongue. "Med-nin…stuff."

"That's a long story," Sakura huffed, pushing her bangs up and off her forehead with a palm, only for them to immediately fall back again. "I did manage to isolate the problem and cure the population," She hugged herself. "But the people here are sort of…fanatic about their deity, Iwanagahime. They think that I should have let people die, and since I wouldn't cooperate, they tried to make sure I couldn't…interfere anymore. Madara became collateral when he stepped in," Shuddering, she looked up at Izuna, almost in tears. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have tried to take them all on in a place where they have the advantage. I…this is on me!" Sakura scrubbed a sleeve across her face. "This time…it's all on me." Her eyes were faraway, like she wasn't speaking directly to them at all.

Something hardened over inside Izuna, Madara could sense it. "No. It's all on them. We're shinobi. We face danger on every mission, whether that's from unforeseen incidents or known dangers like enemies…"

"Tell us how to help," The blonde girl smiled. "We're here on standby, on the Hokage's orders."

Hokage… That was a funny word.

"We made it back into town without any problems," Sakura explained. "But I really don't feel like it's over."

"If they went as far as trying to kill you both, you're probably right." Izuna agreed.

"My plan was originally to move on to the other islands, see if anyone else needed help, you know? But now…"

Madara began to tune them out; he couldn't help it. It wasn't that what they were saying was too
hard to follow—and it did, after all, concern him directly—but there was something else…a feeling he got.

Edging to the door, he listened for movement on the other side. It was light, just some soft breathing and a soft scrape on the wood, but it was there. Instinctively, he pulled it open, seizing the person lurking and dragging them into the room, ignoring their yelp of protest.

The room descended into chaos almost simultaneously. Suddenly everyone but him had a weapon drawn, pointing it at the spying intruder. Aside from some weak squirming, she didn't protest much, but Madara still kept hold of her wrist. Like the pinkette, she was dressed in miko garb, small in stature. Her pale red hair was cropped short and her eyes were milky and unfocused. "Who's this?" he asked, figuring maybe someone else would be more aware than he was.

"One of the followers from the temple...they found us." Sakura grumbled, darkly.

"W-Wait," The redhead gasped. "I'm only here to help…"

In a sudden burst of strength she managed to twist away from Madara, nearly stumbling and losing her footing altogether. Backing away from them all, the miko tried to make herself smaller.

"You're part of a cult that tried to kill us—so maybe you'll understand why I find that hard to believe." Sakura snapped.

"And you were spying," Izuna added. "If you were hoping to finish what you started, you shouldn't have come alone."

"It's nothing like that!" she cried, exasperated. "I...yes, I was outside, but only until I could find a way to get you to believe me. You're all in danger. I'm sure you know that!"

"Danger from some crazy fanatics," The blonde-haired male mocked, tanto still in hand. "You know, the ones you're affiliated with,"

"...My affiliation is...complicated." She mumbled, fidgeting. "My name is Takara. It's true I'm a miko who follows the way of Iwanagahime, but that's exactly why I came. I...I saw the future."

The silence that followed was so dense, it could have swallowed a clap of thunder.

The blonde man let out a ridiculously loud bark of laughter. "Now you're just stalling so we won't kill you."

"Unlikely as it may seem...it's the truth." Takara bowed her head, "I...I've had this ability since birth. I can't control it. But lately, I've seen visions of a pink-haired warrior, and of a clash that could doom us all."

"How can you see anything?" Madara found himself blurting out. Four pairs of eyes glared in his direction. "I wasn't the only one wondering."

Takara began to pace lightly. "That's hard to explain...in my dreams I have sight, everything is clear, and when I wake up, I paint what the gods have shown me."

Sakura made a choked noise, like someone had taken hold of her windpipe and squeezed. "You...it was you!" she exclaimed. "The painting I found in the temple!"

"Yes," Takara confirmed, restlessly walking a circle. It was a wonder she didn't trip... "I've had the visions for weeks now...then you came to the temple. The others are in hiding, waiting for the
prophecy to come to pass…I volunteered myself to come and spy on you, so I could warn you. There isn't much time."

"Time before what?" The blonde kunoichi asked.

Takara stopped in her tracks, and despite her unseeing gaze, it almost felt like she could peer through all of them. "Before the dead rise."

Chapter End Notes

Don’t forget to drop some comments at the end if you liked this. I read them all and they're appreciated.
Chapter Summary

The final chapter for the arc, the epic conclusion that will save or sink the islands of Water Country!

The chickens saw him coming and eagerly started clambering closer, making him smile a little. At least they appreciated him, despite it being for a simple reason like bringing them food. It made him feel guilty when he had to slaughter the hens who stopped laying.

"Muyo! Kaa-san wants you to...oh, you're already doing it," Mina came bouncing up behind him, her pale hair fluttering. She rocked on her heels and watched him scatter the feed before speaking. "You're so on top of everything, little brother."

"Stop," he mumbled. "Y-You know better than anybody I'm always angering mother because I don't remember half of what I should, and I never do things fast enough. Should you really be outside in your hostess attire?" Sometimes, most times, he felt he cared more about his sister's duties as future hostess of the inn than she ever could. But what else could he really do? His mother had proclaimed him useless, and his father never really bothered to tell him otherwise. In fact, he seemed to defer to his wife in most things. "If you get the ends muddy..."

"Then I get the ends muddy," Mina shrugged it off with ease. "What'll she do..? Scold me and send me to my room? Not when she needs all the help she can muster." Oh, how he envied his spirited sister. She was friendly, good at her chores, and best of all...their mother liked her, even when she was disobedient. But he'd never hate her for that, or for anything. Mina was the only one who even attempted to understand him. "Hey," she went on, "Did you know? We've got more visitors wearing those shinobi headbands!"

Her words ended in a squeal, the news bursting out of her. Knowing that she expected him to show interest, Muyo smiled quietly. "What are they like?"

"So much different than everyone else around here," she answered without hesitation. "You know the handsome shinobi...Lord Uchiha? Well, there's another man that looks so much like him, I think they must be related! The other two that came are a man a woman. They're young, but still older than us. I think they're related too. They look like a matching set." She snorted at her own joke, rambling unstoppably, "Oh, I'd really like to visit the mainland one day, wouldn't you?"

Muyo gave the last of the feed to the hens and their one rooster, watching them peck it up. His life was so pitiful, he envied the simplicity of these animals, lowly birds who were oblivious right up until the end. "Yes," It was the honest answer. His dreams would never come to fruition, more than likely. As bland of an existence as he lived in Water Country, it was all he knew. And even if she didn't really need him, Muyo wanted to stay and help his sister.

"You could, you know," she hummed calmly.

Startled, he nearly dropped the empty feed sack. Mina's eyes were full of the kind of instant understanding only a sibling could have, and Muyo had to remind himself she was much more observant than she seemed. "I could what?"
"Leave Water Country one day. Explore the mainland. Muyo, kaa-san can't keep you here forever," She hopped up deftly onto the wooden post of the little chicken pen. "You think your whole life has to be like them?" He followed her gesture toward the ambling chickens. He'd always felt he wasn't only similar to them because of the direction his life went, but his cowardly nature.

The heavy yoke he'd never been able to throw off hitching him to the crushing weight of his doubts, his mother's scorn, and every negative trait he saw and picked at in the mirror…

Muyo worried the sack still clutched in his hands, not meeting her eyes. "I just think I know my place here, and that if I don't forget it, I can't really be disappointed. Maybe I'll find a new life out there, but that doesn't mean it'll be a better one." Because, truth be told, he'd spent a lot of sleepless nights dreaming of what would happen if he ran away.

The fear that he'd be leaving his stability, as disappointing as the life that came with it may have been, for something unknown and dangerous and sad, always made him turn over, blow out his candle, and force himself to sleep, his unpacked rucksack hidden under his futon.

Mina choked down an incredulous laugh, "You're only fourteen!" If she'd been closer, he knew she would've given him a hardy slap to the back. She had their father's strength, to their mother's dismay. "Your place is enjoying the rest of your childhood, then gearing up for the big adventure the rest of your life is gonna be—because we'll make sure of it." She slipped down, coming to touch his hand. He lifted his head to smile at her initially, but it was the sky that drew his attention.

"Mina," he whispered, his breath stolen away by the sight of the once blue, autumn sky churning restlessly, blackening steadily with each second.

Her head snapped up, mouth agape in the same way his must've been. It started like an obtrusively deep gray bordering that didn't quite fit the sunny spot it was framing. They watched together as the once beautiful heavens disappeared, shrinking down to a pinprick, only the smallest sliver of blue still visible.

"This is unreal," His sister stated, just before the last wavering bit of color got swallowed up too. The air was so dense now, the sky overhead pitch. It wasn't only the loss of sunlight that shook through his bones, but the very real feeling of impending destruction seizing the air from his lungs. It was everywhere. His pulse jumped and his skin clammed up. Mina felt it too, her pupils exploding until it encompassed nearly the whole iris. Death was watching, right on their heels, waiting…

Muyo remembered hearing about an eclipse happening on the islands once, years ago before he or his sister had been born. A bad omen, their father had said. That season famine and a harsh winter ravaged Water Country.

He'd never seen an omen physically manifest itself, as much as everyone on Sekai and beyond believed they were beholden to the whims of the gods. But he was sure if what he was seeing could be described as anything, it was the wrath of some vicious deity, being brought to bear.

Heart galloping, his sister reached for him, their holds on each other threatening to hurt them both. It was a tense minute of waiting to see what would happen next, if something would come cutting through the darkness, but their mother's sharp wails rung through their heads. Muyo could have wept; nothing had ever sounded so glorious…because it let him know he was still alive.

His arm nearly wrenched from its socket before he knew he was being made to walk, nearly dragged, back down the little path and away from the chickens, back to the inn. They burst into the back hall, where no guests were allowed and where the family lived.
A warning that they should both remove their shoes so they wouldn't upset their mother stuck like wet sand in his throat. Mina wouldn't have listened even if he'd managed to get it out, anyway.

She was on a mission, weaving the three bends that brought them back to the front of the inn, where the tavern was separated by an ornate partition from the lobby that greeted guests, and where they were just in time to see their mother drop to her knees, arms held wide for their bemused younger sister.

The shriek had drawn not only their father—who stopped short behind his wife and stared blankly — but the shinobi guests from upstairs, and a red-haired woman in miko robes he had never seen. Maybe she'd come in while he'd been outside. At any rate, no one was paying her any attention.

"Fuyuko," His kaa-san kept crying, grabbing his sister's little body and holding her tight. "My Fuyuko,"

Muyo could just barely make out the top of her black head. She was almost hidden in the tight embrace of their kaa-san. Everything about her was so familiar, it hurt. Her rosy cheeks, long black hair, blue eyes, the deep purple nemaki she'd fallen asleep in. Fuyuko was a winter child, named for the season of her birth. The same one that had taken her from them a year ago.

Muyo clearly remembered the tears, holding her cold little hand, and the burial that was too quick and unsatisfying to bring closure. A priest of Iwanagahime had come hobbling down from the mountains, said some words over her as she was lowered into the ground, and declared her a child of the goddess.

"Maka," His father grunted. "What's the meaning of this?" Beneath his full beard and the hard lines of his face, there was disbelief…and fear. In all his life, he'd never seen that before. His father was a giant of a man, well over six feet and able to split logs with his bare hands—strong as, no, stronger than an ox. In every way it was possible for a human being to be, he was immovable. That extended to his emotions, which were sparse.

"Oh," Their mother, still refusing to let go of Fuyu, smiled brightly. It was abundantly clear by the sheen in her eyes that she was euphoric, holding her youngest child again. She knew—she knew it was unnatural. But a mother's love knew no bounds, and Muyo fully suspected she didn't care.

"Hachirou, can't you see our daughter is back with us?" And she peppered kisses to the crown of Fuyu's head, ceaseless tears still dripping from her face.

"Our daughter is dead." His father said in his rough baritone, swallowing thickly. "And so dead things should stay." Muyo and Mina glanced in unison to the axe gripped tight in their father's right hand. He'd just come running from chopping lumber.

"Things?" Kaa-san screeched, enraged.

"Dead?" asked almost everyone else. There was enough shock and horror to go around, Muyo watching it jump like a tick from one face to the next.

Only the redheaded miko's expression remained unchanged. "So it's already too late," she said, wearily.

"Kaa-chan?" Fuyuko wriggled free, and Muyo wondered when she'd ever been that strong. The cornflower color of her eyes was still so vibrant and innocent, making the memory of watching them close for the final time seem like a faraway, horrid dream. "I'm…I'm really hungry," Their mother sprang into action, scooping her up and whisking her off to the kitchens, and their father followed with a displeased frown.
Mina toppled over, breathing erratically, and he sank to his knees with her. All he could do for his sister was hold her together, knowing the omen had just gotten worse.

After everything that had happened since arriving to Water Country, one strange revelation after the next, Sakura fully expected her ability to feel true shock would have long since left. But it hadn't. Downstairs, a mother was fussing over her dead little girl, who was once again alive.

Everyone was agitated, Yurine remaining close to the family, fully armed and ready to act. The rest of them huddled upstairs, in the room she'd been sharing with Madara once again. He took in the dour expressions with passing interest, but the gravity of the situation hadn't really sank into him. Not that she'd expect it to with the way he was.

"What else do you know?" Izuna snapped, glaring at Takara.

The miko was sitting on the edge of the cot, her body language suggesting she was doing everything in her power to shrink into herself. Despite the tremor running through her clasped hands, she spoke with quiet conviction. "I know that little girl must be destroyed. And that if she's risen, so have others."

That settled as well as anyone could expect. "Then how?" Kureno demanded, no longer any hint of his usual playfulness remaining. "If death doesn't stop a dead thing, what does?"

Takara picked at her fingernails, lips twitching.

"Speak, if you've got something that'll help!" The Yuhi threw up his hands.

"I saw what I believe is the source once," she said lightly. "In my dreams I saw a field in a valley between the mountains."

"And it was covered with violacias." Sakura added. "Because after it rains, the dead rise!" The story Joben told them all those nights ago resurfaced, and she would have been proud she'd remembered if the terror left any room for it.

"You know the tale." Takara smiled a bit, "That makes things easier. Destroy the field, destroy the dead."

"That's all?" Madara sounded unimpressed, blowing his bangs out of his face. "Why is my hair so long?"

Sakura had asked herself the same thing on more than one occasion, but she'd never expect to hear it come from Madara's own mouth.

"You always preferred it that way," Izuna trailed. "And what do you mean, that's all? Isn't that enough?" He looked between her and Kureno. "We need to find that field."

"I'm willing to show you the way," Takara stood.

"If you knew it, why didn't you take us there from the beginning?" Izuna sighed. "Well, never mind. I'm not sure I trust you completely, but—"

Takara smirked, unoffended. "It's either this or watch the island sink into oblivion."

Sakura was starting to get annoyed with the miko's blasé attitude. If she truly wanted to help, she could do a better job of making herself seeming more open and trustworthy. "How far is this
field?"

The redhead craned her neck. "Far enough that we'll need to hurry,"

"What about your bird?" Kureno asked, immediately following the question with a full-body cringe.

"Bird?" Sakura and Madara asked in unison. Even in his amnesiac state, the mention of birds apparently held some appeal to Madara, as he leaned forward, engaged in the conversation for the first time.

"He means Shinta, the eagle Summon of the Uchiha clan." Izuna's shoulders slumped. "My name isn't on the contract. That's a rite of passage usually reserved for firstborns of the head family."

Their eyes all trailed to Madara, who didn't seem to be catching on. He stared up at them dumbly. "Madara," Sakura ground out, "That's you."

"I'm older than you?" he asked Izuna idly. "By how much?"

"Is that really even important right now?" the younger Uchiha grumbled.

Madara glared, not a hint of a joke in his eyes. "I want to know."

"Three years."

"Good." The Uchiha puffed out his chest in satisfaction. "But I don't remember how to call any bird." Then, filling the room with second-hand embarrassment, he attempted a half-hearted whistle that wouldn't have even called forth a crow. There was no point in telling him that whistling had nothing to do with Summoning. It was just another headache no one could afford.

Sakura was doing her best not to throttle Madara right in front of Izuna, but her fingers ached with the restraint it took to stop herself.

"We're wasting time, then." Kureno grunted, running both hands through his hair and tapping his heel. "We'd be better off just going it on foot."

"Agreed, but I'm not sure if I can keep up with you ninja." Takara added.

"Then get on my back," Sakura offered, almost throwing the young woman over her shoulder, but managing to wait for her to climb on properly. The willowy arms around her neck were stronger than she would've thought, a hint of hidden power in the grip. No sooner had Izuna and Kureno made sure they were properly armed than Yurine came tumbling in, soaked in blood.

Kureno rushed forward, touching the spot on her cheek and staring at the crimson that came away on his hand.

"It's not mine," she reassured, panting. "It's not..." Stopping with a shudder, she gave Sakura a desperate look. "Sakura, you need to come quickly. The innkeeper's wife...I was hoping you could save her."

Sakura remembered how the dour woman had been so different, overjoyed by the return of her supposedly deceased child. "Where is she?" Takara had already hopped down, backing away and crinkling her nose at the strong odor of iron.

Yurine glanced down at herself. "In the kitchens...but wait!" She grabbed for the other kunoichi
with two hands. "They're here, outside trying to get in."

Izuna touched her shoulder when she started to sway, "Who is?"

"More like Fuyuko." Yurine stared down at herself. "We barricaded the entrances and sent all the
guest to their rooms, but I don't know how long it'll last."

Sakura bolted, not waiting to see what Kureno or Izuna would decide to do. Sprinting made short
work of the expanse of hall, and the creaky stairs. Reaching the bottom of the steps, she nearly lost
her footing and skidded through the trail of blood dirting the otherwise squeaky clean hardwood
floors.

Following the spatters to their end, she burst into the kitchens, coming across signs of an obvious
struggle. Food was flung as high as the ceiling in dripping spatters, overturned pots littered the
floor and the large table where meals were carefully prepared had been pushed onto its side, one
leg broken.

Pinned to the wall by the axe in her gut was a crying Fuyuko, who reached fruitlessly for her
mother, babbling apologies. Her little feet were dangling off the ground, and for all the blood
running from the fatal wound, she appeared fine.

The large man, the girl's father, was sitting on a keg with his head dropped into his hands. He
looked up the minute she set foot into the kitchen. "You the medic?"

Sakura nodded wordlessly, and he threw a thick arm to the side, motioning to his children gathered
close to their mother and applying pressure with towels. Sakura didn't waste time, lowering to the
floor and prying the woman's hands from her bleeding abdomen. For someone with the haze of
death starting to creep over them, the arms she'd banded around herself were like steel.

"What happened?" She asked as she worked, glancing at the children on either side of her for an
answer.

"Fuyu was with kaa-san; we were outside the kitchen and we...we heard the noise..." Muyo shook
his head, unable to finish.

"My wife was attacked when her back was turned," Their father sighed. "I managed to get that," he
shrugged a shoulder in the child's direction. "Pinned to the wall before she caused more damage.
Whatever it is now, I know my daughter's still gone."

"Papa!" Fuyuko trilled. "Papa, it's me!"

"Then why didn't you stay dead?" Hachirou started to shed silent tears, something Sakura surmised
didn't happen often. "We already buried you once. You were at peace, and we were moving on."

The child started to thrash, groaning, "I'm so, so hungry...!" she cried.

That's what she said right before she attacked." Hachirou explained, his knee bouncing. "My wife
had made her a feast and I watched her eat every scrap, but she kept complaining that it wasn't
enough."

Fuyuko had quieted, and when Sakura checked to make sure she was still secured, she was treated
to the sickening view of the child sucking blood from her fingers, a ravenous look glowing in her
eyes.

The woman's breathing was starting to even out, her eyelids twitching. She'd almost finished
closing the injury now. Any longer and she would have been too far gone to save. Izuna was right. They had to find that field, or more people would die.

The innkeeper's wife started to open her eyes. Sakura thought she heard the husband call her Maka. Disoriented, she screamed, struggling weakly, but the pinkette had no trouble keeping her down. "You're alright," she soothed. To the woman's family, she said, "You're going to need to move her, and——"

With an angry grunt, Fuyuko jerked the axe from her gut, slumping to the floor. No one wasted any time scrambling to their feet and out of the way. Sakura picked up and carried Maka with Mina right behind her, leaving Muyo and Hachirou to start sealing up the kitchen with whatever they could find. Fuyuko's wailing echoed from within, the axe blade striking and sticking in the door.

"Fuyuko," Maka began crying from her arms. "Why?"

"Your daughter, and likely everyone brought back, are gripped by a deep bloodlust," Takara's stated. Kureno came down the stairs with Takara on his back, the others following. Madara was noticeably absent, but considering that now probably wasn't the time for his antics, she wouldn't be surprised if Izuna had locked him in the room.

Fuyuko kept screaming, beating the door from the inside. Takara climbed off of Kureno's back and spun her body in Sakura's general direction. "We should hurry, or this whole island and the rest of Water Country is damned for sure."

"Don't go out the front," Yurine warned, her hair loosening from its ponytail and sticky with sweat. She was still wearing her soiled clothing, unbothered, and Sakura remembered how both Yuhi siblings were used to the gruesomeness of daily life with the Kaguya. Even before that, she'd been a kunoichi, and right now it showed. "That's where they all started gathering."

Hachirou, towering over them all, looked solemnly around the room, eyes landing on his haggard wife, who Sakura had deposited gently in a nearby chair from the tavern. "Take the back way. Muyo and Mina can show you."

"Someone still has to stay here." Izuna muttered, "To keep the inn from being breached."

"We can," Kureno lifted his hand, the other resting on his sister's arm. "Right, Yurine?"

"You go and resolve this, Sakura," The blonde girl pulled her into a quick hug. "If anyone can, it's you."

Her heart sank. The enemies they were facing seemed indestructible—a little girl who had survived an axe blow to the stomach?—and almost certainly outnumbered them. So there was a chance she'd never see either of the Yuhi again, and they knew that too.

"Ready?" Izuna asked, already waiting with Muyo and Mina.

Sakura shook off her melancholy, unwilling to feel sorry for herself when everyone here was doing their best to keep it together. Nothing could be more traumatizing than the child a parent had once buried returning, only to nearly kill them.

And she wouldn't be the only one risking her life. "Takara, are you sure you know where to go?"

"We're in the endgame now." Takara shrugged. "The location is the easy part, what comes after is what's hardest."
"Is that a no, a yes, or a maybe?" Kureno growled.

"I'm sure enough," the miko said.

Rolling her eyes, Sakura once again helped Takara onto her back. Regardless of the fact that Takara wasn't their best option, at the moment she was the only one.

Driftwood rooftops didn't feel as sturdy underfoot as the tiled ones he was accustomed to. With every leap, Izuna was careful to apply just the right amount of chakra to absorb impact, not keen on the embarrassment of crashing through someone's house. He knew if he was watching his steps, Sakura had to have been being doubly cautious with the added weight of Takara at her back, though it didn't slow her jumps.

Izuna didn't trust the mysterious woman, and he doubted any of the others had unwavering faith either, but they knew they didn't have the liberty of being as wary as usual. What had happened at the inn was all the proof they needed that at the very least there was a bigger threat than Takara and whatever agenda she had.

He'd come because he was worried for Madara and for Sakura, that their lives would be in danger. And yet the situation was somehow even worse than the scenario he'd been thinking of…

"Do you really think Madara will be alright?" Sakura asked, keeping perfect pace.

It was a valid question, considering he'd asked himself the same. But in his state of mind, Madara could be more of a danger to himself on the battlefield than any great asset to them. "He'll have to be," he winced. "Kureno and Yurine aren't going anywhere either, so he's at least moderately guarded from...the undead. And himself."

All he got was a noncommittal hum. "Mm,"

"It's the west side of the mountains," Takara shifted. "So you'll want to travel a little diagonal to reach it." They moved accordingly across the houses, and their strange guide fell silent again.

Izuna glanced down at the people moving through the darkness, screams of terror or aggression echoing up to meet their ears. Predictably, chaos had consumed the island, the dead wearing the same faces they had in life, even acting the same right up until the moment they moved to slaughter.

He'd never considered himself much of a believer in the gods, but he thought they had to be particularly cruel to unleash this kind of punishment on so many unsuspecting people.

It raised a question he'd been wondering since Takara had conveniently shown up, and he couldn't help but give voice to it now. "If this is the will of your goddess, why are you helping us?"

Takara laughed, mirthless. "Because I've had a connection to the heavens since birth. No matter what the others believe...this doesn't feel like the will of the Iwanagahime I know."

"Then who's the real enemy?" Sakura demanded, jolting Takara when she made a particularly hard jump. "You'd better not be holding out on us!"

"I only know what the gods allow me to," the miko claimed. "I wouldn't have sight at all, but they allow me to see through my visions. In them, I saw you, staring down a powerful force. What happens next is something I couldn't tell you."
Izuna thought it over. Honestly, it all felt insane, but it was no more unbelievably than anything else he'd seen or heard in the last few hours. As long as he was in Water Country, Izuna supposed he had to suspend everything he thought he knew about the word believable. "How much further, Takara?"

"Well," She turned her unseeing eyes to him. "There's a stream that runs through the mountains and from there reaching the valley is pretty simple."

"Wait! Down there!" Sakura yelled, already leaping into the darkness.

Unable to stop in time, Izuna nearly twisted his ankle as he leapt to the next roof they should have both landed on together. Staring in disbelief, he watched her run toward the scene of some fierce battle, a charging group held at bay by a tall luminous wall in a hexagonal formation. Cold mist rose up from the sheets, Izuna realizing they were made of ice. 'Ice walls?'

Perplexed and unwilling to let Sakura charge in alone, he reluctantly joined her on the ground. Men and women in light blue yukata stood shoulder to shoulder, their backs all bearing the same elaborate snowflake symbol. A crush of charging, crazed undead rushed them, holding knives and swords while cowering civilians huddled behind the shinobi clan. As one, they wove hand signs, filling the streets with a united cry of, "Makyō Hyōshō!"

Izuna felt the stagnant air pulse, three rows of approximately twelve mirrors each circling around each other in a spiral, trapping the dead inside. Additional mirrors formed to float above the ground, three rows of eight angling downward in concave formation, a final giant mirror a roof stretching across the top and sealing a massive, icy dome.

It had to be a kekkei genkai, because despite the sound of fists and swords beating the ice, they didn't so much as crack. A pause hitched the breath of the civilians and shinobi alike, and then a triumphant round of cheers rose with the chill mist, punctuating the air with relief.

Members of the clan began attending to the villagers, leading some away, presumably to safety.

No longer distracted by the impressive bloodline limit he had never seen before, Izuna was easily able to pick out Sakura, Takara still clinging to her as she talked to a man that was obviously from this ninja clan of ice-users.

"...all of them buried." He was saying somberly.

"Right," Sakura nodded, voice trailing off. "And Erika always facilitated that exchange."

The ice-user paused, his eyes widening visibly even in the dark. "Now that you mention it...yes. She told us early on she'd managed to establish contact with the acolytes. No one comes or goes on the island without their approval...When the sickness was at its worst, we were losing ten patients a day on average. Acolytes seemed to show up and gather bodies immediately, and they always insisted on dealing with Erika only. Which is peculiar, given her status as a traveling healer and how private the order generally is."

Sensing a lull in the conversation as Sakura took in the information and the man glanced toward the ice dome, Izuna broke in. "We need to be going. But you'll keep tending to...whatever that is?" He motioned to the as of yet unbroken prison, the chatter of dozens of angry voices coming from inside. While they appeared nearly driven to madness with bloodlust, they were clearly still capable of human intelligence, which made them all the more horrifying than if they'd been grotesque and mindless.
Sizing him up once, the other shinobi slowly nodded. "Our Makyō Hyōshō can stand up to it fine. Or...that's what I’d like to believe." He sighed, glancing over at the structure. "But it's only as strong as our chakra reserves. As long as we alternate, we should be safe from chakra depletion for a while, but not forever."

"Take these," Sakura reached for a small pouch at her waist. It was too dark to see whatever small thing she pressed into his tentatively stretched hand. "They're chakra pills I was keeping. I think you'll need them more right now."

Izuna watched discerningly as the older shinobi's face lit up and he squeezed gratefully at her hand. "Thank you, Sakura. You've been more help here than you realize."

Her smile was faint and it dropped quickly as he heard her whisper. "Maybe you shouldn't thank me just yet," Sakura took to the rooftops once more, Izuna bidding the shinobi a brief nod and followed after her.

There was something melancholy hanging over her now, and he was determined to get to the bottom of it. In the time since they'd been acquainted, he had noticed a pattern she had of overextending herself, taking blame for perceived shortcomings when there was truly no need.

"I should have known," she said aloud.

"You couldn't have." Takara comforted, "I hear the heavens in my dreams each night and I still only had a suspicion."

Izuna sped up so their paces matched. "Of what?" he interjected, thoroughly aware how uninformed he was on the entirety of the situation.

"Erika's involved in all this..." Sakura said over the wind. "I know it's going to sound ridiculous," she hesitated, and Izuna worried he'd have to prompt her to keep speaking. "But there's no other way any of this makes sense."

The Uchiha knew for certain this person was their enemy. He trusted Sakura's assessment. But that was all the more reason he wanted to be in the know before they reached their destination. "And Erika would be?"

"A traveling medic that was here before me. She said she got here around the same time the blights started."

"Blight?" His long ago conversation with Madara hit like a smack to the face. "Black butterflies? ...That's what's doing all this?"

"Yes," It was the miko who answered. "I should tell you now...Erika spoke with the high priest shortly after arriving. She told us all she communicated directly with our Iwanagahime and knew her will. Whatever honeyed words she fed him privately must have worked, because, he was always seeking her counsel. The medic was correct that the acolytes would have only been dealing with her."

Izuna wasn't sure what that meant for them, or if he could even wrap his head around actual myths coming to life. Turning back had ceased to be an option the minute he'd made up his mind in the Hokage's office, though. "Soon she'll be dealing with us, and we'll put all this madness to rest." he announced, adrenaline running high now. His declaration made the intention clear—they would win or they would die fighting.

Without words, he knew Sakura shared his sentiment, feeling her resolve link with his. The village
rooftops gave way to the trees dotting the path up the mountain, the temple sitting ominously atop it, a guardian overseeing their final confrontation.

Once again they had all left him, stuck by himself without much in the way of explanation, staring at the walls. Madara may not have none as much about himself as he wanted to at present, but he knew he didn't like being ordered around. When Izuna, his younger brother, left with the others—telling him to stay put before locking the door and taking the key—he was outraged.

But outrage had given way to grumpy resignation when he'd pounded the door and it didn't open up. He'd even kicked it as hard as he could with the flat of his foot, earning himself a stubbed toe. They told him he was a ninja, but after that failure he really wasn't sure.

The people in the room next door sounded frantic, and for a while he had tried listening to their conversation, but it didn't make any sense. Punishment from Iwanagahime? Bored, he flopped across the futon on his stomach, pretending to swim the sheets like a fish traveling upstream. As hard as he tried, there was no clear memory in his head that gave credence to anything they'd told him. Taking their word was all he could do. Not that it sat well. It didn't.

Next door, someone was sobbing gently, whispering prayers. Ugh. Madara sat up, shifting away from the wall. He didn't like criers. That was another fact he knew instinctively.

Restlessly standing to pace, he found himself at the window, looking through the glass and hoping to make out anything that could tell him what was going on. The darkness that eclipsed what was once a peaceful blue sky gave no clues, making him more frustrated.

He pressed his cheek up against the cold pane, watching his breath fog it and lifting his finger. "Ma-da-ra," he mouthed as he steadily wrote out the characters. Unfortunately, seeing it written only made his nose crinkle in disdain.

The door rattling made him pull away, racing to the other side of the room and getting the sword Izuna had left for him. Of course, he was gone before Madara could complain he didn't know how to use it. But well, he reminded himself cheerfully, how hard could it be to stick the pointy end into someone? Any idiot could do that!

"Who's there?" he called, not really expecting a response. There was a heavy sigh on the other side and Madara charged forward, sword raised as the door swung open. Sakura Haruno dodged nimbly, ducking under his raised arms and sweeping his legs out from under him. He landed hard from his back, sword flying from his hands.

"What exactly did you think you were doing with that?" she hissed, eyes flashing as she stood over him.

"Oh," he scoffed, trying to hide his red cheeks and wounded pride. "It's you again. What're you doing back?"

She glared down at him, moving around to survey the room as he picked himself up off the floor. "Against my better judgement, checking on you." She shook her head at his writing on the window and the unkempt state of the futon. "But you seem fine."

Madara didn't know why, but her exasperated tone rubbed him the wrong way. If he had it his way, he'd be out there, doing whatever shinobi things the others were doing. But no one would let him.

"I am," he grunted, stalking over to the futon, plumping the pillow for no other reason than to have something to do. "So you can go. You're all busy stopping some big threat, right?"
In spite of his clear dismissal of her presence, she remained, her footsteps near silent but there nonetheless. The pink-haired kunoichi came and perched herself beside him on the futon, looking up into his face. "I trust everyone else has it under control."

Madara slowly sat. "How do you know that?" She parted her lips, but he interrupted, "Even if that's true, you should be out there helping. Aren't you a medic?"

He half-expected her to huff, declare that of course she was, and storm off. For some reason that just felt like what she'd do. Instead she leaned over and took a lock of his hair, rubbing it with her thumb. Unnerved, his dark eyes trailed down to focus on her perfectly groomed nails, short and pink. "You know, you're a strange one." She looked up at him from under her lashes, green eyes bright. "I like strange."

Madara wrenched her hand away, scowling. "You acted like you couldn't stand me before, so I doubt that." Persistent, she crawled toward him, sincere interest reflected back in her gaze.

"I'm sorry if I offended you then." Her chest touched his. But instead of feeling her heat, he only felt cold, a chill seeping right through his yukata. "Maybe I just needed more time to see you for who you were." Madara had no good argument, as he didn't know who he was, but it still all felt too surreal.

Some small, dulled prick of awareness made his muscles clench as she let her eyes drift shut, puckering her lips. The sense of discomfort flared up, two fingers coming up to poke the center of her forehead. She retracted, eyes blinking open. "Wha…"

"Why's this pink?" he asked, tracing the diamond at the center of her forehead. "Wasn't it purple before?"

Sakura Haruno looked taken aback. Her hand flew to cover the mark. "Well I…"

Eyes narrowing, he bore down on her with heat in his voice. "It was hard to tell until you were close enough, but your hair's darker now too. It was a lighter shade when you left. So you might as well come clean, whoever you are."

"Whoever I am?" she growled. "I can't believe you!" Madara watched "Sakura" become overtaken by a wide smile that morphed her face. Her eyes shifted, darkening like ink blotting over fresh paper. He jumped back, waiting. "I mean, you must pay more attention to her than I thought. Or maybe I just got too careless?"

The imposter's whole countenance had shifted to reveal some roiling darkness. Her skin might as well have started peeling, because it wouldn't have made the sight of madness twinkling in her too-round eyes any more frightening.

She rolled her shoulders, shrinking minutely at first, and then as drastically as a foot. Reaching up to rip the white ribbon away made the dark pink hair fall black and cropped to her shoulders. Madara reached for the sword, but she was quicker, slamming him into the wall with just a movement of her hand. The Uchiha groaned, tasting the blood from his bitten tongue. "I hope you feel special, because I don't go this far to kill just anyone. You two were supposed to die at the temple; it's why I sent you. But if you want something done right..." She shook her head.

Madara glared. "Don't remember. Being crushed by a rock tends to do a thorough job of jumbling your memories."

Erika's eyes glittered with interest. "Amnesia? How...unexpected." She went on, "I went to the
trouble of tracking you down. I was going to give you the Kiss of Death and be done with it," The tiny dark-haired intruder sighed, climbing up onto the cot until she was eye level with where he hung suspended. "I didn't count on you putting up much resistance if you thought I was on your side." A child's finger poked at his lips and he fought to turn his head away. "This is more fun, though."

Madara growled, his jaw feeling clenched tight and sewn shut by invisible thread. When he opened his mouth, it was with great effort. "Who're… you really?"

The child grabbed both sides of his face and pinched at his cheeks with unnatural strength. If she tugged, he was positive she'd come away with flesh. "Do you want the who or do you want the what?" There really wasn't much answer to that inquiry but to bare his teeth, not that it did much. She held his life in her hands and she knew that. "Who I am varies from time to time, century to century. But for right now, since it's the name you'll remember the easiest, you can call me Erika." Madara's eyes flew open, wide and livid. So this sadistic little child was Erika?

"Recognition!" She slapped both his cheeks hard between her palms, and he bit his tongue again. "You're Madara, I presume?" she smiled charmingly. "I don't see who else you could be. And your name's right over there on the window…" Mocking him, she let her eyes drift across the room, showing him she knew exactly how powerless he was. "I can't believe it's taken us this long to meet face to face." He squirmed away from her clammy touch, realization washing over her face. "I should let you speak; that's the polite thing to do."

The thread came loose, and the very first thing he wanted to do was bite her corpse-cold fingers as hard as possible. It wouldn't be productive though, so he settled for seething quietly until he knew exactly just what he wanted to say. "You're behind all of this." He said, perusing her. "It's hard to believe, but then you're not really a child."

Erika's brows rose, dark eyes thoughtful. "Oh? I admit I'm fond of this form so I use it whenever possible—whoever suspects the little girl? Well, a conversation should be an equal exchange, correct? So I have a question of my own for you, Madara Uchiha…" All the pressure holding him aloft was released and he slid down the wall, landing on the cot unceremoniously. "What do you know about Kaguya Otsutsuki?" Nothing. That name didn't mean one iota to him, and she must have seen that plainly. "Fair enough; it was before your time. Then again so am I."

Madara discreetly searched for the fallen katana, all the while keeping track of Erika's movements. She didn't appear too concerned about him possibly planning anything. "You seem confident no one is going to come and stop you," he commented.

"Oh, they won't." Erika beamed, her cheeks pink with glee. "They're too busy fighting for their lives downstairs. My armies have the inn surrounded, you know." She lazily lifted and spun a pointer finger. "I just wish I'd arrived sooner, when you were all here to crush at the same time." She drummed her fingers to her chin.

Ah! The sword had landed by the desk, near the window… "Army of the dead…" he muttered.

"Precisely," Erika nodded. He inched toward the window as if he were going to look outside at her handiwork. "Let me share a secret with you, Uchiha… Life is unfair even for an immortal. Not all deities have the adoration of loyal mortals, a coveted place in the heavens, or godly strength, and for those of us that don't…our best chance at survival is developing skills to make up for the attributes we lack. I've always had a…a knack I suppose…a nice streak of cunning and the ability to manipulate just about anyone."

When she faced him with wide open arms and a soft, blissful face, he fought the urge to stare back
with blatant disgust. "I've done so well with so little! I'll always be proud of myself for that. Even my latest project infecting these islands was something more spur of the moment, you see." There it was, young countenance rolling into a new, twisted expression. Now Erika's round little face was frigid and childish as she balled up her hands and stomped her foot, pouting, "I was just so bored with waiting and searching."

This time when he dove for the weapon, she didn't stop him. Madara wanted to believe he'd caught her off guard, pivoting on the spot and thrusting the katana straight through her chest cavity. She shrieked, stumbling backwards with a panicked sheen in her eyes. The Uchiha stood panting over her downed body, waiting for it to be over. She shook and wailed, at one point throwing a bloodied hand up to her forehead.

He couldn't remember seeing anyone die, but he knew if he was a shinobi he must've not only seen it, but been the direct cause. Maybe it was that fuzzy, out-of-reach sensation of knowing death intimately that made him wonder…

…Should her death be taking so long? Would it be so theatrical with such a clean, precise finishing blow?

Only some honed, dormant sense made him spring back in time to avoid the two-handed swing with that same sword. Erika had effortlessly plucked it from her wound, up on her feet and lunging at him with bubbly giggles that sounded so distorted coming from her mouth. "Shame, shame!" she chirped. "Did you think a simple attack like that could kill an agent of death, a shinigami?!"

Madara crouched, rolling away, narrowly avoiding the strike from above with only a few wisps of severed hair to show for it. Erika jerked the sword from the wood of the floor and feinted right, make a hard slash left at the last minute that caught him across the shoulder.

Expecting the pain to bring him to his knees, he was more than a little grateful when aside from a shudder, he quickly adjusted, putting it down to a high pain threshold. Madara attempted to put as much distance between them as possible, but really there was only so much space to begin with. Erika sighed so loudly it shook her whole body, her grip on the blade loosening. "I would have preferred more challenge than this." She leveled the bloody tip in his direction, "But I suppose the act is reward enough," she whispered. "No one else in the pantheon can boast that they slew Madara Uchiha~!"

"You know," he coughed, backing away until they stood adjacent. "You really do talk too much." The shinobi slammed his foot down as hard as possible, loose floor board rising up to smack Erika in the face. The katana flew high, hilt over blade, landing in his outstretched hand. Ignoring his frantic heart, Madara held the sword diagonal to the ground in a surer grip, a brief spark of knowledge making him more confident.

Erika however, clapped, not at all angry. "Oh, now there's that fight I'd hoped for! I really enjoy reaping souls like yours. It's why I was so upset about your brother, you know? The one that got away."

Madara may have barely remembered anything about him, but he knew that if nothing else, he cared deeply about his brother. Izuna… There was a stinging sensation behind his eyes, just enough to make him blink, and then everything was incredibly clear. "Stay away from him,"

The self-proclaimed shinigami made a face. "Are you threatening me? What would you do if I didn't agree?" She fingered at the hole in her clothing, "Look at all the trouble I've already gone to! All the pieces I've had to line up, just to knock them down! I have every right to—"
He felt it before he saw it—a tremor of power so far yet so fierce, his soul shook apart and then reassembled itself in an instant. Erika's speech came to an abrupt stop, the pupils of her eyes expanding. He watched her sway as if caught in some trance, even as her mouth fell open in awe. "He's...he's come," she yelped. "My master!" Just like that, the child monster patted endearingly at her cheeks, mentally psyching herself. Almost apologetic as her gaze fell on him, she winked, "Well, I never claimed to be all-knowing, did I? This isn't your time to die after all."

Madara didn't think anything could be stranger than what he'd just endured. But Erika's body jerked, collapsing into a swarm of black butterflies as if they'd all been caught inside a net of flesh and bone, smashing the window and funneling out into the darkness.

"Across here," Ignoring the freezing temperature, Sakura waded waist deep into the river at Takara's instruction. Luckily it was slow moving, and reaching the opposite bank only cost her the uncomfortable feeling of being in wet pants.

Already, they'd trekked so far into the forest of the mountainside, and still their guide spurned them on. At any other time, it might have been questionable—following the directions of a blind woman?—but the divine essence that allowed her to ascertain powerful energies had been buzzing beneath her skin. The more they traveled, the stronger it became, so overwhelming at one point she had to pause and regain her equilibrium. None of them felt overly talkative, and navigating through the dark, dense forest and sloping terrain was difficult enough without distractions, so most of the talking was left to Takara, calling out directions. In the breaks of silence, Sakura had time to fully take in everything, to observe her surroundings, to mentally fortify.

Except for the unnatural stillness, any other time the forest probably wouldn't be so bad, she mused. The trees weren't as thick and mighty as the woods surrounding Konoha, but they were tall nonetheless, and spaced apart with gnarled roots that threatened to snag their angles as they picked their way through.

Occasionally, her hand would brush on feathery ferns that stood up to near waist level, or her feet would nudge clods of mushrooms bulbs that seemed to faintly glow and then flicker out before she could decide if her eyes were playing tricks.

There were some points when she wondered if they were lost, foliage blending together unrecognizably. But Takara quietly assured that her visions had told her the way, and Sakura imagined a mental map stamped across the miko's brain, the three of them blips following some unseen path. Izuna was taking point, and whenever the presence up ahead shook her resolve, he would gently touch her arm, almost like he could sense exactly when she needed the encouragement.

When the trail sloped downward and plant life grew scarce, Sakura knew deep inside they were almost there. At one point her foot slipped on the loose soil of a steep embankment and despite how hard she tried to squint, the kunoichi couldn't see past her own toes.

"You can't mean..." Sakura swallowed, a wave of power bursting up and zipping through all of them at the same time. That didn't effect only her this time. Izuna grunted in pain, and Takara sagged.

Puffing, the miko picked up her head from her shoulder and confirmed it with a deep, shuddering breath. "Now we leap,"

Sakura bent her knees, teeth grit so hard she worried they'd crack. While she was fully accepting that what she was about to face was deadly, she couldn't help but hesitate over the choice to let
Izuna followed her. If he died, would it affect the timeline? "I don't know if—"

"I do," he cut her off, once again able to anticipate exactly what she was stoking herself to say. "We do this together."

She shook her head, knowing she was defeated before the argument had even begun. "You're really stubborn when you want to be aren't you."

"I prefer the word driven, and I actually think it's one of my better qualities."

'Thank you.' She jumped, falling vertical for mere seconds before she was sliding downward across the craggy mountain slope.

The sudden lurch that picked them up into the air and then dropped them to roll across the plush grass of a field dislodged Takara, a soft breeze blowing at her back. The velveteen touch of a petal pressed against her lips and the strong but undefinable fragrance that wrapped around her had Sakura lifting her head to a field of springy purple blooms that shot up everywhere for as far as the eye could see. Takara had plucked one and brought it to her nose with a delicate sniff. "Violacia."

"You need to get back. We can't fight and keep you safe at the same time, so lay low." Izuna commanded.

Out across the field of swaying flowers, a tall figure stood with back facing them in crimson garments edged with gold that trailed the ground. The agitation stirring inside Sakura clawed around under her skin, a foreign pull that had her up and charging, heedless of Izuna calling her.

It wasn't that she didn't understand how dangerous it was to rush an unknown enemy, but more that the beast inside that had called for Madara's blood reared its head again. It felt his power and decided upon a new challenge, eager for combat.

As she ran closer, the entity grew larger, slowly turning to reveal four crossed arms and blue skin, a knotted gold headdress with a small skull encrusted in its center like a jewel sitting in his long, wavy head of hair. He easily stood taller than any human she'd ever seen, dwarfing even the giant innkeeper of Hagakure. But his smooth face was very human, not even particularly old-looking, and save for the two tiny tusk-like protrusions curling up past his top lip and the blazing ruby eyes that looked and leapt unnaturally like entrapped flames, nothing was really amiss.

He was so otherworldly, so daunting, and so very much not Iwanagahime. The heavy force that slammed into her and sent her tumbling to the side rattled her mind too much to think about it. Erika pinned her down, snarling manically. She was wearing the same yellow yukata from the clinic, a bloody hole in the fabric right where her heart would be. "Sakura," she giggled, spittle flying into the kunoichi's eyes. "I told you that outsiders need to be very careful about disturbing the order."

Feeling the bloodlust inside shift to a new target, Sakura jerked so she could roll on top to pin Erika belly down. "Erika...or should I say Iwanagahime?"

In spite of their positions, the child-like entity lifted her face from the dirt and laughed. "Her?! That sulking wench hasn't left her chamber in the heavens in almost a millennia! You can continue to call me what I've always been to you: Erika." Shifting, she slid away, materializing behind Sakura in the next blink and seizing her tightly by the hair. "Proud shinigami of Lord Yama." Cold lips ghosted across her lobe, "And Sakura, I have to confess that while I enjoyed working alongside you, I can't let you keep getting in the way of my real job. You've been ruining my quota lately."
She felt the heat before she saw it, Izuna blowing out a large fireball that Erika was forced to dive away from. Sakura rolled just in time, too. Some of the flames still managed to land in the shinigami's hair, and she patted at them with a screech, inconvenienced more than actually harmed. "You!" she yelled, "Your soul's going to be my personal reward when this is all over, and I'll shred it to bits and piece it together as many times as I want—for eternity!"

With the hand not cradling the back of her head, she waved droves of blights at them, Sakura appearing in front of the Uchiha as a shield, letting them sink deep into her skin.

The intensity of simultaneously absorbing so many stoked whatever had already been prowling just below the surface, and she felt every bone in her body shifting unnaturally.

"Sakura?" Izuna grabbed her arm to pull her behind him, but she pushed him away, falling to her knees in the patch of charred earth. She didn't want him coming any closer, not when Erika's attack had just fed whatever was inside.

"You've taken in quite a few of those, haven't you?" A new voice remarked, blue sandaled feet coming into view of her swimming vision. "Many more than a human should." Sakura felt herself picked up by the front of her haori, dangling between only the thumb and forefinger of the large monster.

"She's the one, my lord!" Erika's shrill voice cried down near his feet. "Mizuchi's new plaything."

"Ah yes," he rumbled. "I sense it now. Underneath all the taint, you have traces of Mizuchi's essence."

"Put her down," Izuna demanded, slashing at her captor but meeting steel with Erika instead. The sleek blade she wielded was almost identical to his save for the jet black color.

"Your whole cursed lineage fascinates me," she spat, pushing against him. Standing his ground, Izuna drew away with a scrape of metal, unleashing a furious barrage of strikes with grace and well-timed precision that would have likely downed any other foe.

Erika danced under every one, on the defensive and still managing to make it look as though she were winning somehow. "Even if you land a strike, it won't do a thing. An ordinary weapon isn't going to kill a being born from death."

"Everything born can die," he returned, lashing out with a kick to her unguarded side. She squealed, flying sideways but flipping midair to land safely as Izuna landed behind her, already aiming for her neck.

Erika dropped into a crab stance that evolved into a backflip, opening her mouth to blow out a stream of pollen-like mist. Guarding his mouth and nose, the Uchiha leapt back several paces for distance, switching his sword to one hand and taking several shuriken from his weapon pouch in a fluid motion too fast for the naked eye.

Although they were all deflected, Izuna was able to rip a gash into Erika's side, and it bled freely as she looked down in surprise.

Sakura watched them clash, marveling at Izuna's swordsmanship as much as Erika's speed. The god seemed similarly impressed. "He is good for a mortal. One of the better swordsman I've seen in a century." He turned those flaming red eyes to her and she saw they actually glowed like coals, hitching the breath in her throat. "I am Lord Yama, God of the Dead. You've met my subordinate…" Yama waved one of his many arms toward the clash. "Erika, as she calls herself
these days." Oddly polite for a being of utter destruction, but Sakura wasn't about to let her guard
down.

"Why are you doing this, and why go so far as to frame Iwanagahime?" She reached up and bent
his fingers back until the tell-tale pops met her ears. Sakura dropped, watching in dismay as Yama
simply fix his broken fingers by snapping them back into place.

"We have orders handed down to us, and I don't quite appreciate that it takes me away from my
duties in the underworld. I sent Erika on ahead to scout in my place." Yama clenched and
unclenched his fist, wriggling the two digits she'd broken. "Perhaps that wasn't the right course of
action, given how impetuous she can be. However, none of my other shinigami are half as eager,
and there's something to be said about how often she's successful once she sets her mind to
something."

Sakura released her Byakugo, the seal invitingly familiar after remaining inactive for months.
Yama anticipated her action almost before she'd decided on it, stopping the blow of her chakra-
enhanced kick with the flat of his broad palm, the ripple of the impact sending a visible shockwave
through the air.

It tore up flowers and grass and dirt and made deep troughs under the deity's feet when he was
pushed back. Bringing two palms together, the death god released a spinning ball of black and blue
light that reminded her of the truth-seeker orbs. Sakura flickered around the field, watching the orb
kill everything it touched in its quest to reach her. She had no delusions about what it would do to
her, were she touched.

'Don't run. Push back,' The same warm hand that had touched her head and sweetly told her she
could kill Madara if she wanted to pushed between her shoulders in an encouraging nudge, and she
stopped in her tracks. The orb made a beeline toward her, and not really understanding why, she
opened wide and unleashed a fierce blast of water that would have made Tobirama sit up and take
notice.

The attacks collided, fighting to encompass each other and then cancelling out with a tremor that
rocked the ground. She'd never been able to perform a water jutsu half as successfully since
Tobirama began teaching her. Where had that come from?

Sakura apparently wasn't the only one contemplating her newfound proficiency in water-style. On
the fringe of the field, Erika and Izuna had paused their duel briefly to watch, and Yama was
giving her a look she couldn't quite place.

One thing was made abundantly clear in that moment—he was the real deal. Never before had she
fought someone with not only superior physical power but godly abilities she assumed were beyond
even Kaguya.

"Why resist?" Yama pondered aloud. "If you simply revealed to us where Mizuchi was, and
forfeited the soul of your companion, we could be on our way."

Sakura started, not suspecting Izuna would be such a hot commodity for two higher beings. "His
soul?"

"Yes, I admit I've been too busy to focus on retrieving it, and it becomes less of a priority as time
passes, but it was meant to come with me months ago." Yama explained. "The realm of death is
mine alone, and yet on top of her many other transgressions, Mizuchi interfered in it and
intercepted the delivery of his soul to me. Thus, setting off an unlikely chain of events. Quite a few
of the heavens suspected that she may have help in whatever she was planning next, but what deity
would dare? Now I understand: an average mortal, a transplant through time…you."

Sakura had known the truth all along. She was in a time she didn't belong to, and Mizuchi was enigmatic at best and dangerous at worst. But hearing him say it so plainly made her want to shrink into the ground, afraid of the possible punishment to follow. She bowed her head. "I didn't… ask to be dragged here." She raised a knee, and, expecting her to drive it into his stomach, Yama merely cupped a hand in front of it.

Sakura sprang up off the ground at the last possible minute, letting her leg snap up into a full kick that caught him in the nose. Stumbling, he lifted one long blue arm to guard himself and she jumped off it using the momentum, raising herself to straddle his shoulders and bring her joined fists crashing into his skull with all her might. Her knuckles caught the side of his headpiece and it cleaved neatly in two, the broken halves falling into his hands.

"Lord Yama!" Erika roared, already rushing over. Izuna used her moment of distraction and caught her clothing while she turned away. Swinging her back into his sword, he impaled her above the navel, twisting the blade in to the hilt. Her incensed squawk split the air, so shrill it weaponized into a spiraling concussive blast that tore half Izuna's shirt and had him covering his ears. There'd be blood on them when he pulled them down, no question.

Sakura shot away from her foe, putting her fists up in preparation for a retaliating assault. But the God of the Dead wasn't trying to engage her back at all. She found Yama staring at his broken circlet. "This was a gift," he sighed, tossing it away. "Very well, I acknowledge your spirit is a cut above the average human's. Time for the next level of this battle." He waved two of his arms in an arc, summoning a shimmering golden staff with a rounded ornament on the end.

Just a shake of the staff, a movement so minute she barely caught it, and a jagged seam opened up underneath her, shadowy hands reaching out to lock around her. They ground her body between them until every limb felt rubbery and unresponsive, every cell deadened.

Yama took his time approaching, pity silently passing over his otherwise blank face. "I have sympathy for you, a lost mortal drawn into the foolish plan of a delusional river deity…but if you will not aid us, and if you stand in the way of my reaping…" His huge hand seized her whole head, Sakura gasping as her seal receded and something sinister wrapped around her body like a great snake constricting prey muscle by muscle.

Bones snapped and realigned. Sakura would have screamed, but her breath was so scarce that it came out in a feeble whimper. "Don't look at me that way. The blights were already corroding your humanity…I merely sped up the process. I wonder what'll become of you now? If the divine essence Mizuchi's placed within you will be enough…" Sweat fell from her forehead and dripped down her jaw, her whole body burning and aching with what could have been an intense fever if she didn't know better.

Though Yama's restraints kept her from struggling much, she could just barely see her wrists and hands where the shadows ended. Every visible vein was thick and grotesquely black, carrying the impurities into every cell, pumping right through her heart.

Everything became murky, her senses blurring uselessly and a male voice faintly calling, protesting. Sakura thought of home. The one with people she had known for years, those she loved and missed. She also thought of the one with the new friends she'd made, those she was getting to know better every day. Leaving one set behind was bad enough, but leaving both was unbearable.
The tear that scalded its way down her cheek plopped onto her hand, making it twitch. Yama's attack shriveled and disappeared back into the patched seam of earth, and Sakura shakily held her hands out in front of her. Tough, unyielding scales with wickedly curved talons almost poked her eyes out. Not as surprised as she ought to be, she felt the right side of her face.

Smooth skin, if not a little grimy. The left? More scales, stopping just under her eye, the vision of it a little distorted. Her right eye on the other hand could see for miles and miles, beyond the field, clear across to the expanse of mountain range, to every inch of wood and layering of frost and bit of gravel.

Unreal.

Sakura sat and marveled first that she was alive, and then at the metamorphosis her body had undergone.

"Lord Yama, what should I do with him?" Erika came back into view over Yama's shoulder, sword still jutting straight through her and a weary but triumphant grin on her face.

A bruised Izuna in a shredded top held by the throat dragged behind her; blood congealed from a vicious gash in his side at the waist of his pants and one eye was shut and swollen, the other bright with a three-tomoed Sharingan. "S-Sakura…?" he looked unsure.

Sakura…you're really so damn annoying. And then he plunged his whole arm through her chest, crushing her racing heart in an electrically-charged fist. Blood burbled past her parted lips, and she couldn't bring herself to stupidly ask why, because why did it matter?

"S-Sasuke…" she growled, more scales climbing her neck and back. "Sasuke!" He looked so pitiful, so worn and confused and horrified. But what he didn't look was sorry.

Break him down. Make him understand your hurt.

Tears clouding her vision, she lunged the same time Erika let go and stepped away, swinging a fist into his handsome jaw, and another one up into his gut, shattering ribs. For years she had only wanted to help him, to understand him, to be close to him. And for years, he had hurt and shunned her.

Her claws cut three stripes from waist to throat and he fell down in shock, the red fluid running from the gash and down his chin. She launched herself onto his chest and snarled into his drawn face.

"This is what happens to those who take in so many blights. They're warped, until they can no longer recognize friend from foe, illusion from reality." Yama's voice drifted over her senses. "Even the slightest provocation can elicit a negative emotional reaction so strong they're seized totally by it."

Sakura set her eyes on them next, opening her maw and sending a stream of glimmering green flames that they almost didn't avoid. Her chest rose and fell harshly, wild eyes searching for something else to burn, to maim to slaughter.

That was when Sasuke's hand reached up and seized hers, locking his fingers in between her reptilian digits. She tried to pull away, but he squeezed with considerable effort. Some of the haze clearing, Sakura blinked in bewilderment. The touch of a hand at her scaled cheek almost made her jump out of the snug new skin. Resisting the urge to rip off the offending extremity, she stared down into his tiredly smiling face. "You're still…in there." He rasped. "I know you are."
"Sa…suke?" When had he ever spoken to her so gently, or looked at her so patiently? Every so often, he would reward her with some gruff, clumsy affection, but it never felt so tender and trusting.

This wasn't…Sasuke.

"Izuna?" she asked, fangs scraping over her tongue.

The least swollen side of his face quirked up, his opened eye drifting skyward. "There you are,"

"Oh!" Fighting back a sob, she watched as the hand holding his shrunk into the familiar one she'd always known. "I…I hurt you…"

"Almost, but not quite," He gently pushed her off, climbing to shaky legs. Sakura followed him, glad to see her teeth felt normal and her skin didn't pinch. "You went into your mind. It looked like you were under some sort of genjutsu."

It was definitely a surreal enough feeling to be dragged into the depths of whatever the blights did to her head. "I still attacked you. There's no excuse for that,"

If they lived through this, she'd definitely be confronting Mizuchi about whatever the hell was happening to her. Because twice in just under two days she'd tried to kill someone in some kind of murderous trance. Some people might be able to live with that, but Sakura wasn't one of them.

The path she had incinerated with the odd green flame stood out as a stark reminder of what her new powers could do. The flowers and grass weren't just burned, they looked like they had been eroded by acid, the ground still bubbling. "Here, let me help…" Without waiting for permission, she put two fingers over his eyelid and let the healing chakra flush through it.

"So you overcame the corruption," Erika huffed, rolling her eyes. "So what? If you won't destroy him I can destroy you both. Right, Lord Yama?"

"We'll do this together, Erika." Yama corrected, holding out his staff toward them.

"Will you?" Sakura had barely finished knitting the gash in Izuna's side closed, and she was far from in the mood for more complications. Staving off the corruptive power of the blights inside took more out of her than she would admit to.

When the wind picked up into a gale force tornado and she had to use chakra to keep her upright, she was positive she wouldn't like the reason why. But as she peeked up through the barrier she'd made around her face with her arms, she saw a large winged creature circling the field, lower and lower to the ground.

"It can't be…" Izuna wasn't even covering his eyes. "S-Shinta?! And…Madara!"

'Oh, this had better be a joke…' But it wasn't. Madara had arrived, riding a massive eagle. Still high in the air, the unexpected Uchiha released a vicious stream of fire, the bird flapping its wings rapidly to fan the flame. The duo circled what quickly became a burning funnel, stoking its strength. Yama swung his staff as it spun toward them, deflecting some of it back up into the air. The eagle soared around the attacks with a grace that bordered arrogant.

They landed, right up behind she and Izuna, the wind blowing hair into both their eyes.

"What're you doing here?" was the first thing said, and she wasn't even sure if it came from her or Izuna.
Madara hopped down, "Helping you, obviously. You both look like warmed over death."

"How do you even remember how to Summon? And how'd you find us?!" Sakura sputtered, trembling with the shock of it all.

"Brother," The younger Uchiha clutched at his sibling's arm. "Are your memories back?"

"Not really," he shrugged. "And that bird almost took my arm off." Shinta ignored the accusation, spreading his wings and standing in an offensive stance as he faced down the two deities.

"I was able to manually activate those memories pertaining to combat, at the very least. I also transmitted your location into his brain. You are certainly welcome." Right in front of them all, Mizuchi popped through one of her dragon's eye portals. Surveying them, she added, "I would not normally be inclined to agree with a word he said, but you do both look like warmed death." She licked her thumb and tried to wipe a smudge from Sakura's cheek.

The kunoichi hissed, scuttling away.

"Head into battle looking like an urchin then." The dragon goddess raised her nose scornfully.

"Mizuchi, this is a most unexpected turn of events!" Yama guffawed. "You must care for the human a great deal more than I thought you capable of if you've risked yourself to make an appearance."

"That's right. This human is my godslayer, but she isn't truly ready." Sakura frowned. "To that end, until she is, I will be the god and she will do the slaying."

Yama's eyes fell over all of them, fixating on a point out of focus. "And the others? Iwanagahime's miko who's been quietly playing possum this whole time?" Sakura had nearly forgotten Takara, but it was nice to hear she wasn't really dead. One less thing on her conscience. "And these Uchiha?"

"The miko is here of her own volition for reasons I don't pretend to know, nor care about," Mizuchi answered in the nonchalant way that only she could. "These Uchiha are sword and shield to my progeny respectively. They serve their purpose as long as I feel she has need for them."

Izuna and Madara traded dubious expressions, no doubt questioning when they'd committed to those roles.

Erika snorted, moving in front of Yama a little. At a glance the matchup looked comical: Mizuchi's poised, svelte form facing off against a petulant child. But Sakura could feel it in the air. This was truly shaping up to be a clash of gods. "You know, Mizuchi, I've always thought of us as two equally ambitious castoffs that rose above our stations to become something...more. Wouldn't you say?"

Mizuchi began to shift, her skin hardening into beautiful black scales and powerful wings rippling from her back. As her spine lengthened to accommodate a tail, her lips pulled into a smirk. "I would say... even in my weakest form I have always outclassed you. And I am feeling incredibly strong right now."

Erika's cheeks were so red they glowed, her eyes hooded in anger.

Mizuchi took to the sky, immediately breathing green fire, Erika blowing a cloud of black spores that collided in midair, the smell of burnt leaves filling the air. That just left the three of them to deal with...
Yama watched the attacks attempt to overwhelm each other, his mouth set in a calculating twist. "Let them settle their grudge match. Come then: all of you. Your opponent is me."

Sakura activated the Byakugo once again, relieved that it was still usable. Madara climbed back atop his eagle, and Izuna's Sharingan shifted into a new pattern she'd never seen before. 'I didn't know he had that! It's probably an advanced form.'

"Amaterasu," he whispered, black flames flickering into existence and cutting a line straight for Yama as if they had life of their own.

"Amaterasu? What a peculiar thing to name a technique." He lowered the ornament on his staff to face the ground and swung, "I happen to know the real Amaterasu," The flames changed course and came rushing back for them, rising like a wave swelling toward shore at high tide.

Heart rattling in her throat, Sakura found herself releasing a strong green blaze that clashed with the incoming attack, the heat from the intermingling flames boiling the air and drenching her in sweat. Encouraged, Sakura's fire burned stronger, overcoming the misdirected Amaterasu and piercing it to scorch Yama.

The god stared incredulously at his burnt, blistered shoulder, the skin peeling away and the acrid smell wafting through the air between them. Smirking, Yama charged, brandishing his staff. For a god nearly seven feet he was agile, using it like a flail to cut through the remainder of the black flames. Shinta circled overhead, creating another vortex.

This time, Sakura rushed forward into the wind, stopping just short of the vortex and slamming her foot into the ground. It buckled and flew apart, getting pulled into Shinta's wind attack and spinning toward Yama as a storm of earth and debris.

Madara wasted no time, swinging his scythe at the god, Shinta flying around him until it completely restricted the movement of his arms. Before he could free himself, Izuna used a partial Susanoo, an orange ribcage wrapping around his body and sprouting skeletal arms that grasped Yama and lifted him from the ground.

Knowing it wouldn't hold him for long, Sakura launched herself into the air, slamming a kick so powerful into his unprotected head that it created a crater underneath him, burying him waist deep into the ground, a strong wind from the aftershock even managing to temporarily knock Madara off course from the air.

Overhead, the battle seemed to be winding down, Mizuchi unleashing the biggest flame yet with a guttural cry.

Shinta dove for them, Izuna snatching her around the waist as he jumped up onto the bird and the dragon flames torched the field. "Get the miko!" he commanded, Shinta spotting Takara trying to scramble up the mountain and away from danger, swooping to pick her up in his strong talons.

Takara flailed uselessly, "I will not beg for mercy. If you want to kill me, do it now or..."

"Takara you're safe!" Sakura told her. "It's just us."

She stopped fighting, content to dangle precariously in the bird's sharp claws. "Oh, so you've triumphed after all."

Smoke stung the kunoichi's eyes and embers licked at her hair. It had been hard to see through the darkness the island had been plunged into, but the green glow provided some reprieve. Sakura saw the violacia field going up in smoke, the noxious scent rising up to meet them on the wind.
"No!" Erika wailed, fruitlessly running through the burning blooms and scooping at ashes. "My army!"

"Let it go, Erika." Yama wriggled from the ground with effort, staring up at them. Mizuchi had flown over to hover beside Shinta, the bird looking more intrigued by her wings than frightened to be so near a dragon. "Today, you've won..."

"But, Lord Yama!" Erika protested, motioning up at them frantically. "I could shoot them down! We could get back the soul!"

"No." Yama said more firmly. "I am feeling gracious today, Erika. So we will concede defeat."

Sakura nearly fell off the eagle's back. She had been expecting a fight to the bitter end. Hell, half of her hadn't thought she'd live so long in a fight again a god. "You'll leave the island then? For good?"

"For good?" Yama ran a hand through his hair, thinking. "There will always be souls to reap, and when there are, I will send my shinigami. But in the meantime, Erika will cease her game of blighting and prematurely reaping souls."

Erika looked crestfallen, the flame light brightening her face giving the illusion of a young child denied a sweet. "But the balance..."

"There are other ways to keep it. I will return the souls she reaped, as a reward to you. And for you, young man, I will not actively seek to take your soul." He cleared his throat, studying the dragon next. "Mizuchi...as far as our encounter, it never happened. ...Or perhaps it did? Far, far away from here. To the deserted No Lands at the edge of the world. That should give you time to find yourself an adequate place to hide."

"All this talk about gods and you're running away?" Madara asked, incredulous. "This is it?"

Sakura wanted to knock him off the bird, but she had to grab Izuna's arms to keep him from doing it first.

"Yes, mortal. It is. But the next god you encounter will likely not be so generous...to any of you." Yama swung his staff, the ground shuddering and then opening up, red light spilling up from it. "Come Erika," He stepped down into the portal, disappearing.

Grumbling, Erika cast one more resentful look across the burning field. "Sakura...today Lord Yama's generosity was your salvation...Next time, I will have my vindication. And your lives..."

She hopped down after her master, the ground shifting to seal up behind her.

"Good riddance..." Sakura murmured, leaning heavily into the eagle. The sky started to lighten, the dark shroud of death that had blanketed it falling away to reveal a clear midday blue. "I can't believe it. After all this time it's only been hours?"

Mizuchi roared, sweeping over the field and sucking in the fire, zipping back and forth until the field was flat, smoking dirt. Shinta gingerly landed, watching as the dragon became a beautiful woman once again.

"It's finally over." Takara sighed. "The island has been purged of evil."

"Not quite, miko." The deity corrected.

Sakura placed a hand to her chest, the stirring like a thousand wings brushing around. Something
made its way up her throat, and she hiccuped, a nearly translucent buttery sputtering out. Its
delicate wings were luminescence like stardust powdering the air with each twitch. She watched it
flutter around in disbelief, the single insectoid creature suddenly five, and then a dozen more,
multiplying until there were clouds of them everywhere. Scattered across the sky like snowflakes.

"Congratulations, Sakura." Mizuchi smiled kindly, "You have not only expelled the blights, but
you've learned to create something better."

"What are those?" Madara held out a finger, one of the white butterflies briefly alighting on it.

"Miracles," said the dragon goddess. "If blights are everything dark and evil in the world, these
represent everything light and beautiful. A true deity can give mercy in equal measure to
condemnation."

Her mind was foggy, her body more tired than it had ever been. Sakura had a feeling that the only
remedy for this was lots of rest and a nice long sleep. Still, she was enthralled by her newest
creation, accidental as it was. "I... I made miracles? I thought it was just a miracle I could keep
sitting upright," she joked. "I feel so drained..."

"I think we're all feeling spent for the day, though," Izuna winced, staring down at his bruised
chest. Crimson rivulets seeped from his eyes and he hastily swiped them away.

"I need a nap," Madara yawned. "Take us back, bird."

Shinta screeched in outrage, bucking through the air in a haphazard flight pattern. "Stop!" Izuna
screamed, holding on tight. "Stop telling him what to do or he'll kill us all."

"I think I've changed my mind about everything," Madara announced as loud as possible, holding
on for dear life. "Shinobi life is overrated in hindsight!"

ASiT

Yurine collapsed backwards with a grunt, a cackling woman falling on top of her. "No!" Kureno
tried shouldering through the two men he'd been fighting, but he found himself ducking under the
swing of a knife. Still, it cut into his bicep, a long line of red dripping to the floor.

"You don't have time to worry about her right now." his foe growled. "Sorry, but this feeling's just
too strong to fight."

Sweat falling heavily from his brow, Kureno could feel his body nearing chakra depletion, casting
multiple genjutsu taking a toll. The knife came at him again, but he was determined to go down
fighting. Blocking the attack with his wrist, he lashed out with a quick swing of his tanto, watching
the hand and knife drop to the floor. Despite the bleeding stump, the undead man wasn't deterred.

Kureno shuddered. If this kept up...

They had been at it for so long, and they were so exhausted. Yurine had found that because they
still had the senses of their human selves, genjutsu was a viable defense. For a while they had
worked together to cast a combined illusion over the inn, but one of the dead saw through it.

They had hacked and slashed and held off as many as possible, but they just seemed to keep
coming. Even those trapped had brandished chairs and knives and plates and begun to tentatively
fight back. The innkeeper's timid son had been the most help out of all the untrained civilians there,
surprisingly. The boy had risked his life sprinting to his father's toolshed and returning with more
weapons the inn residents could use to arm themselves.
When a small swarm had come after his family, he leapt to action with a mighty cry and a hatchet. Nevertheless, two shinobi and a group of determined civilians fighting for their lives were no match for a group of dead out for blood with inhuman strength and near invulnerability.

'Sorry Izuna...I guess this is just a fight we can't win.'

Panting, he looked around at the barely immobilized dead picking themselves up, perspiration stinging his eyes. Had he not reached up to wipe it away, he might have missed the tiny white butterfly.

"H-Huh?" He was seeing things in his final hours. He had to be. More butterflies came, fluttering past serenely, right through the door where the dead scratched and pounded. Overwhelming light enveloped the room, Kureno letting his eyes flutter shut as he slumped to the floor.

ASiT

The ice was starting to melt. Kohei came tumbling out and he rushed to help him off the ground. Kou knew his clanmates couldn't keep it up forever. But they had to. They were among the last lines of defense. Even with the chakra pills they had split amongst themselves, their reserves were slipping dangerously low.

"Rest," he touched his cousin's head, moving toward the mirror prison.

"Kou, you can't," Kohei protested, grasping at his hand. "You've exerted the most chakra out of all of us."

Smiling a little, he pulled away, launching into the mirrors to be confronted with nearly three dozen angry dead. Their faces all haunted him. Each and every one of them someone they couldn't save.

"Kou," An old woman, one of the first to go, turned to him with a twisted smile. "Such a sweet boy you were. Always peddling your medicine as a child. But they couldn't save me, could they? Not any of us," she sighed. "It's alright though. It'll all be over soon. I intend to keep fighting the bloodlust for as long as it's possible."

"I hope so, obaa-san..." he smiled weakly.

A boy who had died in his own sick lunged for his mirror with a savage noise, Kou bracing himself in case it didn't hold. His vision clouded over in white, and he briefly wondered if he had departed from life himself. Until the powdery white wings of dozens and dozens of butterflies caught his attention, each of them touching some person in the dome.
Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of the fiasco in Water Country, Sakura and company prepare to head home. But Madara still struggles with the adjustment...and back in Konoha, so do the Kaguya.

Chapter Notes

Original AN from FFN: Someone asked last chapter about everyone's ages, and I've honestly just forgotten to bring that up until now.

Sakura-17
Izuna-20
Tobirama-21
Madara-22 (but mentally 9 right now)...almost 23
Hashirama-23 as of ch.15
Toka & Naoko-25

Of course, everyone will keep aging, just as a head's up. Also, small side note that despite everything that's happened, all the events of this arc have taken place in roughly a week and a half from start to finish.

Hashirama knew that when Tobirama came to drag him into the office there was a chance his brother might have a silent, dignified mental crisis. What would actually happen to his younger brother if he didn't have to make a schedule based on ordering him around for half the day?

The Hokage was fairly sure it had become a part of Tobirama's reason for living a long time ago, no matter how exasperated he acted. He wouldn't take kindly to the fact that he'd only been humoring him all along; though Hashirama admitted at times he enjoyed toying with Tobirama's patience more than he should... Then again, that was a perk of having a sibling.

Had his thoughts been less troubled, he might have found room for amusement in all of it. But he just wasn't in the mood. It hadn't been a restful night. Hashirama couldn't help but let his thoughts keep wondering back to whatever was going on in Water Country. Hopefully he'd made the right choice.

Climbing the spiraling steps to the office, he took his time, smoothing a hand over the grains of wood that made up the walls, his arms more than long enough to touch them in the narrow, enclosed space.
He so clearly remembered building the Hokage Tower as if it were yesterday, working tirelessly to construct the village with his clansmen and the Uchiha at his side. Now, it had grown so much in such a short time, people flocking to share in the dream every day. The academy would be complete soon and would usher in the next generation of Konoha shinobi, eager young minds ready to learn about what he called the Will of Fire.

Hashirama reached the top step, took a deep breath, and then pushed his way into his office. Everything was like he'd left it: quiet, arranged, calm. The same scrolls on the walls. The same neatly stacked paperwork. The same beautiful bonsai he cherished so dearly.

Drifting around the space, he ended up at the window just behind his desk, prying it open and leaning out to sniff the cool, early morning air. Spring was probably his favorite season, but fall wasn't without its own merits. And it had definitely settled deeply over the land.

Turning his face to the sky, he watched the sun crest over the horizon, the village bathed in a soft orange glow that spotted the ground in shadows as the last vestiges of night gave way to sunrise. There was something so soothing about the consistency of nature, he thought with a small smile, appreciating the smell of wet earth. Today, the sun was rising.

As it would rise tomorrow, and the day after, and long past the point where he had become a relic of the past. All over the world, no matter what clan they hailed from, or what region they called home, people took in the same sight. They shared the same sunrise. In that breathtaking moment, all Hashirama truly wanted was for the sun to keep rising and falling on Konoha forever.

A great shadow fell sudden and heavy, and Hashirama glanced up with alarm. Illuminated in a wash of golds and oranges, a bird circled overhead. Craning his neck to the right and squinting, he noticed with mild horror that this was a big eagle. His heart jumped as he thought back to his last encounter with the larger-than-average raptor. The bird had looked him over as if he had decided not to eat him on a whim. Now, he was apparently back to finish what he'd started!

Hashirama started to close the window, noticing the eagle getting ready to land. The latch was almost secure when a beak wedging its way under it and wrenching the window wide open made him withdraw both hands in shock.

"So fast!" Too quickly for the naked eye the creature had descended and stuck his sleek black head into the office with one fluid motion. Shinta, if he recalled correctly, eyed him with sharp indignity, not believing he would dare try and bar him from entering.

With a chastising scream, he stepped back, allowing Hashirama to see he once again had a scroll tucked into the harness around his chest. A message from Izuna?

"I'll take that," he said, slowly inching his arm forward. Shinta reached down and plucked up the message, the roll of paper ridiculous clutched in his large beak. If Hashirama didn't know any better he'd say the gleam in the bird's golden eyes was...taunting.

Was he...holding a grudge? "I didn't mean any offense," Hashirama said carefully. "It was rude of me and I didn't realize you had a message. You probably came a long way to get it here so swiftly."

The bird tilted his head in consideration, as if to say, 'Keep going,'

"You're definitely the fastest flying Summon I've ever seen." Hashirama praised, noticing Shinta swivel his head back with pride. "Maybe even faster than any Summon I've encountered." The eagle soaked in the flattery, ruffling his shiny sepia-colored chest feathers. Up close, he really was
a striking animal. All the way down to his neck, he was dark as midnight, but his body was a nice shade of lighter brown, his feet and the skin around his eyes reddish-orange. When he briefly stretched his wings Hashirama saw a pattern alternating between gray and black with white undersides. It was truly fitting for Madara to have a Summon as flashy as he was.

He stretched his face forward, offering the scroll, and Hashirama's lips stretched in a grin. His hand had only just brushed over the waxy paper when suddenly the bird turned his neck and flung the missive.

Stunned, Hashirama felt the scroll smack him hard across the cheek as Shinta threw his head back in a fit of caws that sounded suspiciously like laughter. Eyes narrowing, he rubbed his cheek as the bird disappeared in a cloud of smoke. *What an attitude.* Hashirama leaned over and picked the scroll up from the sill, inspecting it first to make sure there was no damage, then carefully unfurling it.

It was a different handwriting than before, every word neat, close together and slanting. "I apologize in advance for whatever Shinta's done. He's wild, but if a message needs to arrive in a hurry there's no faster way. Any other messenger bird would take days. I think you'll be relieved to know that the situation has been contained as best as it can be. While they'd both probably say they've seen better days, Madara and Sakura are coming home in one piece. We all are. I wouldn't say this was an easy assignment, but I think the details are better shared in person. Even then they may take...a while for you to process.

*We set sail from Water Country today. Sakura's assured me she's already arranged for our voyage back. I'll send another message once we arrive in Yumegakure, but I doubt Shinta would bring another one any sooner than that. Just getting him to carry this required a ridiculous amount of bribery."

Hashirama gave the message a once over, not sure what to make of the bizarre, brief report. On the whole it was promising; Izuna and the others had managed to make it in time, and that was what was most important. Everything else, like insisting they talk about details in person was confusing but understandable.

Especially if it was sensitive information or something unforeseen that made a hiccup in negotiations. Then there was the issue of Shinta evidently being belligerent even toward members of the clan he was in servitude to. The bird had Izuna treading carefully it was like the roles were reversed. Hashirama had never seen a more willful Summon before in his life.

Sighing, his eyes skimmed over and caught on certain words again. A familiar kunoichi's name stood out to him. Twice, Izuna had referred to her by only her given name with no trace of the polite honorific he had heard him use when speaking to her previously.

It was such a minute, unimportant thing that hardly deserved any consideration. Not when there were so many other more substantial pieces of information to puzzle over about the note. Hashirama had a seat at his desk, but if he was being truthful he flopped down and hoped the chair was there to catch him.

On the day when they had all met at the Uchiha compound to speak with the clan heads regarding the academy, Izuna and Sakura-san had turned up together, arm in arm and quite comfortable with one another. While he couldn't deny he was a little disappointed not to have a chance to speak to her before the meeting—to go over the plan, of course!—it was something he put aside.

But now...now Hashirama felt some tiny niggling curiosity stirring again, edged in just a hint of doubt. Had something...changed? Between Izuna and Sakura-san? A dropping of honorifics could
mean a lot, or it could mean nothing more than Izuna didn't use them to save room on the scroll. *But there was still enough space left over to write more.* His mind pointed out unhelpfully. Hashirama blew a strand of hair from his eyes and tossed the scroll down, satisfied when it snapped closed again.

His eyes drifted to his bonsai as he dragged some incomplete paperwork closer. Soon it would be time for Bukkai's first repotting. Cherry blossom bonsai did better in winter that way, and a shift of seasons was definitely right on their heels.

Maybe Sakura-san would be interested in the progress the plant had made when she returned. *Or maybe she'll already have plans and other people she wants to spend her time with?* Hashirama could have hung his head in defeat. For whatever reason his brain was downright mutinous today. Regardless, he was thinking a lot about what could turn out to be nothing.

That settled, he started reading up on the proposal sitting in front of him for more recreational facilities to be built. One of them included a desire to construct an onsen around the recently discovered natural hot springs on the far side of the village. Interested, the Hokage let his mind drift to the benefits of shinobi being able to enjoy a soak after long missions, his quill moving nimbly to sign off on the plans.

It felt like half the island had come to see them off. Sakura looked down at the large jar of kirin mitsu that had been coaxed into her hands, then back up at the smiling villagers she had received it from. "On behalf of us all, thank you," Kou and the rest of the Yuki clan bowed, Sakura and the others bowing in return. All except Madara, who stood rigid and confused.

Sakura was just thankful he was keeping quiet for a change. As it turned out, Yama had altered the memories of the island inhabitants, and everyone believed a diligent pink-haired healer from the mainland had come and saved them all from falling to a terrible illness.

Even little Fuyuko was brought back, and Sakura couldn't help but notice the family from the inn seemed so much happier. Maka hadn't yelled at her son once since the ordeal, and Muyo glowed in a way she'd never seen before.

Not a soul appeared to remember the uprising of the undead, except maybe Takara, who'd had a twinkle to her sightless eyes as she told them she would be taking over as head priestess, guiding the acolytes in the true teachings of Iwanagahime.

"I suppose you using us to get rid of the threat and leaving you to usurp power from your last leader was purely coincidental." Izuna glared.

"Purely," Takara agreed with a coy smile, walking off into the mist.

"This has been an exhausting mission," Yurine exhaled, her shoulders slouching as they walked down the pier. "I'm grateful they don't remember any of that, but I don't think I'll be able to forget it any time soon…"

"No kidding." Kureno seconded. "But hey, at least we got this…uh, tasty blue syrup?" He held up his jar of kirin mitsu. "Someone's already tried it right? It does taste good, doesn't it?"

"It has kirin in the name." Madara mumbled. "What if they gave us kirin blood?"

Everyone cringed, Kureno groaning loudly.

Sakura was still trying to accept this new, blunt Madara who said strange things. Not too long ago
that would have never come out of his mouth.

Hoping to change the subject, she searched the line of docked ships, fighting back a smile when she found a familiarly battered vessel sporting a new set of sails. She stopped in front of it abruptly, the others walking behind her nearly running into her back.

"T-This is the one?" Yurine gasped. Her carmine eyes flickered to the name carved into the wood. "Um, are we really sure it has to be this one?" She wrung her hands together. "It's called the Harbinger and I've had enough bad omens to last a lifetime."

Even Izuna was looking uncertain suddenly, his eyes taking in the ship from top to bottom and then glancing her way for reassurance. They all probably thought she was crazy, but after the journey to Water Country, Sakura had absolute trust in Joben and his crew.

Speaking of… "Don'tcha worry a single head on that sunshine head o' yours," Sakura knew instantly her smile had wormed free as the burly, bearded captain came swaggering down the gangway with Junko and Kazu right behind him. "The ol' girl may not look like much a' first glance but she's weathered her share o' storms. Ain't a more reliable vessel out there."

Junko looked the group over, strutting back and forth before making a noise of satisfaction as she came to a stop. "See there's more a ya this time 'round." She muttered, her trusty ladle over one shoulder and the other hand on her cocked hip. "No matter. I'll fatten ya up just the same."

"Great…" Yurine smiled, sharing a glance with her brother. Izuna was maintaining a polite expression, but Sakura didn't miss the brief, bemused look in his eyes. None of them truly knew what to make of these brash, straightforward sailor folk.

Little Kazu was the last to reach them, stopping several times to wait for a tiny creature darting around his feet. When his hazel eyes locked on Sakura's he all but launched himself into her arms. "I missed you,"

Laughing, she spun him once before setting him down. "Energetic as ever I see."

"And look what I got!" He picked up and showed them all a ginger tabby kitten with bright yellow eyes.

Sakura reached out to stroke its soft head, and a smirk touched her lips as she noticed Izuna seemed keenly interested on the little feline.

"Like cats, do ya?" Joben stroked at his beard. "Well then you'll be happy ta know we picked up some new crew since we left ya, lass." he winked.

Before she could ask what he meant, Ai peered over the side of the ship. "Cap'n!" she shouted through cupped hands. "We're all loaded up n' ready to go!"

"Couldn't a asked for better timin' if I planned it!" he chortled, slapping his knee. "Come on then," he motioned to the Harbinger. "Sea's a waitin' and we've got plenty o' stories we can swap, don't we?"

He marched back up the gangway with Kazu and Junko. Yurine and Kureno hesitantly followed behind them, and as soon as they reached deck, they were met with a chorus of boisterous greetings. Sakura started up after them, but a tug on her arm stopped her. She turned, finding the Uchiha brothers standing there with two entirely different facial expressions. Izuna definitely had some questions, but she didn't see anything except curiosity in his eyes. On the other hand…
Madara, the one who'd stopped her, spoke first. "I don't want to get on that. It looks like one strong wind could sink it." The disdainful frown was so like what he'd done the first time he'd seen the Harbinger, Sakura couldn't help but laugh.

"You think dying at sea is funny?" he hissed.

Sakura shook her head. "It's just that some things don't change I guess. You weren't really impressed the first time around either."

"Sounds right," Madara said, pleased.

"But it got us here," she stopped and thought, "And after a while you really started to like sea life." It was the furthest thing from the truth, of course. While Madara never outright complained, it was so obvious he loathed every minute of the journey. But one harmless white lie in order to get him to cooperate wasn't a bad thing. The plus side of it was it would bring her some amusement as well.

Madara gave her a dubious stare. "I liked…sailing?" He turned to study the ship with new eyes, contemplating it, and Sakura felt guilt settle in her. Without his memories he was a blank slate, vulnerable. Maybe it was best not to take advantage of that…

Feeling ashamed, her eyes flickered to Izuna, sure she'd see his disappointment, but his thoughts were hidden by an unreadable countenance.

"Oi! Comin' aboard?" Inoue yelled down to them. "We're settin' sail here, folks!"

This time Madara climbed up without so much as a complaint, and Sakura couldn't help but wonder just how much he'd already taken her words to heart. Great. She was taking advantage of an amnesiac. Izuna's shoulder brushed hers as he passed, and when she reluctantly looked up, her heart stuttered over the mischievous tilt of his full lips.

"Junji!" Kikue's voice echoed around the corner, reaching him even before she came into sight. Her feet pattering rhythmically across the wood floors, a solid weight clinging to him seconds later. She wrapped her arms around him from behind, her chin falling onto his shoulder. "Guess what?!"

Putting down his tea, he wrapped an arm around his sister as best he could. "Any reason why your cheek is sticky?" Kikue's dark little head pulled away, and he was able to turn away from the table so he could take her in, proud smile and…red smeared on both sides of her face in the shapes of long, triangular fang marks. "Kikue is gonna be an Inuzuka now!" She raised one fist in the air. Ever since coming across the clan, Kikue had become enamored with just about everything about them. Their customs, their ninken, their sense of community. More than anything, he suspected that was what she loved about them. Their own clan had never regarded her as anything more than a hindrance.

Yoku and Harihane trailed into the room behind her, the latter noticing Kikue's 'face paint' first. Stepping forward, she swiped a finger across their younger sister's cheek with a grunt. "Is this…berry juice?"

Yoku's new ninken partner, Asuga, yipped. Kikue giggled as the brown and cream puppy leapt at her, futilely trying to reach her face and lick away the sticky sweetness.

"It's all Kikue could find that was the right color." She explained, still fending off the playful pup.
"Harihane grinned darkly. "Blood would've been the right color too,"

"Harihane," he warned, getting to his feet. Her grin dropped. "What are you girls planning?"

Yoku smiled bashfully, "Mother's gotten permission from the Hokage and as long as you're all supervised,"

"We can leave the compound." Harihane finished impatiently, arms crossed. "So I guess we're supposed to be grateful their leader is nice enough to let the prisoners stretch their legs."

"It's a start, isn't it?" Jun'ichi said, trying to be optimistic. Although he would never complain after the great amount of generosity Tsuba had shown them, even he could admit that staying within the walls of the Inuzuka compound day in and day out for the past week and a half was grating.

Even if it was as Harihane implied and they were just slackening the grip on their chains ever so slightly, testing them, Jun'ichi would take what he could get.

"Kikue, I think you should clean your face," Yoku prodded the younger girl's shoulder gently.

"Aw," His sister frowned a little, but didn't other anymore resistance as she darted out of the room. "Don't leave! Kikue will be right back!" she called.

Jun'ichi joined Yoku in a little laugh and Harihane's scowl slackened in spite of herself. "Where would you three like to go today?" Yoku asked politely. "I'm still getting acclimated to everything myself, I admit, but I believe we can trust my nose to guide us around." The girl's nose wiggled as if in agreement.

"I dunno," Harihane still had her arms crossed tight. "Does it really matter? You know the minute we set foot out there, it'll be a free for all. You're the clan that's decided to harbor three bloodthirsty freaks." She tried admirably to hide it behind a wall of condescension, but he didn't miss the hurt that seeped into her tone.

Despite what she may say, or how she may act, he could sense Harihane very much wanted to be a part of a functioning and welcoming community. But she'd convinced herself—perhaps rightfully so given the clan's reputation—that nowhere like that existed for them as long as Kaguya blood was in their veins.

Jun'ichi was tired. Tired of hiding behind his former indifference and tired of measuring every action and carefully considering what his father would expect. They'd gone this long and no one had come for them yet. Maybe it was alright to dare to hope they could truly have a life here in Konoha.

"Hari," he said gently, "The Inuzuka have been incredibly accommodating, don't you think?"

Blowing hair away from her nose, she glared up at him. "Yeah, why?"

Closing the small gap of space between them, he settled a hand on her head. "Don't you think maybe if we don't owe the village, we owe them? To try?"

Instead of swatting him away or shooting off some sharp-tongued remark, Harihane thought quietly, some of the tension easing from her face and her arms finally unfolding. Her dark eyes darted to Yoku, who stood waiting patiently with an encouraging smile in place.

He truly thought the Inuzuka heiress was a good influence on his sister. On both of them, but especially Harihane, who had never had a friend her age, or time for a real childhood at all.
Blushing, Harihane muttered something unintelligible, but it sounded close enough to agreement that he ruffled her hair. Dancing away before she had a chance to recover herself and smack him, he listened with a grin as Kikue's footsteps returned and then she was back in the room with a freshly scrubbed face.

"Kikue's ready," she said with a twirl. "Lead us to fun, Yoyo-chan's nose!"

That broke any lingering pressure in the room, and this time even Harihane joined in on the laughter as they followed a skipping Kikue down the hall.

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Maybe he wasn't who he usually was at the moment, but Madara was starting to suspect it was his old self that wasn't mentally sound if he'd thought that this chaos was a good time. There were half-drunk sailors everywhere. According to their captain, a journey home was cause for celebration. With how whimsically he spoke about it, Madara had reason to suspect a sword through the gut would be reason enough to drink for these people.

He hadn't seen Izuna drinking, but the other three were indulging too, albeit much more carefully. Already, someone had almost gone overboard, too tipsy to keep his sea legs, and it was a mad dash to grab him up before the sea did.

Madara scowled, resting his elbows against the railing and inhaling the salt smell, ignoring the tickle of his hair spilling well past his shoulders in the wind. Dark waves beat against the side of the vessel, and he stared into their depths as if they could provide him all the answers he was missing, or at the very least calm his mind.

Glancing around uncertainly, he made sure everyone else was preoccupied. Satisfied to see they were singing, drinking or milling about, Madara pulled the cloth headband from his pocket. Grasping the ends between slightly trembling fingers, he held it up and sucked in a breath at the way the shiny metal caught the high noon sun. His thumb grazed over the symbol in the middle, a strange swirling pattern that ended in the point of a triangle. A stylized leaf…

"We're going to need to come up with a name for the village." The man's eyebrows lifted in thought as they stared out over the terrain together. His long, brown mane shifted gently in the breeze, and he carelessly brushed loose strands behind his ear. "Any thoughts?"

Madara's eyes trailed upward, watching as a leaf fluttered past his face and holding out his palm to catch it. "Hm," Raising it to his face, he stared at the lush foliage and the tops of the buildings he could see down below through the little hole in the leaf. The area they had chosen to construct was dense with forestation acting as a cozy natural barrier. "How about…Konohagakure no Sato?"

Surprised, the other man turned, biting at his bottom lip to stifle a sudden bout of snickers. "Is that really your best idea? It's really not very imaginative." His broad shoulders bounced with the weight of his chuckling, and Madara felt a ball of irritation expand from his chest.

He scowled. "You call yourself the Hokage—how's that any different?" he snarled, tossing the leaf down with a glare. "I'd like to see you do better, bastard!"

"No," Hashirama stopped laughing as abruptly as he'd started. "Konohagakure it is." Some of the ire eased from Madara's eyes. "Though if anyone asks, you'll be taking credit for the name."

Jolting, Madara realized with surprise that was quickly followed by elation that it must have been one of his lost memories! 'Konoha.' He stared down at his hitai-ate with newfound pride. 'I named the village.' There were a great deal of specifics he couldn't recall, but he knew now this place they
were all returning to, Konoha, was really his home. And the man…Hashirama…was his friend. Probably.

The name and face caused an odd mix of feelings to bubble up, so for all Madara knew it was much more complicated than a simple friendship. Somewhere in that confusing jumble of emotions he was sure he felt a spark of something like…rivalry. Rivalry over what, though?

The tap against his cheek was mildly distracting, and Madara brushed at it, hoping to shoo it away, only for the plush scrape of something soft tapping his face to persist. "What the hel—" His protest died in a yelp as he glared over his shoulder to find Izuna holding a fluffy black cat incredibly close to his face.

His headband slipped from his hands, and Madara almost lunged after it to make sure he caught it in time before it disappeared into the waves. Holding it close against his chest with a sigh of relief, he made a full turn to size up his brother.

Even without looking into a reflective surface, he knew the agitated expression on his face was a perfect contrast to Izuna's wide grin. "What was that for?" he demanded, slipping his headband back into his pocket as discreetly as possible.

"You know, I would've never been able to sneak up on you like that before." Izuna contemplated, tilting his head. "Maybe not all your shinobi skills are back…"

Madara scoffed, crossing his arms. "So that's it? That's all you wanted?"

"No," Izuna shook his head, ignoring the hostility. "I came to introduce you to my new friend actually." His brother gently hefted the cat he was holding higher into his arms, and Madara blinked down at it. The creature was soot black from head to toe, larger than the average feline, and had a sweep of fur covering one of its eyes that almost reminded him of…

"I don't like cats," he blurted, inching away. That being said, there were certainly enough of them on the ship. Cats of all sizes and colors ambled around like they owned everything they laid eyes on. A yellow one had tried climbing his hair when he sat down, and a red one had the nerve to jump right into his lap and proceed to cough out a slimy hairball…

Evidently they were the crew's answer to keep rodent infestations down. Joben had told them proudly about Kazu's idea of adopting a colony of cats to guard perishables.

Ignorant of his discomfort, Izuna followed him, holding the cat up until it was—glaring?—right into his face. "Of course you do. They're your favorite animal." Madara's eyes widened slightly at that revelation. That just…didn't seem right for some reason. A brief, fuzzy flash of a white and silver cat with mismatched eyes baring its teeth at him crossed his mind. Yet Izuna knew him very well, and if he said that Madara was a fan of cats then maybe it deserved some consideration. Funnily enough, he could have sworn he'd prefer the cold dignity of raptors.

"Alright," he huffed, reaching a hand forward and patting at the cat's fluffy head. "What's its name?"

Izuna's eyes brightened again, an innocent smile finding a home on his lips. "Madara."

Madara felt his brows shoot down. "I know what my name is. But what's the cat called?"

Izuna's bangs shifted across his forehead as he tilted his head back and laughed. The cat in his arms was still…watching him like it wanted him dead, unnervingly. "You're his namesake." He said when he'd calmed down. "You apparently made such a lasting impression on the crew, they
decided to name him after you."

Mouth falling open, he couldn't help but stare hard at the feline who looked more and more like his animal doppelganger every second. "You must be joking." he said flatly. "There's no resemblance at all."

Izuna peered down at Cat Madara and Cat Madara peered up at him. His brother shrugged. "I disagree. They've also got a very pretty mi-ke named Sakura, if it makes you feel better." He didn't know what a mi-ke was, but he knew it did not make him feel better.

Suddenly feeling slighted for a reason he couldn't explain, Madara leaned down into the impostor's face, just out of reach of its claws should it decide to take a swipe. "I was here first." He told it. "And I'll be here last." Cat Madara hissed, accepting the challenge.

Knowing he wouldn't be able to go back to staring out over the water as long as that…name thief was around, Madara turned his back on Izuna and marched off, intent on finding the quarters he would be living in.

The musk of a well-aged book was among her favorite scents in the world, but Yoku appreciated the crisp, clear smell of fall sunshine almost as much. In the short time since her clan had settled in the village, she had the opportunity to explore, quickly growing use to the cadence of her new life and hospitality everyone seemed to emit. Konoha was nicer than anything she could have imagined, with its blend of peoples and its abundance of space and especially its proximity to the forests that called to her.

Occasionally, people clearly familiar with the Inuzuka clan through way of rumors would take note of her cheek markings and shy away. But her mother had done an excellent job of explaining to her since she was old enough to understand that their heritage was nothing to be ashamed of.

They had a connection to the earth and their ninjen that was to be envied, in touch with their roots on a primal level outsiders couldn't dream of. Looking down with a smile, she saw Asuga happily keeping pace with her, curly tail bouncing over her back and cream paws hardly touching the ground before she picked them back up again in graceful strides.

They hadn't even been together for two weeks, but her pup was diligent and loyal, and Yoku didn't question why they had been paired together for even a second. The minute the squirming brown and cream bundle had been placed in her arms, the bond was there, strong and instant.

Secretly, she had been a bit nervous, knowing that when Miku's litter of five was weaned, it would be time for she and some of the other children of age to get their very own ninjen. It was the most sacred rite of passage for an Inuzuka, but it was a delicate one that couldn't be forced. Canine and human had to have spirits that completed each other. There was no other way.

Up until then, Yoku had missed out on getting her ninjen many times, none of the puppies from past litters destined to be her partners. She could admit she'd become self-conscious that she, heiress to her clan, didn't have a partner when children six years her junior did. So when it was time for the pups to meet the Inuzuka they would spend their lives with, Yoku— the oldest child there—waited anxiously at the back of the room, more than willing to be last, to work up the courage to see if it would finally be the year. When only two pups were left, she inched forward, biting and releasing her cheek as her mother knelt in front of her with sympathetic eyes…and offered her Asuga with a proud smile. That moment had been the happiest in her life to date.

Now, with Asuga at her side and her new friends, Yoku almost felt spoiled. Kikue was walking at
her left side, though the younger girl stopped frequently to gasp in awe over something new she'd laid eyes on. Jun'ichi and Harihane were barely a half-step behind them, both of them more discreet about the keen interest they had in the village's many sights.

Because it had so much to see, Yoku had led them down the main street of the market district. The Kaguya siblings all appeared to be enjoying themselves, Kikue pausing yet again to peek into a tall clay jar on display under the red tarp of a pottery master. It was set in a row of six other jars, clearly the masterpiece of them all with the most attention to detail, painted gray and blue in a pattern of rolling lines that have the illusion of being endless.

Yoku noticed with some amusement it was big enough for Kikue's head to fit in it easily. "Ooh!" her excited voice echoed from the depths of the jar, and Harihane stomped over to jerk her away before the owner saw her playing around.

"Do you have the money to pay for that?" She asked, shaking her sister by the shoulders. Kikue's head bounced back and forth on her shoulders, the bone securing her bun miraculously in place. "Nah-ooo-ooo-ooo," Harihane turned her loose and cuffed her across the back of the head. "Then don't touch it."

Yoku shared a closed-eye grin with Asuga, now more than use to seeing the sisters bantering. At a glance, Harihane came across very…harsh. Everything about her was sharp. Her tongue, her Shikotsumyaku and her glare. But the benefits of having a nose as keen as an Inuzuka was a great help in seeing past all of that. People who lied or had bad intentions had a thick, burning odor around them that was hard to ignore. Even in the midst of her most volatile fits, Harihane never did, and Yoku trusted her instincts.

"We still have a lot to see before lunch time," Jun'ichi reminded, ever the calm older brother. Yoku was even starting to see him as something of an older brother to her as well, although she was a little shy about telling him. What if that made him uncomfortable?

The sisters glanced around, Kikue clapping her hands with a nod while Harihane shrugged. "Yosh!"

"Fine."

"Let's go that way." They said in unison.

She watched as they pointed in opposite directions, Kikue indicating she wanted to explore the area where merchants sold handmade clothes while Harihane had more of an interest in seeing artisan crafts. Spinning around to face one another, the sisters blinked.

"I'm older. We're going my way, and that's that." Harihane announced, taking a menacing step forward with her signature scowl in place.

"Kikue wants to look for soft new clothes in brighter colors!" she balled her small hands into fists, bottom lip trembling pitifully. Since coming into the care of the Inuzuka, the siblings had been living in hand-me-downs and Yoku had never stopped to consider maybe the outfits weren't to their tastes. None of them had ever complained before. Her heart twisted in guilt, wondering why she hadn't been thoughtful enough to ask.

"I have news for you," Harihane knocked a fist against her little sister's skull. "You're supposed to
be a ninja. We don't wear bright colors!"

"Kikue's not a real ninja anyway!" she argued just as fiercely. The proclamation was followed by a stretch of awkwardness.

Recovering first, Jun'ichi cleared his throat. "You both clearly have your own ideas about what to look at, so let's split up. I'll take Kikue with me," he wrapped a guiding arm around her small shoulders, "And maybe if you ask nicely, Harihane, Yoku won't mind going with you."

Yoku was nodding even before he finished. Of course she wouldn't mind spending more time with Harihane. They were the same age, and even though she had no idea about how the Kaguya girl viewed it, in the weeks since they'd met, Yoku had come to see the siblings as her friends. "I don't mind," She turned to Harihane, who was surprisingly quiet. "What about you?"

"Is that even a good idea?" she asked, ignoring the question. "We're supposed to be supervised. You two can't just go off by yourselves."

"That's true…" Jun'ichi tossed hair out of his eyes. "But I think it should be alright as long as we're well within the same area as Yoku."

"Fine. Whatever. And even if you do get caught, I'm the one sticking close to our supervision here," Harihane nodded triumphantly, much more amenable to the idea suddenly.

"That's…one way to put it," Yoku couldn't believe she was 'supervising' when Jun'ichi was much older and probably more responsible, too. But she wasn't complaining. Far from it.

She could tell her friends had been getting restless shut up in the compound. And she felt guilty each time she was able to roam free while they sat inside, confined to the limitations of Inuzuka grounds. If she could be the one responsible for walking around while they got out and stretched their legs, she was thrilled to do it. Asuga snuffled, wagging her curled tail, sensing her partner's emotions.

Kikue was already bouncing away with her brother hot on her heels, so Yoku turned patiently to the only remaining Kaguya. "So what do you like about artisan crafts?" She took the lead, knowing her way around the market much better and figuring Harihane would appreciate them taking a shortcut.

The grumpy girl followed without question as they cut through a small opening between two stands and around a woman talking up beaded necklaces to several enthralled older women.

"I like the way it's made," Harihane finally said, still oddly meek sounding. "Hands can…do a lot of things. It's nice that some of those things don't involve inflicting pain, I guess. They can make things people consider beautiful."

Knowing how hard that must have been for her to get out all in one go, Yoku didn't want to make a big deal out of how off guard the comment caught her. "I know just what you mean," she said instead. "I really think quilling is pretty, personally."

Harihane's eyes swept up and down every artisan station, muted awe on her face. "What's that?" she asked, pointing with an uncharacteristic excitement. She was walking away before Yoku had the chance to respond.

"Ruff!" Asuga bounded around her feet, pushing at her calves.

"I know, girl," Yoku giggled. "I've never seen her like this either."
Harihane finally came to a stop in front of a young couple with beautiful filigree pieces, every type of design from flowers in pots to castles and even adornments like earrings in brooches, all of them glinting shiny and silver. "Pretty, hm?" the young woman beamed, rocking back on her heels. "We just love when people take an interest so young."

Harihane leaned over, reaching out as if she wanted to touch something but pulling her hand away last minutely. "It's really good soldering. Only a steady hand could connect the metal so well," she nodded in respect at the wide, round earrings. "And look at the way the silver's been subdivided by the metal." She turned to Yoku expectantly, so the Inuzuka felt the need to nod along, even if it was all starting to go over her head.

"You certainly know your stuff, little lady," The man said, folding his hands behind his back. "Are your parents artisans as well?"

Harihane coughed loudly, but with her acute sense of hearing, Yoku recognized it for the disguised laugh that it was. "No," she smiled thinly, managing to sound composed. "My father did take me to a village with a really talented man who did quilling, though. So I watched, and for a while my father paid him for trinkets my mother would like. Until he kil—" The couple stared in confusion, and the Kaguya cleared her throat. "Couldn't afford to pay him, and we moved on to another village."

Luckily, though baffled, they didn't seem to catch on, and soon Harihane was towing Yoku away by the hand. "What's next?" she grumbled, some of her old attitude back in her voice.

"This is really more of your trip than mine," Yoku said pleasantly. "Anywhere you'd like is—"

"Yoku-chan, dear," Asuga's ears perked, even the folded one coming to stand erect, and Yoku felt her own wiggle at the frequency of the shout. She dug her heels into the ground, gently pulling her wrist from Harihane.

Satoko-san, a woman she'd become acquainted with on her previous trips to market, waved in greeting from across the street. Her hair was mostly tucked under a scarf to keep it from her face, and her simple yukata looked warm and padded against the chill weather.

Not thinking anything of saying hello, Yoku navigated her way through the crowd with Asuga almost outpacing her and Harihane following hesitantly from a distance.

"Hello, Satoko-san." She admired the delicate lacework the housewife had clutched in her hands. "That's a very pretty pattern."

"Oh," she glanced down at the open-holed cloth. "Oh isn't it? My husband's just received his mission pay and I couldn't resist treating myself. What with taking care of two sick children, it's nice to have these pleasures to reward myself sometimes."

"That's entirely understandable," Yoku agreed, running a hand through her short-cropped hair with a nod. She figured that's what the woman was fishing for anyway, someone to agree with her. Satoko-san was helpful, if not somewhat pushy.

She had been nice upon their initial meeting, willing to tell Yoku where everything was when she was out running errands and still learning the lay of the village. Since then they'd run into each other twice more, and although at times she was long-winded and a little intrusive, Yoku felt it was only polite to stop and spare her some time. "By the way, how's your mother doing? Is she adjusting to village life alright?"
Happy to speak about her mother's well-being, Yoku grinned, "Yes, she's really—"

"Has she tried those oils I've recommended? You know one good massage with those can rub the stress right out of you."

Yoku cocked her head, not wanting to have to explain yet again that perfumes and oils and any other scent blocker would only interfere with their strong sense of smell, something vital for an Inuzuka. Most scented things other people thought nothing of putting on their skin severely agitated them. She knew her mother would never go for it. "Actually, she—"

"I figured she would need it, what with all the rumors I've been hearing," Satoko-san leaned in with a conspiratorial frown. "The Hokage's forced your family to house those awful Kaguya prisoners, hasn't he? Honestly, I'm not sure what he'd be thinking, even allowing them here." She gave a dramatic shiver.

Yoku opened her mouth to protest, positive Satoko-san was just ill-informed. Some people thought the Inuzuka were savage, too. That they took parts in all forms of debauchery, simply because they saw the world a little differently. And although her clan were blunt people, sometimes rough around the edges, they were no more uncivilized than the next clan who had lived off the land for generations.

"Satoko-san, you've heard wrong," she said quietly. "The Kaguya don't mean anyone any harm, and we're more than glad to allow them a place to—"

Satoko-san stuffed her purchase into the basket hanging from her forearm and then clutched her arms, eyes still wide and tinged with paranoia. The smell of it wafting from her was starting to make Yoku's nose itch. Asuga whined restlessly near her feet.

"You be careful. Why, neighboring village next to the one I grew up in was razed to the ground by them. They killed the men and kidnapped the women and who knows what became of those poor children. They joined the feast, I suspect." The woman shook her head, clicking her tongue in shame. "I've gotten use to ninja over the years. I married one, after all," she kept rambling. "And now that I've heard they'll be making an academy open to even civilian-born children to attend, I know my little ones will want to be a part of it. But how can I send them off to a place where their peers might be…"

"Yoku, are you ready to go?" Despite all her heightened senses, Yoku jumped, completely unaware Harihane had been standing silently at her back, listening to every word.

In spite of not having once agreed with Satoko-san, Yoku's cheeks burned red hot with shame. "H-Hariha—"

"Oh," Satoko moved forward, eyeing Harihane with curiosity. "Is this a friend of yours, Yoku-chan? I haven't seen you around before," She was all smiles now, addressing Harihane with genuine warmth. "And you are?"

A bone-deep shiver of dread went up Yoku's spine, and she was sure every last hair on her body stood on end as Harihane also stepped forward with a saccharine smile and ice chips for eyes. "Harihane Kaguya," And she curtsied prettily just for show. "From the monster clan." She finished flatly, the white of her Shikotsumyaku idly beginning to pop out of her wrists. "It's nice to eat you."

Satoko-san gasped, her face growing as white as a fish's underbelly, hand flying over her mouth in horror.
"Slip of the tongue," Harihane giggled. "I meant it's nice to meet you, of course."

Satoko-san swallowed several times around the visible lump in her throat, her head bobbing frantically. "Of…Of…Of course," Offering a shaky smile, her eyes darted everywhere but them, searching out the quickest possible exit. "You know, I should be getting off now. Dinner won't start itself. Yoku-chan," she met eyes with the Inuzuka heiress, but only briefly. "You take care." She didn't even try to hide her wariness of Harihane as she briskly took off, disappearing into a throng of passersby leaving the marketing district.

Yoku rounded on Harihane immediately to see her wearing a wide, chilling smile. "Nice place. Nice people." She laughed, and it made Yoku's gut twist. Then she spun on her heel, and Yoku almost tackled her from behind.

"You mind?" she spat, all of the vinegar that had melted away over the course of the last few weeks back in full force. Asuga growled softly, her teeth holding tightly to the bottom of Harihane's yukata and her paws flexing to get a solid stance. Yoku appreciated how well her partner anticipated her moves.

"Are you asking if I mind you leaving the market? Because of course I don't. We can collect Kikue and Jun'ichi and go back to the compound right now. But if you're asking if I mind you breaking your promise to your brother and giving up because of one ignorant gossip, then yes! I do!"

Harihane wasn't even really exerting all her strength, but Yoku was having to use at least half of hers just to keep her feet planted. The same age, and yet the lives they'd lived, Harihane's harsh training regimen, made the differences all too clear.

"I don't think I ever promised anybody anything!" And Harihane jerked her arm away with a snarl, whirling on her with a look like a wounded animal, pain dilating her eyes. Instinct made Yoku back away slowly, and she motioned for Asuga to do the same. The little pup let go reluctantly. "I said I would try." She shook her head. "And I did. But if you think she's the only one who feels that way— and will always feel that way—then you're a bone-headed mutt."

Yoku recoiled. She would admit it hurt, stinging more coming from Harihane's tongue than it would have coming from the lips of a stranger. She knew she was far from stupid. But this was what wounded animals did; they lashed out, blinded by pain and just hoping they could sink their fangs into a vulnerable area. And Harihane, well, she was the best of the best, because she had immediately gone for the throat.

"Insult me all you like," Yoku hoped her voice didn't waver too badly as she squared her shoulders. "I'd rather be a mutt than a coward any day."

Harihane bristled, really looking ready to pounce. Yoku half-wondered if they'd end up ripping at each other with teeth and nails right in the middle of the market. Her mother might actually consider nailing both their hides to the wall. "What?" the Kaguya bared her teeth—too blunt to be proper fangs but still an impressive imitation. "What did you say?"

Yoku's heart thundered. She never considered herself confrontational. Pursuits of knowledge were preferable to pursuits of battle any day. "You may not have the same kind of hearing I do, but I don't think I need to repeat myself." She challenged boldly. Clasping her hands together, squeezing so tightly she felt her nails biting at her skin, she pressed on. "You…I really admired you all this time. What you told me that day, about how you should say exactly what you mean, made me think about the kind of kunoichi I want to grow up to be. And even when you take hits, you get back up on your own two feet, no matter who tells you to stay down in the dirt,"
Her eyes were shining wetly, and Harihane's were a perfect mirror, much to her surprise. "Who cares if…if Satoko-san or some other stranger or even the entire village doesn't want you here? I do. Kaa-san does." She bit her lip, suddenly feeling shy even after coming so far. "The Harihane I know isn't a coward who tucks her tail in and hides. She would..." Yoku sucked in a deep breath, closing her eyes tightly. "She would shake this whole village to the core until they see how wrong they are!"

Tears slipped past her closed lids, but when she cracked one eye open she saw Harihane was stock still, liquid flowing steadily down her own cheeks. Feeling it was safer to approach, Yoku inched closer, relieved her friend wasn't trying to move away.

When she was in arm's length, she didn't hesitate to reach out and snag her in a painful embrace. Harihane shook in her arms, but she didn't fight it, didn't try to get away. Yoku could feel wet plops hitting her shoulder and smell the saline, but it was alright. Slow, unsure arms came up and weakly returned the embrace, Yoku laughing in her head. "I really," Harihane croaked, voice muffled. "Hate crybabies like you."

They stood like that in the middle of the market, two girls crying and embracing and sometimes even laughing, finally pulling apart with reddened eyes. "Let's um," Yoku rubbed a hand under her nose. "Find the others and go home."

Harihane rolled her eyes, lightly punching her shoulder. "Yeah, but we're splashing water on our faces first. Junji sees we've been crying he's gonna try that nurturing big brother crap and I can't handle two mush-fests in one day."

For big, tipsy brutes the pounding of their feet across the deck as they danced in drunken revelry was almost rhythmic. Izuna watched men and women stomp around in circles, clapping their hands to the sound of the captain's singing and then swinging each other in wild arcs at every chorus. They were a flurry of bodies moving as if mesmerized by the atmosphere, dancing without a care in the world under the open cerulean sky.

The man in the crow's nest had even pulled out a fiddle, and its light notes carried clearly across the ship—miraculously still being steered by a woman with short-cropped blond hair who looked less drunk than any of the others. Junko, if he remembered her name correctly. That was a relief that someone knew what they were doing.

He looked down into the mug of…suspicious alcohol that had been shoved into his hands, taking a curious sniff. Everyone else seemed to have enjoyed it earlier, and even Sakura had a tumbler of it at one point, so there was probably no harm in a little. Slowly bringing it to his lips, he closed his eyes and took a deep sip, waiting for the flavor to settle on his tongue as the warmth of it surged into his gut. Whatever the concoction was it certainly disappoint, the crisp aftertaste of apples making the drink oddly refreshing. Izuna swallowed more, then wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve and smiling at the several cats that had come to sniff at him.

One of the bolder felines leapt up onto the wide crate he was using as a seat and pawed at his leg. Izuna stroked its back, admiring the black ticking over the smooth cinnamon coat. Purring in appreciation, the cat climbed into his lap, its eyes squinted closed in contentment. He sat there and scratched under its chin for a minute, a sudden wave of understanding and appreciation hitting him hard.

Living on the big ship, in the moment, and answering to no one but themselves…that's the freedom that the Harbinger's crew enjoyed, and Izuna had a sneaking feeling it'd probably enticed Sakura at some point too, which was why she appeared so relaxed.
"I can't get over how good you are with them." He lifted his head, liking how just thinking her name was enough to draw her to him. Sakura sat down beside him, her eyes mellow as she watched the dancing, petting the fluffy white cat with one eye that had stopped trying to get Izuna's attention and rushed to her instead.

"Cats aren't that hard to get along with," he told her. The white cat was so happy to have Sakura's attention it almost shook with the tremors of the purrs coming from its chest. "I think they're more misunderstood than anything." A small kitten that had clumsily wandered into her lap and then up onto her shoulder batted at the ribbon she was using to secure her hair, and Sakura giggled, tugging it out.

Izuna tried not to be too obvious about staring, memorizing the side view of her face in profile. Her green eyes shone as she smiled down at the kitten, one hand going up to absentmindedly brush away some stubborn hair that hung around her lightly flushed cheeks. It looked even longer than it had when she left Konoha.

As she dangled the ribbon around for the playful kitten, he watched, eventually being jolted back to reality by the spotted brown cat nipping at his hand, not pleased that he'd stopped petting. "Maybe you're right," she mused. "Growing up I never really thought that much about liking dogs or cats more…I mean my parents wouldn't let me have a pet anyway, and then being a shinobi it sort of became impractical. But Usamaro's not standoffish at all. He's smart and loyal, and I really feel like we've bonded. Being around so many cats really makes me miss him."

He couldn't help but mentally congratulate himself on making the right call, turning the former stray over to her care. Izuna's attention went back to the persistent cat trying to catch the white strip of cloth. Sakura was apparently too slow with tugging the ribbon away, and the kitten was able to jump up and secure it with a victorious meow.

They watched it fall flat on its face in her lap as it landed from the jump, popping up unharmed and trying to stumble away with the long length of ribbon, tripping over its own feet. They shared a snicker, a comfortable silence settling over them afterwards. Izuna wouldn't have minded staying that way for the rest of the day, just sitting with Sakura, surrounded by cats with the sea breeze in their hair.

But they were shinobi. Life wasn't supposed to be that simple for them, and soon talk restarted, shifting to the inevitable. "We're going to have a lot to explain to Hashirama..." he sighed. "That brief update I sent didn't even scratch the surface."

Sakura's shoulders slumped, her elbows resting on her knees as she looked wistfully out at the crew of the Harbinger enjoying themselves. "I...I'm really nervous." She confessed. "That mission was...well, it was nothing short of a disaster." Before he could break in with some comforting words, she held a hand up. "You don't have to bother trying to spare my feelings. It's a little too late for that, anyway."

"You're right," he admitted, pulling his ponytail away from the spotted cat, who had started to chew on the end of his hair in retaliation. "Even if we presented a united front and gave uniform accounts of the mission, there's still a lot that sounds impossible to believe without seeing for yourself. I'm not looking forward to having to repeat any of it to the Hokage with a straight face."

Sakura nodded, chewing on her lip. "He's a fair man, though. Maybe he'll give us a chance...I think an even bigger problem might be his brother." She glared at nothing, no doubt imagining Tobirama's blunt rejection of their explanation. It'd crossed Izuna's mind too. Tobirama Senju was very devout to his belief in logic. A pragmatist in his thinking as deeply as anyone could hope to be.
If Hashirama believed them, Tobirama definitely wouldn't. Izuna could see the white-haired Senju trying to make a case to keep them both locked in the village under heavy monitoring, indefinitely.

Shaking his head, Izuna looked her in the eye with as much determination as he could muster. "Some things are stranger than fiction, too strange to be made up. What we both experienced definitely counted…I saw the dead rise. And a god that was able to redirect my Amaterasu like it was nothing," His fist clenched hard on top of his thigh. He was still troubled over that. Amaterasu was a technique that had taken him a long time to master and control. He rarely had to use it, but when he did, no one had ever, ever stood a chance.

Izuna had no problem admitting that the god, Yama, wounded more than a little of his pride as an Uchiha. And Erika—his face contorted into a scowl. She'd just been toying with him. No matter what he threw at her, how many fatal blows he landed, she got back up, eventually wearing him down and then beating him black and blue.

"What about me?" she asked quietly, staring down at her hands. "You saw…me. You know about Mizuchi now. You must have a lot of questions," When she hesitantly met his eyes, her face was so pinched with pain, her bright irises had shifted to an entirely darker shade.

That was decidedly one part of the mission he would have rather imagined he dreamed up. He could even handle Madara's amnesia, as shocking as that still was to wrap his head around. Seeing Sakura partially transform into a…a dragon that was perfectly capable of maiming him had sent his heart straight to the soles of his feet. Izuna was fully prepared for the fact that he might not have been able to get through to her, and then she would have either killed him, or he would have had to kill her.

Choosing his next words carefully, he swallowed back all the hesitation in his throat. "You're right. I saw you. Just like I see you now." And it was true, because scales or skin, claws or fingers, green eyes or green-gold, it was all Sakura on the inside. And the fact that she had stopped, that she hadn't gone through with ripping his throat out, convinced him of that.

Her eyes narrowed and then opened wide. "Izuna, now you're really just taking this whole humoring me thing too far. Mizuchi is a deity. And I'm bound to her whether I like it or not." Now he followed her eyes and could tell her focus was on the sea, and the way the sun made it glitter. Sakura looked put out enough to dive in head first and let herself sink to the bottom. "Strange things are probably going to keep happening to me, and in case you haven't noticed, you too."

"Strange things have been happening for months," he grunted. "Before we even met, I was supposed to die," If Madara's recounting of how close he'd been to death's door wasn't enough, a spiteful shinigami determined to reclaim his soul was convincing in a way that was hard to ignore. "And now I find out I'm only alive because your…deity…saved my life for a reason I don't think has anything to do with the kindness in her celestial heart."

Sakura shuffled anxiously. Even the cats had gotten bored with them and fallen asleep or moved on. "That's classic Mizuchi. She always has a plan, but you never know what your role in it is until she wants you to." Sakura sighed. "I was oblivious to all this, until she turned up one day and declared I was going to help her. I've been getting pulled in whatever direction she wants me to go in ever since." Rubbing her palms over her lap, she stubbornly avoided his eyes. "I figured may it wasn't such a good idea to tell anyone, though. I mean all of it sounds crazy, right?"

Izuna had no qualms believing Sakura was an innocent in it all, as much as any of them. Battling gods with someone tended to establish a deep well of trust. But aside from that, his encounters with the deities had underscored what highly capricious beings they were. Pulling mortals into their
orbit and using them thoughtlessly was exactly what he'd come to expect from them.

While he could do without any more colossal mishaps or the encounters of the otherworldly kind, he felt the need to reiterate again to Sakura that he didn't hold her responsible. "Then you're just as caught up in this as the rest of us are," he said slowly. "Which means we need to come up with a convincing way to relay the events of the mission. Together."

Some of the irritation tightening the corners of her eyes melted away. "T-Thank you…and I'm sorry."

"I haven't done much for you to thank…" He swiped a hand across his face tiredly. "Thank you on my behalf, and Madara's too."

The name brought a frown to her face again, and Izuna cursed himself. But when he studied her closely, there was a shadow of guilt falling across her countenance, not bitterness. "I meant what I said before…Memories do come back under the right circumstances,"

"My example," Sakura repeated cautiously. "Uh," she blushed, rubbing her shoulder. "You're not talking about when I told him he liked to sail, are you?"

Izuna laughed a little. "That's exactly what I'm talking about."

"You're not…upset? That I lied? I'm a medic…so I should be taking this more seriously."

"If I was upset with you over that, I'd have to be even more upset with myself for convincing him he likes cats." Sakura gaped at him. "Well," he considered Madara's hesitant expression. "Half-convinced. It might take a few more attempts before he truly believes that."

"…" Sakura took a minute, eyes flickering around. Leaning forward, she whispered, "Harmless things, right? We only tell him completely harmless little lies?"

"Harmless," He echoed, placing a hand over his heart.

Once she had confirmation, the dark cloud that had been hanging over her instantly lifted. "What else do you think we can get him to believe?"

Madara couldn't say he was happy or comfortable down in the cabin he was apparently going to be sharing for the duration of the trip. It was…small. The floorboards creaked. There was precisely one cot. And he'd had to chase out five cats that were trying to use the room for a nesting area before he could even decide if could stand it.

Maybe, if he'd had the room to himself, it would have been tolerable (and that was a big maybe). But they were running short on cabin space, as it was told to him by a drunken green-haired woman named Ai. So he would be sharing with four other people, or else some of them would have to squeeze in with the ship's crew and it most definitely wouldn't be him.

Sitting by his lonesome, he listened grumpily to the pounding of feet and the loud drunken revelry happening up on deck, and he felt the sea tossing the ship this way and that, and Madara put serious consideration into his chances if he were to strip down to only his essentials and swim for shore. The door creaked on its hinges and swung open, and he sat up, expecting to find the
persistent felines he'd chased away were back for another round.

It was the pink-haired medic, and when she saw him, she leered at him, moving to unpack her things and set out her bedroll.

"Are you really sleeping now?" he scoffed. "The sun hasn't even gone down."

"How would you even know that?" she challenged. "You've been down here for hours." She roughly tossed the bedroll down and stepped back from it with a huff. "I'm just setting out my things for tonight, in case I'm too tired to do it later," she mumbled, not meeting his eyes but instead glaring at the floor. "It doesn't exactly hurt to be prepared." Dropping to her knees, she began smoothing out her sleeping mat.

Madara could have sworn he heard he say, "I can't believe I'm in this situation…again." Huh. Had they slept in the same room before? They'd only had the one room back in the inn, so they must have.

Nevertheless, her apparent need to control every minute factor of their circumstances was laughable. "Preparedness even to the smallest measure?" Why was that even so important? It was just a bedroll. "That sounds like something someone without actual survival skills would use to compensate."

Sakura stopped smoothing her hands across the bedroll, head whipping up as her green eyes widened. "You…" she shook her head. "You said that to me before…when this mission started."

Madara brought one leg up on the cot and curled an arm around it casually. "Did I? Maybe some things really are coming back to me faster than expected."

Sakura grunted, sitting back on her heels, placing her own hands on top of her thighs. "Or maybe," she grumbled. "You're an asshole to your core."

He blinked, amused, and she flinched, evidently having let the barb slip out. "Why does it have to be on me? My memory loss is your fault, so maybe this is too. Maybe you're just a prude." He suggested helpfully, watching her whole face crinkle with the effort it took for her not to lash out.

Something about this felt right. The banter, the emotions she couldn't quite keep out of her clear green eyes. Madara realized belatedly he was having fun. By himself no doubt, but what did he care?

"I think we're just incompatible," she said, breathing deeply through her nose. Ah, she'd chosen to go with the diplomatic answer. Because that definitely wasn't the one that nearly came out of her mouth at first. "In every way possible."

Madara wasn't going to let it deter him. Since leaving the island, it felt like he was being left out of the loop, and he wasn't sure he liked it. He didn't have actual memories of any past battles, just the muscle memory of his years of training. That didn't stop him from concluding that whatever the hell had happened in that flower field was far from the normal scale of a battle, even for seasoned shinobi. "Regardless of us being incompatible, your deity saw fit to partially restore my memories." he reminded her.

One minute, he had been staring off into the dark, trying to figure out if a shinigami had really attacked him, or if he'd had bad shrimp. The next, a beautiful woman with strange eyes and a mischievous twist to her red lips was in the room, grabbing him by the back of the head.

He could feel her sift around inside his mind, tossing things around even more than they already
were. Whatever she had found made her satisfied, and suddenly it was like a lock falling away, revealing what turned out to be very extensive battle knowledge.

It was the first time Madara felt like maybe he really had been a shinobi. He didn't get much time to think about why she'd done it, or how, because she was slipping out of the room then, and somehow there was a location in his head, and he knew just how to get there.

She groaned and it snapped him back to the here and now. Sakura made a face as if not wanting to be reminded. "Ah yes, return of the warrior."

"Tell me more about that," He sat straight, giving her his full attention. "Do you grow a tail too?"

The dragon woman, Mizuchi, had warped before his eyes into a sixty foot creature with a long, muscle-packed body that sprung straight from some work of fiction.

Sakura worked her jaw around, trying to decide how to respond; he could see it in her eyes. "Just spit it out," he sighed impatiently.

"If you're asking what my exact relationship is to Mizuchi then—"

The door burst open again, and they both jumped. The blonde ninja, Kureno, came marching into the room with the captain's son on his shoulders. They paused in the threshold, reading the tension rife in the air.

"Uh…" Kureno laughed nervously. "We can…we can come back."

"No we can't!" Kazu pouted, one arm gripped around his head for balance. "It's almost dinner. Junko's gonna want us all on deck or nobody'll get to eat nothin'."

Kureno gently let the boy down. "She runs a pretty tight ship, huh?"

Kazu nodded emphatically. "Ai tol' me she's got everybody by the bal—"

"Hey," Sakura stood abruptly, "I'll be there in just a minute." She dusted her hands pointlessly, maybe out of nerves. "Where's Yurine?"

"In the galley," Kureno shrugged. Turning to Kazu, he asked, "That's what it's called, right? A galley?"

"Ay!" He fist pumped. "You're gonna be talkin' like one o' us 'fore you know it!" he said, clearly imitating Joben.

Kureno shook his head with a grin. "Anyway, she's in there. I don't know who told her learning to peel potatoes better would help her find her one true love, but I'm pretty sure she thinks those things are related."

"Oh! You can pull a man's heart out through his stomach!" Kazu declared.

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach," Sakura corrected.

"No, that's not right." Kazu said, his freckles bunching up in consternation when he frowned. "Ai definitely told me it the other way,"

Madara believed it. None of them seemed fit to be raising children or imparting any wisdom.

Standing himself, he glanced between all three of them, his eyes finally settling on the stubborn
kunoichi, who he was beginning to suspect really didn't like him. "We'll finish this talk sooner than later, Haruno."

From his peripheral vision, he saw her tense, and he could only begin to imagine why.
Sleepless

Chapter Summary

Awkward situations abound aboard the Harbinger when Sakura is tasked with precarious sleeping arrangements.

Chapter Notes

I genuinely just forgot to repost here for a while. Honestly it's hard enough keeping up with updates over on FFN but I will try to do better with transferring content here as well. All I ask is that readers who mostly read my story here try to review. It's good motivation.

The sunset was stunning cast across the seemingly endless expanse of sea. A spill of warm purple and deep orange blanketing the waves made Sakura feel small, yet so awed.

She hardly noticed when Junko put the bowl of fish stew in her hands, if not for the strong aroma wafting up to her nose.

"Keep a tighter grip than that or you'll spill!" she chided, and Sakura instantly cupped the bowl more firmly. As more stew was passed around, everyone gathered together in a circle of makeshift seats. She noticed the cats were prowling, their eyes gleaming hungrily.

"Pay 'em no mind," Inoue scoffed, getting up and tossing over a bucket of fish heads. The cats dove with the ferocity of true apex predators, claws out and yowls of triumph issuing from their throats as they tore into the scraps. Sakura watched for a minute, faintly disgusted as they gnawed the lifeless heads with gusto—right down to the glassy eyes—and then turned away.

Junko was coming back around with mugs, and Sakura was sure she knew what the contents were. 'Isn't there anything else to drink besides alcohol on this ship?' But when she accepted her own cup with a tiny smile and peered in, to her surprise the clear liquid had a minty smell and green sprigs floating around in it.

"Mm," Yurine sipped from her cup with a smile. "The mint water really is refreshing."

"What's this?" Gintaki exclaimed, water already dribbling down the sides of his face as he drank and talked.

"It's what ya lot shoulda been drinkin' a long time ago." Junko glared around at them sternly. "Easy ta make and better for ya." Seeing that everyone had a cup and a bowl of stew, she finally took her own seat, crossing her legs and beginning to eat.

Sakura finally took a few sips for herself, the cold temperature and tasty flavor washing down her throat. It beat having to constantly burn alcohol from her system for the next few days, and Ino had ranted that lemon water and mint water were good for dieting and clear skin. None of those alleged
benefits mattered now, in the grand scheme of things, but it was so refreshing in comparison to what she could be drinking…

"Bah!" Joben briefly made a face, but a quick scowl from Junko and whatever protest he was preparing to make died on his lips. He sipped innocently from his mug, glaring as his crew snickered. "Traitors, the lot o’ ya…" His excited eyes finally met with Sakura's and he cleared his throat."We're all good n' settled now,"

Several murmurs of agreement echoed him. "So tell us about what happened on your mission—"

"Everything!" Kazu interrupted, cats eagerly crowding close to him as his squirming nearly caused his stew to spill. "Start with how many people ya killed!"

"Is that appropriate?" Yurine gawked. She sat between her brother and Inoue, cradling her bowl on her lap. "I…I mean he can't be more than seven—"

"I'm nine!" Kazu screeched in outrage. This time, some of his stew did spill when he jerked, and the cats lapped at it instantly. "And I wanna hear all the gorey details!"

"Well, 'fore we get to talkin' about gore, ya could tell us why we didn't meet yer friends first time 'round." Junko suggested.

Sakura exchanged a cautious look with Izuna, then the Yuhi siblings. How much could they reveal? Izuna's face was calm as he dipped his head in an almost imperceptible nod, bringing a spoonful of stew to his mouth.

Yurine's red eyes, pale enough to be dark pink in the fading sun, were wide and anxious, but trusting. Kureno simply winked, eating around one of his usual charming grins. They were all leaving the decision to her, all of them trusting in her judgement. Madara was the only person preoccupied.

Wedged between Izuna on one side and Ai on the other, he sat poking at the fish chunks floating in his stew, his expression settled somewhere between trepidation and longing. He had to be hungry, Sakura suspected, but some innate pride kept him from just eating like the rest of them.

Turning her attention back to the expectant crew, she decided telling them the story of the mission could serve as a valuable test. Soon they'd have to return home and repeat the mission details to a much tougher audience. If they were going to mess it all up, it was best to do it now.

At worst, the seafolk would take anything unbelievable as embellishment, imaginative additions to crank up the excitement. Sakura laughed a little under her breath. The last few months trapped in this strange new world drummed into her head quite thoroughly that fact had a way of being more colorful than fiction, when deities were involved.

"It was supposed to be a two person mission," she started. "But things got out of hand pretty fast and we needed help."

"Shame ya couldn't a called us," Joben sighed remorsefully, eating two hearty spoonfuls of stew. "Samplin' every tavern on Mino was fun but not as excitin' as I was expectin'."

"The cap'n jus' wants an excuse to put his sword through somebody's belly," Gintaki said slyly, cutting the rugged man a look. "Relive his glory days a bit."

"I get plenty o' glory now," The captain snipped. "And I'd thank you sorry lot to remember who runs this blasted thing."
"Aye, Junko!" someone jeered.

And everyone burst into peals of laughter as the cook flexed her leanly muscled arms and Joben's cheeks flushed under his beard.

Sakura smirked around a sip from her spoon. When the laughter calmed, a relaxed energy hung over nearly everyone on deck, and Sakura leaned back on her seat, just watching the horizon change colors.

"But tell us what happened after we left ya," Kazu urged. "Did you really meet Iwanagahime?"

"Uh, no," Kureno drawled, his blonde brow rising in an unamused grimace. "Try legions of the dead."

Loud gasps went up from the surprised crew.

"The dead!" a woman shrieked.

"The tales are true; always knew they would be…” A man rumbled.

"But if wasn't Iwanagahime what did it, then who?" Inoue questioned.

"Apparently," Izuna cleared his throat. "Stories are a little…misleading in that regard." They waited with bated breath, leaning forward impatiently. "It was a shinigami."

Another eruption of noises and confusion.

"No, no!" Joben bellowed, waving his arm. "That's all wrong! Go back tah the beginning," he said, pointing a thick finger in Sakura's direction.

The chattering mellowed, and in that instant she had everyone's attention. Even Madara, who seemed to have been hesitantly starting to eat shot her a goading look as if to ask what she was waiting on. Setting the stew aside, Sakura tried to settle into the role of storyteller, knowing what they all really wanted was a performance, and not a simple, perfunctory narration.

"I knew something was wrong the minute I stepped on the island," She told them honestly. "There was so much hostility the air was hard to breathe;"
he always would.

Madara got up as gracefully as he could manage, wandering away from the group and toward the other side of the ship. Eventually their voices all faded, and he knew he was truly as alone as he could be within the limited space of the vessel. The stars were hovering up above— so small, so distant, but so radiant. On a night so full of them, like this one, even the moon was outshined. Eternal beauty, totally unattainable.

Some faraway fragment of a time long passed scratched at his mind. It took a while to fully form, and even then he was unsure of details. He saw a stern man, dark-haired and scowling with sharp eyes. He could see himself, a boy with the roundness of baby fat clinging to his face, kneeling in the grass and taking off bloody armor.

A small Izuna dressed in battered armor of his own approached him, followed by three boys even smaller. Their features were faded, their faces lost. Only Izuna's face, his haunted, fearful eyes, were a crystalized outline in his head. Izuna was...was he even eight? Why were they all so young? The only constant he could see, the one that tethered the past to the present, was the unchanging face of the moon he gazed upon, and the many winking stars that had soothed him, even back then.

Madara knew without question he was truly a shinobi. The skills the goddess returned to him belonged to a warrior who had trained from youth, and not a man who had lived a peaceful, sedentary life. The weight of that was only just now registering. He hadn't gotten his skills, his battle-efficiency, simply from training, had he?

It had to be put into practice at some point. When he...when he killed.

He'd taken his first life as a child. In his soul, Madara knew he'd had blood on his hands longer than he could hope to remember. Especially now.

His fingers found purchase in a tight grip against the railing as he leaned forward and looked at the black, tranquil sea. Even in the moonlight up above, he couldn't see his face, but he had a suspicion that his mask was starting to slip, so that was likely for the best. There'd be too many questions etched into it that he couldn't get the answers to.

Like a fish desperate to be released into the safety of open water, the memory tried to wriggle away from him. Or else it was an eel that not only fought for its freedom but had a nasty sting in retaliation for daring to disturb it. The memory of taking a life was that elusive somehow, but all at once, never far from the surface.

Even if he didn't remember the numbers, or their faces, or the gasps of their last breaths, he had slain them. That didn't change because he couldn't recall it. Just as the moon and the stars in the heavens didn't change. Madara sighed and the night swallowed up the sound even as his breath hit the air and turned into a white cloud. What if the reasons he'd taken their lives from them, ended up being ones he couldn't completely reconcile with?

It was just like he'd declared before. Shinobi life really was overrated in hindsight. He left the ship deck with that firmly settled in mind. He found his room with no help (a small conciliation to his fractured memory), and he ignored the half dozen cats who had found it too. They weren't the problem at present. Nothing was more of an issue that there was one cot and Haruno's bedroll and five of them expected to cram together for the night...

Haruno...Haruno had lied to him. She must have! He didn't like life at sea. Because the only feeling he could muster for this situation was sheer indignity.
Sakura's gaze cut nervously around the room. Yurine, Kureno and Izuna stood just as stiffly around her, no one willing to meet eyes with one another. After all the fanfare over the story of their mission, after exhaustion had finally settled over them all, it was time to retire for the night. Life hadn't exactly been simple and gracious lately, though. Why, Sakura griped silently, should it start now?

Her bedroll and the cot in the corner. That was all they had. Five of them and two places to sleep that weren't the floor meant that they'd inevitably have to squeeze in together, and they all knew it. Maybe that was why Madara had taken the easy way out, crawling into the cot and sprawling out to ignore them and the situation. His naked back was to them, the sheets resting down at his hips. He couldn't be more obvious if he started fake snoring.

The flickering light of the candles mounted into the wall were still burning bright, so they had more than enough brightness to look this awkward situation in the face whether they wanted to or not.

"Well," Kureno said meekly, "We could…we could draw straws?"

The timid suggestion snapped Yurine out of her stupor, and she turned on her brother with a pinched brow, her eyes heavy with tiredness. All of them really just wanted to be able to go to sleep already.

But unlike a certain Uchiha feigning slumber in the corner, they had to be adults and settle this first. "How would that even help?" she groaned, pulling at her hair a little. "That would only make sense if someone was willing to take the floor. And after the past few days I've had, I deserve better than that." She finished her declaration with a resolute nod, and that was that. Their only suggestion was tossed aside and they were back where they had begun.

"Madara's going to have to stop deluding himself with the belief he's getting an entire cot to himself and move over to make room; it's as simple as that." Izuna announced, loudly enough so that there was no way his brother hadn't heard. Sakura thought she saw the muscles in his back twitch, but she couldn't be sure.

"You men folk can cuddle up," Yurine sighed. "Sakura and I…well, we're ladies, so it's only natural that we'd share." The blonde kunoichi inched closer to Sakura as she spoke, until she was gripping Sakura's arm almost possessively.

The rosette couldn't hide her sigh of relief, already soothed by the idea. Yurine was right. And there was no awkwardness sleeping next to another girl. Trying to rest side by side with any of the other three and she was sure her soul would just ascend right then and there.

"That's fine by me," Sakura managed a tired smile. "My bedroll's right here..." She started to move toward it with Yurine still wrapped around her arm, even her feet sluggish so when the blonde's own feet moved forward they bumped at the back of Sakura's heels.

"Hold on, sister dear," Kureno cut in, pulling Yurine aside by the arm as she walked past him. Now thoroughly agitated, she shoved back at him, shooting him a glare that perfectly conveyed how little patience she had left.

"What now, Kureno?!" The Yuhi siblings had at least a four inch height difference, Sakura estimating Yurine standing somewhere at 5'6" to Kureno's likely 5'10"; but when she squared up to him like an angry cat with its hackles raised, no one would believe they weren't evenly matched. "I'm tired, I'm annoyed, and I need my beauty rest!"
Kureno, more acquainted with her moods than any of them, nodded rapidly, knowing better than to provoke her in such a state. Still, despite looking like he'd rather keep his next words to himself, he raised his hands with a loud gulp, opening his mouth, "The three of us... us guys... we won't all fit on that one cot. We're not as small as the two of you and honestly, it looks like Sakura's bedroll is the most accommodating."

Sakura's eyes trailed to her bedroll, innocently and invitingly laid out on the floor... and she realized with quickly mounting dread that he was right. Call it a bit of vanity, but Sakura had purchased a bedroll that was more spacious than strictly necessary. A tiny bit of comfort in the field. It still wasn't anything luxurious.

Flat and thin enough that it wasn't hard to feel every pebble or twig underneath her when she was laying on the forest floor, but it at least gave her the option to comfortably sprawl her body out if she chose to. Never did Sakura think she'd come to regret that decision more than she did in that particular moment. Izuna, Yurine and Kureno were staring at her flat, unimpressive little bedroll like the universe's secrets were hidden somewhere in its folds.

Madara had not so subtly shifted—was he really still keeping up the ridiculous charade?!—to face them all now, and even though his visible eye was closed, Sakura would bet her mission pay that the eye underneath his bangs was wide open and leering at her humble bedroll just like the rest of them.

The air in the small cabin shifted all of a sudden, Yurine perking up as she took a shy glance at Izuna. "I-In that case... I don't... I mean I would be alright with sharing with—" Her sputtering died as her smooth complexion was overtaken by a blush that brought out her eyes. Sakura blinked. Had she... had she missed something?

"Me," Kureno stated.

Yurine gaped. "What?" she said slowly.

"It makes the most sense. We'll take the cot. It'll still be uncomfortable," he shrugged. "But we've shared more than enough times. And I'm pretty sure the Uchiha brothers aren't going to want me between them, even if there's room." Kureno stared at Sakura's bedroll almost mournfully, probably telling the extra space he could have had goodbye. He recovered quickly though, handling the situation much more maturely than she'd expect him to, "It'll be fine."

Yurine turned slowly, facing the cot where Madara was still giving the illusion of being asleep. He was dedicated, if nothing else... "I... I..."

"Unless," Kureno's voice took a stern edge. "There's someone else you'd share with before your own brother..."

Sakura watched Yurine guiltily avoid eye contact, wringing her hands together and staring at them instead. Kureno had evidently hit his mark.

Izuna was none the wiser to the dilemma he was causing, and Sakura understood that no matter how intelligent, at some point all men were destined to be dumb when it came to the fairer sex's attractions.

"Madara, you can stop pretending now," Izuna put one hand on his hip. "No one's fooled."

The elder Uchiha sat up, stretching in a way that unwillingly drew Sakura's attentions to the many hard lines of his abdomen and the strength in each defined square of muscle. It was Sakura's turn to
look away guiltily and hope no one noticed. It appeared for the moment her luck held out, or everyone was feeling too tired to call her out.

Madara didn't try to deny being caught or feign ignorance. He stared at all of them in complete boredom, his hair rumpled and wilder at the top of his head than usual. "That only solves one problem." he said, his gaze sliding to Sakura.

She fought back a glare. It's not like he had to tell her that when her heart was already beating a botched rhythm in her throat. Sleeping next to one Uchiha would have been too much, but both?

"Sakura," Izuna said gently. "We don't mind using the floor for the night." Always chivalrous, he was quick to offer an ultimatum that gave her the clearest out, and she found herself stabbed with an emotion akin to guilt.

Madara slid from his place on the cot and strolled across the room to look down at the bedroll. "The way I see it all three of us are taking the floor." He crouched and started to drag the bedroll toward himself. "But I don't think I feel like sleeping directly on moldy wooden planks."

Yurine and Kureno sat on the vacated cot in the corner, watching the show in silence.

"It's Sakura's bedroll," Izuna argued. "If she doesn't want to share with us, then we're both taking the floor."

Madara glared up at him stubbornly but Izuna held firm with a disapproving face to match. "You said you're my little brother, didn't you? But you're always talking as if you know best."

Izuna folded his arms, "I assure you that age notwithstanding, I'm not the one acting like the younger brother."

Sakura wanted to butt her head against the wall until she had a headache strong enough to put her out of her misery. Of all times to have a sibling squabble! Clearly, it was up to her to provide the voice of reason in such an unreasonable situation.

"We can just share," she interrupted, motioning with a sweeping hand at the bedroll that had started it all. "It's only for a night." A little extra convincing for her protesting subconscious. Madara and Izuna traded one more heated look and then it was all decided.

Yurine made sure that when she looked her way, the blonde was ready with a smile full of true sympathy. She wasn't enjoying her friend's plight, nor was she actually envious, and Sakura was grateful for the silent support.

Kureno scooted to the far end of the cot, appearing unsure with the whole arrangement. Some of his golden hair fell into his eyes and he brushed it away with a flick of his hand, cut jaw working anxiously. It occurred to her that he really was handsome, ridiculously unusual personality aside.

"Are you…are you sure you three'll be alright?" he asked tentatively. He too understood the tense predicament for her and didn't make any jokes.

"Ask in the morning…" Sakura muttered. If she made it to the light of dawn, then that meant the answer was yes. For now it was still too unclear to say.

Figuring she'd end up in the middle, she lowered her body and started to crawl to her spot, mindful of how Madara was still kneeling there... half-naked. Settling inside was awkward, her every movement stiff as she waited to feel the warmth of the two additional bodies on either side of her.
She hated how her heart was equal parts terrified and giddy. Sakura didn't relish sharing close quarters with them but, well, they were attractive and she could admit that at least.

No way around it regardless. Madara was nice to look at and so was Izuna. The heat and weight of Madara laying on top of the bedroll beside her made her turn instinctively away, toward Izuna. Oh, she really wished she hadn't!

He was in the middle of pulling his shirt up and over his head, because she'd been a fool to think at least one Uchiha kept all their clothes on while they slept. They probably thought they were being modest… When they slept at home did they take off even more?

The thought briefly sent the wildly inappropriate image of being sandwiched between two men in nothing more than undergarments slamming into her mind and Sakura dove as deep into the bedroll as possible with a muffled yelp.

"Sakura, are you sure you're okay with this?" The thin material didn't filter out Izuna's voice. When she was brave enough to peek out of her cocoon, his toned abdomen was staring back at her. Well, to be fair her head was tilted back and staring at it, but she brought her traitorous eyes zipping up to his face before they had time to truly linger on the musculature definition veering beneath his stomach into his pants.

Her heart fluttered involuntarily all over again. Sakura couldn't remember a time when she'd seen Izuna with his hair down since they'd met, but now that it was, the resemblance between the two brothers was never stronger. The Uchiha genes were a force to be reckoned with, that was for sure. The medic that had been pushed down in favor of the young woman who had once been infatuated with an Uchiha, resurfaced. If it was possible, it would be interesting to study the dominance of their clan's genetics.

Sakura ignored the way her throat constricted, noting Izuna was taking in her very warm face with obvious concern. She wanted all his attention off her at the same time she couldn't help committing the length of his eyelashes and the fullness of his lips and the perfect structure of his nose and cheekbones to memory. 'So beautiful...' It was going to be a very hard night for her.

'Hard?!' Sakura mentally squealed. Why, of all possible adjectives, had her brain supplied her with that one?

"I'm just a little cold, I guess. It's fine." That was a convincing lie, wasn't it? Because her body was the furthest thing from cold.

"My memory may still be damaged," Madara's voice rumbled from beside her, entirely too close to her ear. "But I know the meaning of cold hasn't changed. Your body heat is bleeding through the fabric." he pointed out, voice flat.

"That just means you're probably laying way too close if you can feel it!" she snapped, twisting to give him the evilest eye possible. He could have done so many things. He could have definitely minded his business. But he chose to expose her to the entire room instead! Sakura wished her cheeks didn't at least give him so much credence, but unfortunately they were still bright as fresh roses.

"The downside of this sleeping arrangement, Haruno," Madara drawled, "Is everything about it. But the closeness especially is unavoidable if you hadn't noticed."

Instead of responding to the taunt she turned angry beryl eyes to the ceiling.
There was an uneasy break that was smothering, and Sakura used it to get her breathing under control. It didn't last long because she was made acutely aware of Izuna's proximity not long after. Sensing her dismay, perhaps, he too chose to remain on the outside of the bedroll.

That left Sakura to take what small comfort she could from the knowledge that there was a barrier that separated her thin yukata from their bare torsos. It hardly helped at all. Madara was right. It could be because she was hyperaware or because size aside, the bedroll wasn't for sharing, but she could feel their warmth starting to transfer to her. Her hand itched to start loosening her clothing, but she refrained.

"We should probably be prepared for an early morning..." Kureno's sleepy voice drifted through the stillness. "Junko said something about wanting to put us to work, have us help out with ship chores or something."

The group of five breathed an unhappy groan as one.

"I actually think I may enjoy learning new dishes from her," Yurine yawned. By that time the candles were starting to burn down, pulling the room further and further into darkness. Sakura heard faint rustling from the cot.

"Yurine...your desperation is starting to scare me. None of this actually increases your odds of finding love."

"Kureno," Yurine chirped sweetly.

"Yes? Ouch!" There was an audible thump as Sakura imagined him jumping up and landing ungracefully back down in place. "Did you just pinch me?"

"Good night~"

That was...one way of dealing with it.

It took Kureno a while to stop whining, but sleep must have taken them almost simultaneously because Sakura heard two sets of even breathing from their corner.

"I refuse to clean up after those cats." Madara announced suddenly. "Fish heads are disgusting on their way in. I don't need to see what happens after they've made the journey out."

"The cats love you," Izuna mumbled softly, snuggling a little further into the bedroll. Sakura held in her yelp as he rolled and his chest brushed her side. "Especially Madara."

Despite her urge to snicker, Sakura held that in too. From only inches apart, she could feel the ire rolling off of human Madara quite plainly. "Stop calling it that!"

"MadaMew." Izuna corrected himself.

Madara was still miffed, but he settled down and got quiet. Sakura expelled a loud breath, shifting as best she could without rubbing too much on either of her...bedmates. It was impossible to brace for anything other than a strange, long night.

The air was charged with the feeling of late fall. The leaves in the trees rattled, hues of yellows, oranges and reds that cast shadows along the ground when the sunlight dappled through.

Many trees were already bare, and every day the temperature seemed to drop more, until it wasn't
chilly, but *cold*. In preparation, people had taken to bundling themselves, dressing in thicker clothing, sometimes dawning hats and scarves and anything else to keep extremities protected.

Fire Country was on the verge of another seasonal shift, and if snow started to drift down from the sky one day, Toka wouldn't be surprised. In the meantime though, she would train. Because her blood was restless and so was Tobirama's, and drawing their weapons on each other suited them both just fine.

The smallest distraction had his blade breaking under her guard and cutting at her throat. She managed to parry, not as efficiently as she'd like, but well enough to keep all her blood where it belonged. Toka leapt back several paces, weary of attempting to unbalance his blade with her own.

The fact was, she wasn't committed enough to her sword work today to get the upper hand. Not that way. So she sheathed it, watching Tobirama eye her warily, his mind already working through some analysis no doubt. But it was too late. She had him. He just didn't know it yet.

His right thigh jerked and then his leg buckled completely, his red gaze slightly bewildered as he took a rasping breath. To his credit, his knee never touched ground and he managed to right himself in the nick of time. Not that she expected anything less.

Tobirama was one of the few opponents capable of withstanding the full assault of one of her strongest genjutsu techniques. Almost anyone else would have been reduced to a quivering heap by then, their mind in tatters. Nevertheless, he wasn't completely unaffected, the shaking in his arms evident as he brought his hands together to release himself.

Toka was prepared for that, too. A slightly weaker genjutsu lay buried in the first, and when he blinked and found himself caught in a second trap, she didn't hesitate, flickering over to him and snapping her leg up in a kick that caught him under the chin. That did knock him off his feet.

Tobirama let his body move into a fluid backflip, sword clenched tight in his right hand.

Toka withdrew her senbon and moved in close again, refusing to let him get the distance he needed for a Suiton attack. The slim weapons flew through the air and caught the sunlight, every needle hitting its mark. The younger Senju staggered to the side, landing clumsily as the sword slipped from his grasp. "How do you like my newest nerve agent, Tobirama?" There was no difference in station between them when they sparred. No need for formalities.

A small smirk of approval touched his lips, even as he grimaced in frustration. "Stronger than your last batch, yet not nearly potent enough to be deadly. I'd say anyone struck with these could expect a slow demise from you. Then again you always were sadistic." His body twitched involuntarily, hand unsteady as he reached for one of the senbon protruding from his calf.

Toka's red-painted mouth pressed thin, the bruise on her cheek inflicted earlier in their spar turning purple fast. "Aren't you the same?"

She felt the breeze stir the hairs pushed behind her ear and leaned away in time to avoid the kunai aimed at the back of her neck. One of Tobirama's clones stood close, glaring her down with several more kunai at the ready. "Yes," it sneered.

Toka spit her poisoned senbon. One, two, three… Each deflected a kunai thrown with deadly precision. The fourth pierced the clone through the chest, and it vanished in a burst of water that came spiraling toward her. Pivoting minutely, she noticed the real Tobirama had escaped her senbon, conducting the liquid from his defeated clone into an angry water dragon.

Teeth gritting determinedly, Toka let her fingers weave through the seals for her own counter-
attack, a smaller but equally fierce dragon clashing with his own. The beasts snapped their jaws at each other, crashing together with the tightly held emotions of their casters behind them.

Soon the field was a sopping mess, both of them forced to seek higher, dry footing in the branches of two nearby trees. They held eye contact, no words necessary in the aftermath of what had been a sparring match filled with killing intent.

An onlooker may have wondered how they could ever claim to be allies, let alone friends from the same clan when the aggression behind their assaults would lead one to believe their intent was truly to destroy each other.

But Toka knew Tobirama needed it as much as she did, to be pushed in a controlled environment where no one would expect them to express feelings that had long been too difficult for either of them to unpack. Their understanding stretched back to childhood, a bond forged from stoicism.

Toka peered at the waterlogged earth, nodding to the white-haired man in the branches opposite hers as they worked in tandem to evaporate the excess liquid. With it, the agitation they'd been holding in evaporated too.

Toka didn't have to tell him how worried she was that Reira maintained her rebellious attitude, and he didn't have to speak a word about whatever trouble had spurred him to demand another of their brutal spars.

She wouldn't tell him to his face, but if she had to guess it was Uchiha-related again. He was hopelessly predictable sometimes, and it was no great secret he didn't agree with Hashirama's decision to allow Izuna Uchiha to go searching out his brother in Water Country.

Especially because the Uchiha clan had kicked up no small fuss that the Hokage had "sacrificed" both their heirs on a dangerous mission without properly consulting their council. So they'd watched Hashirama spend the last several days trying to placate the clan elders, ensuring them that both brothers were fine and on their way home.

Toka suspected they merely needed a reason to complain while they still could. Their heirs would return and they'd be forced to fall into line again, unable to badger the Hokage as much as they wished. Oddly, the woman acting as something of the leader in the absence of both brothers, didn't appear to hold Hashirama responsible in the slightest. He'd even explained that he preferred talking to her (although he wasn't sure to make of her constant flirtations), because she was by far the most reasonable.

She couldn't, however, do a thing to keep them all off Hashirama's back, and Tobirama noticed the sag in his brother's shoulders when he joined them for dinner each evening. In his own indirect way, Toka supposed Tobirama was only...concerned. Or the correct word could also be protective. He didn't appreciate the grief Hashirama was dealing with not only from the Uchiha elite but from "concerned citizens" who had objections that the ever-dangerous Kaguya were being allowed asylum.

Toka hopped down from her perch at the same time Tobirama did, both of them sporting a light sheen of sweat across their faces. 'Half of all issues would be settled before they arose if people were in the habit of minding their own business more.'

That was naturally too much to ask...

Tobirama tilted his head back and took in the cheerful sky. He'd forgone wearing his happuri, and his bangs were splayed across his damp forehead the same way she suspected hers were. He
looked almost...at ease though. With the shine of suspicion gone from his eyes and the scowl absent from his mouth, Tobirama was just a handsome young man.

"Tea," she rasped, her voice chilled in her throat by the cold air until she cleared it. "Mei-san will have warm tea out by now."

A quiet huff brought a puff of white condensation past his lips. "She'll fuss," he said lightly.

Compared to the severity and length of past spars between them, their injuries were light today, certainly nothing that required any concern. It wouldn't stop Mei-san, the woman who had practically been a nursemaid to them and many other Senju children over the years. Of course now all of them were adults, or teenagers...or...

A slight shiver of shame ran down her arms, flashes of a girl who was always smiling surfacing. And how cruel were the gods, to give her that smile back and set it into the face of her niece? Toka stopped herself. She had to. "When doesn't she?" she returned as casually as possible.

"I could use the strength before I go face whatever...antics Hashirama's chosen to entertain himself with today."

"Heh..." Toka moved forward, her shadow drifting behind her. Tobirama's bobbed alongside it. She could tell him that Hashirama didn't need half as much watching as his brother thought he did. That the leader of the clan, Hokage of the village, and one of the most powerful shinobi of their generation, really, really enjoyed the control that came from having Tobirama hassle himself over his every shenanigan.

But deep down, Toka had a feeling Tobirama already knew. If the two were fine with their slight codependency, she wasn't one to interfere. She'd just said the world would be a better place if people kept their noses out of affairs that didn't expressly concern them.

Their shadows stretched and stretched but never snapped as they walked side by side back to the main hall of the compound. Toka was more than ready to bask in the small pleasure of some cold-weather snacks and the toe-curling heat that awaited her at the bottom of an empty cup.

Sometimes during the night, an already uncomfortable sleeping situation had morphed into pure hell. There was fishy breath in his face and a damp nose prodding his eyelid... Although it was much preferred to the absolutely horrifying discovery of a rear end directly pressed into his cheek, tail lying limp across his forehead.

The itch of fur settled under his nose made him sneeze, and he sat up with a jolt, nearly launching the cat sitting on his chest into the air. Instead it dug in with its nails and yowled in his face, unhappy with the disruption of its comfortable spot. Channeling some feline aggression of his own, Madara hissed his own displeasure and it scampered off.

The three more on him, one on his stomach and two on his legs, didn't seem as inclined to leave. While the heat of the purring body across his naked torso was nice, the evil look he was getting from the big, surly cat that had taken his name was not.

It came sauntering across the room with a sleek little tri-colored cat at his side. "Stay back," he warned, unsurprised by the hateful gleam in the beast's dark eyes. Tilting his head down to the three felines of varying colors who hadn't budged, he attempted to jostle them by twisting at the waist.

A feminine groan from his side caught his attention. "Too much hair..." she slurred, sleep still
weighing heavily in her tone. As he turned, the cats finally dislodged themselves, but only long enough to let him shift onto his side. Then they were back again. And the two newcomers, the black gremlin and the little white cat with the orange and black patches and deep green eyes were sniffing at him.

He figured Haruno had been plagued by cats all night just like him. "I'm trying to get rid of them now if you don't mind," Madara snipped, not really expecting much answer.

"Not them," she sighed, wriggling around. Heat pooled under the skin of his belly when a small hand carded blindly through his hair and seized a thick chunk. Haruno tugged lightly. "You." she clarified. "All night, your hair's been in my face." Before he could decide whether or not he liked the way it felt to have her hand moving through the thick pieces that hung down around them, she removed it. "Izuna's too, actually."

Laying on his side, it wasn't hard to peer across the woman to see his brother sleeping soundly. There was an orange cat sound asleep on his neck, and a white cat wedged between his chest and Haruno's side, half inside the bedroll with her.

'Bastard...' he thought, not sure if he meant the cat or his brother. Izuna looked like the only one between the three of them who'd gotten a decent night's sleep. Even now, he slept on, oblivious to the shared discomfort between himself and Haruno—albeit for different reasons.

"Morning already?" A scratchy voice asked from the cot. The Uchiha recognized it as the male sibling.

"Kureno...why do you roll so much?" Yurine asked on a grunt.

"Is that why I kept feeling you try to push me out with your feet?" Kureno sounded genuinely curious, and Madara noted he didn't have a rebuttal to the fact that he was, apparently, a restless sleeper.

Her voice rose, indignant. "I was trying to keep myself from getting crushed, actually. And try not to sleep with your mouth open! You have fish breath from that stew..."

"Hah! Well you talk in your sleep. Want me to tell you about some of the things you mumble?" he offered tauntingly. Madara wanted to know where they found the energy and who gave them the right to expend it all at once so early in the morning when others were so clearly struggling.

Their bickering went on, but he blocked them out in favor of looking pointedly at Haruno.

"What?" she demanded, hair mussed charmingly.

"I did say the discussion wasn't over," he whispered. "You still haven't told me whether or not you're going to sprout a tail."
Sakura has witnessed a surprising side to Madara in an unguarded moment, but Yurine's assumption is still completely off base!

Meanwhile in Konoha, Reira wrestles with the weight of feeling her clan name is unearned, further exacerbated by a trip to the Uchiha compound.

Sakura climbed the steps above deck, breathing in the salty tang of the waves as the nippy wind blew hair directly into her eyes. Carefully pushing it out of her line of sight, she sighed, getting a deep lungful of sharp air.

The crew wasn't as boisterous as she'd expect in the late morning. The strong wind had them preoccupied as it tried very hard to change the Harbinger's direction and the sailors tried even harder to keep them on course. Joben was steering, feet planted firmly in place as the ship swayed. Others manned the sails and Inoue was up in his favorite spot, the crow's nest. Sakura dropped back to her knees seconds before attempting to completely stand as the vessel kept rocking, and then powered her way up with another try. The boards creaked.

There wasn't a day of the journey that passed where she wasn't grateful she wasn't contending with seasickness. One small issue averted. That left plenty of others to plague her though. The most immediate problem—annoyance?—was Madara's insistence that he wanted to know all there was to know about her connection to Mizuchi.

That secret had found its way into the light now. Into Madara's focus. She really couldn't say why. Izuna was letting it go for the time being, maybe out of consideration that she was already handling so much. The both of them were still facing the report to the Hokage. Whatever divine mess the dragon goddess attached to her had become entangled in might as well have been her problem too. Winding her arms around herself, Sakura ambled her way across deck, just silently observing.

Kazu was talking to the Yuhi siblings, waving his arms around and yelling something to them over the wind. The rambunctious ball of energy that was the captain's son was always happy to have an audience, just as outgoing as his father. Sakura smiled slightly, swinging around until she was closer to the back of the ship, where several men and women were discussing, of all things, Junko's mint water. It had unexpectedly become a big hit, despite earlier reservations.

Sakura knew she had missed breakfast, spending her time milling around below deck and avoiding speaking to either of the men who had slept beside her the previous night. Luckily, they were needed to help with some heavy lifting at the crack of dawn. The Uchiha brothers helped the other men bring crates of goods that could be damaged by the expected storm coming later that night, below deck.

Yurine left shortly after they did to help Junko with breakfast, and Kazu had come bursting into their cabin, demanding to play with Kureno. Sakura helped Gintaki and Ai feed all fifty-three of the crew's cats and kittens, and by that time she had a good reason to avoid eating with the others, even when her sailor friends rushed off to have some porridge.

Sakura hated how transparent she was being. It was cowardly. She wasn't denying that…but what
choice did she even have? What was she supposed to say? She spent the majority of the night between two attractive men and all she could really focus on was whose hair was in her mouth and willing her nose not to start bleeding.

Going into battles with near-impossible odds stacked against her to face down deities was well and good, but the awkwardness of talking about the night's sleeping arrangements was something she would happily avoid.

Manly, indignant cries from around the other side of the deck drew her attention, and Sakura scowled. She couldn't have a proper pity party with all that noise! Every step was another creaking plank, but she'd gotten mostly used to the ominous sounds the old ship made. The sight of the very same men she'd been trying hard to dodge stopped her short. Although she might have paused even if she wasn't hiding from them, only because she wasn't sure what she was looking at.

Izuna had his arms locked tight around his brother's waist and one foot up on the railing, hauling Madara away from the edge. Three cats watched idly near their feet.

"What's going on?" Sakura asked, alarmed. Had Madara tried to—

"I want off this ship," Madara hissed, still struggling.

"Inoue's already said we're ten miles out in the middle of the sea," Izuna grunted. "You can get off when the rest of us do."

Sakura couldn't really offer up much more comment as Madara almost managed to slip out of Izuna's arms, if not for the extra sharp squeeze that drew a groan of pain from him.

Without ever loosening his hold, Izuna turned to her with an exasperated glare she knew wasn't meant for her. "He found out breakfast had lard in it, thanks to Ai, and tried to jump."

Sakura slowly raised a brow. Another burst of wind fluttered everyone's hair, and she was so flummoxed by what she'd heard, she didn't even bother moving it out of her face.

"I wasn't going to drown myself," Madara clarified, sounding put out by the mere thought. "I was just going to swim back to shore...or the next ship I spotted. Whichever came first,"

"Are you sure you have no idea who you are?" Sakura grumbled, hands knuckled into fists at her hips. "Because something that dramatic sounds exactly like what you would've done before."

The look the Uchiha shot her was full of contempt. Right. Sakura had to remind herself that Madara took his dramatics very seriously. It was a trait that she'd gleaned during the war, but spending as much time with him as she had since coming to the past, it was showcased in perfect outline.

"You were notably absent from breakfast," Madara countered smoothly, causing her to go rigid. Damn him! Perhaps thinking his brother was no longer in danger of flinging himself into the icy sea, Izuna's arms loosened, and then let go entirely. Madara immediately straightened himself and brushed his dark shirt into place over the hint of his pale skin with so much dignity, anyone who hadn't witnessed him a short two minutes earlier would have never believed what she'd seen. "She didn't want to tell me about her tail," he told Izuna offhandedly.

Sakura's cheeks warmed as Izuna's eyes flickered between them curiously. "There's no tail," she assured impatiently.

Madara's lips thinned thoughtfully, like he was still deciding whether or not he believed her. "But
there is a dragon. And you are connected to her." He persisted.

Sakura glanced around nervously. The one part of the story she'd treaded lightly around was her connection to Mizuchi. That was still something that felt like the less people who knew, the better.

"Madara…" Izuna cautioned, noticing her apprehension.

Madara sighed, nonplussed. "Alright, discretion it is then. Even though I think it's too late for that."

Sakura hated to think he had a point, but…

"But if we're setting aside that discussion," A coy smirk found its way to the elder Uchiha's face. "We should talk about the unnatural amount of heat you gave off last night." He turned to Sakura expectantly, and she blanched. "Is that dragon-related as well or is there another reason, Haruno?"

Her jaw dropped but words refused to come. Suddenly, she wasn't so sure she would have minded if Madara had thrown himself overboard.

Madara-sama still hadn't returned, and then Izuna-sama had left the village too. Kagami may have been young, but he wasn't oblivious to the tension circulating around the compound lately. His obaa-san assured him that soon enough, things would be back to the way they were when their leaders returned; but he couldn't help but wonder if she meant that or was only saying it for his sake.

As it had been every morning since Izuna-sama's absence, Kagami joined the other children on the training grounds where Naoko-san stood with Hikaku-san, spear held confidently at her side.

Reira was standing next to him, and she was vibrating with so much giddiness Kagami wouldn't have been surprised if she shook the ground a little. "Thanks again for inviting me," she said around a grin as they both sat down in the dirt. Manabu and the others watched them warily, but none of them said anything. They only kept their distance. Kagami couldn't say he minded. It was too early to be dealing with the bully.

"When I told Naoko-san that you wanted to join in on her training, she was very…" Kagami scratched his head lightly, "amused." The woman was actually tickled pink to think of a Senju training alongside them. But she didn't object, and when he'd asked Reira if she'd like to visit the compound and see a kunoichi who was a master of the spear, she was ecstatic.

Naoko turned to them, her dark hair fluttering softly around her shoulders. "Just because we've got someone new with us today, don't think training's getting any easier." she winked, and nearly all the children groaned. Reira clapped, squealing under her breath, and for that she got several contemptuous glares.

Even Hikaku-san's eyes looked bright with apprehension as he took his position across the field from Naoko-san.

Izuna-sama was thorough in his training and firm in his expectations, but he gave them breaks and gently corrected their flawed movements. Naoko enthusiastically told them to push through the pain and would use the blunt side of her spear to sweep their legs out from under them as an indication that their stance or their defense was off. "If I can knock you down, so can any opponent tricky enough to go for the knees," was her reasoning.

Kagami, unlike many of the others, was still convinced she was well meaning… But Miyako pointed out that a mother bird was well meaning when she forced her fledglings from the nest and
some fell to their deaths, and the rest of the class seemed more inclined to agree with her when it came to a comparison of Naoko-san's training.

"Let's get right to it," Naoko called, drawing everyone's attention. "I'm going to show you how a spear can be used to smash through defense, even from up close." The spar started similarly to how it often did, with the two shinobi sizing each other up and then one of them trying to find a way to throw the other off.

Hikaku-san drew his sword, darting forward with a strong slash toward Naoko-san's knees. She predictably used her spear to deflect, taking a measured step back as she did so. Hikaku hadn't let up, feinting successfully and bringing his sword toward her chest for another attack.

Again, Naoko's parrying was quick enough to deflect him, and she spun on her heel, smashing her spear's pole down against his gloved hands. Kagami winced, knowing that the hard wood of her weapon was just as capable of causing injury as the tip when in her hands.

Naoko jabbed through his defense, thrusting the gleaming end of the spear toward his throat, making Hikaku's head jerk to the side to avoid what very well could have been a fatal blow. The class watched with bated breath, none more than Reira, because it never ceased to amaze how hard they fought, demonstration or no.

The two continued to trade blows, some of them looking like they would come dangerously close to ending with a serious injury, but so far Hikaku only sported a shallow gash across his jaw while Naoko bled a little from her arm.

Up on her knees and leaning close to him so he could hear, Reira began talking frantically, "I never knew kunoichi could be spearfighters! And Naoko-san's moves are so pretty and fierce," she sighed dreamily, and Kagami wondered if bringing her to watch would put…certain ideas in her head. It was looking more and more likely the rounder her eyes grew.

"Naoko-san is the only one in the clan who uses one. Some of the other kunoichi use naginata," Kagami explained.

Reira fidgeted, nodding vigorously, and he knew her well enough to know she was bubbling to say something else but trying to collect her thoughts. "If I took up a spear, do you think Naoko-san would train me?"

The Uchiha had to do a double-take, his eyes jumping from Naoko flipping backwards over Hikaku's head and jamming the tip of her spear into the ground to use for momentum for a flying kick, to Reira's hopeful expression.

Rubbing a suddenly itchy palm against his pants, he swallowed. Well, it wasn't that Reira taking interest was unexpected. And it was good to see her so excited about something, when lately she'd had such an air of melancholy around her that he and Chisato both agreed was unlike their free-spirited friend. "I…Naoko-san doesn't usually have pupils…” he said carefully, "She…she does lots of espionage. Izuna-sama trains us, and we train at home." Every word brought her lips further and further down until she was outright frowning.

He watched her fingers come up to fiddle with the ends of her braid, looking thoughtfully out across the field. "And I guess it wouldn't be so normal, would it? An Uchiha kunoichi training a Senju? Tobi-nii barely wanted me to come today," she laughed a little. "It's just…I don't think I can get the kind of training I need at home anymore."

Kagami's brows bunched, his head tilting involuntarily as he mulled over her cryptic words. "But
isn't Toka-san an active kunoichi? She seems very—"

"Tobaa doesn't understand." Reira's eyes became unnervingly flinty as she clenched the thick, sunny fabric of her yukata. "She won't train me the way I need in order to catch up."

"To who?" he asked softly, worry starting to consume him as Reira's mood continued to drop right in front of his eyes.

"To you," she surprised him by saying. "And Chisa-chan, and everyone else our age who gets serious training."

They sat there in silence, then, Kagami at a loss and Reira refusing to look anywhere but at her lap. Then, as he'd started to gather the courage to try to console her, her head lifted and her eyes shone like wet gold-brown coins at the way Naoko-san had ended the intense match. Hikaku-san was on the ground, breathing hard, and Naoko-san loomed over him, satisfied smile on her lips and hair falling into her eyes, spear leveled at the shinobi's forehead.

"Yield," Hikaku rasped, out of breath. "I yield." That was all it took for Naoko to withdraw her spear and bring it back to her side, point down. She bent at the waist and helped Hikaku to his feet.

"That's what I want to be. A real kunoichi," Reira whispered, so entranced Kagami wasn't even sure if she was talking to him or herself. He leaned back on his palms, legs stretched in front of him, staring at his toes. This side of Reira had all of her normal determination and none of her usual playfulness. With some shame, he admitted that not even he was sure how seriously he took her at times. Then this drive presented itself...

Naoko turned her focus on all of them, and Manabu and a few other boys flinched away as she searched their pale faces. "Now that you've all seen how to fight your way out of a corner using a spear, I expect someone to commit to the life of a spearfighter." Her eyes shone teasingly. "So who will it be? Manabu? Tenma? Yuma? No takers?"

The class collectively shook their heads. Naoko barked out a laugh. "Alright, Hikaku, they're all yours for this next part."

With his breathing appearing to be back under control, Hikaku tied his hair up into a ponytail, away from his sweaty forehead. "Right. Who's going next? I want to see some real progressive with that taijutsu from the last time."

In the end, he selected two girls to have their spar first: Miyako, and Yuma's twin, Tsubaki. The girls exchanged friendly smiles, wading through everyone still sitting and going to take their positions.

"Why doesn't she have the crest?" Reira pointed at Tsubaki. As she made her way past them, the absence of the red and white fan on her high-collared purple yukata was plainly visible for all to see.

Kagami wasn't sure the answer was what Reira needed to hear, given her apparent feelings of frustration with herself, but before he could gently word a response, a new voice broke in.

"It's because she hasn't earned it," Manabu huffed, evidently having been listening in.

Reira looked at Tsubaki's back, then at Manabu's smirk, before finally meeting eyes with Kagami. "What does he mean by that?"

"Exactly what he said," This time it was Tenma who felt the need to join the conversation, albeit
with much less hostility in his tone. "You're only allowed to wear the crest once you've successfully performed a Gōkakyū."

"It's a coming of age rite." Yuma added, tugging at her long hair to move it. She beamed, looking over her shoulder at her own back. Kagami saw Reira follow her gaze, landing on the Uchiha crest sewn in the middle of her yukata. "Marking you as a true adult in the clan."

"Right," Manabu's smirk widened. "And if you can't do it, can you even call yourself a Katon-user?" he asked flippantly. "Or an Uchiha?"

Kagami scowled. It was true that performing a Gōkakyū no jutsu was a long-held tradition for their clan, and a technique that was a great source of pride. But those who couldn't perform it yet weren't valued any differently.

His obaa-san had once told him she didn't accomplish the feat until fourteen, and that may have been why she retired from shinobi life at only twenty-six to settle into the role of wife and mother. Many of the Uchiha who ran shops or lived as civilians had similar stories they'd told him.

Late bloomers by most standards or in a few rare cases, never getting more than an ember at all. Every last one of them were truly Uchiha, though. There was more to being an Uchiha than a single rite. Only staunch traditionalists, like Manabu's father, believed otherwise.

And he'd imparted a similar belief on his son. Manabu in turn rallied the other children to equate their worth to the ability to perform the jutsu. For a while he'd picked on Miyako over the size of her fireball, until Tenma had intervened on behalf of his younger cousin.

Their attention was forcibly drawn back to the match when Tsubaki drew a pained cry from Miyako, who had failed to dodge a kick that sent her flying.

"Your sister's gotta handle on her taijutsu, I gotta admit." Manabu grumbled.

The silent consensus following that statement validated the agreement from the others who looked on as Tsubaki seemed to have the upper hand at almost every turn.

"She's been working hard to improve in other areas," Yuma shrugged. "You know, since she hasn't been able to do a real fireball yet."

"So being a member of the Uchiha clan has to be earned..." Reira said slowly.

"What other way is there to be a member of an elite clan?" Manabu rolled his eyes. "You walk around wearing that," He gestured toward Reira's shoulder, where the Senju crest resided on her outfit. "And you haven't even earned it?" He turned to look at his friends. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I wouldn't want to be a part of a clan where just anyone was allowed to call themselves a member 'cause they were born into it. How're you gonna root out whose really worthy if you do it that way?"

Reira's head drooped, and Kagami glared fiercely. "Back off, Manabu."

"Shut it, runt." Manabu waved him off. "You may be trying to protect her feelings, but you know I'm right."

"There's more to worth as a shinobi than one jutsu," Kagami argued. "Izuna-sama taught us that."

"Yeah, maybe for an Uchiha that's true." Manabu chuckled, "But your little Senju friend agrees with me I bet. She knows her clan can't compete. That's why she's here, to see how real ninja
train." Reira was already up on her feet and trudging quietly away before that insult. When Kagami looked around he saw she was making a fair bit of distance between the training grounds, back to the front of the compound.

"Reira, wait!" He stumbled onto his feet, vaguely hearing Tsubaki declared the winner of the spar as he sprinted to catch up with his friend.

The ease and comfort with which she was performing Suiton surprised not only her audience, but Sakura herself. Four consecutive, successful water jutsu. Sakura lowered her hands from the last attempt. And she didn't even feel the slightest strain!

Yurine squeaked as a little water sprayed her in the face, but the pinkette hardly noticed. She was too busy marveling at how the techniques Tobirama had shown her, the same ones she'd been working hard to master not long ago, were now solid ninjutsu in her arsenal.

"Impressive attacks," Gintaki said, walking by, "Ya could sink an enemy fleet with that, I bet."

Sakura rubbed the back of her neck. "Hehe…" Inwardly, she had to wonder at how. There wasn't much time to practice in Water Country, and more practice usually led to more aptitude, not less…

Unless it was just another thing effected by whatever new abilities she'd unlocked during the battle. Mizuchi was, after all, a river deity. Any sort of tether should have made Sakura highly proficient in Suiton too. That was at least the tentative theory she was working with.

"What do you say about using all that skill to control the waves and get us home a little faster," Kureno joked, laying on his back and staring up at the sky.

That was a level of control she didn't think she'd mastered just yet, but a certain standoffish Senju could probably manage it. The thought of rubbing her proficiency in his face the next time they met made her heart jump with smug glee.

"Actually, I think sea life has been good to us." Izuna strolled up beside her, and she suppressed the urge to startle, taking note of the gleam in his dark eyes. "Madara's definitely made some new friends he'll be sad to leave behind."

"Oh no," Yurine pressed fingers to her lips. "What have you done now?" After informing the Yuhi siblings of their ongoing torment of Madara, they had reacted with a mixture of amusement and pity. The duo had elected to watch it all unfold rather than participate, but Sakura was sure Kureno would have joined in, if not for his sister telling him it wasn't their place.

"Back, greedy beasts!" Sakura perked up at the sound of…Madara in distress? Now her thoughts echoed Yurine's question. Just what had Izuna done?

Madara came running across deck soon after, erasing the need to press his brother for answers. Sakura wasn't sure what had him so worked up, until she saw the small pack of kittens at his heels.

Kittens. He was running from…kittens.

All the while they chased with a chorus of cute mews, fluffy tails in the air. Kazu's orange kitten
was leading the charge, making decent strides to catch up. Before Sakura could decide if she should laugh or take pity, Madara had stopped in front of Izuna, dragging his brother closer by the front of his shirt with a menacing growl. "You," he spat, "You did this."

"I just suggested you give the kitten some scraps." Izuna calmly tried to pry himself out of Madara's white knuckled grip. "You enjoyed feeding the strays with me as children. I was hoping it'd help your memory."

Madara pushed away from Izuna with disdain, glaring down at the half-dozen kittens who were occupying themselves trying to get the elder Uchiha's attention. "You expect me to believe you didn't know they would swarm?" A particularly bold kitten, Kazu's, made a daring jump and latched himself onto Madara's pant leg, scaling up his body with a series of tiny growls.

Sakura couldn't hold in her laughter anymore. The image of Madara causing chaos on the battlefield and the same man affronted by the thought of kittens finding him a suitable toy, was just too laughable. Kurenō and Gintaki threw their heads back in peals of laughter while Yurine tried to be more modest by turning away to hide hers. But Izuna grinned in the face of Madara's irritation.

She watched the kitten continue its trek, until Madara scooped it from his body and into one large hand with minimal effort. Holding the cheeky feline close to his face in scrutiny, he shook his head. "Very bold of you, little one." The kitten wriggled in his grip, leaping onto his shoulder and purring as it rubbed against his cheek.

Sakura's fading giggles died into a reluctant sigh of contentment. "How adorable," Yurine voiced for them all. 'She's right.' Sakura thought. 'I guess even someone like Madara is no match for something that pure.' The kitten was oblivious as it nipped at the ends of the powerful shinobi's hair, making itself comfortable on his shoulder. Down below, its siblings clamored for acknowledgement too, several trying to follow their leader and climb Madara.

"They're highly persistent, aren't they?" he grumbled, watching a jet black kitten tumble over a gray one as they competed for the best grip up his clothes.

"It's not as bad as you're pretending it is, and you know it," Izuna told him.

Sakura thought about who would ever believe her if she tried to tell anyone from her time about this once she made it back… Madara didn't even look like he could believe he was letting it happen. Yet the evidence was in the fact that he wasn't prying the kittens off. The one on his shoulder had tired itself out with the energy it had expended chasing and climbing, and was half asleep nestled under his hair.

The earlier fire in Madara's eyes had softened, and for a single terrifying second, Sakura thought she felt her heart skip a beat.

The dog was as big as any ninken he'd ever seen, and it made sure to assert itself by standing between himself and its master. Tsuba seemed not to mind or notice as she kept her eyes focused straight ahead. "We haven't had any issues," she said, calmly. "The children are all adapting to the village as well as can be expected."

Tobirama couldn't understand why yet, but the Inuzuka head was quite fond of the three Kaguya children she had agreed to watch over until their fates in the village could be determined. She said all was well, and there was nothing about her chakra to suggest she was lying. From her perspective, all truly was fine.
But the woman who had requested an audience with Hashirama not long ago, saying she felt threatened by a Kaguya child she'd met in the market district raised concerns. "You'll understand if I say I'd like to see for myself," he responded firmly. Tobirama had agreed to check if they were being unruly, or if it was, as Hashirama thought, unfounded fear.

"If that's what you feel needs doing." Tsuba agreed. "I haven't told them you're coming, as requested."

The corridor ended, and she gestured toward a set of fusuma that he could only just see faintly through. There were silhouettes inside, and the sound of several children talking filtered out.

"If you'll excuse me," Tsuba whispered, "I need to speak with the kennel masters."

Tobirama nodded, woman and canine going back down the hall and leaving him to his work. Very slowly prying open the door, he crouched, getting a glimpse inside. Sitting in a line on zabuton, the three Kaguya and Tsuba's own daughter were…brushing and styling each other's hair, talking without a care in the world. "Junji, your hair's getting longer." The middle child was saying, "If you're not planning to trim it, at least consider styling it differently every now and then."

Tobirama's eyes narrowed. It was the vicious, ill-tempered little girl who'd dared to bite him. Harihane… If any of them would cause a disturbance in the village, he'd suspect her even before her brother. She'd certainly brought panic to the streets with her refusal to come quietly on the day they'd arrived.

Her brother "Junji" sat with his back facing her, delicately combing through the hair of his small sister, who sat fluffing the fur of a puppy dozing on her lap. "I don't mind keeping the same style." He said, voice gentle as he concentrated on the task of grooming the dark head in front of him. "Simple suits me just fine."

"You know what else suits you fine?" She felt through the strands of his stark white hair. "Dullness. You're boring." Shaking her head, she grabbed up a jade pin and studied it. "I'm going to do something different with your hair, whether you like it or not."

"Make Junji-nii pretty!" The youngest sibling cheered, even as her brother took up some of her black hair and began weaving it on one side. She was the one with the insistence to talk in third-person and the babyish persona. Kikue. She'd said her own name so many times back then there was no forgetting it.

"You know, I've been wondering…" Tsuba's daughter—Yoku, he thought her name was—murmured. With the shortest hair of them all, a boyish cut that barely brushed her ears, she stood behind the middle girl and combed. "You all wear your hair differently, but you all seem to prefer buns of some kind. Is there…is there a reason for that?"

"Kaguya tradition." Harihane answered, "It's the same reason for the beads."

"Interesting." Yoku hummed. "Harihane, would you mind if I left your hairstyle alone then? I'm not confident in my ability to accurately do more than imitate what you already have."

Tobirama had heard much of the Inuzuka long before meeting one, and he would have never thought Tsuba to be such a level-headed woman when the clan was anything but in battle… Her daughter was even more polite, soft-spoken and considerate in way that belied her last name. Hashirama would disapprove of him voicing those thoughts aloud, and remind him that in spite of clan affiliation, each person was an individual.
"Who cares?" Harihane was already securing some of her brother's hair with the pin. Her fingers were deft as they wrapped up the white strands in a loose braid.

"Kikue wants to look like a princess, Junji-nii. Use lots of pins!" Kikue threw up her hands in excitement and startled the dog on her lap awake. Its sleepy eyes blinked in his direction, and Tobirama briefly wondered if he'd been found out. But sensing no danger, it gave a yawn and then placed its head back down.

He couldn't blame the animal. The whole affair was as dull as he could imagine. If these children were plotting trouble, they'd saved that for later in their day, instead choosing to focus on the finer points of hair care.

"I'll use as many as I can without overdoing it," Jun'ichi chuckled. "You'll have to stop wiggling so much, though."

"Sorry," she said meekly.

"I've never had anyone to do this kind of thing with." Yoku smiled. "It's very…relaxing,"

"Our mother did it with us when we were small." Jun'ichi explained. "I believe when she was feeling trapped, busying herself with us soothed her."

"That sounds like a very nice memory," The Inuzuka heiress sighed. "When kaa-san is stressed, she goes hunting with Miku."

"Hunting treasure?" Kikue asked curiously.

Tobirama had always considered himself to be exceptional at reading someone, even someone who wished to hide parts of themselves… but this child threw him for a loop.

"If you mean the treasure of fresh meat." Her sister snorted.

"She and Miku typically hunt rabbit, pheasants, foxes and deer." Yoku added. "One day I hope to be as in sync with Asuga." The pup lifted her head to yip, tongue hanging out lazily.

"If she gets as big as your mother's dog and you stay as short as you are, then you could ride her into battle." Harihane suggested.

Yoku huffed a laugh. "Doubtful…but a definite way to catch enemies off guard," She finished with Harihane's hair and stepped back. "There. I…I did the best I could manage," she blushed. "I'll go and find a hand mirror." Tobirama quickly flattened himself to the ceiling and suppressed his chakra completely. Briefly, she tipped her nose up and sniffed the air as she passed his spot, but if she caught a whiff of him she chose to ignore it, perhaps guessing the reason he was there. When she had passed, he remained where he was, figuring it wouldn't be long until she returned.

"Now that Yoku's gone, I've got something I wanna say," Harihane cleared his throat. "I've decided I'll give this village a chance…even though I wouldn't be surprised if they were spying on us as we speak."

Tobirama stiffened.

"That seems a little farfetched," Jun'ichi said.

"Kikue hopes it's not the scary, red-eyed man!" she squealed. "Kikue still gets nightmares…"
Something stabbed faintly in his chest. A child thought he belonged in her nightmares? Tobirama felt involuntarily offended. He was no Hashirama, but he was also no oni that prowled in the night.

"That's exactly who'd be watching," Harihane continued. "He strikes me as the paranoid type." Now he twitched. Caution, and warranted at that, was a far cry from paranoia.

"I think you both are being a little extreme." Jun'ichi attempted to soothe them, but he wasn't trying very hard, because he heard the youngest speak again.

"Kikue doesn't want to leave! She likes it here! She'll even tell the r-red eyed man so…"

"I'm sure it won't come to that," Jun'ichi patted her head reassuringly, careful not to disturb his recent work.

Tobirama left the Inuzuka compound very disgruntled that afternoon. Everything he did, he did for the good of the village, and occasionally to protect Hashirama from his own good intentions. Nothing warranted the grave insult of stray children thinking he was a paranoid, red-eyed manifestation from a nightmare!

A solitary leaf brushed her cheek as it fell, and Sakura caught it loosely in her hand. Being on land again, closer to home than she had been in weeks, was an invigorating feeling. Days on the Harbinger were peaceable and lively all at once, each night testing her just a little more as she tried to adjust to their sleeping arrangement.

On the second night when they'd returned to the cabin after dinner and Sakura realized they would need to share, yet again, she told herself she'd make peace with it. That had turned out to be a lie at worst and an extreme stretch of the truth at worse. None of the bashful awkwardness from the first night had vanished. Not really.

Strangely it had never dawned on her that would be how her nights went until they returned to land, but it sank in quickly enough. She woke up the next morning stiff from trying to stay perfectly still, with Madara bluntly telling her that she'd been the one keeping him awake. Because she snored.

She didn't. She was sure she didn't. He was an antagonistic liar. Nevertheless, it was good to be back out in the open, the piney smell of the Fire Country's forests she was so familiar with drifting to them as they left Yumegakure. Saying goodbye to the Harbinger's crew at the port had been bittersweet. Making the return trip back had endeared them to her more than ever, and she was sure that the others felt much the same. Even Madara, to a degree, had begun relaxing on the ship. Minutely.

Joben assured them that were they ever in need of his services again, to shout to the sea and the wind would carry the message. In actuality, she supposed he was a contact of Konoha now.

In favor of returning back to the village as fast as possible, they had decided to skip taking a scenic day to sample the seaside town and continue on their way. It was growing colder, too, and none of them really wanted to stay at an inn after the last big…incident. Konoha was just under two days away, but so was the inevitable mission report.

If there was ever a time when Mizuchi intervening on her behalf would be appreciated, it was then and there. No such luck, though. The goddess had gone silent again, presumably off somewhere hiding away from the other deities around the world they now knew were all hunting for her.

Because… that, Sakura reminded herself in agitation, she didn't know. It was frustrating, putting
blind faith in a goddess who was as wily as she was powerful, when she too could become a target simply for her reluctant affiliation with her.

The next leap from one branch to another shook a cluster of dried leaves from the tree, a smattering of fall colors dropping to the forest floor. Yurine landed beside her, arms cinched tight around her own body. "If it's this cold now, imagine how it'll feel when it's nightfall..." she pouted. "You... you don't think it'll snow before we reach the village, do you?"

"Well that shouldn't be a problem." Kureno called from behind them. "They know Katon, don't they?" he inclined his head to where Madara and Izuna were up ahead, speaking in hushed tones as they traveled. Sakura wondered if Izuna was mentally coaching Madara on how to interact with everyone once they arrived home. Unless his memories miraculously all returned between now and then, he'd have to face a pretty big adjustment...

All things considered, though, he'd taken to the amnesia in stride. Plenty of patients she'd seen who had it grew more and more distressed the longer they were without their full identity. Some even fell into a state of depression, or experienced waves of past trauma when unpleasant parts of their lives they had since coped with came back, and they had to relive them. Madara was in many ways holding up well. That was...good.

For Izuna's sake! Sakura recovered with a shake of her head. It was a relief for Izuna, since he'd be dealing with Madara the most. Although, she couldn't forget that she'd approached him and volunteered to stop by the compound as often as her schedule was allow to work with him the way she'd worked with other amnesia patients, checking to make sure he wasn't regressing.

Izuna was a friend, she told herself, and she wanted to alleviate some of the worry he'd be naturally experiencing from his mind. Then there was apart of her that remembered why Madara was amnesiac to begin with. He'd attempted to shield her from falling rubble. Unnecessarily.

She hated how she felt guilty against her will, felt a moral sense of obligation when not even two weeks ago she'd been happy just to hate him and nothing more. A breath whooshed out of her when she nearly misjudged the distance to the next branch and slipped before righting herself.

"Sakura, what's wrong?" Yurine asked. "And didn't you hear what I was saying?"

Blinking rapidly as if that would wipe the distractions from her mind, Sakura turned to her friend with a smile she hoped was genuine enough to avoid suspicion. "Of course I did..." she bluffed. Yurine didn't look as convinced, and Kureno shot her a knowing grin. "But tell me anyway,"

"I said," Yurine pursed her lips, "Shouldn't we be getting ready to make camp somewhere soon? The sun always sets quicker in the winter." Winter. Yes, technically it was early winter, December rolling in with a burst of cold. "I'm worried those two will just want to keep traveling through the dark with the way they're going...and the village isn't that far away that we need to rush...right?" The blonde clasped her hands in front of her and looked up through her lashes.

Sakura glared. She knew what Yurine was getting at. She wanted Sakura to be the one to ask the brothers if they could stop for the night. Because the girl who saw hearts and roses around every corner had it in her mind that Sakura held some special sway over the Uchiha. Some attraction between them all.

It was further proof to just how love-addled Yurine's brain constantly was. All she ever did with Madara was argue. Memories or no memories, that hadn't changed much. And she and Izuna got along well. As friends. What was Yurine seeing that she wasn't?
"Fine," she said pointedly, "I'll talk to them." Yurine's ruby eyes lit up. "Only because I'm kind of cold too."

Yurine's smile brightened. "Tell them you're hungry and I think Madara will hunt something." Sakura resisted the urge to gawk. She was clearly overestimating how much Madara cared about her needs to begin with.

"What about my hunting skills?" Kureno whined, clearly feeling left out.

"You're more of a gatherer." Yurine turned away from her brother dismissively. "Anyway, Sakura, go on!" she encouraged.

Ignoring the siblings chattering about the likelihood that the request would work, Sakura increased her pace, jumping closer and closer to the backs with the matching fans.
Sakura faces the moment she’s been dreading: coming clean to the Senju about the details surrounding Sekai’s mission gone awry, and her role in it all. Afterwards, everyone attempts to get back to some form routine in the village again.

Just to be clear, several different texts are used in this chapter. "Bold" text indicates present-day Mizuchi is speaking in Sakura's mind.

"Bold/Italics" text indicates past-Mizuchi talking.

"Italics" is Sakura speaking directly to Mizuchi, aloud. Different than her contained thoughts.

You may have guessed from this "text key" that some pretty serious things are discussed in this chapter. And you'd be right.

Also, chapter titles are all pretty important with this story, and this one is no different.

Since childhood, there had been a set way Tobirama went about life. His clan praised him as a brilliant tactician far beyond his years, but truthfully he just despised leaving things to chance. That carried over as thorough strategy on the battlefield. Better to be sufficiently prepared. Even for the unexpected.

That was why he'd quickly been able to work village management down to its own equation of sorts. On any given day he had a schedule, a plan to squeeze efficiency from every hour be they light or dark ones, and room for contingencies, should anything go wrong.

Nothing was ever as flawless as he would like—which never really impeded his persistence that everything in his proximity be made as close to faultless as nature would allow— so making room for plan alterations was a must. He accounted for the factors that remained a constant, like Hashirama's many eccentricities, his training, and the fact that somewhere along the line a fool would cross him and try his patience.

Additionally, his formulaic logic allowed for no fewer than three changing variables but no more than five. In his just over two decades of life, Tobirama had never gotten to the point where he needed to account for more than five unexpected changes in one day.

But nothing could upset a meticulous schedule, a sound plan, quite like the irksome sense of humor belonging to whatever higher being that blew the catalyst of an anomalous pink-haired kunoichi into existence.
Hashirama's preoccupation with the weather and how it would affect his bonsai, he could predict. Simple causal mechanics. In the earliest hours of the morning snow had started to drift down, gentle but persistent. Knowing his brother to the exasperating extent that he did, nothing surprised him when Hashirama paused speaking to the civilian he'd been receiving, and commented rather forlornly that Bukkai would need to be repotted before snow piled up.

Cold weather was when cherry blossom bonsai did some of their best growing, and caring for the infernal weed was at least a solid quarter of all Hashirama ever thought about anymore. The rightfully speechless man requesting permission to start a donkey farm off the land near the residential district where he lived—no, no, and a thousand times no, the smell alone!—had been shooed out in a hurry shortly after by the brother least distracted by the snow but most impatient for the meeting to end.

After that had been sorted, it was back to the usual. Refocusing his petulant older brother who would most likely be helping the village children pile snow together for their winter creations if he had it his way, was near impossible. So Tobirama suggested they break for tea. Yet another prediction was met when Hashirama agreed.

They sat in the office and drank, Tobirama's more bitter than sweet as he preferred and Hashirama's generously dolloped with honey, eating the bento meals Mei-san had forced on him before he left the compound that morning. Normally the mother-henning would be met with at least token resistance, but Tobirama had taken the two meals with open gratitude, because it had already promised to be a long, cold day, and they'd need to keep their strength up.

"I don't remember the last time it snowed this early in the season," Hashirama said around a huff. After a long sip of tea he continued. "Weather has been a lot more…unpredictable than usual for months."

That was true enough. Plenty of panicked farmers had come to them when the summer heat stretched into fall, worrying over what that meant for their crop yields. Hashirama, bleeding heart that he was, had promised to compensate them all for the vegetables and fruits that wouldn't survive and therefore meant less for them to sell.

A good gesture, but Tobirama could only think about how quickly Hashirama forgot that with Konoha in its fledgling state and with most of the money initially granted to them from the daimyo already allocated into infrastructure, they couldn't go tossing coins at every weepy-eyed farmer who couldn't get their tomatoes to grow, no matter how unfortunate it was. Sometimes circumventing Hashirama's desire to meet the needs of every last villager was the hardest part of his job as adviser.

"Nature will right itself," Tobirama said, a touch distracted. The arrival of the group containing two very distinct chakra signatures, one of which he'd know anywhere, had come sharply into focus.

"Of course," Hashirama went on, picking over his bento. The food at the end of his chopsticks made it an inch away from his lips before he set them down again with a sigh. "It's just not optimal…you know, when the village is only just getting on its feet."

Idly, Tobirama cut his brother a pointed glance. Sitting up a little straighter, he took his half-empty cup in both hands and let the heat transfer into his palms, crossing one leg over the other. "Your idealism can't effect the weather. Even you should know that."

"Still," His brown eyes cut to the window behind him. Snow was still making its descent to earth. "The team that went to Sekai should have made it back at least to Yume by now. Unless there were delays out at sea. Do you think they'll—"
"I wouldn't worry about them." That drew a disappointed frown from his brother.

"Tobirama, I'm very aware of how you feel about the Uchiha, but showing some consideration would be—" he stopped, his attention at the door. Good. If his brother didn't notice the five chakra signatures when they were this close then he wouldn't have been much of a shinobi.

Hashirama was suddenly the picture of discipline when the voices muttering in the hall quieted down to a knock on the door.

"Come in," His brother was trying his best to keep his voice neutral as he leaned forward. It was as if there was any actual mystery about just who'd arrived.

Tobirama set aside his cup and what was left of his lunch as Izuna Uchiha, the Yuhi siblings, Haruno, and lastly Madara, filed in with a mood of apprehension hanging about them. There was a rosy tint to all their faces and he absently watched Haruno reach up and brush lingering snowflakes from her hair. Curiously, the older of the Uchiha was the only one that didn't seem to be carrying any unspoken tension. He shook the light dusting of snow from his shirt at an unhurried pace.

"Lord Hokage," Haruno said in a clear, polite tone. Four of them bowed at the waist. Madara remained upright. Tobirama barely suppressed a glare. In spite of Hashirama's ease with the informality of their relationship, in such a setting Madara could pretend to care about rank.

"Welcome back," Hashirama greeted warmly. His brother didn't comment on that subtle rigidity that swept in with them, nor did he try to keep up the façade of the reserved Hokage. "It's a relief that everyone's finally made it home." It was easy to tell he meant it. Hashirama spent many a day attempting to conceal his concern to no avail.

Madara took conspicuous glances around the room, his eyes falling to settle on Hashirama. "Hashirama," his eyes squinted contemplatively. "If it weren't for the crumbs on your face I might actually buy into the whole Hokage image."

Easy amusement passed over his brother's face as he brushed away the stray crumbs. "Good to see your time away hasn't made you any less blunt," he smirked. "With the urgency of your last message I wasn't sure what to expect for a while."

But none of the others were charmed, Tobirama noted. Haruno and Izuna especially cast Madara rueful looks.

"Actually, Hokage-sama," Haruno intoned, her voice small and her eyes downcast. "There's been… a lot that's happened since we left." The way she carefully chose her words sobered Hashirama, playfulness falling from his features.

The blonde siblings fidgeted tellingly. The girl played with her hair while the young man crossed his arms and quietly tapped his fingers. Tobirama could see Izuna mentally girding his loins, preparing himself for some fall out they all clearly could feel coming.

"I see," Hashirama rested his hands on the desk and swept his eyes over all of them. "Maybe you should start from the beginning, then."

With a nod, the rose-haired woman lifted her face to reveal it set with determination. "There was obviously something wrong the minute we arrived. Aside from the hostility from the islanders, the atmosphere was tainted. I met a medic from the Yuki clan, and he brought me to the clinic where they'd been quarantining the victims of the illness." A grimace passed over her as she swallowed. "Once I got a good look at what was happening it really wasn't a surprise no one understood how to
treat them. There's no conventional cure that would work on...on a blight."

Tobirama couldn't maintain his silence. Since they'd entered, something he couldn't place had been off. In addition to Madara's usually noxious chakra, the likes of which had been making his skin crawl since childhood, Haruno's own presence was mixed with the same prickle of something otherworldly he'd sensed the moment they met. Only now it wasn't a subtle feeling that evaded his grasp. Although hers didn't contain the same malevolence he associated with his Uchiha nemesis.

"A what?" he demanded.

"They're a destructive, corrosive taint." She explained. "They come from gods."

"Gods?" The Senju echoed, two tones clashing. While Hashirama was mostly surprised, Tobirama was irritated by the irrationality of what he'd been told so far. Four. His outlined day still had room for four unexpected occurrences. Nothing was in danger of unraveling. Yet.

"Just because a malady hasn't been encountered before, it can't be directly contributed to interference by the gods," he asserted, drawing Haruno's attention his way. As if noticing him for the first time—something that he would never admit only annoyed him more—her face contorted into a confrontational glare mid-blink.

"I know what I'm talking about," she stated, her lips settling into a firm line.

"It's true," Izuna added, briefly and gently touching his hand to her arm. Tobirama found himself staring at the spot minutes after they had stopped contact. "Blight are real, and they were the cause of everything happening on Sekai."

Hashirama leaned back in his chair and sucked in a deep breath that came out in a weary sigh. "The more obvious cause would be political unrest over limited resources and an unfortunately-timed and highly contagious outbreak."

"On the surface," Izuna shrugged, "That's the case."

"But underneath that it was all staged," Haruno insisted, her voice steadily rising. "The warning Madara must have written to you about was because a sect of acolytes that worship the goddess Iwanagahime was after us, to keep us from getting to the bottom of everything."

"And...and you were attacked by these acolytes?" Hashirama ventured a guess.

"We made a great many enemies during this mission." Madara explained, adjusting the position of the kama at his waist. "The acolytes being the least of which. Although I'm told that was the confrontation that led to me losing my memory,"

A bug could have been heard crawling on the windowsill outside.

Hashirama's eyes bulged wide, his jaw hanging slack. "Lose your memory?" he sputtered. "That's a strange thing to joke about, Madara." The weak chuckle died off when no one joined in.

"He's not joking..." Haruno declared with a head shake. "He's suffering from an acute case of retrograde amnesia."

Inappropriate as it was, a small scoff managed to slip past Tobirama's mask of impartiality.

"You remember nothing?" the white-haired shinobi pressed. "Your own name notwithstanding evidently."
"It's coming back slowly," Izuna spat, sending him a withering glare that told Tobirama the Uchiha second-in-command knew he found the situation far more intriguing than he should.

Madara sized him up with a head tilt. "I remember I don't like you."

"A mutually shared sentiment." Tobirama agreed.

"Not now," Hashirama hissed, massaging his temples. "I'm still...this is...how did this happen?"

Immense guilt was rolling off Haruno in waves but Madara hardly took notice. "I'm told I played hero a little too well," he carded a hand through his hair. "And pushed Haruno out of the way of oncoming danger."

Both Senju turned their stares to her, and she grew flustered. "W-Well he did, but—"

Tobirama cut off her blathering with a sigh. "You finding a way into a tense situation is the one part of this story I have no trouble believing thus far,"

She tapped her heel, fists clenched, and across the room a superficial crack appeared on the side of a bookshelf. "It's not my fault!"

Seeking to diffuse the situation, Hashirama lifted his hands in a placating fashion. "Of course not," he soothed. "Please, continue."

"It wasn't long after that that we found them at the inn," Kureno Yuhi spoke up for the first time. "After the ride straight from hell." he grumbled, a flash of genuine horror passing over his features.

"And then a strange woman found us after that," his sister joined, "Takara. A miko of Iwanagahime."

"The group trying to kill you?" Hashirama, for some reason, had pulled his bonsai closer and was stroking a leaf between his thumb and forefinger. "You were discovered by the enemy?"

"It's a little more complicated than that," The male Yuhi sheepishly rubbed his neck while holding up his other hand and indicated a small pinch. "She wasn't really our enemy at the time."

The longer the story continued, the more it worked at going from outrageous to the work of fairytales. "Then who was?" Tobirama bit out.

"The God of Death."

"The undead."

"A bored shinigami."

Any one of those three answers on their own would have sent him into a steady rage over the blatant disrespect to his intelligence. But hearing them all together was just too much, really, and a very audible snarl rumbled from his chest. Air left his brother's lungs in a choked wheeze simultaneously.

"Enough," Tobirama got to his feet, coming to stand in front of Hashirama's desk and directly before all of them. "The truth. Now."

"The truth," Izuna said just as fiercely, "is exactly what we've all just said. As unbelievable as it sounds to you."
Tobirama laughed coldly. "Unbelievable is putting it mildly. Deities and their servants roam the earth spreading havoc?" His sensor abilities had been in effect the entire time, and they seldom, if ever, fed him incorrect information about individuals in his crosshairs. None of their chakras suggested they were lying. At least they didn't believe they were. "Whatever happened on that island has taken a long-term psychological toll." Turning to Hashirama, he continued, "None of them are fit to continue on active duty. They truly believe what they're saying." He had room for three more unplanned deviations from his status quo. He'd gotten by on less.

"Or," Haruno sneered, that other energy curling around her chakra igniting into something…less docile. "We could be telling the truth."

"Truth is relative to each individual," the younger Senju conceded. "But my truth has always been based on proven facts. Nothing you've said so far sounds provable or factual. Skepticism is a warranted response."

"He makes a point," Madara confessed. Down to two more unplanned deviations. Madara agreeing with him even grudgingly could technically almost count as two in one, but Tobirama wanted to be generous with himself. "It's still an obnoxiously delivered one though." he told Izuna.

That he could brush aside. He and the Uchiha had described each other in much worse terms in the past, anyway.

"I..." Haruno squeezed her eyes shot tight, and when they popped open again they were lit with undeniable fire. "I can partially transform myself." she offered. And then quieter, "Into a dragon..."

With a lazy perusal, Madara muttered, "You can't do that at will."

"Whose side are you on?" Yurine Yuhi scolded.

Tobirama remained doubtful. "Dragons aren't real." Even Hashirama looked ready to object at that. "Using Suiton or your Mokuton to shape water or wood into the form of a dragon hardly makes them real."

"I'd be highly curious to hear your simple explanation to that," Madara taunted, forcing Tobirama to give attention to Haruno, who was doubled over and holding her abdomen, eyes shut and teeth clenched.

The air was so full with that potent essence she kept locked inside, there was no doubt everyone in the room could feel it. Not sure what he was witnessing, the younger Senju silently drew two kunai, holding them at the ready.

Less cautious, Hashirama peered around him, "Sakura-san?"

She lifted her head to stare directly into Tobirama's red glare. Half of her face was a patchwork of scales that shone beautifully, silver with a tint of overlying red. When she uncurled her arms from her waist, he could see one of her hands was scaled and wickedly clawed with nails that could gut a man. The eyes staring defiantly at him were mismatched, one its normal soulful green, and the other a peculiar mixing of green and gold with a thin pupil more like that of a snake's than a human. "I wanted to keep this to myself until I could figure out what was happening," she huffed.

"Is this a kekkei genkai?" Hashirama mumbled. Leave it to his brother to sound more awed than wary.

"No," Tobirama answered for her, kunai still held steady. "I'd be able to sense it. What exactly is this, Haruno?"
One side of her mouth curled in a smirk that revealed the promise of inhumanly sharp teeth. "Your proof."

He was rock still, sizing up every part of her in this transformed state, unable to deny… that… she…or at least this…was something there was no easy explanation for.

Sakura Haruno had single-handedly caused him to use up every one of his five allowances for improbable occurrences in one day, and shattered the scrupulous working of his logical approach to everything. And in that moment, he sorely resented her for it.

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In the charged silence that followed, Sakura focused on regulating her breathing and shifting back to normal. She may have effected a cool exterior, but inside she was a racing heart and iced blood, terrified that the Hokage and his brother wouldn't be as accepting as her companions thus far. Both men seemed to still be processing, after all.

When the fangs in her mouth had receded enough for her to speak without the fear of biting through her tongue, Sakura bravely continued, "Before I arrived in the village I met a river deity named Mizuchi. I was disoriented and she was persistent." she swallowed, everyone's eyes locked on her. "She decided to make me what she calls a godslayer." The haughty, demanding face of the goddess who had dragged her into mess after mess filled her mind. A glance at the back of her right hand revealed it had returned to its smooth, pale state, much to her relief.

The acute sight in her left eye she associated with the advanced senses granted to her by the… Dragon State… had disappeared too, so she was guessing that was also back to normal. Still, Tobirama Senju looked ready to come rushing at her, to run her through without a second thought. They'd all anticipated the uphill fight this would be, but Sakura was beginning to worry over whether being truthful would land them all in a dank prison cell. Had the T&I building been constructed in their absence?

"A godslayer," The Hokage said under his breath, his brown eyes troubled. "That seems like an incredibly big task to entrust to a human…"

Sakura nodded. She'd spent plenty of nights in the first month awake and wondering why it had to be her, what she'd done to attract such unwanted attention from such a dangerous force. "I still don't understand why exactly, but after the events of Sekai I know she's not the only one out there. Yama, the God of Death we met might have overpowered us if Mizuchi and Madara hadn't arrived in time. And Erika, his shinigami, was able to manipulate everyone's minds and decimate most of the island's population with no resistance."

"You should have seen those things," Kureno cut in, and Sakura couldn't say she minded someone else taking over the story for a while. "Ordinary people with the strength of monsters. I saw a little girl take a fatal axe blow to the stomach and brush it off. I…I cut a man's hand off and he didn't flinch, just kept trying to kill me." He stared challengingly in Tobirama's direction. "Since when does hacking off someone's limbs not even so much as slow them down? It wasn't natural." he concluded. "None of what happened there was natural."

Despite their vehement testimonies Tobirama still had steel in his piercing eyes. "And how did you manage to escape such a hopeless situation? The revelation of Haruno's otherworldly power boost aside, those odds didn't bode well for your survival."

"Everyone pitched in," Yurine said softly. "Kureno and I acted as distractions and protected our fortress so to speak. Sakura and the others left to confront the threat head on and destroy the
"The flowers?" Hashirama blinked.

"The shinigami Erika devised a way to resurrect and forcefully tether souls in near-indestructible bodies by using the power of a legendary flower called the violacia." Izuna sighed. "Some myth that turned out to be."

"Some myth any of it turned out to be." Madara complained. "I might not have all my memories but you can trust me when I say I don't exactly relish standing here to tell you I was nearly bested by a demonic child barely higher than my kneecaps."

Sakura could only imagine how hard it was for Madara, even this version of him, to admit. At this point he had to understand their freedom could very well hinge on how convincing they were. Maybe Hashirama's first instinct wouldn't be to chain them in a cell, but she wouldn't put it past Tobirama if he saw them as a threat now. More specifically, if he saw her as one.

A furtive glance in the direction of the man who might be their only hope revealed about what she had expected. The Hokage was processing as best he could, but she didn't really blame him for the extra time it was taking to sink in. If she hadn't experienced the dramatic events firsthand Sakura would be having much the same reaction. "There's a flower that resurrects the dead?"

"Hold on, brother," Tobirama held up a hand and gave the disgruntled Uchiha a mildly intrigued look. "I think I need to hear more about this encounter Madara had with the child shinigami and how close he came to losing." That got him dubious expressions from all around the room. "For data-collecting purposes against an evident new foe." He tacked on professionally.

"I think she's the least of our worries," Sakura admitted. "Yama, too. He had a chance to keep escalating the confrontation but backed down. He said...he said the next god we met might not be as gracious though." They'd survived the encounter by the skin of their teeth, but they all needed to be better prepared. Something told her Yama's warning wasn't just idle speculation.

Hashirama slumped forward on his desk and rested his cheek against the wood. It was clear that he was beyond caring how he presented himself as the village leader. He'd just heard admittedly very shocking news, and he was a man trying to take it all in. Sakura felt partially guilty over bringing so much trouble home with her, even if she didn't really have a say. "This is a lot..." he said to no one in particular.

"Yes," Izuna responded. "It'll probably continue to be."

"Haruno," Sakura's head whipped to the white-haired Senju assessing her. "Where do your loyalties lie? With Konoha...or this deity?"

"Konoha." The answer was immediate, and her heart steadied at the confidence she felt. Konoha was where she was born, raised, and it was the home she wanted to protect, now and in the future. Whatever Mizuchi's true intentions, nothing could change that.

The stern carmine of his gaze bore into her. Sakura felt like she was being probed. Two cold hands might as well have peeled back the halves of her chest to poke at her heart experimentally.

"Well?" came the Hokage's quiet interruption.

"Your chakra suggests you're not lying." His brother admitted, speaking directly to her. "However, you can't deny that your status makes you a threat to the village."
"At least by proxy." he finished. "So it seems like a necessary compromise to suggest that your remaining an active shinobi in the village hinges on you becoming the best godslayer your deity intends for you to be." Tobirama finished, looking satisfied as he crossed his arms.

Deep shock spread through the room. "What?" Sakura breathed. "But you just—"

"Gave you a choice. The decision is yours." The Senju doubled down. "By your own admission you're dangerous, Haruno, and you attract trouble. If Konoha is supposed to remain your home, then the least you can do is agree to act as our final line of defense."

"You expect her to go out there and become a one-woman-army against invaders?" Izuna scoffed, incredulous.

Tobirama merely rolled his shoulders. "I expect her to earn her keep the same as before, but at a higher capacity. Each shinobi in this village does so, and Haruno has more to offer than most. If the time ever comes, it makes sense that we wouldn't hold back what could very well be standing between whatever higher-being sees the village as its new stomping grounds."

"There's a fine line between what you're suggesting and exploitation," Madara threw in. If not for the long weeks of the mission spent together, Sakura might have missed how he sounded slightly peevish. Was it really…on her behalf?

Hashirama didn't look entirely comfortable with the thought either, but he turned questioning eyes her way. "Sakura-san, what you've given us and the things you've been through are both a lot. If you need time—"

"No, I'll do it," she reassured everyone. At this point it wasn't like she had a choice. And it wasn't like Tobirama didn't have a point. Maybe the others didn't like how he'd forced her hand, but they knew deep down that a time could come when they very much needed whatever powers Mizuchi had granted her.

"Just like that?" Tobirama pushed.

Sakura straightened her shoulders. "Just like that."

"If all that's over, then this meeting is over, Hashirama." Madara informed him. "I have a large adjustment period ahead."

No one spoke on his potential insolence in simply declaring he was through without waiting on the Hokage.

"Right…everyone is probably ready to return to their homes and unpack," Hashirama muttered, rubbing at his forehead. "But before you go…these arrived just yesterday. They were incredibly generous and doubled what they originally said they would pay. Not to mention the diplomatic negotiations were a success."

The Hokage flashed a grateful smile Madara's way. "Konoha will be receiving regular shipments of minamatori minerals in exchange for several rare plant species that only grow on the mainland starting in the spring." And he heaved up several very hefty sacks from somewhere under his desk. The mission pay. With all the 'excitement' it had been the last thing on her mind. But she wasn't about to turn down money she had more than earned. Everyone formed a single file and collected the pre-counted reward. "If I need anything else, I'll send a summons."
Madara was half out of the room already with pay in hand. "It doesn't mean I'll answer it,"

The smile Lord Hokage gave them almost reached his eyes. "Dismissed."

Sakura could feel in her bones that it was only the beginning.

The frosted ground seeped coldness into her toes, and she wiggled them periodically as she walked. Sakura and the others had already parted ways, and while Izuna had looked ready to offer to walk her home, she reminded him the priority should be getting Madara settled in.

A sentiment to which the older of the brothers had vocally agreed. A part of her was also grateful for the solo trip. She took the streets, because she didn't know how slippery the rooftops were, and because she needed the extra time to collect herself and decompress. Since the war, it had been one life-altering event after another, and she'd been waiting patiently to process. It didn't really seem like a good time for it would be in the near future, though…

'I could use a good meal and a few days of rest,' Sakura rubbed her hands together. After the back-to-back exposés dropped in the Hokage's office she couldn't see herself being allowed from the village anytime soon. And while that would quickly chafe at her independence, at least a part of her wouldn't mind.

A glance upward revealed that the sky hadn't ceased crying frost-kissed tears, and while her fingertips were a little number than she'd like, quite a few children she passed were having the times of their lives.

They chased each other with clumps of snow ready to fling, while adults were much more careful about traversing the snow-dusted streets, one woman holding her market purchases tight to her chest and pausing every other step to look down at the ground and make sure she didn't step on an ice patch.

A day such as this one would be a perfect one to curl up by a fire and page through one of her favorite tomes, maybe even the unrealistic love stories Ino and TenTen recommended so highly. Too bad she didn't own any such books anymore. Not here and now—

The crunch of footsteps from straight ahead brought her out of her musings, just in time to see a small cream and brown puppy darting between legs and a frantic group of children following it. "Wait, wait!"

Sakura's eyes widened, a forced double-take happening at the familiarity of the black-haired little girl on the puppy's heels, but she barely had time to register where she knew her from when the scared little creature tried to dart by her and she reached down to pluck the pup from the snow.

The kunoichi instinctively brought it close to her chest so it wouldn't squirm out of her hold, frowning as she felt the speed of the puppy's heart through her clothes. "You're alright now," she soothed, discreetly pressing a little chakra into its body to scan for injuries while also calming it down. The quiet whines stopped almost instantly and the warm pup went lax in her arms. The girl who'd been in the lead after it skidded to a halt, plowing up a little snow in her wake.

"Ah, Kikue's sorry!" she cried, and Sakura nearly dropped the dog at hearing the name. Sure enough, when her eyes met the child's face it was indeed Kikue Kaguya, the sweet and somewhat quirky youngest child of the monstrous Yoshiro.

'But how?!' she yelped silently, all the while plastering on a calm smile. She had been in disguise the last time they'd all seen each other. They had never met pink-haired Sakura Haruno of the
"Kikue, did you catch her?" A new voice she was unfamiliar with asked with worry. A slightly older child with her brown hair cropped short joined Kikue, the red fang-like markings on her cheeks indicative of her clan.

Kikue, who had stopped panicking, stepped forward with wide black eyes focused unblinkingly on Sakura's face. It made her calm smile a bit more awkward as she offered the placated puppy back to its presumed owner. "I'm guessing she's yours."

"Yes," the Inuzuka girl accepted her ninjūn back with a bow and a sigh of relief. "My apologies. Asuga's not usually scared very easily, but—"

"But my dumb sister popping up out of the snow spooked her." Harihane, the proud middle child of the clan head, stepped up between her sister and the Inuzuka they evidently knew. While she wore the same grumpy default expression, Sakura could feel something had changed for the once-bitter girl.

'What's going on?' Sakura's mind was racing with questions. 'The Kaguya are in Konoha! That's not part of my timeline.'

"Forgive me for being so forward, but, something about you is very familiar to me." The oldest and last of the siblings, Jun'ichi studied her too. He was as handsome as Sakura remembered, his hair somewhat longer and his face more openly gentle. Her heart skipped a beat and she couldn't identify why right away but she put it down to nerves.

'You have no idea...' she thought miserably. Kikue wrapped herself around Sakura's waist without warning.

"Neechan!" she squealed, nuzzling her cheek into the mint yukata.

"Kikue, what are you doing? We've never met her before." Harihane groused, attempting to pull her sister off by the arm.

Sakura let her arms awkwardly hover over the youngest Kaguya's back, resisting the urge to pat her.

"It's Oka-nee-chan!" Sakura gulped, knowing she'd been found out. How could she forget this unassuming girl was a budding sensor-type who, with proper guidance could be incredibly gifted?

The two older siblings wore matching looks of surprise, while the Inuzuka, the one she most definitely had never met, only looked mildly confused.

"Is that true?" Jun'ichi asked, moving closer with a tentative expression of hope. Sakura had to look up at him, into his eyes, and she really wished she didn't.

"Well..." Their reactions alone were enough to nearly compel the truth out of her on the spot. Plus since she'd stopped moving her toes were getting just as cold as her fingers.

"You don't have to say it," he whispered. Snow drifted down into his hair, the same way it was probably drifting down into hers, but it disappeared in the stark white as soon as it landed.

In that moment he was more pretty than handsome with winter as his backdrop, making Sakura's words stick in her throat, even as her mind swirled with thoughts of envy. In Water Country it had been Kou, now Jun'ichi returned to remind her that there were men who could give her a complex.
"You did a lot for us, more than you'll ever know," he took one of her hands in both of his. "Thank you."

Sakura shook her head slowly, unsure just what she'd done. Izuna had suggested that the siblings' joint decision to aid in their escape had been because she'd reached a part of them that had triggered a change. Back then, it had been easy to deny. Naruto was the one who changed people's hearts.

But they were standing here, far from home…and…and looking at her like a goddess among the people. When her words started to thaw enough for her to speak, Sakura struggled to find adequate words. Seeing them again was unexpected, though not unpleasant. But this wasn't how it was supposed to go! "Why're you…I mean shouldn't you be in—"

Slowly dropping her hand, his gaze grew distant. "We no longer call the Land of the Dead our home."

As spry as Sakura remembered, Kikue jumped away from her and twirled around to strike a clumsy but endearing pose. "Kikue lives here now!"

"And your clan?" she asked, wondering if they knew the truth… Mizuchi had mercilessly dispatched of the Kaguya and yet these three had been noticeably absent from the bloodbath. Now she knew why. But did they know they were the last remaining Kaguya on earth?

"We cut ties when we decided to make it on our own," Harihane threw her hands over her head in a stretch. "Starting over here came a little later. The Inuzuka clan's been putting up with us so far."

"Ah," said Inuzuka shifted her puppy into the crook of her arm. "I'm sorry. My name is Yoku Inuzuka. I…It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

The poor girl was so mannerly, so much different from brash Kiba. It almost made her giggle. "Sakura Haruno,"

"Sakura-san," A hint of fang flashed in a cute smile. Asuga's "grin" was a close match to her owner's, save for her tongue lolling out.

Clearing his throat, Jun'ichi briefly rested a hand on her shoulder. "Now that we know we'll be seeing more of each other, I'd enjoy having tea together some time."

Sakura nodded quickly. Now that, she could do. "Of course!" she agreed. "I'd invite you all over now, but I just got back from a mission and I'm guessing the cupboards are pretty bare."

Kikue pouted, but it melted as swiftly as the snowflakes catching in her lashes. "Promise to tell us about your mission?"

Sakura hoped they didn't catch her grimace. She petted through Kikue's hair, "Only if you promise to tell me all about your journey here. We can swap stories if you want to."

Harihane looked pleased at the prospect, not even scolding her younger sister for pulling on her sleeve.

"I'm sure we'll all look forward to it," Junji replied.

No point in trying to explain her predicament and the ultimatum she'd been given by Tobirama. Better to just let them think the only worry on her mind was stocking her house so they could have afternoon tea.
Humans had so many unfair rules. They trapped him inside, told him it was too cold for him, then
they rushed off to play in the white powder falling to the ground as soon as they'd given him water
and food.

Usamaro sat by the window and watched the descent of the tiny white fluff Reira called snow.
Each time the piece he was tracking reached its final destination, he quickly zeroed in on another
target.

It looked light, and he could tell from the temperature of the glass that it was cold, but that didn't
deter him from imagining what it would feel like to leap up and catch it with his paws. Make a
game of how much snow he could get before it touched the ground.

If anyone ever let him outside to try. Kagami said they'd come by tomorrow, but what if that was a
lie? What if tomorrow never came? He meowed plaintively, perfectly aware he was alone in the
house with no one to take pity on him. When was Sakura coming back? He missed her terribly. The
human who had saved his life and gave him treats and let him curl up into her each night. The
human that had brought him to her, Izuna, was missing now too… So rude of them to just keep
disappearing.

Usamaro butted his head against the window, drawing the attention of a passing crow who was
hopping around on the ground and pushing snow around with its head. Curious, the bird flew over
and landed on the windowsill, nothing but glass to separate them.

It tilted its head this way and that, only seeming to realize that he couldn't get through when he
pecked the glass a few times with his beak. Usamaro tapped the glass a few times from his side,
just to demonstrate how solid it was. Birds. And they wondered why cats chased after and ate
them.

Enamored with the sight of its ugly reflection, the dark bird preened and cawed, completely
ignoring the cat trapped within the house. "Mrwar…” Usamaro muttered, a little annoyed. The bird
wasn't going to pay him any attention, so what was even the point of him flying over.

Slinking away from the window, the young feline strutted through the empty house, trying to
remember where he'd last moved his newest treasures. He had to continue to hide them, otherwise
inevitably they'd get taken away and he'd be scolded. Usamaro was halfway to Sakura's kitchen,
where he was keeping a thin scrap of cloth called a fundoshi he'd found on a clothesline.

The string attached was just too hard to resist. He'd watched through windows as human men tied
them around their bottom halves, and he'd decided then and there they were wasting a perfectly
good toy. Why even be upset that he took one, when the yelling man that the fundoshi used to
belong to had several, and was even wearing one when he'd come running outside?

Nosing the bottom cabinet open, Usamaro pulled his prize out, just starting to back away when his
ears twitched, alerting him to footsteps approaching from outside. Abandoning the scrap of
clothing, he raced for the door and slid to a stop in front of it, wondering just who'd be coming by.
Raising his hackles in warning, a low growl emitted from his throat as the door opened and a very
tired, cold looking Sakura stepped through. Sakura…Sakura was back! His mistress was back!
She noticed him immediately, and the weary expression softened. "Usamaro," she smiled,
crouching and holding out her arms. Once, he wouldn't think twice about going to her. But still
shocked, he backed away, watching and waiting. A small sniff confirmed it was indeed Sakura.

No one else had her scent. She dropped her arms to rest on her knees with a sad sigh. "Not so happy
to see me, huh?" Standing back up, Sakura shouldered her backpack off and removed her shoes.

Leaving both by the door she'd closed, the woman made a beeline for the kitchen. Usamaro raced to beat her there and hide his stolen goods, sliding across the floor and crashing headfirst into a cabinet. Whining, he flopped pitifully onto his side, not sure if his head or his pride hurt more.

He didn't have to wallow on the ground for very long, because cool hands lifted him carefully, and he found himself staring into a gentle face torn between amusement and concern. "You know what I've told you about running around like that. You're not always the most coordinated, you know."

Usamaro blinked slowly, wondering why he hesitated the first time she opened her arms, when this moment was all he'd been waiting for. Without even meaning to, he'd began to purr. Hugging him to her bosom, her lips dropped to his head in a quick kiss. "You at least seem like you've been eating well." She laughed, bouncing him in her arms a few times.

Usamaro stopped purring and cracked one eye open accusingly. Was she saying he was fat? Wiggling around until he was set down, the cat marched across the floor and sat so his back faced her, making it clear he was offended. As far as he was concerned, if he put on anything, it was muscle. There wasn't time to gain anything else when all he did for exercise is get chased around the village by humans claiming he stole from them.

"Don't be like that," Sakura chided, walking by him and peering in a top cabinet. "I just mean I can tell you're big and strong now. Nothing like the scrawny kitten I had two months ago. Empty…" her voice trailed off as she drew her head back from the depths of the cupboard. "It figures."

She cast him a smile that brought out the color of her eyes. Usamaro had a marble he'd found the exact same color. He'd show it to her later. He'd show her all his new treasures…as soon as he was sure she wouldn't make him return them. "Just give me a minute to change into something warmer and we'll go to the market. It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Unable to control himself, Usamaro rushed over to her ankles and started doing excited loops. He was going outside! He'd get a chance to feel snow for himself after all. Having Sakura home was better than he'd hoped it could be.

---

Hours later, their bellies were full and so were the cupboards. Sakura would happily call it an early night, even though the sun was just starting to set. But there was one more thing she felt obligated to do.

While Usamaro dozed content and bloated near her thigh, she sat with eyes closed in deep concentration and traced a path back to the plane where Mizuchi had first made true contact.

She didn't dwell there anymore, wherever there was, but Sakura would bet that it would always be a sure fire way to reach her quickly. Too bad she hadn't thought about it before now. 'I've waited long enough. I gave you time. I followed everything you told me to do, but I'm done. So answer me!''

"Oh…so forceful now," Eyes she could now recognize anywhere manifested from the dark, a glowing silhouette taking shape until the dragon goddess stood before her. "What changed?"

A small, wry snort escaped her before she had the chance to rein it in. So many things came to mind, but most of them, Mizuchi already knew. "Everything."

Mizuchi spread her arms out and the landscape around them changed, a forest reminiscent to the first one in the memory of a young Kaguya, but this one looked healed. "Everything always
This was one of only a handful of moments Sakura could recall when Mizuchi appeared more
vulnerable human than capricious goddess to her, and she couldn't imagine what had brought it on.
Brow furrowed, the confused kunoichi was on the verge of letting all the questions she'd been
damming off overflowing, until she caught sight of a shimmering, immaculate young woman
moving through the clearing with the grace of a deer.

The reaction was instant and visceral, Sakura leaping back, on the verge of activating the Byakugo.
Only Mizuchi's smooth palm cupping the back of her neck grounded her enough to remember that
what she was seeing play out was a memory.

That woman, an adult Kaguya, could not see nor hear her. Unlike the last two times, where the
Mother of Chakra had been a mere girl, Kaguya was older, a teenager on the cusp of adulthood
with horns and her third eye. This Kaguya had already eaten from the world tree…

Aside from being more youthful than she had been in the war, she still dressed as a human girl
from humble beginnings in a patchwork-material yukata that was almost too short on her willowy
form. Mizuchi and Sakura watched on as the white-haired pseudo-goddess made her way through
the sun-dappled forest, stepping directly into a ray that illuminated her hair like spools spun from
moonlight.

To Sakura's surprise, forest creatures started to emerge from the shadows and trees. Chipmunks
and rabbits coming closer and even a fawn curiously sniffing at Kaguya's outstretched hand instead
of moving away. The oddity of seeing a being that was filled with so much malice on the
battlefield able to touch timid animals was possibly the most mundane shock she'd receive; she just
knew it.

With a final pat to the fawn's head, Kaguya came to rest beside a clear, flowing stream, kneeling to
cup water in her hands and suck thirstily. Birds chirped and leaves rustled, but Kaguya's dainty sips
were somehow the loudest sounds of all.

Sakura glanced over at Mizuchi, searching for some indication about what this memory was
supposed to divine to her. The river deity only stared straight ahead, lost to time.

"What have you done?"

Kaguya slowly lowered her hands and let the water trickle from between her fingers. She stared up
defiantly, her full lips a near-sneer. "What you would not."

"Why? Why do you persist in this foolish search for godhood? To end war and bring peace?"
she spat the last word out as if it were a curse. "And then what? Embracing godhood means you
will shed your humanity, and I will not allow it. In time, it will corrupt you." Kaguya was on her
feet in a flash, her anger suddenly matching in perfect sync with her adoptive sister's. Since the last
memory Sakura witnessed, Kaguya had grown tall enough to nearly meet Mizuchi inch for inch.
They stood glaring down one another at eye-level.

Even if it was just an echo of a time long-past, the animosity swirling through the air made Sakura
clench her arms around herself and warily wait for what she was assuming would be a big confrontation.

"You see..." the Mizuchi at her side half-whispered. "I met Kaguya as a lonely, gentle girl and became her family. She taught me the ways of humans, and I soon grew to embrace the experience. To love it. I had never been particularly close to the other deities, and I saw myself in this feeble human child, cast aside, and took pity. I was little more than a child myself then, fresh from creation, and I had little knowledge about the covetous nature of humanity when faced with power. Even the most well-intentioned souls..." She waved halfheartedly toward where Mizuchi and Kaguya were still speaking heatedly.

"What do you know?!" they heard Kaguya challenge. "You do not understand. You cannot understand. I have lost family. I have witnessed the emperor's greed. I have seen the world ravage itself endlessly with wars that have no true victors." Tears welled and fell from her wide pearlescent eyes. She looked so lost that Sakura could almost forget what a monster she'd been and take pity on her. "In all the years living at my side, you've never truly understood, Mizuchi. Humanity is still beneath you when you can simply retreat back to your own realm in the heavens the way you always seem to do these days."

The bitterness in those last words hit like a slap, crackling and even more painful for the deeper hurt meant to inflict under the surface.

Where Sakura had expected Mizuchi to rise up in quiet wrath and forcefully quell Kaguya's temper, she only stood there and took in that anger. "You are...very mistaken." She said when she was sure the young woman had finished. "To you, I am mighty, but there are those whose powers exceed mine tenfold. You and I are but lowly stains to them. Your persistence in matters a mortal should never dabble in will enrage them. ...Understand, humanity has many things to offer."

Mizuchi moved forward and gently took Kaguya's face in her hands, wiping away stray tears and placing a kiss on her forehead, blemished now by a closed third eye.

"Things godhood lacks. Wonderful things that those who dwell in the heavens will never grasp. You have taught me these things, and made me aware of what beauty can exist here among humans. You would do well not to discard the gift of this life you possess. Godhood is a curse, and an eternal burden marred with a scarring loneliness only a god could know." More tears ran in a steady stream down Kaguya's dove pale face, but Sakura was choked by surprise yet again to see that Mizuchi was crying too, both in the past and present. The solemn expressions worn by the present goddess and her memory-self were both wet with dutifully silent tears.

"Mizuchi..." Kaguya choked, "You've...you've been like a sister to me." Slowly, her hands came up to cup the ones on her face, squeezing. "But not even you can understand my mission of peace."

With newfound resolve, a still-weeping Kaguya shoved the deity away with impressive strength Sakura had only developed from extensive training. The lid on her forehead lifted to reveal a perfect Rinne-Sharingan. "I am sorry, Mizuchi. But the time has come for me to bring peace to this world. With these abilities, I can finally end all wars, all suffering." Stunned, Mizuchi collapsed in the stream as Kaguya opened one of the dimensional rifts Sakura had unfortunately experienced firsthand, disappearing through it.

"And she did just that, didn't she?" Mizuchi asked, tilting her head encouragingly toward Sakura. "Or for a time it seemed so..."

"What...what happened?" Already her brain was recalibrating, condensing this wealth of information into what she knew of Kaguya Otsutsuki.
“Kaguya became known as a benevolent deity among the people.” Suddenly Mizuchi’s voice was flat, devoid of emotion. She gestured at the scenery as it changed again, showing Kaguya activating an Infinite Tsukuyomi and imprisoning half the world’s population into the God Tree. “She drifted further from my reach, and I watched the corruption take hold in her until she had cast aside the sweet child I knew as if it were a burdensome husk. She faced her sons in combat, and unable to vanquish her, they sealed her in the core of the moon. The rest is as you know it.” Sakura watched in horror as Kaguya battled fiercely against two men, identical in power and in viciousness to the ultimate being they had faced at the end of the war. Naruto had given her the abridged version, but it was nothing in comparison to seeing it play out.

“Why didn’t you intervene? Aren’t you more powerful?”

“Of course, by far. An imitation of godhood is still only that—an imitation.” Sakura almost had to smile at how some of the righteousness returned to the deity's tone. She clasped her hands in a misleadingly demure fashion. "But Sakura, I could no longer intervene if I would have liked. I too was sealed by my fellow deities shortly after as punishment for tempting a human to the point of obsession with the idea of godhood. For a mortal to try to assume such a mantel is blasphemy to most deities."

"Then why drag me into all this? If this is what happened to Kaguya just because she met you, why did you think getting another human involved in non-human affairs would work out any better the second time?" Sakura realized in the midst of talking her hands had somehow migrated to her hips and she’d taken on a tone similar to the one she’d use to scold her teammates when they had far exceeded their limit of lacking common sense.

But now that she was in the stance, in this irate mood, she wouldn't take it back. Somewhere along the line, she’d lost some measure of fear for Mizuchi. A powerful, unpredictable goddess she may have been, but at times she was little more than an immortal child ruled by whimsy. However, after meeting Erika, who was literally exactly that, Sakura was beginning to have a sinking feeling something about immortality tended to make them behave that way.

"Because, as it happens..." Her once strong voice drifted off timidly, "I truly need your help. I had nothing to do but watch the world fall to ruin yet again after Kaguya's dark manifestation manipulated her descendants and the world with them. I feel that I at least partially share in this blame. It was never my intent, but Kaguya became an evil of my own creation by affiliation." She sucked in a breath and expelled it. Sakura stopped herself from holding her own breath, sensing she was finally starting to get to the bottom of the mystery that had changed her life months ago.

"You are not one of Kaguya's descendants, who are responsible for the horrid turn of events, and yet you know and care deeply for many of them." Sakura nodded along slowly. Sasuke, Naruto, shishou, now all the additional members of the Uchiha and Senju clans, and the Kaguya siblings too—if she had to hazard a guess based on their kekkei genkai—she’d met in the past. Even the prickly Tobirama and infuriating Madara were at the very least, memorable characters from her time here. When she got home she was unlikely to forget them, despite her conscience still warring over what to make of the two sides to Madara. "I have watched the world, and you, for a time between my long bouts of sleep in my prison. Your unyielding spirit seemed best suited for this job, which I cannot accomplish alone. Your compassion and resilience both appeared good traits in someone who would assist me, would you not agree?"
Sakura was still nodding along in agreement when the words clicked into place. "What?" she sputtered. "I mean, no!" She followed it up with an adamant shake of her head. "You can't just pluck people from their rightful places and put them wherever you want to do whatever you want. It's wrong!"

"What's wrong is the state the world will soon fall into and the unwillingness of my fellow deities to fix it. They are fine with watching humanity crumble. I am not. For that, I will be hunted and sealed again, if I am lucky. You, Sakura," Mizuchi took her by the shoulders and peered deep into her eyes with frightening intensity. "Are destined for this. You will become the godslayer that carves a new path through the heavens."

Still, Sakura held her doubts. "You want me to kill a bunch of immortals stronger than Kaguya?"

"No. But if the time comes, I would want you to be adequately prepared. If they cannot have history repeat itself, they would just as soon rid the earth of all traces of Kaguya entirely."

Rid. You rid crop fields of crows by installing scarecrows. You rid ships of rats by getting cats. You rid the earth of a divine being’s presence by…killing off her descendants en masse. Sakura instantly felt her blood pulse hot. Maybe shinobi hadn't done everything right. And maybe a great many of those shinobi could trace their lines back to Kaguya, but she refused to think the solution was to slaughter all trace of her, when those traces were in people who mostly had long forgotten her.

"You will help me protect humanity by avoiding the events that led to the state you knew during the war. And in doing so, you would have a better world to return to."

That struck a chord. Protecting those who'd protected her was one of her longest and deepest held desires. If she could eliminate the events that would cause everyone she knew to suffer, then… then…didn't she owe it to them to try? Could it really be so simple as following Mizuchi's plans? Well, Sakura reminded herself with a small crinkle of her nose, nothing Mizuchi had guided her to do had really been simple. Especially going in with as little knowledge as she'd been working with.

"And in spite of that, you handled yourself with composure and heart," The deity reminded, flashes of everything she'd done and everyone she'd helped since arriving in the era coming into view.

"So you were watching," Sakura accused, although she'd known as much. "What would've happened if I'd failed, huh? Or gotten killed?"

All she could was an enigmatic smile, which fueled her desire to try some of her newly acquired powers on Mizuchi all the more.

"You wouldn't have failed, Sakura. Humans like you don't fail. They find a way."

...

Back. Back in her room, sprawled flat across her bedroom floor with Usamaro nudging urgently at her cheek. Sakura sat up with a groan. Next time she willfully entered into a catatonic state in order to communicate with that taxing deity, she'd do so on a more comfortable surface.

"At least now I have my answers..." she said thoughtfully, detangling some knots from the back of her head. Sakura took a lock of hair and examined it. Huh. Guess she really had committed to growing it out again, without even meaning to.
Dropping it, Sakura put her head in her hands and groaned harder. She had answers, and though it might seem obvious, what was she honestly supposed to do with them? Honestly, being informed came with just as many problems as being in the dark…

Izuna had instructed Madara on just what to do, and just what to say and to whom. But even without the majority of his memory, his brother was stubborn, and there was no guarantee he would follow along. Of course, behind the scenes, he would take on most of Madara's duties; a glance in his sibling's direction revealed that he looked at peace.

Izuna felt guilt that he was attempting to get Madara to give that up by coaxing him through details of his old life in the hopes that it would trigger memories. But he also wasn't sure he could live with himself if he just allowed his brother to remain in a state of incompleteness. Relaxed as he might appear, not knowing things about yourself that were once as easy to recall as breathing was frustrating, and he could tell when Madara was struggling.

"That's the compound," he informed, pointing in the direction of the gates they were approaching.

Madara lifted his gaze from the ground and blinked. "So that's home." He gave the layout an assessing once over. "It's not really what I imagined."

Quirking a brow, Izuna asked, "Well what were you imagining?"

Madara sent him a lazy stare. "The man that runs this village can't keep crumbs off his face, and he gets a tower."

Izuna had to suppress a snort, although he didn't bother hiding the roll of his eyes. "Hashirama is the Hokage." It was broad daylight so the gates to the compound were left open, and inside their clan members were clearing paths through the snow with shovels and small bursts of Katon where it was deep enough to warrant it.

Madara wasn't convinced. "I just feel that if formal titles are enough to warrant grand living spaces, then—"

"Oh, Lord Izuna! Lord Madara!" All eyes were on them now, people rushing over to welcome them back.

Taking the lead before Madara had the chance, Izuna waved. "Hello everyone,"

"Oh thank goodness," A woman holding a shovel exclaimed. "When you left so abruptly the clan was in a tizzy. We weren't really sure what to think, and all anyone could say was you were assisting Lord Madara on his mission."

His responding smile was cordial but thin. What explanation Naoko would give the clan or how they would take it had been the least of his worries before. At the time his only focus was getting to his brother before he did something colossally stupid. Being back just reminded him of elders he'd have to pacify. Naoko wasn't likely to have told them anything they found to be adequate as an explanation. If anything, his childhood friend would relish the uproar a little too much.

"As you can see, we've both returned." Izuna motioned to himself and then his brother. Briefly watching the sky, he added, "Right in time for winter, too." Some of the apprehensive expressions softened, but the real fight would be the council members who'd have their feathers ruffled. Nothing he hadn't been exposed to before, of course. He'd witnessed Madara's back and forth with them one too many times.
"Yes, my lord." A man mumbled. "We'll leave you both to rest. Your mission was a long one."

Subtly directing Madara with a nudge, Izuna made his way through the small crowd as it parted, finding the rest of the compound to be peaceful in spite of the activity. As they walked they saw men and women sweeping their porches, and children running wild through the snow with whoops. One group in particular he recognized right away. Manabu cackled as he tackled a smaller boy and shoved him face first into the cold, powdery stuff blanketing the ground.

He cleared his throat. "It's nice to know the cold hasn't made any of you shirk training." Izuna said flatly. Manabu flew up as if his rear had been scorched by a wayward fire jutsu. "Lord Izuna, a-and Lord Madara!" Seconds later a group of children had converged on them and Izuna found himself wrapped in multiple pairs of arms.

"Why did you have to leave?" Tenma asked, his normally steady voice quivering.

"It was awful," Miyako sniffled as she pressed her face into his side.

Izuna had a good idea exactly what they were referring to. "I'm guessing Naoko did things a little differently than the way I normally do."

"She's insane!" Two voices chorused in unison, the twins no doubt. He noticed with amusement some of the kids had even surrounded and began hugging Madara, who was staring at them with wide eyes and his arms held up awkwardly above his waist.

"Izuna..." he muttered. There was an unspoken plea for an explanation. Maybe just a plea for help in general.

"What do you think, Kagami?" he craned his neck to his star student hanging back. "Was Naoko's training soul-crushing or are these slackers exaggerating?"

Cheeks reddening, Kagami turned away. "Uh...it was...enlightening?" A nice way of putting it to be sure.

"Noted." Izuna laughed, gently disentangling himself from the group embrace. "Snow or sunshine, you know training goes on." he reminded them.

"Yes," they chorused halfheartedly.

"But Madara and I still have a lot to discuss with the council. So I guess that leaves the rest of your day open," he winked. The dozen or so young faces lit up, and they scampered off in all directions, resuming their play.

Madara released a heavy sigh. "Absolutely no warning that you're so popular with children we'd be mobbed?" Observing a wet spot near the him of his shirt, he cringed. "I'm going to tell myself this is melted snow, and not drool."

"It could always be a little of both." Izuna said cheerfully.

"Disgusting."

"We need to speak to Naoko urgently." he dropped his voice in case any open ears were nearby. "I'd like to keep your...amnesia...between as few people as possible."

"So it's a point of shame for you." Madara grumbled. "But it's alright if the child torturer knows."
"Naoko is someone who, in spite of her faults, we can trust," Izuna explained, crunching his way across the path down the main street that had been cleared with Madara at his side. "And no, I'm not ashamed of you. Why would you think that?"

His brother cracked his neck, not speaking. Izuna assumed that meant he'd be receiving the silent treatment for the rest of the trip to Naoko's home. "Everyone tells me who I was, and it sounds like a lot to live up to." he finally said. "I suppose without my memories that reputation doesn't fit anymore. Maybe the position of clan leader is no longer earned."

"It was yours by birthright." Izuna thought of how as a boy he'd felt inadequate that his father meticulously groomed his older brother while simultaneously preparing him to live in Madara's shadow. Their three younger brothers had much the same fate, but unfortunately none of them made it to adulthood to break free of that.

As he grew older and recognized the burden thrust upon Madara for what it was, he began to feel differently. His position wasn't one that had to shackle him to the role of a bystander in their clan's future. He could grow accomplished enough to support both his brother and the clan, a resolve that had led him to taking his role as second-in-command seriously. "But you've more than earned it, Madara. There are those that aren't so happy you've chosen a different path than our father's." he admitted, "But the majority of the clan is behind you."

"But they need a leader they can feel comfortable knows what he's doing and how to guide them. Not an amnesiac man stumbling through the motions." Madara guessed.

"Inspiring confidence is only a small part of good leadership." Izuna watched snowflakes catch in his brother's long hair and settle like tiny ornaments of decoration. Winter really was a season that suited him, and perhaps that's why the powers that be had brought Madara into the world right in the middle of it. "You have other good leadership traits too. I'm just concerned that there might be those that would take your lapse in memory as a sign of weakness."

Madara sighed and a puff of condensation misted the air. "It is a weakness, Izuna." Izuna stepped onto Naoko's porch. There was light on inside so he hoped that she was home and...unoccupied...

Her favorite bedmate was Madara but she had other partners infrequently, and he'd once been unlucky enough to walk into her house at a time when they were supposed to be going hunting together, only to find her tongue-deep in a woman she'd been flirting with the previous day.

Izuna gave the door a few strong knocks. "I know I explained a little on the way back from the mission, but as second-in-command, I'm essentially the one who guards those weaknesses. In and out of battle." Madara gave him a small smile. "More importantly, I'd do it anyway as your brother."

The door flew open without warning and Naoko–bless the kami fully dressed— appeared with a cock of her hip and a devilish grin. "What took so long boys? No hiccups out there, I hope." Even as she kept up her usual playful candor, she was checking them over for any signs of injury.

"That's what we're here to discuss." Madara told her.

She nodded as if she already knew exactly what topic was up for discussion. "Oh, by all means come in then. You can tell me how badly you got your asses kicked out there while we eat white stew."

She stepped aside and went traipsing back into the house like she knew they'd follow. Izuna was first through the threshold and he began removing his sword and shoes. "What a strange woman,"
he heard Madara say under his breath.

Snickering, Izuna stood to his full height after he got both zori off. "She was supposed to be your wife, you know."

Madara pulled his shoe too hard and nearly toppled over at that exact same moment.

Chapter End Notes

*Notes originally posted on FFN*

I admit I hadn't put much thought into updating recently, because so many other things have been going on. Still prepping for my big move upstate which got pushed back (upstate might not seem far but unfortunately my family has a ton of stuff and I have a lot of pets XD), which means I should probably be packing at this very moment and not writing this. lol Add to this my bouts with illness and there just really wasn't a good time lately.

Also hadn't felt compelled to rush back to this fic in particular for a couple of reasons. I'd really appreciate it if those who are still here could let me know they're reading. Lately I've been sort of unsure on that number vs those who might have followed or favorited but aren't actively reading. I have a lot I want to share in the chapters to come, especially with the continued action and twists as well as romance developments. Don't wanna put all that effort in and find out I'm screaming into the void, to be blunt. I'm grateful for everyone's support, of course. This story might have not lasted through some of my uninspired periods without how vocal some of you have been about enjoying this fic and being invested in the journey.

I'm hoping to dial things up very, very soon and include a lot of SenjuSaku moments that are going to be pretty fun. Don't worry about how prickly Tobirama is being. He needs time but Sakura's going to start making big headway pretty soon on softening that ice wall. I just wanna stress yet again that Tobirama's got a very gray sense of morality. I love that about his character and the nuances it comes with. So I will always strive to explore that in the storytelling. But again, TobiSaku will arrive, meaning the two of them will come to get a better understanding of each other. There's also one chapter in particular I've been chomping at the bit to get to that is full of FoundersxSaku steaminess. That last word could be taken figuratively or literally.

I hope to go back and try to get the next chapter of Wabi-Sabi rolling again if anyone follows that fic. It's UchiSaku. Also wanting to revive both More Than Words and Vice and Virtue, Team 7xSaku and NagatoxSakuxYahiko respectively. It's just been one thing after another since the New Year began. But honestly I just have to wait and see what my schedule allows for. Hope everyone enjoyed the update and will be around for all the adventures and romance to come~
Chapter Summary

Sakura is left reeling after Mizuchi’s revelation but an unlikely source of comfort comes in the form of a Hokage who may be sharing some hidden worries of his own. Meanwhile the village continues to expand when the academy opens, bringing tough encounters for Sakura when her knowledge of the future becomes relevant.

And Hashirama’s green thumb just might rub off on her. Or not.

Chapter Notes

*Originally posted on FFN*
Other stories I mentioned last chapter still are being worked on. I have so many word documents open, ugh…

This chapter had more HashiSaku interactions than even I anticipated. That's not a bad thing though. HashiSaku is possibly the most neglected of all the SakuraxFounders pairs. It ended up longer than anticipated, and I jokingly mentioned in a discussion that I think Hashirama is directly ghost-writing in extended scenes for himself. Why else do his appearances always get out of hand? In general, even aside from the pairing interactions, this chapter had a lot of fun scenes. It's important to put those in while I can. Although angst and drama are fun too, but…I digress.

When a week without cataclysmic consequences had come and gone, Sakura wanted to believe that at least within the village walls, she could let her guard come down fractionally. But she knew, whether or not she'd seen him, that Tobirama kept a watchful eye on her. The man wasn't going to just let everything he'd learned go.

The suggestion of finding an in-roads with him and building up his trust in her to regain her sense of freedom wasn't a bad suggestion, as far as ones from Mizuchi went. It was just…how was that possible with someone like Tobirama Senju? Where could she begin to look for and find common ground?

Having him know the truth didn't make her feel any better. If anything it had only forced her further between a rock and a hard place. Mizuchi wanted to proceed with turning her into a godslayer, and Tobirama was willing to allow her to remain an active kunoichi if she committed herself to strengthening her abilities and becoming a…well, nothing short of an ace weapon for the village.

Neither was particularly appealing when truly, she yearned for a way home more than her next breath most days. There was a bitter loneliness Sakura couldn't shake, a sense of displacement that struck in the quiet hours before dawn where she would lie awake and mull over her predicament for what had to be well over the hundredth time. Absently stroking Usamaro's fur as he pressed his
purring body in against hers was a comfort. A small one.

But she dreamed of their faces. Her friends, her parents, her mentors… She dreamed of a proper reunion for Team 7, and of a long-overdue girl talk with Ino. She dreamed of hugging her parents tightly, grateful that she got to see them again when she had joined the front lines never knowing if she would. She dreamed…she dreamed...

The moment she was ripped from them featured prominently in her dreams too. But instead of being pulled backward into a new time, relatively undamaged, she landed hard on barren ground, and when she weakly raised her head, nothing but destruction was there to greet her.

Bodies, so many of them familiar, littered the ground, some sporting horrible gory wounds and others not visibly injured but pale and lifeless all the same. Naruto, Sasuke, Sai, Yamato, Kakashi… The rest of the Rookies… Her parents… shishou… The Yuhi siblings…Madara, Izuna, Tobirama, Hashirama, Tora and Reira…all her new friends and her old. Gone.

Attempting to stumble onto her feet, noting she too was covered in heavy wounds, Sakura would feel the all-too-real pain and disorientation of trying to hold her mangled side together and still heal whoever she could find.

But a harsh blow to the back of her neck would send her dropping back to the ground, and as a hand wrenched her head back, so many evil, flickering eyes would close in from the shadows, taunting. "You shouldn't be here." Spat like some of Katsuyu's acid, corroding away at her skin and her soul.

Shooting up in terror, Sakura would see she had never left her room, or the comfort of the futon she resided in. All a dream, she had grown accustomed to telling herself. Typically she gave herself a few long minutes to get it together, shirk off the nightmare like any good shinobi would.

But as she sat awake, shaking with anxiety and cold in the dead of night, she scrubbed her hands down her face, and all at once the first sob slipped through. Sakura's next breath came out somewhere between another sob and a gasp, because crying was something she'd sternly warned herself away from the moment she'd arrived. For months, she had been able to keep going.

Compartmentalizing a great deal of her sorrow had been the only way she'd held herself together for so long. Going on acting composed and taking everything thrown at her with little more than an indignant huff, maybe an enraged screech when the situation called for it.

But truth be told, it was scary. The era was fraught with danger around every corner, not only in the form of surly future Hokages who at any time could turn against her, but deities that cared very little about humanity, and a seemingly impossible responsibility resting on her. She considered herself competent, yet it didn't change the fact that in the grand scheme of things she was only a seventeen-year old doing the best she could and adapting as necessary.

Sakura wanted to believe she at least had a few allies in this time period who would have her back, one of them being a goddess, but all the same she felt trapped and dangerously close to emotional overload. Every violent dream made her question her agreement to Mizuchi's plans. It could very well be an omen from the not so distant future. Where some wrong move she made caused both the worlds she cared about to collide, resulting in even more causalities than the last great war.

Sakura's hiccupped cry made Usamaro stir, and she could faintly see the cat's outline as he got to his feet and stretched with a quiet meow. Ever a comfort, he came closer, brushing his head against her wrist until she had no choice but to lower one hand from her face to pet him.
He continued to nuzzle her persistently, purring up a storm. The sounds rattling through her chest continued, tears accompanying them steadily. Sakura didn't bother to wipe at her face, figuring it was a pointless venture when the tears would only get replaced by more, since she couldn't seem to stop. 'Stop it, Sakura,' she scolded herself, biting at her lip. 'What good has crying ever done you?'

A pitiful moan that broke in two as it left her was the last forlorn noise she permitted herself. Afterwards Sakura closed her eyes and sucked in deep, shaky breaths until she was finally able to trust herself to contain her feelings to silent weeping. Most of them residual tears.

Swiping a hand under her dripping nose—why had she always been such an ugly crier?—and the other across her eyes, Sakura reached beneath the futon, her fingers ghosting across the cold wooden floor until they latched onto cloth and metal. Tugging the headband up, she brought it to her chest, dropping her chin and closing her eyes again. The hitai-ate, a keepsake from the war, kept her feeling connected to home.

Because there were days when time blended a little too seamlessly and Sakura almost wondered if she had dreamed up another life. Holding the tattered red cloth kept her assured that she had indeed fought with the Allied Shinobi forces, and she did have a home and life to return to. There wasn't a day since her arrival that she didn't take it out and use it for strength at some point. Morning or evening or middle of the night. It was no different now…

Then again, it definitely was. Straining against the dark, Sakura lifted the headband to eye level, staring at the engraved center. "I swear…" she said quietly, throat aching, "I swear on this headband that I'll do it. I'll make it home to all of you." She clenched tight fingers around what she considered to be her most precious treasure, careful not to let her strength bend or dent it. "So…" her voice trailed off. 'So just wait for me!'

Usamaro's paw pressed against the back of her hand, and she looked down to see the cat's observant green and blue gaze studying her. She could just barely make out the gray side of his furry face. Her breathing evened, Sakura slid from her futon and let the cat hurry and settle into the warm indentation her body had made. It didn't take him long to get cozy and drift off again.

She envied him, because after the nightmare and fraying mental rope securing her emotions, her nerves were awake and her mind was restless. What she needed was time to clear her head, and laying back down wasn't very appealing just then. Walking around the room, she dressed by the soft light of the moon, replacing her thin night garments with thicker, warmer clothing that layered, slipping tabi on her feet before her zori. Snow had stopped falling, but a glance out the window revealed how much had piled on the ground, and she wouldn't be surprised if there was at least five inches of it. Sakura wanted to be prepared when she set foot outdoors.

She set out, pleased that her precautions seemed to have paid off. While she hadn't completely escaped the chill, it was tolerable enough for her to go on her walk without fear of freezing extremities. Dark as it still was, she found her way through a combination of shinobi senses and the low-burning lanterns hung above house doors.

No one else was around, her footprints lonely as she wandered down the glittering white street. Clumps of snow had settled onto roofs and on the branches of naked trees, everything succumbing to the winter landscape. There was no particular destination she had in mind, so her pace was unhurried as she turned her head and admired the construction that had gone on in her absence.

There were more houses—she was almost sure of it—to accommodate more villagers. Earlier when she'd been to market there were more artisans than before, too. New restaurants like a noodle bar and a teahouse were doing good business if all the activity had been anything to judge by.
And street gossip said, though she hadn't seen for herself yet, that a new recreational district was underway. The village was steadily growing more like the hub of life she had known and loved. To see it all unfold was surreal.

Textbooks in the academy had talked about the first two Hokage and how they had spent a great deal of their time building the village up, how the Shodai lovingly made infrastructure with his Mokuton, and how his brother had later expanded it. Lots of reverence was shown for areas considered a part of Konoha's history. Shops and homes that were new here were well-aged and painstakingly preserved eighty plus years onward in her rightful time.

Of course, some of the original structures had been lost to the Kyuubi attack, sadly. Sakura had only been a baby then, but her parents informed her of how like the good child she was, she had slept through most of the chaos while they took refuge deep underground in the bunkers with other civilian families.

Other areas had survived it, just to be damaged or demolished in Orochimaru's invasion. And when Pein decimated the entirety of everything until it was nothing more than a sunken crater… Sakura had to stop her dismal train of thought, realizing just how many times her home had come under attack and been destroyed. Each time the people would rebuild, toiling together to restore the village they all cherished. The love everyone had for the land, passed down through generations, was something that would surely bring a touched smile to the Hokage's face if he knew.

A nippy burst of air stirred the hair across her forehead, but she shook it from her eyes with a flick of her head. 'Wow,' she thought with a silent laugh, 'How long's it been since I could toss my hair back like that?' Short hair was easy to manage, it didn't get in the way, and if she said so herself, she wore it pretty well.

But long hair had its own merits, and the more it grew out without her regular trimmings, the more she enjoyed the feel of it down past her shoulders again. As a young girl with hopes of catching her crush's eye she had dutifully worn it long for years, groomed it routinely and kept it shiny. Silly as it was to admit, Sakura could remember the exact fantasy she would always let run through her head when she was daydreaming.

On a lovely spring day when the flowers of her namesake were in full bloom and a mellow breeze carried birdsong and the perfume of honeysuckle, Sasuke would approach her. He'd take a piece of pink hair between his fingers and bring it to his lips, tell her how sweet it smelled and how she made such an enchanting picture with her tresses twirling around her in the breeze.

Sakura's feet kept crunching the ground as she continued on, looking up and smiling when she saw the academy finished and painted, appearing exactly as it had when she was attending. She stopped at the entrance to take it in. 'I definitely couldn't understand how much my life would change back then on orientation day.' Sakura smiled, hit full on by the weight of nostalgia.

Hard to imagine that her entire ninja career had been launched from a naïve wish to make friends and gain some confidence. Her parents certainly never saw their shy, insecure daughter making it to graduation, or it was unlikely they ever would have acquiesced in the first place.

For each time she would come home with red, swollen eyes and a slump to her shoulders, they exchanged wary looks and then gently suggested transferring to the academy for civilian children.

Sakura wanted to get through just one year of ninja school before she gave it all up, though. But before the end of that year she'd met Ino, her first friend, and her life changed yet again.

Under Kakashi's tutelage and as a member of cell 7, Sakura began going on missions, increasingly
more dangerous over time, and they couldn't always hide their frowns of disapproval quickly enough.

So many shouting matches had spawned from her refusal to quit what was arguably the best thing to ever happen to her. Shinobi life was never what they wanted for her. 'They didn't always understand.' Her eyes drifted up. Such a nice night, perfect for stargazing. 'But it's still thanks to them signing that slip that I was able to enroll.'

Sighing, Sakura started walking the academy's outside perimeter, moving along. She wished she could apologize for all the stress she was positive she put them through… She'd never take back her decision though. Their daughter was a kunoichi, for better or worse.

Just as she rounded the first wall, another breeze lifted hair into her face again. What a night not to secure her hair… Sakura once again pushed strands from her vision, barely noticing something amiss in her peripheral. She craned her neck back and blinked. It wasn't a trick of the eyes after all.

There was a figure on the flat rooftop of the school, still as stone, just sitting there. Up until that point Sakura hadn't run across another soul, oddly enough. In a shinobi village, there was always someone stirring no matter what time. Ninja kept odd hours as it was, and many were naturally inclined to be active in the dark anyway.

But it felt like the two of them were the only ones up. Curious, Sakura nimbly hopped the wall, then into the highest branches of the tree that housed the swing Naruto could usually be found on during their time as students.

The change of seasons had stripped the treetop of a great many leaves but she was still hoping with the cover of darkness, if she was still enough she could blend in. Just long enough to get a peek at who else couldn't sleep.

Gripping the thick branch tightly, she leaned forward and squinted. He'd hardly gotten a good look when his—the build alone revealed that much—head turned in her general direction. 'Rats…'

She could smack herself. He was a ninja as well, and she hadn't bothered hiding her presence.

"Hm? So there's someone else up at this hour?" Sakura recognized that voice… There was truly no point to even attempting to hide anymore. The rosette burst out of the tree and streaked to land on the tiles of the roof, only about three feet in front of the Hokage.

"H-Hokage-sama," They were close enough for him to make out the movements of her bow, but thankfully dark enough to conceal her flushed face. To be caught all but spying on the Hokage, as unintentional as it might have been, was incredibly humiliating. "I..." she had no proper excuse.

"Sakura-san," he greeted, sounding as friendly as always, looking up at her. "I didn't really picture you as a kunoichi who keeps such late hours. Ah," he paused. "Not that I've been trying to imagine when you are most active. That would be a little strange in itself." Sakura genuinely found it amusing how frequently this man, a shinobi that stood peerless in his prime, could talk himself into awkward conversations.

"I understand." she assured him. "Actually I was just out for a walk to clear my head. Then I saw someone sitting up here…"

"Maybe there's something about nights like this that make it easy to become restless." Hashirama muttered, almost as if he didn't mean for her to hear. "Thinking under an open sky full of stars always feels like it helps me sort through whatever's troubling me. You're welcome to join me if you'd like."
Sakura started to shake her head, not expecting that. The last thing she wanted was to disrupt the Hokage while he was in the middle of his contemplation. "No, I'm already interrupting enough as is. Sorry—"

Hashirama straightened and fully met her eyes. In the patch of moonlight that fell over him, his expression had become a firm one. "No, Sakura-san, I insist that you stay. I'd like the company for a change." Her heart squeezed, and she sank down next to him wordlessly.

The seconds ticked by in silence with Sakura staring blankly out over the academy courtyard, trying to figure out how one minute she'd been prepared to leave and the next she'd plopped right down. 'What the hell happened?' Suddenly he was so authoritative, and she could see the similarities between him and his brother. Hell, shishou had given her that don't-argue-with-me tone a time or twelve.

While she got her pitter-pattering heart back in check, Hashirama leaned back and observed the expanse of vast, starry sky. So many were out, and it was clear enough to see every grouping. They twinkled proudly like a generous number of diamonds sewn into black silk. "On nights like this, I think about them, and I really wish they could see it." Hashirama whispered. "They deserved to see it."

Sakura at first couldn't decide if she should respond, her eyes darted between the beauty of nature's masterpiece and Hashirama's thoughtful profile. "Someone you lost?" she ventured.

"Yes…" he made a soft noise of agreement, eyes still trained above them. "My younger brothers, Itama and Kawarama."

Afraid he'd stop speaking if she reacted too dramatically, Sakura gave a mute nod. So he had more brothers. Nothing they learned in school about the Founders era ever mentioned that, so it was likely his brothers died during the pre-village system era referred to as the Warring Clans period, when Hashirama would have been a child himself. In regards to the early lives of Madara and the Senju brothers specifically, lots of details were unknown. Lessons only told them about the general atrocities. Young children were often casualties of never-ending fighting then, placed on the frontlines long before they were ready.

"Not just them either," he continued, his voice growing stronger with passion. "All the other children who lost their lives fighting grown-up battles, too." She saw his fist clench tight on top of his thigh, barely fighting the instinct to take his hand and uncurl it. "If there'd been a Konoha would it have made a difference? Could it have saved them?" When he chuckled, it was nothing like his exuberant laughter that filled a room, but a brittle sound. "Those are the kinds of questions Tobirama would berate me for even considering…but I think I have to." He nodded twice. "I've mulled it over so many times and I have to believe that this village will protect its children the way it wasn't there to protect all the others."

If Sakura weren't a medic who hadn't logged hours upon hours into studying the human heart, and if she didn't know it was a pumping mass of muscle tissue and veins and blood and organic matter, she would swear that her heart was ceramic, cracked right up the middle as future knowledge beat against its sides.

She was more grateful than ever for the low visibility that could cover her weak smile and watery eyes from him. Tonight was no good for the delicate state of her emotions, as it turned out. If he knew what she did, about the village's future, would he be proud? Or would Konoha's shortcomings discourage him?

Knowing more about the kind of man he was firsthand now, Sakura had a feeling that hearing tales
about the Uchiha Massacre that had left Sasuke a tormented husk of the happy boy he'd been, and about Naruto's long years of suffering, and the callous misdeeds against children for the "betterment" of the village conducted by ROOT, would break his heart.

She hastily pressed a palm to her eye. Well no dream was without heartbreak. There would always be flaws to smooth out, higher goals to aim for, and people who got hurt… In that way she thought she could understand Tobirama's less idealistic approach incredibly well. Maybe he troubled himself with those thoughts so his brother wouldn't have to. So he could keep dreaming.

Not much different than the way she'd come to have so much desire for Naruto to achieve his dream she'd put her life on the line for it without question. Although it was clear to her Hashirama wasn't striving for a brighter future with an unburdened heart.

"I'm sorry." The shock of the clear apology pulled her out of her own mind.

"Huh?" she said, intelligently.

"I told you that you were welcome to sit here and clear your head, then I say things that make that impossible."

"I don't mind," she admitted. When Hashirama loved Konoha and its people so much he broke his heart over them it was impossible not to want to offer the shoulder he was denying himself. "Hokage-sama has a lot of people to consider every time he makes a decision." Tentatively, she placed a hand on his shoulder. 'I'm sitting beside him, but I still have to reach up so far just to touch it.'

Hashirama took note of her hand, then smiled softly. "Thank you for listening, although I still feel guilty for making you."

"Trust me, this is far from the worst conversation that's been forced on me." Sakura smirked, unable to catch herself. Naruto could ramble on about noodle and miso soup combinations all morning long. Ino was just as bad when it came to expressing the many ways in which her team annoyed her.

There was some unspoken relief at seeing that his answering grin was much more genuine and easygoing. "I have to try harder. I could regale you with tales of Bukkai's growth over the last few months. Tobirama tells me that's enough to make the dead cover their ears."

Sakura joined him in a shared laugh. "I'm glad I chose well."

"Of course," he hummed. "I've always had an affinity for plants since childhood. I assume it's related to the Mokuton."

Sakura had studied his cells when she'd help Shizune take apart the dead Zetsu, but all that told her was the genetic material was a match to Hashirama's and that strengthened the strange plant-like entity's abilities. In the midst of war she hadn't exactly had time to do a deep analysis that would have led to unlocking the Mokuton's secrets by any means.

She was intrigued to hear the First Hokage's take on his own power. "That would make sense. Maybe contact with you stimulates healthy growth in a process similar to osmosis?"

"I've had that theory for a while," Hashirama raised a brow, pleasantly surprised. "You're very astute, Sakura-san."

Sakura ducked her head despite being vaguely aware that the pink on her cheeks wasn't bad enough
for him to notice. High praise from a shinobi as impressive as he was sent a flutter of elation through her stomach nonetheless.

"When you start out with so many handicaps, you have to be sure to build strength in the area you are decent in." she mumbled. "For me that was sucking in as much knowledge as possible."

"Oh?" The waxing moon was directly overhead and it was easy to see each other if they tried. Hashirama looked doubtful. "There's nothing subpar about the combat skills I witnessed in your spar with Tobirama, and you're certainly impressive enough to gain Toka's respect."

"Well..."

"I can tell Izuna holds you in high regard as well." Sakura couldn't figure out why his voice almost sounded...strained. "I'd bet that Madara's opinion of you has changed over time, too."

"That remains to be seen." she scoffed.

"Madara is still enough like himself that I can tell these things," Hashirama insisted. "I've known him since we were boys." Flashing her a conspiratorial look, he said, "I doubt he remembers all the secrets I've learned about him over the years."

"We should exchange information sometime," she suggested coyly. "I'm pretty sure I witnessed a good year's worth of his embarrassment in a few weeks. That has to be a record."

Hashirama shook with laughter. "Whenever his memories return he'll be livid."

Sakura thought about all the jokes she and Izuna had played at Madara's expense. "I think Izuna's counting on it." It gave her good insight on why Naruto was such a prankster. It was much more fun than she'd willingly admit.

"Did he tell you about the time he, Naoko and I convinced Madara he was being haunted by the spirit of the forest for all the animals he hunted?"

Sakura imagined Madara jumping at every small noise while trying to downplay his paranoia and she doubled over in laughter. Hashirama explained the story between his own chuckles. When she was able to stop laughing her stomach and cheeks were sore, but knowing about that story was well worth it.

It dawned on her then how much talking to Hashirama had lifted her glum mood. She could forget all the problems that brought her out for a walk in the middle of the night in the first place, just converse as if they were old friends.

A streak across the sky up above caught her eye and she gasped. "Was that a shooting star?"

"They're pretty easy to see on clear nights like this one."

Sakura clasped her hands together and closed her eyes. 'I wish...I want...' she fumbled over the words even though they never left her tongue. But she managed to get it out into one cohesive wish, and her heart felt a little lighter.

Slowly opening her eyes made her blush, thinking Hashirama must think it was bizarre for her to wish on shooting stars at her age. But he was only just opening his own eyes, brown meeting green in total understanding.

"It's nice not to be the only one who still feels compelled to do that." he said.
"I guess there's just something magical about seeing one," Sakura considered. "You can pretend making what you want most come true is as easy as wishing it."

Hashirama crossed his legs together and rested his arms on his knees, gazing at the sky almost wistfully. "Those kind of shortcuts just don't exist in reality though, do they?"

"No," Sakura agreed. "They don't."

Easy silence stretched between them. They both had their sights set on the stars, soaking up the peaceful atmosphere.

Sunrise would be in a few hours, bringing another day with its own challenges and possibilities, but the moment kept all that at bay.

"Heavens garments are without seams." She heard him say.

'On the contrary, it's seeming more and more like the heavens can't get their shit together.' Sakura thought.

"You were right about a good view," Sakura grinned. "I can even see the constellations. That's the OoInu over there, I think." She pointed slightly to the left where she was confident it would be.

Hashirama followed her finger. "Actually…" She could feel his body heat as he moved closer, even through her four layers, and when he gently wrapped his large hand around the back of hers to guide her finger she withheld a squeak. "That's the KoInu. The OoInu is here."

Her face and neck were warm at their sudden proximity and her heart was skipping every other beat. She could feel the power in his hand despite the mild grip, and smell the earthy but pleasant musk that had to be Hashirama himself, but it was no big deal. She could just…deal with it.

"Right," she whispered. "But I know that's Ryouken." Sakura moved her hand again to point at another constellation but Hashirama held on. He craned his head to see better and strands of his hair tickled the sensitive skin of her neck, forcing her to hold in a noise between a gasp and a giggle.

"Sakura-san," he looked down at her with mirthful eyes. "You're pointing at Karasu. It's not really even close."

She scowled, squirming as she felt his quiet laughter. "Fine. I'm not very good, I know."

He released her hand, and she drew it into her lap, secretly missing the heat and comfort. That was just the cold talking. "Does it bother you that much?" Sakura blinked. At first, embarrassingly, she assumed he meant that he'd stopped holding her hand. But his question was directed at her apparent ineptitude for identifying constellations.

"Yes and no?" she tried, "It's not like it would be the first time…I know what it feels like to fail. I'd just really rather not."

"Hm," Hashirama leaned back with a wistful tilt of his head. "That sounds like a much milder version of my brother's philosophy."

Everything Sakura knew about the man who would one day be Nidaime suggested he wasn't a fan of being denied success. At anything. What other kind of person would devise a way to achieve optimal performance on the battlefield from living corpses? 'Hm…I wonder if there'd be a way to stop him from trying that. It would save everyone so much pain in the future.'
"Has he always been…" Sakura searched for a word that wouldn't offend him. Tobirama's bedside manner aside, he was still the Hokage's brother.

"So ornery?" Hashirama finished.

Sakura squinted. "Sure, that."

"You could say that even from a young age he was more reticent than most,"

'So he was a grumpy old man from birth.' Sakura decided.

Hashirama rested two fingers under his chin in a loose grip. "I remember our parents introducing us shortly after he was born. I wasn't much older than a toddler myself. Our mother was holding him, all wrapped in furs that he nearly blended right into." Sakura listened raptly as he recounted a tale she was positive no history book had ever contained. "I expected a baby to be crying. But he just stared right back at me with the most unimpressed face a newborn could ever make." Sakura grinned at the fondness in his voice. "I tried to touch him, but he grabbed my finger and almost crushed it without ever breaking eye contact." Hashirama rubbed at his neck. "I ended up being the one crying. …That's my very first memory of Tobirama."

Sakura had no trouble imagining that Tobirama had arrived into the world already well and truly done with everyone and everything. "So it's only gotten worse with age…" she mused aloud before catching herself. "Oh, I mean—"

Hashirama burst out laughing, placing a warm hand on her arm to steady himself. "That's possible. I've been dealing with it for so long I hardly notice anymore." he calmed himself down with a sigh. "The perfectionism has been present nearly as long as the attitude."

The vision in her mind of a grumpy, self-sufficient baby Tobirama toddling around at a foot tall had her choking on a laugh.

"He wouldn't talk for nearly two years, so everyone assumed he couldn't."

Sakura's eyes found his face in the dark again. "What was the real reason?"

Hashirama scratched at his cheek with a wry tilt of his lips. "Apparently he couldn't be bothered speaking all that time because he wanted his first words to be clearly understood. So it'd be easier to scold everyone for the 'indignity' he was 'subjected to' because of the constant gushing directed at him." A two year old sassing anyone who dared to coo at him? If anyone would, it would be Tobirama. "He really was a cute baby—even when he was unhappy with something."

Sakura could feel the dubious expression on her face. "I think you're right. I might have a tendency or two that leans toward perfectionism, but nothing that…severe."

She could have sworn she heard him mutter what sounded like, "thankfully."

"I do wish that maybe I could find common ground with him," she confessed. "At the very least we had a working relationship before." Granted, Sakura could understand the wariness. Before any revelations about deities and time-travel, if she had been faced with a strange person with a volatile power who she didn't really know skulking around, they might find themselves on the sharp end of her suspicions too.

"Well, Tobirama has a great appreciation for intellect and anyone who takes responsibility seriously. Everything I've learned about you suggests you have both qualities in abundance." Standing to his feet, he offered her a hand. Sakura hesitated before taking it. She hardly had time to
note the calloused heat before he was dragging her up.

"Thank you," Sakura had to crane her neck back, the disadvantaged one in their height differences. She could elaborate, but chose to keep it simple. Something told her he would understand.

The moonlight illuminated them as they stood close together, so she could see the kindness in his eyes. "The Hokage always has to be ready to provide an open ear, day or night." he winked.

"It won't be night for much longer."

"Which is exactly why I should be getting back in. An open ear." he repeated, tugging at his earlobe. "All day."

Sakura distinctly remembered how much Tsunade usually loathed receiving days. She or Shizune always tried to be on standby to offer a more pleasantly smiling alternative than whoever came to the Hokage for help having to look into a dour face. While she was more than competent at her job, her mentor's patience came and went. But she could see Hashirama likely being the opposite, patiently listening to the concerns of his villagers and shinobi with an encouraging smile.

"When do you actually rest?" Sakura asked in awe.

"Whenever Tobirama's not looking."

The erratic weather made it hard to decide what to wear lately; but since the sun was out and it wasn't snowing, the young Uchiha decided to split the middle with a long-sleeved shirt, pants, and a scarf his obaa-san had made him the previous winter. It was, after all, still chilly.

His breath came out in short pants as the academy came into view, and his friends with it. They'd all agreed to meet early, mostly because Reira would have dragged them there before anyone else anyway, but also because Kagami didn't want to be forced to endure a walk with the others from his clan who would be entering. Mainly it was having to deal with Manabu so early in the morning.

Chisato, bundled in her normal jacket, gazed in his general direction and then turned and said something to Reira, who was clearly in the middle of some excited chattering. She turned with a gasp and waved him over, bouncing on the balls of her feet. Kagami grinned, glad to see her bearing a semblance of her old self today.

"Kagami-kun!" she yelled in his ear as soon as he stopped beside them. "This is it!" she grabbed his shoulders, shaking him with a scarily wide smile. "We're gonna get headbands! We're gonna be ninja!" She raised a fist in the air, whipping her head to look at Chisato then back at him. Taking the cue, he slowly lifted a fist of his own, as did the quiet Aburame girl, and Reira gave an impassioned cry that echoed in the frosty air.

"Is your face alright?" he chuckled, pressing both his index fingers to her cold cheeks.

"Not sure." She chirped, speaking through an impossibly wide smile. "Might be stuck this way now. Guess I'll know in an hour."

Chisato placed her mitten-covered hands against their friend's face and Reira sighed in content, though the dopey grin didn't fade. "Chisa-chan, I always say you're cool. But I'm happy you're so warm."

Chisato stepped away, unceremoniously pulling her jacket up and then jamming it down over a startled Reira. Kagami looked on in bewilderment as the brunette flailed and squawked from the
inside of the baggy jacket, her head and shoulders covered.

"Chisa-chan, w-what're you doing?" Reira's muffled voice asked in alarm. "But I admit it's pretty warm in here…"

"My insects retreat into my body to escape the cold." she explained. "I thought Reira could benefit from shelter, too."

The Uchiha tilted his head dubiously. "Um, the gesture's nice but I think she's just too big." At that moment Reira's disheveled head popped out of the jacket's neck hole, making the girls look like a strange two-headed beast.

"He's right," Reira grumbled. "Thanks for trying Chisa-chan but this is just weird." She wiggled her way out, smoothing her hair down with a heavy sigh. "Can't we just huddle up for warmth for a while? Look at how long Kagami-kun's scarf is."

He hadn't paid much attention when he'd looped it around his neck on his way out the door, but Reira was right. The thick material and considerable length could wrap around all of them. "I don't mind,"

The words had barely left his mouth before the girls were rushing at him. An undignified squeak may have escaped when Chisato grabbed one arm and pressed close while Reira focused rewrapping the scarf so it draped around all three of them equally. Soon Kagami found himself snugly in between them both, blushing in spite of himself when Reira rubbed her face into the scarf, and in the process, his.

'I…I didn't think this through.' He lamented, but when his friends released twin sighs, the boy decided one small act of chivalry was the least he could do. They all stayed packed close together in the courtyard as children and their parents slowly trickled in.

Before the doors officially opened, the Hokage was going to come and make a commencement speech. Being an Uchiha, Kagami had a good understanding of the importance of ceremony, but it didn't stop him from mentally begging the man to hurry up.

"Wow, do you see that?" Reira exclaimed. Knowing her, she'd make sure that if for some reason they didn't see that, they soon would. "She's got a dog! I didn't know we could have dogs with us or I would've brought mine."

"You don't have one." Chisato reminded.

"I'd get one just to bring it!" So saying, Reira took the lead, tugging them toward a short-haired girl fussing over a dog snuggled to her chest, standing beside two dark-haired girls, a white-haired young man and an intimidating woman with a giant, equally intimidating ninken.

Reira was making a beeline for them without an ounce of hesitation. Chisato followed without any resistance. But Kagami, still wound up in the scarf, was choking as he stumbled along, clutching at the material suddenly too tight on his windpipe. 'N-Not this again!'

Just as he feared he'd fall face down in the snow and choked out for everyone to see, the line he was attached to came to an abrupt halt, and he bumped a perfectly calm Chisato. Kagami always thought he had a lot of composure for someone his age, but nothing ever daunted the Aburame, not even Reira's spontaneity.

"Uh, hello," When he caught his breath and oxygen started getting back to his brain, he could see the girl with the dog—definitely an Inuzuka—was watching them curiously. Though with her
polite smile if she thought they were a trio of idiots she hid it well.

"Hi," Reira greeted, "I know you don't know us, but we saw…well I saw you. Your dog, really! I saw your dog and she's just so…" Her voice grew softer until it tapered to an inaudible gush. "…She's so perfect."

The puppy barked approvingly. "She says thank you for noticing, she spent a lot of time working on her fur this morning." The Inuzuka girl translated. Looking down at her canine partner, she hummed in thought. "Is that why I couldn't find you?"

The puppy barked again.

The tanned, dark-haired girl who had looked disinterested the whole time glanced toward the teenager staring out across the courtyard, tugging his sleeve sharply. "You see? What kind of academy is this? People gush over dogs before they even exchange names." she complained.

"Ah," Reira smacked herself in the forehead, wearing a cheesy grin. "Sorry, sorry! I'm Reira."

"I'm Yoku and this is Asuga." The Inuzuka replied, bowing.

'She's nothing like the rumors describe the Inuzuka. She seems really cordial.' Kagami shot the woman with the wild hair and sharp eyes a surreptitious glance, shivering. 'But in comparison, her mother's full of intensity.'

The youngest of the three girls bounced up to them, staring with innocent black eyes. Her hair was pulled slightly to the side in a lopsided bun that looked like it was done with clumsy fingers and held in place by a thin…bone…? There was only one clan Kagami was aware of that used bones not only in battle but as accessories.

That would make the rumors that had the clan in an uproar just a few short weeks ago, completely true. When he'd heard some of the older Uchiha worked up over a small portion of the Kaguya clan settling in the village, he had imagined fierce, battle-hardened men and women that could actually prove enough of a threat to cause concern.

This girl, who couldn't be much younger than them, looked like she wouldn't hurt an insect—something that probably would make Chisato take an instant liking to her. "Kikue is Kikue," she greeted in a high, youthful voice.

Her unique speech pattern drew smiles from not only himself, but Reira and Chisato as well.

"You're so adorable," Not one for personal space, Reira rushed forward and squished her cheeks together.

Kagami and Chisato shared a nod, wordlessly tugging the scarf until the tiny Kaguya child had room away from Reira's clingy hands.

"Reira," Chisato quietly admonished.

"It's okay. Kikue thinks Rei-chan is adorable too." Kikue reached up to feel and admire Reira's signature braid.

"Ugh," the other female Kaguya that could only be her sister clutched her stomach as if she would be sick. "Junji you absolutely cannot leave me here."

"This is how it's going to be." Yoku's mother said in a confident voice. "The Hokage thinks it's the
best way to help you girls continue integrating, especially with your peers. And you're always complaining about being cooped up in the compound, aren't you Harihane?"

The moody, pouting girl called Harihane folded her arms and turned away. Being an Uchiha meant Kagami knew a thing or two about pride as well. Wounded pride especially was easy to spot. "Listen, nobody told me this was the alternative…" she grumbled.

"I'd attend too if I didn't miss the cut-off age by a handful of years." The man Kagami assumed was their brother said.

"Shut up, Junji," Harihane hip bumped him out of the way. "Nobody wants empty sentiments right now. I need to concentrate on reining it all in." She sucked in a deep, fortifying breath and walked off muttering, her shoulders hunched. "That white-haired Senju can just go ahead and make my cell cozy. I know I'm going to be in there for attacking some kid before the end of the day…"

Yoku cleared her throat. "She…she doesn't m-mean that!" she jogged to catch up with Harihane, Asuga secured inside her coat.

Kikue leaned up with a wide, conspiratorial smile and a twinkle in her eyes, hand cupped around her mouth. "Yes, she does~"

"I…I guess we never finished introductions," Kagami valiantly attempted to salvage the meeting with a hesitant glance after the two girls, shifting awkwardly in place. "This is Chisato. And I'm Kaga——"

"There's Hashi-nii," Reira cheered. "That must mean it's starting." There at the front was indeed the Hokage, accompanied by his brother and Madara-sama. Kagami couldn't help but stare longingly at the glowing white fur wrapped around Tobirama Senju's shoulders. It could have just been his imagination but it looked thicker and more tempting than ever. He started to envision wrapping it around his whole face to bask in the plushness.

"Kagami-kun," Reira elbowed him with a whisper. "Are you…drooling?"

Straightening quickly, he swiped his mouth with the back of a hand and was mortified to find it wet. Wiping it off on his pants, he feigned calmness. "No way. Let's be quiet so we don't miss any of Hokage-sama's speech."

ASiT

After the surprise of the Hokage's invitation to the academy opening, several days after their late night talk, Sakura had eagerly dressed that morning and prepared to head out. Toka turning up on her doorstep wasn't really expected, but the pinkette found she didn't mind the company, and something told her the Senju had a lot on her mind.

That was proven to be the case when Sakura lightly mentioned how excited Reira must be during the walk over, and Toka had given her a small, tired smile before explaining her niece had "snuck off" early to meet her friends there. Of course, there was more to it than that. As adapt as Toka was at maintaining a cool exterior, Sakura just had a feeling. Shinobi intuition, maybe.

Still, they got to the academy with Sakura bearing the burden of holding up the mostly one-sided conversation and her companion occasionally responding when she wasn't lost too deeply in thought.

By the time they arrived in the courtyard, clusters of children and parents were standing around, huddling in on themselves against the nippy winter morning and chattering in a blend of
conversations about everything from what they hoped academy lessons would include, to the friends they were hoping to make, or what the Hokage would have to say.

Toka's eagle eyes scanned the area, and Sakura hid a sympathetic smile. Whatever was going on between Reira and Toka, it didn't stop the older woman from worrying where Reira was concerned.

"Should we try over there?" Sakura suggested, motioning toward where a larger cluster of children were talking, standing right next to Naruto's special spot. The swing.

'I can't believe that's been here from the beginning. But there's no way the one we used is the original.' It was just a few smooth planks of wood attached to a branch by some rope. More than easy enough to replace when the old swing sustained too much wear and tear.

"Hm…" Toka said absently.

"Uh…" Sakura was growing steadily more concerned. Here was a shinobi who was always alert, even in seemingly innocuous places like this. It was a little sad that she still didn't know the woman well enough to guess what had her so out of it. She'd have to make an effort to change that…

"Well, well…truly long time, no see eh?" Momentarily pulled from her worriation over Toka, Sakura perked up.

'I definitely know that voice.' Swinging to the right, standing on her tiptoes and squinting through the crowd brought Sarutobi into her line of sight. He grinned, flashing them a glimpse of white teeth clenched around a senbon, his tanned face sporting a neat black beard that was slightly thicker than it had been some months ago.

His hands were tucked into his pant pockets, the vibrant red he seemed to favor on display in his short kimono shirt. The genial man slipped past a group of frantic-looking mothers with a warm pat to one's shoulder, and for the first time Sakura saw a young boy tagging along beside him.

"How many years has it been?" Sarutobi joked, rubbing his beard. "Don't tell me any more than four."

Sakura played along. "A lot less, luckily for you." They exchanged a brief hug, the boy peering up at them inquisitively.

"Toka," Sarutobi greeted, though he didn't move in for a hug, likely sensing the Senju's mood. "I take it you're here to see off your niece. Reira, was it?"

"That's right," Toka nodded briskly. "And this boy is no doubt your son." Noticing he was being addressed, the child stepped around his father with a chest puffed in pride and a lopsided grin.

Sarutobi ruffled the boy's hair with an affectionate chuckle. "Sure is. This is Hiruzen."

Sakura blinked once, twice, taking in Hiruzen, who couldn't be older than Reira, with no small amount of awe. He was…he was…

"Nice meeting ya." he waved, wearing an expression reminiscent of Konohamaru. He was tan like his father, his short, slightly ruffled hair a warm brown like his eyes. There was an air of confidence and playfulness much more like his grandson than the elderly man she knew in her own time.

'So this is the Third Hokage as a little boy.' She marveled.
The leader she'd known had been elderly even when she was small, a long-lived shinobi who was greatly revered for his quick mind and affinity for learning new ninjutsu in his prime years. The Professor, the history texts called him. Other textbooks went even further, naming him the second coming of the God of Shinobi. The sensei of her shishou. And, the man who had let Naruto down... In hindsight, hadn't he really let them all down?

Growing up, much like any other children in the village, Sakura saw a gentle, grandfatherly figure who would occasionally stop in unexpectedly on academy lessons. When he'd fallen in battle, she had mourned him with a heavy heart along with everyone else.

It wouldn't be until years later when she was apprenticing under Tsunade and was entrusted to sort and view confidential information from files only those in the Hokage's inner circle would have access to, that she began to doubt how well she had really known the sweet old Sandaime.

Records would implicate that he was complicit toward those who had risen to be great threats, like Orochimaru and Danzo. Sure, information in files was usually heavily redacted, but Sakura wasn't the highest scoring female student of her year for nothing. She had put enough together to know that old Sarutobi could have done a lot more than he did to protect them, protect Naruto. Knowing what she knew had admittedly cast him in a different light and soured some of his legacy for her post-mortem.

"Everything alright, Sakura?" Sarutobi asked.

Sakura realized she'd been zoning out too long, maybe frowning at the boy a little too hard if Hiruzen's uneasy face was any clue.

Putting all her shinobi skills of deception to the test, Sakura smiled somberly—at least some of that she didn't need to fake. "I'm sorry," she addressed Hiruzen. "You remind me so much of a boy I knew...and he's." All it took was a quick thought to the first child who had slipped away on her table, and her eyes were filming over with authenticated grief. Toka and Sarutobi's faces echoed with understanding, Hiruzen still a little lost.

"Oh...sorry." he squirmed.

Sarutobi rubbed his son's shoulder. "There are plenty of kids here now, go and talk to some of them. They'll be your peers." A light shove and Hiruzen was wandering off.

Sakura got the full weight of Sarutobi's compassionate gaze the minute the boy was out of earshot. "Not an adult here who doesn't understand," he nodded sagely. Sakura almost felt bad for being so good. Clearly he truly believed his son reminded her of some poor child who had been lost to battle. "This academy," He nodded his chin up at the building. "It'll be good for them. I'd rather have them here than out there."

Toka responded immediately, "Agreed." A sudden breeze lifted her bangs before dropping them right back down over her eye. "I can only hope whatever skills they learn here are never needed for real warfare."

Sakura wanted so badly to say something comforting, but knowing the future that she came from, how could she? Instead, she opened her mouth to ask them what they thought of the first-year curriculum, when she caught sight of a troop of children in dark colors walking with a haggard Izuna.

There was a small girl dangling precariously by one arm from around his neck, apparently having fun messing with his hair. But he didn't even take note of whatever discomfort it caused. He was
too busy guiding the broad boy she briefly remembered giving Kagami a hard time with a stern hand on his shoulder. Twin girls walked on his opposite side, talking excitedly to each other. And a pig-tailed girl with a lanky boy brought up the rear.

Normally, the children he trained seemed to regard him with respect, but with the excitement in the air it was evident they were just as susceptible as the other kids around, and Izuna was unfortunately dealing with the brunt of that unrestrained eagerness. Taking pity, Sakura made her way over, hands clasped behind her back.

"I can tell you've got it under control, but just in case, I thought I'd offer a helping hand anyway." Sakura maneuvered around to pluck the giggling child from his back.

Once he'd registered who was speaking to him, Izuna's lips pulled into a grateful smile. In fact his whole being radiated relief.

"Not exactly my finest moment, is it?" Motioning to the children standing around them, he explained, "I decided to come with them for their first day, since I planned to attend the academy opening anyway, but—"

"We're all like, really jittery." One of the twins informed. "Kinda nerves, kinda excitement."

"Speak for yourselves," Manabu scoffed. He was by far the biggest of the bunch in physical size, and there was so much cockiness oozing from his pores Sakura bristled. "There's not a single clan kid or civilian-born here that's better than an Uchiha."

The reproachful glare and smack upside the head that comment earned him was swift. "What did I tell you?" Izuna asked.

Sakura found herself glaring down at him too, and had to remind herself yet again that an arrogant child was still a child.

"Lineage doesn't build a better shinobi. Hard-work and heart make that determination." Manabu recited glumly.

Satisfied, Izuna inclined his head. "Scatter."

The children shot off in several directions, nimble-footed even across the semi-frozen ground.

When Sakura looked back up at Izuna, his face was troubled. "I'm getting a bad feeling about all this clan prejudice his father's been putting in his head."

Sakura nodded. "I can see why. He's already very…opinionated about it to be so young. Actually, it borders on open hostility."

She tried not to stare overtly when Izuna pulled his hair from its now-loosened ponytail so that it fell around his shoulders and down his back. Finger-combing it a few times, he continued on obliviously, "Maro's a traditionalist through and through. He was one of the most vocally opposed about signing a peace treaty with the Senju, and I know he's been quietly casting doubts to any listening ear regarding Madara's competence as a leader for a while now." Finished with his impromptu grooming, Izuna retied his hair.

"That sounds serious." Sakura's brow furrowed. She, being civilian-born, had never had to deal with any tricky machinations the way heirs and heiresses did.

"It would be, if I wasn't constantly five steps ahead." Izuna's voice had gone low, and his eyes were
glassy with a fleeting but present flash of something dark. Feral. An unexpected but not unpleasant burst of heat bubbled low in her belly.

Sakura could only imagine where that had come from, and she was hoping Izuna wouldn't notice. But hoping hadn't helped her in a long time, and it certainly didn't help her when his features softened and he lifted the back of his hand to her cheek. "How long have you been out here? You're flushed down to your neck."

Sakura swallowed a deep gulp of air that did absolutely no good when his hand skimmed down to feel the skin at the side of her neck, just above her racing pulse. "Just a curse of pale skin." At least he didn't seem to suspect that he was in anyway the cause. Sakura really didn't feel going over the implications of that revelation at present. The only men who had ever given her such a strange, bodily reaction were Sasuke, naturally, and on occasion, to her awkwardness, Naruto.

The hand was gently removed, saving her from further questioning on her temperature and rapid pulse.

From the corner of her eyes, she could see Sarutobi and Toka were coming over at last, and they honestly couldn't have picked a better time. They were better divine intervention than any deity had ever been for her. "It looks like the Hokage's just arrived," Sarutobi commented, staring toward the academy's main entrance. Sakura followed his gaze, spotting Hashirama in full Hokage garb making his way to the front of the crowd with Tobirama and Madara.

The assembled crowd of academy hopefuls and their families grew hushed, everyone listening raptly for whatever the Hokage had to say. Hashirama rewarded everyone with a wide smile, Tobirama and Madara stoic contrasts standing on either side of him.

"Thank you all for gathering with us to commemorate this day." he began. It was clear he wanted to seem dignified and reserved, but the sheer anticipation in his eyes gave him away, even at a distance. "It's not just the beginning of a dream come true, but it's the end of a dark era where children were trained in preparation to fight other children in long, ceaseless battles."

Several heads bowed in solemn remembrance.

"Now, children from all clans can learn together as peers instead of fighting as bitter enemies." A short but genuine cheer rose into the air. Encouraged, Hashirama's smile returned in full force, blinding. "Not just them, however, the academy opens its doors to welcome the next generation of shinobi from all backgrounds, including those who are civilian-born."

Sakura felt warmed to witness this piece of history especially. This was the moment that would shape her future decades later. She was a proud kunoichi of her village because the First Hokage had adamantly advocated to allow children just like her to have a chance to be great ninja, too.

"Children," The Hokage said, speaking directly to the youth, "Train hard and form strong bonds of solidarity with your peers. Grow up strong to uphold the Will of Fire. One day, you'll go from saplings to the mighty trees that make Konoha what it is." Hashirama's words rang out to settle over everyone, and Sakura could sense the motivation circulating in the air itself.

Toka, Izuna and Sarutobi seemed to sense it too. They each wore proud expressions, no doubt thinking of the children in their lives they hoped would go on to be the might of the village Hashirama spoke about.

Even Madara and Tobirama, normally at each other's throats when so close together, were content to stand in quiet unity with Hashirama, their expressions tranquil.
"We're gonna do our best!" A child cried from the middle of the courtyard.

"Yeah, I'll be a kunoichi that'll make my family proud!" another declared.

"Starting today I live by the Will of Fire, and one day I'll be Hokage!"

That last proclamation hit home, and Sakura pressed a hand to her mouth, unabashed tears shimmering in her eyes. Izuna gently bumped her, and she nodded that she was alright. 'Just feeling really nostalgic.'

Hashirama was happy to let them all revel in that feeling, and when they'd calmed, he went on as if he'd never been interrupted. "As adults, our duty is to support them as they grow, providing the nourishment and love they need so that their branches stretch up past where ours stopped. Until the day we wither into husks to make room for a vibrant new forest," His face craned toward the sky. "We're the ones lifting them on our shoulders so they can touch the sun."

Quiet, so quiet that it was almost as if every heart in the courtyard beat in sync, and then, an uproarious cheer. Sakura joined in, feeling it echo in her bones and in her soul, this was something she wanted to seal in her heart forever.

There was no telling how long it took the cacophony of cheers to peter out, but when they did, it was Tobirama who stepped forward after clearing his throat. "As that concludes my brother's heartfelt speech, students will now be allowed to enter the building. Instructors can make their way through the back entrance to your designated classrooms. Roster lists will be visible on all doors so that students know where to go. Make sure to memorize them carefully. They'll be taken down after the first week."

Animated chatter broke out yet again as kids hustled indoors, the very first students of Konoha's ninja academy.

Sakura was feeling more inspired herself. Hashirama was someone who just had that effect. All the things she'd been worrying over lately suddenly felt like problems she could tackle, because she'd already faced and overcome so many insurmountable challenges before.

That was probably why a hard shoulder knocking into her, nearly making her lose her footing, jarred her from the moment of peace. The universe had decided she'd had her five seconds of serenity and it was time to get back to the discord that had recently become her life.

She recognized the man, though it had been well over a month since she'd last seen him. Just a glance was enough to tell his elitist attitude hadn't gone anywhere. Before she could even comment on the rudeness of him accidentally knocking her, his thin lips curled into a patronizing smile. "Ah, Haruno-san, I see you're here to witness the fruits of your labor."

"History in the making." Sakura smiled sweetly. She couldn't help but notice the child held tight to his side by Shimura's arm around both the boy's shoulders.

"Quite the rousing speech Lord Hokage gave, no?" he asked conversationally. "Personally I'm looking forward to seeing just what this crop of children ends up being capable of...who will be weeded out and who will grow into a true pillar of the village remains to be seen, of course."

"Yes," Shimura agreed, "So long as everyone assumes their proper place." His eyes slyly landed on
Sakura before he looked down. "This is my son, Danzo." Far from the elder Danzo that she knew, 
the boy had somewhat unruly spiked chestnut hair and an unblemished face, not hidden by 
bandages. Nor did he use a cane or wear one arm in a sling. There was one thing in his youthful 
appearance that hadn't changed. The calculating squint to his eyes she'd recognize anywhere.

Sakura openly scrutinized the boy, who couldn't have been older than ten. As with the young 
Third, Sakura's feelings toward his future self were far from positive. But whereas Hiruzen held 
bias for passivity, Danzo was directly and actively responsible for a shadowed history of 
atrocities in the village.

He had hurt so many children, her own teammate Sai included... He had tried to usurp power from 
Tsunade, though thankfully he'd met his demise at Sasuke's hands before he was fully successful. 
Yet here, he was a harmless child, not a threat by any means.

Nevertheless, looking at the boy and trying not to see the man was hard. Especially when he was 
no doubt already being groomed by the bigot standing in front of her.

"I think our boys are around the same age," Sarutobi remarked.

"Yes," Izuna added, "The same with Kagami and the others."

"Reira as well." Toka chimed in.

"Excellent," Shimura raised his chin. "It's an honor to think Danzo will be learning alongside 
children from clans of such high caliber." He gave his son's shoulder a tight squeeze. "Run along 
now, son." To Sakura's irritation, the boy child Danzo couldn't resist casting her one more 
suspicious glance before about-facing to join the last of the children filing inside for their 
schooling.

Sakura had hoped that would be the end of it and Shimura would leave too, but instead he turned 
all his attention on Toka with an impressed lift of his eyebrows. "My, I'm familiar with Izuna-san 
as well as Sarutobi-san, but I do believe this is the first time we've met, Lady Taka. It's an honor."

Sakura expected Taka to oblige him with a polite if not shallow remark about the feeling being 
mutual. She eyed him once from head to toe as if underwhelmed. "I see."

"You yourself are something of a prodigy with poisons and genjutsu," Shimura complimented. 
"Your work has been openly praised and envied among the Senju's adversaries for years."

A shadow passed over the woman's face before her lips pulled taut, one of the tells Sakura had 
come to realize meant she was shutting away all emotion. "Generous of you to say, Shimura-san. 
But I hope I never have need for those techniques at any point in the near future."

Sakura exchanged looks with Izuna and Sarutobi, who had been all but shut out of the 
conversation. Both men looked wary of whatever Shimura was working up to. "Wishful thinking," 
Shimura sighed. "Unfortunately the threat of conflict is always an ominous cloud even in brighter 
times such as these. However shinobi like us, those who have known bloodshed all our lives and 
can deaden emotions at will to cut down anyone, are the key to Konoha's prosperity. Just as our 
children should reach toward the light, we seasoned ninja should never shy from acting in 
shadow." An oily smile flickered on his face. "Do you not agree, Lady Taka?"

Sakura watched on with worry. Something about his words had effected Taka. She was outwardly 
concealing it as well as ever, but Sakura could still read her well enough.

"I...was born in shadows, Shimura-san. For a time I embraced that existence. But it was no place
for a child." she said, maintaining eye contact with him. "As you mentioned, these are brighter
times. Maybe that won't always be the case. But for now I'm content to shed the dark I grew up in.
As a shinobi, we endure only by adapting. Do you not agree?" And just like that, Toka had cleverly
spun his own words back at him, and Shimura stumbled to response. "I suppose this is where we
part ways?"

Sarutobi and Izuna, knowing they were being addressed, nodded understandingly.

"Don't be a stranger," Sarutobi replied.

"Sakura, would you accompany me?"

Toka didn't say to where, but when she flickered from view, Sakura suspected it was crucial that
she follow.

"You're losing it.' She told herself, landing solidly in a crouch on the deserted Senju training
grounds. Thankfully Sakura had followed unquestioningly. But Toka still felt she owed the
younger woman an explanation.

Sakura was quick to take in their surroundings. "A spar?" she ventured.

"Yes," Toka granted herself a deep breath, "But could we talk?"

"A-Alright…" While the Senju had certainly never had many female friends, or friends outside the
clan at all, she was grateful that the one she had found was so accommodating.

The pink-haired kunoichi took her position, so she did the same. They ran at each other without
warning, no words needed to convey the first tense minute of their clash. Instead Toka used a
forearm to guard against a roundhouse kick, pushing back and stopping a fist aimed for her face
with her free hand.

Sakura took note of her position and smirked, bringing her leg down and attempting to sweep
Toka's feet from under her. The Senju sprang back into a handstand, already feeling lighter on her
feet. "How aware are you of my reputation?" she asked.

Sakura's eyes were sharp with focus. "Not very familiar at all." For some reason, that news made a
flutter of relief touch her breast. "You're a revered expert on genjutsu and poison…like Shimura
said."

Toka spit a barrage of senbon, hoping to catch her opponent off guard. Sakura reacted with equal
speed in producing a previously hidden kunai and deflecting every other needle. Specifically, the
ones that had been poisoned mixed with those that hadn't. The rest, she dodged without blocking. "I
took my first life at the tender age of seven. I had been going to a small village near our settlement
as a courier for the clan. In doing so, I made a friend, the daughter of what our clan head believed
to be his informant."

The Senju weaved through the proper signs for a water bullet jutsu, but when she released them
Sakura made no attempts to counter. Instead she held her arms to the sides, and before the attack
reached its mark, a jerk right had them flowing to circle her in a fast-moving ring of water. That
gave Toka pause. She hadn't even seen the pinkette weave a single sign.

The redirected jutsu came rocketing back as a powerful jet that she narrowly ducked under. When
she peered in Sakura's direction, she was staring down at her hands in prideful wonder. Pocketing
the information of how Sakura, who Tobirama had previously said had no known proficiency in
even the most basic of jutsu, could suddenly perform such strong attacks without weaving signs, she pressed on with her tale. "However, it was discovered that the informant had double-crossed the Senju, and was also working with the Hagoromo clan. He planned to use his daughter to carry information to a member at a late night rendezvous. Secrets regarding our battle tactics."

Sakura paused, listening with wide eyes. "That could have cost the Senju the entire battle."

"Exactly," Toka's eyes focused on a spot in front of her, loathe to admit what happened next. "So you understand why that could not happen at all costs. Because I had been the one used to communicate with them, Lord Butsuma ordered me to intercept Hana. She was only a civilian, and I had no trouble overpowering her…" Hana's frightened face was still vivid in her mind, even so many long years later. "She begged me to let her go, and promised she wouldn't deliver the message."

Sakura sucked in a deep breath, seemingly anticipating what she was about to say.

"But I knew that Lord Butsuma would not consider that enough assurance that our plans wouldn't fall into enemy hands. I made the decision to kill her." She'd tried to make it quick, but she had been young and scared herself then, and her clumsy hand inflicted a wound that would ensure a slow, painful end.

Sakura's face was pained, horrified, as to be expected. While she was a formidable kunoichi who Toka had a great deal of respect for, she also had at times an odd attachment to mercy that could only come from a sheltered upbringing. "Your…friend?"

"My friend." Toka licked at her dry lips. "I killed my only friend, because between duty to my clan and the friendship of a blacksmith's daughter, there was never any real struggle about what meant more." Shaking her head, she smiled wanly. "After that, my hesitation greatly diminished, and throughout the rest of my childhood and into adolescence I was assigned increasingly more dangerous missions."

She darted toward the stunned kunoichi, using the distraction to land a punishing blow to her unprotected gut. Sakura absorbed the hit with a grunt, the hit forcing her back. "I unblinkingly completed each one. Often, the shinobi I faced were my age, sometimes younger. Then, I cut down an adult. A man who told me about his family and his wife pregnant with their third child. He wanted to see them one more time." Sakura held onto the arm that had delivered the punched and yanked Toka forward with vehemence, kneeing her in the stomach and then shoving her away with a foot.

She didn't have a chance to get back onto her feet before Sakura was straddling her with a kunai to her throat, but there was no anger in her face. Just the opposite. Toka always preferred the anger, any hate directed at her than sympathy or compassion. It only made her feel worse. "Toka…"

"I plunged my kunai through the back of his neck…and he gasped his wife's name with his dying breath." Toka remembered stepping away from his cooling body, barely registering the pat of approval to her head the Senju who had stumbled on them gave her. "That was all before my work with poisons." She stopped, meeting Sakura's eyes. "I know exactly what I've done, Sakura. Others know too. Except Reira."

Here, Sakura's sympathetic face faltered with confusion. "She…doesn't know any of it?"

Toka shook her head as best as she was able. Realizing that, Sakura removed the kunai and got off her. "She's never seen a battle, and was kept sheltered inside the Senju settlement all her life before the village was formed. The gory details of my past have been kept from her, yet she idolizes what
she thinks are my heroic exploits and wants to follow in my footsteps as a true kunoichi."

"Then…why don't you tell her?" Sakura asked gently.

That had been a question she had asked herself and struggled with for years. Her cowardice was humiliating, but Toka wouldn't deny she clung to the last shield between herself and the inevitable. Her mind had rationalized that Reira was too young and impressionable, and she would reveal everything when she was older and more emotionally mature.

But that was merely another excuse. Her niece couldn't be unaware that they hailed from a powerful warrior clan. Shinobi were bred to suffer and to cause suffering. A small part of Reira must have picked up on that, right?

Then again, if she hadn't fully grasped just what a shinobi life meant, it would be Toka's own fault. "Maybe it's because the thought that she could look at me with disgust is too great a fear. I've never been ashamed of my sins to the extent that I've purposely hid them. On the contrary, I always saw my work as necessary then. I justified it for a long time before I was ready to admit I had been used like every other child soldier."

Sakura nodded encouragingly. They both sat now, cross-legged and facing each other. "Then you shouldn't be so hard on yourself. You were a child that was exploited, not a monster. Reira adores you, and she would understand—"

"Perhaps in time," Toka mused. "But getting her to understand would require a great detail about my past, the fate of her parents, and the true reasons I've grown concerned about her trying to seek a path like mine. I can't help but think all of that in a short time would drastically alter her worldview." She gave a short, self-deprecating chuckle. "In short, I'm the one who requires more courage than I currently have."

Sakura didn't respond, her growing bangs slipping down over her glassy eyes as she stared into her lap. "…You know, I think I understand." she said softly.

Despite Sakura's past being as big a mystery to her as hers was to Reira, Toka couldn't help but believe her.

The success of the academy opening had him riding high. There was no other way to describe the airy feeling that took over and made him feel as though his feet hadn't touched the ground in days.

Not even the thought of being restricted to a day indoors while cold weather continued outside, could deter him. Especially when he had made an impromptu trip to the Nara Forest and gotten the bag of what he needed to keep Bukkai happy. Hashirama surveyed his bonsai, the pre-cut pieces of wire and mesh, the new, bigger pot he had gotten, and the burlap sack. If he was content, then his tree friend should be.

Hashirama had just picked up his plough when an almost timid knock on his door interrupted. Surprised, he looked over thoughtfully. Today wasn't a receiving day. And not even Tobirama was around, presently monitoring the Kaguya siblings since he had not been pleased about allowing them access to the academy.

Though he couldn't imagine who was at his door or why, he wasn't about to turn them away. He shrugged down at the organized mess on the floor around him. At worst, they would find out that the Hokage was a bonsai enthusiast. If that hadn't been evident already.

"Come in," he replied, already distracted by his repotting when the door swung open. A bright pink
head popping into the room was a pleasant surprise, Sakura Haruno's determined expression morphing into bewilderment when she saw his supplies.

"Hello Sakura-san, what brings you by?"

"Ah," she cleared her throat, pulling her eyes away from Bukkai. "I can come back…I didn't have an appointment anyway, so really this was a little rude."

"Don't mind this," he stuck the plough down into the soil around his little tree to loosen it. "Just doing some maintenance for Bukkai. Winter is when cherry blossom bonsai should be repotted and I feel sort of neglectful since I've put it off for nearly a week." Cautious of getting caught up in a tangent about proper bonsai care, he cut himself off abruptly.

Instead of seeming put off, she regarded what he was doing with intrigue. "You seem to know a lot about bonsai care…have you been reading up or is it a long-time hobby?"

Hashirama thought back to boyhood when he had first cultivated an interest in pruning the bonsai kept around the settlement, learning about the different species from Senju who gardened. Of course, that had come to an end when his father insisted his heir stop tending to plants and start working on perfecting his Mokuton instead.

"It's an old hobby I've been rediscovering lately."

She took a step further into the room; when he didn't raise any objection, she carefully navigated herself until she was standing a foot away, before crouching. "I admit I never took a lot of time raising plants before, but I know someone who's amazing at it." He saw the nostalgia in her beryl eyes that appeared sometimes when she spoke about nameless people from her past. "Would you…" she hesitated, so he waited patiently for her to go on. "Would you mind if I watched?"

Hashirama nearly lost his grip on the plough. Talk about unanticipated…

A sudden frown touched her pink lips. "Actually, that's probably a little invasive, isn't it? This is your free time."

"No, no," he scooted over. "I don't mind."

Sakura moved closer and picked up a piece of mesh. "So what's this for?" The crinkle between her brows was adorable, "Is it for some kind of filtering?"

"It helps keep the soil around the roots from being rinsed away during watering," he explained, fitting a piece of meshing over the drainage hole. Sakura considered the mesh in her own hand before mimicking him on the other side of the pot. Hashirama didn't comment on it, wondering if she even realized she'd done it or was simply someone who enjoyed trying what she learned for herself.

He reached for the purposely bent wire and fed it into the middle of the mesh. As he pushed the piece down with his thumb, he glanced up at Sakura to see her still watching intently. "Not that I mind Sakura-san, but I assume you didn't come here to watch something this dull."

"Learning's never dull for me." She shook her head absently. "But I was talking to Yurine about academy lessons. She told me she's going to be a full-time instructor."

Hashirama thought back to the energetic Yurine Yuhi and how surprised he'd been that Tobirama deemed her suitable as an instructor. The skills she possessed were more than fine, though occasionally she could be flighty, a trait his brother wasn't known to be fond of. "Yes, she's
teaching basic genjutsu."

"Mhm." Sakura once again copied what she'd seen him do with the wire. "Anyway, she mentioned there's no one teaching the students basic field medic skills."

Hashirama slotted the longer pieces of wire into the four small holes, two on both sides of the pot. "That's true," he reached for the bucket he'd set aside, then the burlap sack. "This next part is pretty messy." He warned. "You might…it might be sort of hard to sit that close if you're not use to it."

Sakura blinked slowly. "Hokage-sama, I'm a medic, I've been close to plenty of unappea—" The words died on her tongue when he undid the sack's tie and the pungent aroma of fresh manure saturated the air space. Sakura pinched her nose, eyeing the bag with disdain. "Wh-What in the…"

"It's compost from the Nara Forest made with deer droppings." He admitted sheepishly. "Fresh."

Sakura was quick on her feet, practically charging across the office and wrenching the window open with none of the polite manner he'd previously come to associate her with. With a jab, she pointed to the opened sack of compost. "And that makes the way it smells better?!"

She had never been so informal or feisty toward him before. Even on the night they'd talked under the stars, there was a line she was clearly unwilling to cross. Apparently the reek of the soil was too foul not to speak up on.

Chuckling under his breath, Hashirama made sure the bucket was steady between his legs and then held the sieve over it with one hand, pinching the side of the bag with the other and trying to slowly shake it out. It wasn't easy with one hand, but he managed. "It's not that we didn't consider that position," he said after some thought. "Tobirama assured me he couldn't find anyone fitting for the job. Not in time for the academy opening."

"How hard did he look?" she grumbled. "Oh… oh!" Sakura's cheeks colored as her words seemed to catch up to her. "I'm sorry."

"It's not a secret that Tobirama is hard to please, especially in the area of medical expertise." The kunoichi made her way back over to squat nearby again, evidently choosing to put up with the smell for a closer look.

Hashirama made sure the compost was thoroughly sifted into the bucket, separating clumps, then used the plow to mix it around for good measure. Accurately guessing what he'd need next, Sakura pushed Bukkai's new pot his way.

"But even so, there has to be someone who can do the job. I mean medic nins are always in high demand, aren't they?"

Of course she was correct. If at least one child could graduate the academy with the knowledge to aid their teammates with field-dressing skills—not that he could ever envision authorizing using children on the frontlines—it would help stave off infection and possibly prevent lots of casualties. "Is this your way of volunteering your services?"

The young woman's head lifted from her singular focus on his work, genuine surprise appearing in her clear, green eyes. "I…I…well, no." she bit her lip. "I'm flattered, and it's not like I'm trying to be pushy without offering to help, but I'd prefer to be on active duty more than an instructor, and —"

Hashirama ceased her increasingly frantic rambling with a gentle smile. "What about once a week? Or even every other week?" She had switched from an expression of mortification to
thoughtfulness, so he continued. "Sakura-san, you're more than qualified, and it's true that this is a
skill students really should be exposed to. I don't mind working out the details in a way that suits
your schedule."

"That might work."

He nodded enthusiastically. "Great!" His hand swept toward Bukkai, which had been waiting
patiently off to the side. "Would you mind removing the wires at the bottom of the old pot?"

Sakura's eyes darted across the room as if she couldn't fathom who he was speaking to, before she
pointed to herself incredulously. "Me?"

Hashirama's ears began to heat up, and he knew before long they'd be pink. Maybe he had misread
her clinical interest as enthusiasm and she didn't want to have an active role in helping him after all.
"Ah, if it's not too much to ask."

Shrugging, she reverently picked up Bukkai, held the underside of the pot at eye level and tilted
her head. "Oh, these?" Effortlessly switching the little tree to one hand, she pinched the wiring
between her thumb and index finger and pulled it free from the pot's base.

'Normally I would have had to cut through those with a kunai...' he mused. 'Her strength is
immense but she's also very used to performing delicate tasks.'

She handed him Bukkai without missing a beat. "What next?" If he didn't know any better, he'd say
she was getting very into the whole process.

"I have to carefully take it out all the way to the roots." A quick, gentle tug and Bukkai came free
from its former home; Hashirama didn't waste time going for the small rake claw and fussing over
removing soil from between the roots.

"So a bonsai really does have a root system closer to a tree than a flower." Sakura observed.
"They're so thick!" She ran a careful finger over one.

"That's actually part of what you need to pay attention to with bonsai." He told her, pointing down
at some of the thickest roots. "These should be pruned before it goes into the new pot. The
branching system won't be well-balanced if one or two roots are allowed to become much stronger
than the others."

"That makes sense," Lifting the same finger she had tenderly touched the root with, Sakura
produced a restrained, visible amount of blue chakra concentrated around her fingertip, slicing
cleanly through the root he had pointed out. She repeated the process with the other two roots that
had been the same length and level of thickness. "I didn't mess up, did I?"

"It's perfect." Hashirama marveled at how uniformly she'd made the length of each. "You're
starting to make me think you're a natural."

Sakura placed a hand to her chest in relief, her eyes somewhat proud. "It's sort of the same concept
as making really precise incisions during healing."

Hashirama could certainly see why so many that had witnessed her skill in action saw her as
competent. It also raised questions he'd been mulling over, and even brought up with Tobirama.
"You know, I've been meaning to ask for a while now...exactly where did you learn medical
ninjutsu? There's just something about your technique that reminds me of the way Senju..." he
trailed off when he saw how some of the light had drained from her face.
"I…"

Why did she look so nervous? Did she think he was subtly accusing her of somehow stealing clan techniques? There was some possibility that a clan member assumed lost to battle had actually survived and defected. It was rare but occasionally happened. They might travel around, keeping a low profile and retiring from ninja life while peddling services for money.

There was nothing to say Sakura hadn't inadvertently encountered a Senju who had taught her in her home village. "I never really thought too much about who I was learning from, I was just… really eager to be able to do something I thought would help people." Hashirama could tell there was more to it than that, but let the matter slide.

He set Bukkai into the new pot, handing her some more wire. "It has to be properly secured again. Since you managed so well with undoing the old ones, do you think you could twist these tight?"

She complied, another perfect estimation of what was needed. Hashirama added the last of the compost to pat and cover Bukkai's roots snugly, poking his finger around lightly.

"This is going to be one happy bonsai." Sakura said.

"I'm sure it already is." He picked up the watering can and gave the tree a hearty sprinkling. "This was fun, Sakura-san. Thank you."

Looking up through her lashes, her mouth quirked into a shy smile. "I really didn't do much besides barge in on you."

"I do keep an open door policy." He joked. "I'm no stranger to being barged in on." Thinking back to how many times civilians, Reira, Tobirama, Madara or a random ninja had let themselves in made him sigh. "This is actually one of the nicer times it's happened."

Giving herself a once over, she brushed at some dirt that had gotten on one of her kimono sleeves. "But does it usually end up so messy?"

Hashirama noticed for the first time he might have been even worse, some of the soil having fallen onto his lap and caking his palms. When had that occurred? "Not usually, no…"

"Here," Sakura began tidying the floor space with sure hands. "It's the least I can do."

"When I see you cleaning up my mess, it's pretty shameful…allow me." Hashirama pulled the root claw from her hand. Or tried to. Her grip suddenly tightened on it. One fierce glare and he released the tool.

Satisfied, Sakura set to work using a cloth to wipe off the tools. She didn't get far into it until her countenance grew taut in frustration. "How can you stand the stench and the stickiness? This is… this is gross."

He started to rub at his cheek before remembering his palms were dirty as well. "I'd have to ask Doi, but I think the uh, freshness and the deer's diet this time of year might have something to do with that."

"Like I said," she deadpanned. "Gross…"

"What happened to the bravado of the undaunted medic?"

Sakura smirked. "I'm still cleaning, aren't I?"
Hashirama was elated that she was taking it in stride. Sakura-san really was something else. "I'll make sure to mind the consistency next time. Sorry it ruined your sleeve. But it should come out with—"

The highly audible sound of a throat clearing alerted them both to Tobirama having appeared from thin air in the shadow of the open door. Presumably, in time to catch his last sentence.

A hand moved up to wipe across his entire face. "Do I…even want to know?"

"Brother, how was—"

Tobirama gave them his back, promptly marching back out the door. Hashirama could have sworn he heard his brother's voice complaining about a stench like rotted fish.

Chapter End Notes

*Originally posted on FFN*

I appreciate the number of people who let me know they still have an investment in this story. I'd really lost a lot of enthusiasm for it and when I got it back, I was hesitating between updating and letting the hiatus continue indefinitely. Hence the interest check-in. I'm sure everyone has heard this not just from me, but other fic writers, but the best way to "pay it forward", get more chapters, show you're around, etc; is always to comment (respectfully—no 'update now'/more!). I remember the readers I see in my reviews a lot, and I often think about them when I get ready to update. So commenting is definitely not done in vain. I should also note that writing this chapter felt fun and effortless as opposed to the chore writing had become as of late, so I think that says a lot.

Tabi are a particular kind of sock worn with different open toe shoes and sandals in Japan. They're known for the big toe of the sock being separate from the rest of the foot.

OoInu is supposed to be the translation for the Canis Major, or Big Dog constellation. KoInu is the Canis Minor, or Child Dog constellation. Well, if the translations I found are reliable anyway.

Ryouken is a constellation called "Hound", which Sakura confuses for Karasu, or "Crow". She could probably use some astronomy lessons.

Kimono shirts are also a real thing. It's similar to what Jiraiya often wore. There's also modern fashion based off this style for both men and women. These are usually loose shirts different than the women's kimonos that are just shorter than average.

The breakdown scene at the beginning of this chapter: I wanted to show that while Sakura may have had a delayed reaction to her grief all this time, she still feels displaced, she's still hurting. Waiting 35 chapters into the story to show that was very deliberate, as I feel Sakura is the sort of person who would hold herself to near-impossible standards and shaft aside her own emotions when it comes to this stuff because she feels obligated to. Especially given how she was at a young age and how she sort of told herself to woman up after the Sasuke retrieval mission failed, and her continued conflicting feelings over Naruto's "promise of a lifetime" well into
Shippuden. Yes she's still openly very emotional, be it displays of anger, happiness or sadness, but that doesn't mean she can't be a bit neglectful to herself emotionally if that makes sense.

If you enjoyed this, please review!
Chapter Summary

As winter goes on, feelings may begin to change and kindle in different hearts.

Chapter Notes

Lots of people requested me to keep updating the fic here and since I’ve been slowly but steadily getting more comments on AO3 I decided to put up the new chapter the same day the FFN readers get it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"It's possible, yes."

Sakura waited, expecting Mizuchi's statement to be followed up with at the very least an explanation. In return the goddess arched a fine brow as if she were the one owed an explanation.

"There's definitely a little more than 'it's possible'." Sakura said impatiently.

Mizuchi pointed her finger at a patch of snow and it thawed to water, zipping straight at the kunoichi in a spear-sharp point. Sakura seized control of the minor attack with minimal effort and the weaponized liquid remained suspended as harmless droplets.

"Sakura, what you have accomplished already is no simple task." Mizuchi cupped her hands together and the droplets became a single glob in her palms. She dumped it out with a splatter. "I admit now that I acted recklessly. I should have prepared you in the event that you found yourself in a position similar to what you faced with Yama."

The pinkette still recalled that conversation with resounding clarity. "He said the blights I absorbed were going to strip away my humanity." She shuddered, remembering what she'd almost done first to Madara, then later Izuna. Some primal force that had overridden any rationality sang for blood so strongly it was hard to fight off. When she had thought of Madara's actions in the war, and when she had mistaken Izuna for Sasuke, and remembered all the emotional distress the latter had put her through... something snapped.

"And didn't it almost?" Mizuchi queried. "How close did you come to allowing the taint inside to swallow you?"

Ashamed, her head dipped low and hair hid her face. "In the end I feel like I'm just a girl who's still ruled by her emotions." Further proving her own point, water welled behind her eyes and she quickly swiped at them. "Mizuchi, I can't be the warrior you need."

Winter was upon them, but it didn't stop Sakura from sinking down on the riverbank and curling her knees to her chest, just staring at her reflection. Though she had only spent months in the past, somehow she looked so changed. Her matured face still held onto its youth but her eyes, though
bright, had a more solemn edge.

Mizuchi plopped gracefully beside her. She always wore such fine kimonos, every thread gleaming as if it were constructed from the finest material heaven could offer, and yet she never hesitated to get her clothes dirty. On the other hand, Sakura tried hard not to let anything soil her civilian clothes, knowing the convenience of a washing machine was nowhere to be found in the bygone era.

"Unfortunately for you I've already bestowed too much investment in you to turn back." The goddess droned. "You are still my intended godslayer. And though you stumbled in the beginning, you survived self-destruction by blight, which is a most impressive feat many wouldn't achieve."

Sakura cast Mizuchi a shrewd stare. "Is that your nice way of saying I'm your first successful experiment?"

The goddess smiled cryptically. "The hardest lesson has perhaps been learnt. You now have a chance to begin to call upon that form whenever you wish, while maintaining your sanity."

Sakura let that turn over in her head a few times. Truth be told, even briefly transforming in the Hokage's office had been a terrifying, mildly traumatic experience in which she was very cognizant of the last time she'd shifted. The near-consequences.

Albeit, unlocking that form in the heat of battle was inadvertently caused by the stress of the blights. Despite having confirmation that the Dragon State and the beastly nature weren't entirely one in the same, her conscious still had a hard time separating them, trusting herself not to revert back into a mindless, bloodthirsty monstrosity.

"If you are still unsure, try to call upon the inner dragon now while I am with you," Mizuchi coaxed. "In the event that you truly lose control, I'm more than capable of stopping you."

Trepidation thrumming in her heart, Sakura rose to her feet while Mizuchi looked on. But, it only took the span of a nonverbal exchange to realize she didn't know what to do. The first time was accidental, the second, brought on in a fit of stubborn determination and panic. All she was feeling was reluctance, and that felt counterintuitive to the goal at best.

"Am I just supposed to close my eyes and let instinct take over?" Sakura finally asked, annoyed that Mizuchi was never as forthcoming with hints as she could be. Why did the very nature of an immortal entity have to be so damned puzzling? It was no wonder humans had no idea what they were really like.

"Put simply it would be fastest if you did, yes. Faster still if you were to consciously ignite the dragon's inner fire."

Sakura squinted in thought, clicking her tongue in frustration. "Okay, pretend I'm clueless and break it down…" She wagged her finger, adding, "No obscurity."

The river deity chortled. "Surely you've accepted by now that our link makes you a little more than human, yes? Not immortal nor invulnerable by any means but absorbing my unique spiritual essence has given you access to some of the finer points of my power."

She nodded as she ticked off traits on her fingers, "The acidic flames, the Dragon State, the…" Pausing, her face blanched in horror as she recalled the question Madara had wanted to know. "I'm not going to grow a tail, am I?"

Mizuchi's answering grin was all too frightening, "And if you do?"
Sakura shuddered. If she did she'd never be allowed to live it down as far as Madara was concerned.

Noticing her deepening mortification, the goddess sniffed delicately. "Only a small joke." The twinkle in those distinctive eyes gave Sakura pause, though. One could never be fully sure with Mizuchi.

"In all seriousness, if you grasp that much then you should understand what it means to share space in your soul with the raw energy of a dragon. Humans always speak of chakra, and seek to combine their mental and physical energies in order to achieve your use of ninjutsu," She rolled her eyes as if unmoved by the thought. "Branding you has seared new pathways through your body. It's in your veins, and if you truly wish to master them, the power is there waiting to be channeled."

While she wasn't sure if she wished to, necessity took precedence. If any one thing had been made clear it was that she would not have the luxury of idly waiting in the village for a way home to pop up. Not until Mizuchi was satisfied at least, and though crazier than previously thought, what she now knew to be happening did indeed sound pretty dire. Gods twice as powerful as Kaguya couldn't just be left to run amok and alter human history as they saw fit, could they?

"You already know my answer..." Sakura took a deep breath in. "I need every advantage possible if I'm going to make it out of this."

The sharp, green-gold eyes took in not only her face, but the measure of her being. Apparently finding satisfaction, Mizuchi moved like a specter, one fluid motion bringing them chest to chest. "An answer nothing short of expected," she said with a pleased hum. "What drives you drives the dragon."

At first, it sounded like a riddle, but Sakura quickly figured out it truly was that straightforward. 'What drives me...' she thought. Going home had been her driving ambition all along, no matter how much she'd grown to care about many of the people she'd met. The past wasn't where she belonged. Of course, knowing what she wanted didn't make it simple.

Already at this stage in the journey she'd faced countless perils, and all in all home was just as far away as before. The lack of so much as a dent being made should have been highly discouraging, and once it definitely would've been. But if she didn't have hope that it was a possibility, then she was forever without wings.

Hope was such a strange, slippery thing, she'd come to conclude. It was also the first spark in the pit of a dragon's belly, slowly changing into a full-blaze. Hope was an objective so tiny and far off in the distance it was practically an illusion, until eyes made focused by new knowledge and a bigger picture brought it closer.

Hope was survival in a strange land that, at the same time held fleeting glimpses of familiarity that made her heart ache. Hope was vulnerable but strong, timid but brave, confusing but clear.

Power skittered through her cells, knocking the breath from her lungs. The transformation had warped her reflection into someone recognizable only because of the intimate knowledge she had of herself.

From fingertips to forearms sleek scales climbed like ivy, protectively incasing her pale skin as snug as a pair of combat gloves. Fangs peeked past parted lips, no less surprising than the stubby black horns sprouting from the sides of her head. Sakura blinked, her eyes an identical shade and shape to Mizuchi's. When a calm breeze wisped past, hair moved to reveal the state of her right ear,
"Hope." she said breathlessly. "Hope wakes up the dragon!" With that knowledge safely tucked in her heart, the last vestiges of fear she'd had about losing control melted away, and Sakura watched her features return to normal. She beamed up at Mizuchi, confidence radiating from her pores. "I can do it now. At will!"

"That you can." The dragon confirmed. "But you've only just begun, Sakura. More potential lies waiting just under the surface."

The kunoichi's mind was already working through several types of training she wanted to do in order to get a better handle on her abilities. If the need arose for them, she couldn't afford to be a novice.

"Then let's find it," she stuck out a hand. "Together."

Mizuchi considered the outstretched hand with a cock of her head, seeming to take measure of the resolution in her tone. Just as one of her own hands slipped from the wide sleeve of her kimono, Sakura withdrew her own with a gasp. "Training!" she carded the hand she'd pulled away through her tresses, tugging at the roots. "I'm supposed to be training with Toka today."

The dark finely shaped brow of the goddess dipped in exasperation. "You would delay this, so close to a breakthrough, to train with a mortal?" Sakura could have imagined it, but Mizuchi seemed more put out by the idea that she could want to spend free time with someone else more so than her leaving their training for another time. Deities and their enormous pride…sometimes it was impossible to avoid running afoul of it.

"Only for the day?" Sakura tried, already turning to leave. "I promised. And Toka…" Frankly Toka could probably use the company right about now. Her strained relationship with Reira was still something making her more sullen than usual.

"Go." The dragon woman harrumphed, nose upturned. "I don't feel it necessary to hear in no uncertain terms just how lowly I rank to you at the moment."

Sakura winced, though inwardly she couldn't stop an eye roll. So dramatic. Normally a guilt trip like that would come from Ino or her mother.

With a small wave and an apologetic grimace, Sakura turned her back on the deity, heading toward the Senju compound.

Compared to when she'd last visited the Senju compound, the grounds were lifeless, especially for it to be the middle of the day. Though no one was around the gates were left ajar, and Sakura quietly let herself in.

She cast apprehensive glances about, trying to convince herself she wasn't sneaking around. Toka had indeed invited her for another spar, something that appeared to help the stoic kunoichi work through her thoughts. Sakura was glad to oblige, understanding the need to distance oneself from a mind of troubled feelings.

'Let's see…' she thought. 'I think the training grounds were…two right turns and a left? But that was when I was using the big hall where the party was held as a point of reference. From here…' Sakura gave up with a groan, dragging her feet with a slouch. She couldn't imagine what was going on that the home to a clan of at least a hundred people appeared deserted. Toka hadn't mentioned anything taking place where visitors would be unwelcome… it wasn't like her responsible friend to
"I should probably just come back another time…” Sakura muttered aloud, peering down yet another empty street, this time lined with more homes with a light dusting of snow on the roofs and doorsteps. It might look suspicious if she were to be caught skulking around, unintentionally or no. She pivoted on her heels with a frown. "Toka obviously just…"

She stopped, her eyes catching on the sight of a figure at the end of the road hobbling along. Sakura was no dojutsu user but her vision was keen enough to tell the poor person was unsteady on their feet, and they looked to be carrying something in their arms.

Lots of the snow on the ground had melted, and the sun was even starting to appear from behind the clouds it had hidden behind all morning, but Sakura still feared the next mild wind might blow the person over. Her concern prohibiting her from pretending she hadn't seen them, she started forward again with careful steps, but when they leaned forward and then collapsed with a lurch, Sakura was sprinting to their side.

"Ah, hold on!" she practically skidded over, dropping to her knees.

An older woman with her face drawn and her eyes unfocused breathed heavily in the snow. Sakura rolled her from her side to her back and wrapped an arm under her shoulders to support her. "I need…to help…” she whispered, her voice thin.

Sakura shook her head in disbelief. "I need to get you some help." Her bare wrist touched the back of the woman's neck when her sleeve moved. "You're burning up. Ma'am please, which way is your home?"

Eyelids fluttering, the plump older woman sighed. "Just…just ahead there." She pointed toward the third house near the end of the street on the left side. As all the others it was dusted with snow but otherwise neatly maintained with a solid foundation, raised porch and sturdy-looking roof. 'I bet the Hokage built the compound too.' she mused.

Sakura collected what the woman had dropped, which appeared to be a box of small tied bags. When she had it securely tucked to her side, she helped the woman up, taking on the majority of her weight. Together they slowly made their way toward her waiting home. "But…he's going to need these. He's going to need help."

Sakura smiled kindly, admiring that she had spirit even when clearly unwell. "Whatever it is, it's going to have to wait. I'd rather get you inside and warmed up first."

Tilting her face to the side, the observant eyes with the wrinkles in the corner took her in. "But my you do look familiar. Then I suspect you're a hard one to forget with that head of hair. What's your name child?"

They had just made it up the final step.

"Sakura." she replied. "Sakura Haruno."

ASiT

As it turned out, she had met the woman before. Indirectly.

Mei Senju, affectionately called Mei-san by the majority of her family, had spent many decades as a nursemaid to countless Senju children after prematurely losing her own, and she wasn't one to be crossed.
She was present months back during Hashirama's birthday celebrations, directing traffic and scolding anyone who broke the traditions of the event or disrupted order.

Sakura had learned this after barely managing to talk the woman into resting—but oh, the fight she'd put up!—helping her change into her house clothes and laying her down in her futon after making her a steaming cup of tea and some miso broth. Despite her rising temperature, she shook as if the cold had taken hold. "While I say it with utmost gratitude in my heart, I'm not one to be fussed over, dear Sakura." she said lightly. Sakura ignored it for the most part, dabbing her forehead clean with a cloth and clucking under her breath as the blotchiness starting to form on her visible skin. "I've got to get these supplements to the kitchen in the main house's dining hall."

"Mei-san, you're in no condition to walk a single step." Sakura used her firmest med-nin tone, just to get the point across. "I can't let you go anywhere like this in good conscience…"

"Well you shouldn't stay here all the same. This pox has proven highly contagious." She grumbled, getting a little more comfortable beneath her sheets. Strands of damp faded brown hair streaked with gray clung to her forehead and splayed across her pillows. "I've been taking medicines and supplies to every house hit with it since it first cropped up. I thought I'd taken all the right precautions, been careful…but not careful enough I see." she scowled bitterly, then succumbed to a coughing fit.

"Pox?" Sakura straightened in alarm, rag slipping from her fingers and back into the bowl at her side. "There's a pox in the village?" She momentarily felt her temper flare up, wondering why she hadn't been informed, but then she remembered that she was not known as Sakura Haruno, trusted apprentice of the esteemed Fifth Hokage, but Sakura Haruno the mysterious medic with a dark power attached.

While that was certainly a different reputation than the one she had worked to earn for the past several years, surely someone would have thought calling on her might have proven useful before this got so out of hand. It might have been a blight!

Disconcerted, Sakura drew on the energy she now held full control over to search Mei-san's body for the telltale sign of the corruptive force. Strangely enough, nothing. Her bottom lip found its way between her teeth. That meant it wasn't a supernatural presence at work, but a true pox.

Come to think of it, hadn't the amount of Senju she'd seen in the village decreased dramatically over the last day or so? She couldn't say she was overly attentive to it, having grown used to seeing the many faces of people walking around with the famous crest somewhere on their clothing.

But it was only just registering that she'd seen far less of them recently. And Toka….had the sunken look to her face been from stress and worry or a deadly sickness taking hold? Her heart rate spiked and she nearly shot to her feet.

"It's a miracle not one casualty has been suffered so far. It's a damn slow thing, this death by pox." Mei-san continued.

Her increased pulse slowed marginally. A miracle indeed! Sakura would have suspected that the clan could have at the least seen a dozen or more losses in the last several days. Given a week's time their numbers could be decimated, cut clean in half. She'd seen it countless times in smaller villages with fewer resources than Konoha she'd been sent to and assisted during outbreaks.

"What about the Hokage?" she asked quickly. "He has to be aware that—"

"Of course," Mei clucked indignantly. She seemed to think she was insinuating Hashirama wasn't
doing enough. "But he has a village to run. That hasn't changed. Everything is under control…"
She broke off into another round of coughing and all Sakura could really do was stand by, dabbing at her skin with the cloth again. "D-Despite…despite what it seems…" she panted, "the clan is already in the best of hands possible."

Sakura's eyebrows shot up her forehead. Was there even a single soul left standing aside from Hashirama who could deal with something like this? "…So someone's analyzing this? Preparing some kind of treatment regimen for everyone?"

"Yes," Mei took a shallow breath, moving restlessly in her bedding. "Lord…Tobirama…has never…let us down."

The small, agricultural village of Tenryu was a four day trip west of Konoha, settled along the base of the Jaifuku mountain range. It was a humble settlement of farmers in a scenic but otherwise unassuming area.

That was, unless, one was aware that it was one of the few places in all the world where the rare Shiga herb grew, growing only in summer and winter and pollinated by beetles that shared their name. They could easily be mistaken for weeds, discarded carelessly when really they were a coveted resource.

Long ago when the Senju were semi-nomadic, they had befriended farmers in Tenryu, and learned from them that their Shiga herbs had great medicinal benefits. Even after calling the village of Konohagakure home, Senju still traveled to the village twice a year to bring the people hard found seedlings for a share of Shiga herb.

Senju travelers brought it back by the wagon-full, enough to last them until the next harvesting season, and for many years all had been well. Then Taji Senju returned several days ago, not at all in the state he'd left in. Taji was middle-aged, but a spirited man who always had a colorful tale for the youth of the clan about his own misadventures growing up.

He'd made the journey for many years, longer than Tobirama could recall. When he returned with a gaunt face and muscle weakness, he cheerfully put it down to old age and declared he would recover in a day's time, if that, with rest, honey wine and his wife's sukiyaki. It was wishful thinking, but not what happened.

Instead, a short day later, his wife Oki was complaining of the same initial symptoms, seeking treatment from the clan healers while her husband had worsened and was bedridden with a spreading rash, high fever and bad tremors.

The healers were baffled when her affliction was resilient against all their usual treatments for those symptoms, and sent her home with their strongest of muscle strengthening tonics. Not long later five healers suffered the same fate as Taji and Oki. But not only them, those who had handled the herbs, to bring them into storage. Soon the number of afflicted had risen to twenty, then forty-five, climbing and climbing at an alarming rate, until only a handful of healthy, able-bodied Senju remained.

By that time Tobirama was incredibly irate about it all. He'd had to stop his surveillance on the Kaguya, his advisement on Hashirama's office affairs, and his check-ins with the academy to handle the matter of a clan normally one hundred and six people strong being reduced to a dismal five in a matter of days.

Since he'd began doing his own careful investigation that number had dropped to three, and he
soon suspected it would be two. Mei-san wouldn't admit it, but she hadn't looked very well herself. He on the other hand, felt strong as ever, and after being exposed to the outbreak for longer than forty-eight hours, the timeframe in which symptoms normally began manifesting, Tobirama was confident he had immunity.

Hashirama too was unaffected thus far, and would likely remain so. While he had warned his brother against coming in contact with any of their ill clan members, that wasn't in his nature to stay away from those under his care who were suffering. In the end, Tobirama was neither surprised nor too worried about Hashirama remaining in good health after his visit with the sick.

His unique genes, some of them Tobirama long suspected were a combination of recessive throwbacks to their Mokuton Possessing ancestors (most of which proceeded the clan's written history), made the exuberant man-child that was his elder brother hard—if not impossible—to fell by illness.

And while Hashirama would have gladly volunteered to help brew the medicine Tobirama was expecting to restore the clan's health, someone had to run the village. A preoccupied Hokage was better than not having one at all. Besides, Tobirama didn't think he needed the help.

He had the whole of the main kitchen hall, which was the largest in the entire compound and resided in a sub-building connected to the main house by a long corridor, to prepare a meal for all one hundred and four of his incapacitated relatives. One that was mixed with the supplemental concoction to cure the pox. Because, after initial observation it was clear that was what it had been all along.

It was really no wonder the medics hadn't suspected it. Even in the area it originated from, cases were uncommon from what he knew.

Deciphering that much did nothing to solve the mystery of how a virus generally spread through an invasive species of insect dormant in the winter had come to survive long enough to get mixed into the herbs, then go on to transmit the Spotted Shiga Pox.

All of it was rather suspicious, and if his hands weren't so full Tobirama might consider an impromptu visit down to Tenryu to see for himself what had happened.

However…

The lone Senju released an irritated huff as his eyes took in the many pots, raw ingredients and cooking tools laid out before him. Whatever investigation outside the village he wanted to conduct would have to wait.

Water was boiling over a huge, elevated stovetop of brick and stone, inside a pot easily as big around as the circumference of some of the trees deep in Konoha's forest, and as deep as the plummet into a sizable hole in the road.

It was strange to have the room be so silent, when normally many Senju came together to dine at the unusually long chabudai that supped a combined number of roughly forty at a time. Yet now that only he was around, Tobirama had very few sounds for company save for the bubbling water and the crackle of the hearth, where a tea kettle hung and heated.

Determining the water to be hot enough, he took the metal cup and heaved the lid from the five foot barrel of prepared rice, but no sooner had he began scooping than his skin crackled from the back of his neck down to his toes, alerting him to an unexpected presence.
Sakura Haruno peered around the partially opened rice paper door as if she were on reconnaissance. He met her eyes, unamused, and she sucked in an audible breath and slowly scooted herself further into his line of sight.

"Did you really suspect you wouldn't be detected trying to sneak up on me?"

"I wasn't sneaking up per se," She defended, hands behind her back and eyes down on her bare feet. At least she'd had the good sense to remove her sandals before entering. "Mei-san directed me here."

Tobirama considered that information, and the fact that his suspicions had basically been proven correct. "Then you're aware of what's happening, and what I'm doing." She nodded. "You should run along, Haruno. This is the Senju's problem to handle."

Pale green eyes widening, her stance shifted from meek to indignant. "Are you really that stubborn? I know you're competent in medicine but this is a pox you're dealing with. If you and Lord Hokage are really the last two healthy members of your clan then—"

Silenced by Tobirama's heavy, blank stare, she paused in her rant, and he took the time to go over and check the kettle. It had just begun to squeal out, and so he carefully removed it with a mitt, set it aside to cool. "Are you going to suggest that I'll need your help?"

By the way her nose rose into the air, it certainly seemed that way. "Mei-san thinks so. She told me you'd refuse but I should just ignore that." And was she ever taking that advice to heart. Tobirama glared as instead of leaving him alone to his work, Haruno padded right by him and went to take stock of all his ingredients, hands on her hips.

Tapping a finger just under her bottom lip, she mumbled quietly, "Hmm...the medicine's going to be served with food, right? I'm guessing it's strong, so that's a good idea. It'll be more palatable that way. But okayu or zosui?" She picked up an egg from the woven basket on the bench by the stove and brought it up to her face.

"Okayu." He said, then mentally berated himself for responding. The last thing he wanted to do was give her the allusion that he wanted her input, her presence or her help. The hardest part had already been done, and since the medicine to alleviate the pox symptoms were prepared, he felt more than sure he could handle a task as simple as cooking.

Spinning around, Haruno held out the egg between her thumb and index finger with a baffled expression. "If you've got everything necessary then wouldn't zosui probably be better? It's more flavorful. It might disguise the taste of the—" Without a word he stormed over, snatched the egg from her, and put it back in the basket, barely avoiding damaging the delicate shell.

"Haruno. I've already said this isn't your problem." The girl's stubbornness matched his own, and he couldn't say he found that very endearing. "This is more than a meal, it needs—"

"And I've already said," Haruno lowered her face but stared up defiantly through her lashes, "That a pox is serious and I'm not leaving. I understand the complexity of making a dish with ingredients that won't interfere with the cure you've made just fine, Tobirama-san. I'm guessing your goal is the same when dealing with a pox treatment..."

"Detect and protect. Counter and neutralize." They said in perfect unison.

Against his will he had to stop and assess. That was always the Senju method for treatment, but rarely had he seen many other medics outside the clan follow a similar practice, though it wouldn't
be impossible. Just unusual. Sakura Haruno might prove herself more legitimately knowledgeable than he thought.

Regardless, Tobirama's glare hadn't softened even slightly. He had the feeling for some time that this woman was a pushy one, annoyingly so, but never did he think she'd be bold enough to barge in on him in his own home and start issuing commands. "Fine." he spat, turning his back to her, "You're only exposing yourself unnecessarily."

Though quiet, Tobirama heard her footsteps as she peered into the pot of hissing water and sighed. "I'd like to try something." When he looked over it was just in time for the Senju to see her tap her finger to what should have been earthenware hot enough to scorch her, the water inside starting to bubble up less, though it was obvious the temperature had remained the same by the steam coming off it. "I've been talking to Mizuchi…" she trailed off and met his gaze. "That's the deity."

Tobirama grumbled, starting to prepare the now almost-too-cool tea. "The point?"

With a quick glare, she went on, or attempted to, but instead her mouth opened and closed as she stared at him as if for the first time. "Are you…" she rubbed at an eye, "Are you wearing an apron?"

One short glance down at himself revealed that yes, he was in fact wearing his apron. He made a point to wear something protective when he'd engage in experimentation that could get messy, and, though he now did the activity far less frequently, an apron when he cooked.

There was likely never going to be a day when he'd admit to the miniscule traces of pink spreading across his face. Instead his face hardened. "How does what I wear in my kitchen effect your cognitive functioning?"

Haruno shook her head, not ready to let go of her disbelief. Her lips caught in an unsure smile and she wrung her hands together. "You just look so…domestic…"

The Senju started to roll his eyes and then caught himself. It was true that he was dressed differently than how he was when they met in the village. He wore a warm, black shirt and matching pants under the apron, his bangs falling into his eyes, reminding him that they needed a trim. It would have to be soon, otherwise with shaggy hair it would look twice as unruly. "I assume this was all originally going somewhere, before you found a fascination with my apron."

Admittedly, he felt some satisfaction over the fact that the apples of her cheeks were turning pink as well. "Oh…right. I might have boosted immunity from normal illnesses now." Finally bringing her focus away from his apron, she stared off to the side as if hesitant to continue. "That's at least what I'm hoping."

Tobirama brought the herbal tea up to his lips, took a deep breath of it, and then sipped calmly. "You have a great deal of faith in these protections you believe this goddess will afford you."

Haruno scooped rice into the water, moving swiftly until she almost had the pot packed too full. "This is going to need stock." She looked back at him expectantly, and Tobirama only stood and glowered for a time, still resenting being ordered around in his home.

The one thought that got his feet moving was that the sooner he made Haruno feel as if her help was no longer needed, the sooner she would go, and he would be free to complete his tasks in solitude. Preparing the meal was one thing, but bringing it to every home in the compound was entirely another, and Tobirama suspected he would need the help of his imperfect shadow clones to do it before sundown. She didn't need to know that though.
So when the stock was in her hands, she wasted no time adding it in and stirring the broth, rice clumps now broken up until none of it stuck together. For a minute, Tobirama watched, occasionally sipping from his tea. She seemed right at home in a kitchen that wasn't hers, cooking such a large quantity of food with total concentration.

Being in close proximity to the heat of the stove had started to make her brow damp with sweat, causing her to absently use an elbow to wipe her bangs away. It was then he noticed her hair was growing, and that it gave her a more matured look.

Sensing him stare, she raised her head and sighed. "You don't have to stand there and watch me like I'm going to put something in it."

At present, the idea of Haruno attempting anything funny was furthest from his mind. But since she'd brought it up, he didn't feel an overabundance of trust toward her either, and she should be fully aware of that. In spite of that awareness, here she was…

Seeing that she had it well in hand, Tobirama took his attention from her and found the bundle of carrots he had been planning to use, certain that everyone who'd be eating the zosui could use the vitamin boost anyway. There wasn't much sunlight to go around in the first place with the majority of the weather lately being overcast, but even if it was better, bedridden as they were, none of them would be reaping the benefits. Finding the well-nicked cutting board he set to work, making precise, even pieces in no time.

"Add these." He told her, figuring it was high time he did some commanding of his own. She acquiesced without complaint, which was a small relief.

A short-lived one as well. "Carrots aren't going to be enough for flavoring. What about ginger and garlic?"

Nothing was exaggerated by the consternation he felt at that suggestion. "Why would those be necessary?"

Haruno was instantly as perplexed, her brow puckering. "Don't you think it's important to improve the taste?"

"I think taste is irrelevant as long as the right amount of nutrients are present." he replied honestly.

Sakura stared openly, taking the time to process. She knew Tobirama could be a bit of a minimalist, so it didn't really surprise her to learn his idea of cooking was stripping down meals of everything not deemed nutritionally valuable.

Abandoning her post at the stove she bee-lined for the grouping of spices set aside in different sized jars and canisters. While it wasn't a feature of the kitchen Tobirama used much, apparently, it appeared well stocked, which gave her some nice variety. "That's…well that doesn't surprise me to hear you say that, but," Getting on her tiptoes, Sakura reached for a canister, sniffed the top and then put it back with a shake of her head. "Half of healing is psychological. You can't argue that if food tastes good it makes you feel better."

"A healer should deal in results," Tobirama said, not bothering to help. "Not placebos."

Not wanting to waste time pointlessly arguing, Sakura returned to searching out what she needed. A small whiff of the next jar she opened confirmed it would do, and she couldn't help but grin triumphantly as she hurried back to the pot, sprinkling a fair dusting of the ginger inside.
Replacing the ingredient where she'd found it, Sakura searched for garlic, wondering if the Senju had it at all. They appeared to have everything else. It took a few tries, but she located that too, and when she added it in and stirred, the food began to smell truly tantalizing and home-cooked.

All the while, Tobirama had watched intently with a stoic face not unlike his usual. Sakura would have thought he'd be maybe just a little impressed, but that was hoping for too much, it seemed. "I bet you really were this way since birth." she whispered, unable to control herself. Only when one of his eyebrows began to shift up into his hairline did it dawn on her what she'd said.

"You've been talking to Hashirama." he asserted, no question to the tone.

Sakura remained elusive. "In passing maybe." She wouldn't put it past him to bully his poor brother over something like sharing those stories. Sniffing at the pot, Sakura took a wooden spoon and dipped it in, letting her tongue dart out and taste. "It's better than bland but it could probably still use more…" It occurred to her that she couldn't point what it needed more of. Just that it needed.

"It's fine as is." She watched him bend to reach for a wooden crate balanced on a shelf above the stove. As he pulled it down, he could see rows and rows of glass vials, each full of what she presumed to be the medicine. The minute he unstopped the first one, a sour aroma drifted out and curled around the room. Sakura resisted the urge to rub under her stinging nose.

The smell was reminiscent of mildew and rotted wood and Sakura couldn't imagine that if it were poured into the soup in its current state, that the unpleasant taste wouldn't overpower that of the milder flavored dish. Tobirama moved to add the concoction into the pot, but unable to watch her efforts thwarted, Sakura grabbed for his wrist.

Expectedly surly, he glowered at her hand and drew his arm away. "Do you really believe anything this potent would taste pleasant, no matter what's done to it?" he snapped.

"No," she admitted, "but there's still a lot that could cut the bitterness back some." So help any Senju unfortunate enough to down that if there wasn't.

Surprisingly, instead of further berating her, Tobirama stared at his medicine almost thoughtfully. "I'm sure you have suggestions?"

The kunoichi did not get a chance to respond before a shadow fell over her. Piloting on instinct, she spun with a strangled shout, driving her fist into the solar plexus of whoever had snuck up on her.

In reality Hashirama, all six foot plus of him, narrowly jumped away in time. Sure she was imagining him, Sakura shook her head, considering swinging another punch just to be sure. The man who was undoubtedly the Hokage caught both her hands and curled his fingers around her fist, smiling down at her sheepishly. Annoyed, the idea to headbutt him as hard as possible—even if her head didn't meet his—passed through her mind.

"I didn't mean to startle you," he said as Sakura caught her breath.

"Where did you come from?!" Sakura stepped back and almost bumped Tobirama, who had been standing closer behind her than she thought.

"From my office." Skepticism had to be radiating off of her, or he felt he might be in danger of receiving a punch that actually connected, because he hurried on. "I was worried and I just came to see how Tobirama was holding up, but you both seemed to be busy, I didn't want to interrupt…"

A flash of heat hit her full on, appearing on her cheeks as noticeable red blotches. How much had he heard?
Tobirama was free of such compunctions. "First Haruno, now you." His lips thinned. "I'd have this done much faster if no one was looking over my shoulder and constantly offering up suggestions."

"Oh no," Hashirama laughed, placing a hand on Sakura's shoulder as he stepped around her and into his brother. "You can't take it back now! Both of us clearly heard you ask." He jabbed a thumb at the soup. "We only have so much time left before it gets overcooked."

"We?" Sakura and Tobirama repeated, sharing an incredulous look between themselves before pinning it to Hashirama.

Anticipating their reservations, Hashirama waved calmly. "Nothing's going to fall to ruin if I'm gone for a while. I have an obligation here, too."

Sakura considered his words held some logic, but Tobirama's face was covered with disgust. "Using the welfare of the clan to escape Hokage duties? You've acquired a new low, brother."

In turn Hashirama stumbled back, absolutely scandalized. "Don't you think that's going a little too far? What kind of person am I supposed to be to you, exactly?"

Tobirama parted his lips with a defiant gleam to his carmine eyes, but Sakura inserted herself quite literally between them. "What do you think it needs, Hokage-sama?" She dipped a hand toward the pot.

Hashirama cradled his elbow in one hand, shrugging. "Without tasting it, that's hard to say. May I?"

Feeling embarrassed, Sakura muttered an apology and hurried to put more soup on the tasting spoon.

"Please be careful though. It's really ho—aah!" Not missing a beat, he'd seized her hand and pulled the wooden utensil to his mouth. One deep blush from her and a quiet smack of his lips later, and Hashirama's face lit up as if he'd found the answer.

"You can definitely tell Tobirama didn't make this." Releasing her hand, he added, "That's a good thing."

Sakura tried to fight the shy grin, but in truth she was flattered. Zosui was a straightforward dish that didn't require much culinary talent in her opinion, but it was nice that someone liked it. Someone whose opinion was…of importance to her.

The moment was cut short by Tobirama's irritated voice, "You two aren't where you think you are."

"Sorry," Hashirama's apology wasn't particularly apologetic, his smile laidback. "If I had to put my finger on it, I'd say this could use an earthier flavor to ground it. I'd suggest mushrooms." From a hidden part of his kimono he pulled forth a small pouch. "I happen to have some on hand—"

What he happened to have on hand was an endless supply of eccentricity…

"Hold on." Sakura squinted, "You're just carrying those around with you? Mushrooms." It brought to mind the time he had pulled berries from his clothing in the Nara Forest.

By the expression on his face, Sakura could tell Hashirama had only just begun to see how that could be viewed as downright strange.
"Well." They gave Hashirama time to consider his response. "I know a spot where they grow even in winter. I gathered some earlier."

All that did was raise the question of when he had the time.

"Get rid of them." The hairs at the back of her neck rose, catching the dark look settled across Tobirama's face from her peripheral. While the man was always grouchy, Sakura didn't understand why mushrooms offended him so deeply. He hadn't even been so angry when she had started taking charge of the meal preparation. He had a block of tofu in hand now, and he was starting to chop it up rather…aggressively.

Hashirama pouted, brown eyes wide with rejection. Nothing about seeing the Hokage make such a face was dignified, but in spite of her best efforts, Sakura felt sympathy rising.

Maybe him trying to add his own assortment of strange fungi to the recipe was uncalled for—so was popping up from absolutely nowhere—but there was no reason to be harsh about it. Ultimately, he had a right to want to help his clan anyway he could.

"Um," Sakura cleared her throat. "We don't have to use all of them, but thinly sliced mushrooms could possibly—"

"Absolutely not a single one is going into this pot." Tobirama had already finished cubing up tofu and dumped it into the slow simmering soup.

Sakura was relieved that he'd changed his mind about the soup being done as is, although she couldn't figure out why he was attacking the tofu with so much animosity. What had it ever done, besides be a little bland without the help of some seasoning? If anything, it should be the most relatable food in existence to him.

Grabbing up another block, the white-haired Senju restarted the process and both she and Hashirama stood and watched. "Not if Hashirama picked them unsupervised." Likely in defense of himself, Hashirama raised a finger in protest, but Tobirama was having none of it, rounding on his brother and pointing the knife his way. "Don't start. Have you really forgotten what happened last time?"

Interest piqued, Sakura took the bait, heedless of Hashirama gulping loudly. "Last time?"

In what the kunoichi would personally deem uncharacteristic, Hashirama became preoccupied with playing with his hair while staring up at the ceiling. "It was a…small mishap that Tobirama's blowing entirely out of proportion."

Tobirama chucked more tofu into the pot with so much force they heard the splash.

"A man with a deep affinity for natural energy from a forest-dwelling clan should know better than to pick the first suspicious mushroom he stumbles across." He chastised, Hashirama shrinking back under the admonishment. "Though I suppose there's a reason you're not sick right now. Idiots don't catch colds."

There was a story there, and it was a great source of shame for the Hokage if his face said anything. "Tobirama…" the older brother begged, "It was a careless mistake!" Shaking the bag of collected mushrooms, he sighed. "The entire clan shouldn't have to suffer because of my one tiny mix-up."

Sakura wasn't sure if they even remembered she was in the room anymore, and she also wasn't sure if she should remind them, because whatever was playing out was as entertaining as it was
baffling.

The sight of Tobirama stirring soup in an apron was also one she wanted to commit to memory since she wasn't sure she'd ever see it again. "The last time anyone let you put mushrooms in a stew, we found you bare as a newborn the next day in the middle of the woods."

Sakura could feel that image rippling through her brain, causing it to temporarily go blank. Huge eyes glued themselves to Hashirama, and he looked desperate to explain himself. "The…the mushrooms I picked may have had slight hallucinogenic properties. It wasn't intentional."

"Yes." Tobirama said flatly. "Naked. High off of some suspicious fungus. And what was it you insisted you'd had a run in with?"

"...A tree spirit of enlightenment." Hashirama admitted glumly.

Now back from mental static, Sakura found herself caught between pitying the man who had just had such a shameful (and bizarre) secret dredged up, and laughing hysterically. Her eyes were beading with water in an effort to hold the latter in. If the story became anymore absurd she'd lose it for sure.

Satisfied, Tobirama nodded. "In conclusion, those mushrooms could very well make the entire clan higher than the heavens."

In his defense the Hokage did an incredible job saving face as if she'd never heard the tale of his mushroom mistake. "Well at least let me add some shiitake." Hashirama put away his hand-picked mushrooms and walked the length of the kitchen until he came across a sealed container and pried the lid away. "They won't be as savory as the wild ones, but it's better than nothing."

Sakura surmised it was probably a fifty-pound barrel at minimum, but he picked it up and brought it over with ease, tossing handfuls of mushrooms into the pot without Tobirama's objection.

The whole thing was smelling delicious by then, and despite her presence initially being rebuked at every turn, Sakura decided she could tell Mei-san with confidence that she'd managed to make "stubborn Lord Tobirama" take the help after all. The soup would be done soon and ready to deliver. All that was left was adding in the pox cure, and Tobirama was managing that just fine himself.

There was only one burning question left on her mind. "Wait," Both brothers glanced at her. "You said the tree spirit you met offered you enlightenment…what kind of wisdom was it?"

Tobirama smirked over at his brother, which in turn only made him grow pale. "Who could forget?" he drawled, pouring the last of the medicine into the soup and stirring it around. "The wisdom of the ages it imparted on you."

Sakura had never seen someone's face go from tanned to pale, even as their cheeks lit up with vibrant red. "Bet away what's dear to draw fortune near."

Of everything she'd heard, somehow that was the hardest to believe. "What?" she choked out, praying she'd heard wrong. "You're saying that you met a forest deity, and the only thing it encouraged you to do was…gamble?"

Was she in disbelief, was she angry, was she humiliated for even giving this story so much of her time? Sakura couldn't be sure. What stood out to her was that perhaps she'd really been too hard on her shishou through the years about her poor money managing habits.
Clearly it was beyond her control as she came from a line that was downright afflicted. Sakura would go as far as to describe it as a curse. Or maybe, her inner voice supplied, this man had rubbed off on his granddaughter a little too much. More than anyone could have suspected at the time.

"Whatever you're feeling right now is only a small amount of the exasperation I feel on a daily basis." Tobirama offered in a roundabout show of solidarity.

The old adage was ringing truer and truer. Don't meet your idols. Or, in this case, past Hokage. Sakura stifled a long mental wail. *The history books call this man a god among shinobi!*

**ASiT**

Steam rose up from the bowl Sakura passed into small, shaking hands. Reira dipped her head to take a delicate sniff, grinning tiredly. The room was generous for a child's with thin sliding doors.

Considering the bright personality of the girl whom it belonged to, there was nothing particularly surprising about the scroll on the wall with the kanji for spirit. The small stack of books strewn across the table in the center of the room featured both old fairytales and warrior adventures, Sakura wondering when someone with as much energy as Reira kept still long enough to read them.

There were staggered, built-in shelves directly across from the futon where pieces to board games had been abandoned, and unfolded just behind their backs was a beautiful byobu gilded in gold and painted blue with goldfish varying shades of red, orange and gold swimming in different directions. This, Reira proudly informed her, had once belonged to her mother and passed onto her by Toka.

Sakura sat patiently on her knees and watched Reira attempt to cool the soup on her spoon with short breaths that left her winded. "T-Thank…" her scratchy voice trailed but the medic nin was only considered that she got her first bite in.

After visiting nearly thirty houses, all of them full of sick but grateful inhabitants, Sakura had announced herself at this one and been greeted by a sweaty faced girl with bags under her eyes, one who resembled a frail version of the vibrant child she knew.

With a short explanation, Reira was glad to let her in.

"Well?"

Unlike her usual manner of eating, the young child swallowed carefully. "It's…actually…good?" she had evidently surprised even herself. "As good as medicine soup can be." Reira stuck out her tongue, but fed herself more soup without complaint. "Tobi-nii really made this…?"

Shuffling until she was cross-legged on the tatami mat beside Reira's futon, Sakura rested her cheek against her knuckles, tilting her head. "I might have had a little bit of input."

Reira coughed, but nothing as terrible as the ones she'd heard in previous houses. "Knew it."

"It sounds like you've had his cooking before." Sakura winced discreetly.

Reira actually stopped eating and shivered. "Yeah…" Her burnt gold eyes drifted to stare at the mushroom she was poking at.

Snickering, Sakura figured she was in safe enough company. "He's not very creative in the kitchen, is he?"
The little Senju shrugged, sipping straight from her bowl. A small bead of broth escaped her lips and she licked it away nervously, glancing around like the walls had ears.

"Tobi-nii is good at lots of things. The problem is he tries to be good at everything. Fighting, making jutsu, raising koi fish…" Sakura smiled with amusement at the last mention. "But when I eat his food, it almost tastes the way it feels when he scolds me." Reira placed a hand over her stomach, and unable to help it, Sakura cracked up. It wasn't long before hers was joined by another, and the two girls sat and laughed until it spurned Reira to start coughing.

"Don't worry, you can eat up this time," The pinkette reassured. "The more you finish the quicker you'll get better."

"I hope so!" Reira gasped. "I can't miss a day at the academy!" She slurped down the whole bowl of soup so fast Sakura was afraid she'd choke, but it was gone to the last drop, vegetables and all.

"I think you'll be on your way to recovery pretty soon with an appetite like that." Sakura braced her hands on her knees and climbed to her feet.

"You're leaving…already?" Bowl empty, Reira sat it aside and flopped back into her pillow.

"I should check on Toka again before I go, but…it's getting late." Sakura nodded. "I think they should have delivered soup to all the other houses by now, and I don't think I should overstay my welcome."

Clearly it wasn't the answer the girl wanted to hear. "Aw…" She played with her sheet restlessly. "Fine…but come back soon, alright? We can play Ohajiki."

Sakura slid some hair over her shoulder and stared over at the games on Reira's shelf. Ohajiki brought back memories. It was something she hadn't played in ages. "Sure, we'll ask Toka if she wants to play too."

Reira's answering smile was a careful one. "Okay."

Sakura slid the door's shut, thinking about Toka's last admission and when she would share it with the person who needed to hear it most.

**ASiT**

A pox might be tough but Tobirama knew Mei-san was far tougher. She had watched after not only himself and Hashirama, but their younger brothers and many more Senju children than anyone could count.

In a time where sons and daughters were brought into the world and toted along onto battlefields soon after, barely knowing childhood and sometimes not parental affection, the stern, opinionated woman served as something of a comfort. Though unafraid to knock sense into them, there was no doubt that in her own way she cared.

She ate her soup without flinching, only stopping to have the water she requested. Thirst quenched, she eyed him heavily, and for a transient space of time Tobirama was reverted back to boyhood, when she would give him a sharp rap to the back of the head with her walking cane when he skipped resting for too long.

He was at least sure she wasn't about to hit him, though. She didn't have a stick anywhere nearby… "I can see you've had help." she commented, mildly.
Tobirama stared at her soup. "Yes." He scowled from beneath his bangs, knowing it wouldn't intimidate Mei-san. Back to his infancy, she'd been perhaps the only adult aside from his parents who wasn't at loss over his sharp manner. "Sending help was excessive."

Mei-san closed her eyes, savoring another mouthful of soup. "You still accepted it, though. The proof is in broth, boy."

Not ready to admit defeat, Tobirama shook his head stubbornly. "Only because you'd sent her."

"Ah," she clucked, frowning in disappointment. "You're forgetting there's a difference between lying to yourself and lying to me." She leaned forward, narrowing her eyes as she poked a finger into his chest. "Who offered the help on whose behalf means very little in the face of your inability to take it. And in all my years, I have never seen someone as against the very idea of needing help as you. Straight from your mother's womb you nearly died because you wouldn't stop fighting long enough to get the cord from around your neck."

Tobirama sagged, a low, inaudible mumble coming past his lips.

"Speak up, boy!" Mei-san snapped. "A babbling brook is louder."

Tobirama barely fought the urge to duck. The phantom pain of a long-gone goose egg throbbed near the top of his head. Years ago, Mei-san would've punctuated that retort with a swing, just to see if he was paying attention.

Even knowing she was without it at present, Tobirama was cautious. "I asked where this was all going..."

"Where it ought to," she replied, sniffing. "And when it gets there you'll know, but in the meantime, you sit and listen to an old woman speak her piece." So he sat, because what else could he do? Incense burned low in the room like a smog, almost too thick, but this was how she preferred it, so he said nothing. "I like that girl. Just the right amount of fire, seems to know her way around sickness without whining, and if you couldn't send her running then there's no one in this clan who can."

It was a difficult thing to hold on to impassivity when Mei-san was openly praising someone, calling them competent. Compliments were certainly never given out needlessly with her. No, she was more likely to serve chastisements.

"She must be very special to gain Mei-san's approval." A warm chuckle filled the space with fresh air as Hashirama walked in wearing a dopey smile and brushing snow from his shoulders. He'd sensed him coming closer and closer and yet Tobirama was too used to his brother turning up suddenly to do more than shoot a hurried, dismissive look. Feigning obliviousness the way he excelled at, Hashirama settled himself on the other side of Mei-san, tilting forward and pecking her cheek. "Who is she?"

The old crone had the nerve to be entertained, damn her. It was written all over her face.

"Haruno." Tobirama harrumphed.

"Oh, Sakura-san?" Of course he'd react this way, transparent fool. She was fast becoming a favorite topic with Hashirama. Reira or Toka could bring her up, and even if it was only meant to be in passing, his elder brother was more than happy to speak about how thoughtful she always was. "You know, I told him some time ago he had my blessings. Now you have Mei-san's."

Tobirama grunted as Hashirama slung an arm around his shoulders for a hug.
"Don't be hasty." Mei drank more water to keep her throat cleared. "I've only said she seems like a competent sort. Admirable, to be sure, but I'm far from advising you rush to anything binding."

Hashirama deflated, forced to cork his exuberance and Tobirama threw the heavy limb from his shoulders. "Thank y—"

"But if I were to advise…"

Tobirama withheld a groan when he realized he'd spoken too soon.

"It would be to think of the future now. You both may be occupied with other pursuits in the present but someday…you will desire more than this. Families."

The hearth was roaring but it was cold enough outside to where it didn't make the room feel sweltering. Now Hashirama tugged at his collar anxiously, a placating grin on his face. "I…we have family. Plenty! You, Toka, Reira…"

"Don't play dense with me, boy." This definitely would have been a time when she would go for her cane if she had it. "You know perfectly what I mean. And you are the clan head, Hashirama. Sole carrier of the Mokuton and Butsuma's eldest son."

Tobirama couldn't bring himself to experience pity. He couldn't even bring himself to try. After all the wheedling, the intrusive comments, the less than subtle hints, Hashirama was getting what he deserved. A taste of the discomfort delivered tenfold.

"Mei-san..." he took her hand and then briefly glanced his way as if silently asking for luck. Tobirama turned his head away unpityingly. "It's not something I'm ignoring, or even putting off." Here, Hashirama wasn't hesitant to stare pointedly his way again. "But I'd rather not do it lightly. I'd like it to happen in its own…time."

Her dulling hair was frazzled as it fell back to her pillow. "Were he alive, your father would see you marry to strengthen Senju alliances. Perhaps to a daughter of Uzushio."

Tobirama knew the very clan she was alluding to. "You mean the Uzumaki." A union between Uzumaki and Senju wouldn't be without merit. Their village was of an inconsequential size but they were impressive with their rich, red hair, their unusually strong life forces, and their unmatched proficiency in fuinjutsu. He hadn't seen one since they had traveled to Uzumaki occupied land to sign the treaty between Uchiha and Senju.

"Mm," Mei agreed.

Hashirama stared down at the hand that still held hers. "And what do you think kaa-san would want?"

"For you to be fruitful and long-lived." Mei-san's eyebrow quirked. "Love or no love, alliance or no alliance, she would want you to produce heirs, if only to see if one would inherit your gifts."

No one said anything as that grew cold and then eventually got swallowed up by the crackling fire.

"Pleasant as this has been, a sick old woman does require her rest." Mei mumbled with her eyes closed. "But I meant what I said. I do like that young lady."

Tobirama crossed his arms, allowing himself the eye roll that he had earned after the day he'd had. "Are you still going to insist that Haruno and the talk we just received are unrelated?"
Mei-san cracked one eye open. "It means just what I say it means, smart-ass!"

Hashirama clamped a hand over his mouth, eyes twinkling, Tobirama recoiling on instinct. Tobirama didn't know how she did it, but even half asleep she was effective with her scolding. "Neither of you should wait until the clan is in peril to bring her around. At the very least she's a smart, resourceful woman worth getting to know."

Her hand slipped from his brother's and her breathing evened. The lengthy chat had sapped the strength from her, but with rest and the help of his cure, much like with the others the hope was for a full recovery in a moderate timespan. Whatever else Mei-san was harping on about could…

"What?" he hissed, rounding on his brother who was attempting to laugh quietly enough not to disturb the slumbering woman.

"She called you a smart-ass."

"…"

The laughs kept spilling out as Hashirama slapped a hand to his forehead, nearly doubled over where he sat.

"Moron."

The last he saw of his brother before flickering away, he was wiping his damp eyes with the back of his hand.

Days rolled on and, finally good news came to her window in the form of a messenger hawk. Many suffering in the Senju clan were already up and around, everyone showing marked signs of getting better.

Sakura took a minute to hold the note close to her chest and take it in. She had been stumbling her way from day to day not really sure what had or hadn't happened originally in the timeline and tiptoeing around the inevitable that she was likely causing changes somewhere. Hopefully at least positive ones…

Like the choice she was making to visit the Uchiha compound and check in on Madara for Izuna's sake. Sakura was more than halfway to her destination and still unsure of herself.

But it felt like the right thing to do, out of obligation if nothing else. She may not have known every small detail about what should or shouldn't happen, but Madara had only gotten amnesia because she was there. Never in her life would she expect to feel guilt over someone like Madara, but never in her life would she have imagined she'd land in the position she was in.

So Sakura trudged on. For a winter day it was comfortable, so lots of people were out, making the most of the short sunlight hours, but still bundled in cloaks or additional layers. She'd opted to wear a padded silver kimono with white trim that depicted a scene of snow-capped evergreen trees, spending at least an extra hour getting into it correctly.

It made her blend in at least physically, but the more she thought of her true home and the trials she was supposed to overcome to get back to it, the more she felt a distance between herself and the citizens and shinobi going about their everyday lives unburdened by great destinies.

Sakura turned a corner around the artisan district and allowed herself a small, triumphant cheer under her breath when she saw the famous fan painted on the gates surrounding the compound
looming up ahead. Two sentries stood around, neither appearing to be on high alert. Instead they talked among themselves, only pausing when they heard the crunch of her feet as she approached.

"Yes?" The female sentry asked, hand on hip.

Sakura held her chin up and tilted her shoulders back, pasting on a polite expression. "I'm here to see Ma—Lord Madara." Addressing him by title felt as awkward as using someone's full name in place of just their given name. "He'll be expecting me."

The sentries looked at each other, thinking it over. The older man craned his neck and it popped loudly. "Say, you were at the meeting a ways back, right?"

Sakura brightened. "Yes, I was!"

He nodded along and rubbed the side of his whiskered face. "Uh-huh. Thought so. I'm usually good with faces if not names." Turning to the woman, he said, "I think we can let her in."

His partner shrugged. "Well alright, but if she causes any trouble I'll just say you told me to."

Sakura stepped back as they rolled open the gates and allowed her through. Nothing much had changed since the last time she'd visited save for the exception of the light sprinkling of snow everywhere.

She smiled when she passed a group of children using the modest amount of packed snow they'd been able to find to build a small fort, the smallest child more preoccupied throwing it up in the air than pitching in.

The peace once again sent a jolt of discontent through her, because no matter how much fun and laughs she had, peace was not something she would ever find if she stayed where she didn't belong…

'Save it for later, Sakura.' she directed herself.

If she could just stay grounded in the present, she could find the main house, assess Madara, and then be on her way. The layout of the Uchiha district was just as expansive, or maybe even more so, than the Senju's and she'd only been there once with Izuna as a guide.

It might have been prudent to ask for directions from the sentries, or clarify where she'd be seeing Madara before arriving. Sakura could smack herself in the forehead for being so scatterbrained as of late.

Her eyes darted around, trying to locate someone who seemed approachable and good with directions. She settled her sights on a young man carrying a wooden beam with a focused dip between his brows. While he wasn't the most amicable looking person around, he had a certain air of reliability that had her hurrying to catch up to him as best as she could in her kimono.

"Excuse me!" she shouted, cupping a hand around her mouth and waving with the other. "Could I ask you something?"

"Huh?" He swung around suddenly, forcing Sakura to duck under the beam. "Whoa, be careful!" It started to slip from his shoulder, but Sakura shot a hand out to grab and lift it with one hand.

Free of the beam, he stared open-mouthed, sizing her up in disbelief. Sakura let him; she was used to it. Not every day a woman her stature easily lifted a wood beam three times her weight.
"I didn't mean to startle you." She told him.

"You didn't." he said hurriedly, smoothing his hands down the front of his shirt. "But you're not really a familiar face."

"I'm Sakura."

"Hikaku." he smirked. Hikaku dark brown hair with bangs across his forehead and falling around both sides of his face with the rest up in a high ponytail. He wore the typical high-collared shirt the Uchiha clan favored and carried himself with confidence.

Sakura stowed the name away for future reference. "I'm trying to find Madara. He's uh, expecting me…"

"So you'd be looking for his house, huh?" Hikaku stroked his chin, then turned his face toward the sky. "This time of day I'd say he'd probably be out training. He and his brother have been going at it pretty hard lately."

Sakura blinked. "O-Oh…"

"Tell you what," Hikaku reached for the wood beam she was still holding and she carefully gave it back to him. "Just let me…" he adjusted it across his shoulders with a grunt, "take this to my neighbor's house and I'll show you the way."

Sakura didn't mind a detour, but a slender woman in a purple kimono breezed her way up to them before she could so much as agree. "No need." she chirped, setting a hand on Hikaku's shoulder and leaning into his back. Her dark eyes glittered at Sakura. "I've got nothing better to do, so I'll play escort."

Hikaku's eyes trailed up and over his shoulder. "Naoko…"

"I'll be on my best behavior." Her eyes told a different story, one that Sakura wasn't sure she wanted to be written into.

Hikaku was just as hesitant, but when he closed his eyes with a single shake of his head, she knew her fate was sealed. "I need to go and get this to Daichi. He's waiting on it." At least he remembered to give Sakura a nod as he headed off again. "Nice to meet you. Naoko'll get you there."

Sakura watched him go, wondering if it was too late to try and convince Naoko she'd be alright on her own. It wasn't that she had anything personal against the woman; she just seemed so…wily.

"Just us girls, now~" The Uchiha woman sang, looping her arms with Sakura's and starting off at a near skip. Flustered, Sakura didn't offer up much resistance as she took in the other woman. She was beautiful, in the way most Uchiha were, with full lashes, blue black hair cropped only slightly longer on one side than the other and neat bangs trimmed evenly above her brow line, and maroon painted lips. Her kimono she wore incredibly fitted, accentuating her toned physique without being distasteful. Catching her staring, Naoko only smiled a little. "I changed my hair recently, if you were wondering. I prefer to keep it spontaneous."

Not really sure how to respond to someone so whimsical, Sakura swallowed. "It looks good on you."

The Uchiha hummed appreciatively. They passed a dumpling stand, and the owner waved them over and handed Naoko two sticks, telling her it was on the house for her help. "Here ya go." She
handed a stick to Sakura. "If there's a sweet shop in the district, then it's a guarantee that I'm their best customer."

They kept moving at Naoko's pace, so Sakura quietly ate her dumplings, fleetingly thinking about how this vivacious woman was close to Madara. How close were they still, she wondered… That thought stopped her short. Why did it matter to begin with?

"Thinking hard, huh?"

"Oh," Sakura blinked rapidly. "I…"

"I know you're here to check on Madara," she went on blithely. Sakura almost lost her footing, pushing her hair from her face and staring up at the dark-haired woman in open shock.

"What?" she sputtered. "No, he—"

Naoko laughed, and even that was melodic. She reached over and pressed a finger against Sakura's lips. "Ssh. No need to be nervous. Izuna's told me everything, and I know how to keep a secret or two."

Despite her playful demeanor, Sakura could tell that about this topic, at least, she was being earnest. That was enough to bring her heartbeat down some notches.

"So you know…how he lost it?"

"Actually," Naoko sighed. "Izuna didn't tell me that tiny detail. But I already assumed it had something to do with you."

Sakura discreetly looked to their linked arms. She didn't sense any hostility. Naoko's chakra hadn't spiked at all, her feet never faltering. But for some reason the pinkette worried about subtle retaliation.

"Why do you say that?" she ventured.

"I don't know. They both have been strange lately. It always seems to come back to you, in some way." Naoko polished off her dumplings, nibbling on the stick. The answer was cryptic, but Sakura didn't fight for clarification. She wasn't sure she wanted it.

Instead she stared at her dango, lost. Usually she'd tuck right into sweets, but her appetite was absent and her throat felt as sticky as the syrup coating the round little treats. "So you're very close then."

"To Madara?" Naoko tilted her head, her aura morphing her into someone lost in time. "Well I'd be lying if I said that wasn't true. Our history is complicated, and it stretches back to childhood. I will say, he's the only man I've ever given my trust to who didn't use it as a bartering chip."

That left her even more confused. Madara was a man known for manipulating anyone he deemed useful to the detriment of others and never himself. He had played Obito along for years, only to be in turn manipulated himself.

Naoko was so resolute she could practically feel the profound affection and faith when she spoke about him. It went much more deeply than lust, than friendship, than romantic love. Sakura didn't recognize what they had, exactly, but it was a precious bond to Naoko.

"Almost there," Sakura could see what she assumed to be the house of the clan head and his brother
coming into view. It sat bigger than the rest, facing the row of houses as if guarding them. "Last chance to ask me all those questions floating through that pretty head of yours."

Sakura suddenly remembered where she was, who she was with, and she blushed. "I guess it's just that...you know enough about what's going on to be upset, but you're trying to be friendly instead? I don't think I quite get it," she mumbled, more mortified with every word, especially in the face of Naoko's patient expression.

"Oh no," Naoko crooned, suddenly stopping and pulling Sakura's head flush against her bosom in a hug. "Someone's bullied you over a man before? You can tell nee-san who."

"I never said," Sakura squirmed to free herself, managing after some effort and no help on Naoko's part. "I never said that!" She patted down her flyaways and avoided meeting the shameless woman in the eyes. Truthfully though, there was no saving face after that. A few older ladies walking by even giggled and sent Naoko approving nods!

Unabashed, the dark-haired kunoichi leaned back on her heels and pursed her lips. "Well, did you really have to? Isn't that what this is all about? You think I'll get angry, maybe territorial?"

Sakura wanted to deny it; she really did! She was right to be wary of this woman, who was far more than she first appeared. "I can assure you that we don't stake those kind of claims on each other, Madara and I." She placed a hand over her heart for emphasis. Then she started walking again, backwards this time. Sakura followed hesitantly only because Naoko had brought her this far. The Uchiha flipped her hair over her shoulder and it glinted in the afternoon sun like the sleek feathers of a raven.

"O-Oh...sorry for assuming."

Naoko shrugged. "I might if I were you. Oh, watch your step." Sakura was jerked up and over a patch of ice as effortlessly as if she were a child.

Quietly, she was impressed. That was easy enough for her to do, even to someone twice her size, but now that she paid close attention, even hidden by the kimono Naoko's arms were plainly powerful.

"Thank you."

Naoko's answering grin was endearing, open. "I think you're going to be nice to have around, Sakura." One of those toned arms landed around her neck, tugging her close again. Unsure what else to do, Sakura tried to remain relaxed about it.

"You think I'll be around more?"

"It's obvious at this point, and I'm fine with that. I think, no, I have no doubts we'll come to be close friends." Naoko squished her cheek into Sakura's with a purr. Nearly in unison they stopped, right at the edges of a training grounds.

There was a large, solitary tree bare of all its leaves keeping guard, a stray cat grooming itself near the base. At the center of the otherwise deserted area were Izuna and Madara, standing across from each other with swords drawn. They were evidently about to face off.

"Oh," Naoko bounced, eyes glued on the spectacle. "We got here just in time for the show."

Izuna knew without looking they now had an audience. Madara, however, felt the need to peek
around to see who. "It's Naoko…and she brought Haruno." he stated, aloof.

Izuna knew it wasn't Madara being underhanded so he could get in the first strike. Since losing his memories his brother had become very blunt in most every way. Now every joke he told was almost certainly observational humor not intended for a laugh. Though it often drew them as a byproduct. It had at first, anyway.

Lately Izuna had felt himself growing paranoid. Soon they'd be found out and Madara deposed. Watching his brother's back constantly, to cover for him in case he slipped up, was taking its toll. He was exhausted… But he had a duty. "Just focus," he commanded. "You at least remember the majority of your combat skills so this shouldn't be so bad."

"You say that," Madara scoffed. "But you've been besting me more often than not lately, and I have the bruises to prove it." Unfortunately, he was correct there too. At one point, despite his prowess in swordplay, he was always beaten by his elder brother in the end. Now?

…Madara still fought hard, could still take down nearly every other opponent the clan tossed against him, quite handily. But when they fought one on one, Izuna saw differently. It wasn't that his brother's skills were rusty; it was more that he'd lost that innate spark of passion for battle that he once held. He'd hoped, been sure that, given time and practice it would come back. So far nothing.

Izuna took his normal fighting stance, no longer wanting to talk. "Ready?" Typically he wouldn't ask, just leap. Madara would anticipate him and be prepared to send a timely parry, but this man who wore his brother's face and almost had his abilities, needed the extra warning.

Madara mimicked with a sigh. "Yes."

The air barely shifted, the dirt beneath their feet hardly disturbed as they joined in a clash of blades, lurching away and then drawn magnetically together in a spark of steel. The usual fair for the beginning of their spars, going at each other to test the extent of the guard the opponent was putting up.

One small chink was an opening to be exploited, often painfully. Izuna rolled away, going in low for a strike. Madara flipped back in time, leaping nimbly to his left, swinging in a graceful arc that Izuna managed to block. Though it was pleasing that his brother was putting in the work at least.

Izuna danced around as he slashed periodically, once managing to send Madara's blade spinning before fast reflexes allowed him to catch and block in the same movement.

'This is…almost like old times.'

Their blades sang as they made contact, and Izuna was abruptly transported back to a long gone summer day when the cicadas were buzzing and all of Tajima's children were gathered together to take turns practicing.

"No, Izuna, stop ignoring your blindspot and assuming you'll get to the enemy's before they get to yours!" Madara blocked, sending him flying when the attack failed.

Izuna hit the ground hard, his breath leaving him with a groan. When he cracked his eyes open, three faces hovered over, peering down at him. "Mada's right you know. You're kinda cocky cause tou-sama gave you your own blade." One of the twins giggled, jabbing a finger into his cheek.

"Oh hush, Koya!" Kamin chided. "If you had yours you'd be the same way."
"You're gonna get him one day," Sanna patted his head, "You already beat all of us."

Izuna pouted. "But…"

"But you're saying that's not enough, right?" All four siblings looked over to the eldest. "You want to go on raids with me, Father and the rest of the clan, go up against the Senju."

"Big brother..." Izuna gasped. "How'd you know?"

Madara walked over, bending down and pulling Izuna up. "Because I use to be in the same position!" He jabbed Izuna right between the eyes with his pointer finger, snickering when it earned him an angry shout. "So how about it? Wanna try again?"

Izuna rubbed at his forehead, pout turning into a full blown grin. "Yeah!" He took his stance again. "But don't go easy on me just 'cause I'm still learning, okay?!"

Madara got ready, holding his sword out in front of him. "No way. I'd insult you if I didn't go all out."

"Madara," He briefly locked eyes with his brother as they locked swords once again. "I'm not going to insult you in this battle with anything less than my best. So don't you dare…insult me!"

Izuna was filled with ferocity as he spun, Madara stopping the attack but pushed back in the process. Unrelenting, he changed direction and swung in a spin again with the full force of his power behind it. Instead of attempting to block blade for blade, Madara flickered from sight.

Half-expecting it, Izuna had only to look up to see that his brother had indeed attempted an aerial assault. The tip of the blade struck his before Madara even had both feet on the ground, and sparks so vicious they could have been mistaken for lightning rose between them, the younger brother feeling the pressure bend his knees slightly. 'Yes!'

This was the Madara that he had been waiting to fight again! Regardless, it didn't mean he'd let his newly spirited brother win. Letting his arms go lax and then shoving back last minutely sent Madara flying, no longer able to fight gravity and caught off guard by the amount of exertion wielded against him.

As expected he landed safely on his feet, though Izuna charged at blinding speed, catching only a small glimpse of pink and black haired figures on the sidelines as he went straight for his brother's unguarded back. Madara spun and blocked, turning it into a full strike that Izuna ducked under, losing some strands of hair to the blade's sharp edge.

At traded intervals they flew, one brother leaping from the ground and unleashing a flurry of attacks while the other did his best to move from under the barrage and go back on the offensive. Anyone watching likely thought they were going to end up killing each other, but it really couldn't have been more fun than feeling like he had his brother back.

At the very least some parts of him. As his attacks grew more persistent, Madara's occasionally let up, almost as if he'd become distracted. Izuna couldn't understand it. While his eyes never left their match, his mind must have been far away from their training.

Making one more decisive maneuver he was sure would end it, Izuna lifted his sword high, face perfectly blank. Madara quickly raised his own sword to stop the downward strike aimed at his head, only for Izuna to change his trajectory and throw his brother off balance. He landed flat on the ground, blade not quick to keep the one dangerously close to stabbing him throw the abdomen at bay. "Izuna, what are you doing?"
Izuna growled as Madara grabbed his blade, crimson coating the polished steel as it sliced the flesh of his palm. "Giving you my all like I promised!" So rapidly his mirth had become something else, throbbing, white hot and insatiable.

"Stop!" A voice in the distance shouted, one he vaguely recognized.

Stopping wouldn't be what his brother wanted, though. Izuna panted, a bead of sweat falling into his eye as the wicked edge sank agonizing inch at a time into yielding flesh, Madara's eyes flashing defiantly all the while.

"I said *stop!*" The explosion of pain in his cheek made the earth move under him, blade dropping from his hand. He swayed uneasily on his feet, blinking the red from his vision. It was only when he rubbed at his eye and the crimson tint didn't fade that Izuna realized his vision was truly red from activation of the Sharingan. 'When did I…'? It hardly mattered, not when Madara was on the ground trying to yank a sword from his stomach and Sakura kneeled beside him, screaming at him not to.

Reeling, only the arms catching him kept him from the ground waiting to meet him. Izuna carded a trembling hand through his hair as Sakura turned burning eyes on him. "Why didn't you…why didn't you stop?"

"I couldn't." He hadn't meant to say that, but it was true nonetheless.

Dazed, he staggered from Naoko's arms, not sure he wanted the comforting just then. Not sure he deserved it. Because deep down, some ugly thought had drifted through his head, and without much hesitation he nearly acted on it.

Madara. Sakura. He couldn't look them in the eyes.

The choice was clear, and he took the first opportunity he had to put distance between himself and all of them.

One minute he'd been at the mercy of Izuna's blade biting into his stomach, the next Haruno was leaning over him and openly showing more worry on his behalf than he could ever remember seeing her show before. Naoko had…suddenly vanished. Leaving them alone together. "Here, let me see that." Feeling dizzy, Madara held out the sword that had been laying next to him.

Haruno batted it away with an exasperated glare.

"Alright," she took a deep breath. "I'll make this quick." She drew the sword from his flesh before he had time to pass any sort of sarcastic reply.

"Shouldn't you have just left that?" he grunted, her hand beating his as it pressed to his wound.

"No, I'm going to cauterize it." She tried to draw up his shirt, but he hunched in on himself, ignoring the searing pain. Haruno protested as he climbed to his feet, dragging himself toward the porch that overlooked the training grounds, where fresh medical supplies waited. Haruno tugged at his arm. "Where are you going? I haven't even—"

"I don't need medical attention for this." He insisted, snatching his arm away. Apparently she found his response so unfathomable it stopped her in her tracks. That gave Madara enough time to tumble onto the porch before she caught up.

Without preamble he took his shirt off, feeling the chilled air on his sweaty skin the same time he
felt the pang from his wound. His bloody hand over his bloody stomach, the Uchiha reached for something, anything, to flush the gash out with.

"Ma-da-ra!" Pink-haired and terrifying, a raging Haruno stomped his way with steam streaming from her nostrils. She ripped the bottle from his hand and sat down right beside him. Their hips flush. "My next step is sitting on you."

"Then take it," he taunted, grabbing her wrist and bringing the bottle of home-made antiseptic close. Haruno twisted away with a snarl.

"Why are you doing this?" she cried. "You could be bleeding internally."

"That would be cause for celebration in your case, wouldn't it?"

Placing the antiseptic down in her lap, Haruno barked. "I wouldn't…Izuna—"

"Caused this?" Madara gestured down with a sweeping motion, giving her a glimpse of his hand. She caught it between both of hers and studied the slice.

"I'm definitely healing this, with or without your permission."

Madara knew even without an intact memory that it wasn't the first time she'd looked at him as if he was married to insanity. "The only thing you'll be learning about is the hard, painful recovery that comes with an injury like this!"

"It's not like I expect you to understand, Haruno," he smirked through the pain. "But if you're only trying to heal me for my brother's sake, then consider maybe I'm trying to prevent that for his sake as well."

Although he could tell he'd made her truly angry, Madara couldn't help but think she was far more attractive this way. The danger that made her eyes a darker shade of green, the rose to her cheeks, the static settled into her hair. Yes, much better. "Stop saying things that don't make any sense and acting like you're handing out divine wisdom at the same time!

"A medic who isn't nearly as perceptive to ailments she can't see?" he chuckled, plucking the antiseptic out of her lap and getting the cap off. "That's…unfortunate."

"Give that here!" she seized it from him, but unlike before, when she unscrewed it she dumped it onto his wound without pause. Madara sucked in a hiss; deep inside, though, a part of him wanted to purr. She was a downright spiteful thing when provoked, and that kept her interesting. "There, happy?"

"That's not fair," he heard himself rumble. "If I said I was you'd only call me names."

Haruno shook her head and tried to pretend that her blush wasn't reaching critical levels as it spread down her neck. "You said you don't want me to heal you because of Izuna…explain that…"

Madara thought back to all the signs he'd witnessed. In hindsight Izuna's actions were neither
random nor unpredictable. "He's in pain. He has been for a while." Admitting all these things to someone, to Haruno, wasn't what he'd planned, but she was here, and listening, and Izuna definitely trusted her. "I didn't see it because I wasn't trying to."

"You can't always know what's in someone's head." She mumbled. Haruno had snuck her hand over his injury, probing. She wasn't trying to heal it just yet, so for the time being he allowed it. "Even if they're—"

"This pain links me to Izuna's pain. It reminds me to do better as his clan head and his brother." Just as she began to switch her chakra from probing to healing he threw her hand from his body, growling down at her. "You aren't going to heal it."

Haruno was just as stubborn and just as fed up. "Fine!" She snatched the bandages and tossed them his way. "And if Izuna asks why you suffered through a preventable injury, remember who didn't want to have it treated."

"I never said anything about not accepting any treatment. I'll heal with time." Madara huffed, unwinding the bandages and starting to wrap himself. He knew by the third pass around they were neither neat nor tight enough, but Haruno was still watching smugly.

She drew her knees to her chest and leaned her elbows on them, head in her hands. "Good news for you is you're not internally bleeding so I guess if you're alright with it, then there's nothing much I can do to dissuade you."

Madara felt a short surge of triumph, until the wrap slipped from his hands and bounced once, Haruno catching it before it unwound too far. "But what you're doing with this bandaging is a travesty,"

Silently, she stood up, and he fleetingly thought she would leave him to his pitiful wound care job. The skin of his spine prickled when she settled in close behind him instead, shuffling uncomfortably in her kimono until he felt her knees against his lower back.

Unlooping all his previous work, she ripped those bandages and tossed them to the side to start fresh. With an efficiency and speed he simply didn't possess in the field, she was rewrapping his stomach, the scent of her hair in his nose and stirring something in his lower stomach each time it tickled at his collarbone when Haruno leaned in. The next time she did, Madara reached back and grabbed both her wrists, yanking her closer than ever.

She gave a pitiful squeak, nothing like the courageous lioness who fought him tooth and nail. Out of her element, she froze up, her thundering heart against his back the only indication she hadn't outright stopped breathing.

"Slow down and show me," he told her. "I'm going to need to know how to do this myself when you aren't here." Haruno's breath on his neck made his stomach lurch more than he expected. Madara wondered if his body reacted this way to her even before he'd lost his memory. At the moment he'd give anything to remember that if nothing else. It wasn't much of a power play when he was as affected by her close proximity as she was by his. "Unless you plan to come every day and nurse me back to health."

The indignity inherent in that suggestion did the trick. Sakura jerked away, cuffing him once upside the head. "Do that again and I won't even finish wrapping this!"

Madara knew better than to doubt her conviction in following through on the threat, but when she slowly wrapped more bandaging, giving him instructions on how to handle the injury by himself, it
all struck him as funny. Absurdly so. "Hehe…hehe…"

Haruno's heat left his back as she pulled away. "These must not be tight enough if it tickles." she said waspishly.

"You…" he mused. "It's so clear by the way you speak about me, who I was, that you and I were not close. Perhaps I once wronged you in some way." He felt the muscles of her forearms, which rested on his shoulders, tense. "I wonder…how must the man I was have looked to you, through your eyes."

This time, even without making contact he knew her heart rate changed and she was startled.

That was even more incentive for Madara to keep going. "Needless to say, whoever I was to you, whatever I've done, it seems unlikely that you would help me now. You claim it's for my brother, but everything I've pieced together makes me feel you should be comfortable leaving me like this."

Her arms slipped away from him. He heard her ripping the bandages at last, felt her finish placing the last strip and then tucking it in. "When it comes to patients medics don't get to hold grudges." A sharp inhale through her nose. A barely audible exhale from her mouth. "Right now, you're not even that person. What's the point in holding an amnesiac accountable for something that might never be made right with or without your memories…? I don't even know how much it matters anymore! I... I spend every day trying to figure out if it's right to hate you when you're like this!"

Her fingers dug into his shoulders as her hands rested there. "You're only this way because of me, after all."

Madara could feel some of the weight leave her grip, the tension she'd been holding in…release. Unintentionally he'd given some way to find a new resolve. That was the instinctive knowledge her body language was expressing to him. "What you're saying is that you've found a way to forgive me in this state? Or does pity simply outweigh animosity?"

"What I'm saying," Haruno fiddled with the bandages one more time. "is that you should focus on getting better. Heal. Try to get your memories back. Then we'll talk about what can and can't be forgiven."

Chapter End Notes

Reposted A/N:
To make sure everyone understands the gist of the first scene, Sakura has overcome what was happening to her on the mission, which was her succumbing to all the dark emotions and lust for revenge and power that the blights were causing. Now that it's no longer an issue she's moving on to the next step of her godslayer training. In order to put herself on a more equal playing field with foes who are literal deities, she works with Mizuchi to tap into what, for the time being, we'll call the Dragon State. Think of it sort of like a Sage Mode. Except it's not fueled by senjutsu but an entity's essence/life-force.

Ohajiki is an indoor children's game similar to jacks and marbles that was popular with girls starting around the Edo period.
Byobu is a type of folding screen used as a partition.

Oyaku is a dish that is basically rice porridge, and known for being very simple and mildly flavored at best.

Zosui is sort of like rice soup made with leftover pre-cooked rice usually, and mixed with a variety of vegetables, broth stock and maybe some meat. Although Sakura and Tobirama are initially at odds about which one to prepare, they both are traditionally dishes eaten a lot in winter (the season this chapter is set in obviously) and both are often served to the ill because of the nutritional value but also because they're dishes easy to digest/keep down.

On that note…some time ago I was speaking to another fan and we talked about how Tobirama's practicality might affect how he does domestic things like cook. Surely a very efficient man such as Tobirama would have no problems preparing a meal in theory, but joking around, we concluded it's very likely his food is bland because he sees flavoring as being unnecessary so long as it's chock full of nutrition. That's all food is really for anyway, right? Who cares about taste when it's irrelevant? XD Cue Hashirama and Sakura begging him to season that food! Tobirama constantly gets some flak from readers for his prickly demeanor around Sakura in past chapters. I don't mind exploring a more…human side in this one.

Also, many people keep asking about Madara and exactly when his memory will be restored. Honestly, it's strange to even ask because I think it's obvious by now I enjoy my twists and turns. The scene in this chapter was to confirm that the subplot of Madara being without his memories and Sakura struggling with how to treat him is not over.

I enjoyed writing this chapter very much, much like the last one. If you enjoyed it to, comments are always appreciated. Still very busy this summer, so I'll update…when I can update. Who knows, the next one may even come from the new house (I can hope). Hope everyone who lives wear it's unbearably hot (such as where I live now) is beating the heat and reading this under the AC.
Chapter Summary

When everyone visits the hot springs on the same evening, a bit more than some secrets may accidentally get bared.

Chapter Notes

So I normally don’t do updates outside of Saturday’s of my choosing. I decided to cut readers some slack (especially by posting here the same day FFN gets the update) and whether or not people comment will determine if it continues, honestly.

A/N repost from FFN:
Last chapter someone mentioned something about hoping this story's rating changed. Well actually it was quietly bumped up to M about four chapters ago. XD And although I know people always hope M-rated fics will have intense intimate moments when it comes to romance (i.e. sex scenes) the real reason I moved the rating up for now is actually due to my desire to portray graphic (realistic and not gratuitous) violence that doesn't quite fit under the T umbrella in upcoming arcs, including graphic violence toward minors. It doesn't mean that explicit stuff in terms of the romance is off the table, per se; I'm still mulling that over or wondering if I'd possibly put those scenes in the AO3 version exclusively and write "fade to black" stuff here, but I thought that deserved a bit of explanation either way. That being said, I think the chapter title here is very fitting and well deserved as you'll soon find out.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If the change in the color of the sky was any indication, hours had gone by, and still Izuna felt no desire to show his face at the compound. Instead he found a quiet bench to sit on near an area recently designated as a park, and stared down at his hands, turning them over to study every line and callous.

Never in his life would he have thought himself capable of taking it too far, striking down his own flesh and blood for no reason other than…than what, exactly? He had yet to figure it out. No, rather he was scared to try. Tilting his head back, he let his mind drift to Sakura, and what she would think of him now.

Naoko hadn't seemed angry at him. She had tried to steady him until he pushed away from her and went off on his own. She would give him space, trust him to sort it out and talk when he was ready.

Madara…Madara hadn't really appeared mad either. Confused, hurt in both senses of the word, but not bitter. Hard to tell that with the brief exchange of eye contact they'd shared afterwards, though. So again his mind led him back to the disappointment at him and worry for his brother he had seen in Sakura's eyes.
Whatever damage he'd caused, she would fix easily, making Madara whole again in no time. But he really didn't see her thinking too highly of him. It was fair, because at present he didn't think highly of himself either.

Rubbing a hand tiredly down his face, Izuna considered going home when the first snow he'd seen all day began to fall. It drifted down slowly, right through the spaces between the barren branches of the trees dotting the side of the path, settling on his clothes and in his hair, making him grateful he'd dressed warmly that morning.

Fuzzy memories of running through the snow on nimble feet chasing after his brothers and being chased in turn started to surface, and for a while he was content to replay the rare memory where he and his brothers were together and happy like children should be. Then more winters passed, until less footprints marred the snow, until only he and Madara remained. Izuna took in a deep, shuddering breath and let the cold sting his lungs. It felt like the bone-deep chill of winter had been settled into him for longer than he'd realized, something he'd buried. Something that had finally surfaced to hurt—

"...na? Izuna?"

Izuna blinked snow from his eyelashes and pushed his hair aside. A person was coming toward him, bundled up and white-haired. "Jun'ichi," he said, putting name to face when the Kaguya got close enough to see in the fading light. They hadn't really run into each other since he'd gone to visit the Inuzuka compound and hear for himself what the Kaguya wanted in Konoha. Of course, that had led to an uncomfortable nagging about where exactly Jun'ichi's relationship stood with Sakura, but that too he'd managed to stuff down.

"This is a very lonely spot to reminisce..." Jun'ichi remarked, taking in his no doubt pitiful state. The Uchiha knew his cheeks were rosy, his hair sheened with frost and his stature slumped and defeated. He looked pretty down on his luck, in short.

"It's an even lonelier spot to go walking at sunset alone." he returned, unsure what to make of the other young man's sudden appearance.

Jun'ichi's lips quirked in a wry smirk as he drew his kimono tighter to him. "Loneliness is bred into a Kaguya, in our bones I guess you'd say."

Izuna was yet again baffled by the subtle but distinct way in which the person before him had changed since childhood. "You tell jokes now?"

"Not very good ones my sister assures me." He gestured to the free space on the bench. "May I sit?"

Izuna shuffled a bit to let him know he was welcome, despite there already being ample room available without doing so. Jun'ichi settled himself gracefully beside him, and they sat quietly, just watching the snow drift to their feet.

Oddly, though he had been avoiding returning home, having someone else at his side wasn't as uncomfortable as he'd anticipated.

"Your adjustment to the village must be going well," he glanced at Jun'ichi then back at the barren trees and white landscape. "You're out by yourself."

"Mm. Well, there's the matter of being watched near constantly by Tobirama Senju. He's rather persistent."
Izuna narrowed his eyes. "Quite."

"I suppose our activity so far has been innocuous enough to allow for some small freedoms. I can take evening strolls outside the compound, and my sisters can attend the academy with the other children. Depending on which you ask you'll get a different answer about if that's freedom or not." He rubbed his tanned hands together. "Kikue takes it in stride. Harihane, I'm told, has been caught trying to dash up the wall and escape no less than four times during recreational playtime."

Izuna chuckled, thinking of the varying ways in which the children he mentored had been adapting to the academy structure. Kagami was content, making friends, and many of the others were coming out of their shells and playing well with all kinds of children.

Manabu gravitated toward other children from equally prestigious clans, and interacted with them exclusively. It gave further credence to the suspicion he had about the ideology his father was nurturing in him.

"She's going to be on a tighter chain than ever if she keeps doing that," Izuna mused. "I'm certain she's hoping she'll be dismissed from the academy outright."

Izuna grinned, knowing that Hashirama's unending insistence that every child no matter their clan be allowed to learn the Will of Fire, would never make Harihane getting her wish that easy.

"Slowly but surely you're finding a life here, in the village." He leaned into his knees, "That was more than you were willing to hope for the last time we spoke,"

"A change in self has a way of changing your outlook." Jun'ichi explained. "Things have fallen into place and I haven't questioned it. My sisters have a chance at childhood here, and I'm content with that."

Izuna nodded in understanding, imagining what could have been if only Sanna and the twins could have had the same second chance. "My younger brothers didn't grow up to see this," he said slowly, "Madar and I carried a lot of shared resentment over that for years."

Jun'ichi closed his eyes, silently grimacing. "I apologize. I should have—"

"No, don't," Izuna assured him, touching a hand to his arm absently. "It took me a long time to learn that you can't live in blame."

Jun'ichi sized him up, making a small noise of assessment in the back of his throat. "Your lips and your eyes are at odds."

The quiet assertion seized his full attention, and with a sharp turn of his head, two sets of dark eyes clashed with each other.

"That's very bold." Izuna muttered.

Jun'ichi's bark of laughter was decidedly self-deprecating. "And there is one word no one has ever needed to use to describe me," The Kaguya responded flatly. "Up until recently I was a passive coward, as I'm sure I've told you. I did a lot of observing, but not a lot of acting. Maybe that's why I can recognize someone soaking in melancholy." He touched a finger to the tip of his nose. "There's almost a smell to self-loathing."

"And I'm giving off that smell?" Izuna asked, "Right now?"
Despite his small effort to play off Jun'ichi's irritatingly astute statement, the Kaguya was having none of it. He arched a brow pointedly. "You tell me."

The choice was his. To lay his heart bare to someone he had once been an acquaintance of at best, or to brush the opportunity aside and go on his way. Izuna swallowed around a sudden lump in his throat, shrugging.

"Siblings sometimes disagree."

"Of course," the white-haired shinobi said.

"I wouldn't say it's really an issue."

"No, fights are normal among family."

"I could have handled it better…" he admitted.

"In hindsight we all find ways to minimize the damage we've caused."

"He didn't ask to lose his memory, just like he didn't ask to be our clan's heir."

"I don't have any experience in memory loss but the pressures of being groomed as a clan heir I know pretty well. I'm assuming your older brother isn't well lately?"

"He's fairing…I think." Izuna found himself staring off blankly. "Or maybe both of us are closer to falling apart then I'd like to admit. I'm not as immune to Uchiha pride as I thought I was."

Jun'ichi's hand was warm on his shoulder even through his clothes. Izuna stared down at it in puzzled wonder. Without pressuring him, without judging him, the Kaguya heir had prompted him to speak his mind, and he had. "I…I'm not sure why I said any of that."

"Correct me if I'm off base, but those are words that have been on your mind for some time now?"

Izuna sighed. "You could say that. Although now that they've been released I'm both relieved and disturbed. I told myself I'd made peace with the idea of being Madara's right hand. As a child I thought of it as living in his shadow, but…when I got older I decided to see it as a greater purpose."

"The…parallels and distinctions in our family dynamics are sort of jarring." Jun'ichi whispered under his breath. "Growing up, I found myself born into a horrible legacy I wanted nothing to do with but was too afraid to change. My sisters, on the other hand, worked endlessly for our father's approval and were denied at every turn because of their places as second and third-born, as well as their gender. I know I caused Harihane a great deal of pain, especially, ignoring the ways she was hurting."

"But she's forgiven you now?" Izuna asked, wondering if maybe he hadn't forgiven his childhood grudge against Madara as much as he'd previously believed.

"Through trial and error, yes." Jun'ichi told him. "We've recently found the sibling bond we were denied growing up like we did. But it was only after we talked things through. For the first time I confronted her pain, and my own, and there was a new solace in coming out the other side of it all. You and your brother must have shared in nearly everything your entire lives, too."

He was right, of course. Jun'ichi had been right a lot since they'd started talking. As Uchiha, as friends, and more importantly as brothers, they had shared in years of experiences. There wasn't a time he could recall when Madara hadn't been with him. With the exception of the few short years
spent as an only child, his elder brother would have to say the same. "Battles, losses, dreams..." he recounted. "Not the affection for cats, but I've been working on that." He added, trying to bring levity into what was otherwise a solemn discussion.

"Your bond has already withstood a lot." Jun'ichi surmised. "I may not have all the details, but I don't see why this would be different." He stood up, turning and offering a hand with a small smile. Izuna took it, getting to his own feet. "Go home, Izuna. Your brother should be waiting."

Gratitude on his lips, Izuna paused. "Thank you...and what I said about Madara's memory problems..."

Jun'ichi smiled in confusion. "I might have memory issues myself, because I don't recall that."

Izuna smirked, clapping a hand to his shoulder. "You're a decent man, Jun'ichi."

Madara eyed the meal placed in front of him, Naoko bustling around the kitchen seemingly without a care. "I still can't help but feel like this is taking it to the extreme."

"Quail is just the kind of meal that keeps your strength up in this weather, actually." Naoko tossed hair over her shoulder, sitting down and setting a loaf of fresh bread between them.

"I mean the fact that you said you would handle Izuna, and yet you're here."

Naoko looked up through her bangs, breaking off some of the bread and pointing it at him. "I told you in my experience it would resolve itself, and you don't remember enough to know differently."

"Therein lies the problem," Madara leaned his chin against his knuckles, poking around his plate of vegetables with chopsticks.

"Are you saying you don't trust me?" Naoko pouted, her voice wavering.

"I'm saying that with one less person at the table there's more food." He pointed out, "And a great deal of it is already on your plate."

"I will apologize for many shortcomings but being well-fed isn't one of them, Madara." She sniffed daintily. "Izuna is capable and before today, mostly rational. He'll come home when—"

The front door slammed open, letting in a terrible draft. "Madara!"

Said Uchiha turned his head, blinking in shock at the sight of his brother standing there, panting and wide-eyed. Naoko grinned around her next bite of quail. "Izu—"

"I have a lot to speak to you about,"

Madara slowly stood, mindful of his bandaged, twinging abdomen. For his brother's sake he fought the urge to rub it. "Clearly," he said. "We were about to have a me—"

Izuna rushed over, clasping his shoulders with the same desperate look, "It can't wait," he said hurriedly. "I don't want to carry this anymore. I—"

"If you'll excuse me." Neither brother registered Naoko's exit much, although Madara vaguely noticed she'd carried off the rest of the dinner bread and a chunk of quail meat.

Removing Izuna's hands, he studied the deep onyx eyes so much like his own, finally nodding. "I'm listening."
Izuna carded a restless hand through his hair, puffing out a large breathe and licking his lips. "I didn't mean…I didn't mean to let the heat of the moment get the best of me." Madara followed his crestfallen face down to where it rested, his wounded torso. "I let things go unspoken for too long. Brothers should never cross swords in malice."

"Malice?" Madara repeated, more amused than offended. "Recovering my memories seems more and more likely to lead me to the revelation that I was a bastard."

"Well…" Izuna smiled half-heartedly. "You had your moments, but that aside, we're brothers, the last of our immediate family. I told you that I would help you, that you could rely on me while you recovered, but I wasn't up to the task."

The elder brother gripped his elbow, cocking his head. "I would say neither of us was truly honest. It wasn't that I didn't consider what carrying the secret burden of my amnesia was doing to you. I'm far from blind, but I chose to close my eyes nonetheless. For that, I'm sorry Izuna. We should both be more honest with ourselves and each other."

Mouth agape, Izuna glanced up from the ground, eyes watering indiscreetly. Something about the expression he wore, so full of emotion, brought a distant memory zipping back.

A smaller, younger Izuna with shorter hair peered up at him with the same teary eyes. Unthinkingly, he pulled him forward, nearly drawing away at how cold he felt. But Izuna was quick to latch on, chin resting on his shoulder, body quaking silently. Droplets of warmth landed on his clothing. Madara kept a steadying arm across his back, choosing not to mention the discomfort of having the weight pressed to his injury.

The week had dragged like a year, and it wasn't even over! Sakura rolled over under her sheets, Usamaro snuggled up under her chin. Bone tired. That's what she was. There were absolutely no plans to abandon her spot. The day had already been fully dedicated to rest with sleep as her mistress.

The Senju. The Uchiha. Learning more about her new abilities. Sakura felt as though she'd been pulled in every different direction, a malleable piece of dough up for grabs. If she stretched any further, then she would undoubtedly separate into pieces before very long.

Sleep and solitude were undoubtedly the safer of all options.

"Usamaro, why didn't I do this sooner?" she slurred, eyes fluttering shut in spite of the sun high in the sky beyond her drawn curtains. And the folding screen blocking those for good measure.

The cat purred in answer, and she let the soft sound carry her deeper into slumber, worries about what would become of the brothers without her to mediate for the day lifting from her shoulders.

Shikamaru may have been onto something all along, because there was something delicious about the way her body sank into unconsciousness. At least, she thought so, until sound outside her bedroom made Usamaro bolt up with a loud hiss, his claws digging into her side as he stood atop her.

Sakura was equally if not more irate, shooing the cat away and climbing from the hollow of her crisp sheets. Her hand found purchase on the kunai never far away, and she had already told herself that friend or foe, whoever was in her house would be on the business end of her kunai without a damn good explanation.

"I'd really hate to be you right now!" Sakura called loudly, moving with stealth in spite of herself.
"This is the worst possible time to get the drop on me, because I'm sleepy, I'm armed, and I'm—"

"Not at all sick, at least. That's good to see." Sakura whirled in the direction of the chakra signature to see Toka upright and alert, watching her in relieved consternation.

"Toka…" Sakura let the tension fall from her shoulders, breezing by to set down her kunai. "I'm glad to see you're better." It would wound her friend's pride for her to bring up but only one of them had been laid flat, blotchy and near delirious the last time they'd seen each other.

Usamaro crept out of his hiding place and used a paw to bat at the older kunoichi's foot. When Toka noticed the cat she bent automatically to hold him, and just like that Usamaro melted into a gray and white ball of happy grunts. "Yes, thanks to you I'm told." She stroked a hand down the feline's spotted back. "I can't say I recall much clearly. But along with Lord Tobirama you rescued the clan from certain peril."

Sakura glanced around her mostly sparse bedroom, save for the few things outside the futon and trunk used for décor. "You can...you can come sit," she offered, moving back to the edge of her futon herself. "I was just passing through and Mei-san explained the situation, I couldn't just leave."

"No," Toka rubbed Usamaro's gray ear and Sakura laughed at the way the crease of his eyes was almost gone as he practically grinned. "You're far too diligent of a medic to abandon the vulnerable. I'm grateful, as we all are."

"Toka, you're embarrassing me..." The pinkette crossed one knee over her thigh. Self-conscious, she ran a hand through nonexistent tangles in her now long hair. "Did you stop by to check in on me? You should still be resting."

"I'm recovered," the brunette said firmly. Sakura wanted to point out that she was just as likely to say that even if she was still unwell, but the woman carried on without missing a beat. "I only wanted to thank you in person, but I also feared when I noticed the quietness of the house that you had succumbed to pox belatedly. Lord Tobirama said you may boast immunity, but one can never be too cautious,"

Shaking her head, Sakura covered a yawn. "Oh, I think so at least. I don't feel sick, just really exhausted with...well, a lot."

"Understandable," Toka hummed, finally letting Usamaro down so he could return to her side. He trotted across the floor, bobbed tail swishing as he reached Sakura and flopped down on her leg. To make his goal more cleared he gnawed lightly at her fingers and she rolled her eyes, patting him. Leaning forward the Senju squinted closely. "You do have an impressive set of bags, maybe the onset of wrinkles."

"What?!" Sakura gasped, both hands flying to pull at her cheeks. Was her skin still tight and smooth, or had her luck finally run out? Had all the events of her adventures caught up with her until she looked just like her mentor without her youth henge in place?

"I...I'm sorry," Toka coughed into her hand. "I meant it as a joke, but—"

"There's a line that shouldn't be crossed!" Sakura pointed accusingly.

"In all seriousness you do look rather fatigued. Perhaps you've been overextending yourself with the matters of everyone around you."

"A little," Sakura rubbed at her eye, ignoring Usamaro who had sprang into her lap, paws on her
chest as he all but glared directly into her face, demanding more pets.

Toka appeared thoughtful. "Then maybe…"

"What?" Sakura straightened, sending Usamaro tumbling from her lap with a short cry. He landed on his feet, but it didn't stop him from grumbling as he disappeared into the cavern of the deserted futon.

"There is a new hot springs recently opened. I've heard nothing but praises, maybe a visit to see its benefits firsthand would do us some good."

Sakura blinked, more alert suddenly. "A trip to the baths? With you?"

Toka frowned, "Does the idea truly offend…"

"No," Sakura held up her hands. "That's not it. It sounds perfect actually. When do you want to go?"

Toka's face softened, "Tomorrow evening."

Sakura stood up, already feeling more invigorated. "Alright," she cheered, throwing one fist in the air. "I'm actually getting pretty pumped. It's been way too long since I've enjoyed a good hot springs bath. She could already feel the steamy water on her poor muscles. "How about we invite some of the other girls? Like Yurine, Shikamarin, and um, maybe Naoko Uchiha, if that's okay with you?" Naoko was an interesting character, but despite her whimsical nature, she hardly seemed bad. Sakura thought she could be a person worth getting to know, and what better way than during a nice soak together?

Toka shrugged. "If you wish."

Sakura collapsed back into her futon with a giddy squeal, realizing her mistake too late when Usamaro rocketed into the air with a yowl.

Submerged in the water to his shoulders, steam in the air and the tall bamboo walls dividing one side from the other, all was peaceful. Tobirama let his eyes drift closed with a sigh. The serenity of the moment was well-earned in his opinion. The high levels of endless vexation that came with working from the shadows as well as in the open to maintain a well-functioning village system needed a release. After their opening, the hot springs had become the answer.

He and the owners had an understanding, allowing him to come twice a week on certain evenings, guaranteed that he wouldn't be disturbed by any other patrons. It had been working quite well, and Tobirama got the solitude to meditate. For a shinobi, a healthy body was as necessary as a strong one, and he was determined to keep an ideal level of balance in that regard.

Somewhere nearby, the distinct sound of a cooing dove made Tobirama slowly open his eyes and shift forward, the water sloshing around his naked torso. While he couldn't spot the animal, he mused that just its cry and its presence meant that nature still hadn't quite righted itself from the erratic bouts of unseasonable weather the later half of the year had been plagued with. No doubt the birds and other wildlife must have been confused. Foraging for prey animals such as doves was usually slim in the full throes of winter.

The dove cried out again, and it was hard to say if it was in mourning or elation, but the sound carried well across the mostly empty bath area, so it was likely not far. Tobirama got comfortable again, reaching for the tray of sake at his side to imbibe.
The heated path it licked down his throat was pleasurably warm while the gently falling snow melting on his sweaty skin provided just enough cool reprieve to keep him from feeling overheated. When he leaned back the press of the shiny, dark stones lining the bath was there in support. Yes, this time of year, destressing this way just made sense. His fingers loosely curled around the bottle to pour himself another cup, but they halted when the unwelcome presence of intruders curled over him. Each one far too recognizable for it to be mere coincidence.

Lips firm in a scowl and ruby eyes hardened, Tobirama abandoned the sake and waded to the side of the hot spring furthest from the bath's entrance as the door slid open, a boisterous laugh spilling out and shattering the tranquility in one fell swoop.

Hashirama near staggered out into the open, his arm slung around a disgruntled-looking Madara, both clad in the inn-issued towels at their waists and nothing else. Curiously, heavy bandaging wrapped tight around the latter's lower stomach stopping just above the edge of the towel. A more subdued Izuna followed behind them, and an eager-eyed blonde that Tobirama vaguely remembered as one of the Yuhi siblings from the disastrous mission report brought up the rear. As per usual his older brother was dominating conversation with sheer charisma, guiding Madara to the water's edge with the arm still hanging around his shoulders. "No worries, no worries! Even if you don't remember if you can swim, you probably won't drown either."

"That's your idea of reassuring?" The Uchiha's deep voice spat.

"So this is a real ryokan?" Yuhi questioned, his excitement clear.

"This is your first time at one then?" Izuna asked.

"Well," he chuckled, rubbing a hand through the short hair at the back of his head, "I guess so. The Yuhi never had much in terms of territory and our numbers were never big enough to fight other clans for more. We made do with what we had before…you know…"

Some time ago, it was reported the Yuhi clan had been slaughtered down to the last child and their village razed by the Kaguya. Obviously that wasn't quite true, but very close nonetheless as Konoha was now home to the last two survivors, as it were.

Deciding it was impossible to expect anything remotely close to a peaceful end to his bath, Tobirama turned to climb out, but of course his luck lately never held, proven when he was spotted. "Oi, Tobirama!" he turned to see that Hashirama was waving a long arm through the air with bright eyes. The Uchiha brothers had gone stiff, Madara with his leg dangling awkwardly into the water as he prepared to climb in and Izuna staring with open wariness.

"It's just like you to pollute the ambiance here, anija."

"Don't be like that!" Hashirama called, spreading his arms wide. "There's no need for you to leave when the baths are large enough to accommodate all of us."

With that, Tobirama let his gaze dart pointedly to the two Uchiha with him. "I don't enjoy the sight of you in a towel any more than I enjoy your presence itself," Madara finally slid completely into the water. "Stay or go, it doesn't matter to me." Then the man had the gall to turn his back to him and begin putting his long hair up.

"You see?" Hashirama grinned triumphantly. "That was basically a peace treaty. Sort of…"

Tobirama sat back down in the water, far from happy. He didn't take kindly to the idea of being nonchalantly dismissed by Madara, of all people. He'd stay as long as he liked and leave when he
wanted, Uchiha be damned. The tension eased enough after that for Yuhi and Izuna to climb in as well, the younger Uchiha also securing his own hair. Hashirama's was already tied in a loose bun and he wasted no time joining everyone in the bath and then letting out a long, obnoxious sigh of contentment.

When the tray floated past and his elder brother took the sake bottle and a cookie for himself, he didn't bat an eye. It was nothing short of expected for Hashirama to take root in whatever space he occupied. Like a garden of weeds, as it were. "I guess there's no point in asking how you charmed the owners into letting you all in when I explicitly told them I wanted to bathe alone."

The elder Senju's brown eyes crinkled. "Being the Hokage has its own privileges. I convinced them whoever their guest was wouldn't mind."

"Yet here we are," Tobirama said flatly.

"Don't let us stop your enjoyment," Hashirama knocked back the sake, already pouring himself more. "You'll hardly know we're here."

Somehow, Tobirama couldn't muster the will to believe him.

Sakura got her first glimpse of the hotspring from over Toka's shoulder, and her heart thrummed a happy rhythm in her chest. It'd really been far too long since her last soak in the Konoha baths, and this was the right season to get reacquainted with their benefits. Behind her, Yurine chattered on about how much she planned to make the most of the evening. Lanterns strung up along the inn's roof cast an inviting glow on the water, and as her bare feet moved across the slick tile carefully, she paused mid-step.

"Something in the water?" Naoko asked from behind her, a sleepy Shikamarin propped against her for support.

"No," Sakura swallowed back a grimace, smiling instead. Naoko gave her a very unconvinced smirk as she brushed past, escorting the half-asleep Nara down the stones.

What she couldn't tell them was that she felt several powerful auras on the other side of the bamboo wall. More attuned to her borrowed divinity than ever, picking out particularly potent chakra was now second-nature. And, in her experience only a few individuals would thrum against her senses so strongly.

Nevertheless, she wasn't in attendance to worry about them, but to enjoy a soak among friends, so Sakura slid into the springs without a word. A pleased moan slipped out as soon as the heat sank into her body, and Naoko chuckled from her spot lounging near the center of the bath. "That was a surprisingly naughty sound."

Sakura pressed a hand to her lips with a blush. "I…I didn't realize how much my muscles needed this I guess."

"Agreed," Toka took a bucket of water and poured it over herself. "It's easy to get so caught up in the day to day that one neglects adequate time to relax."

The heady scent of jasmine and some sort of spice washed over everyone's senses. Sakura inhaled deeply, her guard lowering at the intoxicating smell alone. The hostess had promised them an enjoyable time, offering to prepare the area with a set of bath supplements that would enhance the experience. By the way her skin tingled pleasantly, it was working. All the tension and strain felt like it was leaving her by the second while the steam lifted the fragrance directly into her nose.
Yurine nodded, her long blonde hair, normally tied in a ponytail at the side of her head, wrapped into a bun in the same place. "Don't get me wrong, I've enjoyed my academy position so far. I appreciate Lord Hokage taking a chance on me, given that I'm not much older than some of the students. But some days I can just feel the stress making me wrinkle," she patted fretfully at her cheeks.

"You're taking the wrong approach to it," Shikamarin rubbed at an eye. "When you go with the flow, every day becomes less bothersome. The water still feels nice, though, so thanks for having me along."

"I second that," Naoko stretched her arms above her head, the light of the paper lanterns making her pale skin glisten. "It sounds to me as if you ladies are in need of some lessons in being carefree." She began to gently float on her back, her soaked towel a second skin. "It's highly recommended; I live much happier that way."

Sakura saw Toka eyeing the Uchiha as if she didn't quite know what to think. Naoko was the sort of person to give you mixed emotions upon first meeting, so the pinkette didn't blame her.

"There are times for fun and times for duty." Toka asserted, still watching Naoko float around. "Not being able to separate the two is dangerous in our profession."

The dark-haired kunoichi drew a hand from the water and waved it up and down idly, water droplets flicking off. "I've been told that all my life and I've still managed to outlive most of the people who've told me." Naoko sat up with the gleam in her eye Sakura was starting to recognize meant trouble, or at the very least, incoming mischief. Suddenly inviting the Uchiha in a bid to get to know her didn't feel like her best idea of the week.

"Tell me how that worked out for you." Naoko began to swim circles around Toka. "I've heard about you, Lady Toka. Not that long ago you were the Senju's Nightingale."

The skin between Sakura's eyebrows creased up. Toka's body went rigid. "Nightingale?"

"Mhm," Naoko nodded reverently. "We never met in battle, but I always had a great deal of respect you know. In retrospect meeting like this instead of as enemies is much better, don't you think? Less messy too," She threw in with a wink. Finally, she stopped her circles, leaning into Toka, who leaned away with a tight expression. "What do you say? I'm always looking to expand my friendship circle. Why don't we wash each other's backs?"

Toka blinked quickly, her eyes widening but the stern expression not softening. "Just as I thought, you leave an impression. Simply not the one I would've expected. You're something of a legend yourself. An Uchiha woman so beautiful and unpredictable some have mistaken her for a kitsune in disguise."

Sakura and Yurine exchanged unsure looks, wondering if there was a need to intervene. For the moment, the air was calm. Some of the pressure was further offset by Shikamarin beginning to snore softly in the background.

"Oh you know how it is," The Uchiha batted her eyelashes. "Can't let the enemy get a read on you too easily. Got to keep them guessing."

Toka, surprisingly, seemed to relax a little. "Indeed."

Yurine leaned into Sakura and cupped a hand to her ear. "Are they on the same wavelength now?"

"I…I still can't tell." Sakura returned, just as hushed.
"Enough of that though!" Naoko giggled. "We can trade boring old war stories anytime. At the hot springs there's truly only one topic appropriate for the occasion."

"What's that?" Sakura asked, Toka echoing her. Shikamaru's snores grew a little louder, then tapered off again.

"Oh!" Yurine shot a hand into the air, bouncing in the water. "I think I know!" Her large eyes were clear in the moonlight. "It's romance, isn't it?" she breathed.

"Right you are," Naoko confirmed.

Sakura groaned quietly, her forehead finding a comfortable resting place between her palms. It wasn't that she had anything against trading information about crushes. It had been a long time since she'd gotten to discuss something as...normal...for a girl her age as gossip about boys.

But for the longest time her crush had been Sasuke. Everyone knew it. Foolishly, she had once believed he'd be the only one for her. Then the longer he remained gone from the village the more her feelings changed, and Sakura thought perhaps she didn't understand love as much as she'd originally believed.

There was a light nudge at her shoulder. She looked up to find Toka offering her a small cup of sake with a sympathetic look. Sakura gratefully accepted the liquid courage and let the burning sensation distract her briefly as the other women prepared to delve into the conversation at hand.

"Seeing as I suggested it, I'll go first." Naoko volunteered, all attention falling to her. Sakura didn't really care who had the spotlight, so long as she wasn't first up. She hoped the others would take as long as possible.

"Start with telling us about your type!" Yurine clapped, already wholly invested.

"That varies," she shrugged. "But there are some similarities whether it's men or women." She lazily began swirling her finger in the steaming water. "A sharp mind is always alluring, and arms as strong as mine, so we can take turns lifting each other." Everyone laughed. "They'd have to be able to keep up with me in a spar, naturally." Sakura joined Toka and Yurine in nodding sagely. "But well, I guess there is one thing I really like if we're speaking about physical attributes."

Sakura blushed in anticipation. 'Oh no...she wouldn't...'

"A soft place to lay my head," Naoko finished with a dreamy sigh.

"That's the cutest!" Yurine squealed, flailing the arm that wasn't cupping her cheek.

"The pillowy softness of a warm chest, for example." The way her eyes squinted contentedly reminded her strongly of Usamaro. "There's nothing like it."

"Ooh," Yurine stared down at her own chest with a pout. "Now that you had to go and remind me..." she shook her head in silent mourning. "If you don't mind me saying so, Toka, I think you and Naoko are tied for the most well-endowed among us."

The Senju, who had been listening silently, sat up with a gasp. "E-Excuse me?"

"She's right." Naoko grinned. "Those are quite nice."

Uncharacteristically bashful, Toka peered down at her own towel-wrapped bosom. "H-Hardly. When did this become the topic of discussion?"
"Talk about hidden assets." Yurine continued, "Totally unfair."

For poor Toka's sake Sakura didn't dare to comment, but it was easy to see where Yurine was coming from. She had thankfully long ago grown comfortable in her body, fine with being a slightly late bloomer. It didn't mean she couldn't admire.

"L-Let's move the discussion onwards!" The Senju squeaked, her cheeks rosy. Sakura doubted it was entirely because of the heat of the bath either.

"Then you go next," Naoko goaded.

Toka shook her head. "I have no lover to speak of," she responded curtly.

"But everyone at least fantasizes from time to time, right?" Yurine coaxed. "I know I do!" When she clasped her hands together under her chin with a faraway look Sakura was afraid she was already lost in the grips of a vivid fantasy. But thankfully she was able to wake herself up almost immediately, giving the older kunoichi an encouraging smile. "So don't be shy. We're not here to judge."

An awkward silence fell over the group, only broken when Toka cleared her throat. "I…raising Reira since I was fifteen, I hadn't given it a great deal of thought. I suppose…someone who wouldn't mind children for obvious reasons."

"And?" Naoko said. "Is there more? Or are you telling us you'll settle for anyone who may have a soft spot for children?"

"Of course not!" Toka sputtered, an edge of indignity in her voice. "I'd like someone who's contemplative, but who has optimism about the future." Toka paused, turning away. "This is all rather abrupt and embarrassing for me. I…I've never done this."

"It's alright," Yurine put a hand on the brunette's shoulder. "I can go next. I'm raring to go!"

"We can all see that," Sakura stuck her tongue out. "You seem like someone's already on your mind."

"Eek, Sakura!" Yurine lunged at her, seizing her friend by the shoulders. "How could you give me away like that?!"

"I'd say you gave yourself away the moment we started this chat." Naoko corrected, sipping from the nearly forgotten sake.

"Fine, fine," The blonde breathed deeply, calming down. "I…I've always had an ideal. Ever since my mother told me tales about princesses and samurais I could just picture it all. But lately there's someone that does come to mind." She giggled to herself.

"Well don't hold it in, tell us!" Sakura grinned, happy to see the other kunoichi so giddy.

"Here goes then," Yurine slapped her right cheek lightly. "He's um…he's very kind." Naoko absently jerked a sleeping Shikamarin up as she began to slide dangerously low under the water, never taking her eyes from the gushing Yurine. "Handsome, too. I know everyone says that about the person they like, but it's true! He has very intelligent eyes, and a lot of patience."

"Wow," Sakura mumbled. "I have to admit he sounds pretty great."

"Oh, he is!" Yurine agreed. "The only thing is I don't know if he'd be interested. I mean I wouldn't
be heartbroken if he wasn't. It's just silly infatuation. R-Right?" She placed a hand over her chest where a no doubt racing heart was caged.

Sakura moved in closer to pull the nervous girl into a hug. "You never know until you try. Why not do something special just for him?"

"Now this is getting interesting." Naoko swam closer. "Definitely worth boiling my buns for."

"I wouldn't know where to start. I never really follow through on things like this…"

"That's where we'd come in." Naoko interrupted. "Isn't that right, ladies?"

"Sure," Sakura smiled.

"I'm not sure I'd truly be much assistance…" Toka started to say.

"It's decided, we'll start our planning soon enough. But for now, I believe it's Sakura's turn, no?"

"No!" Sakura moved away from Yurine, crossing her arms in an X motion.

"A little too much protest for us to let you be, Sakura!" Yurine chirped.

"W-What about…?" Sakura's eyes roamed the hot spring in a last ditch attempt to get out of it. "Shikamarin hasn't gone yet!"

The Nara had been asleep almost since the time they'd stepped foot into the hotspring, and her face was flushing brightly from the heat. In truth, she'd probably need to be dragged out soon, or they'd have a hard time explain to the Nara clan how their heiress got cooked alive.

"Is there even any point in waking her up to ask?" Yurine scratched her cheek, skeptical.

Shikamarin broke off into fitful murmurs just then, pawing at the air. "N-No…that's my cabbage stew. Damn…deer…"

"I think that answers that question." Toka replied, wading over to lift the sleeping kunoichi from the water and onto the rocks.

"Before I start, I'll tell you now that it's complicated," Sakura relented, already knowing they would never let her be.

"That's even better. Makes for an interesting story I say," Yurine said eagerly.

"I did…have someone I liked for a long time." Sakura wrapped her arms around herself.

"And what was he like?" the blonde prodded.

"Smart, popular, handsome, mysterious…" Sakura mentally went through all the traits she'd ascribed to Sasuke growing up. "He never gave me the time of day though, and I was competing with lots of other girls including my friend, for his attention, but that never stopped me."

"Forgive my bluntness, Sakura." Toka cocked her head. "It sounds…like a rather doomed pursuit."

"It was…" Sakura's smile was a little melancholy. "I just didn't know it yet. Anyway, that's over now. I'm pretty sure I'm finally alright with how things went."

"Hm," Naoko said. "That takes a lot of bravery to walk away from someone who could never
"return your feelings."

"You sound as if you're speaking from experience on that," Yurine said slowly.

Naoko remained nonplussed. "I know a few people who have. I've never been in love, quite frankly."

Sakura gaped. "W-wait, hold on! W-what about—"

"Madara?" Naoko smirked. "I've already told you we never placed that kind of exclusivity on one another. I would say our relationship couldn't quite be described as just carnal, but we've never had issues in that area."

Sakura felt her throat grow dry trying not to imagine Naoko and Madara tangled in each other, bare skin sliding together. "S-So it's...not love?"

"Not the kind between a man and a woman who want to spend their lives together. We were betrothed from a young age. I was thirteen, and he was eleven. Neither of us were thinking about a forever as husband and wife, but our fathers made their plans, and it was our job to be dutiful. We did grow to be friends over the years,"

"So you're still marrying him?" Yurine placed a hand to her mouth, scandalized. "Even though there's no love?"

"While there are no shortage of loveless arranged marriages in clans like the Uchiha," Naoko sighed. "I've been spared of that fate, and the clan has been spared of having me for their lady. Madara annulled the betrothal as soon as he became clan head."

Sakura processed the information gradually, letting it tumble around through her head. It would explain the closer than friends but not quite lovers relationship Madara and Naoko seemed to share. There was also some relief that accompanied that revelation. Sakura nearly fell back into the water at her own train of thought.

"Oh, Sakura!"

"Sakura!"

Toka and Yurine reached for her at the same time, pulling her upright.

"Something pull you under?" Naoko asked with a knowing shine to her inky eyes.

"It's a little slippery down there," Sakura huffed. "Just lost my footing for a second."

As Yurine slowly drew away, she nudged the pinkette a little under the water, whispering, "Good news for you,"

Sakura nearly fell back again. What was **that** supposed to mean? Did Yurine really still think there was something with her and—

Sakura wanted to slap a palm to her face. It was Yurine, who thrived on romantic fantasies, of course she did! And she wasn't relieved that Madara and Naoko would likely never marry because she had any interest in Madara. She would've felt the same relief to hear any forced marriage without love had been ended. There were no personal feelings involved, Sakura concluded, it was the mere principal of the thing!
"We've heard about your past, but what about now?" Yurine waggled her eyebrows. "Anyone that catches your eye? We could help you!"

"I don't think that'll be necessary…" she mumbled quietly. "There's really not anyone I—"

"If it's an Uchiha I could easily get you a way in, you know." Naoko joined in, playfully splashing at her. "All I'd need is a name and I'll have them trussed up and on your doorstep."

"That sounds almost like you intend to deliver them against their wishes." Toka added suspiciously.

"Says who? I have it on good authority that some Uchiha are very into that." Naoko's grin was so devilish Sakura could feel herself melting from her roots down. It didn't help as an unfiltered image of two Uchiha she was particularly acquainted with came to mind. Sakura sat down in the water so fast it got up her nose, and she snorted it out, mortified.

"Does that mean it is an Uchiha?" Yurine flapped her hands as if she could take off into the sky any minute. "Or is it someone from another clan? There are a lot of them in the village now, aren't there? Uchiha, Nara, Aburame, Sarutobi, Shimura…"

"Definitely not that one." Sakura spat. The thought of ever becoming Sakura Shimura had bile rising in her throat.

"Good," Yurine swiped a hand across her brow. "You know I hate to speak poorly of children but Lord Shimura's son Danzo is a real little bully. He thinks he's too good for my genjutsu lessons!"

"Let's not get side-tracked," Naoko hummed. "If our dear Sakura wants to marry into a big clan, then it's our job to assist in any way possible."

Sakura squealed. "I never said I wanted to marry into any—" Naoko put a finger to her lips just as she'd done the other day. "So what other clans are there?"

"Technically although it's small, Kureno and I are from a clan." Yurine said. "Sakura!" she suddenly looked on the verge of fainting. "You're not…you're not having a secret tryst with my brother, are you?!

Sakura was torn between laughing and screaming. "If I was seeing your brother, why would I keep it secret from you?"

"I'd expect anyone interested in Kureno to keep it a secret." Yurine scoffed. "It's Kureno. Who would want to openly admit their taste is that off?"

"That landed much harder than a sting, didn't it?" Naoko muttered.

"So is it?! My brother, I mean."

"No, it's not your brother."

Yurine stroked her chin. "What about…oh! That Kaguya. The oldest one. I've seen him once or twice. He's really pretty,"

"Junji and I friends, but," Sakura shook her head. "I think that's about it."

"If you ever change your mind," Yurine tittered, "Friendships can easily become more~"

"I feel like there's a certain clan we've all neglected to mention." Naoko's hellspawned smile was back, and directed at Sakura yet again, much to her horror.
"What clan?" Yurine wanted to know. "What clan?!

"The Senju…" Toka said coolly.

Although they had undoubtedly been at it for a while, suddenly the bath felt too hot on her skin. White hair, brown hair. Red eyes, brown eyes. Sunny smiles and shallow sneers. Kind gestures and rare acknowledgements.

"I think we have a winner!" Sakura snapped out of her thoughts to see Yurine looking entirely too victorious.

"That's not necessarily true," Naoko clicked her tongue. "She had the same spacy reaction when the Uchiha were brought up."

"Or it could just have been your sadistic suggestion to kidnap the person of her choosing," Toka rolled her eyes.

"Again," Naoko said impatiently, "It isn't kidnapping when the person is in full agreement with getting roughed u—"

"I think we're missing the important thing, which is that we've narrowed it down to two possible clans!" Yurine raised a fist in the air with a bright smile. Wet blonde hair that had escaped the bun clung to her shoulders, and her cheeks appeared permanently flushed pink—ironic considering she'd had the least to drink of all of them.

"Why are we so focused on me?!" Sakura squawked. "This isn't fair! Everyone else only got a few seconds of grilling. But this is an entire interrogation."

"We've gotten the farthest with you, though…" Toka ventured.

Sakura placed both hands above her breasts and pouted hard. "You too, Toka?"

The evening had gone from pleasant retreat to personal hell fairly quickly after Hashirama and the Uchiha arrived. Locked into a silent battle of wills, waiting for one or both of the Uchiha to leave the bath before he did, Tobirama sat cross-legged on a rock, attempting to tune out Hashirama's prattling. The Yuhi, who he had been reintroduced to, had gone off in search of more sake and snacks, yet to return."This is nice!" His elder brother grinned from ear to ear. "A good soak with good friends. Seems like we would've tried this sooner."

"When would there have been time for that?" Izuna asked. "This inn has only been up and operational for a short time. The last time I've soaked is on the way back from that battle in Kokura." He rolled his shoulders, letting the water lap over them.

"It was in Hakone." Madara corrected.

Izuna hummed absently. "You're right, Kokura was the one with the—" He spun quickly, staring at his brother in disbelief. "Did you just correct me?"

Even wet, Madara's mess of hair spiked like a puffed cat. "Is that a crime now?"

"I think he means that you remembered a detail about your past!" Hashirama gave Madara's shoulder a light-hearted push.

The older Uchiha contemplated that briefly. "So I have. It's hardly anything to celebrate though."
"Why be so cynical?" Hashirama frowned. "Any connection to your former self, no matter how small, is progress."

Tobirama continued to pretend he wasn't listening, basking in the seclusion of his chosen rock. It mattered very little to him whether or not Madara ever regained his memories. He was unpleasant to be around with or without them and his foul chakra still choked him—such as now—so Tobirama personally preferred the rude, awkward but overall fumbling amnesiac to the proud, calculating man he'd been before.

"By the way, Madara," Hashirama pointed down at his friend's wrapped stomach. "What happened there? I know you mentioned something about a training accident, but…"

Madara patted at his gut. "It's been attended to and that's all that matters."

"I could heal it." Hashirama volunteered, already moving closer.

Madara waded backwards, shaking his hair out and sending droplets everywhere. "It's fine. Haruno examined it and there's no internal bleeding."

Tobirama cracked one eye open. Haruno had been chummy with the Uchiha for some time, but playing their personal healer? The last time he checked she loathed Madara nearly as much as he did. What had changed?

He stared off at the wall dividing the two sides of the bath. The powerful, strange aura was unmistakable. It had been there since shortly after his brother and the others had arrived, and until she was brought up, he had done his best to leave it be.

A strange expression crossed Hashirama's face. "Sakura-san? Well, if she did a thorough check then I'm sure she's right. Still, let me fix this so you won't have to burd—both—well, just let me heal you."

"I said I don't need it," Madara hissed, hopping around the bath as Hashirama waded after him.

"Aren't you being a little too dodgy?" Hashirama complained, outstretched hand glowing a deep green. "What's the big deal with this injury not needing to be healed?"

Tobirama scowled. Just when he was thinking of getting back in the water so the visit wasn't a complete waste, they had to start up. "If the Uchiha wants to fester and rot from the inside out, why not let him?" Tobirama called down to them. Izuna glared sharply.

Hashirama pounced, grappling with a defiant Madara. "Don't be so sour all the time," he responded, smirking at his annoyed rival. "The hot springs are a place of quietness, remember? As soon as I get Madara to comply and Kureno returns with the sake, I'll coach you on proper, ah—"

Madara, slippery as he was, slid under Hashirama's arm and around him, churning the water in the process.

Izuna moved further away from them with a frown. "Maybe you two should calm down before the hostess comes out and there's a problem."

"Tell it to this maniac!" Madara growled, biting at the arm that locked around his neck. "He's going to kill me before he actually heals me."

Tobirama had to smirk at the sight of Hashirama trying to restrain Madara with one arm, the Uchiha gnawing away on his brother, who was doing his best to get his free palm close enough to the bandaging to heal the wound beneath.
"This is getting out of hand," Izuna snapped, making his way toward the older Senju and Uchiha. "Hashirama either let Madara go before he drowns or Madara, you could let Hashirama heal you and get it over with—"

With an agitated grunt Madara drove his head back into Hashirama's nose, causing Tobirama's foolish older brother to fall backward, taking his captive with him. Izuna, as close as he was to them both, was hit by the wave of water that followed. Sputtering, the attempted mediator resurfaced spitting out the steaming water, blinking rapidly and pushing his bangs away from his forehead. His towel was skewed at his waist and he looked dazed, caught entirely off guard as he was.

Tobirama lounged back on his rock with gleeful eyes. The frustration over his evening being ruined was all but gone when the three morons in front of him were providing plenty of entertainment.

Wordlessly, Izuna launched himself into the fray, and the three turned into a clash of thrashing arms and heated words. From his vantage point there was no clear winner, and Tobirama suspected they had forgotten what they had each originally been fighting about, too worked up to care anymore.

Madara began to hold Hashirama underwater, and Tobirama thought to intervene; but when one of his brother's floundering legs came very close to nailing Izuna in the groin, he made himself lie back again.

It went on without end, none of them the least bit tired. Tobirama idly wondered whether to stay or go. The Yuhi boy hadn't returned and it was only a matter of time before the inn's owners got wind of what was happening in their hotsprings. Hokage or not, surely not even they would tolerate so much roughhousing.

The flare up of chakra had his attention pulled back down to the scuffle in the water to see they had found their way just under his rock. A loud clap from arms hitting the surface was all the warning Tobirama was allowed before a plume of liquid shooting up into the air, clearly the result of a misfired Suiton, blasted him directly in the face. Stunned like a bird struck from the air by a stone, Tobirama tumbled into the bath with a splash, surging up instantly. "Enough!" he bellowed.

The buffoons stopped clambering over themselves long enough to stare at him in a stunned silence. Tobirama couldn't decide if the water steaming around him was due to the springs themselves or his own wrath. Not giving them any time to ask for mercy, he struck, summoning a mighty water-based jutsu that pulled them all in.

They spun and crashed against each other, pulled toward the center of the springs, trapped in his vortex, searching for something to hold onto and finding nothing. Too late, he remembered where he was, and that he above all should have respect for the peace of the hotsprings. His attack, still carrying the three men trapped within, surged up against the bamboo wall.

It came down in an explosion of wood and water.

All of them, with the exception of Shikamarin, who they'd lost sight of, sprang into action. Sakura was sure they were under attack. It didn't matter that she couldn't think of a single enemy stupid enough to attack the four most powerful men in the village. Clearly someone had tried it when their guard was down, as it was the only thing to explain the commotion right before the thick bamboo wall splintered apart under the force of a giant Suiton jutsu.
"Get ready!" Toka yelled.

Sakura worked in unison with her to manipulate the water, ready to defend or attack as the situation called for. All control was lost, however, the minute she caught sight of the four men staring back at them from the other bath. Sakura's eyes jumped from one face to the next, traveling down the four wet, defined bodies and stopping at the—

"Such a show, and it's nowhere close to my birthday." Naoko purred, licking her lips. "Who knew our Hokage was so...beefy." Sakura followed the Uchiha's line of sight, and she wasn't entirely sure if she could say she regretted it. Erect and thicker than any patient she'd ever examined, she was positive the vision of him curving up to his stomach would stay with her long past the moment.

Yurine's reaction was entirely different as she clamped her eyes shut belatedly. "I saw!" she cried. "I saw it and I'm not even married! One of you is going to have to own up to this and make an honest woman out of me!"

Sakura was floored, quivering in her towel, torn between dunking her head under the water and being unable to take her eyes away.

Hashirama, sans covering, moved forward with an incredibly awkward smile. "Please, everyone remain calm. This isn't at all what it looks like."

"I can't see a thing, but it looks like you're naked in the women's baths!" Yurine screeched, whipping around in blind circles. "Am I wrong? Does he have clothes on now?!"

"You filthy animals!" Toka seethed. One sharp tug on her hair and she had several senbon at her disposal. "You...you bastards! How dare you—"

Sakura tried to cover her nose, which she suspected had begun to trickle. Seeing Toka could not be reasoned with, Hashirama turned to flee. Nothing beat the speed of vengeance, and he'd hardly been able to sprint away before several senbon were imbedded in the cheeks of his ass.

"Shit!" he hissed, trying to run and pluck them out at the same time. Toka leapt from the water after him, killing intent crackling around her as she produced a kunai from whatever fold in her towel she'd tucked it away into.

"Do you really believe I'd let you flee? I will end all of you!"

"Has anyone seen Shikamarin?!" Yurine yelped, still feeling around while covering her eyes with one hand. Under different circumstances Sakura would have thought she was playing a game. Under different circumstances, she would have never suspected a day would come when she'd be subjected to the Shodai, a shinobi legend and village hero, in the buff.

How had it all gone so horribly wrong? Running for his life, chased by one of his oldest friends who appeared relentless in her pursuit. Worst yet, he was shamefully without a towel, and had every reason to believe not only Sakura-san but every woman in the baths had been flashed. He was many things, but never would Hashirama consider calling himself an exhibitionist.

Toka must have gotten a clear shot, because yet more senbon were lodged into his ass. Even with his regeneration, he had a strong feeling sitting would prove painful for a while to come. Pulling out the needle-like weapons was painful and, trying to keep from slipping as he ran the length of the baths was humiliating. But his mind blanked as Toka chased after him yelling obscenities, and he couldn't think of a decent place to poof away to that she wouldn't instantly find him.
The second lap back around his eyes locked with a green pair, and he nearly stumbled to halt, hoping to at least explain himself. Tobirama, still refusing to leave the water, grumbled something and lobbed a sopping towel his way. Hashirama had more of a sense of dignity than he was often given credit for, and he deftly fastened it around his waist.

Safely covered at last, he could finally focus on beating a swift retreat, the perfect destination in mind. Hashirama took one last deep breath, the hotsprings popping out of sight just as he noticed Sakura-san was clutching her loose towel to her body for dear life.

When things took a wide-swinging turn, Izuna really should have been more prepared. For months unseen incident after unseen incident was all his life had really been. But when Hashirama had stopped by to invite Madara and himself to the hotsprings for a chance to catch up, he hadn't foreseen anything even remotely like this happening.

Fresh off a reconciliation with his brother, Izuna had thought such a peaceful venue could only help them more. Tobirama being there was a mood dampener, but one he was mainly able to ignore.

No, the true problem had arisen when his brother and Hashirama had gotten carried away. He hadn't expected to get pulled in too, but as ashamed as he was to admit he wasn't immune to competition nor moments of immaturity. Both just happened to have struck at the same time, landing them in figurative hot water that matched their physical location.

Really though, if anyone was ultimately to blame it was Tobirama. Surly and dramatic, he had been the one to cause the wall to collapse. Sakura and some of her friends on the other side, flustered and undressed was not what Izuna was prepared for. Toka Senju, enraged and on a mission to punish every last one of them indiscriminately hardly gave him time to think.

Except for the blood flowing southward the more he took in Sakura deliciously indecent in the towel that appeared ready to slide off any moment. Her face was flushed, her green eyes were more breathtaking than ever, and the water sluicing down her skin was distracting.

Izuna let his eyes roam to follow the beads sliding from her collarbone and disappearing under the hem of her towel, between her cleavage, before his brain screamed at him to prioritize his own escape. The raging Toka was turning her sights toward the rest of them.

Fishing around in the water, Izuna snatched the first wet clump his hands brushed against and fastened it around himself, flickering to collapse in the safety of his room in the compound in a wet pile. Then and only then did he notice, Madara was nowhere to be found, and making amends meant he was unfortunately obligated to go back and rescue him. Sakura likely still being there had nothing to do with it.

The events of the night had confirmed what he had suspected for some time. Hashirama, his rival, his childhood friend, was an idiot running an entire village. There were glimpses of good leadership qualities on occasion. Charisma, a strong sense of fairness, diplomacy, raw strength if he'd heard correctly... Though none of those things explained why he was cheeks to the wind being chased around by a very vengeful looking brown-haired woman.

Haruno was gaping, hadn't moved since she got an eyeful of them if he had to guess. Madara was sure the water covered him from the waist down since he hadn't been idiotic enough to try to get out in an ill-fated attempt at diplomacy, but he was also sure he had lost his towel as well.
Maybe that should bother him more. But if his memory served correctly, towels in public baths were a choice, and taking them nude was just as common. There was no sense in kicking up such a fuss, in his opinion, when hot springs were one of the few places it was alright to walk around in a more…natural state.

Naoko made no effort to hide that she was looking. As Hashirama ran her eyes followed every bounce of his member. The blonde girl was wailing nonsense and groping at a body that was face down in the water, probably dead, trying to drag it back to the rocks.

The pink hair in his vision was a beacon though, and her reaction didn't disappoint. Haruno could be as coy in peeking as she liked, but the strain of her nipples against the wet fabric, her glazed eyes and deliciously pink face, and the especially damming evidence of red trickling from between the fingers held up to her nose were all giveaways.

The debauched sight kick started some image in his brain, and he remembered a time when she was holding a man by the throat in the middle of a rainstorm, screaming threats, and something about the feral glint in her eyes had made arousal course through his veins.

Now was no different. Except perhaps, a strong reaction. With or without his consent, his body knew what it wanted, and had it not been for Izuna screaming that "she" was going to destroy them too if they stayed…if not for the sharp jerk of his hair being gripped as he was spirited away by said younger brother, Madara might have been inclined to see what a mixture of impulsivity and want could turn into.

In hindsight, letting his emotions get the better of him was a perfect example of why he worked so hard to repress them in the first place. Hashirama might live with his heart always leading the way, but he'd much rather be known as a man governed by logic.

Worse yet was the thought that this event could jeopardize his arrangement with the owners of the ryokan. No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than the door to the inn slid open from the men's side, Kureno Yuhi waltzing back out in a warm robe with a smile and a bottle of sake, owners in tow. "Sorry about the wait, but I..." He stopped there with one foot over the door's threshold, his jaw dropping. "What kind of tsunami hit while I was gone?!

Toka, who had retreated back to the women's side to help deal with the half-drowned Shikamarin Nara, glared pointedly in his direction. It was a look that said her revenge was far from over.

Taking a moment to make sure his dignity was intact and that he, unlike his stupid brother, would not bare more himself to the world than necessary, Tobirama stood, getting out of the water with grace, ignoring the stares burning their way into his naked back. Kureno buckled under the intensity of his gaze, scrambling to move to the side with eyes still surveying the damage done to the separating wall. It floated in miserable pieces across the women's bath and littered the walkway.

Determined to be the mature one of the situation, he looked both owners in the eyes and bowed deeply. "Apologies for the mess. I'll personally be seeing to the repairs."

"O-Oh..." The hostess removed the hand that had been pressed to her mouth, bobbing her head. "Yes, thank you."

She was taking it in a fair bit calmer than one could expect, given the trouble caused. Tobirama would have personally saw to it any patrons so rowdy were permanently banned if it were his establishment. As it stood he had some vengeance of his own to exact on the three who had ruined
the wall and his evening of blissful solitude.

"Any money owed to you tonight will be doubled," he added smoothly. He could sense all the women still on their side of the springs, observing.

Her husband swallowed, tilting his head to stare out at the hot springs. "That's very generous of you."

"Lord Tobirama, we...understand." his wife winced. "Well, partially. We trust your word. A-And this way," she spread her arms and waved them around. "It lets us see what our springs would look like without a wall. To put a more positive outlook on things. We'd been considering something like it."

"Yes, mixed bathing." The middle-aged man finished with a sigh.

The Senju just barely withheld the tick in his eye. "Mixed...bathing?"

"It means in the future it won't just be the water getting hot!" The insufferable Uchiha woman called out for all to hear.

Tobirama glowered in her direction, or at least he meant to. But his eyes happened to land on Haruno as she tugged at her crooked towel. The knot had slipped free, and he was treated to the pale, perky mound of her breast from a side angle as she resituated herself with an embarrassed yelp. His head had never swiveled around fast enough for his jaw to crack before that moment. "As I said," he went on through clenched teeth. "You'll be well compensated for any inconvenience this causes you."

Fast as an irate snake, his hand snapped out to clench the sake bottle in the Yuhi's lax grip. He pulled it away without resistance. Tobirama wasn't as fond of drink as his brother, but he had more than earned it now.

Chapter End Notes

Originally, I had thought to have Sakura's scene open the chapter and then jump straight into the chaos of the hot springs for the rest of the chapter. However, given where the Uchiha brothers left off last time I also felt it was really important to have a scene from Izuna's POV to better explain his headspace. Otherwise both Uchiha brothers turning up at the hot springs either magically reconciled or awkwardly pretending after Izuna going a bit crazy, would have been weird and disingenuous. Not to mention a wasted opportunity to reflect on their brotherhood. It also gave me a good chance to have Junji and Izuna talk again. I think they could come to grow a solid friendship and potentially have a lot in common. Just like Sakura is developing new deep friendships that have nothing to do with the guys, I feel it's only fair if the guys all get chances to interact with and become close to people other than Sakura and each other. Much better that way.

This was supposed to be an experimentally risqué chapter with more adult humor. Just seeing how it goes and if I felt good about writing it. Things got...aired...quite literally all around. Sakura has now seen what she's in for. Oh boy.
Yurine's comment about being an honest woman is one that may not cross over well as I'm not sure about its cultural origins, but it's a reference to the fact that in time's past, it was considered proper to marry a woman if you'd already had a committed sexual relationship with her, to keep her "honest" and spare her the humiliation of being unwed and known for having had sex… Yurine is both a romantic and intensely dramatic, so she says the first thing that pops into her head although getting flashed is hardly the same thing as her having slept with one of the guys. Imao

The story heads further into the "romance" territory; although it isn't quite there yet, it's nice to see (and in my case write about) romance-related comedy like this. I have the next big 3-4 arcs all planned out, and they're pretty packed full of more surprises, mythology, romance, angst, adventure and so on. That's already required a lot of rough planning ahead and I can't be sure how long each arc will be but beyond that I'll see. I can't believe it but this fic is steadily plodding toward 40 chapters.

Lastly, I just want to remind once again (I feel like I say this a lot between here and my blog) that the best way to show appreciation is simple: just review. It's really common courtesy in the world of fanfics. I know people are busy and sometimes they can't read for a while, and I totally get that. This is more addressed to readers who read at their leisure but talk themselves into believing there's no real benefit to reviewing for one reason or another. I can assure you that's never the case. There's always benefit. When a writer feels good about the interaction they're getting, it's always easier to find motivation to crank out faster updates or at least start writing the next chapter sooner as opposed to waiting months to do so.

There's already a large amount of disparity between views and reviews. So just something to keep in mind. This is generally applicable to every single chapter of every single story I put out there, not just when I mention it, by the way. Thank you, to those who are always so giving with your comments (and who keep them chapter/plot/arc etc focused especially). You're noticed and appreciated. Anyhow, if you're someone who was really anxious for TobiSaku interactions or more Tobirama development in general (there were a lot of you last I checked), you're definitely going to want to be around for the next major arc. That being said the other three love interests certainly won't be forgotten. Oh, no. More development on all fronts. Sakura's friends in the present also come back in a very big way soon, and there's quite a bit of stirring from restless gods and goddesses.
Esurient

Chapter Summary

In the wake of the hot springs, Sakura deals with some awkward urges, and deep worries come to the surface.

Chapter Notes

Reposted Note from FFN:
Between last chapter and this one, I was informed by a very kind reader that this story had been plagiarized. Again. The copy has since been taken down after a lot of pressuring. However I was very disheartened to find it had been posted since April, and that before this reader brought it to my attention, someone else had mentioned in the story's comments that it was a rip-off. I ask that going forward if you see something, say something. Immediately. About any of my fics. Never assume it's too small. Never assume I'd be annoyed you contacted me or that I may even be okay with stolen work that changes small details around or that too much time has passed. I, and any other fanfic writer I know, wants to be informed when they're being stolen from. It's just a hobby for many of us but it can be as thankless as it is rewarding. I have realized much to my shock recently, I've literally been in the Naruto fandom for half my life now (granted I am not that old) and I've seen the rise and fall of a lot in fandom spaces.

I stay because I've met some fantastic people and because I still want to finish my existing stories but theft and infrequent commenting is not how you keep content creators around. It's how you lose them. It's getting tiring to address this every six to eight months when a new case of theft of one of my fics crops up. If you love it so much then read and comment, maybe give me a shout-out to others you think would also enjoy it, but for the love of the gods don't just…take and assume I'd be okay with it. And please don't just passively say something to a copycat but not bring it to my attention if you see they have no intention of taking the story down.

Moving on…

Thank you for all the feedback last chapter and the positive responses. Not only was it just really pleasing (honestly some of you had long comments that absolutely made my night) but it gave me confidence in writing material that reflects the upped rating. That was really only a taste of what could be to come, and it can certainly get a lot…steamier. XD But we'll see. No need to get ahead of myself.

Also, thank you to the one reader that complimented my use of chapter titles. I've been waiting all this time for someone to notice the effort I put into choosing them! Each and every chapter is named carefully and tied directly to the contents therein, or themed appropriately. Sometimes there are even double meanings, in case anyone was wondering.
The air was chilled and stuffy, nothing but cool death creeping down through the thick stone walls. The stray water droplet occasionally slipped from stalagmite over their heads as they traversed further down, multiple footsteps meeting the slippery steps. Konoha had definitely spared every expense to keep prisoners as uncomfortable as possible.

Sasuke's dark eyes moved to the shadows behind his splashed on the wall. There were some among the village elite that would have him spend his days here instead of allowing him to come and go as he wanted. But Naruto was never one to sit back without meddling, and secretly, he was grateful this time.

"Watch your step, milady," One of the Hokage's escorts said, his voice echoing in the cavernous space. "You'll find the ground gets even slicker and more uneven the further down we go."

"The warning's appreciated, but," Tsunade sighed, "I've split a battlefield or two in my day. I should manage."

The party had arrived at the lowest cell block, apprehension high. A prison guard took the lead with the Hokage following behind and Sasuke at her side. Karin, who had been uncharacteristically silent up until then, dashed forward, her arm brushing his. "Are you holding up alright, Sasuke?"

"Fine."

"Well I never expected Konoha to have a facility like this." Her head swiveled around, glancing at the scattered prisoners who leered out at them from behind the small windows in their cell doors. Once they had caught sight of the Hokage, a few became rowdy, calling out threats or demanding release, but the group didn't spare them another glance. "Makes the one they took me to for interrogation look downright cheery." she scoffed.

"You should be used to this, shouldn't you?" It likely came out more callous than intended, and Karin grew silent.

They had nearly reached the end of the block before she responded. "The thing is you never really get used to this environment. You just tell yourself you do."

"This is it."

"Open the door," The Hokage snapped, impatient. The guards scrambled to obey and the heavy metal swung back with a rusty scrape. Inside the small, dark cell was as cold and musty as the rest of the prison. A solitary figure sat hunched inside, long black hair covering nearly his entire face. Sasuke took a moment to observe how pitiful he was, a hollow cough in his ears as the man straightened.

"Ah," the voice rasped, "The Leaf finally shows some hospitality. Visitors, eh? How very sentimental to see not only a dear old friend, but my favorite student and one of my greatest experiments."

Karin glowered, clenching Sasuke's arm protectively. He let her be, knowing she had to be fully aware just who of the three of them required the most protecting.

"Don't get used to it." Tsunade said, holding out the scroll in her manicured hand. "Does this look familiar?"
Orochimaru lifted his gaunt face. Narrow gold eyes focused in on the sealed scroll Sasuke had personally retrieved. His ashen skin was so unhealthy in the dim lighting of the cell, even with the First Hokage's DNA in the body he'd possessed, he was a breathing corpse. The interrogation masters of T&I had no doubt relished having one of the village's oldest enemies to work over. Prison had not been good to the sanin.

Whisked away shortly after the battle along with Kabuto, it was only recently Sasuke had learned that the once proud snake sanin was even alive. If the half-life he was granted could be considered any sort of life. "That old thing? Why, Sasuke, wherever did you find it?"

"Exactly where you keep all your other half-finished, dangerous schemes." Karin retorted, her eyes no doubt burning with venom.

"I take it this is no coincidence?" he clicked his tongue. "No one ever stops by to say hello. No," Gold eyes shined keenly. "This isss…a request?"

"Call it a demand." Tsunade corrected. "You've got nothing better to do, and holding off on your execution this long has been contingent upon you helping us cycle through as much of your research as possible." Sasuke admired the way she didn't beat around the bush.

"My, my Tsunade…no warmth at all for an old friend." He sighed, feigning disappointment. "Though I should have known better when you did this to me." He lifted a bony arm, pushing his sleeve aside with some effort due to the cuffs biting into his wrists, and showed them a rectangular seal branded into the underside of his forearm.

"You always did love to leave your mark." Tsunade mocked. "Ironic, I guess." Rolling her deceptively dainty shoulders, she moved on, "Onto business. Under close supervision you will finish that jutsu, at all costs, no later than the end of the month."

"Hm," Orochimaru craned his neck in thought. "That's an incredibly complicated jutsu based upon a theory not even I completely understand. Scraps I gathered from here and there across the globe in my travels." Smirking, he licked at his fangs. "This is about your apprentice, no? Sakura, was it? Desperation is a lovely shade on you, Tsunade."

Unamused, Sasuke's strike was swift, his arm pressing hard into his former master's windpipe. "Can you do it? Or should I cut you down here?"

Wheezing, his eyes rolled down, eeyeing the arm guard settled against his throat. "The pupil...has finally...become the masss-ter..." He lifted a hand to clutch Sasuke's sleeve with a slack grip. "I trust...I'll have the...proper accommodations?"

"Whatever you need." Tsunade's tone was curt. "For the time being."

"K-Ka-Kabu..."

"We'll get you your pet," Karin grumbled. "But this had better work. I'd hate to be you once these Konoha folks get their hands on you if it doesn't."

Feeling satisfied the negotiations were complete, Sasuke let up. "He's on borrowed time either way."

The empty cups were piling up, though she tried to organize them into some semblance of neatness. Faintly, something sounded off in her brain, telling her perhaps she'd indulged enough, that she would regret it later.
Sakura sucked her sticky fingers clean and looked down into the shiny jelly of the half-eaten anmitsu, and she couldn't for the life of her figure how this could be so wrong, when it made her feel so good.

Besides, the alternative was really...just as bad, if not worse, for her health. She rubbed her thighs together and bit her lip, remembering like she'd been remembering for the past few nights. 'Shishou...' she mentally whined. 'Shishou, I...I'm sorry!' And she shoveled in another bite of her favorite comfort food.

It was the dead of winter, and more than once she'd woken up flustered and in a cold sweat, tangled in the sheets of her futon and gasping desperately for breath. The details of her dreams may have been blessedly fuzzy, but Sakura didn't need them to know that this time, it was very different from when she had been visited in her sleep by thoughts of destruction. The only imminent threat she was facing now, was the havoc being wreaked on her poor, unprepared body.

Blood rushed hot in her veins, keeping what felt like a near permanent flush on her face, all the way down her neck. The combination of heat and cold made her feel miserable, and she'd barely been out of her house in the last handful of days. The odds of seeing one of them was entirely too high. The only thing pushing her from the security of her dwelling was the need for food and some fresh air.

Sakura took the most optimal paths to where she needed to be every single time, choosing hours when she knew they were least likely to be in the same places. She got what she needed and she booked it back.

Was it pitiful? Yes. Could she keep it up forever? Absolutely not. But, she reminded herself, she didn't have to. Just long enough for the embarrassment to blow over. How could she look the Hokage (shishou's grandfather) in the eyes, when she'd seen—shamefully maybe even ogled—the most intimate part of him?

Sakura huffed, picking up the pace of her sweet consumption. Usamaro watched her curiously from across the table. He bent to sniff at a mostly empty cup, his eyes closed in inspection as he licked it several times. "What was I supposed to do?" she asked. "It was right there. It...It was so big!" She tossed her spoon down and smacked herself in the forehead.

'Oh, no!'"

Just like that her mind took her back to the hot springs, letting her relive her out of body experience in vividly colored detail. It wasn't as if seeing a shirtless man was anything new, but if she'd thought sleeping between the Uchiha brothers on the return to the mainland was bad for her heart, seeing all of them soaking wet had been near-pulmonary arrest inducing. Then, Lord Hokage had climbed from the water and Sakura didn't need a machine to know her heart flat-lined.

Every time she'd viewed male genitalia it had been from the pages of a textbook or during a full body exam, in which case her mind had been clear and focused on her duty. Nothing felt anything less than strictly clinical—to feel otherwise during those moments would have made her a terrible medic.

But in such a setting there was nothing to keep her mind from noticing, in a less than professional fashion, that the penis she was viewing had a distracting vein leading almost to the head. No medical facts to draw her attention from the vague thought she'd had that closing one hand completely around it would have been hard. That...that it was hard, beaded in water like the rest of him.
Sakura choked, patting her hand to her chest and shaking her head vehemently. She would not go down the path of no return. She refused! Each of them had been attractive in their own ways. The years of battle that had produced men with toned muscles quite evident.

Acknowledging that in the privacy of her own head meant nothing. She hadn't even been the only one looking! Naoko was leering harder than her. And, Sakura wasn't positive, was sure she must have been kidding herself, but at times she swore their eyes zeroed in on her, too.

The moment when her towel's knot had come loose and her breasts had been exposed to the cold night air for those agonizingly long seconds, she was thinking Tobirama had seen, though he turned away just as quickly. The thought that he of all people would view her as a woman was probably the most ludicrous.

Nevertheless, the heat rushing down to pool between her legs hadn't really abated, and until it did, Sakura was avoiding anyone who could be directly responsible for making it worse.

So what if Ino would have laughed at her, urged her to just take care of it and get it over with. Maybe urged her to find someone to do that for her. A shudder prickled along her spine. It was out of the question, anyway.

She wasn't from this time. She couldn't afford to...to find someone, even if it was a one-time arrangement. That wasn't how she saw it happening, more to the point. The fact that the images kept playing in her head for so long made her feel guilty enough. These weren't ordinary men, and one in particular would go on not only to be a legend, but to have a granddaughter who was a legend in her own right. Even young, unmarried and handsome, Sakura felt the self-loathing creeping in.

Whether or not finding the bottom of a dessert bowl made her feel better or not, it was the route she was going with. The one that could scratch the itch was too turbulent. Troubled waters.

Ignoring the slight grumbles of complaint starting to arise from her stomach, Sakura lazily lifted another bit of anmitsu to her mouth. Let the spoon sit on her tongue, in no rush to pull it out. Someone knocked loudly on her front door, and she figured it might be Toka, maybe Yurine.

Both had been by to see her, to rant their own feelings about what had happened the other night. Toka apologized profusely, vowing to punish everyone involved in ruining what was supposed to be their stress-free evening.

Sakura had told her there was no need. Honestly, she wasn't sure how much the Senju was listening.

Untucking her legs from under the table, she got up with a stretch, debating on whether or not she was in any state for company.

Her hair might've been a little on the tangled side since she hadn't done much with it after rolling out of bed. But she was bathed and dressed and if Toka or Yurine could see her nearly bare, they could see her with some anmitsu smudged around her mouth.

Usamaro sprang from the table once he saw her on the move, anxious to beat her to greet the new arrival. Sakura scooped up her bowl on the way past, logically knowing she didn't need more but still wanting to have a few more bites.

She barely blinked as she opened the door, raising her hand in greeting and then taking in the sight of people she least expected or wanted to see standing anxiously in the frame. Eyes bulging out of
her head, the spoon dropped from her mouth and, heart thudding, she closed the door with a slam harder than intended.

'This...this is really going too far!' She'd never imagined that after everything she'd tackled, this would be what she finally lost her sanity to.

"No...No one's there..." she rubbed at her eye and pulled the door open more carefully. Contrary to what she had told herself, people were there. Sakura sputtered incoherently and shut the door again. Usamaro looked up at her and hissed quietly, apparently tired of almost having the wood shut on his whiskers each time he poked his head out.

Sakura really couldn't be bothered with her cat's feelings when she was experiencing a personal crisis. Sliding down the sturdy wood, she sank to the floor and set the bowl aside. Usamaro nudged hard at her cheek, but when she didn't flinch he went chasing after what was left of her anmitsu.

'Why are they here?! I went two days without seeing them. Oh, but today is...' she racked her brain to make sure this was the correct date. It was. Normally today would be her weekly check-in on Madara. No matter how awkward that situation still was, she'd made a commitment as a med nin.

But Sakura tended to go in the early evenings, and it was barely lunch time, never mind sundown. Plus, Madara hadn't been on the other side of that door. In this case, that would have been her preferred visitor if she had to see any of them.

A lighter knock above her head had her craning her neck back. "Is this...is this a bad time?" Izuna's voice asked, unsure.

Naoko's laugh followed. "It seems like the two of you are a bit of an unwelcome sight." The woman's usual easy manner took some of the edge off. With her ear so close to the door, it sounded like she'd added at a whisper, "On the other hand maybe you're both too welcome of a sight..."

"H-Hold..." Sakura paused at the squeak in her voice, clearing her throat. "Hold on," she said more clearly, pushing her way up on shaky knees and then pressing her body flat against the wood. A few steadying breaths and she was as ready as she would ever be.

Stepping back, she opened the door again. Naoko rested most of her weight against one side, cocking her hip with a smirk. Izuna's face was openly concerned. And Hashi—Lord Hokage peered up at her anxiously, not meeting her eyes with a wide smile as he normally would. "Fine day for a visit," Naoko said.

Sakura swallowed, bobbing her head without really listening. What the three of them could be doing here, together, still alluded her, but she'd already slammed the door on them twice. Three times might just make it personal. "Do you want to come in?" she asked, feeling a little braver.

"I will," Naoko immediately trotted forward, brushing by as she fluffed out her hair and stepped inside. "Boys?" she called, quirking a brow.

It was funny the way Izuna and Hashirama both fumbled, apologizing under their breath to each other as they tried to enter at the same time. With some maneuvering and a few more apologies both men got in, and Sakura let the door swing closed more gently than the previous times.

Stepping back, she allowed them to get their bearings. Naoko surveyed the table, still littered with cleared bowls, nodding to herself. "Impressive."

"Ah," Sakura's cheeks heated. She toed away the bowl she'd sat on the floor. "It's...well it's been so cold, and anmitsu is my favorite, so I—" It sounded lame even to her ears but not one of them
said anything about it. "It's a mess, sorry, but come sit down if you want to."

"Thank you," Izuna found a cushion and plopped down at her table as if he were oblivious to the mess around him. Usamaro immediately dashed over, his whole body vibrating with impressive force as he rubbed his head under Izuna's chin.

Sakura wanted to smile, in spite of her own conflicted feelings. It was nice to see the love affair between man and cat was still going strong. "Nice to see you too, Usamaro," Izuna indulged the cat's quest for attention, cupping his little face in the palm of his hand.

Hashirama, tall and broad and in a very thick kimono, sat down carefully, glancing over as Usamaro and Izuna got reacquainted.

Naoko flopped comfortably, perching her elbows on the table. "You know I've never been over," her eyes leapt around at the otherwise neat little space.

"Sorry about that," Sakura mumbled. "I've been a little under the weather the last few days."

"Are you alright?" Hashirama stared at her with deep brown eyes, and for just a second she forgot that her table was in its current state because she couldn't stop imagining him and his brother and the two Uchiha undressed. "Sakura-san if you're unwell, you should be resting." His frown became stern. "Even being a medic, you shouldn't take your health for granted."

She lowered her head, feeling guiltier. He was kind enough to worry…

"He's right," Izuna spoke up. Usamaro had migrated to his shoulders and was quite comfortable there. "We've probably been making you feel put upon lately. You've been seeing to Madara's recovery and Hashirama told me about how you helped the Senju last week as well. I'm sorry that we—"

"No," She shook her hands frantically. "It was nothing serious, and I'm completely fine now." She pasted on a smile Kakashi-sensei would have been proud of—closed eyes and everything—hoping they bought it. "Did you need my help?"

Naoko's smile was charming, and her eyes were too knowing. "Yes, actually. You see our dear Madara's birthday is days away."

Sakura twitched. This sounded eerily familiar…

"This has been a hard year for him," Izuna continued, staring down at the table. "He normally doesn't care for big celebrations, but we all were talking and thought just this once, it could lift his spirits."

"Oh," Sakura tried to refrain from asking some pressing questions, such as how she played into it.

Naoko had her covered, leaning forward with a bat of her beautiful lashes. "You're being recruited to this party planning committee. Short notice I'm afraid," she winked, "but we're seeking you to fill the last seat. What do you say?"

"I..." she babbled, understanding and lost at the same time, "I...w-why me?"

"Well...very few people understand Madara well." Hashirama sighed. "He's a bit complicated like that..."

Sakura certainly couldn't raise objections there. He'd been throwing her into multiple fits of
frustration and confusion for months.

"We've noticed though, little by little, that you're becoming one of the people who seems capable of dealing with my brother." Izuna chuckled. Sakura scrunched her nose. "He'd probably never ask, but if something like this occurs, I think he'd want you there."

Sakura drew back, looking Izuna in the eyes with skepticism painted clearly on her face. Madara Uchiha, the Madara Uchiha, would want her at his birthday party? That was quite a jump in reasoning, if anyone asked her opinion, but the trio was so sure of themselves already…

"It's like Izuna says," Hashirama smiled softly in her direction. "Madara has an odd way of showing it, I know…but it's clear enough to us." He motioned to himself and the other two.

Sakura mulled that over. Huh. Could the blunt, often ill-timed 'humor' and temperamental behavior really be his way of expressing civility? Despite reassurances, she doubted it.

"I'm not sure I'm convinced, but if you really feel like I could help, it shouldn't be too hard to make time." Sakura put a finger to her lips, thinking. "I'm supposed to still be doing routine check-ups on him anyway." The shaky laugh that bubbled out gave her away.

"Sentimental pleas aside," Naoko said, "Whatever three heads can do, four can do better, no?"

Tucking a lock of hair behind an ear, Sakura breathed out, nodding.

Beaming, the dark-haired woman shot up. "Everyone in agreement? Perfect~" Naoko twirled. "I took the liberty of planning how this day should go."

Izuna shifted, uncomfortable. "We never agreed on putting you in cha—"

"If you ask me," she tapped at her cheek. "Finding the right sort of gift will take up the most time." Usamaro stopped playing with Izuna's ponytail long enough to crane his head after her. "When you've finished up in here, meet me outside and we'll get started." Flicking some hair over her shoulder, she left with a confident strut.

"Vivacious as always," Hashirama grinned.

"Right," Izuna rolled his eyes, getting to his own feet. The cat jumped down, back onto the table. "That's one word for it."

Sakura played with her fingers, not sure how to navigate the conversation without Naoko as the buffer. She hated herself for being so self-conscious suddenly, wondering if it was all in her head. The men in front of her were either made of steel or had developed a practiced casualness specifically for situations like this. Either way, they were to be envied.

Pushing herself up, Sakura blinked at them, biting one corner of her mouth. "I should go and put on my shoes."

Izuna sighed deeply, staring over his shoulder. "While you do that, I'm going to go and rein Naoko in now, before she gets out of hand later." Usamaro bounded after him with happy trills, but for the time being Sakura let him go. She trusted one of the Uchiha to shoo him back into the house.

Of course, with Izuna making his exit that left her face to face with Hashirama. Not knowing what else to say, she ducked her head. "I'll be right back!" she all but darted down the hall and into her bedroom.
The minute the door was shut she balled her hands into fists and rubbed them none too gently into her eyes. 'What the hell am I supposed to do now?! I should've never agreed to this.' Sakura glared at the wall, approximately where her front room and kitchen would be. 'Sorry Hokage-sama, it looks like this might be a bad day for me after all. Every time I look at you or Izuna I'm going to picture you nak—' 

"Ugh," Sakura wrapped an arm around her mouth and screeched as quietly as she could. "Damn it!" she hissed.

She took her time putting on her shoes, straightened out her futon and moved it into a patch of sunlight streaming through her window, and checked to make sure nothing Usamaro could get into while she was gone was left lying about.

When she absolutely couldn't find anything else to stall over, she grudgingly made her way to meet the others.

Hashirama stepped back, admiring the speed at which he'd managed to tidy up Sakura's kitchen. 'And Tobirama says I can't get anything done,' he smirked. A little of the self confidence fell away as he thought of the pink-haired woman and how obviously anxious she'd been around them from the moment they'd stepped into her house.

They had all been worried, he knew. Two days wasn't a long time, and he'd gone longer than two days without really seeing her since she'd appeared in the village. But this time was different. Two days was more than long enough to figure out when he was being avoided. And he wasn't the only one.

Toka was still cold toward him, muttering under her breath and shooting him nasty looks. He had nightmares about finding senbon in tender places that severely reduced the chances of the Mokuton being passed on. Right now, he was…keeping his distance from Toka, but he knew she'd been by several times to see Sakura.

Reira would ask about the visits and she'd coolly mention that Sakura had been keeping different hours of late. Figuring out why didn't take the "less than two brain cells" Tobirama swore he didn't have.

It stung, imagining whatever friendship had slowly been sprouting was quashed in the early stages. Hashirama couldn't say he blamed her. Getting that up close and personal with someone she was still getting to know might have been too awkward to overcome.

Embarrassing as it was, it also wasn't the first time he'd been compromised. Only the first time with those outside his immediate family. That likely meant the way he was able to brush aside a great deal of his own humiliation wasn't how others would handle it. It definitely wasn't how Sakura was handling it.

For over a month the plan had been for he, Izuna and Naoko to throw Madara a celebration even he could enjoy. Then, last minutely Naoko had cheerfully suggested asking Sakura if she'd accompany them. Neither Izuna nor he expected her to say yes. Surprisingly, though, she had. But the discomfort on her face was plain to see, and knowing he was largely responsible made it all the worse.

Hashirama sat down at her table and traced a finger around an empty bowl that still clung to the sweet scent of the treat that had been in it. 'For a petite woman she didn't have any trouble eating her fill.' The revelation of Sakura's enormous sweet tooth was both unexpected but fitting. He
Slumping forward in defeat, Hashirama rested his chin on the table. *'How do I fix this? It's horrifying enough to not know if or when Toka will come charging at me...'*

Stewing over not so obvious solutions was how she found him. Sakura came poking her head around the corner like a young rabbit deciding whether or not to leave her warren.

Hashirama sat up to give her the same smile he'd given Mei-san as a child when he wanted her to believe he'd be on his best behavior. Sakura blinked slowly, frowned a little, seemed to calm herself, and stepped forward. "Sorry about the wait. Oh," She had noticed his hasty tidying, and her pink mouth popped open. "You...you didn't have to, but thank you."

He stood to his full height, a head above her. "Don't mention it," he assured her. "Tobirama's harping on me about being organized constantly. Last minute cleaning up is how I tend to compromise with him."

Her shoulders loosened, if only just. "I'm guessing he wasn't exactly impressed by the state it was in after we finished repotting your bonsai."

"No, no," Hashirama rubbed his neck. "I mean at the time he wasn't pleased. I got an earful about not respecting the 'dignity of a space meant for governing'." He decided against telling her that his reaction to the smell of the mulch was pretty similar to how hers had initially been.

Sakura cracked a smile, and his optimism soared. An opening presenting itself! Maybe finding his way back into her good graces wouldn't be as complicated as originally thought. "He hasn't found anything new to scold you over since then?"

Hashirama flinched involuntarily. "He's not...speaking to me actually." If Toka's mood had been an unpredictable storm on the horizon, Tobirama's was an all-out blizzard. An angry sensor-type was **disturbing** when they committed to being as frosty as Tobirama had been.

Hashirama had lost track of the number of times he'd walked into a seemingly empty room, not feeling the presence of a single soul. Only to have Tobirama burst into existence behind him, slamming a stack of paperwork down under his nose and wearing a face that was oh so transparent. Hashirama could see at least ten different ways his brother wished he'd die just by looking into those chilling red eyes.

It was the same reason so few people outside their parents and Mei-san had wanted to handle Tobirama as a baby. At one point there'd been talks of calling in a priest to examine the sullen infant, which ultimately were firmly dismissed.

Sakura cocked her head. "Are you going to be alright?" She had to have seen the fleeting glimpse of fear in his eyes. "He'll come around...won't he?"

"Sure," he stated, not wanting to worry her with the complications of his family troubles. "But we've kept them long enough for Naoko to have dashed off. If they're still outside, we can join them."

Sakura clasped her hands in front of her. "Alright," She moved to walk around him, dressed in a brilliant pea green kimono edged in white. Unthinkingly, he caught her arm, gently spinning her to face him.

A gasp passed her lips as her eyes darted up to his questioningly. Hashirama's thumb caught the corner of her mouth, wiping at a smear of syrup leftover from her plentiful helpings of anmitsu. It...
had been so natural in his mind. Made more sense in his thoughts.

Retrospect wasn't usually gracious to him anyway. The soft skin under the pad of his finger felt the way he'd briefly thought it would that night. Because in that wet, clinging towel he'd seen her smooth shoulders and her legs and nearly more of her bust than most women he knew would be comfortable showing a man who wasn't their lover. The path of sensation that recollection took him down wasn't one he needed to travel. Not here. Not now.

They drew apart almost faster than two evenly matched shinobi on the battlefield.

"Sakura-san, I'm sorry…"

"Did I really have food on my face this whole time?!"

After an abrupt pause, Hashirama saw the bright smile curling onto his face mirrored on hers, and before either knew it they were sharing friendly laughter.

When she allowed herself to forget about the formalities she felt he was due because of his station, he found they got along well.

"You know if we don't hurry they really will leave us behind." She pointed a thumb at the door, visibly more relaxed. "Naoko seemed like she had a full day planned."

"Izuna has had…varying degrees of success keeping her at least semi-subdued so far."

Hashirama hadn't met Madara's then-intended bride until they were teenagers. In the middle of a particularly chaotic battle a quick, beautiful girl with wildfire in her eyes had nearly poked her spear through his neck.

And then pleasantly introduced herself as Naoko, complimenting him on surviving her frontal assault. It wasn't until later when he would learn the girl, two years his senior, was to be Madara's wife one day. By now, he was well adjusted not only to the destructive style she preferred in a fight, but the spontaneity radiated from the depths of her very being.

"It's not the length of the day we should be worried about," he said breezily. "It's Naoko's penchant for cramming as much mayhem into a limited amount of hours as possible."

"I saw the look in her eyes," Sakura informed him, opening the front door. "I was already worried about that."

Sakura blinked rapidly as she stepped into the sunlight, Hashirama's much larger frame at her back. For a winter day it wasn't as cold and dreary as she'd been expecting, and that meant more people were likely to be out. Thankfully, Izuna and Naoko were standing nearby, although by their expressions they'd been in a heated discussion.

Izuna turned away after a sharp hiss of words and a heated glare. Naoko didn't exactly look pleased, stubbornly holding a disgruntled pout.

Tension had only just broken with the Hokage. She didn't even want to imagine whatever  that was about. "Have you thought of any leads?" Sakura asked innocently. Both Uchiha snapped to attention, putting away whatever had them displeased impressively fast.

"It goes without saying he needs no new weaponry." Naoko placed a hand to her hip.
"There's nothing that could ever replace his gunbai, is there?" Hashirama mused. "In tandem with the kama of course."

Sakura wondered why none of them appeared fazed by the attention they were receiving as they walked. She focused on not meeting anyone's eyes, instead staring at her naughty cat, who had decided to follow them around. But eyeing Usamaro's fluffy, cute tail didn't change the fact that she still felt the crowds pressing in.

It was to be expected really, what with the fact that she was walking alongside the village leader and two members of the Uchiha clan, both of them wearing the family crest in plain sight on their clothing. 'And me...plain old Sakura.'

Anxiety crept up like an obnoxious old acquaintance. For half her life she had spent more time around important people than most without a noble lineage could boast. Her friends and teammates, her sensei, now this. Sakura occasionally wrestled with feelings of inferiority, but it had been some time since those old insecurities had paid her a visit. Now suddenly, out in the open with so many strange faces peeking curiously, here she was again.

A woman dragging her child mid-tantrum crossed their path. Unfocused, Sakura lost her balance and stumbled, only for a warm hand to seize her by the bicep and pull her upright. "Careful," Breathless, green eyes met black and she granted Izuna a shaky smile.

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Izuna pulled her around two flustered men who seemed to be arguing, one of them pointing down to a cage he was holding full of pigeons.

The memory of how they'd met on a crowded street shortly after she'd arrived came to mind. Sakura had been lost, anxious, fresh from battle and filthy, but Izuna had smiled warmly at her, and the unexpectedly friendly encounter had been grounding in a way.

Following that train of thought, Izuna had been there for her constantly since then, always willing to do what he could to help. Always a friend. In any small way she could, Sakura wanted to return the favor. Even if that meant helping him give Madara, someone she still wasn't quite sure if she truly liked, a memorable birthday experience.

"Definitely!" Sakura fist pumped, barely suppressing her signature "shannaro!"

"The burst of passion is appreciated." Izuna teased, and Sakura wondered if she'd overdone it. He began to guide her to where she could see Hashirama and Naoko up ahead and waiting. They had no choice but to pause, though. Hashirama was half-surrounded by adoring villagers while Naoko stood off to the side, fully enjoying herself.

"What can I say?" Sakura shrugged, "I'm serious about gift giving." On a case by case basis, but Izuna had no use for that information. "B-Because you know whatever you give someone...when they look at it they'll think of you forever,"

"That's true enough," Izuna spoke above the noise of the street. "My parents hardly ever gave us gifts as children,"

Sakura frowned.

"Well..." he went on, "Not in the traditional sense. Most of what we got were 'character building experiences' as they called them. My brothers and I just thought it was a way to make us do chores and get us to believe we were being rewarded." A small smile touched his full lips. "Regardless, to
this day when I see a fresh block of goat cheese, I remember the year we all had to milk the clan's livestock and my father's face pops into my head. You should see the face Madara makes when he smells fresh goat milk."

Without warning, Sakura let loose a high-pitched laugh that surprised even herself. Cheeks red, she clapped both hands over her mouth. Izuna didn't seem to mind. He looked…relieved.

"So it did make you laugh," his expression softened further. "If that hadn't worked it would've been awkward, I'm not always the best with casual humor."

The thought struck like a direct hit from a rogue jutsu. Izuna had been worried about her since they'd shown up on her doorstep. He was trying to make her feel relaxed, and it was working.

No matter the awkwardness lingering from the hot spring fiasco, or the time before that when she'd been him get carried away and stab his brother through, spending time together felt so right. That in itself was scary.

"Thank you," she spoke at a hush, but the way his lips turned up, she knew he'd heard.

Izuna bumped her with his shoulder gently. "I'd say we should rescue Hashirama but he seems to be enjoying his adoring public if you ask me."

They moved in closer, right up behind the people who had the other two members of their group surrounded, just in time to hear one of the Hokage's boisterous laughs. Sakura had to concur; he definitely looked like he was having fun.

Sunny weather aside the air was still nippy enough to give everyone pink faces and, if they were wearing open-toed sandals, cold toes. Yet no one was bothered by any of that, too busy basking in the light of Hashirama himself. Two children, one small and sitting atop an older boy's shoulders, offered him something pale orange and round. The tall man stooped forward and held out his hand, letting the child gleefully drop a fruit into it.

"A satsuma orange!" Hashirama exclaimed, examining the unbruised skin. "One of my favorites in this season." He took the time to pat both of them on the head fondly, and they ran off through the crowd, giggling.

"He really knows how to make an impact on people," Sakura found herself saying aloud. There was just no end of good will from the villagers toward the Hokage. Really it was only natural. If everyone loathed their leader it would be a sign of an unsure political climate and cause for concern. But again and again, as Sakura had watched Hashirama interacting with others, she'd seen how treasured he was, and how he treasured those around him just as much.

Izuna made a noise of agreement above her head. "Hashirama possesses the kind of spirit that wraps you in its brightness. It's…hard to look at directly, but also hard to resist wanting to be close to."

Sakura canted her head, just watching.

"It's always nice to see the village flourish no matter the season," the brunette was saying. "Take care and stay warm everyone," he waved, politely dismissing himself, and as the crowd of people began to shift and part, she and Izuna rushed forward to get closer.

Naoko had also been quietly observing, but she greeted them with a genuine—if Sakura was learning to read her correctly—smirk. "Welcome back." The way her eyes trailed up and down the both of them made her feel uncomfortable about whatever was running through that head of hers.
"You look much looser. The talk was a success?" she leered.

"Naoko," Izuna glared. "Please stop with the unnecessary amount of innuendo." Catching Sakura's eyes, he added, "We're in broad daylight."

She shrugged, looking as if she wanted to make one of her usual quips, but mercifully thought to spare them. "If we're finished here then I think we should finally get down to business,"

"Me too!" Sakura perked up, not really because she was that enthusiastic about Madara getting the perfect gift so much as she'd do anything to steer conversation away from where it'd been headed, and keep it in safe territory.

Satisfied, Naoko motioned for them to follow her, taking the lead. "First up, let's take a look in the artisan area. The man could do with some new lacquerware."

Sakura let her hands hover above an exquisite tea-ware set, wanting to touch, then thinking better of it and lowering her hands. While she was aware of the craft she hadn't paid a great deal of attention to it before, and she was starting to think that was a real shame. The things they saw as they perused the shop covered floor to ceiling in lacquered items, were quite fascinating.

On several shelves to the immediate right upon entering, there were lacquered animal and religious statues depicting deities. Sakura shied away from the area with a cringe when one of the shop owners happily listed off the gods and goddesses they had made idols of.

Strategically placed around the medium-sized space so that guests could study it without tripping themselves, was lacquered furniture. Rich blue cabinets with shiny handles she suspected were real gold stood proudly on display. There were a variety of accompanying pieces of black lacquered furniture with intricate gold trimming that featured carefully detailed murals across them.

Some of finely dressed people fishing on beautiful red bridges. Some of innocent family meals. A few of colorfully patterned koi or autumn leaves floating across what was clearly a still river.

Each new design impressed Sakura more and more. The prices, however, made her gulp and inch away nervously. She definitely couldn't afford to purchase anything she might accidentally damage with her inhuman strength. There was one piece she couldn't help but touch though, a bar cabinet she thought had to be the best looking of the entire collection. It came up just past her hip, so gold and sparkling it took her breath away. There was a wide rectangular drawer underneath the top, and a vertically split door directly beneath that. Both had a carefully fitted black framing, the tiny curved knobs delicate and silver.

Most eye-catching, was that the top and every side of the furniture featured some different scene. The flat surface featured bamboo so artfully rendered she could nearly smell it. Somehow the thin body of the plant was a distinct enough color of beige to stand out from the gold. The front drawers were covered in pink and white lotuses, appearing as if they'd just bloomed.

To say she was enamored was a small understatement.

"Look at this one, Izuna," Naoko called out. Izuna was staring at a lacquered cat statue with glowing eyes, but reluctantly turned away to go to the older Uchiha.

"Madara collects it, if you can believe that."

Sakura jumped, just a little, as Hashirama popped up beside her. He had a bad habit of doing that,
she'd recognized. Never seemed to think for even a second it was unsettling.

"I can see why," she said honestly. "Everything in here looks like it could be in a daimyo's palace."

"What amazing praise, miss! Thank you!" A blushing woman fanned herself as she rushed by with tools Sakura could only assume were to work on another piece.

Hashirama considered the particular cabinet she'd been admiring. "It's certainly opulent enough."

He considered. "The Senju have a sizable collection too, and it's displayed at different gathering points in the compound."

Sakura didn't speak on that for a moment. Somehow, she often forgot just how wealthy clans such as the Hyuga, Senju and Uchiha were. Growing up alongside children from said clans, she had come to view them as peers and herself as their equal. But, in terms of wealth, their stations were far from the same, and now she had confirmation that generational wealth stretched as far back as the Founders era.

Clearing his throat, he murmured so only she could hear, "I wasn't trying to make you uncomfortable,

And she wholeheartedly believed him. Hashirama had hardly proved to be the type to flaunt that above others. He was a Hokage of the people, after all.

"I guess I was just thinking about how amazing it is that large clans accrue so much wealth and pass it on through generations." she replied, looking him in the eye so he knew she wasn't upset. "I still don't really know a lot of things about how clans actually operate internally, and the acquisition of money is one of those things." She shifted nervously from one foot to the other, worried he might find her too nosy.

Instead he smiled, a thoughtful glint in his deep eyes. "That's a lengthier story than I could tell in a lacquerware shop. Toka might explain it better. I'm told the only concern I seem to have with money is how I can gamble it away."

Sakura's heart stuttered, reminded of the strange story she'd been told during her last visit to the Senju compound.

Hashirama read her expression and pouted, "I always win it back twofold." Sakura quirked her brow, amused. If that were true and his luck was infinitely better than her shishou's, then how would he feel about knowing he had a descendent known in gambling circles as the Legendary Sucker?

Before she could inquire a little more about that hobby of his, they heard steadily rising voices that had them both turning in concern.

"Absolutely not," Izuna said flatly. Naoko was holding a very intimidating mask out in front of her, showing it to him.

Sakura shivered. It was the traditionally ugly face of a demon, wide crazed eyes, sharp teeth, drooping ears and wicked tusks. Stony silver instead of the ordinary fierce red though.

"This would hang well over the mantle, you have to admit that much." Naoko narrowed her eyes and dared him to disagree.

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"There must be hundreds of things to choose from here, and you find that to be the most tasteful piece you could pick?" Izuna hissed, waving his hand at the oni face. Peering at the shop owners who were looking on, lost, he offered them a more polite smile. "It's beautiful craftsmanship,
course," he complimented. "Only…”

"No need to explain, son," The older mustachioed man shook his head. "I made the blasted thing and sometimes when I walk in early to open up shop and it's still dark out, seeing it scares me senseless."

"I always thought it was sort of handsome," The woman who had passed by with the tools cupped her cheek and tilted her head to stare at the mask head on, "In a morbid sort of way."

"My thoughts exactly," The Uchiha puffed her chest out in pride.

"It's still too hideous to display above the mantle." Izuna drawled. "We'll find something else. Something that doesn't make anyone who looks at it feel like they're in danger of getting dragged to the underworld."

Sakura could feel her palms starting to sweat. Not very long ago they had all been engaged in a fearsome life or death battle with the God of Death. Izuna couldn't have forgotten that any more than she had. Maybe…maybe what Naoko didn't realize was that the memory was all still just a little too fresh? Too close to the surface? She began to wonder if she should speak up in Izuna's defense. But then how much did Naoko know about that mission?

And really, that was assuming her guess was even correct. It could also just have been that, as had been pointed out several times already, it was a very repulsive mask, and looking at it every time one walked into a room would be all the more stomach turning for the realism.

"Tch," Naoko scoffed, only clenching her fingers tighter around the ornate decoration, "Izuna-chan, you're not intimidated by this are you?"

"Not really," he replied. "But all things considered I don't think he'd appreciate the reminder of the sticking face incident."

A glance toward Hashirama gave her the sense that he was just as clueless as she was. Whatever they were referring to was inside information between the two, like a secret. But even if they kept it between themselves, they at least seemed to be over the worst of their arguing.

Naoko's twinkling eyes shone with recognition and she carefully put the mask back where she'd gotten it. "Understandable. The panels then?"

Izuna nodded once, firm. "It should be your present to him."

Sakura watched them go back and forth, noting the dynamics at work. Far from what she'd glimpsed between Naoko and Madara, the relationship she shared with Izuna appeared much less…complicated. More than anything the two reminded her of siblings, sometimes mixing well despite their differing personalities, sometimes engaging in heated debate.

Hashirama patted at her shoulder as if he understood exactly how she felt. "They get like this sometimes." he whispered.

"Couldn't help but see it," Sakura sighed. "I feel like we really weren't even needed here."

Hashirama chuckled. "Not this time." He glanced around secretly. Naoko and Izuna were speaking to the shop owners together as if their disagreement had never happened. The kunoichi in particular was making lots of hand gestures while Izuna nodded along with every other word she said.
"You've seen by now how Uchiha can be. They run very hot about nearly everything. Fighting, hobbies, opinions, love… For those two, they formed a bond a long time ago over the person they care about most. And I guess somewhere along the line I was allowed to join in that circle, once they decided I met their standards." he joked. "If I had to speculate I'd say this is you being officially pulled into the fold, Sakura-san."

For all her intelligence, Sakura wasn't sure if she was really comprehending. "F-Fold? You mean like a club?"

Hashirama hummed, mulling it over. "More or less, in an unofficial capacity."

In the way it almost did, the pinkette's brain seized on information that stood out to her. "You said their bond comes from someone they care about most…and someone they think you care about enough to let you be in this 'club' too. That means…"

"Welcome to Team Madara." The Hokage gave her a goofy thumbs up. "Be glad you didn't have to prove yourself through any initiation." The glazed dismay in his eyes told her he was revisiting an uncomfortable place. "That was a bad week…"

Sakura sputtered, then blanched. It was just a further confirmation of what she'd decided months back, or possibly even longer ago than that—the Senju, the Uchiha, all of them were somewhere on the spectrum of certifiably insane.

Daylight was dwindling away when Sakura returned home, pondering over her day. Usamaro brushed at her ankles, meowing persistently. Smiling down at her furry companion, she lifted him into her arms for the cuddling he wanted, walking down her quiet street.

After being dragged from one shop to the next by the trio, and then having Hashirama insist they should stop and recharge with a meal (which ended up being some very satisfying beef and vegetable skewers), Sakura couldn't say she was surprised by how quickly time had passed by.

Naoko had her lacquerware gift, and though he didn't physically buy anything, Izuna said he knew what he was purchasing for his brother, too. Hashirama explained he'd keep brainstorming ideas and get something the next day, and Sakura supposed that meant she'd need to go back out and join them as well.

The ground crunched beneath her feet as her shadow stretched just behind her. Admittedly the whole affair was even stranger than the last time she'd gone gift shopping for a birthday. And call it obligation, but if she was seriously expected to attend the celebration thrown for Madara at the compound, showing up empty handed seemed unacceptable.

Outside her quaint house, Usamaro hopped down from her arms, and Sakura stopped to wave at an elderly couple who lived across from her and seemed to be enjoying the outdoors on their front porch, hands interlocked. She seldom saw her neighbors as busy as she'd been, and part of her felt badly about not being more polite and introducing herself. But there were more important things, such as getting home. Back to her real home.

Palm splayed against the wood of her door, she stiffened, eyes narrowing at the thick, roiling aura she could feel from inside.

Usamaro picked up on her body language, going rigid with sharp feline eyes locked dead ahead. Animals were incredibly perceptive, and her cat proved that again and again. Not wanting to startle her neighbors by bursting into her own home swinging, she bid them one more sweet smile before
casually entering the abode as if nothing was wrong. The second the door shut was another matter, though.

"What do you think you're doing here?!!" She hissed, stabbing a finger in the direction of the Uchiha at her chabudai. By the looks of it, he was right in the middle of a light snack, and the stare he gave her was one of utter boredom.

All the cold and tiredness Sakura had been feeling completely melted away. It was replaced swiftly with bone-deep contempt. Not enough to stir the dragon's fire but plenty enough to make her quake and her chakra crackle.

"The real question," he said, calmly nibbling at the end of a piece of fresh bread that she could tell had come from her own bread box. "Is where have you been? We've had the prior arrangement of you coming to the compound for weeks."

Sakura's spiteful retort died on her tongue when she heard the low, ferocious growl of her cat. He was stalking forward, hair raised and eyes dilated. The yowl was his only warning, and then the cat was charging at Madara with impressive speed, claws out.

Completely unfazed, Madara leaned to the side and the irritated Usamaro flew over his shoulder. Not to be discouraged he was quick to land on his feet and pivot, hissing. Sipping the tea he'd also taken the liberty of fixing himself, Madara eyed the animal lazily. "How fitting that you keep such a savage cat as a pet."

Marching over, shoulders hunched forward and fists balled, Sakura glowered down at her very unwelcome visitor. "You might not remember Usamaro right now but it's obvious he remembers you."

Taking her agitated pet from the floor, she subtly rubbed chakra into his back, hoping to soothe him if only because she didn't feel like explaining to Izuna how Madara lost an eye. It took some hushed whispers and firm rubbing to calm the puffed cat down, but eventually Usamaro had at least put his claws away. "You know it's rude to just barge into someone's house when they're not home and eat their food—is that...is that my Kirin mitsu from Sekai?!

Sakura hadn't even got around to tasting the rare and exotic treat, wanting to put it aside for a special occasion. Now she stared down in mounting anger, noticing the two pieces of bread Madara had were slathered liberally.

Flicking his eyes to follow hers, he took another bite of the stolen food. "It's better than you'd expect coming from a place as backwards as that."

Sakura let Usamaro jump down when she was afraid she would start squeezing him too hard. The cat scuttled to the edge of the room, into the shadows of the corner not touched by the fading natural sunlight with a parting growl in the Uchiha's direction.

She felt like doing some growling of her own. "You shouldn't be here," The urge to flip the entire table was strong. She'd saved enough mission pay to replace it, and the simple tea set she had. Seeing Madara covered in tea and jelly and indignity would be sweet reward enough.

Sighing as if she were just too simple to understand, he rose, coming around the table to look down at her. Sakura half-thought about reaching for her concealed kunai and slashing without warning. "We had a deal. You seemed keen to abandon it today, and I can't leave my recovery to chance. I intend to be fully healed in body and mind by the end of winter."
Still not over the fact that Madara had the audacity to sample her rare jelly before she could, the face she gave him was a sour one. "I visit in the evenings, at my leisure." She spat. Really she'd only been doing the favor for Izuna, who she considered a friend. As she'd told him during their last tense conversation, her feelings toward him were very much undecided. But doing things like this made it easy to remember why she'd been cursing his existence for months. "There was no reason for you to break in."

"Did I truly break in though?" He spread his arms out to the side with a small smirk.

"Yes!" She sputtered, heat rising up in her breast at the casual arrogance of it all. "How can you not see that letting yourself into someone's house when they're not there is wrong!" Sakura couldn't help but stamp her foot to punctuate her point, a scroll falling off the wall.

"You didn't have any special seals to keep out intruders. Any shinobi worth the title could have done the same," he dismissed.

Sakura flushed. She'd only removed her seals because she'd gotten used to this version of the village and come to trust the people, for the most part.

Her neighborhood was peaceful, and she knew that while she was away on missions children like Reira and Kagami and Chisato came and played with Usamaro. She wasn't how adept any of them were at seal-work, so she opted to not bar them entry.

They were reliable children so far and she hadn't come home to anything out of place yet. This, though, was a grown man being impatient who didn't understand the sense of violation entering someone's home without permission brought on.

"It's still not an open invitation." she seethed. "You still should have waited until I came to you."

"When you deviate from the schedule how am I supposed to know if it'll still happen," he accused, somehow managing to look convinced it was all her doing.

"I have a life outside of catering to your every medical need," Feeling defiant, Sakura let her hands settle down on her hips. There was an ember of heat that sparked up in his eyes, but it was gone so fast she could've imagined it.

"Congratulations," Madara sneered, taking his tea from the table again and drinking more. Despite all but chugging it, even that action looked graceful when it came from him. Sakura squeezed her eyes shut tight and then massaged her temple. She didn't want to compliment him in any small way, "You have a life. You've managed to avoid being pitiable by only a small increment."

This was an old song and dance routine they fell into, Sakura acknowledged. The same music and the same steps. She should have been better at not rising to the bait. She wanted to be. But no one she'd met in the past got under her skin the way Madara Uchiha could.

To think, only an hour ago she'd been dragged out because his birthday was coming up. She had been told she was fully recognized as a member of Madara's inner circle. Sakura didn't want that distinction. It came with more problems than benefits. Worst of all, it came with Madara himself. 'Return to sender,' she thought. "Are you really….provoking the person who has access to your internal organs?"

Setting the now empty teacup down, Madara paused thoughtfully, but if she expected he'd ever reflect on his actions and come away apologetic she was sorely mistaken.

"You have access to more than those, Haruno." The ember was back, growing into something
stronger. Sakura swallowed, her skin pebbling as it rose. "As long as you're acting as my medic, my whole body is yours." He snatched up her hand, pressing it to his stomach. "So I expect you to take care of it." The velvety husk of his voice near her ear made her weak in the knees.

She squawked, words not coming out right. Her first instinct was to draw her hand away from the warm, hard muscles that she could feel underneath his shirt. She'd been doing such a good job of forgetting about his role in the state she'd been in after the hot springs.

While she hadn't gotten the eyeful of him she'd seen of the Hokage, water dribbling down pale flesh, the deep navel and the veering lines beneath it…had all been within sight.

Her fingers twitched, and she noticed a distinct lack of wrapping. "The gauze…"

Madara lifted his shirt without hesitation to show her the neatly sewn flesh, without even a sliver of a line where a gruesome injury should have been. "It was Hashirama," he growled. "That pushy bastard managed to heal me after all."

Sakura nodded slowly, bringing her gaze up to his face as soon as possible. "He did good work." She said, hoping he didn't notice the slight crack of her voice. "You shouldn't have any more issues if the Hokage himself treated it." Her eyes dropped to glance at her hands, and she removed the one touching him post-haste. "There's nothing left for me to do. He's incredible."

"Incredible?" Madara repeated, a trace of disbelief in his tone.

"His skills as a medic and his fighting abilities are the stuff of legend." Sakura clamped her mouth shut before she could slip. Madara eyed her strangely. "So I've heard."

For reasons unknown to her, he scowled lightly, his shirt falling back in place as he let it go. "He's a bubbly fool that forces help on others. Stubborn." Staring dead into her face, he made a sound of appraisal. "It makes sense now,"

Sakura could feel her face heating up, knowing she'd been insulted again. But even if it was an insult, he had indirectly compared her to Hashirama, and that wasn't a bad thing in her mind. Getting to know him as the man and not the myth, he wasn't…exactly what she'd been expecting, but that was better. Now, he was human.

Sakura rolled her eyes, and when they landed it was on the spot behind him. Her table. Madara's abandoned plate of bread and jelly sat innocently. The previous mess of bowls she'd had stacked there were gone, something she'd only just noticed.

"I couldn't very well eat in the middle of your mess." he explained. "My skin was crawling at the thought of someone sucking down that much dessert in one sitting." Sakura gasped, offended, when he stared pointedly at her (flat) stomach. "If I wasn't convinced before, that would be ample evidence that you are a touch inhuman. At least as far as appetites go."

"Get out!" She yelled, motioning to the door. "If my eating habits bother you so much, stop showing up unannounced and it won't be a problem." What did he know?! Occasionally she had trouble over indulging in moments of weakness, it was true. But she was a med-nin! If anyone knew the importance of diet and exercise and what the body needed to thrive, it was certainly her.

She preached it to Naruto, and even Kakashi-sensei, often enough. Ironically Sai was the only one who listened to what she told him the first time. Wrangling Team 7's nutrition was neither here nor there, though. Madara Uchiha had some nerve.

"A touchy topic." A mischievous grin curled at his lips. "Fine then, but I still have every reason to
be here." His face slid back into a more stern expression. "You chose to take responsibility for my head injury, or have you developed amnesia of your own?" he goaded.

Sakura's eyes drifted to the top of his head, still covered generously in thick, inky hair that fell down his back in a mane of spikes.

Here and now, with Madara's arrogant taunting and lack of boundaries, he wasn't much different to how he'd been before the fateful twist the mission had taken. Sakura couldn't say she was relieved over the reemergence of this side of him. How things appeared on the surface and how he was still grappling with his missing memories in the recesses of his mind were two different things, and she knew that.

"If you were here because of that, you could've said something way sooner." Finding she no longer had the energy to stand, Sakura plopped down at the chabudai and Madara followed suit. She glared as he reclaimed his (stolen) snack without missing a beat and began chewing.

"It should have been obvious," Madara replied, sucking blue mitsu from his thumb. Static crackled through her head as she took in the care he used licking the digit clean. The weather outside notwithstanding, sweat was gathering at the nape of her neck. Sakura hated this, and she had no one to really vent to about it. Ever since the hot spring disaster it felt like she was hyper-aware of all of them. She couldn't tell if they were as effected as she was or if she was all on her own. She didn't want the answer either way.

"There's no rushing this, Madara," she said, managing a tone of absolute professionalism, if not tinged with just the hint of exasperation. "If you want the truth, it hasn't been very long and you're making solid progress, giving facts. People with your condition can go on for much longer without recovering anything. Sometimes they never do,"

He stopped eating, the air of nonchalance falling away like a silk curtain ripped away. There was a stressed tightness in the troughs beneath his eyes, his lips stilled. So subtly a blink would've missed it, his eyes widened. "What are you suggesting? I'm at the mercy of time? That I may have to accept my memory being in tatters for good?"

Sakura would be lying if she said she didn't feel anything for his predicament. It was Madara, but amnesia had made him vulnerable in a way most people didn't appreciate being. "I'm saying every instance of amnesia I've ever seen has been different, and I'd sleep easier if I didn't make promises about things I have no control over."

He frowned bitterly at her, and she frowned right back. "It doesn't mean we have to stop trying. The exercises I've been doing with you and the ones you do when I'm not there are vital, but slow and steady does it. There's no magic solution. I can't just put my hands on you and heal it."

Again, Madara's eyes flashed. Differently this time, though. Sakura saw an emotion that was far from ambiguous. Hope. It was enough to soften his face considerably. She'd never thought Madara Uchiha could look...innocent. She didn't have time to silently question what had put the optimism in his eyes, because he started speaking with confidence, "It might be out of your power, but not out of a higher power's."

Her mouth fell open a little. "I...didn't take you as the prayerful type."

"Haruno, stop playing naïve." he countered, leaning in. "We've both witnessed incredible events on that island. Your goddess was responsible for partially restoring my memories so that I could join the fight,"
Mizuchi and Madara had shown up to the battle simultaneously. She hadn't put much thought into it then, the heat of the clash already underway. But the simple explanation provided that Mizuchi had just gone in and given him back what he needed to know…could it really have been so simple the entire time?

Sakura sat stunned speechless. "The merit of this idea is clearly coming to you now." The Uchiha appeared a little too smug with himself, all because he'd thought it up first. "I want an audience with your deity."

The finality with which he spoke snapped Sakura from the endless loop her thoughts had spiraled into. "What?" she chuckled, disbelieving.

Mizuchi was hardly as forthcoming to her about answers as she should be half the time. There was always some riddle to work through first, always some argument and prying and frustration. Sakura was almost used to it, the odd rapport she and the dragon goddess had. But Madara was another story.

He was an outsider in that hard-won, tentative bond. She couldn't see the ever-capricious deity giving Madara his memories back because it was a nice thing to do. Not without a struggle. "Hold on a minute. You don't know Mizuchi like I do. She's very particular about what she expects and unpredictable."

"So is Naoko." He shrugged minutely. "And I nearly married her."

Sakura groaned. "Naoko isn't an ancient being who could slaughter a clan in an afternoon!"

Madara took that news about as well as expected, wide-eyed, and Sakura cursed herself. She hadn't told anyone she knew about Mizuchi's destruction of the Kaguya clan. Enough time had passed that she would have thought news would have spread, though. Calming herself, she pinched her nose, then let it go. "I'll...I'll talk to her. By myself first." With his haughty attitude he was liable to approach Mizuchi making demands that wouldn't at all sit well with a temperamental goddess who wasn't above retaliation.

"Regaining my memories could very well affect the future of the Uchiha clan." Madara leaned back, taking another bite of bread. "No pressure."

Sakura glowered. "Are you done?"

"Is my plate cleared?" he retorted. He reached for the next slice, but Sakura had spite-fueled speed on her side and snatched it out from under his nose, cramming as much as possible past her lips.

Madara stared at her unblinkingly as she chewed, cheeks bulging and a smidge of the refreshing, tropical mitsu dribbling from her mouth.

In hindsight, she'd think about the ramifications of eating something he'd already put into his mouth. But he'd already overstayed his welcome and she needed him gone as quickly as possible so she could think with a clear head.

"It is now," she jumped to her feet.

"Well played," he complimented, lazy admiration on his face.

The Uchiha leaned forward until his chest was flat against the wooden surface, in some strange stretch. Seconds later Usamaro soared over his head, claws outstretched and fangs bared, back for a second sneak attack. Landing in the center of the table, the feline hissed viciously.
Sakura wasn't sure if she wanted to save Madara from the maiming Usamaro was intent on delivering, so she watched the man lurch to the side and out of his spot. The spotted cat leapt down into the area he'd vacated, eyes glowing with contempt.

"He's giving you one last warning," Sakura yawned, the events of the day only just catching up to her. "And so am I."

Madara didn't put up the fight she'd half-expected. He took one more survey of her home and nodded in her direction. "Don't take long to deliver, Haruno."

Usamaro meowed loudly, leaping in and out of the smoke Madara disappeared in.

"I think he's really gone this time," Sakura told him, waving a hand in front of her face and bending down to take the discarded plate. She looked at her reflection, dabbing the jelly from her mouth and licking her finger.

Without the fog of infuriation to stop her from experiencing the taste, Sakura realized how delicious it really was. No one touched her sweets and just…got away with it. He owed her.

A vaguely devious idea sparked to life. Celebrations had sweets. She was already an invited guest. If she went and…indulged in as much as she wanted, it wouldn't be in poor taste at all.

Usamaro stared up at her sullenly, claws slowly retracting back into his fluffy paws. The cat's memory was almost as infallible as her own, and there was no doubt he wanted his pound of flesh. If Madara ever returned when Usamaro was around and she wasn't he could probably get the drop on him eventually. The cat was crafty, tenacious, and driven by a large amount of vengeance for a small body. However…The Uchiha coveted their eyes, and their leader losing one to a cat wouldn't bode well, would it?

Sakura pouted. She'd have to do…

"the right thing. 'I definitely have to start using seals again.'"

Given the right motivation, mankind made such interesting choices. The majority of them lived in complete ignorance to the fact that those seemingly innocuous decisions had such powerful ripple effects long past their lifetimes. Mizuchi had watched from imprisonment for millennia as humans made a mess of things, and really that should have convinced her wholly they could never learn. But it only served to make the flawed but fascinating contingent called humanity more entertaining.

Freed from their oppressors, the former slaves built monuments to her, their liberator, over the bones of their captors. She hadn't asked them for devotion. Frankly she hadn't set out with the benevolent goal of saving them in mind. She had wanted the blood of the wicked, and in the wake she left grateful people, in awe of her might and starved for someone to supplicate themselves in front of. That being, Mizuchi thought as she sipped from the goblet her handmaids had offered, became her.

Yes, humans were fascinating. Resilient, but creatures of habit. They gave the Kaguya servitude because it was forced. Hardly expending any effort, she had broken those shackles, only to watch them scramble to bind themselves to her instead. Though she had no use for a following, Mizuchi allowed them. Perhaps that was her own arrogance. Time would tell. But it had been so many long, long centuries since she had true worshippers, and now in a short time they were numbered in the hundreds. It was a small but growing faction. They called themselves…

"You there," She lounged against the throne that had belonged to a now-dead man. With just a languid motion of her hand, the young girl carrying a hardy offering of roasted lamb scrambled
over, dropping to her knees and lifting the tray. "What is it that you call yourselves again? Remind me."

The girl peered up through loose, shining brown curls, smiling shyly. "We are the Covenant of Dragon's Fire. By your flames you allowed each and every one of us to be reborn." Mizuchi rolled her stiffened neck. "You—"

"It's a bit wordy for my tastes," she said, but she really had no further thought on it. She directed all her attention to the meat offered to her. Mizuchi studied it idly, tapping her chin. What deity had first insisted that humans showed proper deference through offerings of food and drink? They had need for neither. At least not what could be found on earth...

They got all the sustenance they needed from the heavenly realm. Human foods were easy to indulge in, though, and they took the edge off. Mizuchi accepted the mutton, ripping into it. Tender, juicy meat rich on her tongue. Dropping what she didn't want, she waved the girl away.

No sooner did she pad away on slipper-clad feet than the connection tugged at her. It started above her navel and then spread across her entire vessel. She was being summoned, and the goddess thought a bit fondly that she never needed three guesses who.

Alone in the quite of the throne room, she held out her hand, made a circle with a finger, and watched the floating form of an eye fill into existence. Through its pupil she saw her progeny waiting out in the forest, by the river where they'd often meet. Anxiety flowed through the connection, but Sakura worried often.

Rising, Mizuchi stepped through with a flutter of her new silken kimono—hand-made by another devoted attendee—rising up in a twist of water from the bed of the river. Sakura fell back, startled, and the deity withheld a smirk. She had grown tired of simply bursting into being from within the portal of the eye. Sadly Sakura didn't appreciate the creativity of her theatrics.

"You could do that all along?" she asked. Glaring, she put a hand on her hip. "Then why've you been using such a creepy method?!" Thinking better of it, Sakura clamped her mouth shut.

Mizuchi watched on in amusement as the pink-haired mortal shook her head. "No, I stand by what I said the first time." Sucking in a deep breath, she continued, "Stop coming through eyeballs if you've got a less disturbing method!"

"I didn't realize it bothered you so," Mizuchi's eyes couldn't help but drift down near her feet, where a basket filled to the prim with ripe fruit sat on the bank. "And this offering is?"

Sakura glanced down, dropping and grabbing up the basket. "I realized I never really left you offerings or anything, and I didn't know what you liked, but…I thought if it was a high enough quality than it should be alright." Mizuchi skated forward, taking the basket from the lightly trembling hands that held them and sifting around in it. There were oranges, persimmons and even half a dozen pears. None of which could have been easy to come by with the weather. Sakura had certainly outdone herself.

"This is no ordinary gathering of fruit," Rubbing her thumb along the delicate skin of a persimmon, she lifted it to study at eye-level.

Lowering her face, Sakura began speaking at a mumble. "It's all out of season so I went to a little farm village that grows exports in glass gardens."

Her sharp teeth pierced the tender skin, a sweet, tangy flavor overflowing from the matured fruit.
"Tricky girl."

Sakura didn't back down, eyes shrewd as Mizuchi devoured one persimmon, then another. "I thought you'd appreciate the effort."

"You are clever, Sakura." Mizuchi began going through the basket, wondering what she should sample next. "Exceptional effort for an exceptional favor…is that not the exchange you were hoping for?"

She nodded, clasping her hands to her chest. "I wanted to come prepared. Ever since that mission, that battle, it's really put a lot in perspective about how dangerous this is getting."

Stepping forward, Mizuchi stretched forth a hand and lifted her face. "I intend to continue to guide you. Your mission is my own after all."

"I appreciate that, because I literally wouldn't even be here if it weren't for you." she reminded. As if Mizuchi could ever forget. She had waited not only for the right time, the strength to choose a human to carry out her goals, but for the right spirit. And peering through the crack of her prison into the mortal realm gave her a glimpse of the state of the world. Sakura's fierce, giving heart was exactly what was needed. "So it might be a little presumptuous of me, but since I'm going along with all this, I figured it'd be okay to ask you something."

Sensing the unease coming from the mortal, Mizuchi dropped her hand from the girl's chin. "Proceed,"

"About what you did for Madara…you said you gave him some of his memories back so he could join the fight. But he still has amnesia," Whether or not she was aware, Sakura's green eyes danced bright with thought after thought. She was carefully choosing each word, trying to coax her toward an outcome that landed in the pinkette's favor.

Her little human was a clever one, always learning and absorbing. "Yes. I gave him back those memories that would make him as formidable as he once was in battle. Nothing more."

"Then you could restore all of the rest?" She queried, out in a rush. Mizuchi felt her fangs scrape her bottom lip as she grinned.

"Is that what this is all for? That proud Uchiha has asked you to appeal to me on his behalf?"

Sakura appeared to be seriously mulling the question over. "A little. But he's also really impatient. He turned up at my house unannounced yesterday," she made a disgruntled face, "It did get me wondering if maybe you could do it."

"I cannot." She said simply.

Sakura gaped, eyes widening, "Just like that? I know it's probably too trivial for you to really put a lot of thought into, but if you do it, Madara would be out of my hair—"

"No." Madara Uchiha didn't deserve someone half as stubborn and kind-hearted as Sakura to help him, Mizuchi decided.

The pain he had caused her directly, further along in the timeline, she had watched from her prison. Sakura had come through time when the flames of that burn hadn't been doused. Seeing him again so soon had only stoked the anger before. Gradually, she was softening, because Sakura's was a
spirit of mercy, even at great cost to herself.

Instead of fighting her, as Mizuchi would have expected, the girl closed her eyes and bit into the flesh of her palm.

"What are you doing?" she asked warmly.

Sakura cracked open only one eye, and it was filled with childish defiance. Unwillingly, she let go of her palm to reply, "I'm going to count down, and if I still feel frustrated when I'm done, I'm just going to dunk my head underwater and scream."

"What an elaborate calming technique,"

"I know when I'm being patronized," Sakura snipped, plopping down on the cold ground. "Why can't you help? What's stopping you this time?"

"Sakura, I can do many things, but each deity has their own unique talents, much like you humans. The mind is entirely too delicate a thing," she sat down facing her. "I suppose I should have put thought into the consequences of only partially restoring certain memories. Of course he would yearn to have them all back. But my powers aren't suited for such a thing. If I were to continue tampering with his head, it's possible I could heal him,"

She gasped, the green of her orbs coming alive. "Or I could damage his mind irreversibly, and there would be no trace of the man you know as Madara Uchiha. There would be no trace of a man at all."

Because she knew her progeny blamed herself enough for some silly reason, she had thought she was being courteous in withholding that information. It hadn't mattered ultimately because she'd found just enough to piece at least Madara's ability to function in battle back together.

"Wait," Sakura looked horrified as the thought dawned on her. "That means when you did it before, you had no idea if it was going to work? You...you could've turned his mind to mush."

Mizuchi wondered when Sakura would stop reacting with such...human naiveté about tough decisions. Never, she supposed. Then, that was what she'd found so endearing about the spunky kunoichi, wasn't it? "I believe war tacticians call it a measured risk. It was an unfair fight, Sakura, and we needed every man."

Sakura placed her face into her palms and moaned. Her fingers split open a fraction, revealing the corner of one eye. "How many more of these unfair fights do I have to go? You...you could've turned his mind to mush."

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"An unfortunate price to pay." Mizuchi wanted to be sympathetic. She understood that by nature mortals were more sentimental than gods. The life of a human was so limited, and their attachments defined them. Deities weren't meant to have such attachments. The bonds one deity formed with another were often so...superficial.

Meeting Kaguya, growing to care for and love the human girl as a sister had shown her how much different it could be. "You understand what is at stake by now, don't you? The others will stop at nothing to rectify what they see as a grave wrong. Actions of the magnitude I'm imagining wouldn't spare those you care about further in time."

Something crumpled, and Mizuchi was sorely reminded of how young she was. Sniffling, Sakura
rubbed a wrist under her eye. "I…I want to go home."

"Home." The word settled on her tongue like a new food with an indescribable flavor. "Of all the concepts humans hold dear, that one may be the most perplexing of all. Home is physical but also transient for you."

Lowering her arm, the pinkette stared with watery eyes. "You're right, it's complicated." Drawing her knees to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them and laid her chin atop them. "I mean sometimes home is a place, somewhere comfortable and safe where you're settled. Like the village. But it's also people, and memories," she paused glumly. "None of this makes sense to you." she stated. "That's why you're asking at all."

"You have a talent for finding what's unspoken."

"Well," Sakura shrugged. "My first teacher was always saying we should look underneath the underneath. Not that it made any sense to me then. The only thing I was trying to see underneath was his stupid mask." Scooting forward, she watched the calm, undoubtedly freezing water of the river.

"This teacher of yours sounds fairly enigmatic."

"Kakashi-sensei definitely kept us at arm's length for a long time," she agreed with a slow nod. "One of my other teammate's too. He was…" She bit her lip, a tell-tale sign of fighting against nerves, "my first crush." Her laugh was slow and tired. "I told him I loved him. I said I'd leave the village if it was for him."

The goddess wasn't sure how they had moved onto such a topic, but Sakura seemed unable to stop herself, and she felt it only fair to allow her these opportunities to speak her mind, when she asked so very much of the young mortal. "Even during the war I asked him if there was any part of him that still thought of me at all. I don't know what I was expecting. I don't even know if I wanted him to say yes. I just had to know. I was so..." Sakura buried her face into her knees and held it there.

Feeling compelled to act, Mizuchi ran her fingers through the pastel hair. It slid through her fingers like silk, never catching. "Why would you wish to return to a time that holds such painful memories? It may take time, but you have it to spare; why not simply find a home here?"

Sakura's head shot up so fast Mizuchi retracted her hand on instinct. "I can't run away and abandon my whole life just because some parts of it hurt!" Her lips were bright from the cold and her nibbling, and her eyes were wild. "And I can't live forever in a time I don't belong to. Who knows what would change! Who knows what's already changed! The Kaguya weren't supposed to be here. Madara wasn't supposed to get amnesia. From what it sounds like Izuna's supposed to be dead." That sentence came out around a considerable lump in her throat and a misty-eyed blink. "So I'll do what I have to in order to get home, but I know I can't stay. That was never part of the agreement."

"It was only a thought." She couldn't understand the ire the girl was feeling. She had been adjusting to her circumstances far better than Mizuchi had initially hoped. "You seem to be forming bonds here, and these changes you've made…who can say that they're bad just because they're new?"

"That's beside the point," Sakura ran a hand down her face. "None of this is normal. Every day it feels like a dream. But it's not. Now the longer I stay the more my old life feels like a dream. What if one day I wake up and think it is? What if everyone I ever knew thinks I was the dream?" Her voice grew quieter, cracking as she gave voice to a fear she had clearly been keeping locked deep in her heart. Speaking it aloud was all it took for the dams to give way, and surprised hiccups
gave way to quiet sobs.

Wordlessly, she gathered Sakura into her arms, ignoring the wetness falling onto her neck. "I assure you, you won't be forgotten so easily. Not your original timeline, and after the impact you've had, not here."

Sakura drew away, her face tracked by shining trails. "B-But how much time is passing? Are months passing there like they are here?"

"If all goes well, time will not matter." Mizuchi soothed. "If it's what you desire, I can grant you the time you've lost to my mission."

"R-Really?" There was so much hope in her fragile voice, it was painful. "So it'll be like I never left."

"Your changes would remain in effect, otherwise all we've done would be for nothing. But, yes...your absence won't be truly felt."

Sakura climbed from her lap, composing herself right then and there. "I can do this." she whispered.

"Yes." Mizuchi encouraged, "You can." Resting a hand in rosy hair again, she let her cool lips touch the center of Sakura's forehead. "In the meanwhile, destiny calls."

Chapter End Notes

Takeaways here: Sakura has been accepted/recruited (against her will) into Madara's inner circle. The Madara Defense Club if you will. Enjoy those benefits as a card-carrying member, Sakura. But all that really means is Madara now feels comfortable enough to break into her house whenever he feels it's necessary.

Also, yes she's incredibly sexually frustrated here but unwilling to do anything about it besides eat her feelings because she's ashamed over it all. In all fairness to her and her conflicted feelings, Sakura has been in the past just under five months. Not really long enough to completely give her heart away to not one but four people, or even be ready to entertain the idea that she could becoming attracted to people she has told herself are off limits. Give it time!

I also want to thank the speculation of why Sakura's a closet pervert that happened on an old forum, because it served as strong inspiration for the angst in this chapter. Aside from Sakura knowing the future and that she doesn't really belong in the time period she finds herself, thus being reluctant to act on any budding attractions...someone also suggested that although played for laughs Sakura often seems embarrassed and upset that she has a libido. She's open with her feelings toward Sasuke in canon but the forum pointed out any moments where she's caught off guard and aroused (like with Naruto's pervy pranks), while meant to be humorous, she seems to be very angry about even feeling that way. And I just found that whole speculation very interesting and built from there. I also am sort of fond of headcanons involving Sakura having a legit sugar addiction. Food addictions can sadly be overlooked, and in a lot of filler material Sakura can be seen overindulging a bit in sweets. Here she sort of...punishes herself by binge eating her favorite comfort food. So in case you haven't guessed it. Yes,
angst ahoy in the future. If you don't think Hashirama and Sakura can be awkward, oblivious, angling dorks together think again. And if you don't think Madara and Sakura could aggressively banter their way into a passionate but healthy relationship one day, you're wrong. XD

In case anyone is curious, the artisan craft of lacquering items is a very ancient and celebrated one coming from Japan. There are a number of different techniques depending on what you're lacquering and if you look up pictures, many things are incredibly gorgeous. Today, the nation of Japan considers some recovered items National Treasures, they're that precious and beautiful. I tried to do them justice with my descriptions. I feel like Madara would appreciate that kind of beauty. Not to mention bigger lacquered pieces ain't cheap so he shows his rich bitch status just a bit by collecting this stuff.

*Madara's birthday may or may not be covered in depth, depending on how long I decide I want next chapter to be...there's already a lot to fit in before the start of next arc.

It should go without saying that in order to keep trying to squeeze out updates while busy I would like to see the reviews keep coming in. I'd prefer not to say it every update, but if I have to I have to: if you're reading this, then don't forget the most important thing on your end is reviewing as often as possible.

I really want to officially start the arc at ch.40. A lot is coming up for me in the next several months, and how inclined I feel to give my free time over to updates depends pretty strongly on how much reader interaction I'm seeing.
Necessity

Chapter Summary

Sakura prepares for yet another hurdle in her journey through the past, but first, burgeoning attractions are brought up.

Chapter Notes

As this "filler" chapter falls right on the cusp of the next arc, I would like to say that quite a bit of important things happen here. Not the least of which being that the building mutual ~chemistry~ continues to be explored. I think it serves as a nice padding considering the intensity coming up in a big way when next arc hits.

Reminder that reviews are the easiest way to keep me crossPosting on this site. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Unlike some of the other activities he had tried, there was instant familiarity being there in the woods with a raptor perched on his gloved arm. Falconry. A favorite hobby of his since childhood, he'd been told. Madara readily believed it.

Deep in the still woods with the cold air nipping at his face and the ground crunching beneath his feet, contentment sank into him. The bird on his arm turned her attention to him, her feathers ruffling in anticipation.

With a few experimental flicks of his wrist he finally thrust his arm up into the air and she flew free with a sharp cry. Izuna and Haruno, both carrying cages containing two more birds, came over to watch her go. She cut through the choppy winter morning with beautiful swoops, liberated and in her element.

"Do you think she'll find anything?" Haruno asked.

Izuna didn't take his eyes off the sky, even as the bird occasionally bobbed out of sight. "Haia's a great hunter, above the average red-tailed hawk. I don't think Madara's raised another bird who has such dead-on precision."

As Madara silently listened to his brother explain about the animal he had apparently raised and bonded with, moments from the past slowly passed through his head.

He had trapped Haia when she was barely more than a fledgling and instantly known she would make an excellent partner. She'd been aggressive in the trap, trying to bite and claw when he'd reached gloved hands to pull her out. Watching her soar through the air reminded him of countless hours spent gaining her trust, of trekking through the woods on day-long hunts and of the primitive bond between a hunter of the air and one bound to the ground. "I remember." He said slowly.

The calmly talking voices grew hushed, Izuna turning excited eyes his way. "You do?" He set
down the cage containing another one of Madara's raptors. Tama the peregrine falcon. The quiver of arrows on his back rattled slightly.

"That was fast." Haruno murmured. Then, she smiled at Izuna. "It looks like your hunch was right."

"When you suggested immersion as a way to jog his memories, I thought that falconry might do the trick." Izuna returned her grin, somehow doing a good job of coming across humble despite clearly basking in the praise.

Keeping one eye on the skies for the cue from Haia, Madara watched the two who had accompanied him on the hunt from his peripheral vision, their easy camaraderie grating.

They were both supposed to be there to support him. Izuna as his brother. Haruno as his ever reluctant but duty-bound medic. Throwing himself into an activity that he enjoyed was a likely way to stimulate old memories without causing undo stress, or so Haruno had said. She claimed she'd come along partially to observe, and yet if she was observing anything, it certainly wasn't him.

"Having you both along is pointless if you're going to be so easily distracted."

Their moment interrupted, they finally managed to tear their eyes away from each other. It was as if they had forgotten he was there up until that point. Engrossed in their own world.

Madara bit back a sigh. Clearly there was something there, possibly something that preluded him losing his memories. And despite what others might feel, he wasn't truly bothered by the notion. It would've been considerate to accommodate his presence by including him, though. The piercing cry of a bird in pursuit of prey shot through them, spurring them into action.

Already high in the treetops, it didn't take long to locate his trusted partner where she flew in circles. A plump winter hare was zigzagging as it attempted to get back to its burrow. Haia wasn't inclined to let it, diving down with talons out, slashing at it once, twice, flipping it onto its back with the third blow and then pinning it down.

Her impressive wingspan was spread as she hunched forward over her catch, waiting. Madara joined his bird on the ground, Izuna and Haruno following his lead. Haia peeked cautiously over her shoulder at them, but didn't release her prey. Its foot twitched, and he could see red on its silvery coat where her talons had caught it.

Crouching next to his raptor, Madara eased a gloved hand underneath the bird to tug the hare out by its back legs, the action like second nature. He trusted the bird not to attack, and she trusted him enough to finally rise and flutter a short distance away.

The hare's glossy eyes were heavily dilated and, with a hand at its neck and a sharp twist, its body went limp. When he raised it up by its nape, Izuna stepped forward in approval. "That's a fat one that'll make a nice stew." He tilted his head in thought, a taunting smirk starting to spread. "You do remember how to skin, don't you?"

"Don't worry about my skills." Madara untied the sack he'd brought along and dropped the fresh kill into it. "The real question is, are the bow and arrow to impress Haruno or do you actually intend to do some hunting of your own?"

At that, Haruno glanced between them, while his brother's smirk only grew. "Is that a challenge, brother?"

"If you take it as one." Madara couldn't say exactly what had come over him, but adrenaline was
pulsing hot through his blood. If Izuna truly wanted to help him recover bits of his memory through the sport of falconry, he may as well be a more active participant.

"I think it should be simple enough to tell who the better huntsman is. All we need to do is see who brings back the most game." Izuna reasoned. "I'll even allow you to use your birds. It would be a shame if they didn't get to participate when we brought them all the way out here."

Madara's eyes narrowed as he saw Tama shuffling restlessly inside his cage. He undid the latch and the young falcon leapt free without hesitation, flying to land on his shoulder. "I suppose I can't object."

His last bird, a young goshawk Izuna had recently gifted him on his birthday, watched the happenings around him curiously. The baby wasn't quite old enough to join the hunting, but he had figured early training was important and brought it along.

"I guess I should watch this little guy. He can't stay in a cage by himself and I'm not participating in this." Haruno stated, kneeling in front of the cage to unhook the latch.

Riku as he'd named him, trilled unsurely, glancing around for immediate dangers and then wobbling forward on clumsy feet. The kunoichi gathered the goshawk hatchling into her bosom and the bird settled quickly. Madara watched, resolving to train it as soon as he found time. He couldn't have a hunting bird spoiled like a house pet.

"Sunset is in a few hours." Izuna noted, staring at the sky through the naked branches of the trees. "That should be plenty of time."

Unable to help himself, he gave his brother a slight sneer. "You'll need all the time you can get if you want any chance to prevail."

Izuna's features were lit with amusement, a light grin slowly gracing his lips. "I don't know about that," he shot Haruno a fond look she seemed to miss as she stroked Riku's downy feathers in wonder. "I'm feeling lucky today."

Although he hadn't been in anyway oblivious before, understanding blasted through Madara now. "Then enjoy your luck while it lasts."

A sound he didn't realize his lips knew how to make left his mouth, and his hunting partners took to the air. He followed them up into the tree tops once more, leaving his brother and the girl they both expressed a keen interest in down on the ground.

She followed Izuna in the opposite direction Madara had taken off in. The sting of the cold watered her eyes slightly, but she never lost sight of the leather quiver of arrows peeking from behind the waterfall of his raven's wing hair as they leapt.

For a while they went on in silence, Izuna seemingly focused on finding a decent spot to begin the hunt, and she with pressing thoughts of her own to occupy her mind.

This friendly but unyielding competition between the brothers…Sakura would much rather see them interacting like this than they had been at the compound on that tense day Madara was injured. Like true brothers.

A dull throb of warmth settled into her chest as she considered the cruel man full of hatred she had seen what felt like a lifetime ago, during the Fourth Shinobi War. Back then she could never see herself willingly spending time with such a monster, as well as the brother she had never known.
he'd had.

But this Madara still had the capacity for emotions she had once deemed him incapable of. Though buried at times behind a veneer of arrogant dominance well befitting his reputation in her world and this one, he wasn't without his softer side, a fact she still grappled with accepting.

With everything at stake, Sakura wasn't sure she could afford to.

Choosing to distract herself, she glanced down at the baby animal in her arms. She had been there when Izuna presented Madara with the little goshawk. Sometime before his brother's birthday, he had left the village briefly in search of a gift and, according to him stumbled on a man selling young raptors that he had suspected were taken from the wild too soon under unscrupulous circumstances.

Generally, from what Izuna told her, falconers trapped and used birds who were already independently hunting. But he'd ended up rescuing the hatchling Madara called Riku.

He was a needy, inquisitive thing with a nature sweet enough to offset the slight ugliness of his patchy appearance from the feathers he hadn't finished growing. As her feet left the ground with every solid jump, Riku stretched his neck and spread his stubby wings as if pretending he was flying under his own power.

Sakura had never given a considerable amount of thought to birds of prey, except that they were highly valuable and reliable animals when a message needed to be sent over a distance. Actually finding them endearing though…well, not so much. Less so after the incident in which Madara's overzealous falcon had attempted to turn Usamaro into its next meal. Riku might be just the raptor to convert her though.

"I'm sorry," Izuna called suddenly from over his shoulder. Sakura's attention was startled off of the hatchling the size of a plump hen, and onto the man she had been quietly following.

Come to think of it, it might have been better if she'd gone after Madara. He was the one she was meant to observe for signs of memory improvement. She hadn't expected the brothers to choose to split up to compete against each other, in her own defense.

Sakura had thought she would be able to stay in the background as they hunted together. Going with Izuna had just…happened. And Madara looked like he was fine with the idea of it just being him and his birds. More than likely he'd have a snide comment about her getting in the way prepared.

Not at all privy to the content of her thoughts, Izuna carried on. "I should have spoken up sooner about where we're headed…but we're approaching the spot I wanted to try first. I don't come out as often as Madara and some of the other hunters in the clan, but I'm confident I'll find just as much if not more than him,"

"You're really getting into this," Sakura chuckled.

Izuna scratched at his head, not bothering to deny it. "I know this was something to help Madara reconnect to his old self, but I guess being out in the woods with the potential of a good winter hunt was bound to stir up some adrenaline."

'I guess even mild-mannered Uchiha are hot-blooded sometimes.' she mused. Izuna had turned around to watch where he was going. Sakura thought of the times when she had caught those glimpses from him. 'That's…good to know.'
If both of them were enjoying this activity then all the better. It was only bound to help in the exercise of immersion therapy. However, seeing the eagerness and instinct with which Madara went about falconry brought her back to something she had thinking of more as of late.

"I don't suppose whatever you're thinking about is something you'd be willing to share?" Izuna asked, his voice closer than before. Sakura whipped her head to the side, finding he had slowed to the space right next to her. She'd hardly noticed! Talk about embarrassing.

Riku wasn't shy about squawking to show he'd been startled, squirming around in her grip. "You noticed?" Sakura mumbled, annoyed by how transparent she seemed to be around him. "Of course you did."

"I'm…sorry?" Izuna tried, clearly confused.

"It's not your fault," she clarified. "It's just that I've been thinking for a while that as Madara grows more comfortable he's more like himself, isn't he? W-Well I think so; you'd know better than me."

"I'd say that's fair," Izuna replied. Both of them had slowed to moving almost idly through the trees, the sense of urgency to their speed nearly gone. "There are still moments where he doesn't respond to things quite like he used to, but he feels more like the brother I've always known every day. But that's a good thing." One of his eyebrows lifted in consideration. "Or have you noticed something that's cause for concern?"

Sakura sucked in a deep breath of winter air for what she was about to explain. "It's not him. His recovery is going fine, maybe even slightly better than expected all things considered. He's frustrated by limitations but that's not unusual. It can't feel right not to know little things about yourself that should come naturally. It's just I was thinking…"

"You were thinking?"

"Maybe we should stop…telling Madara things about himself that aren't true." Sakura worried her bottom lip, her eyes flickering to his. "It was fun at first, but now—"

"I understand," Izuna said. "I've been thinking the same thing. One or two harmless claims are one thing, but I see now how much frustration he's dealing with in all this. We shouldn't try to amuse ourselves at his expense."

Sakura beamed, nodding vigorously. "Right! And, oh!" Her voice dropped as she placed a hand on his arm. "Is that a quail?"

Down below, a plump quail was pecking at the ground, scrounging for food the best it could. Despite bugs being harder to come by with the cold weather, the state of the bird's body made it hard to think it'd missed a meal.

Wordlessly, Izuna crouched, notching an arrow and aiming his bow. Angling it just so, he let it fly, and Sakura hardly had time to track the projectile's path as it lodged itself into the chest of the bird. Izuna grinned her way, starting to make his way to the forest floor. She followed, staring on in wonder as he took out a sack just like the one Madara had placed the hare in, and bagged the quail.

"How'd you do that from so far away?"

The man glanced up from tying the bag, then humbly averted his eyes. "It wasn't that impressive of a shot. And it's nothing like what my mother could do."

"She taught you archery?"
Izuna nodded, huffing a laugh. "Among other hunting and survival skills. She gave Madara his first raptor and taught him the importance of the tradition of falconry. She tried to teach all of us how to be falconers but… Madara took to it the best. I had more of a knack with the bow right from the start, and my… my younger brother Sanna was the best at working with a hunting knife. He usually handled skinning and gutting, because he was the best at not damaging the hides we kept to tan. It's a shame she didn't get the chance to teach the twins…” He stood up with his bow, sack in hand.

Sakura was fascinated, though not at all surprised to hear the late Uchiha matriarch had been such a self-sufficient woman and a skilled huntress to boot. "She sounds so impressive."

"She was. Whether it was politics, sports or fighting, she was never the kind of woman who stood by and let men overshadow her." Interestingly, a faint pink tint colored his defined cheeks, and Sakura wondered if maybe Izuna was getting cold. "I think she would've really approved of you."

Caught off guard, Sakura nearly dropped poor Riku. The chick warbled to express his displeasure. "R-Really, what makes you think so?" she asked.

The Uchiha turned slightly, eyes gazing off in the distance. "It's just… something I feel. You're intelligent, a talented medic, able to deal with Madara's moods, and strong-spirited. That last one especially would've impressed her."

Sakura slowly felt the temperature of her own cheeks rising. She couldn't say why the thought of his deceased mother—who by the sounds of it was her own woman in every way—finding her acceptable was such an internal relief. But if Izuna thought she could've won her approval, then she would take it as high praise.

"Anyway," he continued, "I think maybe we should stay on the lookout for more animals. If time runs out and this is all I've gotten, Madara won't ever let me hear the end of it."

"Sounds like him." He had a very pointed but effective way of rubbing things in that wasn't at all subtle. She bent at the knees, ready to head into the trees so they could continue to the spot Izuna wanted to hunt, but he shook his head. "Here should be far enough. The place I had in mind is only a short walk onwards to the southwest."

So walk they did, mostly in a companionable silence, Izuna occasionally signaling to her to stop when he spotted fresh quarry.

Not everything they came across was hunted, as Izuna was adamant that if the animal was too scrawny to provide ample meat, then ending its life would be pointless.

Sakura found it admirable that he showed that level of consideration and restraint. Two fat ground-squirrels joined the first catch in his bag, impressing her once more that even in the midst of winter, some animals were plump and thriving.

For a while the sporadic weather leading up to the shift in season was cause for concern. Nature had to reestablish its delicate balance somehow, and it had done so just in time.

Sakura found herself thinking of what the weather might be like back home. Back in her own time. It was close to a new year, and she found herself no closer to reuniting with her friends and family than when she’d arrived—although Mizuchi might beg to differ.

As days marched on, and especially as the prospect of facing a brand new year completely isolated from everything and everyone familiar dawned, Sakura felt the niggling sadness that she had
pushed away growing deeper.

It wasn't something she had shared with anyone, not something she felt she could share. Who would understand? Relocating to a "new village" and missing her old one was an understated, half-true summary of her problem. One many villagers could likely sympathize with. No one, Sakura was sure, had been displaced through time though. That was an experience she alone had, and that compounded her loneliness.

So lost in her own head, it took her several moments to realize Izuna was trying to get her attention. "I-It's not what it looks like. I know exactly what you said." It was a bold bluff, and one she knew instantly he could see through.

Izuna held a branch aside for her as she walked by. "I know I'm the one doing the hunting," he sighed, "so this doesn't require your undivided attention, but it feels like sometime during this walk I looked back and only half of you was there."

Sakura choked on a gasp. He was so adapt at reading her, and no matter what he saw, he consistently offered patience and a listening ear. What came next wasn't hard to guess.

"Sakura," he stopped abruptly, "You're entitled to the privacy of your thoughts. But if you're holding it in because you feel like you have to, you know—"

"It's not a big deal," She said in a rush. The concern on his face visibly growing made guilt slam through her chest. "It didn't start as one." Sakura amended quietly. "It's just that a lot's changed for me since I came to the village. It hasn't all been bad. Most of the time it's been...about as good as I could expect it to be, all things considered. I have a home to defend, and connections."

She paused just to see if he was with her so far, and his deep eyes remained attentive so she pushed on. "I-It might sound callous, but I didn't say anything sooner because I didn't think it was something anyone would fully understand."

Her shoulders slouched, the weight of depression and defeat making them tense. Half of her expected Izuna to admonish her, say something along the lines of how it was vain of her to think she was the only one having problems adjusting, when his clan had gone from facing the Senju in mortal combat to living with them as neighbors.

Sakura could feel the heat of him as he moved closer, nothing on his face signaling aggression, passively or otherwise. "Does this have anything to do with Mizuchi and her mission? Is that why you think no one could understand?"

Sakura's pupils blew wide, stepping back to really drink Izuna in. He had gotten as close to the truth as he possibly could have in a single guess. At this point it was fair to entertain the thought that maybe he was secretly tuned in to her emotions on some bizarre level.

"Y-Yes..." she responded timidly. "You could say that."

"I...I can't say I completely understand the situation, but it's reasonable for you to feel that way."

Riku, who had nearly fallen asleep, stared blearily up at them when Sakura hefted him higher under one arm.

The Uchiha's words were so infused with sincerity, Sakura felt supernaturally compelled to tell him more. "I've gotten so many people involved in this who shouldn't have been, including you. And it gets lonely sometimes, y-you know." Her vision became blurry at the edges, but she held firm.
"The new year is only a few days away, and I guess it just hit me that I wasn't dealing with any of this the same time last year." The first tear seized on her moment of weakness, streaking down her cheek before she could stop it.

Gentle fingers swiped it away. "Spend the new year with me."

Sakura stilled, and his touch disappeared as he withdrew his hand. "S-Spend it... with you?" Were things different in this bygone era? She and Ino often daydreamed about the holidays and having significant others to share them with growing up.

Ushering in the new year with Izuna, just the two of them, didn't sound unappealing but it also sounded closer to intimate than she was sure how to feel about.

Izuna gulped audibly as his own words registered, staining his cheeks a violent red. "Spend it with us!" he rectified. "There are... always festivities at the compound on the last night of the year. Fireworks, food and games. This has been a big transitioning year for us too, so everyone's going to be in a really celebratory mood. Naoko might get a little less carried away if you're there." he explained. "I think you're a grounding influence of sorts on her."

Sakura unleashed the breath she'd been holding, understanding slowly penetrating the fog his offer had brought to her mind. Joining the Uchiha clan in celebration, as a guest and a friend. That was... a lot less pressure.

Things hadn't gone as bad as she had imagined when she visited for Madara's birthday. She'd gotten sweet (in the literal sense) revenge, happily partaking in what desserts were served. She'd spoken with Naoko, which was never dull. And she'd had her fill of rich drink, courtesy of the Hokage providing it for the event. Perhaps most significantly, Madara had accepted the obligatory gift she had presented him without much fuss.

The epidote bracelet, a marbled green chain of beads meant to sharpen memory, was slipped onto his wrist without snide remark. The sake had probably addled her memory somewhat, but there was almost, dare she think, silent reverence at the gesture.

So, at the very least she knew she hadn't worn her welcome too thin with the famous clan. Trying to form the appropriate words in response to the thoughtful offer left her at a loss. Izuna opened his mouth as if to assure her she was free to decline, but a sudden pile of snow plopping unceremoniously onto him from above stopped him cold.

It sat in a mound on his hair and dripped down his face. Sakura couldn't contain the shocked giggle in time, peeking up to see a dark flash as Madara streaked by in the branches above them, having dislodged the accumulated snow from one with his movement. "Feel free to concede defeat at any time," he called down.

Izuna shook the powder from his head and wiped a hand down his face. "After that declaration of war you just issued?" he fired back. "Don't you have your own hunting grounds?"

Unfazed, the elder brother went on his way with his birds circling overhead. "I did just hear you call this war didn't I?"

Sakura listened to their banter, incredulous at the turn it had all taken. She hadn't even gotten a chance to answer Izuna before he was taking off after Madara. She looked down at the sleepy bird in her arms, shaking her head a little.

Some strange afternoon it had turned out to be...
Sakura wasn't exactly sure why they were insistent she return to the compound with them, 'at least for a while'. Something about how they would be determining the true winner there and preparing the catches.

She watched them each slowly take out what they had from their respective bags and place it down to compare. Naoko sat across from her at the table, sipping tea, her brow ticking up every time one of their piles grew.

"It's nice that you boys bonded over a friendly brotherly competition, but did it occur to either of our esteemed heirs that this is too much meat?" she scoffed under her breath. "Never thought I'd say something like that."

Sakura smiled a little, drinking some of her own tea. Naoko had been quick to usher her inside with the others, and offer her a cup before she so much as cast the brothers a look. And, as it turned out, she brewed an incredible pot of fresh tea.

"After we finish proving that I've won, we'll set aside what we're keeping for ourselves, and then give whatever is left over away." Madara reasoned.

Tipping her chin at the two piles, Naoko smirked. "I count an even amount on both sides. Maybe instead of taking a victory lap you can settle for a more subdued, conciliatory handshake."

Madara's eyes narrowed, and Sakura could tell he was mentally counting for himself. When he discovered that his friend was indeed correct in that he and Izuna had managed to tie after everything, his jaw ticked and he crossed his arms derisively.

"This is probably the best possible outcome," Izuna chimed, "Madara is a sore loser and a sore winner. Either way we would have been hearing some form of complaint or bragging for the rest of the week."

"I'm feet away, Izuna, and my ears have never worked better."

The pair left the room, Madara still claiming that the results were too inconclusive to say he had lost, and Izuna saying he would tell Hikaku and some of the others to come and get some of the game for themselves. When the door shut and it was just the two of them, Sakura glanced up from her teacup to find Naoko's beautiful eyes trained on her.

"What?" she asked, already suspicious.

The Uchiha took her time with another long sip of her tea. She removed the cup from her lips with a deep, contented sigh that made Sakura want to roll her eyes. "I just find it satisfying you're ingratiating yourself into the day to day workings of the clan so well. It'll make adjusting to life as a member go much more smoothly."

Her fingers became clammy around the cup, and Sakura accidentally inhaled a larger gulp than she'd meant to, scalding her throat in the process. Naoko was no help, simultaneously offering her napkins to clean the spill with and laughing heartily. "Is there never a minute where what you think gets processed and possibly appropriately filtered from what you say?"

Sakura dabbed at the spot that had resulted from the liquid dribbling down her chin and onto her kimono.

"What fun would life be if I rationalized like that?" she gave a convincing pout, complete with lip
quiver. "Consider my point, if you will. I did say I would help you marry into whatever clan you liked. Naturally that meant I'd offer up my own as well."

The pinkette made sure her flat stare spoke for itself. Yes, the Uchiha had been gracious toward her in their inclusion of her lately, but that was simply explained by her connection to their clan leader, second-in-command, Naoko, and…

'Oh…'

"As kind," Sakura began, ignoring the dark-haired woman's wide grin, "and unnecessary as the offer is, don't fashion my wedding kimono anytime soon."

Snickering, she seized and bit into one of the anpan in the basket on the table between them. "You can't blame me for taking an interesting, Sakura. You have been spending quite a bit of time among Izuna and Madara, in one way or another, for months."

"A-As a mission partner and a friend!" She defended, cheeks going up in flames at the implication there could be…more. Right now the relationship was…complicated in comparison to what it could be, but it wasn't that kind of complicated.

"Teasing aside, is there anything you'd like to tell me, or any questions you'd like answered?" Naoko licked the sweet bean paste from the corner of her mouth, then sucked four of five fingers on one hand. "You know, Naoko-nee-chan is here to help."

Sakura fidgeted, eyeing the tempting sweet treats she'd been diligently trying to ignore. She had indulged enough after…that.

But well, what was a little more indulgence when life was short and wrought with complications? Snatching up the first roll her fingers touched, Sakura bit into it with a teeth-vibrating moan.

'Maple custard,' she thought blissfully. Naoko had provided an assortment, and suddenly trying every flavor on the table didn't seem like such a horrible idea. Or, all things considering, maybe it was a horrible idea, just not for reasons pertaining to her waistline.

With warm tea and fresh sweets in her belly, the information came forth steadily. "Everything had been alright, I guess," She chewed slowly at her anpan and swallowed even slower. "I thought I understood how I felt about my situation in the village. Lately I," she furrowed her brows and sighed in frustration. "I wonder if I was just fooling myself."

"Ah," Naoko twirled a lock of hair that had fallen against her face. "You do strike me as the type that forces herself to adapt a little too quickly for the sake of not burdening others."

Sakura rocked forward in her seat. "W-What?"

"I'm saying you're forcing yourself to be alright with something that clearly makes you uneasy, or at the very least more exhausted than you'd like to admit." She poured herself more tea and took a calm sip. "Am I right so far?"

Sakura reached for another anpan, then stopped herself, seriously considering the assessment. "You…could be onto something."

Naoko hummed appreciatively. "Twenty-five years ago, my parents named me Naoko. They used the characters they felt would be most befitting of their ideal daughter. In accordance, I should be both submissive and obedient. Unfortunately, the only attribute I have that served their goals was beauty." She finished with a low laugh and a momentary gleam of something dark twinkling
behind her eyes.

Sakura stared at the woman who if anything was chaotic energy wrapped in human flesh, her eyes bulging.

The expression caught on her face had the Uchiha across from her bursting into raucous laughter. "Yes, imagine the surprise and sheer disappointment when I grew up to be neither of those things. But instead of adapting to their expectations, the expectations of the entire clan, I chose what I felt was more important. My own survival. I don't think I'll ever regret it."

"I think it's pretty obvious how much you like shocking others at this point. You had fun messing with Toka at the hot springs." Sakura mumbled, finally giving into the urge to have another snack, though eating more carefully.

Naoko didn't look at all ashamed or repentant. "Maybe I did take that too far, but my only suggestion to you would be that you think about what others want from you, and what you want from yourself. Draw your own line, Sakura. Living up to expectations are only worth it if they're your own." She popped an anpan in her mouth, chewing loudly.

Sakura was surprised at how much the advice resonated. After all, since arriving in the past she had been doing what Mizuchi had told her, reluctantly but thoroughly nonetheless.

She had worried more over the ripple affect her experiences had on others than the strain it was putting on her own mind. Alloting herself only one breakdown in a period of several months seemed strong-willed and rational at the time, but there could be truth to what Naoko was getting at.

She wouldn't serve anyone any good, least of all herself, by ignoring her feelings. Nothing said she had to be quite as free-spirited as her new Uchiha friend, but finding her own balance was important.

"I see it's sinking in," Naoko scooted back to stretch her legs out. "But I don't think my work is done yet. There's still something I think we should discuss while it's just us two."

Feeling calmer somehow, Sakura tilted her head in genuine bewilderment. "Uh, o-okay…"

"Does this always happen," Slender fingers brushed over her cheek, bulging with food, "Whenever you're feeling…frustrated? In any capacity?"

Sakura coughed roughly to dislodge the piece of food that had almost gotten stuck. She sucked down more of her cooled drink, glaring at Naoko all the while.

"Did I get it wrong? I thought it was delicately put, considering my usual line of inquiry." Naoko feigned hurt, hand to her own cheek.

"You're not supposed to unexpectedly pass comment on that." Sakura accused.

"Is that the way it works," Naoko winked. "I thought I was generous to turn the other cheek that day. You were far more transparent then I'm sure you would've liked,"

Sakura groaned, "Do you think they noticed?"

"Who can say," she shrugged, moving a lock of hair from her eyes. "Either way, the frustration was palatable at the time, and it left me wondering if you'd holed yourself inside with a lonely table set for one because that's the only way you were handling it."
"I c-can't do this!" Sakura squeaked. "I know it's just us, but, I can't!" Firm hands pried her own away from the tight suction they had over her eyes. Slowly, she cracked one open to find Naoko staring at her with nothing but encouragement.

"I'm not advocating you do anything drastic," she soothed. "But if what I witnessed was in anyway tied to shame, I simply thought you'd take comfort in knowing some of us are happily shameless, and it hasn't killed anyone yet. That I know." Naoko gave her hands a squeeze and then dropped them to tap thoughtfully at her chin, "Loss of blood, however—"

"I get the picture!" Sakura interrupted. "T-The hot springs happening was so much…"

"Stimulation?" she purred.

"You don't have to say it like that, but yes," Sakura finished her cup of tea, and reached to pour herself more. "I got caught up in my own head for days thinking about it, and then worrying if I was allowed to think about it."

"People do more than think about it all the time," the older woman tutted, "But your restraint is commendable. A little strange in the way you express it, but commendable. On the other hand Sakura, fantasizing is a natural part of attraction." Naoko traced a finger sensuously around the rim of her cup and Sakura was unwillingly transfixed.

"I…I know." She gulped.

"Even acting on those fantasies when you're alone can be, let's say, its own fulfillment if you know what you're doing." She picked up her cup, puckered her full lips, and blew at the steam.

"I know," she repeated, her voice weak and throaty. She'd…well no one could judge her unvoiced thoughts so there was no shame in admitting she had wanted to. But every time trembling fingers drifted, she jerked them away with a cringe.

"Do you?"

"Are you mocking me?" Sakura squared her shoulders, not in the mood to be teased over what felt like a very real dilemma of the mind and body to her.

"No, I'm asking do you know what you're doing?"

Sakura could feel her hands go clammy. It was a somewhat intimate question, yet in this setting, with this conversation, not really out of the ordinary. The answer was that in theory, yes, she did. It wasn't that she hadn't ever indulged. Just that the great shift at the center of her private fantasies had brought a sense of guilt that hadn't been there before. Never to the degree it was any time she had made an attempt and come up short.

"The action is one thing…the s-subject is…"

"Understandable," Naoko mulled it over. "It didn't stop me from imagining the possibilities, what with the Hokage and Madara being such good friends for so long I'm sure they wouldn't mind both —"

Heat rose in her blood, heat that was both familiar and foreign. There was the hot, pulsing haze of blooming arousal, and then there was the icy tendrils of cold fire that tended to prelude her anger.

In spite of how the tension ratcheted, Naoko lost her thoughtful expression and laughed prettily.
"I'm sorry," she cupped a hand to her stomach as she settled down. "That was an inappropriate test."

Sakura's gaze wasn't any less narrowed. "Test?"

"I had suspicions of the kind of reaction a comment like that would bring."

Sakura's heart tumbled to thud against her ribs as if it had picked up so much momentum it couldn't stop quick enough. What kind of ammunition had she just given the cunning woman? She wasn't even sure why the image Naoko had been painting brought about desire and...indignation...in equal measure.

"It just caught me off guard." It was a pitiful explanation and they both knew it. Everything Naoko said and did caught everyone off guard. This was different.

The door slamming open and several voices jumbled by conversation filtered into the room. Naoko barely lifted her face at the return of her clansmen. "Right. Another time then?" she asked, standing before Sakura could answer. "You're welcome to stay for dinner. Stew does have a satisfying way of warming you down to your toes."

Sakura nodded dumbly, barely comprehending the invitation. She should've known confiding would bring about as many new questions as it answered.

He hated sitting idle. Especially regarding something so momentous that was meant to help someone so important to him. But as Shikamaru had helpfully pointed out, jutsu requiring the delicate application as the advanced-level one that might just bring Sakura back to them, wasn't Naruto's forte by a mile.

He, along with Suigetsu, had been told to keep quiet and out of the way or go. That was offensive in itself. While the nuke-nin from Mist may have just been dragged along into events because of his affiliation to Sasuke, he had a personal stake in it.

And even if he didn't understand exactly what the Hokage's hand-selected research team was doing, he didn't want to be left out of the loop. He'd do almost anything for his friends, but of all things they needed him for, it had to be this!

"Stop squirming unless you want me to lose this needle in your arm!" Karin hissed, shoving her glasses up her face with authority.

Naruto clenched his teeth, not because it hurt, but because it felt like had been getting poked and prodded for hours. Sasuke, ever the show off, sat on a chair just to his left with Kabuto bent over to draw his blood sample.

"Why's this even necessary?" he complained.

"Oh my, for all that power you possess it seems time hasn't changed the very little you're able to comprehend." Orochimaru tisked.

Naruto raised the arm not being jabbed and sent him a flippant gesture. The sanin, still unsteady on his feet and looking like warmed death, smiled dangerously. Naruto silently vowed that as soon as it was all over, he'd press Tsunade-baachan to be rid of their old enemy once and for all.

He'd throttle the fucker back into a prison cell if he could, but they insisted they needed him to have a hope of saving Sakura-chan. Kabuto was the same, a necessary evil they were tolerating. So
the duo stayed.

"You are the present reincarnations of the Sage's sons." said the snake sanin.

"Sasuke-kun was onto something to think the answer to unlocking a portal dwells in the bloodline of Hagoromo Otsutsuki. After all, just look at the blessings its afforded you, children of prophecy." Kabuto drew away with the sample in hand, shuffling away as Sasuke sat up.

"Just shut up and let them work." The Uchiha told him. How could he be so nonchalant? He knew exactly what Orochimaru was capable of. What was there to guarantee that he wouldn't pull something underhanded and botch the jutsu on purpose.

"Because it isn't to his benefit to be uncooperative." Karin grumbled, close to his ear. "Trust me, he knows he's cornered right now."

"We needn't waste our time running tests just for the chance of chatting with the Sage's soul." Orochimaru announced almost lazily. "One Reanimation and I could have him here in an instant. Isn't that what you'd both like?" he cooed, "To be reunited with your poor, lost teammate as quickly as possible? Assuming the girl hasn't already succumbed to—"

"That's enough out of you," Tsunade snapped as she entered the room, radiating tiredness. Shizune scurried in behind her, frowning in concern "We're doing this my way or you can go back to your cell and await execution. We're not going along with anything you suggest—not on your miserable life. The council's giving me enough hell over this already."

"Tsunade, Tsunade, you may not trust me but we're all aware how much you need me. Extending my life depends on retrieving your precious apprentice from wherever she's been hurled off through time and space. A daunting task, but I always did like the challenge."

"Do you ever stop yapping?" Naruto tossed his head back against the chair and groaned. "You really like the sound of your own voice."

"Done," Karin straightened her body that moment, holding three full vials of his blood. "We'll start using these in our practice trials right away."

"Yes," Kabuto's eyes shone bright behind his glasses as he carefully twirled the vial containing Sasuke's blood. After whatever crazy experimentation he had done on himself, the once average-looking four eyes from the Chunin Exam resembled a reptilian creature almost more than his master, with an awful white pallor the color of a fish's underbelly.

He had a patchwork of haphazard scales appearing in places, and golden eyes identical to Orochimaru's. It was idol worship gone wrong and taken much too far, in Naruto's honest opinion. He had wondered if there was no cure for his metamorphosis or if he simply chose to stay that way. "We should be set to run the first test in two days' time. If that's amenable to Lady Hokage." the serpentine-looking medic finished.

Baa-chan only glowered. There wasn't anyone in the room who didn't have bad blood with Kabuto and Orochimaru, separately or as a pair. But they were all rallying around the chance to bring Sakura back. At least find out where she'd gone, then definitely get her back.

Naruto slid from his seat and no one tried to stop him. "If we're done for the day then I'm outta here,"

He brushed by Tsunade, slumped against the wall with her arms crossed. "Fine. Just stay out of trouble for a change. And be on standby. In case we need anymore samples."
He waved her off, his mind already on a bowl of mouth-watering Ichiraku ramen. It'd been a while since he'd stopped by to speak to Ayame and the old man… He could really use a pick-me-up just then.

In the time after deserting the clan, Kikue hadn't really missed much they had left behind. The most important thing to her, her siblings, were with her. Konoha had tentatively allowed them a place to stay, and the Inuzuka clan felt more like family than their own kin ever had.

Her father wasn't there to cast his disgusted gaze her way or rant about all the ways she was his weakest and most disappointing child. Life was different now. Different and better. Usually.

"Still here?" a voice sneered from behind, and Kikue desperately tried to be smaller, even though she knew it was futile.

Turning cautiously, she was confronted with a posse of children who hadn't exactly been endeared to the fact that they were peers with a Kaguya. It didn't matter how much she tried to present herself as friendly, everything she did only solidified their dislike.

She talked too childishly, her kekkei genkai was disturbing, she was too weak to keep up in spars, her very presence was offputting, and so on. Though she kept up the semblance of cheer for her siblings, not wanting to worry them and knowing how Harihane was prone to react violently, it was starting to get to her.

They were starting to get to her.

"Kikue's allowed to be here as much as you are," she whispered defiantly.

"That so?" Manabu leered, his hair flopping into his eye somehow menacing. He was several years older than her, already taller and broader than most of their male classmates even from his own age group. He had been one of the most vocal about reminding her of her place since the first day. "My father says the Kaguya are just ticks that came riding in on the Inuzuka's backs." he smirked, and some of his friends echoed the sentiment with smirks to match.

She bit her lip, staring up at them through her lashes, not sure if what she felt was the urge to flee and cry or…something else entirely. More often lately, her skin would prickle as it happened, a stir of a new emotion she wasn't capable of naming yet accompanying the feeling.

Today, Kikue thought she knew as she watched bones lengthening from each knuckle before she could stop them. Her fight or flight response was finally becoming fight.

It wasn't the best time, though. Harihane was inside, not allowed out to play for the day because she kept trying to climb the wall and leave. Yoku stayed inside to keep her company, and Asuga was naturally with her master.

Chisato, Kagami and Reira, the three she had met on the first day, the three who were consistently nice while everyone else pretended they didn't see her torment or actively participated, were not around. Their class hadn't been dismissed on a break yet. Technically, that meant she should only be dealing with one of her main bullies, but the Shimura boy was so proudful he would leave his class early when he felt the lesson was beneath him.

She was on her own, and the sharp eyes of the boy called Danzo soaked in her apprehension. "They say even a cornered mouse bites back on occasion…are you a cornered mouse?" Dark eyes flicked down to the thickened bones protruding threateningly. "Or a cornered monster?"
"Kikue's had enough of you!" She raised one fist, the silent threat delivered. They took a step too close and she could fire off bones as sharp as kunai in an instant.

"Hah!" Manabu elbowed Danzo, who hadn't stopped passively staring. "We're getting an ultimatum from the mouse monster." He moved faster than his size would lead one to believe he could, and the front of her yukata was clenched so tight in his meaty fists she thought he'd rip it. Feet dangling, no longer touching the snowy ground, she yelped. "My father also says allowing the Kaguya to invade just proves the Hokage's incompetence, and I agree. We all know what your clan's really like, so you can drop the act."

The ground looked so far away, and she couldn't imagine what would happen to her if she kicked out and he dropped her. Frantically searching for someone that might be inclined to help brought no reassurance, as everyone else was too busy playing as if nothing was wrong, lest they be the next ones Manabu went after.

A knot swelled in her throat, and she felt a whine slip out. Crying was unfairly appealing at the moment, but that was something the old Kikue would do. Cry and cower and take it.

The memory of kind green eyes and shining pink hair granted a measure of courage, and Kikue lifted her chin. "I know I'm a Kaguya, but I'm tired of being ashamed about that. And I'm tired of being pushed around by someone like you!"

She hadn't meant to...or maybe she had. One minute a rush of energy coursed through her body. The next, Manabu sported an ugly cut that started at his cheek and curved down over his lips, courtesy of her body's bony defense mechanisms.

His hands flew up to her face, and she fell to her knees in the soft snow, which was already sinking through her clothing. When one of the Uchiha's fingers pulled away and he noticed the thick smear of blood, her heart sank.

All bravado had left her as fast as it'd come, and she tried crawling backwards, away from the deep rage in his snarl. Funny how they had taunted her, said she was a monster for her bloodline, but everything about the boy in front of her right now was downright beastly.

"Easy Manabu," Danzo warned. "I think our monster friend's temper tantrum was a spur of the moment thing."

"Who cares?" the large boy spat. "She started it!" To her, he said, "You think you're gonna get away with that? Hey, I heard a Kaguya's bones are three times as thick as normal. Wanna test it?"

His fingers seized her arm and he jerked her up like a doll until she was dangling again, a shooting pain lancing through her shoulder.

"Let Kikue go!" she thrashed, not afraid to allow her adrenaline to take control anymore. "Let me go!"

"I think listening instead of escalating this situation is for the best." A feminine voice stated assertively.

Kikue could only blink as a girl about her age pushed her way through the loose circle of children who had come to observe the spectacle. She had short brown hair to her jaw, held back and in place by a pink headband with a flower for decoration. Her simple green kimono looked warm, and the stern expression on her face made her look as strict as an adult.

Manabu lowered Kikue a bit, turning to glare over his shoulder. "Who're you supposed to be?"
"I'm Biwako Hagino." she said, hands on her hip. "But the real question is who're you and why are you fighting with another student outside scheduled sparring time?"

"Is she for real?" Manabu grunted, seemingly to himself. Puffing himself to appear even larger, he tossed Kikue aside and stepped forward challengingly. "You want to be next?"

Kikue's rescuer, Biwako, didn't bat an eye. "How tasteless." she scoffed. "And Danzo-san," she turned and addressed the boy. "You missed the last thirty minutes of the lesson. Yurine-sensei isn't pleased so don't be surprised if there are consequences in your near future."

"You know her?" Manabu shook his head in disgust.

"Hardly." Danzo chose to ignore Biwako completely, and Kikue slowly got to her feet to inspect herself for injury. "She's the class know-it-all. A civilian-born who shouldn't even be here."

"One's birth status has nothing to do with being a ninja!" Biwako glowered. "I—"

"It has a lot to do with it, actually," The large Uchiha cut her off. "You're in an academy, hoping one day you'll be able to say you're a shinobi of this village, but what jutsu have you learned yet?"

"I've been reading on the practical applications of hand signs before attempting—"

"Do you even know the best way to manipulate your chakra?"

"Of course, that was covered on day one of class. It's best if you draw from the—"

"Where's your kekkei genkai?"

For the first time since intervening, Biwako fell silent, a troubled look replacing her unshakeable resolve.

"That's what I thought," Manabu bumped her shoulder roughly, and she stumbled back. "That's exactly the reason people who aren't from clans shouldn't be anywhere near an academy for the future shinobi of the village!" he exclaimed, met by nods from some of his cronies. "You really think book smarts is going to save you on a mission?" He tapped his temple. "Face it, you aren't made to be ninja—it's not in your blood. And even then, having a shinobi background might not save you from being hopeless. You might still end up like that!"

Kikue looked down at herself, knowing he was pointing directly at her without following the path of his finger.

"You're really starting to get on my nerves."

Kikue perked up, inwardly shedding tears of joy. Reira, Kagami, Chisato and a boy she didn't recognize had meandered their way over. Right away, she could tell Reira and Kagami were ready for a confrontation, almost as if they'd dealt with Manabu's brand of cruelty before.

"More wannabe shinobi." Manabu rolled his eyes.

"Hiruzen," Danzo stepped toward the boy Kikue didn't know. His hair was sandy brown and he had dark eyes set in a tanned, boyish face. "You're hanging around them now? A shame. I thought someone from the Sarutobi clan would make smarter choices."

"What's wrong with them, Danzo?" Hiruzen asked, scratching at his cheek. "I figured since we're all in the same class it shouldn't matter. We could all just…get to know each other and be friends?"
"I'm not looking for friends," Danzo turned to scowl off at some unseen foe. "I'm looking for worthy rivals that I can push myself with. I thought you could be that rival."

"Eh? I...I'm flattered. I think..."

"Manabu, I think we're done here, aren't we?"

The Uchiha felt his face, sticking his tongue out to lap at the spot where the wound had hurt his mouth. "Yeah," he sucked his teeth, giving Kikue a menacing grin. "For now at least. I'd have to knock too many heads just to finish off one mouse monster. But watch your back,"

"What is up with them?" Reira flailed her arms, as the duo of antagonistic boys left and the kids who had been gathered to watch followed. "When I perfect my Futon jutsu I'm really going to teach them a lesson!" she slammed her fist into her open palm in demonstration.

Kagami tapped her shoulder. "Uh, Reira..."

"Huh? What's wrong Kagami-kun? Oh! I know! Manabu's been bothering you for a long time, huh? Don't worry, I won't leave you out. We can tag team!"

"No, it's not that..." He subtly motioned with his head in Kikue's direction, and it was only then that she realized tears were finally winding their way from her eyes.

"Are you okay?" Hiruzen asked. "I'm sorry about Danzo. I don't know why he's in such a bad mood today, but I'll talk to him!" He did an about face, stopping short when he almost bumped into a motionless Biwako. "A-Ah, sorry." he apologized. Then he sprinted off in the direction the bullies had gone.

Biwako watched Hiruzen leave with a passive face.

"He wants to try to talk to them..." Chisato stated. "His words might not reach Danzo-san if he was serious about not wanting friends. Still, Hiruzen-san is determined to try. What a strange person."

Kagami smiled a little. "Coming from you that seems a little lacking in the self-awareness department."

Chisato's head cocked to the side, but not enough to see her ever-hidden eyes. "Does it?" her soft voice mused. "Well...maybe so."

"I'm glad you look mostly okay, Kikue!" Reira rushed forward to wrap her in a hug that was too tight. But Kikue accepted the embrace as a gesture of true concern. "Did you get caught up in that too?" she asked Biwako. "Oh, I'm Reira by the way! And these are my friends. You sit two rows behind us. You're...uh...Bi—Bisha...Huh. I know it's on the tip of my tongue."

"Biwako Hagino." She drew herself as tall as possible. "I know right now for most clan heirs that name's not worth remembering."

"N-No, it's not like that!" Reira insisted. "Not all of us are stick up jerks! Manabu and Danzo bother us too."

"I see," Biwako murmured. "But they seem to make anyone not from a clan particular targets. I came to assist because I thought the fight might be unfair," She offered Kikue a nod, her eyes softening. Kikue's heart suddenly went out to the girl who intervened in a fight that wasn't really her own, knowing it would make her a greater target, because her sense of justice wouldn't allow her to stand idly by. Biwako deflated a smidge, sighing. "Although I admit right now there's not
"Don't concern yourself too much with their opinions," Kagami said. "I know it's easier said than done," he stared down at his feet. "Manabu's been like that for years, and now it looks like it's getting worse...But—"

"I don't intend to let something like this stop me." Biwako assured him. "I wanted to enroll here because I too have a goal to be a shinobi. People like them will just have to get used to the idea."

"That's the spirit!" Reira hopped in place. "I like your attitude, Biwako!"

"Um," Kikue finally found her voice again, stepping toward the solemn girl shyly. "Kikue's happy you tried to help her. She thinks Biwa-chan is already way braver than them."

"M-me? Brave?" A light blush dotted her cheeks.

"I second that." Chisato voiced.

"Me too, me too!" Reira shouted. "You're pretty hardcore, Biwako!"

"And you know, if you'd like, you could be our friend." Kagami added with a boyish grin. "If Manabu feels stronger and braver when he's in a group, I don't see why we can't."

Kikue gave into the urge to fling herself at their new friend in a hug. She looked taken aback, but didn't complain. The Kaguya wanted to believe maybe, just maybe, Biwako felt a little less alone now too.

Yurine held onto her like she didn't want to let go. When Sakura had pried her off, the blonde composed herself with a sheepish grin. "This is so exciting! Aren't you excited?" she clapped, her usual excitable self.

Sakura nodded along, letting Yurine lead her through the halls of the academy, which she was sure she could have navigated all on her own if she'd needed to. It hadn't changed much in terms of layout. Or, more accurately it wouldn't change too much by the time she was enrolled in the distant future. Yurine didn't know any of that, so she allowed herself to be taken on a 'tour' of the building.

Sakura made sure to ooh and aah at the appropriate times to keep up the charade. Although one or two gasps of excitement were genuine when they would see something that reminded her of her own time as an academy student. After she'd shaken off the nasty bullies from her early years, anyway.

"To tell you the truth, the children will be going home to spend time with their families before the new year after today, so the curriculum is slightly altered. Aside from your lesson, it seemed like a good idea for us to be more lenient on the last day. Half their heads are in the clouds anyway," Yurine explained. "And well, I'm really glad you're here because I could use the break too." she pouted. "While you do your thing, I can take it easy for a bit."

"Don't worry, I completely understand." Sakura nodded. "I've never tried teaching medical ninjutsu basics to anyone so young though, so I hope I do alright."

"You're teaching specifically to the group that shows the greatest aptitude for precise chakra control so far. That doesn't mean every single one's going to turn out to be as amazing a medic as you are," her friend winked. "But if even one takes an interest, then I'd call it a win." She stopped short at the third door on the hall, giving her a final encouraging smile. "This is it!"
Yurine opened the classroom, slightly smaller than the usual, to a cluster of about two dozen students waiting patiently in their rows as a male teacher lectured them about giving the utmost respect during the lesson. "Remember, you've all been selected for this because you show great potential to learn the honorable and invaluable skills of a medic. Do not squander this opportunity!"

"Yes, sensei," Most of the class chorused.

He turned at their entrance, bowing as he scuttled out of the way. Sakura walked in to find all eyes already on her.

"I'm sure you all remember when I said there'd be a medic coming today to begin showing you the basics. This is a good friend of mine, Sakura Haruno. Feel free to address her with the same respect as you would us sensei!" Yurine chirped.

'I can do this. I've given plenty of demonstrations before. Just because they're children it doesn't make it any different.' Sakura mentally coached herself as she made her way to the table already prepared. She had requested certain things she would need to properly instruct them and, at a glance it looked like it had all been provided to specifications.

"It's just like you've been told, I'm here to instruct you in the art of medical ninjutsu. Of course, there's a lot more to learn than I have time to teach today, but at the very least we'll start the basics."

She carefully unfurled and activated the scroll, a small, flopping fish popping out on the paper. Sakura moved the bowl of water she'd asked for closer as an extra precaution.

When she glanced up at the students, she saw one boy had already shot his arm into the air. The med-nin resisted the urge to lean in and squint. Something about him was almost familiar.

In fact, she saw the faces of several children who could possibly be people she recognized in her own time, and others she definitely did. To her chagrin, a young Danzo was slumped at his seat in the second row, looking as disinterested in being there as she was in teaching him.

Nothing about the man she knew held the spirit of a healer, and she didn't want her beloved mentor's techniques falling into his hands even partially.

But there was nothing she could do to get the boy out of the classroom without it coming off suspicious. What reason would she have to single out a child she supposedly barely knew?

"Already a question," she smiled at the child with his hand raised, trying to outwardly appear calm.

"Yes," The glasses-wearing boy nodded at being acknowledged. "Assuming we all take to your method of healing, at about what level of proficiency do you think it's possible for us to reach while we're here at the academy?"

Sakura had to admit, for a kid no older than ten or eleven, he was already pretty astute to wonder over how effective it was possible for them to get with any techniques they learned. "That's usually more dependent on the individual. Technically speaking, the possibilities are as limitless as your own aptitude and determination." She flicked some water onto the fish to keep it comfortable.

The boy leaned back in his seat, clearly thinking on that response. "Alright, please continue."

Yurine released an exasperated sigh from the sidelines. "Sorry about that, Homura likes to interrogating us on the use of every lesson, he can calculate the way to tackle it that'll give him the
"Homura! As in Homura Mitokado!" Sakura squeezed the table for support but let it go when she realized with the turmoil inside her, breaking a chunk of it off was too likely.

The boy's familiarity made perfect sense now, and unfortunately he was another face she wasn't too thrilled to see in the past. In her time, he would be an old and wizened member of the village council, one who tried to undermine Tsunade's decisions at nearly every turn, and who'd kept secrets and sided with Danzo on more than one occasion.

The council also weren't great fans of Naruto, which they voiced to Tsunade often, even while Sakura herself was present. There were too many reasons to dislike the boy, and she couldn't let that show. 'If he's here...that probably means...' Sure enough, within a minute of scanning the classroom, her eyes landed on a brown-haired girl with a neutral expression that she was positive was the other half of the annoying council duo, Koharu Utatane. 'Danzo, and both council members in the same classroom? So much for a smooth-sailing lesson…'

Forcing herself to regain her composure, Sakura went on, "Today I'm going to show you the best way to isolate infection in an opened wound, which I plan to demonstrate with this fish. Its scales have been damaged, and without treatment infection will easily penetrate its body and it'll die." She was careful not to promise anything unrealistic.

After all Yurine had been correct that of all the children in the room, it was unlikely any more than a handful would have true aptitude needed to keep going. Danzo, she could already imagine, wouldn't make it. Then perhaps that was also wishful thinking…

From that point on, Sakura continued her lesson (including a rundown on the anatomy of the type of fish they were using) as if she was completely unaware of who some of the students were and had no idea who they would grow up to be.

All things considered, she felt she was doing a good job keeping the reins on her vexation well in hand. Danzo couldn't stop looking exasperated, after all, and she was all set to demand that if he imagined he could do a better job with the lecture, to come up and try it.

When her fish was healed and happy, swimming around painlessly in a tank of water, she began calling on children to come to the front individually and try it with their own fish, all stored safely for the time-being in prepared scrolls. Sakura wasn't sure where so many injured fish had come from, but animal injuries had been fairly common to start with during her own training.

She coaxed the first three kids through the healings, asking them questions to make sure they remembered what they needed to from the lecture before attempting it. Only one had botched the attempt, and patiently guided the girl through her sniffles until the fish's scales glowed a healthy, lustrous silver.

Truthfully, due to the fact that they were academy students and she hadn't gauged any of them for herself, she stared them with the barest of basics, at a lower level than what she'd done with her first attempt.

While her shishou would have her healing internal damage or mending broken bones within her first few weeks, Sakura wasn't convinced the students could handle that on a first try.

A few damaged scales were more suitable for young amateurs. With a gasp, the little girl ran a careful finger over the scales of the lively fish. Sakura hardly had time to react when, in her joy, arms locked around her waist in a hug. "Thank you so much, Sakura-sensei!"
'Sakura...sensei...' There was no immediate description for the emotions that flooded her at the title. She'd never considered if she'd have students of her own one day. It had felt like a long way off due to her age, but here she was, teaching children only a handful of years younger than she was. It wasn't really an unpleasant feeling, she'd say that much.

"You're welcome," she hugged the child back, then picked up the scroll and flipped it to dump the healed fish in the tank with the others.

"Who's next?"

Another girl stepped up, wearing a pink headband with a flower in the middle, and with a face of resolve seldom seen on children. "I'm ready." Sakura almost...saw a little of herself in those early days as her shishou's disciple.

"Then let's get started," she said, watching the girl carefully assess the fish.

"This area of scales are broken, right near the gills." She pointed as she gave her assessment. "That means that the fish is probably having a hard time breathing right now. If I apply what you showed us, I think I can isolate the infection safely without risking its respiratory system." Sakura watched the girl work as she quietly thought aloud to herself. With sure movements, she did the small amount of healing required, a slow smile quirking her lips when she stepped back. The feeling of a kindred spirit flared up again when the girl turned dark eyes upward to her for further instruction. "Was that correct, sensei?"

"It was. Especially for a first attempt. You seemed very sure of yourself."

Danzo, who wasn't very far back in the queue, answered for her, "Book knowledge is really all she has to rely on when her combat skills are so weak."

Yurine descended on him immediately, seizing him by the shoulder. "Why don't you and I step outside for a talk?" she said with forced sweetness.

If Sakura claimed the amount of elation at having the boy removed from class even temporarily wasn't cathartic in that moment, she'd be lying.

"He's partially right..." The girl slowly agreed. "I also had been looking into medical ninjutsu on my own, in case it was something I could become proficient in."

"And what's your name?" Sakura coaxed.

"Biwako Hagino, sensei."

"Keep at it, and with that kind of memory and some dedicated practice, you could be an excellent Konoha medic one day, Biwako-chan."

Sakura nodded along in agreement, "Exactly, if you—huh?" she halted in confusion. "I didn't say that..."

Her verdant eyes shot toward the doorway, where kids were already clambering around the sudden appearance of none other than the Hokage himself. Even Biwako looked a little star-struck, and the male teacher had rushed over to great the village leader with a gracious bow.

Sakura tried to recalibrate her thoughts accordingly, blindsided from her teaching by his unexpected appearance and the pull he clearly had on the whole room.
"Lord Hokage, it's an honor to have you join us." The sensei exclaimed.

Hashirama removed his hat, laughing off the formality. "Please don't mind me. I'm only here to observe today. If anything I'm honored to catch Sakura-san teaching the next generation."

That was…reasonable, she supposed. The Third Hokage had occasionally popped in without preamble to observe them going about their lessons, too. The tradition had to start somewhere, and with so much riding on the way the youth of the village were taught, it made sense that the Hokage would be interested in their development.

But this wasn't old Hiruzen with the scent of his pipe clinging to his robes and his kind, grandfatherly smile.

Sakura subtly shook her hair into her face a little so her reddened cheeks wouldn't be as obvious. He didn't have to make it sound so noble and look at her with so much reverence.

Things had only just gone back to a semblance of normalcy and blushing all the way to her roots at the sight of him would be obvious that even children might take notice.

"R-Right," she cleared her throat. "I agree with what the Hokage said, Biwako. I think you've shown some potential for this."

The brunette returned to her seat with some added confidence to her steps, and that alone was enough to make Sakura feel better. Students like that needed the kind of praise and assurance they were on the right track. Book smarts was a perfectly applicable real world skill for shinobi to have, and she didn't want a single child doubting that like she once had.

Sakura instructed another ten students, nearly all of them chirping a bright thanks and calling her sensei. The entire time she could feel the unyielding gaze of the Hokage on her. He had perched himself in the front row like an eager pupil, ridiculously big beside the small children surrounding him.

Blocking out the comical sight, she managed to get through the guiding of Koharu Utatane without incident, then two more nameless students she didn't know, then eventually Homura Mitokado. Finally, it was almost Danzo's turn.

He had returned with Yurine, anger in his eyes, and been placed at the very back of the line as punishment. Sakura stared the little boy down like she was staring down an S-ranked nuke-nin, and his expression was cold with challenge.

Danzo wordlessly moved toward the table, eying the struggling fish with indifference. He brought his hand up to hover over it, but as far as Sakura could tell it wasn't in an attempt to activate a jutsu. The room was silent, everyone slowly growing confused at the boy's actions. Sakura was an odd mix of triumphant and frustrated. She wasn't too broken up about seeing the child possibly embarrass himself, but she'd just as soon get it all over with. "Do you remember how—"

"Don't talk to me," he mumbled so only she could hear. Her jaw nearly dropped. "I'm concentrating." The rude boy who would grow into the despicable man went back to examining the fish, which probably could have used some water at that point. Sakura was half-tempted to bump Danzo aside and heal it so she could put it back in the tank with its brethren. A chorus of gasps going up brought her attention back to Danzo and the fish, only to find the pitiful creature had stopped moving altogether.

"It's dead. He killed his fish!" A student cried.
"It was just a fish." The Shimura scoffed.

"You can't force too much chakra into such a small wound," Sakura scolded, "You'll metastasize the cells."

Not only that, but with such a blasé disregard toward even the smallest loss of life, there was no way he would have the compassion needed to ever treat human patients. Not that she'd been holding out hope that the man responsible for the atrocities of ROOT would ever give candy to a crying child after a shot.

"Danzo, return to your seat please." The male sensei commanded, sounding disappointed.

The boy complied, and Yurine pinched the bridge of her nose. "I think we've taken up enough of Sakura's time for today. Why don't we thank her for helping us?" The young voices joined together to express their gratitude for the lesson, and then Yurine and her fellow sensei ushered all of the children out, encouraging them to go play in the snow outside.

Sakura supposed all things considered that hadn't been such a bad lesson. It went as well as anyone could expect given circumstances.

She leaned back against the desk, very aware that she still had an audience. For reasons she couldn't guess, the Hokage hadn't left yet. "You know, I think the children really took to you," he said, getting up and making the short trip to her. "Well, I guess...Shinpachi's son Danzo is still..."

"A menace," Sakura groused. "He's a menace and you know it."

Hashirama didn't refute it right away. "I'd like to think there's still hope."

Sakura wished she could have his blind faith, but he didn't know what she did. If Hashirama was aware of just what kind of threat to his dream the standoffish boy would grow to be, she wondered if even he would find enough forgiveness to spare.

"I guess anything's possible at this point," she shrugged. Though she would sooner believe in gods and goddesses with hidden agendas for humanity than the possibility of Danzo turning out to be a decent human being. In the meantime Hashirama would need to keep enough hope alive for the both of them. 'I hope your heart always stays that open."

"You'd know that more than most, wouldn't you?" he teased, drawing a genuine laugh from her.

No one could have gotten her to believe she'd be having this conversation, in this time, a handful of months ago. Hashirama didn't know the half of that situation either.

He still believed she was a girl with no family who had been directed to try and start a new life in Konoha before her mother had died. Omitting certain...crucial bits of information from him when he'd been so generous with her, wasn't something that made her feel good. Still, it was something that needed to be done. Hopefully, if the day ever came that she'd need to reveal her true origins, he would understand. Tobirama, however...

"To be fair, I only know because the impossible keeps chasing me down to remind me it exists." Sakura quipped. The comment amused him, judging by the way his eyes shone.

"Speaking of chasing down, I think Toka is getting closer to forgiving me. She's stopped watching me like she wants to hunt me for sport every time I enter a room."

Sakura wondered how someone could sound so completely enthused that their relative had stopped
casually plotting their murder, instead of concerned it had taken so long. As previously established some time ago, Hashirama Senju was as eccentric a man as he was endearing.

"And your brother?" They had discussed, in between trying to push Madara into loosening up to enjoy the celebrations in his honor, how to get Tobirama talking to his brother again.

"The problem is he's not interested in staying in a room long enough to listen unless he's going to slam paperwork at me." Hashirama had confided as Sakura sat and drank with him.

She supposed maybe they should be focused more on Madara, given that it was his party, but currently he’d been whisked off by Naoko and some other women, something about modeling some winter kimonos he’d been gifted.

Sakura supposed that the way the women had descended on him like a swarm of locusts should have been…worrying. But Izuna hardly batted an eye, so at the very least the Uchiha would probably still have their leader come the following morning.

Then, although she wouldn’t admit it, the honey wine's rich, sweet flavor had a slightly addictive quality. She was far from inebriated with her chakra consciously burning through the alcohol's effects, but for someone who hardly drank, Sakura could get used to the taste.

"I hope I'm not overstepping, Hokage-sama, but maybe he thinks you'll make excuses. I don't know Tobirama-san that well, but if he puts as much importance on soaking at the hot springs as it sounds like and he thinks you're responsible for ruining it…" Sakura wasn’t even sure how they’d gotten on the topic, or what had her emboldened enough to dare offer the Hokage advice on his situation, yet here they were.

"You're right," Hashirama confessed, sighing, "My brother's held grudges longer over much, much less."

"Why am I not surprised?" she whispered into her drink.

"Did you say something, Sakura-san?"

"Nothing," she said quickly. "But if you're working together, this can't go on, can it?"

"It…could..." The Hokage stared into his empty glass. "It's just not very comfortable. Dinner's every night are only getting more awkward, too. I asked if he'd mind passing me a dish last night, and he scooped the rest onto his plate and told me there was no more."

"Ouch..." Sakura shook her head in pity, as if she hadn't done nearly the same thing with Madara and the inari-zushi platter. "Maybe you...maybe you should try something that appeals to him and then apologize then. Make a gesture too sincere to ignore."

"I think that's underestimating my brother's ability to ignore grand gestures, but thank you, Sakura-san. You shouldn't waste the party listening to my problems."

Near the center of the room, hoots and whistles rang out, followed by a very low, agitated voice. Sakura and Hashirama slowly rose, the former having to work a little harder to see through the crowd.

When they simultaneously found what had everyone worked into such an uproar, Sakura clapped a hand to her mouth and Hashirama split into peals of laughter.

Madara, his hair in a high ponytail and blush painted on his cheeks, stood in what was almost
certainly woman's kimono, one with a scandalously plunging neckline—no doubt having been modified—at that. Everyone was getting an eyeful of his defined pecs and upper chest.

He was hard to hear, but whatever he was saying to Naoko and her accomplices wasn't appropriate for young ears and women of delicate sensibilities anyway, if Sakura had to make a guess.

She was claiming it was all an honest mistake, and he was having none of it.

"That's a side of him I've never seen before," Hashirama wiped a lone tear away.

Finally allowing herself to cave into snickers, Sakura grinned wide. "If his reaction is anything to go by, I think that's a side of himself he's never seen before either."

It was hard to think any more on getting the Senju brothers to reconcile after that point. But for the Hokage's sake she really hoped he'd tried when he got home.

"I spoke to the couple who owns the inn, and had them set up something for Tobirama where he could really be alone without interruption." He rubbed at the back of his neck. "He's...I think he's suspicious, because in his mind it takes me much longer to learn my lesson."

'Wonder where he'd get a true idea like that."

"But he hasn't tried jumping out at me in empty rooms like he was doing before, and he gave me a cup of tea this morning that he didn't slam down on my fingers!"

'O once again, no one should sound so cheerful that their family isn't being blatantly hostile to them...'

"T-That's...progress..." Sakura had no idea if it really was. "Is that why you came to visit the academy today?" She left the thought that she'd expect Tobirama to have him on a tighter leash unsaid.

Here, he timidly tried not to make eye contact. "Not...quite...I'd heard you were going to be here doing your first lesson today."

"O-Oh..." It hadn't really crossed her mind that she was the direct cause of his appearance. Maybe he regretted making the offer and had come to see that she hadn't irreparably misguided children. That was a silly notion, of course. The Hokage had hope for Danzo, so needless to say he wasn't so swift to withdraw faith in others, even if maybe in some cases it was warranted. That left the alternative. He'd come because he was happy to see her teach. To see her.

'Friends support each other at times like these!' Sakura rationalized. 'And that's what we are now... I think.' Surely some sort of tentative friendship had been worked out as of late. Right?

"I hope it wasn't so unexpected that it made you uncomfortable," he frowned. "Although if you were bothered by me being here, you hid it well."

"I'm fine under pressure, it comes with the med-nin territory." She'd once manually pumped her best friend's heart on the battlefield, having the First Hokage watch her teach academy students the most basic of skills was a peaceful spring stroll.

"I'm sorry," Hashirama sat next to her on the table, placing his hat on one knee. "It's rude to discredit you. Sometimes you just don't seem as battle-hardened as most shinobi are by your age."
Sakura felt her brows draw together in worry. Could he be starting to suspect she wasn't exactly who she claimed to be?!

"That's a good thing," he amended. "You're well aware of it, but part of my hope is that by attending this academy and having the village to call home, more children could end up less scarred by senseless fighting."

Sakura smiled sadly. She wanted his wish to become a reality, but time would prove to be cruel to generations of Konoha children. "I know." It brought to mind a large portion of the reason Mizuchi told her she was there indefinitely. To right wrongs, and possibly stop celestial threats… In doing so, she'd be protecting his dream, giving it a chance to be better than before. "I want that too…"

At least they kept their distance. The snow crunched beneath his feet, and children screamed, zigzagging around the play yard chasing after their friends. Not one approached, though he got some curious stares when they assumed he wasn't looking.

It was all just as well. While Hashirama took time pretending to tour the inside of the academy in a bid to go moon at Haruno, he would watch to see how students acclimated to playtime with their peers.

Some might question what interest he held in such a thing, but Tobirama was not a heartless man. On some level even he was moved to see clothing bearing so many different clan crests flitting about in close proximity to each other, and clothing with no crests at all, and know that these children were forming lasting bonds of camaraderie.

At their age, he could have never hoped for such a thing, to have a friend from another clan to play with. To be allowed time to play at all was a rare enough thing. Yet, because his brother had dared to go off and defy their father, because he had befriended the heir to their family's sworn enemies, a ripple-effect was cast.

His foot moved over something colorful, and Tobirama took a moment to bend and pick up a scrawny carrot discarded on the ground. "Tobi-nii!" Reira was barreling toward him with arms stretched forward, her friends tagging along.

She flew through the air, and he was forced to support her weight with a hand around her upper back. "You found our carrot!" She plucked it out of his hand and tossed it down to the Aburame girl.

Sighing, he sat the brunette down on her feet. "This answers the mystery of where Mei-san's last carrot went this morning. A crow met the end of her broom behind your misdeeds."

"Aw," she whined. "Don't tell, okay? We all brought stuff to make a snow-person, and I needed to bring the nose. Chisa-chan brought buttons for eyes, and Kagami-kun brought old earmuffs." As she spoke, his eyes caught on the handful of buttons in one mitted hand, and the worn earmuffs clenched between another pair of mittens.

Reira, her nose pink from cold and her hair coming slowly from its braid, looked so proud. Tobirama saw another face from a pastime, identical save for the eyes, and holding out a riceball to him as he kneeled in the snow, bruised and shivering.

"W-What's that face mean?" he heard her grumble. "It's not what you think. T-This is training!" She began waving the carrot. Catching on first, the Uchiha boy was quick to nod in agreeance. Their navy-haired friend nodded once, the pert nose and thin line of her mouth the only thing
visible when the majority of her face was hidden by hair.

Reaching a hand toward her, his fingertips ghosted to the cloth headband she wore across her forehead. A childlike show of admiration, to imitate Hashirama. As he sometimes had in the past, he tugged the cloth over her eyes in one nimble motion. She squawked, dropping the carrot. "Enjoy this time," he told them, leaving the trio to their activity.

The rest of the yard was just as bustling, and he passed a child leaning in with his face dangerously close to a hanging icicle on the barren branch of a tree. His friends jeered for him to lick it, and he closed his eyes against their yelling.

It was childish, reckless fun.

The essence of it made him content, because the alternative to this scene was a gruesome one in which these children would be pitted against each other in mindless slaughter. Better they not see what almost could have been, better they only envision the indulgences of youth stretched out before them.

A dog came bounding out from a mound of snow, shaking itself with a yelp as the Inuzuka heiress covered her face. "Asuga, please!"

Standing just beside her, wearing the grouchy expression he remembered from before, was one of the three Kaguya tentatively granted asylum under his watch and by Hashirama's mercy. The teachers had reported in with them, just like they had been instructed to. Fretfully they'd informed them that the older Kaguya girl was at times reluctant to participate, but grudgingly would with a nudge from her friend or sister. She also had a penchant for trying to climb the smooth walls whenever she could.

The younger sister they said, was bubbly and curious, adapting much better. This Tobirama had decided to observe for himself. Imagining either child from such a bloodthirsty clan adapting at all had been a stretch.

If the more difficult of the two was behaving herself, then where was her younger sister? Tobirama spread his sensory-abilities out, probing for the signature he had catalogued during the many times he'd surveyed them from a distance. Strangely, the girl wasn't in the vicinity.

He walked carefully, searching for a sign of the child who matched her physical appearance, playing in the snow. It was only after he had passed several mounds constructed into makeshift forts that he spotted a small figure crouched behind one, knees to chest, dark head moving from side to side.

His eyes narrowed in wonder. That was clearly the girl, Kikue Kaguya, and yet her presence wasn't detectable to him. Why? Before he could draw any closer, her head lifted suddenly, and she turned to him with a look of sheer panic.

Her expression was one he had seen on enemy faces a number of times, but she, a mere child, looked as if he would cut her down. Hopping clumsily to her feet, she made to run, but he was there flash-stepping into her path without warning.

She reared back with a squeal, falling into the cold snow. Tobirama took a step, and she rolled onto her stomach into a ball, hands over her head. "Kikue hasn't done anything wr-wrong!" she blurted. "The Red Eyes Man sh-shouldn't be here."

Unimpressed and somewhat disgruntled at her reaction to him, Tobirama crouched,
unceremoniously tugging her arms away until her dark eyes peeked up at him. "You're a sensor-type."

For a minute they only regarded each other with unsure expressions, he bewildered that he had not noticed what she was sooner, and her seemingly in awe she had not been harmed. She blinked her round eyes up at him, relaxing only a bit. "Kikue's heard that before, but she doesn't know what it is!"

Now, Tobirama was truly intrigued. The child had no idea of her budding ability, but even if only shortly, she had managed to evade his detection from such a close distance. Seasoned shinobi experienced at cloaking themselves usually couldn't do that. "You...have a gift for masking your presence to be undetectable, and with practice you would be able to find individuals over a great distance. But if you're this ignorant of what you can do, I can assume no one's been training you."

Slowly, she sat up onto her knees, still regarding him with big, dark eyes. "N-No,"

The cogs in his head turned faster as he weighed his next words carefully. He had only come to observe for himself that these Kaguya, products of such an unstable clan, would play nicely and normally. And, while he suspected there was nothing much any of the three could do against the might of Konoha should they ever choose to rise up, developed sensor-abilities were still dangerous in the wrong hands. In the right ones, however...

"Um," Kikue wrung her hands. "Y-You're not going to punish Kikue for not knowing?"

Tobirama closed his eyes, considering that maybe his introduction to the young child was more intimidating from her perspective than he had thought. "There's nothing to punish."

"Really?" Her tone was equal parts relieved and inquisitive. "Then...you know someone who's going to help Kikue?"

Growing impatient, he shook his head. "You aren't swift on the uptake," he informed her. "Under my guidance, we'll be exploring just how far your abilities go. They're in the early stages, but I wonder..." He stood, and so did she.

"You want to be Kikue's sensei?"

Tobirama gave the girl a flat stare. Never had he told her he would take on that mantle. He hadn't even chosen a child from his own clan to train exclusively. His intent had been to do an initial assessment, then find a sensor who could work with her.

The child had other plans, already mentally latching onto the idea that he would be her instructor, by the looks of it. "Could you show Kikue how you do what she does?"

A demonstration? Well, it was a harmless request. Flaring tendrils of his chakra outward, he first detected every person in and around the academy, wondering if rumors he had heard were true. If two sensors stood close... Hesitantly, he placed a palm down on her shoulder. The gasp she released was comical, her jaw going slack.

The Senju smirked, the images his abilities fed him flowing into her. They stood there in the snow, everything else fading away to the two of them. "Kikue can see!" she cried. "She can see! So many colors."

Tobirama removed his hand, placing one on his hip as he settled his focus on the top of her head. "And?"
"If Kikue trains she'll be able to do that on her own?"

"Ideally."

He didn't bother telling her that all sensors saw slightly different things. It was enough that she was excited by the prospect of learning. "Please Red Eyes-sensei! Please train Kikue."

That brought a small twitch to said eye, but given that she was an easily excitable and unrefined child, he would allow it for the time being. "My training won't be easy. You'll be pushed to whatever limits you've established."

"Kikue doesn't mind. She just wants to see all the colors again."

"Fine. Then I'll inform Tsuba of the arrangement."

Somehow, on that nippy winter day, he had found a trainee in an energetic Kaguya child. Hashirama was never going to stop gushing over this...

There absolutely had to better ways Mizuchi could pick to reach her. The early morning light of dawn hadn't even broken over the village, and Sakura raised her head and rubbed her eyes, instinctively knowing the splitting headache she possessed was no coincidence. "I'm up," she slurred, patting down the messy tangle of hair on the side of her head and then giving up. It was too early and too cold for effort.

"It took you long enough."

Sakura smacked her lips, mouth unbearably dry. "You sound...close." Her vision was still mostly blurry, but there was no missing the unearthly power she had grown familiar with.

"You'd notice why if you only drew your eyes upward."

When Sakura saw Mizuchi sitting on her floor, her long black hair spilling around her and Usamaro curled comfortably on her lap, she had to do a double-take. All grogginess instantly surrendered itself to her pointed need to know exactly what was going on. "You're...you're here," she said lamely. And then with added emphasis, "You're here!"

The goddess looked like she was only just holding on to the urge to roll her eyes. "So we've both established,"

"Shuffling herself so that she was on top of the futon, legs curled underneath her, Sakura leaned forward. "Why?"

"An excellent question with a simple enough solution. I need to be. They are on the move, I'm afraid, and it's going to require we prepare counter-measures sooner than I had hoped we would need them,"

"They?" Sakura yawned and shoved a hand through her disheveled hair. "I'm going to take a small guess and say you're talking about these...other deities you said wanted to wipe out any of Kaguya's descendants."

"Yes, among other plans they have for humanity. It is highly likely you will be engaging another such entity in combat soon. And unlike Yama, they will not feel inclined to acts of great generosity. Thus, prepare for situations escalated far beyond your imagining."
"I don't like the sound of this." Sakura admitted, "I still barely have a handle on the Dragon State, and I don't think I could stand up to...that...right now."

Mizuchi's face was unreadable as she continued to pet the purring feline, stretched shamelessly on her lap. "At the least, you will require adequate weaponry. Ordinary human crafting could never hope to deal true damage against an immortal."

"It would probably be too optimistic to ask if you have something already prepared."

"I am a goddess of rivers, so weapon-making is far from my specialty," she said. "However, there is one among us whose work is unparalleled. He is who you will seek out."

"One...among us? Are you saying he's a god?" Sakura couldn't understand why Mizuchi thought it could be a good idea.

"Yes, he considers himself a neutral party to the Heaven's affairs, but with the right prompting, I believe he will be willing to provide aid."

"That sounds...risky." Sakura gulped. "There's a lot riding on him agreeing to that, and if he doesn't there's a lot more danger."

"The true danger is in doing nothing," Mizuchi growled, eyes flashing. Usamaro tumbled from her lap as she stood. "Sakura, you must understand the severity of what allowing my enemies, our enemies, to win would mean. Nothing as you know it would be left unscathed. Consider that carefully."

Sakura shifted nervously, clenching and unclenching the fabric of her futon. Mizuchi was adamant that this was a gamble they needed, and Yama had also warned that he was not the only one hunting them. Erika had been trouble, and to think even more powerful celestials were closing in was...disturbing to say the least.

"W-What do I need to do in order to get one of his weapons?"

Mizuchi's red lips pulled into a smile that flashed a hint of pronounced fangs. "The god of blacksmithing is an elusive deity that prefers isolation. He has remained quiet in his solitude for some time. But I have found his location to be in a mountainous region not far from here. You will travel there and we will appeal to him for a weapon for you to wield."

"A-Alright," she rubbed at her arm. "Assuming he doesn't refuse," Sakura paused. "I know we can't wait, but traveling through winter always slows a journey down."

"A point I had already considered," Mizuchi nodded, finger to her chin. "I will use my powers and manipulate the weather, drawing the land into an early spring."

"You can do that?" Sakura stared in alarm. "H-Have you been doing that?"

The goddess scoffed, plopping herself on the trunk near the futon. "My control over weather is not as strong as other gods, but it will be enough, yes. You may have noticed the fluctuation in the seasonal weather patterns in this land. That was at least partially due to the activity of myself and other deities."

It made sense suddenly why summer had lasted so long into fall when Sakura had arrived, and then why winter had slammed into them as if barely kept at bay before. 'How much of our world do they already control? The seasons, blights, the dead... if they've already got so much power over human lives and nature itself, consolidating it would mean...'
Mizuchi may have been forceful about it, but she had a point. Sakura couldn't stand by and allow her world to be subjugated anymore at the fickle wills of deities. "Will nature really be okay?"

The elegant woman moved her dark hair over one shoulder, exposing a pointed ear. "In time," she said nonchalantly. "In the days of old, during some of the fiercer tempers, gods and goddesses of seasons have caused far worse. We cannot worry too much about that, only procuring the weapon. Another big flux will be more likely to draw attention from those who will recognize the signs for what they are, but it is a weighted risk that needs taking."

Finally climbing out of bed, Sakura rubbed her forehead. As long as she remained in the past, these dangerous tasks would be a regular occurrence. Understanding that didn't make the rate at which they were sprung on her any easier to cope with. "When do I get started?"

Chapter End Notes

Very quickly, I'd just like to thank guest commenters who go above and beyond to leave very thoughtful reviews. I can never reply to you directly, but reading through the long ones that are so excited over updates gives me excitement too. A few worried about being too long? No such thing for me. lol And to answer the question I received, yes, I do repost this story over on AO3 so that account is also me. However, if this story is found in part or in full posted by anyone else, please let me know.

IzuSaku had another angst-fueled "moment" here and shit sort of got real. A lot of people have asked how Madara would eventually warm up to the idea of sharing a lover as he comes across the possessive type to a lot of people. I try to include very subtle nods to the fact that his feelings on that may not be what others would expect. He ruined his brother's moment not so much out of jealousy, but more the fact that he would like to be a third wheel in such moments and if he doesn't get his invite it's not happening.

Lots of people wanted Sakura to reach out to Naoko about her boy troubles, among… other things…and I had already been considering a scene like that because I agree, Naoko just seems like the right person for the job. She's steadily becoming an even more nuanced character than I originally thought she'd be, but I'm happy for her. Haha

Sakura also finally got to show what she can do at the academy! If you noticed the little girl introduced in this chapter, Biwako, is the same one that Madara accidentally scares in the anime, and the one who becomes the Third Hokage's wife much later. She also becomes a medic whose skills were recognized enough to be one of the few entrusted to help Kushina give birth. See where I'm going with this?

This was the last semi-filler chapter that happened in the break between the last arc and this new one. Next chapter officially kicks off the next big cycle for this story. TobiSaku time, bitches.

Also, people keep trying to figure Mizuchi out and that's endlessly amusing from this end. Glad so many have invested into the sort of friendly but fierce, near mother-daughter relationship that is starting to form between her and Sakura. At times I'm sure Mizuchi takes actions that seem excessively harsh or just frustrating but it's important to remember that in many, many cultures, the temperaments of higher beings are said
to be whimsical, often self-serving, and most importantly beyond mortal understanding. She's complicated for a reason and also harder to really apply human morality to in the sense that a divine being does not answer to the standards of right and wrong humans do. I definitely consider her a morally gray, chaotic neutral force. XD
Seeking

Chapter Summary

The Heaven’s Forge Quest begins! Sakura sets out to find the god of blacksmithing, hoping to obtain a divine weapon to further her godslayer training. Tobirama sets out to discover the culprit behind the pox that nearly eradicated the Senju. Could their goals push them together unexpectedly?

Chapter Notes

Ch.40. What a milestone. I've never done a fanfic this long...lol ASiT still has a lot in store, and thank you for some of the beautiful reviews that have helped carry us all to this point.

What point is that? Just to refresh everyone's memory it's time to begin the third major arc of this story. The "Heavens' Forge Quest". Just as the pair that received the majority of the attention last arc was MadaSaku, this arc's lucky couple is TobiSaku. Tobirama has probably been the most elusive so far, as prickly as he is, but he can't keep his distance forever. Well, probably not.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The change in weather was most certainly not subtle. Tomorrow was the last day of the year and there wasn't a trace of snow anywhere in the village. It had melted, the puddles absorbed by the earth. The sky was a pretty blue with stretches of impressively fluffy clouds floating by.

If anything, it felt like a mild-weathered fall day, and not the end of December as everyone knew it to be. Konoha residents were probably baffled, speculating yet again on what the cause of the random fluctuation in weather might be. Only Sakura knew the truth.

She took it as her sign to commence the plan she and Mizuchi had devised. Her first trip before the journey was to the seamstress in search of a new outfit for combat. For months she had made do in the light yukata and at times, a thick kimono when weather required.

But nothing could beat the comfort of the outfits she had worn at home in her own time. And so, even if it was a bit unconventional, the kunoichi was determined to get something reminiscent of her old clothing fashioned. After a little searching, she located a shop, finding the owner and her daughters chattering excitedly about new fabrics they had gotten.

There were finished yukatas in every shade and palette on display. Casual men's wear and even a wedding kimono. There were also half-finished pieces hanging up, scraps of fabric scattered across the floor.

Sakura surveyed the different colors of the cloth they had, trying to determine which material would be best, but in the end she decided deferring to professionals was the way to go.
"Ah, a new face to the shop!" A woman with her hair in a blond bun and the beginnings of wrinkles at the corners of her eyes smiled at her. The two girls at her sides did the same. "These weather changes are dreadful, aren't they? I hope it isn't an omen," she tisked.

"Mother! Perhaps you shouldn't ponder over morbid things in front of our guest," The girl who looked to be the younger of the two said sheepishly. "Is there any clothing in particular you'd like us to make?"

Sakura nodded, stepping closer. "Yes, I'm traveling soon, and I'd like something suitable for combat. Something a little different than," she plucked at her current yukata, which was yellow and loose, "this."

"A ninja?" The seamstress circled her slowly. "Yes, well we have our fair share of ninja for clients. I'm sure we can make you something versatile. Any preference on colors?"

Sakura considered leaning toward red, a color she had always worn well, if she said so herself. But, maybe it was time for a change… "I…what would you suggest?"

An eager smile lit up the face of the elder daughter. "We've got just the thing!" She rushed off to a shelf stacked with folded fabrics, rummaging around before coming back. "This color will really bring out your skin."

"Ooh!" her sister hummed. "We haven't gotten to make any garments with those yet."

Sakura eyed the fabrics they were proudly showing her: fuchsia, crimson, pink. The material looked breathable, light. Just what she needed. "I'll take it." she declared. The women broke into excited squelches.

"Now that we've selected colors," The seamstress tucked a loose piece of hair behind her ear. "Tell us what kind of design you'd like."

Sakura paused, not for the first time wishing Ino was there to advise her. It wasn't that she didn't have a fashion sense. She wasn't the one who trained in orange jumpsuits… But she'd never essentially designed her own clothing, and she wanted it to be perfect. Taking a deep breath, she slowly began to describe the kind of outfit she was hoping for. "I'd like something a little fitted at the waist but breathable around the bust. Something where my arms can move around. It can't be too long, because I'd like to wear shorts under i—"

The looks they were giving her made her stop midsentence. "I'm sorry. This is too strange of a request, isn't it?"

"On the contrary this is exactly the kind of challenge I've been hoping for!" The seamstress cheered. "A little vague perhaps, but all the better. Leave it to us, dear. And you'll have a one of a kind outfit so pretty you almost won't want to wear it into battle." she winked.

"When did you need it by?" Her younger daughter asked, a gleam of excitement in her eyes that mirrored her mother's.

Here Sakura dipped her head sheepishly. "T-Tomorrow if that's possible."

"Tomorrow?!" the trio exclaimed. "This is the kind of design that we lovingly make with time. I was thinking next week at the earli—"

"No!" Sakura lowered her voice when they jumped. "It's…an urgent mission. I didn't know I'd have to go so soon or I'd have come to you sooner but, please," she took out her money. "I'll pay you
double whatever it costs." Her face must've been absolutely pitiful, because the seamstress softened.

"No need for tears," she sighed. "We'll simply have to work expediently." She turned to her daughters. "Alright girls, this is a tall order but I expect both of you are up for this challenge?"

They stood at attention, nodding. "Yes, mother!"

A smirk curling her lips, the older woman pointed at Sakura in a way that made the kunoichi take a step backwards. "H-Hold on, what are you—"

"Let's get those measurements!"

She squealed as they descended on her in a flurry of fabrics and measuring tape.

The start of a whole new year was upon them and here he sat, cooped in his office. He'd made good progressive, all things considered, but at times like these, Hashirama almost wished he had someone to delegate paperwork to. …Not that Tobirama would allow it.

'Although he's not here right now,' he pushed the stack of completed documents away, resting his elbows on the desk. 'Off on some adventure.'

He cringed, reprimanding himself for taking it so lightly. Tobirama wasn't out amusing himself sailing the seas or tracking down rogues to beat up for a bounty. He'd gone to investigate a very dire matter. One that struck uncomfortably close to home.

_Things must have been changing between them for the better, because Tobirama entered the office normally through the door. "You're unusually late," Hashirama smirked, not looking up from scribbling a response to the Nara clan's request. "I hope you didn't have a long night of drinking." Finally peeking up from his work, he studied his brother's sullen countenance. "I guess it'd be hard to tell regardless. You always look like something's giving you a bad headache."_

"Something is always giving me a headache." The younger Senju turned away, arms folded. "And you're normally involved somehow."

_The Hokage grinned. "I prefer this kind of scolding to you flat out ignoring me."_

_If not for the small huff, it would have been difficult to say if Tobirama even heard at all. "I was able to enjoy the hot springs in solitude once again." he said, as if that were the only thing that he cared about. His brother was at once a simple and complicated person. Something he tried not to dwell on. "I also don't have time to waste on scorn for your antics."_

Hashirama sat up attentively. Whether he'd ever admit to it or not, Tobirama always found time to make him aware of just how exasperating he was. "I'm not following." Then he took a good look at the way Tobirama was dressed. Gone was the black turtle neck and heavy armor. Dressed comfortably in black pants and a navy kimono shirt with meshing visible underneath secured with a yellow obi, he looked casual. Almost incognito… Most noticeable was the absence of his happuri, snow-kissed hair falling across his forehead. "Are you…going somewhere?"

"To Tenryu." he declared. "It's time we received answers about the spread of that pox."

Hashirama blinked slowly. "They're just a little farming village, and they've been allies in trade with us for some time. I hope you don't intend to just go there, weapons drawn, flinging accusations—"
"Can you really afford to be so naïve, even now?" Tobirama's cold glare cut to the quick. "Do you really believe a pox transmitted by an insect that shouldn't have even been alive through the dead of winter was coincidental?"

It was a valid question, and the longer he thought on it, the more the uneasy feeling he had discarded back then began to resurface.

"The pox, which generally has an incubation period of about a week under ideal conditions, should never have lasted long enough to reach the village." Hashirama found his own brow drawing down hard. "Do you understand the seriousness here?"

"You're saying it was a cultivated attack intended to wipe out the clan with bio-warfare. But why? Shouldn't it have worked then? We didn't have a single casualty. Who would—"

"Questions I intend to see answered," Tobirama vowed. "I leave tonight." He turned to go, but Hashirama was a little too out of the loop to just leave it there.

"Tobirama, wait," he stood, his brother glanced over his shoulder. "You can't go alone. I'll go too. Together we can—"

"Out of the question." It wasn't like he expected the idea to be well received, but before he could even argue his point his brother continued. "The village cannot afford to be without the both of us now. And I don't need help. This is a task I've assigned myself, and it's a task I can complete alone." Slowly, Hashirama sat back down.

Stubborn. Stubborn the day he was born and stubborn now. But his words weren't empty talk. Tobirama knew how to get information and get out. His sensory abilities made him as skilled at spying as he was as a front-line combatant.

"You'll write in once you have a handle on the situation?"

"If I feel its pertinent information I'll consider it."

Hashirama smirked, feeling a little nostalgic. "I guess that's all I can expect from you."

"If that's all, then I need to get back to the compound. I've entrusted monitoring you to Toka, so don't think you can shirk working while I'm away."

Huffing, he threw his hands up. "Fine. I saw this coming anyway. But Tobirama, be careful out there. There's no telling what's going on."

A beat passed between the brothers with Tobirama's unreadable mask still securely in place. Until he let loose a small noise of amusement that wasn't quite a laugh. "Don't flatter yourself into believing your impulsive behavior has rubbed off."

In a roundabout way, it was as good as a promise to be careful, to be safe.

A series of polite knocks echoed in the still room, and Hashirama knew immediately it wasn't his brother. Tobirama had left the day before and would have to be well on his way by now. His brother certainly didn't waste time knocking when he was around.

It was possible it was Toka, come to take up her post as the unofficial Tobirama in the real one's absence. In which case it was better he appeared as on task and productive as possible. Hurriedly rearranging a few documents, dipping his quill in fresh ink and moving Bukkai to a better spot, he nodded to himself. "Come in."
The door swung open, but the woman who walked through wasn't Toka. The hair and eyes were impossible to mistake for anyone else in the village.

"Lord Hokage!" Sakura bowed, shuffling into his office. "Is this a good time?"

She looked so different in an outfit he'd never seen before that he almost forgot to respond.

"Yes, now's fine," he croaked, managing not to swallow his tongue. She smiled gratefully, moving even closer. While her shoulders were covered, triangular strips disappeared into her fitted magenta bodice, exposing her collarbones and a careful amount of cleavage. The outfit had detached sleeves reminiscent in style of a kimono—long and loose.

Enough of her arms were visible from the sleeves to see she was wearing long crimson gloves that covered her knuckles but tapered off to expose her fingers. Her clothes had the effect of looking layered, but he could tell just how much mobility they allowed for, even as his eyes wandered to the sliver of black meshing between her waistline and navel.

Her magenta skirt ended inches above her knees, three shiny brass buttons all in a row down the front. Tight black shorts unlike any material he'd seen peeked from underneath, covering her upper thighs. From her knees down were black tabi socks, thin-strapped sandals more like a civilian's than a ninja's on her feet. Where had she gotten such a unique outfit? Why did the colors compliment her hair and skin so well?

"Lord Hokage?" Sakura asked, as if she was hesitant to interrupt his daydreaming.

"I'm sorry," he flushed. "I just noticed your outfit's very…suited to the change in weather." It was a lame attempt to cover his ogling, even to his own ears.

Luckily Sakura only plucked shyly at her skirt. "I can't explain it but I feel more like me wearing this than in anything I've worn lately."

If that was what was worn where she was from then it was nowhere in the Fire Country he'd ever visited. It suited her perfectly though. Sakura looked every bit the competent, dangerous yet feminine warrior he knew her to be. "Well, as nice as it is on you, I'm getting the feeling there's more to this visit."

Her eyes widened, a small blush dusting her face. Hashirama could have smacked himself.

"Oh, y--you're right. It's actually, uh, about a somewhat personal request…" Her eyes lowered demurely, and then she was looking at him through her eyelashes.

'Personal request…Sakura-san hasn't asked me for anything like that before. If anything she's done the Senju clan more than a few personal favors.' As out of the blue as it was, Hashirama had to admit that he felt a little chuffed. If she was coming to him to make a personal request, then that meant she saw him as reliable, that they were closer to being true friends.

"I'd be happy to help, if it's something within my power of course."

Her face brightened, encouraged. "I know it's short notice, and usually I'd put in a notice but…" Sakura squared her shoulders before blurting, "Could I take a vacation?!"

Vacation. The word bounced through his head, the last request he'd been expecting. Truthfully he thought whatever she'd ask from him might have been something challenging. 'A…vacation…she just wants some time to herself away from the village?"
"I don't see why not." The relief that fell over her was palpable. Although, the timing of the request was disappointing to a degree. On the last night of the year, the Senju had an abundance of honey wine. They told stories around a bonfire and toasted to another year of victorious battles and bountiful food.

Tobirama wasn't much for festivities but he was family, and not having him around was going to make things a little amiss. Secretly, Hashirama realized he had hoped Sakura would be willing to join them in revelry. She could talk and drink among them as an honored guest.

There were plenty in the clan who wanted to know more about the remarkable woman who had helped tend to the sick not so long ago. Word had also spread quickly that it was thanks to her doing that no one had to suffer through the pox and the blandness of Tobirama's cooking.

"Thank you!" She fist pumped, almost floating toward the door. "I…may have already counted on you saying yes, so I'm all packed up."

She was that anxious to leave?!

"Sakura-san!" he called, reaching out a hand. The kunoichi stopped, her face full of question. "I understand the excitement but not the urgency. Couldn't you leave tomorrow at dawn?" A trickle of hope filtered into his voice.

For just the briefest moment something flashed in her eyes. …Nervousness? There was definitely more to the request than a simple need for relaxation. And she'd chosen not to tell him.

That…stung. He'd thought they'd been moving more toward mutual trust and understanding. They'd shared so much on the academy roof that night, and again while repotting Bukkai.

They had made up after the embarrassment that ensued from the hot springs. Every interaction made their camaraderie feel more effortless. At least to him it had. But it still felt like to some degree she was keeping him at a distance.

"Ah, I guess so…" Her eyes darted to him, before looking at the door in silent longing. "But I actually feel like being in the village tonight, with everything going on, might be kind of difficult. This is my first year away from my old home a-and I thought getting away for a while could help."

An unpleasant stabbing sensation started in his chest and spread outward. While he'd only been thinking of reasons to keep Sakura close, he hadn't stopped to consider what she might be going through. Hashirama had over a hundred relatives waiting for him at the compound, even with Tobirama away.

To his knowledge, Sakura had no living family. Maybe…she wanted to return to wherever her old village was and pay respects. Doing it quietly and alone was reasonable. "I understand. The more it grows, the more stressful the village can be."

Sakura giggled, motioning at him. "I think you'd know that better than me."

There it was! The light-hearted banter that indicated things between them were alright. Still, whatever she was going off on her own to confront, he couldn't help but worry.

Hashirama didn't think it was her fault, but Sakura's arrival to Konoha had brought plenty of new revelations about the world. Gods roaming among them…plucking up people and bestowing them with terrible, burdensome power to do their bidding. A part of him wanted to warn her not to go, but if anyone knew what lurked out there, it was her. She had been the one to inform him. "…Sakura-san, be safe on your travels."
Her face softened as a warm smile graced her lips. Lifting an arm, she flexed her bicep, cupping it with the opposite hand. "I'll be back before you know it!"

Hashirama knew that probably wasn't true, but she sounded so reassuring. If he worked hard enough at it, there was a chance he could make himself believe it before the end of the day.

Although she hadn't seen hide nor scale of her for a few days, Mizuchi's impact on the environment was everywhere. The forest wasn't the backdrop to a winter landscape the way it had been when she'd tagged along with the Uchiha brothers. She could feel animals tentatively poking around, some probably roused early from hibernation, some already back to foraging.

It even looked like the plant life was growing in reverse, slowly springing up instead of dying away as it should this time of year. Sakura cupped her hands in the stream she'd stopped beside and splashed her face with the clear water. All things considered she felt she was making the most of the remaining daylight hours.

If she had to guess she was already a half day's trip from the village and she'd only set out a handful of hours earlier. Flicking the lingering droplets from her hands and watching in wonder as they drifted through the air languidly like dandelion puffs under her control, Sakura did a mental rundown of everything she knew about her latest objective.

She was out in search of a god who made divine weapons. The only ones capable of actually maiming or even killing the deities that threatened the world. And Mizuchi assured her that the weapon's maker himself wasn't interested in fighting for the Heavens so it wasn't likely that he'd be an enemy.

No, the real issue was convincing him to lend his aid at all. The river goddess had emphasized that he was elusive, the kind of hermit often found in his profession of blacksmithing. He'd been cast out of from the heavenly realm long ago and lived a reclusive life on earth, hidden among mortals. Even now, the little she'd been told rang through her head. "He's so well removed from the workings of the gods, and so unconcerned with garnering worship from the humans, his name must be all but forgotten now. No doubt by design. He is the one known as Ame no Me-Hitotsu no kami. The One-Eyed God."

Sakura carefully committed the name to memory. "But if he's that hard to find, how do we even know where to start looking?"

Mizuchi crossed her legs. "A dilemma to be sure, no?" Except her pleased smile didn't seem too concerned. "There is a very...promising rumor I have come across. Not far from your precious Konoha, in the village of Chosu, there is a forge believed to be ran by a spirit of sorts."

Unconvinced she'd heard correctly, the kunoichi's eyes bulged. "A ghost? I'm tracking down some ghost?!"

"Unlikely," Mizuchi smirked. "Hitotsu would do near anything to be forgotten. Masquerading as a spirit isn't beyond the realm of possibility. But he was created to forge. He cannot escape his nature any more than I can quell the spirit of the river dragon that defines my own."

Shaking her head, a hand drifted up towards her throbbing temples. "You sound really pleased with yourself, and I admit a little information is better than nothing...but—"

Mizuchi's head turned so sharply it was a wonder her horns didn't cause it to tip. "I sincerely hope a complaint isn't going to fall from your lips, hm? This quest will require you to leave no stone
untouched, but you’re a resourceful girl, Sakura.” As gracefully as a swan landing on a lake, she dove into the river they often met beside. Sakura sighed as she leaned over, confirming only her reflection was there now. She was starting to feel that the goddess quite enjoyed leaving her with the grunt work.

Scooting away from the stream, the pinkette took the peaceful moment to turn her eyes to the sky. The sun would be setting soon, though with her steady pace Sakura still felt inclined to keep her momentum and travel a little further before making camp. And...maybe the more distance she put between herself and the village, the sting would lessen a little. Absently, she touched the sea-glass necklace around her throat, idly musing that this was her first time wearing it. It would have been nice to be able to stay for the celebrating. But here she was out on her own, all because duty called. Urgently, Mizuchi opined.

But then in an odd way maybe leaving when she had was for the best. Single-mindedly focusing on another new goal was better than letting all the thoughts specifically pertaining to her last encounter with a certain Uchiha churn around in her head.

Pulling out the map she'd brought along, Sakura checked the route she'd marked to Choshu, satisfied she was on track. No sooner had she tucked it away then a slight rustling had her cautiously looking to some bushes on her left. The presence was no human, and as a highly trained shinobi she didn't think she had much to fear from most of the forest creatures. Still, she'd rather not encounter a disgruntled bear confused about why its hibernation had been cut short.

The small white paw that stepped through the emerging greenery didn't belong to any big, lumbering beast. Sakura gaped openly as an alarmingly familiar animal parted the shrubbery, a narrow, half-gray face watching her.

"Mrwar..."

"Usamaro!" The cat broke free to strut toward her at a leisurely pace, as if their meeting was pure happenstance. Sakura waited, disbelief becoming slight irritation. "What do you think you're doing out of the village? Did you follow me this whole way?!" The naughty feline sat at her feet with large, beguiling eyes. If he expected her to pat his head with pride...well, he just happened to have another thing coming!

"This is a potentially very dangerous mission I'm on."

"Meo?"

"You wouldn't understand," Sakura muttered before she could stop herself. "I even lied to the Hokage...partially..."

Usamaro stood and sprang in one fluid motion, forcing her to catch him reflexively. Staring with half-lidded eyes, he leaned his head into her chest, the telltale rumblings starting up.

She'd been blessed with such a loyal cat, who was also very intuitive to her feelings. Not long ago, even if in her head, she'd been complaining about being alone. As if summoned, Usamaro appeared. His fur was feather soft as usual, almost beckoning her to hold him closer.

"Oh, no you don't!" she scolded, not sure if she was directing it at herself or her cat. Regardless, she opened her arms and he landed back at her feet with a grumble. "This isn't the kind of mission you need to come with me on." As if in defiance, Usamaro flopped onto her feet and stretched his body as much as possible.
Sakura growled in frustration, convinced she didn't have time for something like this. Seeing her cat had lifted her mood, but she needed him on his way. "Any way I could convince you to head back home on your own? I don't have time to take you there." Besides, the last thing she wanted to do was run right into the festivities and see everything she was missing out on. Knowing the way her emotions had been lately, Sakura didn't trust herself not to get weepy when she thought of past festivals at home in her own time.

Usamaro got to his feet, contemplating her request. Slinking to the stream, he paused just at the edge, hunching forward. Sakura assumed he was ignoring her, parched from his busy day of stalking.

Instead he went still as rock, his nose hovering just over the clear water. Curious, she trailed closer, wondering what could be holding his attention. Surely he hadn't picked now to get entranced by his reflection?

Tentatively stretching a paw, he splashed it through the stream. Meowing pitifully, he turned to look at her, then back down to try again, splashing up more water and managing to hit himself in the face.

"Usamaro, what's gotten into…" A fish swam frantically in the vicinity the cat had been splashing, out of reach but close enough to be temptation. That temptation happened to prove too great. Usamaro dove in with a yowl, mouth agape, snatching and scratching.

It wasn't graceful by any means, but he caught the fish's tail in his jaws, hauling it up as it thrashed for the safety of the slow moving stream. Paddling as he gripped his prey tight, her determined cat hauled both himself and the catch onto shore, shaking water everywhere.

Sopping wet but victorious, he trotted over to drop the fish near her toes, and Sakura watched it flop across the ground taking its last gasps. "Brwar," he trilled, nudging the offer at her eagerly.

Incredulous, the pinkette bent to pick it up, trying to determine if her cat had really just caught a fish to convince her to let him stay. Or maybe Usamaro just wanted his dinner grilled and needed help from someone actually capable of making a fire. "You really want to stay with me that much?" He rubbed his damp face across her tabi, and she pulled her leg away. It didn't deter him, his wet face still adorably hopeful.

"This isn't fair! I wouldn't leave him out here and he knows it! If he won't go back to the village and I can't take him…' She swore he could tell the exact moment she gave up, because his ears flickered in interest before she said a word.

"Come on…you went through so much trouble catching this it'd be a waste not to cook it." Usamaro darted around in energetic circles, chirping at the top of his lungs in what could only be thought of as success.

Sometimes, Sakura thought she was being played like a fiddle.

The compound was abuzz with activity, everyone in their most festive yukatas, and the scent of nishime and cooked prawn lingering. While the clan's events always had a sort of dignified solemnity even in the midst of celebration, there was also no mistaking the undercurrent of excitement. The sun was setting on a pleasantly mild day, and heading into what many felt would be a clear, perfect night. A starry sky for the last night of the year.

Considering the year it'd been, Izuna perhaps had more than most to reflect on. Months ago he had
nearly met an untimely end, only to be saved by what he now knew to be supernatural means.

Since then the Uchiha and Senju had put aside their differences and made peace, now calling Konoha home along with many more clans and a growing number of civilians. One highpoint of the year he couldn't forget was that he met Sakura, and that might have been the single most important meeting in his life, because ever since nothing had been the same.

Ups and downs had come from it without question, but he couldn't say he completely resented the ways in which his life had changed. Sat by himself on the porch of his home, he watched the streets filling with his clansmen. A few, like Hikaku and some other young men, had called on him to come and drink with them, recount battles of the year.

In the past the offer would have been graciously accepted, and considering how he'd turned them down, Izuna was just thankful none of them pressed much. Maybe they thought the melancholic air circling him would bring down the mood. Nevertheless after asking only once, they'd left him be when he declined. Izuna had been hoping all day, possibly in vain, to run into Sakura somewhere.

They'd been interrupted before she could give a clear answer, and he felt a bit foolish for putting himself out there so hastily. Albeit, he certainly didn't mean to. The prospect of spending the passing of an eventful year with the woman who captivated an admittedly large part of his attention, had just been so…

His pensive stare fell to the painted toenails on the feet making their way up the stairs, before a bowl of kurikinton was unceremoniously pushed into his face. Jerking away, he regarded the grinning Naoko with a quizzically arched brow.

"What?" she sat beside him, her hair pulled up off her neck and sporting a crimson yukata with a pattern of golden leaves. "Fine. I need a rich suitor more than you anyway." Pulling the dish she'd handed him away, she replaced it with a plate of susubu. "So you take this."

Izuna grudgingly accepted. "A time like this one, I'd have expected you to be a little too preoccupied for me," She was already starting on the potatoes, cheeks stuffed. He gestured with a nod at the brown-haired woman walking by with a sway of her hips, who had slowed down to eye his companion.

Lifting her head, Naoko waved, but otherwise kept eating. Disappointed but seemingly understanding, the rejected woman went on her way. "Eating kurikinton with you, dearest Izuna, comes but once a year. I'll gladly break a few hearts for that."

Izuna lifted a piece of susubu to his lips and took a half-hearted bite. "I'm flattered."

Pausing in her eager consumption of the sweet potatoes, Naoko leaned in to look him directly in the eyes. "Mind telling me what has you so glum? You're breaking a few hearts yourself by not mingling. There are plenty of ladies who were hoping to be on your arm tonight."

"Since when?" he scoffed. "I haven't been approached once today."

Naoko gave him a bland look. "I'm beginning to suspect no one I know possesses a shred of awareness." Izuna thought about asking her to elaborate, but knowing her, she wouldn't bother even if he did. "Anyway, of course you wouldn't be approached. Not with the dark cloud hanging over your head."

Izuna ate another piece of the susubu, despite not having much appetite. "Did you bother Madara like this?" His older brother had done everything expected of a clan head on the eve of a new year.
Normally, a portion of the day would have been spent in war council, discussing strategies going forward to thin the enemy numbers, keep a strong hold on Uchiha territory, hearing griping about the way the younger generation still wasn't hardened enough.

The formation of Konoha had made all that a thing of the past, though. But the surface-level pleasantries were still something the old wardogs that once fought with their father expected of their current leader.

They wanted to know Madara hadn't gone too soft. That he was still devoted full-heartedly to the "Uchiha cause" in the long-term. The vast majority of the clan just wanted to enjoy the newfound peace and stability.

"Not yet," she laughed. "But I assure you it's on my itinerary. Right now I thought I'd sit and tackle one sourpuss before I move onto the next."

Here he rolled his eyes outright. He was not a sourpuss. Was it so wrong to quietly keep to himself for a day?

"I don't think so," Naoko mused, finishing the last of her sweets and setting the bowl down. Izuna blinked in shock. Had he said that aloud?

"But this just seems a lot more like a sulk to me."

"I-I'm not sulking!" he sputtered. "Why would I be?"

To his utter mortification, she reached over and tugged at one of his cheeks. "Sometimes I feel like I looked away and now you're all grown up. When we met you were probably no more than seven,"

"I was eight!" he snapped.

"Ah yes," Naoko released him, patting his cheek in apology. "My mistake."

Izuna glared.

"As I was saying, you seem a little lonely for me to believe you're sitting here in a sulk because you want to be."

One thing he'd come to know for sure about Naoko, she was always more observant than she let on. Rubbing his arm self-consciously, Izuna leaned away. "I…I asked Sakura if she'd join us tonight."

"Join us?" Naoko cooed.

"Us." Izuna insisted. Feeling the conversation was going nowhere he felt like heading, he lifted up onto his feet, slowly descending the steps. "I'm going to go see if anyone still needs help with their stall preparations."

Cupping her cheek in hand, Naoko waved him off. "Sure, sure…"

A good attribute to balance out all the teasing was that she was willing to give others space when they needed it. Space alone wasn't going to do much for him though. If anything it just gave him an excuse to get lost in his own head.

Hard as it was to admit, Naoko might have been spot on. To some extent. Izuna shouldered by two
lovers holding hands and sharing snacks. The woman blushed as she reached up to feed the man.

Unbidden thoughts of the way he’d blurted out his request to Sakura ran through his head. Admittedly he hadn’t done the best job trying to clear up his intentions…Had she gotten the wrong idea and thought he was seeking something more intimate than a friendly night of talking and snacks?

‘I can’t really afford to be thinking of problems I caused myself. Not tonight.’

More than likely when he bumped into Madara, his brother would be on edge and wanting to slip away and spar. That tended to be what happened in previous years after he spoke with the council, which held staunch traditionalists very vocal about their displeasure at the direction the clan's future was headed in.

Some even went as far as pressuring Madara into choosing from some of the more conservative single women to find the next matriarch. They weren't fully satisfied with Izuna being Madara's heir apparent in the meantime, knowing he held and supported much the same philosophy as his brother.

If anything happened to either or both of them, a child would be much easier to control. Izuna wanted to implicitly trust his relatives—his eyes scanned the crowds one last time for a glimpse of pink—but until the last of those like Maro had been brought to the light for the scheming he was sure they did, he had to be vigilant.

He couldn't do that if he was distracted by the trivial flutter in his chest over a shade of pink swimming in a sea of deeper, more somber colors.

However, upon a second glance, it wasn't light pink hair but a pink yukata, worn by a blonde young woman who was stumbling her way through the crush of bodies. Izuna didn't need any enhanced eyesight to see how utterly lost Yurine looked, torn between bolting and asking for assistance. He watched on as several times she reached out as if to stop someone that walked by, only to retract her arm last minutely.

It got to be pitiful, to the point where Izuna thought he should go and see what help he could offer. Unlike the way she had nearly been walked over by Uchiha who didn't spare a glance at the outsider, no one stumbled into him, or stepped on his feet. He got nods of respect, sometimes hopeful smiles from a woman or two. ‘I guess that clears up what Naoko meant before.’

Yurine had stopped to fix a strap of her sandal that had come loose, so Izuna approached cautiously. Her head lifted sharply, gasping when she saw it was him. "Oh, Izuna-kun, hello!" She smiled, and he returned it with a bemused grin as he reached down to help her up.

"A little turned around?" he asked lightly.

Yurine flushed, playing with the end of her ponytail. "N-No…I actually came because I was hoping to speak to you for a little while."

Her hand slipped from his as he drew back. "Is everything alright?" Izuna wouldn't say he knew her particularly well enough to understand what it could be about. They were mission partners during the events of Sekkai, and she and Kureno were both pleasant toward him.

He in turn thought after sharing the experience of all being caught up in such a strange turn of happenings, something like friendship had to have been fostered. They spoke occasionally when he would make checks to the academy, to ask the instructors if all children from the Uchiha clan were
behaving—almost always in Manabu's case the answer was no—and if there was anything he should work with them on during his training.

"My heart's speeding more than I want it to right now," she admitted, "But otherwise…" Whatever she wanted to say, she swallowed down, her eyes shifting to their surroundings. "Is it possible to talk somewhere more private?"

As puzzled as he still was, Izuna didn't think there was any harm in obliging. "I think I know a place."

**ASiT**

Why had she picked *now* to be so bold? Yurine berated herself over and over in the confines of her head. She'd gotten the insane idea to do what she'd been putting off on the last night of the year.

Partly because it lent a certain romantic atmosphere to the occasion and partly because if she didn't say what she needed to, she might not muster up the courage again.

Naoko had vowed to help her, and they'd spoken since the hot spring on a run in at a teahouse. The older kunoichi gave her some coaching, but she hadn't known who Yurine was going to pursue.

The blonde was determined to see the self-given mission through, no matter what followed. Sure, it would have been nice to have her friends support her, but it was all already happening. She stood with Izuna on the far edge of the Uchiha compound, practically deserted when the center was where everyone was busy setting up and socializing.

Izuna looked almost bashful. "I hope this isn't *too* far removed. You're not…you're not uncomfortable here?"

Yurine melted at how considerate he was, as always. "No, no! This is fine. I did ask for privacy. So…thank you." It was nice having a man be so kind to her after the horrors of living with the Kaguya, in constant fear of unspeakable cruelty. She'd heard and seen enough to know only the tastes of their captors kept her "safe" (if it could be called true safety) from being cornered. She was fortunate enough to have only known their leers and the rough shoves or grabs at her wrists.

It was only a matter of time, or so she and Kureno had feared, before she joined the many of women and even men who hadn't been so lucky. Sakura and Toka coming when they did was their salvation, and she never regretted choosing to follow them to a new life. A new life with new opportunities…like, resuming her quest for true love, the way she had been in her small village before…well, things went to hell.

Here she was, now or never, feeling almost empowered by the serenity entwined in the anxiety of the moment. "That's good," The Uchiha said with relief. "Although if it's alright to confess…I'm not really sure what comes next."

Yurine giggled, not because he'd said anything particularly funny, but out of nervous reflex. "I…I'm not sure myself. I've never done this but it just felt like telling you needed to happen today." She twisted her yukata between trembling fingers, then released it in fear of creasing the material.

Izuna's distractingly plush lips fell in a thoughtful frown. Irritation broke through the panic. She'd hoped that would be enough, that he'd follow along from there and they could get on with it. He was a smart one, but that didn't apply here.

Sucking in a deep breath of air, Yurine pasted on a bright smile. "We haven't known each other very long, have we? Maybe over two and a half months?"
He paused, thinking about it, then nodded slowly. "There about, yes,"

"A-And I know we're not terribly close. Not the way you are with…w-with Sakura." It made sense that they were good friends, as far as Yurine could see. She'd wished more than once to have something similar with him, but a true bond wasn't something rushed or forced, so she patiently cultivated a friendship through fleeting chats when he came to the academy.

"We don't see each other much outside of when I check on the kids," he agreed. "And since you mentioned it, that's a little unusual since we are both friends with Sakura."

"Right…” she trailed, hit with a sudden rush of doubt. The fabric of her kimono was back in her clenched fists, and Izuna looked down at her in concern.

"Take your time," he soothed.

"T-Thank you. You've been kind this whole time, Izuna-kun. I don't know if you're aware, but before Konoha, I was held captive with my brother by the Kaguya. It was really awful there… definitely not the sort of place where you find caring people like you. And everyone else…they were scared and just trying to keep their heads down." She bit at the inside of her cheek, but he waited in silence.

"Maybe that's why I feel a gravitation to you. You're patient and easy to talk to. I wanted…” Yurine forced herself to look directly into his face. "I wanted to confess how I feel about you, th-that maybe it's not love now, but it's…” Squealing, she buried her head in her hands. Not even her mother's stories of finding true love could give her the courage to finish. She'd utterly failed. Imposed on his time celebrating with his family and dragged him away for nothing. She probably appeared so selfish in his eyes, she certainly felt that way. It was all—

Through the buzzing of woes that filled her ears, she could dimly hear Izuna speaking to her, and his hands rested on her shoulders. Yurine timidly pulled her face from the shelter of her palms. "That was really brave, you know," he chuckled, looking impressed. "You don't have to hide your face away."

A weak smile tugged her lips, and Yurine raised a sleeve to swipe under her eyes. She was so soft, it didn't take much to get her emotional. In the fading light, Izuna's clear face was full of compassion and understanding. There wasn't anything more to it than that. He didn't…he didn't feel the same.

"You're right," she lifted her chin. "I…"

"No," he shook his head, squeezing gently at her shoulders. "I know that wasn't the answer you came for. I'm sorry, Yurine."

She sniffled, "For what? I just wanted a chance to be true to my feelings, and you gave me that." A little light-headed, she shoved a hand up into her hair. "I already knew…I knew there was a possibility it would turn out this way. But I had to say it because I didn't want to go into a new year with old regrets."

When she felt ready, she backed away, relinquishing the comfort of his touch. "The last night of the year can be for friends or lovers. One night, I'll spend it with someone who means as much to me as I do to them. But for now, I'm really glad I told you, even if it h-hurts."

"You're a good person. A good friend," Yes, it stung to hear it, but already she knew she'd be alright. That time healed all wounds. That someday her heart would be so full of love for the one
she cherished, this pain would be worth it. "And I hope you don't see it as strange that I'm glad you told me."

"No, I'm glad too." The sun had sank completely, and far off, the din of many voices congregated in one spot floated gently on the wind. "I hope we're both lucky in love." Yurine was proud to be able to say it and mean it. "You know, whenever you tell her…I think…I think things will be different for you."

The smile slipped, his eyes going comically wide. "Tell h-her?"

Yurine nodded, unable to contain her wide grin. "Something's clearly there, right? You should follow it and see where it goes."

"I can't follow it because I'm not following this."

Yurine lifted a hand halfway to her face to smack herself, then dropped it. Izuna wasn't there yet, and she couldn't be the one to make him see it if he wasn't. She had a feeling the result would be much better if it happened in its own time anyway.

If there was one grievance he held against his brother above all others at present, it was that, whenever he got good and ready, he could slip away from the passing niceties with the war council.

How was that fair? If Izuna was his second shouldn't he be required to stay for the entirety of the arguing and the droning and the less than subtle pushes to marry some councilman's daughter?

No. Apparently being the heir meant you shouldered all the headaches, and being second-in-command meant you threw your brother to the wolves and then slipped off to brood about a woman standing you up. Izuna was probably teetering between optimism and every doubt in his head being given life. Things wouldn't go any better when he learned Sakura was no longer in the village.

They had that in common. Slipping out discreetly.

Madara sat overhead on his tree branch, trying to decide what he thought about the taste of datemaki. So far he would've preferred some inari-zushi, but he hadn't found any stands preparing that yet. The festivities were getting into full swing now that the sun was down, and someone was probably going to be looking for him to show his face. But he had some problems of his own to deal with. The others could handle the celebrating.

When he lifted the snack roll up, the shape of the beads around his wrist came into view. 'Heh. If this is supposed to help improve my memory so much, why hasn't it worked yet?' The better question was why hadn't he taken it off? It was a gift from Haruno, and their somewhat…volatile encounter earlier in the day probably should have soured his view of the bracelet, but—

*He arrived in time to find her exiting her home, packed for a trip and, much to his surprise, sporting an outfit he'd never seen before. It managed to be tasteful and tantalizing at once, and he eyed her from collarbone all the way down to covered toes.*

*Her cat spotted him and went on the offensive, raised hair and exposed claws. Haruno shut the door and his nails hit the wood with a thunk, sparing him a maiming. She must have been in too much of a hurry to scold him for turning up unannounced again, because she tried to side-step him. Madara shuffled into her path. "Is this a bad time?" he taunted.*

*"It's getting to be a bad time every time you invite yourself over." she replied.*
"But it's alright when you do it?" he challenged, knowing just what would get a rise. "As I recall, you're the one who tagged along on our last hunt, despite doing no hunting yourself."

"As a favor to you!"

"Yes," he leaned in, resting his arm against the frame above her head. "And what about the other favor I requested? Asking your goddess to get involved."

"I did," Haruno straightened herself up to her full height. There was no point when the height differences between them was still so pronounced. "She told me the risks, and as a medic I decided it wouldn't be a method in your best interest."

Madara could feel the tiny embers of his temper sparking up. "That seems like a weighty decision to be making with no input from the patient, medic."

She pushed her way forward, until their chests met, blazing green eyes meeting his own defiantly. "You're starting to recover the core traits of your personality, but you'd be willing to jeopardize all the progress with something so experimental it could obliterate your mind! All out of impatience."

She dared to act as if he were a petulant child sneaking sweets before dinner! Had she no idea of the indignity being without his memory caused him. The flickers he saw in his dreams some nights...he was forced to question Naoko and Izuna, unsure what was a stray conjuring with no relevance and what was an actual part of his past.

Protecting him from himself and the snakes he knew were hiding among the war council had nearly driven his brother to insanity, something she had been there to witness. Haruno had seen every misstep, had acted as his reluctant healer, the most familiar with the situation. But she couldn't possibly understand the maddening wait.

"Impatience?" he repeated, lowering his voice even as his rage rose. "I've been patient for more than a month. I've followed along with your every directive, endured your every laugh at my expense,"

Her face blanched. "That was—"

"And you say I'm more like who I used to be? That I'm...healing. But who I used to be blurs as much as it sharpens. If there's a means to end this cycle of uncertainty, then who are you to stand in my way?"

"I'm someone who's trying to deal with this situation as carefully as you aren't!" she fumed. He could taste her breath, nearly, they were standing so close. To a passerby maybe they looked like lovers speaking quiet but fervent declarations of passion at each other.

"Then we've reached an impasse, Haruno."

She said nothing, just shoved his arm away, blew past him like a tempest. His mind and his body were ever conflicted, because even as her refusal to submit to whatever they shared pricked at his proud nature, it also excited the hunter. There was a freeness to falconry, a primal enjoyment of the hunt. What stroked his inner fire when it came to Haruno wasn't much different right now.

Had arguing with her been in his best interest, when he still required someone who could be discreet and was familiar with the situation to heal him? Time would tell, he supposed. Leaping down from his tree, he discarded the unfinished food for the crows to find. The issue, as he'd told her, was that time was what he didn't have.
Soundlessly he slipped from the compound, toward the forest. There was a way to achieve what he
desired shrouded in the gloom of the trees; he could sense it.

Day two of her investigation was going no better than the first. Sakura felt like a hapless civilian as
she wandered through the quaint village, Usamaro never far behind, and asked for any information
on the local blacksmith.

No one had seen him in at least one moon cycle though, and even though he was a resident of
Choshu, he hadn't always been. No one could recall when he had blown in and set up a forge in the
sleepy village in the valley. And the descriptions they gave…bizarre. Plain bizarre.

Not a soul had ever seen his true face. He hid it behind a metal helmet with a single hole for his
eye—a chillingly deep green, one old man claimed. Others said he remained covered from head to
toe in black, moving like a wisp of smoke. The only sign he was around was the acrid smog rising
from his forge some nights. While the tidbits she picked up were fascinating, nothing was concrete
enough to be of use, and so she was stalled. Stalled and…hungry.

At high noon, with the weather still pleasantly mild, Sakura broke for lunch. What Choshu lacked
in size or wealth, it made up for in its fertile farmlands and the scenic proximity to the Jaifuku
mountain range.

The people were friendly and used to travelers, graciously extending their hospitality with smiles
on their faces. The local inn where she had purchased a room was staffed by an older couple with
an abundance of laugh lines carved into their wrinkled faces, and their excitable young grandson.

Sakura ate the bowl of potato and leek stew and fresh bread in her room, letting the calm
atmosphere soak into her skin. Usamaro lapped at some minced fish meat they'd given him,
content with just that.

From her window she could see the great, pretty valley beyond, where a wide river flowed through
the mountains, to the village on the other side. Tenryu.

Amicable to her bones, the chatty old woman had told her the Senju often came and visited Tenryu
to get medicinal herbs not grown anywhere else. They didn't stop in Choshu as often, she giggled,
but were very courteous and paid well for services when they did.

As it was only fair, Sakura told them a little about why she was there (nothing to give rise to any
suspicions of course) and they laughed and said many were in awe of the beautiful weapons the
blacksmith made when he was around, though no one quite understand the withdrawn man. He had
no family, and he preferred his work to socializing. So far, everything more or less matched what
Mizuchi had said about this god called Hitotsu. Though it could all just be some coincidence, in
which case he'd be no help.

That had been what she was starting to think, that was. Until little Shou came to refresh her tea.
Usamaro jumped when he burst in without knocking, nearly tripping on his own feet. Only
Sakura's shinobi reflexes allowed her to save both tea and boy from disaster. "You've got to be a
little more careful," she gently scolded as she set him on his feet. "And always remember to
knock."

"Awright," he lowered his head, though the shame lasted a mere minute. "Is what obaa-chan said
true? You're tryna find the blacksmith?"

Sakura savored the floral taste of the tea, nodding. "I am."
"Ah! But you gotta go up in the mountains then." He exclaimed, flailing his arms in emphasis.

"What makes you think he'd be there?"

Shou puffed his chest, beaming. With amusement the kunoichi noticed he was missing three baby teeth in the front. "He always goes there when weather gets good. And! It's cause I was playing in the woods by the river earlier," He had the grace to blush. "Don't tell, okay?"

Looking around as if in caution, Sakura extended her hand and Shou took it happily. "It's a promise."

"Yay! Cause obaa-chan thinks spirits are in the woods…so she doesn't want me goin' alone. But I wasn't alone. I had Taro." The inn's faithful mutt. "And we found…funny footprints," he whispered.

"What was so funny about them?" Usamaro had finished his meal and come over to bat at the too-long hem of the boy's pants.

"It was only one." Shou informed her, holding up a pointer finger. "Like somebody hopped on one leg all the way up in the mountains. Ippon-Datara only has one leg. I know cause I got fussed at lots the last time I stared. Jiji-chan said blacksmiths lose legs sometimes."

"Ippon-Datara?" It was an unusual name. A memorable one.

"That's what everybody calls him!" Shou said. "Some people think he's a ghost too, but it's rude to say so to his face…" The boy tapped his chin as if trying to remember more. "I think ghosts wouldn't have footprints, but my friends said they might. I would have looked for more, but me n' Taro couldn't follow that far, cause then I'd get in trouble for sure!"

Although most might dismiss his words as the rambling of a child, each syllable filled Sakura with renewed hope. The tale had to be significant, and she was hardly one to reject it just because it came from the mouth of a talkative little boy.

"Thanks for sharing all that, Shou," she patted his head. "You'd better get that teapot back to the kitchen."

Shou looked down at the simple, well-loved pot in his hands. "You're right," With a final wave he skipped off, none the wiser to the crucial things he'd told her. Sakura let the door click shut before glancing down.

Usamaro waited at her feet as if to ask what she planned to do.

"Footprints all the way up into the mountains? Maybe I can close in faster than I thought."

"Mrp."

She stood and fluttered around the room, gathering everything she thought she'd need. There was no telling what was truly off in the woods or the mountains beyond, but Sakura wasn't going to be going in unprepared.

ASiT

If someone was going to be a recluse, in this particular river valley was probably the place to do it, Sakura had to admit. She and Usamaro had been trekking through the forest, near the river's banks for close to an hour.
There'd been no sign of strange activity just yet, but they had spotted some of the footprints Shou talked about. The boy was correct that if she had to determine, she'd think someone had hopped through the soft earth on one foot.

The trail unfortunately ended near the bank of the river, making the pinkette question if the trail continued on the other side. She'd been slightly blindsided by how lush the valley was, how wide and strikingly blue the river. Usamaro cried out as if he wanted her attention. Sakura nearly crouched to pick him up, assuming he wanted to ride on her shoulders again.

The young cat was really more of an older kitten, every bit as needy as he was playful. He'd rode on her pack or her shoulders more than he'd walked in the two days it took them to arrive in Choshu.

But bending allowed her to see what had likely captured Usamaro's attention. Multiple blobs, bobbing just above the surface. Contrasting brown, beige, and silver, so out of place that she paused for a closer look. One floated right by, turning to stare up at her with big, bewitching eyes and a flick of its whiskers. That's when she knew what they truly were.

*Otters!* They swam by, nearly a dozen, all of them headed upriver. *What's that about?* Sakura thought. Animals often sensed disturbances in nature long before people. But with the essence of dragon flowing through her, she should have felt something preternatural.

The only thing she felt was compelled to follow them. They were swimming fast, and she had to break into a sprint to keep up. Though he yowled a complaint, Usamaro ran right next to her, his long ears flickering like radar.

As she pushed aside hanging branches and leapt over roots in her way, Sakura noticed the numbers of creatures in the water increasing. What had been dozens were becoming droves, and fast. None of them paid her much attention, too focused on whatever it was they were all headed toward. Sakura squinted against the sunlight falling along the river's surface, trying to guess what could be ahead.

"Wait, I think I see something!" she cried to Usamaro. "It's...someone!" At a bend in the river, the otters at the foremost of the group were hopping from the water and scampering across the grass. Someone stood facing a tall, ebony wall of the mountainside. Someone with shockingly white hair...

They wore a royal blue outfit that hugged a trim waist, and when they raised their arms and water whipped out of the river in a spiraling drill to strike the rock, Sakura froze. She'd have gone tumbling into the water if not for the branch that helped her catch herself. The closer she was, the more there was no mistaking.

Tobirama Senju was in a stare down with a mountain. And despite his attack having made no real dent, with the glare he was giving it, Sakura wasn't sure the mountain was winning.

**Chapter End Notes**

Sakura has a brand new battle outfit! Pictures to follow. Someone is drawing her look for me and they're not done yet, but the rough sketches look incredible, that's all I can
You may recall that last time Sakura went on an extended mission, Usamaro became moody and acted out (more than usual) until she got back. This time he decided to take matters into his own paws and tag along. So yes, he's going to be around a lot in this arc because hurray animal sidekicks. lol

And yes, Sakura is also finally wearing the necklace Madara bought her a while back, while he's wearing the bracelet she gave him that's supposed to help strengthen memory. Any significance to that?

All the food the Uchiha serve at their celebration are traditional New Year's dishes and most are highly symbolic of something. Nishime is a dish of boiled vegetables in a beautiful arrangement, prawn/ebi are eaten for longevity, kurikinton is boiled mashed sweet potatoes with sweet chestnuts and the characters in its name translate to "group of gold", symbolic of a wish for wealth and financial success. Hence Naoko's joke about needing to eat it more than Izuna since she wants to find a wealthy suitor. The dish she offers him instead, subasu (seasoned lotus root with vinegar) is full of holes in the slices of the root, offering someone an unobstructed view of the future. There's a lot on Izuna's mind he's hoping for clarity about: his growing feelings, the intention of people who pose possible threats to Madara's leadership, when Madara will be back to normal, etc.

Datemaki is a sweet, rolled omelet that is mixed with either shrimp or fish paste. Depending on its shape it can either mean celebration or luck with academics.

And, maybe to no one's surprise, while on the trail of the blacksmithing god, Sakura finds a wild Tobirama! XD Stay tuned to see what becomes of this unexpected encounter.

I just finished up a really rough move that got stalled by some months several times, and so this is the first chapter I'm sharing in the aftermath. My life's still pretty busy and I have a lot of unpacking I'm still doing, but hey, at least I got this arc started before next month rules in. This chapter is fresh off the press, so further editing may be done later when I'm up to it. For now it's as is.

Reviews are much appreciated.
Chapter Summary

Tobirama and Sakura find an unexpected lead in their respective searches, calling a truce as they face bigger problems.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

While most had allowed their doubts to pass, Sakura Haruno's appearance in the river all those months ago was still a mystery that gave him pause. Her tale was flimsy at best. A fool could see through it! On that note, not even Hashirama had completely taken her at her word in the beginning. But, his brother was a soft touch for tears, pitiful stories of loss, and anyone he saw as a victim of the era's endless violence.

Needless to say he offered the suspicious girl sanctuary in the Leaf, and after some time observing her, Tobirama still hadn't seen anything particularly incriminating. It didn't mean she wasn't a strange one, though. Too many things were broadcasting that.

So it came as no surprise when, after the most bizarre mission report he had ever heard, Haruno revealed yet more secrets she'd been keeping. Power like nothing he'd ever seen, that she claimed was granted to her by a goddess sometime before she came to the village.

He downplayed his wariness at the time, asserting his stance that as long as she used that power for the village and not against it, she could stay (monitored closely, naturally). When she had turned up at the compound, rolling up her sleeves and ready to offer her unneeded assistance, he'd allowed it for the opportunity to observe her when her guard was down.

As half-expected, she didn't do anything dubious. She was a little too comfortable being bossy and opinionated with him though. His feelings aside, Toka, Hashirama, Reira and now even Mei-san felt that she was trustworthy. They liked her. As for him…Tobirama hadn't lived so long or garnered such a reputation for the abundance of trust he freely gave out.

Respect? Yes, she grudgingly had earned his respect some time ago. Regardless of if he'd been holding back or not, very few people could defeat him in a spar. Time and again Sakura had proven she was as capable a healer as she was a fighter. To force her from the village would be to lose a valuable asset. To give her a reason to turn against it would be to potentially create a huge threat that would harm everything they'd worked toward. Better to keep her close and under a watchful eye, allow her to build a life in Konoha.

That seemed like the smartest move for the time being. But when it all circled back around to trust, Tobirama was faced with a much grayer choice. He wanted to be able to trust her if only for the sake of his clan. But trust and respect weren't mutually exclusive concepts in his world, and he felt it was warranted to continue to keep Sakura Haruno at a distance.

The only issue was she hadn't caught on. Right now, for example, distance extended to a few yards that were closing fast as she walked toward him. Clad in a strange outfit that prominently featured her legs, upper arms and a moderate but noticeable window of skin below her neck that was snug at
her bustline.

Even a four day travel from home, in a remote obscure village, without being summoned, she appeared. If he was a less logical man he might start wishing for her to turn up, just to test a theory and see if the opposite of what he wanted would continue to happen.

Drawing an impatient breath, he turned, eyeing the cat trotting along at her feet. "At this point I won't even question what drew you here," he grumbled, "But I do insist you leave me be." Of course he knew it would never be that simple to get rid of her if the pattern up until now held true.

"If I may be so bold," an officious voice drawled, bringing attention to an otter in a blue breastplate that nearly stood at Haruno's hip level, "Both of you are trespassers as far as the laws of our lands go."

Wonders never ceased. That was a bit shameful, because Sakura had been a ninja through some of the most critical parts of her life, and as a member of Team 7 she'd seen and done and experienced more than her fair share.

A talking animal for instance, she had long ago learned came with the territory. Why it had slipped her mind that some creatures did indeed possess the ability for human speech, she wasn't sure. Other priorities and all that. When the largest otter started speaking, the others falling in behind him, she most certainly felt compelled to listen.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered, "I didn't know." A thought struck that if these otters called the area home, and could communicate then maybe they could help her out. "But…do you mind if I ask you something since I'm here?"

The sleek brown one who had spoken narrowed beady eyes at her, and for a minute she thought he'd refuse. But with a twitch of his damp nose and whiskers, he nodded. "Very well."

Sakura had to withhold her urge to gush, instinctively knowing it wouldn't be appreciated. 'Still so cute!'

Politely, she asked, "Have you seen any other unusual human around lately? Maybe one who might have been hopping…on one leg?"

The otter scoffed, "Including you, we've seen a handful of humans coming and going recently, nearly all with an incredibly dangerous aura. None of them locals. Those from this area know to leave us alone. But we haven't been able to do much to chase out those intruders when we have more pressing concerns."

It was at that moment two otters came scampering out of the forest, one of them sporting a gash that seeped blood through its lighter fur. "Captain Noboru!" The one supporting its comrade squeaked, "They're moving in from the east and they've already broken through our furthermost defenses!"

"Damn them!" The otter snarled, falling to all fours and starting to scamper off. "Leave us, humans. We don't have time for you." he tossed over his shoulder.

Sakura cried out, fingers belatedly stretching for the swift animal who'd already darted into the water with his brethren behind him. 'That was the very best lead I had!' she huffed. 'I could always look for more footprints on the otherside of the river, but I have a feeling if I could just talk to those otters a little more…'
A blur of blue darting by reminded her she hadn't been alone. How she'd ever forgotten a person as domineering in presence as Tobirama was right there, she put down to being relieved for a new lead. A lead growing further and further away.

It took a moment of weighing her desire to respect the animals' wishes to be left in peace, and her growing desperation to continue questioning them about at least a description of the humans they'd seen. Sakura had always tried to respect the rules of sentient animals. Katsuyu had been as great a teacher to her as Tsunade in many ways.

Tobirama on the other hand didn't seem inclined to heed the otters' clear dismissal. He shot of across the river to follow them, and she had to wonder what interest he had in them. There couldn't be any chances they were ultimately chasing similar things…could there? 'If I stop and get lost in my own head I'll lose out for sure!' The white-haired Senju definitely wasn't the only one who could be headstrong.

Sparing her cat a quick look, she made her decision. "Usamaro, climb on!" Obediently, her faithful feline leapt to her shoulders, allowing her to give chase across the water without worrying about losing him in the forest.

Tobirama didn't look back, but he had to know she was following too. Funny how she was the one behind him, and yet the phantom burn of a scathing glare still made the hairs along her neck rise. She wasn't about to let his usual surliness chase her off when something so important was on the line.

Pushing forward, she passed him by, managing to catch up to the largest otter the others were following. Unlike Tobirama, he did look her way, but the glare he leveled on her was hardly more amicable. "I told you we want nothing to do with your kind," Noboru growled. "Why do you persist in being a nuisance?"

Sakura could have laughed. According to a certain Senju, and now this gruff otter, that was her specialty. But she would gladly consider it a compliment seeing as how her tenacity got the job done. "You said suspicious people have been lurking around lately. I'm looking for someone and—"

"I have no time to discuss it further. Humans aren't the only invaders to our territory now, just the most recent. If you won't leave, you'll be forced to soon enough." He began paddling along faster, cutting through the sparkling water with ease. The others sped up as well, fanning the river in an arrow formation with Noboru at its point.

Both frustrated and puzzled, Sakura was more determined than ever to get her answers. Maybe finding out what effected the otters with such urgency should take precedence though. If she could help solve their problem, beat back whoever their "invaders" were, they might be more trusting and willing to talk with her.

A sudden spray of water sprinkled her, making Usamaro hiss in disapproval.

Using chakra in his feet, Tobirama rode a wave generated by his Suiton, gliding along even faster than ever. A few otters turned and murmured to themselves, but otherwise kept ignoring the humans at the back of their assembly.

Pushing some of her dripping hair back, Sakura gave him a blank expression, pumping chakra to her calves as she ran. "Why are you following them?"

She almost expected him not to grace her with a response. "You aren't the only one with an interest
The admission sent her mind into overdrive with speculation. Assuming it had nothing to do with hunting down a wayward god, Tobirama's vested interest in interrogating animals they'd both stumbled on by chance meant he too had come to the river valley with a purpose.

Sakura could wager it wasn't to ask them the best spot to see the sunset from the mountains. And though it probably didn't concern her either way, she had to wonder if his reasons were personal, or something relating back to the village.

Those thoughts would need to be stowed, she realized, noting they had entered a lush area of valley. The ground was green with vegetation and colored by wildflowers; beyond the field an unobstructed view of the mountain range sat. Had it not been for the all-out brawl occurring it would have been a picturesque embodiment of serenity and the pure beauty of nature.

As it was, two of the largest otters Sakura had ever laid eyes on, one standing close to what had to be fifteen feet tall, exchanged blows with an equally large beaver, the shockwaves shaking the ground and sending ripples through the river.

Beneath them, smaller counterparts of both species fought just as viciously, many firing off earth and water jutsu or using weapons made of what appeared to have been large shells or sharpened wood.

Noboru and his reinforcements brushed right by them to join the fray, immediately raining down Suiton on a group of beavers that had closed in on a small group of young otters who were being overwhelmed.

Cries of pain punctuated the air as the water attacks, apparently boiling hot, scalded through the thick, insulated fur of their enemies, driving them back. Sakura winced at the pink, raw skin exposed from second degree burns, trying to process everything happening around her.

She had never witnessed animals with ninjutsu fight each other so brutally, the way human shinobi often did. Admittedly, it was starting to become hard to watch, as an otter was run through and gutted by the sharp wood spear of a beaver.

"What...is this?" she whispered.

"On occasion animals wage warfare like this to settle their disputes the same as clans would," Tobirama replied, coming to stand beside her. He adopted his familiar crossed-arm stance, and Sakura told herself it was a bad time to notice that his short-sleeved shirt revealed how nice his forearms were. "No doubt these are the enemies they're concerned about."

'Yeah...they look evenly matched.' Sakura observed. 'At this rate...'

An angry bellow that pierced the tense air and sent birds shooting out of nearby trees shook the valley. The otter's massive leader blocked an attack from the giant beaver with a wickedly spiked ebony club. "HISOKI!" he ground out, pushing against the equally intimidating blade in his enemy's paws. "Continuing this battle will end in your death!"

Grunting, the beaver twisted his flat tail and slammed it into the ground, sending a shockwave that sent beavers and otters alike flying and nearly caused his opponent to lose footing. "Death only awaits one of us today, Enmei!"

Hisoki held his sword high overhead until it caught the glint of the sun. Sakura glanced briefly at Tobirama, wondering if he was as confused as she was. After all, the move essentially left him
Enmei had realized it too, leaping back with amazing agility that belied an animal of his size and swinging his club up at the beaver's exposed neck. Instead of the direct hit Sakura had been expecting, the beaver brought down his sword, now glowing intensely, striking the club with a clang that made her ears ring.

Even the otters and beavers fighting had temporarily paused their battle to watch their leaders trade blows. "Killing you with my new trick should be a proper demonstration of my power," Hisoki boasted. "Here, you could use a little sun!"

The white otter roared in pain as a white beam from the sword struck him directly in the center of the abdomen, denting his armor and throwing him backwards clear through the valley's treeline. Sakura gaped, unable to keep her eyes from the weapon that suddenly felt otherworldly and a touch familiar.

Usamaro yowled, digging his claws into her shoulder from his spot as the white otter grasped his middle, struggling to remain upright. "W-What kind of…power…? Where did you—" He sputtered a cough, red falling from his mouth in rivulets and staining his stark white fur. Then the giant creature fell onto his back, unmoving, and Sakura couldn't hide her alarm.

"NO!" The otter who had been fighting beside him cried out, her eyes blazing with newfound ferocity. "Monster!" she screeched. "You escalate conflicts, invade our territory, ignore all calls for a truce and now…" She raised a pair of tightly clamped clam shells secured on opposite ends with a weighty length of chain, spinning the super-sized nunchucks and managing to wrap one end around the beaver's neck.

Sakura tore her eyes from the pair to see the fallen otter still taking shallow breaths as he groaned through what was surely intense pain. "It's not too late!" she realized, darting away from Tobirama and the stunned collection of animals with Usamaro holding on for dear life.

Something about letting the otter die felt wrong, and not just because she wanted their trust and possibly help… If everything she'd heard and seen was correct, then they were only defending territory that already rightfully belonged to them. Sakura's Byakugo was already finished spreading over her skin by the time she reached his side. Struggling to sit up, the otter turned his head and stared skeptically.

"Don't worry," she reassured him, lightly hopping up onto his body to examine the injury. "I'm here to help."

"Y-You're a… human I've never seen…" he hissed, his paws falling away from his wound.

"I'm Sakura," She began to work on staunching the internal bleeding and restoring cells to damaged organs. "I was passing through and saw all this, and I feel like I had to help somehow."

Settling down once he realized he was powerless to stop her, the otter said nothing more. His amber eyes closed with a heavy sigh, and she took it as full permission to continue her work. Sakura had an inkling he was no more ready to die than she was willing to let him. Usamaro finally climbed from her shoulders with a small jump, landing beside her and watching her work.

Halfway through the job, with only the quiet thrum of the chakra releasing from her palms and the steadying breaths of the otter in her ears, Sakura decided the fighting must have stopped. Craning her head as best she could while keeping an eye on her patient, she immediately spied a distinct lack of beavers around. Although the female otter with the nunchucks was present, and as far as she
could tell all the surviving otters too.

'How'd they get away without me noticing? And come to think of it, what was up with that sword he had? It was almost like he charged it with sunlight... was that a normal technique for a beaver?'

Animals skilled in ninjutsu sometimes had their own hidden arts, unique to their species. But if that were the case, why had the beavers been able to take the otters off guard? Enmei's state spoke for itself; he hadn't been expecting the move at all. 'Something's definitely going on that needs more investigating...'

A powerful aura fell over her like a shadow, signaling the arrival of Tobirama. He didn't make comment on her work, only watched with thoughtful eyes. Finished, Sakura pulled her hands away and allowed the seal to recede. "There, how does that feel?"

Enmei cracked one eye open. "It feels like I'll breathe another day, thanks to you." Large footsteps quaked the ground, and then a more literal shadow momentarily blotted out the sun as the female otter approached. She carried the club in one paw, pausing to look down with a furrowed brow. "Enmei?" she breathed, clear worry hushing her tone.

"My beloved Chuya," Shifting underneath her feet alerted Sakura to the fact that the animal was getting up. She took Usamaro and hopped down with Tobirama choosing to follow suit. Once standing again, the healed otter reclaimed his club. "I...I was taken off guard, but I am fine. Thanks to this human."

Chuya blinked wide, green eyes at the kunoichi. "You...? You saved him?" Sakura slowly nodded. Though the otter's eyes still swam with bemusement, her stance relaxed considerably.

"I heard that they've been intruding on your land. You were trying to protect your home, so helping was the only right thing to do." Sakura called up to her.

A slow smile made the giant animal all the cuter, her paws clasped in front of her. Unlike her male counterpart, she was a haunting silver, fur fluffier than the average otter's with round green eyes. "You saved my mate. We owe you a debt."


"This again?" The same belligerent otter from earlier popped up, his armor dirtied but looking none the worse for wear. "My lord, this human wants to know about the suspicious people that have been prowling around recently. We have no time for those inquiries, as I've already told he—"

"Hold on, Noboru. This human saved my life. A question seems like a harmless enough thing to ask in exchange, wouldn't you say?"

Grumbling, the dark otter threw up one paw. "I suppose if it's not burdensome for you..."

"Sakura, was it?" The white otter questioned.

Smiling up at him, she nodded. "Yes,"

"I am Enmei, fifteenth leader of the otters of Choshu's Neck. This is my mate, Chuya. If it's within our power, we'd happily answer your questions."

"That easily?" Noboru gawked. "This could all be a trap of some kind. They are humans, need I remind you." Cutting Tobirama a hard glare, he said, "This one in particular has a gruff demeanor."

Sakura snickered into her hand, though by the look she received from the Senju, he heard it all the
same.

"You're one to talk, creature?" Tobirama sniffed. "And if your leader is feeling amenable to answering questions, I have a few of my own."

Sakura began to protest, but Chuya gave a delighted coo. "I was preoccupied, but I saw you help our forces chase off the last of the beavers. You both must be proud to have found such competent mates in each other."

Tobirama's face soured in irritation, but then he schooled it into indifference. "That's not our connection. We hail from the same village and apparently had ideas of traveling to the same location for answers."

"Oh," Sakura was sure if otters could, Chuya would blush. "I...I apologize." She cleared her throat, "Well, regardless you both helped us today. I agree with Enmei that we will answer your questions if we can."

"But Lady Chuya, we've only just beaten back Hiroki," Noboru reminded persistently, one paw clenching around a sword strapped at his side. "Letting our guard down out in the open wouldn't be wise."

"You make a good point, my friend," Enmei admitted, "I think we should continue this discussion elsewhere. After we attend to our fallen, of course."

Noboru smirked in victory. From the way things had been going for him since they'd arrived, he probably felt like he needed the win. It was clear he was used to his suggestions being taken into serious consideration. "Of course, a rational pla—"

"Normally it would be out of the question, but I think under these circumstances, you've earned enough of our trust." Chuya clapped. "It's settled—climb onto me and we'll carry this conversation back to our Couch in Prisms Cave."

The gasp Noboru released was so high-pitched it could have been mistaken as a squeal. "H-Hold a minute!" he cried, "Humans in The Couch?!"

Sakura got a very strange mental image of being lost between the crevices of giant couch cushions, though she had a feeling that wasn't what they meant.

"Trust us, if not them." Enmei shifted, lowering his head.

Noboru took a moment to calm down enough to respond, babbling out incomprehensible words in the meantime. Expelling a deep breath, he sulked an affirmative response. "Then I will take some of our group and bury the dead."

"Thank you," Chuya beamed, her eyes crinkling.

He was very obviously still unhappy about the whole thing, but he turned around and commanded about fifteen otters to follow him as they set about collecting their fallen.

"Are you all ready?" Enmei prompted, drawing the attention back to the two of them. Tobirama didn't think twice about teleporting himself up onto the silver otter's head, making his decision clear. Not to be out done, Sakura collected Usamaro and leaped, Chuya's soft fur tickling the backs of her legs.
The whole thing had happened in a sudden bout of inspiration. Just a typical break from the office when he happened to pass by the very same lacquer-ware store they had all visited not long ago. That was when Hashirama remembered how impressed Sakura was by the furniture and something just clicked.

She'd been so down the last time they spoke—or maybe that was more of his problem—and trying to cheer her up felt like a good way to show friendly solidarity. There was perhaps a more subtle way than his grand gesture, but admiring the sparkling new furniture arranged in her home, it was probably too late.

Hashirama couldn't resist patting himself on the back for a job well done. Everything from the golden cabinet she had eyed in the shop, to the other accent pieces he had carefully chosen, fit so well. If Sakura could get over any hesitance she had about accepting gifts of such a notable price, he was sure she'd enjoy her living space more than ever.

It might be somewhat harder to sell her on the Uchiha currently taking up occupancy in her kitchen, though. Madara watched him from over his tea cup with the most casual, unbothered expression.

Hashirama frowned. 'I knew I forgot something...like replacing the seals she put on the door.' He'd removed them the first trip to the shop. After unloading as much as he could, he returned once more to pick up the rest of the purchases. But he was positive he hadn't been gone longer than a half hour. Madara must have swept in during that time.

Finishing a strong, slow sip from his cup, Hashirama's old friend decided to acknowledge him at last. "Considering you didn't ask for my advice, I admit you did a decent job here." So saying, he got up and walked the kitchen area and smoothed a hand down a find the Hokage was particularly proud of. A black table that was meant to be the new centerpiece of the kitchen.

It could comfortably seat at least five, a blooming plum tree in all its delicate splendor decorated the entirety of its surface. The mighty trunk stretched down the base of the table with thin branches of perfumed white flowers winding their way to the tabletop and around the edges.

The art was so masterful it gave the illusion that some of the petals had blown loose and were fluttering to the ground in a spring gust. Hashirama adored the piece the minute he set eyes on it, almost buying it for himself. But the deed was supposed to be for Sakura's benefit, so he dutifully brought it to her house instead.

As he watched Madara's fingertips graze over a three piece canister set on a matching rack, his mind once again drifted back to what Sakura might think of the surprise. Each jar depicted several cranes down on a riverbank.

Some bobbed their long necks toward the water, beaks open for fish. Others arched their downy white wings behind them and turned their heads to the sky mid-song. The artisan had brightened the lacquerware's dark background with not only the white of the birds, but the green and orange pops of color that made up the bank and the tall foliage at the water's edge. "But," Dark eyes regarded him dully. "I can't help but think you've overdone it. You seem prone to that."

Hashirama huffed in disbelief. "What are you saying? Unsurprisingly it's hard for you to give out a compliment and leave it at that."

The Uchiha chuckled, letting his hand drop. "I'm only pointing out that this is a great deal of effort to go through for someone you aren't courting."

"It sounds like you're the one overreacting." Hashirama tutted. "Sakura-san will appreciate it as the
"Oho, friendship is it?" Madara plopped himself back at the table where he'd been drinking tea. There was a teapot with steam still wafting from it, and he poured himself a fresh cup.

"Yes, and if you spent half as much time actually talking to her as you do antagonizing her, you'd see how interesting Sakura-san is to spend time with." Sighing, Hashirama dropped down on his knees across from his best friend. "Er, and on another note... Why are you here anyway?"

The raven-haired man made a face as if the tea scalded him, but from the strong gulp he took that probably wasn't the case. "Tell me Hashirama, when your brother broods, as he so often does, how do you handle it?"

The question gave him pause as the all too familiar picture of an irate Tobirama came into his head. "It really all depends on how bad it is," he cringed. "Normal levels of moodiness I've gotten accustomed to. But if it's showing signs of escalating into a full-blown wrath, it's better to stay clear."

"Huh," he set down his tea, shaking his head. "You can't even stand up to your own brother."

"Is that the way it is?" The Senju's brow lifted in amusement. "I don't think the question was random curiosity. I don't suppose you're avoiding Izuna right now, hm?"

Glares, Madara all but spat his reply. "That's different. Anyone can handle a shinobi in a volatile mood. At least that makes for an interesting spar. But I'm going on a lack of sleep and five straight hours of being serenaded by the same somber flute pieces."

A sly smirk curled up the edges of his lips. "Really? Because when you put it that way it sounds like you ran from music."

"It wasn't just any music. It was the most sorrowful music I've ever heard. I think..." Madara explained. "The curses of memory loss include not recalling that when he's upset, Izuna plays everyone to tears on the shakuhachi. Naoko claims it's part of his coping process."

Hashirama was still failing to see what was so wrong about a few lonely songs on the flute. Alternately, Madara didn't remember experiencing the brunt of Tobirama's temper, which was usually laced with some manner of killing intent.

Armed with memories, he wouldn't complain as much about Izuna's more reasonable hobby to relieve stress. His brother's 'coping process' was challenging whoever he was angriest at to a spar (and that often happened to be him) and then unceremoniously attempting to drown them.

Although, interest was starting to niggle into his thoughts. "Coping with what exactly?"

Madara shrugged a shoulder and stretched one leg out underneath the table. "He thinks he upset Haruno before she left the village, but he hasn't explained how."

That drew a slow blink of consternation from the Hokage. Izuna was tied to the frantic way Sakura left so suddenly?

"I personally don't think it's any reason to sulk. I irritate Haruno purposefully and often, and I haven't suffered any cosmic consequences," Madara boasted.

'Yet.' Hashirama silently added. One day he was going to push one too many buttons and then Sakura would be using Madara's face to scrub bark off a tree. "I guess I can understand the
Truthfully he couldn't judge Izuna when he had initially experienced a similar level of panic at the thought of ruining the growing friendship between himself and the pink-haired kunoichi.

A part of him pitied the younger Uchiha brother and was rooting for him to work out his lament when Sakura came back. Whenever that was. "But Izuna's playing aside, you seem pretty comfortable for this to have been your first time over."

And, in true Madara fashion he made no pretense to hide his ironic sneaking. "I've visited before, if that's what you're fishing for."

"Visited?" he pried, finding the wording a little hard to believe.

"You know, you claim that if I spoke to Haruno more, I'd see how interesting she can be. But who's to say I don't already have any awareness of that?"

Maybe Hashirama should have seen it coming. Since meeting her, Madara reveled in infuriating her as much as she once proclaimed to despise him. Lately, their dynamic didn't seem as full of outright animosity, but it was no less intense. Somehow, someway, he had missed the possibility that it could be due to a reason like this… Madara had interest in Sakura that wasn't strictly aggravating her.

Mouth dry, Hashirama murmured, "You're sure?"

What a question! When was Madara ever unsure? Truth be told, the Senju didn't know why he needed confirmation at all. When he let the fact settle, it came as no true surprise.

Only a minute earlier he himself said Sakura was someone interesting, worth getting to know. Without Hashirama even realizing it, his friend had gleaned that too. His ways of going about it were unorthodox and certainly ill-advised, but in a strange way he and Sakura did seem closer since the mission to Sekai. Shinobi often forged a bond over shared survival of a difficult mission…

"That's doesn't mean it'll lead anywhere. Who can say?" The Uchiha's tone was hushed and thoughtful. "Since coming back to the village, I realize my body remembers what the heat of battle feels like. The…dance that sent my blood soaring every time. Haruno makes me feel something similar to that. I won't deny I like the familiarity."

That was an interesting Madara-esque view on the situation. It explained how he approached the kunoichi. If he enjoyed the thrill of evoking her temper, Hashirama wondered when he was going to get his fill. "Are you sure you aren't conflating the way you feel about battles with the way you feel about Sakura-san?"

"It's possible but unlikely. Haruno has other merits that interest me."

"You're both very passionate people." he noted, spreading his fingers against the tabletop and leaning further into his elbow. "For better or worse."

"There's that," the Uchiha smirked, polishing off the last of his drink. "But most women around me are a bit too eager to mold themselves into the constraints of the clan. Save for of course Naoko. Haruno has no clan affiliation, no sense of duty to tradition, no coyness about the fact that she is a kunoichi who gets her hands dirty. All of that balanced with a frankness and vulnerability that shouldn't work, are things I find intriguing."
Knowing the man for as long as he did, it wasn't difficult to pick up on the unspoken message there. It didn't quite stop at a mild intrigue if Madara chose to appear in her home when she wasn't there.

It was bold and rude but…if he had grown that attached to the exchanges between them, maybe he missed it…no, missed her? Undeniably there was attraction growing. One Madara was cognizant of and embracing. He still wore the bracelet gifted to him on his birthday, claiming there was no deep meaning behind why.

'Should I feel some form of jealousy?' Hashirama thought. 'If they were to court at some point, then there connection would only grow deeper. Much deeper than any friendship I could offer her…'

The intention had only been to come and prepare a gift for when Sakura returned.

Instead he found himself turning the thought of his childhood friend and newfound friend as a couple, and wondering if that should elicit a negative response that was currently absent from his thoughts.

Typically speaking, there would only be cause for adverse feelings if he too shared an interest beyond that of friends. "…and you?" the deep voice droned.

"H-huh?"

Madara looked him over with undisguised exasperation. "I asked what draws you so close to Haruno?"

"I like making friends," he blurted instinctively.

"…How unoriginal."

What kind of answer was Madara hoping to pull from him exactly? "Sorry, I didn't know I was being judged on creativity," the brunette added cheekily. "But if you want my honest opinion: Sakura-san is a clever conversationalist, a highly skilled medic, thoughtful to a fault," he paused for a breath. "Doesn't it seem strange to discuss her in such depth when she's not around?"

If Madara had more tea to slurp, he probably would have snort it out on a sneer. "Don't be such a naïve simpleton." he retorted. "Women do the same when menfolk aren't present."

"O-Oh," Hashirama cocked his head. "Is that so? I never really considered…" And he also itched to ask how the proud Madara Uchiha (still struggling with amnesia) knew so much about the thought processes of the opposite sex. But with everything they had already discussed in one conversation, it was likely a better topic for another day.

The Couch didn't have over-sized cushions, but Sakura wasn't ready to discard the possibility of getting lost in it just the same. The true home of the otters, the depths of Prisms Cave (the likes of which didn't appear on her map), was where they resided in comfort beside an underground river. Safe in their spacious haven, otters dove into turquoise water clear enough to see the bottom far below, from a row of small precipices.

The sides of the cavern were dotted with elaborate stick huts the otters curled into. Their brethren that emerged from the water did so with a bounty of freshwater fish, clams and shrimp.

As Sakura followed the hulking form of Enmei deeper in, they passed a sparkling mound of pearls heaped innocently in one cove. Otters cracked open clams and slurped out the insides, spitting out more tiny priceless orbs. 'I've never seen such a haul before in my life,' she marveled. 'A treasure
hunter would kill to get their hands on those. They'd kill to find this place at all.'

All around them, the rock walls themselves shined in a wavy ripple of reds, oranges, greens, blues and purples. 'That solves the mystery of the name.' Up above their heads was even more stunning, the ceiling literally glittering with bio-luminescent light. Sakura couldn't make out what caused the glow, but the fact that they were being entrusted with something precious wasn't lost on her.

"As you can see," Enmei rumbled, "To allow outsiders to find our home would be disastrous. For generations we've spent our days as guardians of The Neck. It's even been called The Pulsepoint of the Valley because of the fertility of the river banks and the abundance of life." Sakura reached out with careful fingers and brushed them along the rock wall as they went. It was hard to put it on her imagination when she felt the flare of energy skim her skin. "And the location of our Couch is the best kept secret of all."

"I can see why," she breathed. "It's nothing short of magical down here. Thank you for showing us."

"We have always been wary of humans," Enmei looked over his shoulder and smiled. "However, you have proven yourself to be different. You healed not only me but all our injured. And so quickly! Not many human healers are as efficient as you… that much I know."

Sakura flushed, scratching her rosy cheek. "W-Well I—"

"Your companion also is clearly a powerful shinobi. I presume you are as well."

"I'll admit he's strong. And my skills have been expanding a lot lately," she explained. Sentient warrior animal or not, would Enmei care to know she housed the power of a dragon in her body? Noboru had told them plainly dangerous, suspicious humans were lurking in the river valley. This close to having her questions answered she didn't want them to decide she was too big a threat to converse with.

He stopped and ushered her forward into a giant alcove with a wave of his paw. Inside, Chuya hummed as she threw mounds of fish and shrimp into a huge pot on a fire and stirred with a scooped shell.

A cluster of young otters, no doubt juveniles, bounced around an impatient Tobirama, asking him questions about the 'human world' and tugging on his clothes. One brave soul had even crawled onto his shoulders, resting its little upper body on his head. If the sight wasn't comical enough, the fact that he was hunched into a tiny stone chair meant for the small rear end of an otter nearly sent her into hysteric. The Senju might be intimidating to human children and even grown men and women, but apparently nothing about that dictatorial aura did a thing to spooky curious baby otters.

"Mrrept!" Her cat's cry echoed through the room. Sakura found him standing between two more otter pups who threw a purple urchin back and forth to each other over his head. Usamaro made quite a few impressive leaps in an attempt to grab it, but all of them came up short.

'So this is where they've both disappeared off to while I was tending the wounded.'

"Right on time!" Chuya called, looking up from her cooking. A large, cooking otter. Sakura was yet again reminded of how shinobi truly lived in a world far removed from the mundane lives of civilians. Usamaro saw her and came scampering over to launch himself into her arms and mew out complaints. "I'm almost done here. It isn't much, but we had to thank you both for all your help
today, and welcome you to our humble home."

"We should be thanking you," Sakura bowed. "You trusted us enough to invite us here."

"Please sit," Enmei offered. Some of the mirth at Tobirama's expense dropped away when she noticed she was being offered a small seat next to his at a stone table already set with cups of water.

With a hidden grimace, Sakura carefully planted herself into the uncomfortable seat, not wanting to be impolite after the otters went out of their way to be accommodating. She was fairly sure Chuya was only cooking the food to suit their tastes. Plenty of the other otters she had seen were fine catching and eating their fill of raw river food.

The otter matriarch stopped stirring, her whiskers twitching uncontrollably as she tilted her head a bit.

Sakura had to contain another outburst, Usamaro groaning as she accidentally squeezed him. 'The bigger they are, the more adorable!'

"Yes, The Couch here in Prisms Cave is our ancestral home. We're naturally very proud and protective of it. I was telling your mat—um, friend, that we've lived in unsteady peace with the beavers for generations. Their territory is Tenryu's Crown, in the northernmost area of the river valley."

"What caused the change?" Sakura wondered. "What made it escalate into all-out war?"

"That we haven't been able to really determine," Enmei sighed. "Months ago they began to ignore the treaty, encroaching slowly into our territory. Provocations have only grown. We've fought with all our might to drive them off. But until today it's been a bitter stalemate."

He made his way over to the pups surrounding Tobirama and gently plucked them up one by one into his massive paw. Viewing the size scale between them and the abnormally big otter only made the difference more alarming.

They whined at the loss of their new "playmate", the one who'd latched onto the man's head even starting to whimper and cry. When their leader reached for the pup, it dove off Tobirama's head and into his lap, where it curled itself under one of his arms.

Enmei lowered all the other pups to the ground and told them to run along to their families. They complied, but not before waving goodbye at their human guests. Their lithe forms turned the corner with excitable whoops echoing behind them.

Returning his attention to the last stubborn little kit, Enmei rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I apologize. Little Arisu lost both her parents in the last battle against the beavers. The poor thing is so young she hasn't even started talking yet." Quietly, he whispered, "...She's been searching for someone new to latch onto."

Sakura's heart broke over the pitiable creature, desperate for affection she certainly wasn't about to find in the likes of Tobirama. He stared down at the baby animal with an unreadable expression, and she was afraid he might just brush her out of his lap.

Instead, a pale hand finally came to rest on her head, and with just that meager bit of acceptance, Arisu preened, closing her eyes in elation. "Never mind this," he grunted. "I'm more interested in hearing about these human trespassers you've been dealing with."
While he may have taken attention from the purring pup clinging to him, Sakura didn't miss how his hand would occasionally stroke down her rust-colored body.

'Could cute animals be his soft spot?' she mused. Who'd have ever imagined that discovery?

"Ah yes, Noboru did say you were keenly interested in that earlier. Enough to follow him to the battlefield."

"Maybe it was kismet," Chuya suggested. She heaved the boiling pot off the fire and then shot a squirt of water from her mouth into the flames to smother it. "Without you, I'd have lost my mate today, and the beavers would have dealt us a decisive blow we may not have been able to recover from."

"The humans who have been coming and going do so from the border that had been declared neutral territory, further into the mountains." Enmei reached up onto a natural rock shelf and pulled down a stack of various sized clay bowls. He passed them to his mate, who ladled whatever was in her pot into each of them. "It leads to a series of underground passages that come out into the fields where the—"

"Herbs the Senju collect twice a year grow. Those fields are invaluable to my family's medicine stores." Tobirama interrupted. "I tried investigating the usual route we take, but it's been walled off by mountain that wasn't there before. Attacking it did nothing."

"Mountains don't just crop up," Sakura murmured. "And the right jutsu or a good punch should be able to reduce them to rubble." She thought back to when she first encountered him along the bank. 'But I guess what he was doing when I found him earlier makes sense.'

"Both facts I'm well aware of," he snapped, "As loathe as I am to say it, the circumstances aren't ordinary. Your unwelcome visitors may have something to do with it," he told the animals. Chuya finished putting food into every bowl she was handed, then let out an ear-piercing whistle that reverberated through the entire cave. Suddenly more otters spilled from near every crevice, flashes of browns, silvers, tans, and reds.

They clambered around the long, stone table to join them. When a bowl was sat in front of Sakura's nose, Usamaro growled softly as he leaned into it. The pinkette jerked him away with a disapproving glare, which he returned. She had to admit though, she understood the temptation. The smell rising from it was tantalizing, an aroma heavy with the scent of shrimp and fish from a dish that appeared to be chowder of some kind.

A smaller, heavily filled bowl was sat next to hers, Chuya winking down at Usamaro. The cat meowed his praise before hopping from her arms and onto the table to throw his face into the dish. Only with a well of restraint did Sakura remain calm as she picked up the shiny piece of shell in the bowl and spoon food into her mouth.

The first bite was plenty hot and packed with chunks of shrimp and a thick plant reminiscent in taste of seaweed. Somehow, it only enhanced the taste of the creamy chowder, the delicious flavor spreading over her tongue.

As Tobirama's statement hung in the air, the head otters shared a concerned look. "Well neither the beavers nor the otters have much reason to venture into those fields. And with our territory under constant threat of invasion, we'd had to hold off on investigating further, as I'm sure Noboru informed you." Chuya continued. "But I can tell you the people we've seen were all completely covered. They wore dark clothes and masks and carried strange weapons. They've never interfered
with us in anyway, but it's clear that they're dangerous."

"When was the last time you spotted them?" Tobirama demanded. Sakura had to hand it to him; even with a dozing otter pup in his lap, sitting in a stone seat much too tiny for him, he maintained that commanding demeanor.

"A week ago," Enmei recalled. "They headed through The Neck and then off into the mountains. But if you're thinking of heading off after them, I should tell you what once was neutral land, the beavers have now seen fit to claim for themselves. Come to think of it, that black mountain wall's been there since they have a month or two ago."

"Didn't you say that's when the beavers got more aggressive?" Sakura was starting to get an even worse feeling than she initially had. And an idea of what Tobirama was doing in the region.

The Senju had been crippled by a pox not even two months ago, and while she was never fully briefed on the circumstances, the admission that the clan gathered herbs from the mountains here was significant. *Especially if it was a deliberate attack. The inn owners knew the Senju visit Tenryu for that reason. They definitely aren't the only ones. If someone really wanted to find an indiscreet way to attack the whole clan at once, and they were patient and cunning enough—'*

"Yes it was," Enmei confirmed. "We never thought there was any true correlation before now. But that weapon Hisoki had today was like nothing either side has ever possessed before. There isn't a doubt in me that it was given to him, not forged by the beavers."

"Forged!" Sakura gasped. "I...I've been looking for someone who forges. The locals here call him Ippon Datara and say he disappears deep into the mountains for long periods of time."

Enmei rubbed his chin. "A one-legged fellow?"

Heart thrumming in excitement, she nodded. "Yes!"

"He comes and goes peacefully every season," One of the eating otters sitting diagonal from Sakura said. "Never bothers us any. He's another odd sort."

"Have you seen him lately though?" Sakura pressed, clenching the edges of her bowl and ignoring Usamaro wolfing down food beside her.

"Almost a moon cycle ago he went off and hasn't come back down the mountains." A brown female otter chimed in. "We saw him out on our patrols."

"A blacksmith capable of making frightening weapons, and individuals who have similar weapons and may be involved in meddling with my clan," Tobirama grit out. "I'd like to find this weapons-maker for myself if it leads to information on them."

"But why would he give the beavers a weapon like that?" Enmei grumbled. "We've never had any issues with him, nor he with us."

Sakura helped herself to several more bites of chowder. "It sounds like right now the most prudent thing to all of us is finding out more about these people. Our problems may be more intertwined than we thought."

"That would mean fighting through one of the beaver's strongholds." Chuya clicked her tongue. "It's held by Hisoki's sister Hatsuko."

"Yes, and she's ruthless and more deranged than her brother." A dark gray otter with half of one ear
missing hissed. "She cleaved through two units of our finest with no issues."

Tobirama didn't bat an eye, staring into his chowder. "If going through her is the only way to progress further into the valley, then she'll find humans can be just as ruthless if properly motivated." There was dark promise laced in his words, a warning best heeded to anyone who stood between him and the answer of who had harmed his family.

"Teaming up with humans to battle the beavers?" Noboru squawked from somewhere further down. "That's…that's—"

"Just innovative enough to work, and our best option, given how things went today." The otter with the torn ear concluded. "Granted Lady Chuya and Lord Enmei find it permissible." All eyes fell to the two at the head of the table.

"I have no trouble joining forces with these humans," Enmei spoke. "Would you do us the honor?"

"Seeing as we all have something to gain I suppose so," Tobirama conceded. "Haruno, you'll come with me to Tenryu tonight."

The sudden declaration made Sakura swiftly lift her head. "I'll what?"

Giving her a flat stare that brooked no argument, he continued eating in silence. Sakura rolled her eyes and returned to her own food. He either wanted to interrogate her properly about her presence in the valley when they were away from the otters, or include her in whatever strategizing he was hatching. Either way, he could stand to be less glacial about the whole thing.

He was no more open than he'd been the brief time she had spent learning water jutsu from him. It made the less severe look he sported without his happuri and armor misleading. Tobirama was no doubt as mentally and verbally sharp as ever.

'And I have to find a way to cooperate with him again,' Sakura was already exhausted by the prospect. There was no Hashirama around to pop up and offer a silly story to defuse tensions. 'I'll just be honest and explain why I need to know if this blacksmith is who I'm searching for.' With any luck, that would be enough to placate the impassive shinobi. If not, Mizuchi’s mission would become that much more difficult with a distrustful Tobirama trailing her every step of the way.

Twilight had arrived by the time they left The Couch. Haruno tromped grudgingly several paces behind him on the road back to the little village. Her cat, equally as wary, walked in her shadow, far away from him. He still couldn't believe she'd brought it along in the first place.

Although a great many things took precedence, namely the alliance cobbled together with the Otters of The Neck. The attack they would need to mount on the Beavers of The Crown's stronghold.

And perhaps most importantly what Haruno was really doing in the area at all. Hashirama knew better than to send someone along when he explicitly said he would be fine alone.

Yet the otters had taken them back to the river bank where they'd all met and left them a while ago, and still the silence stretched on. A yawning chasm by this point. The forest was behind them, the scenery having changed to field after field of farmland. Livestock grazed behind sturdy fencing with the smell of grass and cowpies in the air.

Occasionally they'd see a young farmhand who would stop and tip his hat before continuing to tend to the animals. The people here were so content with their quiet, simple lives. Tobirama wondered
what it may have been like to grow up far away from the bloody, tragic life of a shinobi.

Somewhere like here in a small farming village. He couldn't imagine it. But if they all kept striving to make Konoha a haven for ninja and civilians alike, maybe someday a Senju child would be born only knowing the kind of peace these people lived in.

In the meantime, plenty of work was left to do. When they returned to his room at the inn in Tenryu, he intended to get the truth, the full truth, of what Haruno's objective was. Something told Tobirama it was related to the troubling antics she was always claiming her goddess pulled her into. And there was no proof this deity was in anyway benevolent, only that Haruno followed her instructions.

"Hey," the pink-haired woman's voice began. "What's going on over there?" Before he looked he had sensed trouble in the form of four young men in the field up ahead. They were loud, dressed in finer clothes than any farmer would be wearing, and laughing as they startled horses and made them thunder away.

None of them seemed to care about having an audience either, content to carry on with their mischief. "I can't believe the things people are willin' to part with under the right sort of persuasion." A young man with oily hair to his shoulders clutched his stomach and snorted. "But is this really the shit rich bastards wear?" He pulled at a sleeve of the deep purple kimono with a grimace. "The old man's clothes are sorta scratchy."

Tobirama was over the fence and looming behind him in an instant. Breath barely had time to hitch at his sudden intrusion before the Senju had delivered a less than gentle blow to the bandit's neck, sending him careening to the ground with a thump. "Then slip into something a little more comfortable—like unconsciousness." he sneered down at the prone body. Thieves who preyed on the vulnerable were no better than the disgusting parasites of society in his eyes. He'd never tolerated them before and he wasn't about to start now.

Despite having him outnumbered, the man's companions—all decked in ridiculously flashing jewels and clothes that were as stolen as their leader's—took off in a run without a glance back. 'No honor among thieves.' Tobirama knew he wouldn't even need to break a sweat to catch them, no matter how much of a head start they had. But the pink blur that sent a hard round-house kick into another bandit's face told him there was no need to trouble himself. With a frightening battle cry Haruno had dispensed of all the others attempting escape, cat on her shoulder and all.

Dusting her hands in satisfaction, the kunoichi looked down her nose at the groaning, unconscious band of rogues. Her cat jumped down and landed on the first body he found, yanking a sparkling ring from unclasped fingers and strutting off with it.

For the time being, Haruno focused on berating the criminals they'd apprehended. "If you're going to bully people out of their belongings you should at least be strong enough not to be defeated easily." Pulling her eyes away from the three she'd taken out, she walked over to the leader, crouching close and wrapping her arms around her knees for balance. "...Unconsciousness? You hit him pretty hard...are you sure he's—"

Tobirama placed his hands on his hips, scowling at the implication. "The last I checked only one of us was a sensor. He's still wasting space and sucking in breath." He glanced between the blood dribbling from the bandit's mouth and the teeth scattered in the grass. Pointedly staring Haruno in the eyes, he smirked. "And knocking a man's teeth down his throat was the only way to stop him, surely."
She had the grace to blush, "Alright so maybe we both overdid it. Now what should we do with them? We can't ask who they took these things from and—Usamaro, what do you think you're doing?!"

The spotted cat had climbed onto a horse's back, lazily draping himself there as the larger animal flicked its tail and broke into a slow trot.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he sighed to suppress a frustrated growl. Why exactly did she have to bring her cat?

ASiT

The caravan the thieves robbed turned out to be long gone, but the local farmers whose livestock had been getting harassed lately were happy to accept the jewels and fine clothes in compensation. Their captured bandits woke up, one urinating himself on the spot when he saw Tobirama again. The red-eyed glare of doom probably had a lot to do with it.

After the group babbled apologies and promised not to cause more problems, the duo left them tied up and under the supervision of some irritated farmers, who vowed to put them to work in the fields until they had adequately made up for the harm they caused.

Sakura couldn't muster up any pity for them, and Tobirama definitely didn't have any to spare. Of course, that didn't say much. He wasn't the type to go around giving out pity and patience and second chances, always maintaining a staunchly earnest attitude.

It was only a matter of time before the rapid fire questions started up, and they were closer to Tenryu than before. They'd probably arrive in time for dinner. Not that eating was high on the agenda after how well the otters fed them.

"Haruno,"

'Here we go...' Sakura braced herself to the best of her ability.

"What do you know about this Ippon Datara?"

"I haven't been investigating long, but from the information I cobbled together, there's a local blacksmith by that name. He's pretty mysterious and wanders off a lot. I'm looking for him because...well," Sakura chewed her lip until it started to get sore, "I need a weapon that's effective against some of the threats that aren't exactly human. I don't know if he's the one I've been searching for or just a normal blacksmith with the same general appearance."

Tobirama remained silent, to the point where she wondered if he would just pretend he had never asked. "Then you've come out of your way on what's essentially a hunch,"

She could just feel him judging her, and she wasn't about to stand for it. "You made it perfectly clear in Lord Hokage's office that because of my position, I had a responsibility to use my power to protect the village. I couldn't sit around waiting for a better idea," she asserted. "It was this or risk being overpowered when the time comes."

They were cresting the final hill in the road, Tenryu sitting down below. The far off sounds of a dog barking and children shouting drifted up to them.

"...Well said,"

Praise falling from his lips was about the last thing she expected. "You're...leaving it at that?"
"For now." he muttered. "My priority is dragging whoever dared to target the Senju from whatever shadow they're hiding in."

"And then?" Sakura urged on.

"And then it'll be time to pay the favor forward," Tobirama's tone was so diplomatic to be discussing murder she almost had to laugh. "So if your blacksmith has any involvement, I hope you procure your weapon before I find him myself."

Sakura understood then that she would have to do just that. She had enough firsthand experience to know headstrong shinobi didn't just end their crusades for revenge because someone asked nicely.

'Mizuchi, this weapon had better be worth it...'

Chapter End Notes

Last chapter the little boy from the inn (Shou) tells Sakura that the people have dubbed the mysterious blacksmith Ippon Datara, which is sort of a clue in itself. Ippon Datara is often depicted in Japanese lore as one of several things, but most commonly is described as a yokai with a single leg and a single eye that lives in the mountains, normally without disturbing anyone. Except on a particular winter night, when it becomes aggressive and will crush anyone it encounters with its one giant foot.

Because of this folktale, it's considered an unlucky day to wander in the mountains in the regions of the country where it's said to appear on that particular day (December 20th). Other people have different explanations for who/what exactly Ippon Datara is. It's been said to be the ghost of a famous one-footed/one-eyed bandit named Hitotsudatara, or possibly the ghost of a woodcutter who once cut off his own leg in penance for a crime. Though stories of the last version are a bit more obscure, my favorite telling is that it's the alias of the degraded blacksmithing god Ame no-me Hitotsu no Kami. For obvious reasons the arc reflects that, and the conflicting information Sakura was getting is largely because of the many versions that exist in real myth.

You may remember a chapter or two back when Sakura accompanied Hashirama and the others to look for birthday gifts, she was really taken in by the pieces of furniture in the lacquer-ware store. Remembering this, Hashirama buys out half the store to surprise her when she gets back. Nothing says "let's keep things platonic" as much as buying your lady friend a very expensive new furniture set. Lavish.

The shakuhachi mentioned is a type of bamboo flute that dates back to early feudal times in parts of Asia. It's pretty culturally significant as far as traditional music goes. In my mind, Izuna plays it so well he could be a bard if he ever stopped being a ninja. Sadly when you're moping around over your secret-only-to-you crush you play the blues and chase your elder brother away from home with it.

This chapter also properly introduces their new allies the Otters of The Neck, who are animal characters I have been dying to add in for ages now. Yes, they will be crucial in this arc. An added fun fact is that a group of otters has lots of potential names. They can be called a family, a lodge, a bevy, a romp or a raft. The last two in particular are my favorites. And their dens can at times be called a holt or a couch. I think it's
hilarious that TobiSaku got taken to visit the Otter Couch. As mentioned here, it's a beautiful bio-luminescent cave unknown to humans and their enemies. The otters take shells and fashion them into weapons as well as using pearls they collect from the clams as their currency. Baby otters can be called pups or kits, so I will use both interchangeably.

As the holidays approach I will be probably taking an extended break. I may try to update once or twice more before then, but we'll see. Please review—thanks. More twists, turns
Haze

Chapter Summary

Tobirama and Sakura head to battle with their new allies, the otters, but a fly in the ointment may complicate plans....

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The accommodations granted to him were clearly special. Sakura could have figured that out even if the hostess of the inn hadn't greeted Tobirama's return with hearts in her eyes.

The woman wasn't discourteous when she saw he'd brought back company though. She prattled on about how lovely Sakura's hair was, how much she loved her sense of fashion. Her name was Etsudo, and despite having a teenaged son she had the energy of a young woman herself.

"I'll have Eito bring up dinner just as soon as it's done," she winked.

"Actually," Sakura began, "We've eaten already."

"Yes, and we shouldn't be disturbed." Tobirama added.

"Oh," Etsudo pouted, her hands clasped in front of her. "Well...you'll come down for breakfast then?"

Sakura blushed. "I'm not staying the ni—"

"Haruno," Tobirama was already climbing the stairs. "Let's get on with it."

"Thank you," Sakura quickly bowed and hurried to follow her temporary partner.

Usamaro leapt the steps two at a time, and she tried to ignore Etsudo's remarks behind them. "You know, your father was stiff like that when we met," she was telling her son. "But what he lacked in romantic gestures he made up for when we were alone. I remember—"


Sakura was happy to shut the door on that conversation.

Tobirama moved around the room, ignoring the expensive hand-woven rug he walked across, the silken sheets, the hand paintings on the walls trimmed in gold framing. Did he always stay in rooms like this? Or was it because he was a Senju and Tenryu had such a close partnership with the clan?

He motioned for her to sit on the floor as he did the same, drawing her thoughts back to the reason she was there. The reason she assumed she was at least. Battle strategy.

Instead of a map of the region, however, he pulled out what she recognized as storage scrolls. Questions bubbled at the end of her tongue, until he unsealed them to reveal several very peculiar
"You remember that day in the Nara Forest?" he asked suddenly, producing several tags laid out carefully in a row. With a calligraphy brush he swiftly began writing across them.

Sakura nodded, thinking back to when Tobirama had been too preoccupied collecting bark samples to care that his brother had been spirited away by enamored deer.

Her hand grazed one finished tag. Usamaro trotted over to sniff at the fresh inking, but she shooed him away. "Yes. This is…what you were collecting samples for?"

Not even pausing as he glanced up, Tobirama grunted an affirmative. "I've found a way to weaponize the elemental paper Doi Nara made. I collaborated with him at first, then made my own batch. Now," He took a tag and adhered it to a kunai with chakra. "These kunai will store and release timed elemental attacks according to the seals."

Without waiting for a response, he took one of them and placed it into her palm. Sakura stared in awe as she felt the crackle of electricity stored in the paper. Zips of it traveled along her finger tips. Assuming his seals worked, striking a target with such a kunai would mean they'd be in for a—very literal—nasty shock.

'Attitude aside,' Her green eyes studied Tobirama's jaw as he took a tiny vial, placed it in the hollow space in the handle of one kunai, and then adhered elemental paper completely around it, 'This is really innovative weaponry."

Though, the repressed curiosity chose then to make itself known. "It's impressive, and with these there's a lot of possibilities to catch an enemy off guard. But why show it to me?"

Tobirama's expression suggested the reason should be obvious. "You're an integral part of this."

Sakura carefully toyed with the sharp weapon before setting it down. Her work with Mizuchi to call upon her power at will was not the same as using it successfully in combat. Finding out about the mishap in the heat of battle fighting Yama probably wouldn't inspire a whole lot of confidence from the Senju. "You really think that's the best idea?"

"There's no reason to assume this Hatsuko wouldn't have the same sort of weapon we saw today. In which case, the otters aren't equipped to handle it. We'll have to be the ones who present a tactic that minimizes their chance of casualties."

That, she could understand and agree on. Although she was almost surprised to hear it from Tobirama. Not because he wasn't intelligent enough to come to the conclusion, but because he already seemed invested in the otters' plight. More than simply partnering with them as a means to an end. Unless she was imagining what wasn't there…

Sakura worried her lip, trying to follow exactly where his thoughts were headed. "Does that mean you believe whatever kind of weapons we're dealing with might be…?"

Tobirama crossed his arms, red eyes boring deeply into her. "You've spent time around this…deity. You'd know best if this is the kind of strategy they'd use. Let's assume there's something in the mountains worth guarding for a divine being. Stoking the flames of a conflict and outfitting one side with the means to eliminate the other is a cunning, effective way to cause a distraction."

Sakura felt Usamaro return to brush himself against her back in another bid for attention. But she was too distracted to do more than reach around and quickly scratch between his ears.
So, Tobirama really had come to the same conclusion she had. Everything the otters told them about the beavers' antagonism further solidified the idea that maybe it was all orchestrated.

"I can engage their leader directly." she volunteered. "I don't think you'd have any problem leading the rest of the otters to a win once what sounds like the bulk of the enemy's might is dealt with."

Well, that was putting the stakes of victory on a lot of variables, really, and they both knew it. The otters made it sound like one beaver was in charge and if she fell, they might have a chance to break through in the chaos.

Before they left The Couch, the otters gave them a pretty decent rundown on the landscape, the enemy numbers, how Hatsuko tended to direct the others in battle, and what resources would be at their own disposal.

Sakura didn't really want to take part in a bloodbath if she could force the other side into a retreat. But did Tobirama share that sentiment or was he wanting to go all out and deal the kind of decisive blow the beavers couldn't come back from?

"I'll have shadow clones dispersed throughout the area to command different units at once," he explained. "While you engage Hatsuko and whatever frontline forces she possesses with the help of Chuya, Noboru, Enmei and I will be hitting them with a pincer attack."

Huh. Overwhelming them with superior strategy and sheer numbers bolstered by some human shadow clones might be enough to make them want to retreat. Sakura was hoping so anyway.

"We should get the information back to the otters then." The kunoichi leaned forward, hands on her crossed legs. "Noboru should be at the rendezvous point soon."

As he started to lift his hands into a very familiar position, Sakura squinted. "Wait!"

He paused, though not without an irked scowl. "Your shadow clones…they're like the regular clone jutsu but they're meant to last longer…is that right?" Sakura had seen her teammate employ shadow clones into his fighting for years, but she had to be sly now.

She couldn't appear to know too much about a technique by and large currently in use mostly by Tobirama and Tobirama alone. Hashirama had raved to her about his brother's brilliance during their chat at Madara's party.

According to the Hokage, the clones were still somewhat experimental. Evidenced by the stoic shinobi's frustration, they weren't staying around as long as he wanted. Which meant kinks in the formula to work out.

"…Yes," Tobirama huffed. "The original clone jutsu serves as an effective intimidation tactic if used correctly. But were they solid their uses would double."

This too, Sakura knew well. Shortening training times, reconnaissance, evening the numbers in a fight, and so many other purposes. "I noticed you making the seals for the parent technique at first in a different order and adding 'horse'…but have you ever considered substituting horse for ox?"

In the future, casting the jutsu would require fewer hand-signs. But this was supposed to be the early stages, and she again wanted to avoid knowing more about the jutsu he created than Tobirama did. His face already looked unsure, and then, to her mild surprise, he did as she suggested. Three more Tobirama's popped into existence, glancing around the room with unchanging expressions.
"This is different," One clone remarked. "We're more solid somehow."

The original stood up, inspecting the duplicates while Sakura waited. "Meet with the otters. Let them know what's been decided." he said, and a clone immediately left in a smoke cloud.

Sakura blinked, hoping she hadn't guided him wrong.

"He's still around," Tobirama noted, a faintly pleased tone coloring his voice. To the other two he said, "Travel as far across the river valley as possible. I want to see the extent of the distance this technique works."

"Demanding." The second clone imitated his stance and regarded him with mild irritation. "Were it anyone but myself…" the proclamation trailed into silence as they both disappeared.

The smoke hadn't even settled before Tobirama whirled on Sakura. "How'd you know?"

Her face scrunched. The clone was right. Did anything that came out of his mouth ever sound like a gentle question?

Nonetheless she considered her answer a moment. "The ox seal is in most long-range jutsu because it acts as a stabilizer and allows the jutsu to travel greater lengths without losing its force," she explained, fidgeting. "Granted that's normally the case for elemental jutsu, not clones, so…"

Maybe it was her imagination, thinking he seemed almost…fascinated. "Your theory could have some merit. They're five miles away but they haven't disappeared." Already, the gears of his mind were turning swiftly. There was nothing hard about recognizing that expression. He kneeled and began scrawling out more tags to attach to kunai.

She said nothing, allowing him to work in silence. Usamaro had grown bored and hopped up on the window sill to nap. Sakura wasn't really sure what she should do, but he wasn't making a big deal about her being around, so she took a seat again.

When next his carmine eyes glanced up and met hers, they were filled with a fervor that made her heart skip a beat. He had the same look she recognized on herself in the middle of discovery. Sakura had a strange sense of elation in that moment, only just grasping that she was around one of Konoha's most innovative minds (for better or worse) and could get knowledge from him firsthand. For the first time, he didn't seem opposed to her presence.

She opened her mouth to speak, tongue still heavy, but all suggestions of collaboration fizzled out. Something passed over his face, so abruptly, a stone wall forming all but tangibly. "The plan is going to be put to motion in only a few short hours at sunrise." he said.

All business. Like the brief meeting of minds had never happened. She could have thrown her hands up. How in the hell was she supposed to read this man? Was he that wary of emotional intimacy of any kind?

He'd been fine scolding her through attempts at learning Suiton before the events of Sekai. But now she'd returned, forced to give up her status as Mizuchi's chosen. And the frigidity was almost tenfold. Just now it was like he had snapped himself from falling into mild civility, the horror too unimaginable.

Sakura stood, determined to be just as curt in return, not about to allow him even a glimpse of how the spurning stung. 'Is this…is this a little of what Naruto went through?' Attempts to connect with others shot down for a burden most could never understand.
It was probably presumptuous. Her friend had lived with the village's treatment his whole life until shortly before the war. Sakura had been Mizuchi's plaything for mere months, and it gave her an even greater appreciation of how upbeat the incorrigible jinchuriki managed to stay in the face of it all.

She gathered Usamaro, the cat only cracking an eye opening and then giving a half-hearted meow as he went back to sleep. "Right, I know." She skirted around the arrangement of weapons, tags and ink on the floor, more out of respect for the process than the man behind it.

He wasn't sure he could take it any longer. He'd tried being patient, tried to avoid pouring salt in the wound. But how much patience was warranted before tough love could be administered? They shared a wall. He'd woken up to that music. He ate breakfast and then eventually lunch to that music (Naoko had been tasked with making sure Izuna at too). He worked himself to a sweat in the training yard with that music following him out the window. He had dinner and Izuna had stopped by then. But now he was going to sleep in hours and the gentle, melancholy sounds of the shakuhachi filled the halls again.

Madara raised his fist and knocked on said wall, sharp and loud. Definitely hard enough to disrupt the tempo of the steady sound that had been playing from within. When it had stopped, he swung himself from his futon and made the short trip to the door across from his. There was no more perfunctory knocking before he barged in. Izuna could squawk about it, but he was invoking elder sibling rights on this one.

His little brother looked appropriately apologetic, Madara standing in the doorway with his arms folded. Idly he wondered if this had ever happened before when they were children. Did he go running to tell their parents or handle it himself?

"Sorry," Izuna sat the flute aside, drawing one knee up to his chest. Clear evidence of his heavy playing, his cheeks were puffy and red.

"No, continue, sleep is optional at this point." Madara deadpanned.

"I'll stop, it's just been helping me clear my head lately."

Storming fully into the room, he headed straight for his brother's futon, shoving him over to make room for himself. Madara snatched the shakuhachi away with a shout of protest falling from Izuna's mouth. "You'd clear it faster if you wrote to Haruno. Tell her when she comes back you—"

"I never said this was about Sakura!" Oh, but his red-cheeked, wide-eyed expression said it all. Madara only hoped his smirk wasn't too haughty. Then, considering the last few days, maybe he didn't really care.

"We are brothers," he informed the younger Uchiha. "You're transparent anyhow." Madara thought he had done a fairly good job playing blind as the infatuation his brother had bubbled over into… whatever misery they were now all living in. But no more. The period of leniency had ended; the time to confront him had arrived.

On some subconscious level Izuna had to know the interest he was projecting clear as day. That the two of them already exchanged enough vibrant looks and lingering touches to make the mind wander.

Izuna pressed his lips together and squinted. "And you're not?" he asked, challengingly. "You rub yourself all over her like a cat in heat lately."
"I make my intentions clear through decisive action. I suggest you try it if you want anything to change." Unconcerned and with message delivered, Madara leaned backward with his arms folded behind his head.

The room was quiet as Izuna lowered his head and brooded. A beat passed before either spoke again, "Sakura thinks you're still just pushing her buttons for your own amusement. I bet it's never crossed her mind even slightly that you're interested."

Madara glared. Every action to provoke her temper brought them closer, in some measure. He was sure of it. He couldn't just present her with flowers and his heart. Not outright. He wasn't even sure if in the long run he would ever want to. But he could offer her sensation, passion, blinding hot—

"If you're telling me you really want her to like you, I recommend less commitment to the role of daily nuisance," Izuna declared smugly. The cheeky shit.

"Then when she returns, should we pursue in earnest?" he queried, blood rushing at just the thought. "Remember Izuna, I'm a much better hunter."

The petulant, puffed face aimed at his direction drew a rich laugh from his chest. He shifted, stood, sure that it was settled. He'd saved the day…or rather night. Shakuhachi be damned he would sleep.

"Before any of that," Izuna's voice was hardly above a whisper, only close proximity letting him hear it, "there really is a lot more I've been thinking over."

Spinning on his heel, Madara gave his brother his full attention. "The odd fluctuation in weather notwithstanding? It confuses the animals, you know. It makes hunting diff—"

"Madara, I'm serious." Izuna rose to his feet, too. Madara had never taken the time to notice they were the exact same height, and somehow the fact that he couldn't look down at his brother when he wanted to, even if by a few inches, annoyed him. "You remember Maro, don't you?"

Maro Uchiha. Over a decade older than the two of them, unpleasant without trying and a firm believer in traditionalist ways. Naoko had told him over tea, rather blithely, that he had been bitter over many of the reforms Madara enacted once he took over. Her personal favorite was the discontinuing of seduction missions for kunoichi who weren't of legal age to truly understand what they entailed.

"The face of one embittered councilman blends together with any other," Although he made himself sound less than concerned, the truth was he did remember. He noticed Maro in the way a hawk noticed a snake quietly creeping upon its nest. Like the hawk, he could easily devour a snake without difficulty. Only if the snake managed to find a weakness and gain the upper-hand was there a concern.

The man wasn't to be trusted by any stretch of imagination, he could tell that much without his memories fully intact. As if it weren't obvious enough with the way a certain other portion of the council was always ready to entertain and sometimes even defend his archaic ideals on what the future of the clan should be.

Why did they need a clan council? Madara had often thought in the midst of yet another vicious argument with them. Izuna had staunchly forbid him from trying to disband it outright, sure that it would be the tipping point that made Maro's "secret" concerns seem founded.

"He's the one most dead-set on deposing you," His brother rolled his eyes, taken in by his rouse of
impassivity on the matter. "The one quietly gathering up conspirators and waiting until the time is right. Yurine Yuhi teaches at the academy. She's told me his son, Manabu, only cares to be around others from elite clans. Namely other Uchiha children, save Kagami, and Danzo Shimura. You know how the Shimura can be—how they are."

"I don't remember past encounters before the incident with them in detail, but, I know enough." Shinpachi Shimura felt slimy. That was about the only way to describe it.

The man was exactly the kind of seasoned, firmly militant warhawk some councilmembers felt should be leading the clan.

"Well I don't think it's a stretch that they could be using their sons as couriers. Even if it's not currently happening, I'm wary." Izuna grumbled. "And right now all they have is conjecture, but that's not going to stop them forever. Most of our clan is finally happy here. Konoha is home."

The softening of the shadowy expression tight around his brother's eyes told Madara all he needed to know on that front too. Izuna had found a home in the village as well, the same as he had.

Despite not being able to freely recall every minute spent at war in the not so distant, bloody past, Madara had enough recollection through tales shared with him and his own dreams, to know he did not miss it. This attachment to one place…this unprecedented unity…it wasn't so bad.

Izuna went on, "Whatever they perceive as a weakness or slip-up is all they'll need to pounce. It's imperative they never learn about…" he touched a finger to his temple and stared at Madara meaningfully.

Although his brother meant well, was only really trying his best to protect him and was right, besides, Madara still bristled. "They never will. While the snakes poise themselves for an attack from the shadow, they fail to see the raptor that swoops down from above."

ASiT

A few more reassurances that they would remain one step ahead of possible dissenters and Izuna was content to go have a late dinner. He'd questioned why Madara was slipping back out, but that concern he assuaged with a claim of wanting one more round of sparring to pacify his heated blood.

Knowing his brother's, Izuna left it there without further question.

And no one really looked twice when he slipped off into the forest just behind the far end of the compound. Following the path he had discreetly marked, it was no trouble to find himself at the still riverside, the same as before.

Rummaging through his clothing, he produced several plump persimmons and studied them. Brushing a thumb over the bright skin, he lobbed all three into the water one after another. "I've returned," he announced.

Waiting and watching, the still surface began to ripple, an intrigued goddess emerging with persimmons in each hand, studying them in scrutiny. A faint but persistent memory stirred, but too impatient, he stuffed it down for later pondering.

With this woman it was best to keep his wits about him.

"So you have." Mizuchi said. She pocketed two of the fruits and delicately bit into the last, making her way to the bank. "In vain, I'm afraid. I have already explained I can do nothing for you."
She cut such a regal figure in the finely tailored silk of the deep emerald kimono, trimmed in gold at the sleeves and neck and tied with a matching colored obi. The pointed ears visible through the silken charcoal of her hair were adorned in jewels fit for a noblewoman. The curving horns jutting from the sides of her head shone like polished obsidian even in the fading evening light.

The ruby of her pert mouth never smudged as she chewed. Her posture was impeccable, her expression flippant, and when she looked down her nose at him with that air of superiority in her green-gold eyes, Madara knew without a doubt she was powerful enough to end him in an instant.

Desperation drove him beyond a point of caring, and he only squared his shoulders forward to stare her down.

"I don't believe you anymore than I did before," Madara insisted, perfectly fine with being stubborn in the face of what he was sure was a bluff.

Giving him some semblance of her attention for perhaps the first time since appearing, she sucked the juice dripping down her wrist without breaking eye contact. A soft, practiced laugh fell from her mouth. "Believe…" she drawled, eyeing the fruit in amusement. "Humans are so interesting to me with their beliefs."

"The relationship between mortal and god is fueled by belief, isn't it?" he asked boldly. "That in a way makes you beholden to humanity's faith."

"No," she chuckled, taking a particularly vicious bite of the orange skin. "Never beholden. Not me, at least." Mizuchi sucked down more of the juice and flesh with a smack, then smiled charmingly. "You flatter me though, coming again with the same request, inadvertently laying power over your fate in my hands. All deities do revel in the power over human life."

Madara glowered. "Yes, I suppose." He crossed his arms. "I'm here for the same thing as before, it's true. You say you can't help and yet, you did on Haruno's behalf. I would wager that wasn't the only time you've found a way."

Her eyes were spectacular as she leaned into his face, melted pools of the finest metals and yet still inimitable. Nothing shone that unnaturally. "You," she whispered, her fruity breath wafting over his cheek, "are not Sakura."

He had a feeling her bias would play a large factor in her resistance. From the few interactions he'd had with the deity, she had a soft spot for Haruno and not much else.

That in itself could be used to his advantage. "A fair statement," he said carefully, "I have no choice but to rely on her good will indefinitely in that case." He had picked up on the stiffness and barely restrained mistrust the night he had found his way into the woods, seeking her out.

Mizuchi finished off the first persimmon, but didn't clean the juice from her skin, opting to stare him down blankly. She took a step back as if to better see him, and just that small action made breathing a little easier without her divine presence pressing in on him.

A flash of something passed through her eyes, lip curling scornfully as she spoke. "I've seen your future, Madara Uchiha. The man you are at the center of your being. Perhaps trust that without your memories, you are more tolerable. If only barely."

She began to walk away, finished entertaining him to any degree.

The Uchiha didn't immediately respond. "How does a possible insurrection factor into what you know?" he called.
Mizuchi had one foot in the water and released a great, put-upon sigh before she turned around. "I've witnessed many future insurrections. Surely you can be more specific."

"The Uchiha clan," he grit out. The conversation had shifted, at least momentarily, but it seemed to be the right one to get this fickle goddess to stay. One thing Madara had gleaned was how important her carefully constructed plans were to her. She could be so resolute and self-assured to the point of conceit because she knew.

Minimal, so small even from up close it was hard to catch, her eyes widened. That was when Madara knew he had succeeded. "There's question regarding my leadership abilities. The discovery of my amnesia would also be problematic."

"Rightfully so," she muttered.

Going on like she hadn't interrupted he said, "There's a conspiracy to see me deposed and instate someone with more… hardline traditionalist views. What do you know about it?"

"There should be no rift happening now," she bit out. "Not like this." If he didn't know better he would say she was genuinely aggrieved. Much quieter and without meeting his eyes, "Kaguya's damnable bloodline. So intent on self-destruction."

Seizing on the opportunity, Madara decided the time was nigh. "I can handle any threats posed against me in combat," he was confident in that much. "But if my memory were restored, there'd be nothing to call into question. Haruno would no longer be burdened with my presence either." He said it to sweeten the pot, not because the final statement was true. If anything, not having to divide his attention between pursuing his memory and other things meant he could devote that time to doubling his efforts in courtship.

Mizuchi's face was hidden by long tresses as she thought. "I cannot afford for everything I have carefully planned to be endangered by this." The hiss that left her mouth revealed fangs. Woe be any man he faced her now. "Give me their names. I will slaughter them by the light of dawn tomorrow and—"

"Don't you think that would be my first solution if it were that simple," Madara wanted to roll his eyes. Deities were supposed to have better foresight than this. "Izuna says that would aggravate the situation, for them all to turn up suspiciously dead."

"Then your memories are the only way to quash this rebellion?" She laughed, a hollow and agitated sound. "So be it. Be warned the method has consequences. You pushed for this."

Madara huffed, growing weary of the ominous threats wrapped in detached concern. "It's been a challenge just to get you to admit to it. I want to proceed."

A thin finger pointed in his direction as she pursed her full lips, "Listen carefully. I will not be repeating myself even once."

The march was a solemn affair, as most marches to battle were. The morning had yielded heavy fog, and it wasn't the only thing bringing chill.

Hardly two words passed between himself and Haruno after the conclusion of their meeting the night before. After his abrupt dismissal he wasn't surprised, but at least she was beginning to take the hint. He didn't want her camaraderie.

A professional, temporary alliance between two shinobi with similar goals was all they were. The
sooner she could understand there'd be no charming him, the better. Tobirama was satisfied to see her cat was absent at the least.

Of course the many otters with them made up for that, fur coats in various colors all around them. Noboru, Enmei's trusted right-hand and general, trotted briskly along with his own platoon of muscular otters the size of adolescent human children. Standing, all of them came up to or even past Haruno's ribs, which might have brought a trickle of dry amusement any other time.

But as it always was when battle was nigh, his mind had been emptied of all things not pertaining to successfully implementing strategies.

Enmei and Chuya lumbered ahead, leading the way, their large, light-furred bodies easy to spot in the lineup. Everyone had been briefed on the plan, knew their parts. Haruno may not have been happy with him but he had confidence she wouldn't be diverting from her role, nor would he or any of the sentient animals accompanying them.

A twitch in Enmei's thick tail was the only sign of his tensing as he stopped to rise to his hind feet. "There," he rumbled, readying himself.

A beaver Tobirama assumed to be Hatsuko, dark enough to be considered midnight and decked in faded green armoring, stood watching them across the expanse separating the territories. She was somewhere in height between Enmei and Chuya (who was roughly three feet shorter than her mate), which naturally meant enormous for her species.

"I was told you might pay me a visit." The beaver greeted, her tail pounding the ground restlessly. "But not to avenge you, Enmei?" she tilted her head innocently, her beady eyes unnerving. "Hisoki must've been sloppy if you've already had time to crawl away and lick your wounds."

Tobirama felt his skin prickle, a sort of zap traveling up his arms and neck. Haruno quickly moved forward, a chakra-laden fist crackling against a silver blur cutting the air. Metal twanged. Movement so fast even he reared back identified that the fight had already begun. The segments of the weapon glinted brilliantly as they flew apart, Tobirama moving his face away just in time.

"You know your places! Go!" Enmei roared to his warriors, otters charging into the mist at the signal.

Without hesitation, the Senju called forth his shadow clones and commanded them to split off as directed.

No sooner had the last one gone with the otter's leader than Tobirama found himself ducking the same weapon once more. When it flicked through the air, swerving to change directions, he saw it was no spear as he had originally believed. Putting distance between himself and the wicked edge, he lashed out with a water whip that sent it recoiling back the way it'd come.

Boisterous laughter from above shook through him, a glance up confirming Chuya and Haruno were doing battle with Hatsuko as planned. Though she had no weapons of her own, the beaver made use of her sharp teeth, wide tail and knowledge of Doton-jutsu.

"Doton: Gōremu no Jutsu!" Hatsuko shrieked, rock piling up and solidifying to create several earth golems of identical monstrous size. Chuya swung her nunchucks, aiming for the beaver's paws to immobilize her, but Hatsuko batted her powerful tail like a mace, knocking them away.

Haruno met fists with a golem, the creature shuddering as its arm crumpled to dust. However, he hardly had time to pay attention to their battle when he sensed more than saw the enemy slicing at
him through the shroud of mist again. Having had enough of defensive, he charged in, body low to avoid a strike as he flung out a kunai.

The first clanged off the blade with the chirps of electricity traveling through it drawing a grunt from the hidden assailant. Directing his attention toward the noise, Tobirama aimed again, sure he had struck true when through the mist he saw a dark shape pause to grip the weapon embedded in his shoulder.

The seal work had held up, doing its job in delivering a timed release of lightning jutsu, enhanced by the moisture of their surroundings. The enemy tremored, swayed, but did not fall.

In perfect striking distance, Tobirama sped through hand signs, intent on finishing off the target while they were immobilized. "Suiton: Mizuame Nabara," Deep, viscous liquid poured from his lips to envelope the feet of the mystery attacker. Triumph swelled when a growl issued from his prey as they attempted to raise a foot, hacking at the syrupy spill with the odd weapon—a segmented sword—and only managing to become more trapped.

From so close he could now make out an ornate porcelain mask, a snarling cat with red streaked diagonally in two lines, and a black cloak that did an effective job at obscuring the rest of the person's body. Just as the otters had described.

"A flashy weapon means nothing if you don't possess the skills to wield it properly." he taunted, stopping just short of his own capture jutsu. While he wanted nothing more than to unmask and interrogate them, sounds of battle still rang all around.

Although he had succeeded in stopping one menace he could question, the right thing to do would be to help finish what they—air whistled and he turned, kunai swinging…and missing.

Haruno landed in front of him from seemingly nowhere, her chakra blaringly loud now that it was right on top of him. Agitated, Tobirama concluded she had interceded seconds earlier on his behalf, her right arm transformed and scaly. Senses rippling, Tobirama cursed himself to discover he had been caught in a genjutsu at some point, Haruno stepping in to disrupt it. A ruby line trailed from between the scales and dropped as she hissed under her breath. "It… cut me…" Apparently that news came as great surprise to the kunoichi, who stared white-faced at the superficial injury.

"Surprised?" Hatsuko cackled, slamming a fisted paw into Chuya's face and then picking her up to fling. "Don't think we haven't prepared for this too."

The winded otter landed with a groan, recovering herself and scratching dangerous claws at the beaver when she lunged. As they wrestled, biting and slamming each other into the ground, the masked person from before materialized with sword poised to strike. As it uncoiled this time in a move that had already become familiar, flaring green heat seared the air in a wave of crescent flames.

Haruno sucked in a deep breath, drawing the fire in as easily as one might drink water.

Even without heavy, oppressive armor and the crisp mountain air, Tobirama felt as though his soul were being seared. *Those are no ordinary flames. Are they like Amaterasu?*

Tobirama's body straightened, the figure calmly advancing, heedless of the chaos in all directions. The sword wasn't raised just then, gripped tight to the side. "Soul of a dragon…" The words spoken sounded crystal clear. "The river goddess Mizuchi's chosen."

They regarded Haruno doing her best to stop the flames, then a hidden face turned to stare in his
direction. "But…Tobirama Senju…it's you I want. Your blood and the sight of your agony will be atonement for all your past misdeeds."

A burst of flame licked a path right toward the sword-wielder as Haruno turned what she absorbed into a fiery attack. But without looking, the sword lashed to cut straight through it, the fire deterred long before it reached its target. "You…" he regarded Haruno. "You wouldn't help him if you knew."

Nerves tight, Tobirama felt out the unknown warrior, sensing no sign of a chakra he had ever brushed with before, only the distortion of a presence like Haruno's but far darker. Packed with rage.

"Experience says the creep in a mask swinging that kind of weapon around is the one with something to hide!" she shouted out, dashing closer. The sword wound apart, and she jumped over it, leg outstretched in a dynamic kick that collided with the assailant's dominant arm.

It buckled and his fingers tensed even as his grip loosened. Tobirama shot a piston of water at the precise moment Haruno flipped away, and the wretched sword clattered to the ground where the pinkette was finally able to seize it.

"Now," Haruno panted, wielding the weapon back at its owner. "We have questions so you'd better start talking!" Were the situation less dire, Tobirama would have begun the round of interrogation by asking Haruno who taught her to wield a sword in the first place. They were an awful instructor. Her form was that of a novice and corrections burned in his throat as he held them at bay.

"Ah," More to the point, the owner of the sword hardly seemed concerned about the predicament. There was no movement to try and attack or reclaim their lost weapon, but it was apparent they also saw no threat to their well-being. That kind of assuredness in such a tense moment either came from unparalleled bluffing skills or knowledge of the upper-hand still being obtainable.

A quiet huff that could have been a laugh slipped from under the mask. "It'll do you no good. That sort of weapon only works for the one it was forged for." Outstretching only two fingers, the sword shook in Haruno's grasp. She planted her feet, grunting as her hold tightened. The masked warrior curled the fingers and the sword lurched away as if drawn by magnetism, flying right back where it had started. 'I'm the one that's been chosen to draw out the hidden power of Soul Ripper. No one else.'

Sakura was livid. It had taken everything to maintain composure and not come across rudely to the otters when she declined their invitation to The Couch for the both of them.

Tobirama for once raised no resistance to her taking the reins, and their furry allies seemed to understand. If anything they needed the breather to clear their heads just as badly.

There had been no casualties, not this time, and minor wounds at best. Suspiciously, the beavers offered half-hearted resistance, playing a strong defensive but not doing much to try and turn the tides of battle. They had definitely known to expect help in the form of the mysterious assailant who had rattled them all.

With the enemy intent on killing Tobirama, they had escaped in a strategic retreat only by the skin of their teeth after a drawn out combined assault, in which they discovered neither of their attacks were particularly effective. Two to one and they were still summarily outclassed, evident by the way they were brushed aside.
This proved to be insult to literal injury for Sakura, all her training over the course of months rendered useless by some assailant with a flashy sword. It had been able to *wound* her.

It sliced through her scales, a feat which she previously would have considered impossible from ordinary weaponry. Though clearly it was *not* an average sword, design aside. Even when her arm had changed back, the wound throbbed insistently until she was forced to tend to it, and it didn't quite dull the phantom pain she swore she still felt. And the flames! Those were *her* flames. Mizuchi’s, passed down to her through the essence of the dragon to be more precise, but it didn’t lessen the blow.

Sakura had spent the walk down to the riverside postulating, Tobirama listening and offering grudging input to either discredit or quietly agree with theories she put forward. He said repeatedly he knew of no enemies he had that would turn up in a peaceful river valley on the off chance he would come. He said no one but Hashirama and Toka had known his destination. Most importantly he said the steel of the blade and the aura of the wielder were both foreign to him, and from the very genuine frustration pouring off him, Sakura was inclined to believe it.

They had some rough idea of what was guarding the path deeper into the mountains now, but considering the need to run for their lives, there were still some questions that could use answering.

That was when the one goddess who had directly or indirectly dragged her into mess after mess up 'til this point came in.

So as the Senju stood back with arms folded and a face that betrayed no emotion, Sakura made a show of calling Mizuchi. Standing on the river with an aggressive stance and a brow marred by a heavy scowl.

Time seemed to crawl, the river's surface undisturbed. She could practically sense the mounting skepticism wafting from Tobirama, because the man's stubbornness ironically defied all reason like that.

Sakura could feel the embers of her temper sparking to a higher elevation, seconds from reaching down below the water and dragging the wayward deity out herself if she had to, when increasing ripples came in earnest.

The pinkette barely withheld her snort of derision as Mizuchi appeared with a dramatic flourish. An elegant twirl and ribbons of water twining up around her before plopping down.

"Sakura, your calls are coming with unexpected frequency—"

"We don't have time right now," the frustrated ninja cut in.

Mizuchi ignored her in favor of observing Tobirama, who observed right back with cold calculation. "A non-believer if I've ever seen one," the goddess declared. "And yet here I am in the flesh. Rankled, boy?"

"Call it dissatisfaction." Tobirama didn't rise to the bait, acting as if he had wholeheartedly believed he'd be having such a conversation from the minute he woke up.

"As you wish." Mizuchi shrugged, bringing her palms upward. "What are you dissatisfied about? As if I couldn't guess."

Sakura felt like if she didn't reinsert herself into the conversation they would never get it where it needed to be. Stepping off the river and hopping onto the bank, she stood just behind Mizuchi. "There was someone who interfered today. They had a weapon that cut right through my scales. I
thought that shouldn't be possible!"

"Well it shouldn't." Was the simple answer.

"And you know nothing else?" Tobirama prodded, clearly unconvinced. His arms were still firmly tucked against his chest and the look on his face was put out.

"I don't recall saying that. You're very presumptuous." She tutted. "I suppose I know why you called me Sakura, but the simple fact is I couldn't tell you what you don't already know. The weapon you encountered is of a divine nature. Therefore it can deal damage to human or god. You," she flapped her hand at the two of them. "And I," Slowly, Mizuchi poked a finger at her throat.

"You're saying you won't assist further." Sakura hated to think Tobirama was correct, but that really felt like the gist of it.

"I will assist," she corrected. "Just not directly. I have my own suspicions about what might be happening. My advice would be to focus on finding Hitotsu. Time is of the essence, Sakura."

"We were trying." The kunoichi stepped in the way as Mizuchi attempted a graceful exit into the river. "I was trying. But I'm obviously on the right track if we're being met by so much resistance."

"Are you sure?" Great. Those green-gold eyes were shining with the kind of cryptic glimmer she hated. "You once explained to me a teacher of yours told you, what was it? To look underneath the underneath?"

Cocking one hip, she gestured to Tobirama. "You might try that too, to help you solve your problem." Then, pausing as if reconsidering, she moved ever closer, until she and the Senju were eye to eye. Sakura wasn't sure what to make of the stare-down, and she certainly wasn't prepared for the deity to reach out and pinch one side of the stoic shinobi's face. "This sour expression… you're rather fond of making it. I do hope for your sake that changes someday. See to that, yes, Sakura? It's a waste otherwise."

Tobirama pulled away with no shortage of indignation carved into his visage, Sakura too speechless to screech the rest of her questions.

The goddess slipped away in the span of silence that followed.

Usamaro nosed at the leaves with interest like had never seen them before. When he managed to get one into the air he was quick to bat it back down. Sakura watched her cat with a sigh, wishing she could be half as carefree just then.

The day was bright and cloudless and the air was clean and balmy. Behind them was sleepy Choshu, a village full of friendly people oblivious to the dangers lurking in the mountains stretched across the landscape.

After the disastrous turn the day before had taken, Sakura had tried to take Mizuchi's advice to heart (fruitless as it felt), and get back to basics, investigating the area where she had first seen footprints.

In an effort to be mature and make peace, she had offered for Tobirama to come and join her, but unsurprisingly he was nowhere to be found. He really did avoid her like the plague it seemed. And, as much as Sakura would tell herself his opinions of her meant absolutely nothing in the face of her greater purpose...a tiny, niggling voice of doubt wondered why such a feared and respected
Konoha mind could hardly stand the sight of her.

Honestly it was offensive. The man had been responsible for the nightmare known as the Reanimation jutsu. Somehow, a girl with a pool of divine power to channel was too unpalatable? She'd have called him out more directly, if only she could explain why it bothered her so much in the first place.

Sakura kicked at a rock in her way and it tumbled across the ground and startled a squirrel investigating a berry bush. Usamaro noticed the small creature and it took off up a tree before her cat could approach. Smart squirrel.

Undeterred, Usamaro ducked his head into the bush and emerged a minute later smacking at the tart, half-ripe berries with red juice smearing his fur. The kunoichi rolled her eyes, patting her leg as she passed to beckon the feline to keep following.

He did, spitting out what was in his mouth and trotting forward.

The ground sloped down, and she carefully watched her footing to avoid a slip. They were coming up on the clean riverside, the area just before the mountain base where she was sure the clues had been.

Although Sakura couldn't spot anything particularly promising in the way of anything that looked like a humanoid being had walked the trail recently. The sound of nature and Usamaro's scampering were all she could hear. Stopping she placed a hand to her forehead and groaned.

'Kakashi-sensei this is getting as old as your excuses...'

A resounding snort echoed her weary sentiments, making her lift her head slightly. Usamaro was stopped at her side, taking the opportunity to pluck debris from his fur. "That almost sounded sort of human," Sakura chuckled. She waited, hoping to hear it again and humor herself. The wind carried nothing. No new noises she hadn't already been hearing. No...

A long sigh whistled through the trees, and Sakura was positive she wasn't alone, even though nothing suspicious pricked at her senses. Neither dangerous nor friendly. "Usamaro, you hear it too, right?" The cat lifted his head to gaze at her with sharp, intelligent mismatched eyes. Then his fluffy tail wiggled as he hopped off into the brush.

A cry of protest bubbled up from her throat as she followed, watching the cat wriggle under tangled overgrowth, meowing persistently. Any number of things could have caught his attention, and she was really just hoping it wasn't another squirrel. But when she parted the bushes, her breath caught and she drew up short. Staring her down dejectedly from his place inside a nasty trap, was the largest boar she had ever laid eyes on.

It had huge yellowed tusks perfect for gouging, ruffling its snout and watching her in clear caution. Aside from the fact that its leg was clamped tight in a trap, painful wound keeping it still, Sakura was curious to notice the animal had only one eye.

One glassy, green eye was trained on her, while the other was closed tight with a jagged, crescent scar over the lid and stopping on the animal's cheek. The injury had once caused such trauma that the scar was white against the brown fur, where the hair had grown back thinner.

The big, ugly brutish creature laid its head down and closed its good eye, resigned to its fate. Pity bubbled over Sakura, wondering what careless hunter had left a trap out for this animal to suffer in it. While she knew boars could be vicious, and were menaces to farmers besides, leaving it on its own didn't sit right with her.
His hulking size suggested he had been through many winters to survive so long. Moving as quietly as possible, the kunoichi skirted to the animals side, waiting for him to swing around and try an attack. This was literally a cornered, wounded animal. It was within their nature.

But despite her closeness he hardly stirred, and that only made Sakura more determined to see him freed. "Just hold on," she whispered, tentatively laying hands on the creature's rough coat and letting them drift down to the trap. Despite his big size it seemed like overkill, biting into the flesh of his hindquarter. A well-placed chakra flick ought to be enough to dismantle it though. And if luck held out the boar's even temperament would hold out enough for her to get some distance.

Steadying herself on a deep breath, Sakura placed her fingers in position and pumped enough chakra into the flick to shatter a boulder.

It did...nothing.

Sakura stared in disbelief.

There had never been a piece of metal more resistant than the chakra control she used to destroy it.

Doubling her efforts, Sakura applied more force with the same results. The boar looked at her dully, as if to assure her that it was all useless.

'This steel doesn't respond to chakra at all. Just like earlier.' Working her fingers dangerously close to the laceration at the risk of agitating her listless patient, she closed her eyes and conjured images of the dragon spirit she knew was always curled dormant inside.

Scales rippled up her arms, flares of fire shooting through her veins as she wrenched the trap open with a bestial snarl. For good measure she broke it spitefully, stumbling away to let the boar get itself reoriented.

The animal snuffled at the wound incredulously, and when he stood wobbly, Sakura did a double take. The beast had three legs, his other hind leg missing. Usamaro chose that moment to strut in fearlessly, almost touching noses with the larger animal very much capable of maiming them both. It didn't look inclined to go after either of them though, staring around the forest as if it hardly noticed their presence. Sakura had half a mind to try healing its injury, since it had been calm so far.

Before she could decide the hog lifted its head and snorted deeply, tendrils of green mist encasing it. Shocked, Sakura fell over her feet, tumbling backwards and shielding her widened eyes.

Chapter End Notes

You may be wondering why Tobirama keeps pushing Sakura away at the last minute even when it seems obvious that whether he likes it or not, they have things in common. Such as brilliant minds. But he won't be able to hold out forever. The arc still has a great many twists to go through.

And yes, while the Uchiha brothers have finally seemingly confronted each other on
their attraction to Sakura, don't be so blinded with joy over that, that you miss the importance on the second half of the conversation. What's going on with the Uchiha clan dissenters you may ask? In canon Madara was the one who couldn't move on from the past, which led him to walk away from the village only to return to attack it. But…maybe the problem in the revamped timeline is something else entirely, hm? Also yup, shady Mizuchi and Madara collab. Keep an eye on that too.

Can't promise any further updates with this fic this year, but I'm hoping to continue A Requiem for Fireflies (exclusively on FFN) for those reading that.

I would like to strongly encourage everyone to take a few moments to review as that's the greatest indicator that you're there, invested and would like to read more. lol That way I can be sure to try and keep it in mind for next year.

Happy holidays to all, enjoy breaks, stay warm if you're somewhere that gets cold (I love the crisp fall weather happening here and could live in it forever). Watch some sappy holiday movies or read a good book curled up somewhere cozy, and take care into the New Year.
Chapter Summary

Sakura learns that finding the god she's been seeking is only the beginning. New trials need to be conquered, with or without the cooperation of her reluctant teammate.

Chapter Notes

As promised, the new chapter arrives with 2020. Honestly I had this written and posted to FFN a week ago because of a request from a good friend. I forgot to post it a little early here too. My bad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This was not a boar. As her mind worked through its surprise, Sakura was confronted by that singular, echoing notion.

Peering down at her indolently was a single eerily green eye. There wasn't much more to be said about the features of the person's face, as they were entirely obscured by the metal brass-colored helmet. Tinny breathing from the slats in the area of the mouth at least let her know this was no ghost. One piece of local folklore debunked.

However, the thick blacksmith's apron that trailed down to the kneecap of the only visible leg instantly raised Sakura's suspicion. The fabric of the long-sleeved, green shirt underneath clung tightly enough to reveal powerful, corded arms encased in tough gloves to the elbows. Arms strengthened considerably by forging, in her assessment. A hard-toed boot traveled up to disappear under the apron.

One leg. One eye. The clothes of a blacksmith.

Usamaro sat nonchalantly and groomed himself.

"Ippon-Datara?" Sakura's voice cracked a little, sweeping once then twice over the person, from top to bottom.

"Hm," The sound filtered out slightly muffled, but audible. "Random human." The god said flatly in sardonic greeting.

Sakura ignored the tone, moving closer in a half-daze. "You're...You're Ame no Me-Hitotsu n—"

"I think you have me mistaken with someone else, unfortunately." He clasped one arm over a wound dribbling red she had somehow missed. The sight kept her enraptured enough not to speak as she thought of how he had sustained injury. "Right...farewell," Ippon Datara cleared his throat and turned his back to her. For only having one leg, he moved with surprising vigor, his foot impossibly noiseless.
Sakura stared after him for only a minute before following suit, sure she had found the right god. *How many injured boars transformed into blacksmiths upon being released from traps?*

"I went through a lot to find you!" she declared, stomping toward him.

The blacksmith didn't so much as slow down. "Then you're going to remain sorely disappointed. I'm not sure why a human knows my true identity, but I haven't been affiliated with anyone but myself in centuries."

Sakura didn't let the aloof attitude concern her, shaking her head. "My name is Sakura Haruno, and I'm the godslayer of the dragon goddess of rivers, Mizuchi." Strangely, a small spark of pride bloomed in her chest to say it aloud.

"Ha…" The humorless sound wasn't so much a true chuckle but rather a moment of realization. "Mizuchi's up to more antics, then. A godslayer this time…? I can't say I envy whatever trouble she's gotten you into."

"She told me you don't like to be bothered," Sakura worried her lip, rushing to continue, "But I need a weapon to help sa—"

"Tenacious. Mizuchi always did favor that type. But I've said it already…I can't help. Or rather, I'm not interested. I'm staying under the radar in case you don't understand." His footprint sank into the soil and yet not a single twig or rock was disturbed. Usamaro found great fun in hopping after him, his longer back legs making him inclined to the movements anyway.

Sakura tried to muster up more patience from her dwindling well. Since arriving in the river valley it had been one ordeal after another. It would be nice if she could find some cooperation from someone besides sentient animals. The kunoichi reached out and seized his arm. The muscles of his bicep tensed, but she didn't let go. "Then why are you making divine weapons and passing them out so freely? Aren't they supposed to be sacred, or—"

There was the smallest sharp intake of breath, made louder in the forest's quiet gloom. Sakura saw the way his shoulders went stiff before relaxing in practiced composure. His helmeted head tipped down to her slightly, and it was only then she realized he was lean and fairly tall.

Usamaro meowed gratefully, happy to stop trotting after them.

"I haven't made a divine weapon since my banishment." the god spoke slowly, "As I said, you've obviously confused me with someone else."

Sakura's pulse leapt, other explanations tumbling incoherently through her mind. *Mizuchi confirmed if it hurt me it had to be divine in nature. And the otters said the beavers didn't have anything like that until recently. If I assume the same could be said for the person we fought yesterday who appeared suddenly—*

"You're the god of blacksmithing!" she stuttered, "If it wasn't you—"

"If I know the river goddess the way that I do, I would guess she sent you on this errand to find me and explained the minimum at best." Sakura stepped back as he rounded on her, glowing eye peering into her and measuring her worth. "As you can see quite plainly, I'm not immune to the effects of magic iron." His voice was flat and tired as he held up his arm. While his clothing was intact (that was impressive material) a dark blotch of crimson stained the area around his shoulder and upper arm tellingly.

Med-nin instincts flaring to life, Sakura made a shrewd evaluation, activating her healing jutsu.
"Here, you're hurt,"

Though it was hard to determine without looking into his face, she thought Ippon Datara blinked at her. As he had been as an animal, he was a docile patient, not putting up any struggle to her touching him. The pinkette grunted, noticing the resistance the injury had to her ministrations before she felt it slowly knitting shut. "...Why would you do that?" he asked. "I'm not a harmless woodland creature anymore."

"Technically you never were," Sakura murmured, absently pulling his arm out to inspect. "Boars are dangerous and you were huge. What was that all about, anyway?"

Satisfied that her Shosen jutsu did the job, the kunoichi was able to fully focus her attention back to drilling the enigmatic god.

"Normally this would be the part where I left you," he grumbled, the green iris disappearing. Sakura could only assume he'd shut his eye to weigh his words before explaining. "But since you've been embroiled this far, I'm not doing any harm in saying more." One gloved hand came up to cradle the elbow of his opposite arm, the other propped under his chin. "Mizuchi's surely shown you her dragon form. She's far from the only one who's able to transform at will. Sometimes it's simply easier to clear my head and think as I forage for mushrooms as a boar."

"Except when you get caught in a trap and can't get out." Sakura prodded, squinting pointedly.

"That was no ordinary trap. It was made specifically with deities in mind." he defended, although she still detected a glum twinge in his voice. "No ordinary metal saps away at divine essence."

The sensation of the sword sliding through her scaled arm like butter drew a choked breath from her throat. "What do you mean by that? What makes it special?"

"Since before humankind learned how to make their own weapons, metals like iron have had magical properties. Even among those of the pantheon, only a small number of us can draw the power out and forge weapons of divinity." Ippon Datara grumbled under his breath, turning his head. "You might guess," He pointed down at his leg, "That not even gods are immune to being cut down by one. I lost my leg to a forging accident when I was young and clumsy."

"W-Why," Sakura wet her lips and slowly let her eyes trail to his arm. She'd been sure the boar was caught by the hind leg. "I mean your leg is…"

"I would be a fool to work with enchanted metals and let the same thing happen twice." The blacksmith spat, sounding affronted. "The pants and boot I wear now protect my remaining leg from injury, and these gloves protect my hands and lower arms. But I was caught as a boar, and wounds cut into flesh by a divine weapon don't just disappear. So it migrated to my arm when I transformed back."

His head whipped back around so suddenly Sakura jumped. The god unexpectedly leaned forward, making the hairs along her neck rise. "What're you doing? You're way too close."

"You shouldn't have been able to do anything for my injury." he said bluntly. "Not with any ordinary ninjutsu…humans are still calling it that, aren't they?"

Sakura nodded woodenly.

"Mizuchi's fondness for unusual things shines through." The young woman was sure she hadn't been meant to hear the mumbling, but she had, and she wasn't through getting information. Though it served no purpose, Ippon Datara reached one of his gloved hands up to scratch his neck at the
area where the helmet met the high green fabric of his shirt. "Well, I can't really spare anymore time."

Sakura was prepared to lunge at him if he tried to get away again, but a peculiarly strong wind picked up, blasting her hair into her line of sight. Not bothering with pushing it from her eyes, she instead spat it from her mouth so she could be easily heard. "Wait, if it wasn't you that's making the weapons, then who is?"

"Telling you wouldn't do much to help your cause." The kunoichi stumbled forward, fingers outstretched as his voice sounded further away. Usamaro yowled like he'd been startled, increasing her level of alarm. "I'll caution you to beware walking through the mountains alone." The whistling of wind picked up to such a pitch that Ippon Datara's voice was a strain of a whisper. The words were choppy, and she only caught snatches. "Wrath...when she's...jealous..."

Shaking all obstruction from her vision, Sakura gaped.

Predictably, he was gone.

The forge was a dim, dingy shack by all outward appearances. With its thatched roof and crumbling stone, it could have just as easily been a pauper's dwelling. As he approached, his feet sinking into the soggy ground and a faint odor of manure filtering in under his mask, a pig lifted its head from some slop and squealed. Crows fluttered off the roof. Ignoring the shabbiness of the building, the young man made his way to the doorstep, knuckles shoving at the sturdy door.

It opened as anticipated, a cluttered one room abode filled with lumps of iron, an assortment of blacksmithing tools and a blazing hearth. His gaze immediately fell to the figure kneeling before it, hands smoothing down a long shape wrapped in cloth and bound at the throat, midsection and feet. Although he knew the process, respected it, his face still fell a little in disgust underneath its covering.

His benefactor paid him no mind, cooing faintly. "Yes, you put up a nice fight. You'll do well." Deceptively average hands wrapped around the forge's tribute and with a heave it was cast into the fire. The orange hungrily lapped up the offering, and a delighted sigh slipped from thin lips.

"Ugh," A quiet sound of revulsion as round eyes watched the blaze in the hearth grow stronger. For the first time, he bothered taking in the small child sitting on the table and examining an odachi in boredom as she swung her legs back and forth. "Spare us all your debauched playtime and get on with it."

"Silence!" A dark head lifted as her glimmering eyes fell to who would dare interrupt her. "You should consider yourself lucky I allow your presence in this sacred place."

"Sacred place?" The childish voice retorted, gesturing around them. "It's a pit of squalor and it reeks of death. Contrary to what you might think, I find corpses repulsive. Playing with them is gross. Who wants the shell once the walnut is cracked?" She turned to him and beamed, wide and innocent. "Isn't that right, S—"

He could feel his mistress getting testy. "You are free to go, then. You're little more than underfoot at this stage in the process."

A delicate sniff and the girl was turning her button nose up in the air. "You think I'm just going to be delivery girl and then skip off into the mountains? I made a pretty big investment because we've got common interests. I'm going to stick around until I see it pay off to my satisfaction."
Rising from the floor, the woman beside the hearth turned her eyes his way, and they softened considerably. "Cat, how long have you been there?" she asked, almost motherly.

He supposed he should be more grateful. Without her, he wouldn't have Oboro, the instrument to exacting his revenge. The blade in his hand was more an extension of himself than anything. Forged by in the flames of his resentment, it did everything he was told it would and more.

They had both given him the chance to destroy the man who, in his eyes, was responsible for so much of his suffering. If that meant being bound to death and serving it, he would tolerate it for now. But not forever.

"I know where they are. I know I have the upper-hand. Why would we give them the chance to recuperate? If that woman's as big a threat as you say and we let her find the One-Eyed God…"

"I'm with the little kitty," yawned the small girl. "Drawn out plans leave too much time for things to unravel. We can instigate a confrontation while they're still reeling and then we can crush them." There was a malicious gleam to her wide eyes that set even his senses on edge. Diminutive size and unassuming appearance meant little when that dark, powerful aura spoke for itself.

"No, we do this my way!" The blacksmith snapped, taking a misshapen piece of iron and holding it to the fire with a pair of tongs. As it grew hotter, glowing with heat, the slightly crazed glint to her eyes seemed to darken. Her hair, piled into a dark, tight up-do started to stick to her forehead, the forge making her pale cheeks flush. "My plan is all we need to crush the wench. And her godslayer. The heavens will reward us all handsomely. Cat will get his revenge." She stopped only long enough to take the metal from the heat and lay it down to hammer at. "Everyone wins."

"Everyone who's supposed to." the room's smallest occupant purred. Her little fingers wrapped around a wicked knife that had been left on the table near her hip. She studied it inquisitively, poking her finger at the sharp edge.

"What am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Cat asked impatiently. "Make nice with the local wildlife? Those beavers are grating."

"You're a clever boy," The blacksmith hissed distractedly, still working the metal into the desired shape. "Otherwise, why would I have plucked you up as my godslayer?"

Cat huffed, getting a mere shrug of indifference from the child in the corner. "That's about the best you can hope to get when she gets like this."

He made his exit, leaving the goddess of iron to her manic mumbling.

Yurine's vision swam as she rubbed at an eye, laying down her quill. She shifted in her chair and a satisfying crack from her stiff back made her sigh. Her colleagues had already left. She was alone, hunched over and grading the latest exams. It wasn't the most exciting way to spend the evening, but it was the routine she'd settled into.

A ghost of a smile touched her lips as she read the answers on the test in front of her. Kagami Uchiha was a phenomenal student. He was bright, his scores placing him as one of the top students so far. Compared to his easy mastery of genjutsu, Yurine sometimes felt a little inadequate to be teaching him, but the boy was always gracious and humble, absorbing whatever new knowledge presented to him. When it came to interacting with his peers, no matter who he was paired against for a spar, he fought the opponent with respect, making the most of every experience. And, from what she had gathered, the boy was already garnering attention from admirers, which he was
unsurprisingly oblivious to.

Yes, Yurine had to admit that Kagami was a student she rooted for especially hard, regardless of her recent rejection by another older and equally talented Uchiha. Wincing, she quickly tallied his total points (he had achieved full marks again) and wrote it at the top of the paper, moving onto the next.

The name drew a groan from her. In comparison to all the nice things she could say about Kagami, Yurine could find just as many unflattering things to say about Danzo Shimura. Knee bouncing, she held her quill poised over his test as she prepared to make marks.

It was so very tempting to want to mark every answer wrong for the hell of it. Unfortunately, a silly little thing called integrity got in the way. It'd be breaking the confidence the Hokage had shown in appointing her this position if she was anything less than professional and unbiased in dealing with each student. No matter how difficult.

Danzo was intelligent too, which meant she didn't often have opportunities to mark mistakes on his work. But there was an unnerving cunning to his demeanor, and coupled with his abrasiveness and disdain for most of his classmates, it didn't lead to a very high opinion of him.

She'd met his father, even tried speaking with him once about his son's general attitude toward learning. It was a waste of time to say the least, her concerns were dismissed almost as soon as Lord Shimura figured out that he wasn't being fed his son's praises.

Needless to say, the gods save them all if Danzo was already such a wayward child. He was only bound to grow into an even more unruly teenager one day, and then probably a nightmare of a man.

Dropping the quill, Yurine put her hands into her palms and groaned loudly. She wasn't sure the pay she received as a sensei was enough to deal with what she was up against.

'Should I really be complaining though? I'm doing an important job, helping to shape the next generation. And...' A smiling young woman took shape in her mind, bright eyes, pastel hair and willpower strong enough to move mountains. 'If I really think about it, it's the least I can do. Look at Sakura. We're the same age and she's already so accomplished.' Her heart sank a little, unable to cage her doubts fast enough.

Since coming to the village, she'd told herself she was going to carve out her own destiny. It was definitely something Kurenno would call her dramatic if she said it, but instead of that, it almost felt like she was a piece of someone else's. The young kunoichi was awed by so many of the people around her, Sakura not the least of them. And as lucky as she felt to call herself the pinkette's friend, she also sometimes felt she was relegated to a background role. Because compared to someone hand-chosen by a goddess, what was she, really?

Skills with a blade and above average genjutsu skills. A tendency to be flighty and an overactive imagination inclined to fantasies of the romantic kind. None of it exactly shaped up to be the kind of amazing kunoichi her mother always told her she would be.

Realizing the cynical direction her thoughts were taking, Yurine giggled nervously to herself, pushing herself up just to hear the crack from her elbows. "Alright, I think I've gotten enough done for today..."

Collecting her belongings was a quick process. Aside from snacks and spare quills she hardly brought much.
Her footsteps were lonely as she walked the empty hall, occasionally passing by classrooms where other sensei were cleaning up or grading and making eye contact long enough to wave.

Everyone was nice enough, but she was one of the younger members of the staff and sometimes she wondered if anyone eyed her discreetly when she wasn't looking and asked what the Hokage could have been thinking.

It wasn't until she set foot outside that Yurine finally felt like she was getting enough air in her lungs again, the mild weather putting her at ease. 'Kureno better have put the laundry out to dry like I told him to this morning,' she thought. Already her focus was shifted away from grades and rowdy students to what they could have for dinner and who would one-up who in whatever evening debate was waiting to be had.

The shadow of a bird circling overhead had her slowing down and peeking up. It was a hawk, and every pass of air under its wings brought it lower as it glided down. Yurine didn't have time to be startled when it landed on a fence post she was pasting and offered her its foot. Moving closer with heart fluttering, the kunoichi's suspicions were confirmed when she saw a small slip of paper on the band around its leg.

The animal took off before she even had it fully unfolded, and there was a single line on the note. "Your presence is requested in Hokage Tower." she read, slowly letting it sink in. "H-Hokage Tower?"

Yurine found herself genuinely baffled as she did an about face, heading back the way she'd come. The Tower was in close proximity to the academy, perhaps so the village leader could gaze out of his office window and watch the children in the courtyard as they played or trained.

Why, though, was she being summoned? And at the end of the day? Possibilities drifted around her brain, but they only made her more anxious. Maybe Lord Shimura or a parent of another child who had issues had complained about her. Requested she get removed. 'I knew I shouldn't have taken that extra six minutes on my lunch break!' The sensei mentally hissed. 'But those pickled radishes were so good...'

Remembering how satisfying her lunch had been that day reminded Yurine that she had yet to eat dinner. Kureno always claimed she couldn't help but be dramatic on an empty stomach. Whatever bad news she received, she really hoped she could take it rationally. Breaking down in front of the Hokage would be beyond embarrassing! She cupped a hand to her heated cheek and drew in a deep breath. She still couldn't quite look him in the eyes after the...hot spring incident. It wasn't that she made a habit of recalling anything she'd seen that night. Just that it was hard to forget.

"Fantastic!" Yurine whispered fervently to herself as she gazed upon the looming Hokage Tower. "I have two things to potentially embarrass myself over now."

Fist clenched and the thought of a warm meal as soon as she got home, she chanted a small, "Go forward with courage!" at herself, attempting to do just that.

Yurine scrambled into the office feeling like she was on the cusp of being chastened. Curse her poor nerves, because she knew the Hokage to be a man of fairness if nothing else. Even if she was going to receive a dressing down, he wasn't going to do it in a degrading way. Still, she all but waddled in with her shoulders to her ears, swallowing around a serious lump in her throat that only sank to settle in her chest.

"Y-You wanted to see me, Lord Hokage?"
"Don't look so defeated. We're all on the executioner's block with you if that helps." Yurine blinked rapidly, because she knew that voice, and it was not the Hokage.

Looking like she had all the time and not a care in the world, Naoko Uchiha sat on the edge of the Hokage's desk with a smile plumping up her full lips. She was impressive and intimidating as always, a stunning woman with entrancing eyes anyone could tell hid layers of secrets. All while picking apart everyone else's.

She wore an average beige yukata with a yellow obi that was a little more opened around the chest than Yurine saw every day, and her asymmetrical hair caught the light coming in the window behind the desk, revealing the navy tint rippling through.

The younger woman briefly turned away to keep from pouting. The Uchiha woman might've well chosen to wear an old rice flour sack with holes cut in it, and probably would have shamed many finely polished courtesans in that too.

"Your phrasing is off once again though I suspect you're aware and unremorseful." Yurine felt herself quickly getting whiplash. She was so blinded by Naoko, she had entirely missed Toka standing proudly right there on the other side of the Hokage's desk.

And the blonde ninja would have openly admitted had anyone asked, that Toka Senju was another exemplary kunoichi she was dazzled by. The woman exuded the confidence of a seasoned warrior, and she was always level-headed on top of that.

Whereas Yurine knew she had moments of being ruled by emotion, causing her to make avoidable mistakes or be indecisive, Toka was all poise and leadership. A genjutsu master with a reputation that proceeded her, possessing a wealth of knowledge about all manners of poisons, raising a niece as her own all while accepting missions as a noted member of a powerful clan.

These were just the random tidbits she'd gleaned from their interactions or when she spotted Toka from a distance in the streets and people made admiring comments. If the brunette were more inclined to talk about herself, Yurine was sure there'd be plenty more amazing feats.

The Senju shook her head scornfully. "You're also not showing the proper amount of respect. How could you think it's acceptable to lounge on Lord Hashirama's desk as if—"

"It's alright, Toka." Although Toka's face was no less disapproving, she waited quietly for the Hokage to continue. "I understand this is an odd time to get called in suddenly. Thank you for coming so quickly, everyone."

"I for one was curious." Naoko spoke up. "There're only so many reasons you'd call on us at this time of day, right?"

"Enough." Toka ordered.

The Uchiha gasped innocently. "I hope you don't think that was supposed to be taken in any untoward manner." she paused, giggling with a shrug, "Although I—"

"C-Can we please just see what Lord Hokage has to say?" Yurine heard herself squeaking. Really, she didn't know how anyone else could keep a straight face, but she already felt herself boiling in her own skin at the implications of Naoko's words. It was too much.

"I think that'd be best," There was a pale blush on Hashirama's face as well, as he held up a scroll for them all to see. Jokes forgotten, Toka stepped forward to accept it, unrolling it without preamble. Yurine slid closer to peer over her shoulder with Naoko doing the same.
"This is the stamp of the daimyo in the corner..." Toka mumbled.

"Surprising, isn't it?" Hashirama said.

Yurine caught glimpses of what seemed to be a request for aid. Directly from the Fire daimyo. "I don't...you can't mean that's why we're here Lord Hokage?"

Hashirama leaned back in his seat, his deep eyes thoughtful. "Yes, it's exactly as you might've guessed. The daimyo reached out with a request for help from Konoha shinobi. It seems he's being targeted."

"His life?" Toka queried, brow knit pensively.

"No. His estate." Hashirama picked up a smaller scroll, the paper thinner. "I don't know if any of you have heard, but there's a thief striking notable dignitaries from here to Lightning."

Yurine shakily held out a hand and the Hokage passed the scroll along. Unfurling it revealed a hasty note. "Fire Daimyo," she repeated, "I know what you've done. In penance to the people, I will come in five days for the most sacred treasure in the capital.—G.I."

"Ah!" Naoko perked up, twirling a thick lock of hair around one finger. "Goemon Ishikawa, right? He's been making quite the name for himself in the last year. Some small villages near the old Uchiha territory would sing his praises. They called him the gentleman thief. He supposedly redistributes any wealth he steals from nobles to the poor."

"But...but this note!" Yurine flailed it around. "Who'd be this brazen?!"

"It's his calling card," Hashirama explained. "He makes his victims aware of his intent to rob them ahead of time. Even doing so, he's never been caught. There've been instances where he's robbed estates blind and gotten away without a trace."

"I like the direction this is all headed." Naoko declared, stretching languidly. "Nothing ensures a new year starts right better than this kind of thrill. I'm guessing we're headed to the capital, no?"

"Precisely." Hashirama nodded. "The daimyo specified he'd like shinobi who specialize in genjutsu to come and join his guard detail until Goemon Ishikawa can either be apprehended or, well, killed."

"Us?" Yurine gaped. She couldn't help it. Suddenly she had gone from silently bemoaning her inadequacies as a kunoichi and wondering what she would be squabbling with Kureno over at home, to being told she was expected in the capital to guard the daimyo.

The daimyo! Konoha was the biggest village she'd ever set foot in. And she didn't know a thing about the proper etiquette in front of someone as important as the country's political leader.

Toka lifted her head from examining Goemon Ishikawa's declaration. "Lord Hashirama doesn't misjudge these things often. If we've been chosen then you should honor the decision by having faith in your skills, Yurine."

Feeling properly scolded, Yurine's shoulders slumped. "I know. I'm sorry...it's just that...well doesn't the daimyo have samurai from famous clans working for him. My grandfather told me that once."

"It's true this daimyo favors using samurai more than shinobi. He's contracted the Minamoto and the Taira clans for some time." Naoko confirmed. "Hm...so we'll likely be teaming up with them."
"There's a high possibility, which is also why I selected ninja with the right skillset who I felt would be able to get along with both the daimyo and his guard." Hashirama looked so proud of himself, Yurine covered her face to hide another blush. Toka was right; for the Hokage to have such faith was an honor and she wasn't sure how to feel about it.

Naoko suddenly burst out laughing, and when the youngest kunoichi looked over she saw Toka eyeing the Uchiha skeptically.

"You can stop wondering why I'd be selected." The woman pretended to wipe away a tear. "I've done my fair share of espionage in the capital. Years ago, but still. I know my way around and I'm very familiar with handling these types. If this mission goes south, it won't be on me."

"Fine." Toka bit out, palm pressed to her forehead.

"Seeing as how time is crucial to this, it'd be advised for all of you to prepare to leave by dawn." Hashirama proposed. "You should reach the capital before midday if you do."

Yurine swallowed, nodding vigorously. "I guess that settles it then. A new mission," An unconvincing laugh bubbled up as she raised her fist in feigned excitement. "To the capital."

No one seemed to notice her lack of true enthusiasm as she scurried from the room.

Had the whole situation been less desperate, Sakura would probably be incredulous over Mizuchi casually walking the streets alongside her. Frankly a part of the pinkette was still surprised. Not that Mizuchi was as discreet about revealing her presence these days, but there were definitely other supernatural beings on the prowl.

What made it all the more ridiculous was Mizuchi's insistence to blend in by playing the part of curious traveler. Nothing was going to convince anyone that she was a normal human woman passing through. Even with her horns temporarily hidden by an oversized straw hat that clashed with the elegance of her silken attire, Mizuchi couldn't pass for human by any stretch.

The average civilian that had no clue that gods and goddesses walked among them probably wouldn't immediately guess they were looking at a deity. But they had to have some inclination. As friendly as the people of the region had been, they couldn't help but openly stare with wonder.

Sakura glanced across the road to where the goddess stood, amicably talking to a man selling dyed cloths. 'Where'd she even get money from? And what's she expect to do with all this? She wears the same kimono all the time!' Sakura glared. They were supposedly on their way to an important location, but the kunoichi was beginning to think they'd never get there. Because the deity was too busy shopping. Worst of all, Sakura found herself carrying most of the parcels.

She had half a mind to march over and demand the goddess knock it off. "I see!" Mizuchi cooed, taking the fabric offered to her and daintily holding it out in front of her to marvel over. Then she had the nerve to turn and present it to Sakura with an overly charming smile, her unusual eyes hidden behind closed eyelids. "Sakura, don't you think this would make you a darling outfit?"

"I think," she said lowly, shoving the packages in the arms of the first man she made eye contact with, "That we should go now."

That got a pout. Mizuchi quietly gave back the man's fabric and glided over. Sakura huffed,
stomping off ahead as if she had the slightest inclination where she was going. Vaguely it dawned
that she was supposed to be following Mizuchi's lead, not the other way around. The deity said
nothing though, and the kunoichi was still put out, so she wasn't going to be the one to speak first.

"I haven't forgotten."

"Are you sure about that?" snapped Sakura. "I don't see how that detour helped at all."

"I wasn't merely enjoying human wares." Mizuchi had taken the lead once again. "I wanted to
confirm something. It's best to do that out in the open, mingling among the people of Tenryu."

Feeling a little less annoyed, Sakura put a hand to her hip. "So you were collecting information.
About what?"

"About if anyone's gone missing in the forest."

The breezy explanation nearly made her pull up short, but she kept on walking since the goddess
hadn't stopped.

"Why, do you think those would be linked to everything else?"

Thin fingers clasped the pinkette's shoulders, stopping her from passing by a very tall, ominous
building of black stone. "It'll all make sense soon enough." Mizuchi promised, unclenching her
shoulder and traipsing up to the door.

Sakura followed cautiously.

The air was musty, indication that the room had been sealed for a while. The window panes were
so tinged it was hard for any light to enter, and the pinkette almost tripped over a discarded tool on
the floor. "It's a forge." she recognized. A seemingly abandoned one at that.

"Yes," Mizuchi trailed her finger along a shelf, a layer of grime coming away. "Hitotsu hasn't
maintained it well. Pity."

Sakura bent her body at an angle to study what looked to be a half-finished blade on an anvil.
"This is a divine forge?"

"It seems lifeless and unimpressive." The dragon goddess seized a flail and swung it
experimentally. "But when it's in use, I assure you it's every bit as powerful as Hitotsu's abilities."

"I told you what he said. He doesn't plan on helping." Sakura restated, nearly leaning back, then
thinking better of it when she saw the cobwebs under the work table. There was a spider in the
center that looked like it'd just love the opportunity to climb her leg.

"That might change under the right incentive," There was dark promise in her tone. Sakura's eyes
widened as the goddess raised the weapon above her head and brought it down with a resounded
crack, smashing a small crate containing raw ore to pieces. She didn't stop there, pounding until
everything was dust, a near-diabolical smile exposing her fangs taking up most of her face.

"Mi-Mizuchi!" Sakura yelped. Calling her name did nothing as she moved onto the next thing,
slamming the flail into everything strewn on the work table. Seizing a well-used pair of tongs,
Mizuchi destroyed them with a grunt and a pull from her clawed hands.

Insane, Sakura thought. She had to be insane. "If we need his help, why're you destroying the
forge?!" Unsure of what else to do, she began gathering up whatever looked important to keep it
away from the destruction that was a crazed Mizuchi.

"Because she knows I won't stand by and let her."

Sakura choked on her next breath, a palpable feeling of foreboding making her skin crackle painfully. Mizuchi stopped, calmly setting down the bludgeoning tool. Carefully glancing in the direction of the hearth, Sakura got her first glimpse of a less subdued Ippon Datara. The forge had lit itself with white hot flame upon his entrance, and underneath his helmet, a green eye shone like undiluted poison.

Every footstep of his had sweat dribbling freely down her neck, traversing the curve of her spine. The god was as much menacing because of his hostile appearance as the heat now radiating from him.

"Hello, Hitotsu." Mizuchi greeted, entirely unaffected.

"You know a deity's domain is off-limits." His voice echoed from the helmet with gravely weight, "You know the penalty for defiling it."

"You were being silly. I only wanted an audience. Should we duel to the death, or talk civilly one immortal to another?"

Sakura bit her lip, carefully observing the exchange. The heat in the air felt like it was beginning to lower minutely, but it was still sweltering. The flames in the forge ebbed, but still shone so brightly they lit the whole room.

"I told your godslayer," Ippon Datara's shoulders fell, his eye no longer as bright. "I don't want any part in this conflict."

"Understandable." Mizuchi reached for the flail again.

"Don't." The god hissed, snatching it away first. He ran a finger over a spike and then down the weapon's shaft. "What've you done now, Mizuchi? Why did you involve a human and now me in your feud with the heavens?"

"It's far from a petty feud." Mizuchi defended, her eyes narrowing. "They're going to purge the world, Hitotsu. They don't trust humanity to steer its own collective destiny. I've recruited Sakura because she's an extraordinary human with a stake in this. I'm recruiting you to assist her because you're going to be plunged into it one way or another. Don't you think it's better to help a fellow outcast?"

"I think if I transformed into a boar and wandered to the No Lands everyone would have no choice but to leave me alone," he grumbled.

Sakura wasn't seeing how this was going any better than when she'd spoken with him in the woods. The heat and the back and forth was starting to give her a migraine. "If he won't help and there's someone else forging divine weapons, why can't I just ask them?"

"You didn't hear a single thing I said in the forest?" Ippon Datara grunted. "You'd be better off jumping directly into the flames of the forge now. That's where you'd end up anyway."

"It's kind of hard to hear anything with the wind blasting in your ears." Sakura pointed out. "And you're not going to scare me with that. I've been—"

"Scare tactics aren't Hitotsu's strong point." Mizuchi assured her. "There is no way for you to get
assistance from the goddess of iron, the only other deity capable of forging divine weapons. She despises me, and truthfully all women."

"Then I'm stuck?"

"No," Mizuchi took her wrist, stroking a thumb over the kunoichi’s pulse point before raising the hand high in the air. "Sakura Haruno invokes her right to the trials of the Four Divine Rites."

Sakura balked, staring curiously up at their hands. She wiggled all her fingers just to make sure they still had proper circulation around Mizuchi's grip. "The what?"

Ippon Datara waved his hand at the forge and the fire died to weak embers. "I heard incorrectly, so you're going to have to repeat that."

"It won't be necessary." Mizuchi smirked. "She'll be taking the Four Divine Rites. And you can't go anywhere until they're complete."

"I thought you cared about this human, Mizuchi," the god laughed bitterly. "Her death is going to be excruciating. And squarely on your shoulders for this."

"My godsayer will prevail and you'll forge her a weapon powerful enough to tear the heavens asunder with a single swing."

"It'd be nice if someone clued the godsayer in on things!" Sakura reclaimed her hand, curling it up to join her other on her hips.

"Mizuchi's volunteered you for a prolonged, agonizing death." Ippon Datara tilted his head back, his morose announcement all the more jarring because of his flat tone. "The Four Divine Rights are a series of tests to ascertain the worth of mostly non-divine beings who might have an affinity for a divine weapon. Essentially, it's for humans who might be worthy, bar the occasional minor deity who also shows potential." Sakura stared between the two immortals warily.

"If I did these trials…"

"And lived, which is unlikely," the blacksmith put in unhelpfully.

"I'd be given a divine weapon?"

"He has no choice." Mizuchi crowed. "Unless you object, he has to proceed as an observant party until you pass the trials, voluntarily quit, or perish."

"There's that casual mention of death again…" Sakura quipped. "Alright, what would I have to do?"

"That can't be disclosed until you agree." Ippon Datara sighed in boredom, finally setting down the flail.

It would've been ideal to have time to carefully weigh all options. From the sounds of it, she was favored to die more than beat the odds.

...When was the last time that had stopped her? Sakura recalled her own words during the war, about going down fighting to the last. She couldn't turn back on that now, otherwise the future might as well have been forfeited to the whims of the gods.

"I agree to take the Four Divine Rites." Sakura's voice was clear, and she made sure to speak with her entire chest.
Mizuchi radiated giddiness as she took Sakura by the hand and dragged her to the forge. Ippon Datara hobbled after them. "Then the First Rite is now."

"Now?" Sakura stammered. The fire was going strong again, and Mizuchi’s nails were beginning to bite into her flesh. "Wait, you said once I agreed I’d know what I’m meant to do! I—" Talons sank deep into her arm without warning, exactly where her gloves ended. Sakura yelled, tearing her limb away as Mizuchi flicked the blood on her claws into the flames.

It hissed, roaring audibly. She healed herself, giving Mizuchi a dirty look, but half of her attention inevitably watched the flames react as if alive. It beat and scorched the sides of the forge as if it would escape. All at once the fire calmed, becoming as docile as a dozing kitten, leaving her bewildered.

"Your blood offer has been accepted. The First Rite is complete." Ippon Datara droned.

"Just like that?" Sakura sagged in relief.

"The First Rite is by far the most painless. Well. Except those deemed unworthy by the flames. They're dragged straight in." Mizuchi chirped.

Sakura's glowering intensified. "You tell me now?"

"The Second Rite is one I wouldn't take unless you're amply prepared for it. You'll be traveling to The Under." The god told her matter-of-factly. "Return here tomorrow morning and I'll explain your task in full. For now, leave. You've both done enough."

Sakura stared at him, then her healed arm, a thousand questions left unanswered bouncing through her mind. However, she’d gotten much further in a day than she’d expected to, and was one step closer to actually getting what she'd come all this way for. Since Ippon Datara had dealt with them, however reluctantly, it felt fair to leave him to his solitude.

"Alright." Sakura walked backwards, inching toward the door. Deciding he was a divine being, no matter how lazy and emotionless, she bowed. "Thank you." A lock of hair fell into her face and she tucked it away.

"Hm," he grunted.

The day caught up to her all at once, and Sakura yearned for no more than a hot meal and soak in a spring.

The meal she knew the inn would happily provide, though she wasn't sure if there were hot springs anywhere in the valley. Regardless, it wasn't something she could get to right away. There was the small matter of speaking to a certain someone first...

Food was generally delivered with far less disruption. The urgent pounding on his door had Tobirama looking up from his battle plans with a quiet growl. The hostess simply had to leave the tray outside and he'd retrieve it when he was ready. She had been good about accommodating his requests before.

Stepping over all the notes he'd made, he wrenched the door open enough to glare out. Haruno was in the hall impatiently tapping her foot. As soon as she saw him she shouldered her way in wordlessly.

"I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. This is important, isn't it?" She should know by his
tone it had better be life-saving information.

"You think I'd come over here otherwise?" The kunoichi was still cross about his abrupt distancing.

"I told them I didn't want guests or unneeded disturbances."

"Estudo's willing to make exceptions." Haruno gathered the ends of her hair and wrung it dry, her damp state suggesting it had started to rain since he'd holed himself away. "She thinks we're involved."

Her nose and cheeks were tinted pink, and the vibrant outfit had started to cling. Tobirama purposefully looked away as his mind treacherously recalled the obscene view from the hot springs. "Ridiculous."

"She wouldn't be the first, you know." she mumbled. "Anyway, what I need to speak to you about is much more important. I found the god of blacksmithing today."

Admittedly, that got his full attention.

Chapter End Notes

Whaaaat's this? A shadowy meeting of bad guys? Hm…who could they be? A lot of revelations probably happened with that, though. We now know there's a second godslayer in the mix, so Sakura isn't quite the only special one who has become the champion of a higher being. That deity may or may not be super unhinged (spoiler alert: she is) but hey, for those of you who were wondering if it was Hitotsu/Ippon Datara who was inadvertently causing problems by making divine weapons…the answer is no. That's only the beginning of the mystery of course.

Also, in many cultures natural metals are believed to hold magic. I mean many European folklores even state that iron can weaken fairies who, while not being the most powerful creatures ever, are still pretty strong and versatile in their abilities. Many more tales can be found of the other supernatural creatures metals can fell. I'm sure everyone's heard about enchanted silver bullets killing werewolves and shapeshifters and yada yada. I digress a bit—this story continues to hold the path of belief that there's magic in metal drawn out with divine forging. So while the raw metal itself is harmless, once it makes its way into the right hands, gods better look out, because it's potentially an instrument of a deity's destruction. Who better to work that untapped potential and those magical properties out than blacksmiths, who craft amazing things through the rigorous process of forging? As Hitotsu/Ippon Datara explained, not everyone has this skill just because they're a goddess or god. Meaning there's only a handful of individuals capable of creating a true divine weapon. Which narrows down who's really at fault quite a bit.

While the TobiSaku "dream team" (which will get much, much more time together next chapter) continue to have their hands full together and separately over in the valley, we go briefly to Konoha where a new mission is coming. I will say as this is a new arc, there are going to be new characters introduced. The cast is forever growing. Some familiar names with new faces pop up, although I wonder if anyone will recognize some immediately.
Goemon Ishikawa was a real person who has become something of a Japanese folk hero. Europe has figures like Robin Hood, and Japan had Goemon Ishikawa, who while mostly shrouded in mystery, is still popularly depicted in various media from books to movies to games to this day because of his stance of robbing the corrupt rich for the sake of the poor. A lot of the tales regard him as an anti-authoritarian figure. He met a rather gruesome end of being boiled alive with his son after a failed assassination attempt of a warlord.

I'm looking forward to these introductions either way.
Farewell (for now) and Happy New Year, all~
Reviews are very much anticipated.
Chapter Summary

The Cat is back, not to mention the struggle Sakura and Tobirama are up against. What waits in The Under?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had listened wordlessly as the kunoichi launched into a retelling of her day. It sounded about as strange as anything else that tended to happen when Haruno was in the vicinity, which meant it was likely all true. The trials she had agreed to undergo was one of many points in the story where he'd wished for further elaboration. The whole thing seemed ominous and the last thing he needed was it all coming to a head while he still tried to hunt down the real culprit behind the pox.

Thinking about the way so many familiar people had laid weak and helpless, waiting for a cure or even death to claim them, his mind was made up. "I'll go with you tomorrow."

Haruno tilted her head and stared intensely, as if she hadn't heard him right. Tobirama stared back unfazed, waiting for her to voice her disapproval. Though her lips thinned, she withheld whatever she wanted to say, nodding faintly.

The absence of the fiery protests that'd normally be falling from his mouth left him just a little put out. But, if everything she'd told him had transpired since he'd last seen her, then Tobirama supposed it'd explain.

She collected her cat and left with a murmured goodbye, and he wondered how much of the truth would be revealed if he followed along with whatever Haruno planned to do.

Generally, the night before a mission, (or anytime really), Toka found deep sleep evaded her. But after another awkward dinner in which Reira was moody, she was at a loss, and Hashirama did his best to lighten the atmosphere unsuccessfully, that was especially true. She wondered as much about how to reconnect with her drifting niece as she did about how to stop Goemon Ishikawa from humiliating the daimyo.

Mei-san's eyes had been far too knowing when she met Toka before the kunoichi could leave the compound, handing her a bento and solemnly promising she would look after Reira while she was away. At this, Toka managed a thin, exhausted smile, wondering if she'd even be seen off by the girl in question.

It had been a tradition of theirs for years. Whenever she was leaving, Reira would be there to give her a final parting hug and whine into her stomach. Although in the last year she wasn't as melancholy, but more curious and interested in when she would be old enough to join.

Toka prayed fervently she would never live to see a time when Reira undertook some of the more dangerous missions she had. But that aside, the thought of not getting seen off at all was a stone in her stomach.
The morning was still as she waited at the village gates, watching the first rays of sunlight enshroud everything it fell on in a soft glow. 'When I return...I'll tell Reira...' "And here I thought I'd be the first one to arrive." Her eyes shifted, finding Naoko Uchiha had silently appeared, her hair shiny and streaked with dark blue in hues of sunrise. Without hesitation, the other woman slunk closer, studying her with keen interest.

Toka didn't draw away, her emotionless mask falling easily into place. "Invading personal space seems to be a trademark of yours."

"You look troubled." Naoko said, finally drawing away. Her gaze flickering to the stoic expression Toka wore, she amended the statement with a small chuckle. "Well, you don't look anything. It's more of a feeling. It can't be that the unflappable Toka Senju has pre-mission nerves?" The Uchiha playfully lifted a thin brow.

Turning away slightly, she decided her best bet was simply to ignore the teasing. One thing she had determined for a fact about Naoko, was that the woman was gifted with an intuitive sense of what buttons to push. For all her crass comments and air of whimsy, she was incredibly skilled at picking up on even the most subtle emotional states of those around her. It was impressive…and with a kunoichi like Naoko, dangerous.

"I see I've overstepped. I've forgotten you're not one for sharing." The Uchiha mused, perfectly content to carry on a one-sided conversation it seemed. Placing her hands to her hips, she swiveled to stare out over the quiet streets of Konoha. "Yurine…she's never done this type of mission before, has she?"

Barely looking over, Toka considered the question. "To my knowledge, no."

"She seemed unsettled in the Hokage's office," Naoko pointed out.

Toka had noticed as well. And it was a concern, given that there'd be no time for insecurities when the daimyo was being targeted and their services to him represented the shinobi force of Konoha. But the Senju had already decided she would take the lead on the mission. If Yurine fell short in some way, as team leader she would simply have to compensate for it.

"Lord Hashirama carefully chose us from the pool of available shinobi. I trust his judgement." The sense of finality to her words were followed by a soupy silence.

Somewhere in the distance a crow cawed.

Then the racket of two voices drawing steadily closer.

The women turned simultaneously to find Yurine sprinting toward them, waving her hand over her head frantically, long blonde hair whipping behind her as she moved. It was the sight of her brother jogging along at her side that truly threw Toka, though. But perhaps he'd only come to see her off.

"I'm sorry!" Yurine cried, skidding to a halt in front of them and bracing her arms out in front of her. "I spent all my time arguing with him about why he shouldn't be coming on this mission!" she pointed accusingly back at Kureno—Yuhi Two, as Toka had taken to referring to him.

"You were daydreaming," Kureno swept some of his windblown bangs from his face with a scoff. "I had nothing to do with it."

Balling her fists, the youngest kunoichi's cheeks reddened. "You—"
"What's this about you joining our happy trio?" Naoko sidled up to Kureno, wrapping her arms around his bicep and placing her head on his shoulder. "Are you going to be the strong shinobi who watches out for us?" A sultry coo was all it took for Yuhi Two to become beat red, incoherent gibberish falling from his lips.

Naoko pulled away with a hearty gale of laughter, one hand pressed to her ample chest as she threw back her head. Yurine had Kureno's ear seized firmly in her fingers, scolding him about how quickly he fell apart, and insisting he return home.

Toka wasn't sure what to make of this. Had Hashirama…really thought these individuals would be right for such an important job?

"Lord Hashirama…sent you?" If there was a note of skepticism detectable in her voice, she could hardly be blamed.

Recovering slightly, Kureno rubbed at his forehead, casting a sheepish look Naoko's way and swallowing. "Y-Yes. Here, this might help explain," He fished out and handed her a slip of paper, and Toka read it with scrutiny. The handwriting was indeed familiar, and it clearly stated Kureno was to be a last minute addition to the team.

"This…” Toka pushed down whatever words of frustration wanted to arise, nodding once. "Alright."

"Alright?" Yurine had released her brother's ear to clutch to handfuls of his shirt, and she was staring at the older kunoichi in disbelief. "He begs his way onto the mission, which he's definitely going to goof up, and you're not going to make him go home?!" By the end of her rant, the blonde's voice had become comically shrill.

"Lord Hashirama has made this decision, and I have no authority to go against it. There's also the fact that we've wasted enough time here." The Yuhi siblings' heads bowed guiltily under Toka's stern expression. "We should move on now."

"Right!" they chorused. Naoko cocked her head, a wry uplift to her mouth.

"I'll assume you're taking the role of our vigilant leader."

"Is there an issue with that?" The countdown to the mission had ended, and the Senju's mindset had already shifted over into completing the objective. No time for games.

"Not at all," Naoko shook her head. "I'm no one's leader."

Despite her pacifying words, Toka found herself locked into another tense stare. Naoko's eyes were beetle black, bottomless. She didn't need the Sharingan to display an unnerving stare. But, with everything she had seen and done, it would take more than intimidating eyes to ruffle Toka.

She turned her back, marching out with her new teammates behind her. The capital. Reaching it in time was what mattered.

An image of a childish grin and inquisitive eyes set into a tanned face flashed through her mind.

Then why were her thoughts already straying to Reira, and the fact that she hadn't come?

The sun fell over the valley and made the dewy hills of the farmland she passed look idyllic. The cows and horses grazing in pastures behind sturdy fences were so oblivious to life's difficulties.
Nothing as grave as protecting the world from wrathful gods would ever fall on their shoulders.

For the same reason she had left Usamaro behind in Choshu. The cat hadn't been happy, but the innkeepers were kind enough to have their grandson watch the little troublemaker so he wouldn't attempt to follow her.

As grateful as Sakura was for her loyal, crafty feline friend, she had a feeling what she'd be up against starting today would do a little more than singe off some whiskers. And she wasn't going to risk Usamaro's life needlessly. She'd rather have him alive to be cross at her later.

Besides, she reminded herself, there'd be a prickly, cat-like man skulking after her. One was more than enough. While the idea of partnering up with the surly shinobi wasn't filling her with any great amount of enthusiasm, she knew Tobirama's stubbornness rivaled her own even if he wouldn't admit it.

He was going to find a way to involve himself in one way or another, especially because he clearly saw some link between her goal and the clarity he was chasing. He'd probably be sorely disappointed when he found out Ippon-Datara was just as cryptic as Mizuchi was. Honestly, handing out vague, frustrating answers had to be a special commonalty shared in divine beings.

The thought of them vexing someone else, someone who would be sharing in her misery, brought a touch of amusement to her lips. But all of it fell away in an instant when she crested the final hill and saw Tenryu nestled down below.

A single sweep was all it took to see something was wrong down in the little village. Ugly smoke snaked up through the air, and the bitter tang curled up her nose and made her throat feel scratchy. There was…fire!

Sakura didn't even bother trying to assess what could've been happening. She was already streaking closer, unsure of what danger she'd have to confront, but positive it was as ominous and deliberate as it felt in her bones.

Oboro whistled through the air, piercing the backs of three people as they ran from the mayhem. He pulled his weapon free of their bodies with a jerk, the segments glistening with fresh, dark blood.

They fell in a heap, and the rest of the sniveling villagers cowered away, trying to shield their children from him. One man, a hole ripped through his chest, attempted to crawl over his wife, her own wound just as severe.

He took his time walking to them, crouching over their prone, defenseless forms and staring hard through the eye holes of his mask. "There'd be no need for this destruction and bloodshed if someone would tell me what I want to know." he informed them.

Groaning, a teenage boy struggled to pull himself from under his parents. As he inched along, eventually rolling onto his back, the masked warrior noticed the hole in his clothing wasn't as large compared to the others.

Possibly because the bodies of his parents had taken the brunt of Oboro's steel. When he peered up into Cat's eyes, there was a deep well of venom under a shine of anguish. "W-Why?" he ground. "What's brought an omen like you?"

"Not every punishment is about whose most deserving." he spat. "If that were the case all the
suffering in this world would be reserved only for the most vile and wicked. But innocents are impacted just as much as the unjust."

A small shift in the air, and then Cat was leaping away to avoid an underground sneak attack. He swung Oboro, the sword slashing right through the neck of what turned out to be a clone.

It disappeared with a grunt, leaving Cat facing down the original. While another clone worked to resuscitate the injured family clinging to their last breaths, Tobirama Senju's icy red gaze locked onto him. For a split second, he felt as if the man knew who he was.

"Ah…back for another round?"

"That was a nice little speech you gave," The Senju sneered, never taking his eyes away as he took out a kunai, twirling it around his fingers, "And normally I'd be inclined to agree…but I hope you don't consider yourself an innocent."

Cat tilted his head down, gripping the hilt of his blade as memories briefly resurfaced before he snuffed them out with a vengeance. "No…I can't be. You took that away from me."

"You aren't the first person to try to enact revenge based on a grudge against me." Tobirama sighed. "But there's a reason I'm still standing. Wanting me dead doesn't mean it'll be how our encounter ends."

"You're so cocky," Cat growled. "If you were an honorable man you'd save me the trouble of all this, lay down and offer me your neck and most solemn apologies before I watched the life drain from your eyes."

Leaping into the air, he flipped, striking out with Oboro and then allowing the sword to deftly slither in the direction of two children hiding behind a fruit cart. Tobirama was quick to phase in front of them, drawing them into his arms and spitting a layered mud wall. The lethal tip burst through the first layer with minor difficulty, but by the time it had collapsed the next three Tobirama and the two small girls had teleported to safety.

"You know, you're really not even who I'm after today…I'd much rather destroy you from the inside out. A man like you doesn't feel much, but if I search deep enough I'm sure I can rip apart what you do feel by taking everything you cherish."

"Then it was you." Suddenly Tobirama was there, ducking under his guard and swinging a punch into his gut. Cat stumbled across the roof he'd landed on.

"The pox you mean? And what of it?"

"You—" There was a ferocious glow the likes of which he had only seen once before. Not from a cold-hearted man with snow-kissed hair, but from the equally hateful carmine orbs of a white-haired boy.

A potent chakra began to leak out of Tobirama, killing intent amplifying to levels that had civilians in close proximity slumping over to retch on the ground. Cat felt the clawed hand of death scrape its nails down his spine. But it was a sensation he had felt too many times before for it to slow him down for long.

"This is the rage I want you to feel when we have our deciding match. Hold onto the feeling that I almost took everyone away from you." At this point he was only sticking around to goad the arrogant Senju, let him know who was really in control.
Back at the forge, they'd know soon enough he was missing and when they saw the state Tenryu
was in, he'd get an earful about how impetuous he'd chosen to be. Scolding was all they could do
though, because they needed him. A godslayer wasn't exactly easy to come by, and he was able to
wield Oboro. Without him, the sword's full potential would remain locked, and it would be a waste.

Tobirama's chilled features darkened further. "But you didn't. I'm guessing now it was all a way to
ensure I'd travel here."

"Coldly analytical." Cat remarked. "It suits you." He swung Oboro and sent a wave of green flames
that he'd sapped from the other godslayer the shinobi's way. Even when he evaded in time, the
acidic flames still corroded whatever it touched, quickly spreading from one roof to another and
sending burning rubble onto trapped villagers inside. Raw screams and pleas for help mixed with
the buzz of disorder already in the air. "Do you understand, Tobirama?"

A strange kunai flew by his head, and he leaned to the side to evade it. A whisper of malice was all
the warning that came before a clone teleported behind him came dangerously close to impaling
him with an electrified water spear. "The next time, I can make a pox that kills within the first
hour. And if I wanted to destroy this village and everyone in it, if I wanted their agonized cries to
be the very last thing you heard before your demise, then that's how it would be."

Ignoring his declaration entirely, Tobirama continued his offensive without holding back. A circle
of flame blasted from his mouth, trapping them both in a tall ring of billowing fire.

Cat stared down, sticking his foot close to the flame and then withdrawing it right before it could
touch him. Underneath his mask, he smirked. "There's a lot of irony in you thinking fire's enough
to trap me. Is this the only plan you can come up with in your desperation?"

"You do a lot of talking, but not a lot of observing of your surroundings." Tobirama stated. "It
makes me wonder how young you are under that mask."

A sharp tug around his ankle drew his attention down, seeing a clone had grabbed his legs. Before
he could raise his sword to detach it, a shadow fell over him, a sharp look up revealing the snarling
face of the pink-haired godslayer with her claws out. Cat had heard about some of her abilities, and
he knew that she was generally despised so much for a reason. Meddlesome. Tenacious. Hideous.

Those were some of the words that had been thrown out when he'd asked to know more about this
godslayer the heavens were keen to see erased as soon as possible. Although, Cat couldn't see any
true credence to the last claim.

With her long hair fluttering like blush pink petals on the wind, an eye-catching outfit snugly fitted
to her body, shining silver scales climbing up her forearms, and glittering eyes swiftly becoming an
unusual golden-green, she was far from unattractive. With a lazy flick of the wrist, Oboro split
apart and rose to meet her.

She crossed her arms over her chest as gravity continued to bring her down. As if the tough scales
protecting her with as soft as melted steel, the weapon cut, bright blood bubbling up. It dripped
down her arms, but aside from a momentary flinch, she pretended as though she couldn't feel it.

Impressive. A wound from a divine weapon burned like liquid mercury shot through the veins.

No...he was sure of it now. Hideous was not a descriptor that suited this woman, something he
could admit despite his willingness to cut her down for his true goal.

If anything...her fury only made her more striking. Unusually dazed by her sudden appearance and
warrior-like image, Cat felt her claws sink into the flesh of his shoulders as she took him to the ground, a knee shoved hard into his stomach. "If that's what you think, then I'm about to become the most beautiful person you've ever seen!"

Had he made the comment about her anger being attractive out loud? Flipping them over, he threw her off, watching her slide backwards and take up a combat-ready stance. "So someone else in my way joins the fray…"

Sizing her up, he glared down at therips she'd left in his clothing. Her claws had cut deep and both shoulders now bled through the material. "Sorry, but you're not someone I'm that interested in killing right now either. But…” They couldn't see it, but his face had pulled into a thoughtful frown. "Maybe you'd be more willing than they were to tell me where the One-Eyed God is hiding? I have some…things I'd like to talk about with him."

She certainly didn't look impressed. Cat decided he liked that she wasn't as trusting as her appearance would lead one to believe. "I'm supposed to just take your word I guess."

"You don't have to." Tobirama flickered to her side, ready to resume what they'd started. "You could watch me turn this little village into a gaping hole in the ground. I'll leave it up to you."

The answer was a tightening on the palpable tension in the air, the spring of their legs as they all flew toward each other. It was a flurry of jutsu and sword swings and licks of flames with corrosive power. As they jumped and guarded, Cat knew exactly what their plan was. They were on the outskirts of the small village, no longer endangering the lives of the people that called it home.

There was also the added benefit of having more room to do battle, though that worked both ways. If they thought they'd successfully cornered him, they were sadly mistaken. Neither of them seemed to recognize the spot they were headed towards, or rather what was beneath it. He on the other hand had ventured down on several deadly errands, the last being to retrieve the materials necessary for his weapon.

"Trapping them will be more suffering than I could ever cause, and give me time to hunt down that pesky god."

The female godslayer struck the ground and it rumbled like a giant's yawn had disturbed the earth. Rock shot up in great chunks he had no choice but to dodge, nimbly leaping closer to her. However, as expected there was no trace of fear in her eyes as she maneuvered from place to place just as effortlessly. He'd lost sight of Tobirama, but there was no doubt he was close.

Staring down at the rift, he waited, allowing the girl to think he was distracted again. She seemed hesitant to attack, perhaps sensing he wasn't as preoccupied as he seemed. But when he pretended as though locating Tobirama was the higher priority, she once again came in for a strike.

His hand shot out, seizing her around the throat before she could land a blow. A short wheeze sounded from her as he tossed her idly, biting his thumb until he tasted a trickle of blood. Weaving one-handed seals, he slapped his palm down on the rock.

The power from beneath glowed, and Cat had to move away himself, not eager to share their fate. Caught unsuspecting, Sakura Haruno shrieked as she was sucked toward the pulsating light of the portal.

He turned his attention outward, catching a slip of chakra that allowed him to locate his second target. Tobirama was visibly bewildered by what had happened to his partner, half surprising Cat when he lunged to grab her arm.
The swordsman swung a knee into the distracted Tobirama's abdomen, sending him sprawling. Seizing the downed Senju by a leg, he flung him with all his might down into the abyss, giving The Under its second victim.

She scraped the side of her face and hit various parts of her body countless times on the way down. One minute she was facing off against the mysterious cat-masked man, the next he'd opened a portal that swallowed her whole.

Now Sakura was free-falling down, down, down, her dragon eyes barely able to make out the craggy, jutting rock occasionally illuminated by masses of faintly glowing crystal. Flipping, knowing she wouldn't find purchase and yet still determined to slow her fall, Sakura extended her talons, hearing the long toenails tear through her socks over the whistling in her ears.

Arms and legs extended, they scraped the sides of the rapidly narrowing space she was dropping through. She continued to slide, though not as fast, giving her a moment to catch her breath. If her limbs hadn't been transformed, she probably would have been feeling immense burn from the friction of the hard rock and her supple skin meeting so quickly.

'This feels like a cave.' Sakura thought, glancing up only to find whatever way she'd entered was predictably swallowed by the fathomless dark that was everywhere. Her feet dangled, indicating the end of the rocky protrusions shortly before her nails involuntarily retracted and she fell to her stomach on a decidedly stony ground.

Rubbing at her head, the pinkette lifted herself on shaky arms. The right side of her face was warm and sticky, reminding her of how much skin had been scraped off from her descent.

Taking the precious few moments she could to heal herself while she got her bearings, Sakura ran through what was likely to be the most logical plan. Tobirama…what had happened to him?

He'd reached for her, a small glimpse of something other than exasperation in his eyes when they locked gazes. Then the swordsman had kicked him out of the way and she'd dropped with no one to hold onto.

Sakura could feel the skin finish knitting itself back together, prodding it experimentally with two fingers to be sure there was no other gash to lead to a nasty infection later.

Granted, even if she'd managed to scrape off the entire side of her face, she was confident she could restore herself in no time, but it was a hassle she'd rather not go through regardless. She'd barely climbed to her feet, mind still trying to puzzle out where she'd been dropped, when a solid weight slammed into her from overhead. She toppled flat onto her face, banging her chin. A low grunt gave her a strong guess about what had happened. Sakura was far from happy when her face shot up from the ground for the second time in under five minutes.

"Are you kidding me?!" she raged, all but flinging Tobirama a distance away, watching his body stop as it met the cave wall. "Shannaro! I just finished patching myself up!"

"Sorry, Haruno," The voice confirmed it was indeed the same surly Senju she suspected. "The next time I go plummeting through a portal and end up free-falling into a cave I'll have a light on hand to see where I'm dropping."

Picking himself up and dusting himself off, Sakura's eyes adjusted enough to see Tobirama surveying their surroundings. "Where is this?" he demanded. "This cave feels strange. It feels… alive."
Sakura narrowed her eyes. Since he mentioned it, the same heightened senses that were more in tune to powerful auras since coming in contact with Mizuchi, did feel something like a pulsing sensation.

Closing her eyes and willing only her dragon eyes to activate, Sakura gasped, noticing a translucent, rippling web stretched everywhere on the cave walls. Moving forward and lightly touching sent a tingle up her arm. Curious, Sakura put one foot up and summoned chakra to the soles of her feet.

She took precisely three steps up before the chakra suctioning her to the wall disappeared and she felt her knees knock together, weak as a newborn calf's. She tumbled onto her back, staring up at the ceiling incredulously. "I couldn't stick..." she muttered to no one in particular.

Tobirama's face appeared above her as he looked down on her with a huff. "I don't see you trying it!" she challenged.

Rolling his shoulders, Tobirama summoned his own chakra and started sprinting up the cave wall. Sakura sat up and watched, annoyed he was making good progress.

That was until he got blasted back down on his ten step. Not wanting to be too uncharitable when he was the only person around in this unknown place, Sakura turned her mouth into her shoulder and bit her lip.

"So it's as I thought..." he said, brushing at a sleeve. Sakura figured it was too dark for him to see her rolling her eyes. Was he really going to play it off like he knew that would happen and still risked an embarrassing tumble just to prove a point? Men and their pride.

"What is?" she asked, humoring him slightly. And, she was partially wondering what theory he was spinning in that head of his.

"This cave is as close to 'alive' as anything inorganic I've ever encountered. It's similar to the black mountain that was resistant to my attacks that day. I shouldn't have to tell you about the strange atmosphere here..."

Sakura slowly nodded even though he wasn't facing her. A deep rumble shook the ground, a piece of stalagmite falling from somewhere overhead. "What now?" Sakura grumbled, already feeling done with the whole ordeal. This was so far from where she had planned for her day to go.

"The walls..." Tobirama's voice had picked up half an octave, indicating unmasked shock. Sakura let her eyes drift to them, then scrambled to her feet when the rock started moving closer. The both of them backed hastily, neither speaking as the cave continued to narrow until the small alcove they'd been standing in was a sliver of space so small a skinny, stray cat would have had a hard time squeezing through.

Blinking, Sakura plopped down then and there, her eyes snapping shut.

"What are you—"

"Shh!" she scolded, "I need to try and reach Mizuchi. I don't know what's going on but she probably does."

Tobirama surprisingly offered no further comments. Sakura made herself as comfortable as possible and started the process of reaching for the invisible tether that linked her to the deity.

It was faint at first, buried deeper than usual. But Sakura pulled steadily until it felt as though her own hand was solidly gripping it in a tightly clenched fist. "...!"
"The connection is faint, Sakura. Where've you gone off to?"

Squirming in place, Sakura curled the hand resting on her knee. "I don't know! One minute I was fighting the same guy with the cat mask and the divine sword, and the next he throws us into a portal. There's something off here, I can feel it. I was hoping you could—"

"Say no more. I'm sure I already know the gist of your situation. Listen carefully Sakura, contacting you again may prove difficult for now. You are in The Under."

The name sent a trickle of recognition into her brain, and she recalled Ippon-Dataran had mentioned it toward the end of the conversation. "The…the place where the Second Rite is supposed to be? Isn't that sort of a good thing then?" Already, though perhaps prematurely, she could feel some of the tightness loosening from her back muscles.

She could almost feel the goddess' piercing eyes searing into her. "Without proper understanding or preparation it is the last place for a mortal to be…The Under is not simply a deep pit in the earth. It is a pocket realm placed between the top world and the underworld."

The jolt of astonishment was so great, Sakura had to fight to keep hold of the connection. It didn't stop the bodily spasm that overcame her. Once she'd calmed, she leaned forward, refusing to give up until she understood completely. "That explains why it feels so oppressive here. It's like being in the stomach of a monster."

"That…is more accurate than you may be comfortable hearing." Mizuchi sighed. "Long ago, early on during a period before humanity, the gods experimented daily, attempting to establish what would roam the earth. Many strange things were made. Then they grew bored, being as fickle as divine beings are, and sometimes they carelessly created monstrosities too unruly and dangerous to ever allow to remain free."

'Typical,' Sakura couldn't help the disdainful thought that slipped free. When had the gods shown good judgement so far?

"Instead of destroying what they had done, they sealed up some of those early, rejected creations into a pocket realm. It is a box of discarded, misshapen toys you might say."

Mizuchi continued. "Not everything in The Under will try and kill you, and some of the most precious, forgotten treasures of the heavens also lie buried there. But for a mortal, it's truly a testament of their endurance and courage to survive there long enough to find anything valuable. In a realm that existed before humans, chakra and ninjutsu will likely get you nowhere. If you want to find a way to escape...you need to—"

Her voice trailed into something tinny, and Sakura cursed aloud. She waited several beats, prodding at the link but there was only more garbled speech and then Mizuchi was gone.

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Nothing of great significance had been said between them in a while. After Haruno finished making contact with her deity and relayed the little bit of crucial information she'd managed to glean, it became a matter of determining the best direction out.

Unimaginable horrors supposedly awaited them, and they had no sense of where they might be lurking or how to outright avoid them, assuming it was possible. The first fork in the path had come not long into their walking, and a standoff had ensued about whose choice they would go
Tobirama's sensory skills had picked up no life from either path, but foreboding wound through each part of him every time he so much as glanced to the left. On the other hand Haruno insisted it was the right that would spell doom, citing that her enhanced draconic senses made her at least slightly more aligned with this new world.

Grudgingly he agreed to allow her to take the lead, with the understanding that if it led them to trouble he would revoke her leadership without hesitation. She agreed and they'd set off. Aside from being dank, sparsely lit by the strange glow high above, and progressively chillier as they traveled, nothing popped out. It had been an inconvenience so far, but not an unordinary one.

Tobirama was busy focusing on the light pink hair swinging down Haruno's back, tracking it as the beacon he was following through the dark tunnel. Her words, admitting that the Second Rite the deities expected her to undergo was to take place here anyway, made him wonder if she'd known the portal would lead to The Under all along.

With the monotony of walking aimlessly stretching his patience thin, he decided there was no point in remaining silent about his questions. "Haruno," he called, aware she'd heard from such a close proximity.

"Hm?" She turned her head a little, still walking.

"How much did you know about this place before today?"

"Nothing besides its name," she replied, her words echoing. "I said that when I explained about the Rites."

"You seem so keen to blindly follow along with these deities and their schemes. You have no idea if they're leading you further into a trap or have any intentions to deliver on their end of the deal."

He crossed his arms, finding himself steadily growing more agitated with the notion.

For the times she had proved herself a deep thinker, able to rationalize and analyze at a level he would have to admit impressed him, she was painfully naïve to throw herself forward into peril so often. Because she felt she could trust the words of that sharp-tongued dragon woman.

'It's not my concern if she ends up fooled,' Tobirama thought.

"You don't really understand the full situation!" she hissed. "I don't put myself in those situations because I like the thrill. But... all my life I've been looking for a way to truly stand strong and protect everyone and everything that matters." There was so much fervent passion in her voice, Tobirama found himself struck silent.

It had been so long since he was a small boy, powerless in the face of the bloodlust and greed of the adults around him. He had vowed with resentment in his heart not to follow their path. Though he knew it would be difficult and the road riddled with huge obstacles, he wanted the same world Hashirama did.

Speaking more quietly, the pink-haired girl went on, "Mizuchi's fickle, I agree, but she's proven reliable enough for me to have developed some faith. I'm not willing to let what's important to me disappear yet."

Her declaration enveloped her in a shroud that radiated heat like a warm hearth. Tobirama could feel the unyielding grit of her will as much as he had heard it in her voice. At some point it had become less about whether or not Sakura Haruno actually had good intentions and more about if
those good intentions would become something that dragged her and everyone else around her down.

It was the source of the lingering apprehension about her he couldn't completely dispel. Haruno probably thought she had it under control, but she was still following along with gods who said they would help.

If they truly possessed such limitless power, why make the ordeal so lengthy when it could be handled instantly? In Tobirama's head, Haruno was more likely to be an instrument they were using for their own ends.

The journey resumed in silence, nothing left to say. Tobirama turned his attention back to remaining vigilant, and Haruno plodded on ahead with her shoulders squared, hopefully in the same mindset. At some point the air was so chilled that he physically felt the skin of his exposed forearms rise and pebble. However, it was more than just the drop in temperature that made uneasiness rise. Between the sporadic pattern of droplets coming from the cave's roof, there was a subtle meaty squelch. It sounded like bare skin that had adhered to a wood floor being forcibly removed.

Haruno noticed it not long afterwards, stopping entirely and craning her neck around. The darkness did nothing to dim the brightness of her luminous green eyes, which were darting in every direction. The squelching continued, and it dawned on him. They were being stalked.

Something wet dripped down on his nose, thicker than the water that had fallen on him before. The spot tingled, the tip of his nose going numb. Wiping it away, Tobirama was sure to grab Haruno's arm, stopping her erratic movements. "Above." he whispered.

They both turned their faces upwards, no more neck movement than necessary. A fleshy lump hung down from the ceiling, large, rubbery lips opening wide to expose three rows of needle teeth and a lashing tongue. What he assumed to be its head bobbed, and then an impossibly long, fat neck shot out with the creature's clear intent to swallow them whole.

Chapter End Notes

Updates are generally slow because sometimes slow reader response makes it hard to stay motivated. However I do appreciate everyone who comments. That means a lot. Someone posted on the FFN version of that they feel there’s too much included about the side characters’ lives and that romance is too slow so the story has fallen flat.

In case there’s anyone on this platform who may also feel that way, all I have to say is I’ve already explained my reasons for world building the way I do numerous times. And this fic is slow burn romance so while it’s true that nothing happens immediately, that’s for good reason too. I didn’t think it’d be realistic for Sakura to give up all pretenses of going home and just snag four boyfriends in a matter of a few months.

People who complain about these things often aren’t attempting to do their own writing, so their critiques make even less sense. Regardless, the story is going to keep developing in a way that satisfies me and I hope those who enjoy it continue to follow along.
Chapter Summary

Exploring The Under in search of a way out, Tobirama and Sakura quickly see how many deadly surprises lie around every corner, but maybe also unexpected help?

Chapter Notes

A short chapter but an important one nonetheless
Happy birthday to me btw 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With a mouth of four inch fangs coming at her, Sakura reacted instinctively, driving a vicious fist into what felt like the underside of its jaw. The flesh was rubbery and unyielding, but the hit seemed unexpected enough to have the monster reeling.

They wasted no time enacting a strategic retreat, stumbling forward through the expanding passage without a clue what was ahead. But there was no mystery about what was behind them. Having detached itself from the ceiling of the cave, the beast was loping after them, its footsteps quaking the walls a bit.

"This isn't going to work," Tobirama said from in front of her. "We have no way of knowing where we're going and we're in the monster's lair."

Sakura didn't slow, didn't grant him the angry look he deserved. "Staying still to think up a plan isn't really an option!" Her mind felt like every step had it bouncing around in her skull. The shrill sounds of the creature in pursuit echoed throughout the passage, reminding her how very little time they had. At one point she could have sworn its slimy, barbed tongue rasped at the nape of her neck, repulsion shuddering through her from top to toe. "This tunnel is too wide; we're not going to lose it like this!" she realized.

Tobirama grunted in affirmation. "Then we'll make it narrow."

In the faint bit of light from sporadically glowing chunks of crystal, Sakura saw him extend his arm, chakra dancing at his fingertips. He dragged them against the rock walls, and she instantly knew his plan. Without hesitation she too focused on pushing chakra into the walls around them, never stopping her sprint.

The ground shook harder, nearly lurching them sideways as The Under had the same reaction to the chakra as it did before. A peek of light up ahead sparked a miniscule amount of hope in her chest, and Sakura dared to look back for the first time.

As the walls contracted, the chalky white monster had less room, its wide shoulders already barely fitting through. It opened its cylindrical mouth to hiss, the rows of teeth on display as its long tongue lashed out. There were no eyes in its face, none that she could spot anyway.
The pinkette noticed it flap stubby wing-like arms, trunk legs propelling it forward despite the walls shrinking the space.

She slammed a palm into the rock once more, desperate for the passage to close up quicker, and the next pulse stopped the monster so abruptly it nearly toppled over. "Let's hurry," Tobirama commanded, drawing her attention back to the end of the tunnel and the fact that their way out was disappearing rapidly.

The futilely struggling beast roared out. The two shinobi brushed shoulders just as they reached the exit, Tobirama vanishing into the intense light right in front of her eyes. It was something so simple, one miscalculated half step that sent Sakura's world toppling end over end. The tightness coiling around her ankle as she hit the ground hard forced a wheeze from her lungs that dislodged something for all she knew.

Her nails scraped uselessly, and when she twisted, all she saw was the creature's pink mouth open and glistening with saliva, tugging her back into the limited and still closing space of the tunnel with it.

Placing both hands around the thick, slimy appendage, Sakura's first instinct was to tear it off. But if the thing had the same immunity to chakra as the structure of the realm itself, that'd likely just make it incensed.

Passively waiting to become its last meal didn't appeal any stronger, and so she let passion stoke the inner flames that transformed her flesh into scales. The talons obtained much better purchase than her fingernails had, making a pained squeal echo around them. Although the victory was short-lived.

For her resistance, the kunoichi was lifted and slammed into the rock, her body convulsing as sharp jolts of electricity stabbed through every inch. The scream she emitted was a choked rasp of agony, the blue arcs coursing from its body into hers making her eyes roll back. She'd thought that surviving the blights' corruption was comparable to being flayed alive, but it had nothing on this.

'...N-no...' Sakura felt consciousness and air slipping away, and she knew she had failed. Either she would be eaten, or she would be crushed, but The Under would claim her corpse regardless.

"Ha...runo!" There was a faint recognition tickling at her wary brain. She knew that bellow. In fact she could almost swear she saw the hazy face of the surly man it belonged to.

Heat with the intensity of a roaring furnace wisped almost gently past her face. A smoky, charred scent trickling into her nose.

Maybe her father had burnt breakfast again...he did that sometimes.

Eyes bleary, Sakura coughed, a tight hand squeezing at her shoulder. "You aren't seriously going to die like this, are you?" Struggling to collect herself, green orbs slowly came back into focus, realizing that she was peering up into a familiar face. Deep ruby eyes, defined tattooed jawline, taut lips and all.

"...You... came back?"

He shook his head, jaw ticking. "Its weakness is fire. It's at least frightened off by it. A regular katon attack might not be enough, but yours could be."

Sluggishly nodding, she tried to work past the splitting headache and all the painful places it felt like her skin was peeling off, waiting for the acidic heat to travel up her throat.
The spew of green light was so bright it was hard to believe it came from her mouth. Blasting the monstrosity in the face, it wriggled against the unyielding walls that trapped it. What Sakura could now see was a tongue finally loosened, and she wasted no time scrambling away.

Her senses were fuzzy, but she knew Tobirama was more or less dragging her through the tiny space of the exit. He shoved her through first, his body colliding hard with hers forcing them both out of the gap.

The glittering inferno lit the whole cave emerald, the smell and squelch of burning flesh stuck to rock searing the air. Then, totally spent, Sakura let herself collapse backward, not expecting the hand that darted to her shoulder and slowed the descent. It was a surreal moment where nothing was said, because nothing could be.

The pinkette stared up at the man crouching beside her, her heart not yet aware that it could stop attempting to gallop out of her ribcage. Sakura wanted to lay back, rest her eyes, but she couldn't.

Not with the huge rush of adrenaline numbing everything and urging her to action. Sakura looked past Tobirama's shoulders, nearly gaping at how different their surroundings now were. Where before they had been in a dank, desolate cave riddled with horrors that hid in the dark, they occupied a spacious room. "This is really still the same place? Or did we both die back there?"

The space was comparable to a peaceful forested glade, strange flowers in shapes she had never seen lining a serene lake with a gentle shimmer of green. The touch of dirt and spongy grass under her knees had never been so miraculous.

Tobirama was predictably unimpressed. "Quiet." The Senju hissed, holding a glowing hand toward her forehead. Sakura pushed it away, wary of any sudden movement.

He clicked his teeth, tense and annoyed. "Stop it and stay still. Don't be a child."

His pale hand surrounded in a soft hue of green once again drew closer, and Sakura's brow rose as she finally recognized what he was attempting to do.

"Are you running a diagnostic on me?"

The sharp slash of his eyebrows drawing down was his first response. "Neither of us have any idea what that creature could have been carrying, and it clearly zapped you. You're not going to become a liability."

A scowl slid into place. 'So much for any hint of concern.'

"Then why even come back?" she muttered. Louder, she scoffed. "I can do it myself." In the privacy of her own head though, there were doubts. He wasn't wrong in the fact that a brush with that monster and its subsequent attack to her nervous system had done damage.

Sakura flushed a little to notice the parts of her clothing that had been ripped in the struggle, random bits of bare skin exposed around her stomach, sides and back. But frigid Tobirama was good about ignoring that as well, so she followed his lead and pretended it didn't bother her.

"This isn't the time to make a point of trying to survive separately." he said after the pause. "One of us alone would never escape this realm. And I'm closer than ever to the man who orchestrated that pox. I don't have plans to die here."

Tobirama had stopped checking her over, moving his hand back. There was an expression there she
couldn't place again. A small amount of satisfaction that he apparently hadn't found anything concerning maybe?

In the irritating way he often did, his harsh logic wasn't entirely wrong. Had she been a liability by coming away from that fight infected somehow, it would have done more than slow them down.

But, for the span of time it took that look to disappear from his eyes, she could almost imagine there was some concern about her wellbeing beyond her simply becoming a burden.

Sakura activated her own medical ninjutsu, deciding to start by healing her head. Getting slammed around had her thinking nonsense. Tobirama tolerated her at best, and the working relationship they had (if it could even be called that) was far from a friendship.

The shinobi got to his feet, but didn't move far. Sakura continued to silently flush out the stiffness and pain. The bubbling, peeling flesh of the attack was smoothing out, thankfully. Had the damage inflicted by attacks sustained here been resistant to ordinary medical ninjutsu, Sakura approximated she'd have collapsed from her injuries in a little over a day.

Speaking of time…

"You have a point," she conceded, drawing a long glance from over his shoulder. "But since this is really a different realm, then how do you think time is working here?" What would happen if they found a way out, only to discover years had gone by in their absence from the world above? There were so many things she wished she'd been able to ask Mizuchi!

"There's no way to tell that yet." Tobirama had completely set his eyes to the lake. He sighed, drifting slowly closer. Sakura couldn't feel anymore danger close by, and at the very least it was brightly lit "day" so they could see. "The focus should be finding a way to navigate. Wandering indefinitely isn't getting us any closer to leaving."

Finished repairing herself, Sakura crossed her legs and placed her cheek in one palm. "That's sensible and everything, but it'd be a lot easier if we knew more about the lay of the land here." The best way to get that was to go forth boldly and explore, ready for anything of course. But after her last close brush with death, sitting still didn't seem so bad.

Adding to her day of surprises, Tobirama sat down by the lake, speaking calmly, "Well it's never that easy in hostile territory. But you and I make a functional team, differences aside."

Sakura blinked, pinching her own thigh on the off chance she was in a genjutsu. "Kai," she whispered under her breath. Nothing. "That's…almost complimentary."

"Take it however," he said. "This is a matter of partnership increasing survival."

It was so very pragmatic and Tobirama, Sakura couldn't help her short laugh. "I can't argue with any of that. But you still don't trust me." Maybe it wasn't the right time to blurt that, all things considering. But the topic was worth revisiting if they could finally come to an understanding.

Sakura knew he held her at arms' length thanks to her connection to the very same deities causing so many issues, and the danger that presented. And stubborn as he was, even he had to see that despite that she'd ended up the exact place as him. Thrown into some deadly, forsaken nightmare realm to fight for survival.

"No, I don't." Tobirama replied, his tone bordering on boredom. "The events of my life up until now have taught me to be cautious of wildcards like you."
Like so many shinobi of the era, a large amount of the Senju's overabundance of caution was the harsh reality of everyday life. Reading about children being sent to war at a younger age than most genin was nothing compared to living it, and he had.

Sakura could understand the sentiment. If a stranger appeared under mysterious circumstances and everything kept changing, she wouldn't be able to accept it right away either.

She couldn't say she'd go about it in the same ways he had, but the devotion the Second Hokage had for the village was well documented in textbooks. It was only frustrating he couldn't see they were really on the same side, more than he realized.

Perhaps the feelings he had were the same factor motivating his resentment for the Uchiha?

"Who told you that?"

Sakura hadn't thought her wandering mind would lead her to utter something like that aloud, but Tobirama wouldn't be staring her down with such cold, piercing eyes otherwise.

"I-It's just…something I've observed." she swallowed.

"The history the Senju and Uchiha share was a long bitter one until the treaty shortly before the village was founded. Assigning a word like hatred to the feelings I carry is far too simple."

Unable to stop herself knowing she may never get the chance again, Sakura leaned forward. "Then could you explain it?"

Tobirama wasn't feeling inclined to share judging by the warning gaze he shot her. But she pinned him with an unrelenting stare, unwilling to let it drop. He couldn't back away from opening up this time. This time neither of them were going anywhere.

"I can't remember the exact age I was when I first saw a battlefield, but I remember the carnage."

Between the low tone of his steady voice, there was a rawness from reliving that moment. "I remember people I knew lying dead and I remember what it felt like to kill my first enemy. She was a child just like I was, but she came at me with a sword, so I struck her down first."

Sakura tried to imagine herself not as a medic nin who had been trained by a sannin, or as a bright-eyed genin on Team 7, but as a timid academy student self-conscious about her forehead and desperate to make friends.

If someone had strapped her in armor and put a weapon into her hands, thrusting her onto the chaos of a battlefield, would she have truly been able to fight for her life? It had taken years to find her courage, so she couldn't see the little pink-haired girl of the past doing much more than cowering. Waiting to be killed.

"That was the first time I saw an Uchiha activate their Sharingan." Tobirama continued on, his face flickering with muted emotion before it was tucked away again. "Her brother was obviously enraged by her death. I watched him cut through five adult shinobi to get to her."

Sakura nodded, but didn't dare interrupt. "He didn't make it, Haruno." he revealed. "My father killed him without mercy. He berated me for not being more focused, and then he told me I shouldn't expect any more saving from him." Stopping, he stared directly into her face. "Although I can still see how that Uchiha dragged himself to his sister's body, and died holding her. That was when I came to the conclusion, no clan loves more than the Uchiha."

Love? Sakura hadn't truly ever thought of it. What drove the Uchiha to become so single-minded in
their goals? Tobirama surmised it was out of love…

Thinking back, Sasuke had spent all his life seeking revenge. He had embraced darkness for the chance to exact punishment on the man who robbed him of everything. He had severed bonds with Team 7, left his home, made a deal with a heinous person like Orochimaru, and become a man on the run. All because he couldn't bear the thought of his family's demise going unavenged.

Sasuke's motivation felt like hatred toward his brother, but it was only natural that the flip side of that coin was deep love for his family.

And Obito…he too had fallen down such a dark path. One that caused him to try fighting the entire world. Sakura was able to piece enough together to understand love for a girl named Rin had started it all.

The fact that Tobirama might have understood the Uchiha more than imagined was tough to digest. "Well, am I wrong?" Tobirama challenged. "Your attachment to Izuna and lately your affiliation with Madara means you understand how seriously that clan takes bonds."

"You're right." she said quietly.

"The more I fought them, the more it all seemed off. They feel love just as deeply if not deeper than the Senju, but our ambition to eradicate them was always made out to be nobler. …I've seen the way an Uchiha self-destructs when they lose what they love most. I know how quickly everything we strived for could evaporate should the day come when they feel wronged in a way they can't get over."

"All this time it's only been precaution? Or are you preparing for—"

Tobirama rose, a faint pop coming from his shoulders as he flexed them.

"We've already wasted too much time here. We need to move on and establish a direction to take."

Sakura climbed to her feet with great reluctance. Everything he said gave her a better understanding of his attitude but it didn't erase a lot of the questions about him she wished she could puzzle out. Another time.

As if the conversation had never happened, he was already headed off ahead.

It could have been any other forest on earth, almost. The only thing keeping Tobirama from buying into that illusion, aside from common sense, was the fact that on occasion he could see things peeking out at them from treetops.

Strange things. His guard was high, ready to attack or defend at a moment's notice. But nothing came at them. Since their discussion, in which he explained far more than he had ever intended to Haruno, she had taken point.

Surprisingly quiet for the time being. He couldn't say he was complaining. She didn't seem to understand she vexed him as much as he vexed her. There'd been no reason to explain himself. Haruno had nothing to do with and he owed her nothing. It was as if her pointing out the irony of expecting a partnership while offering no trust had subconsciously effected something.

Tobirama had no problems disclosing information when it felt needed. If knowing a little more about his history with the Uchiha caused her to be more compliant in the partnership until they escaped, so be it.
"Wait," With the uncanny timing he was starting to ascribe to her, Haruno spoke up. "It's going to sound weird, but I know we've passed those boulders before. The shape is really distinctive."

The young woman had stopped, her back now to him as she studied a small clustering of three boulders. The largest one sat in the middle and reminded him of a curious hare up on its hind legs.

"Haruno,"

"I know what I'm talking about." she insisted. Jabbing a finger down, she declared, "We've passed this before!"

"We did not."

"Your eyebrow just twitched. You're not convinced either…" she crossed her arms, shaking her head. "I'm not taking another step until you admit we're lost."

Tobirama wasn't sure how it was possible, but thinking about it she was right. But he'd never been one to lose his sense of direction. He'd carefully kept a close eye on every turn they made, every right or left up until now. So how—

An obnoxious giggle, the sensation of being watched, and Tobirama was flinging one of his remaining kunai in the sound's general direction. He cursed the damn place that seemed to be dampening his sensor abilities. Haruno's head whipped around, panicked voices making it obvious they weren't alone. A tuft of fur dropped from above, and before he could say a word, the kunoichi was already reaching up to tug it.

"They've gotta hold of me!" something wailed, a furry animal dropping into Haruno's arms a second later.

Tobirama studied it, coming away with the impression that it was something that belonged on a child's shelf. Stuffed.

But based on the amount of whining and wiggling it was doing, it was no toy.

"Shuddup!" screeched a second voice, and then another one dropped much more gracefully from the same tree.

Tobirama was beyond put out. Talking badgers had nearly gotten the drop on him.

Haruno held the one in her arms out in front of her, eyes big with amusement. It flailed its tan paws theatrically. "This is it for me! Eaten by a two-legged…er, what're you?"

"You first," Tobirama spat, showing the badger a kunai.

"They look just like badgers." Haruno mused. Under her breath he heard her say something along the lines of, "So fluffy~"

"Hold your tongue, pink fleshling!" The slightly larger, darker of the two creatures stood on its back legs to appear bigger. It did nothing to make it more intimidating, however. The creature had a large brown nose at the end of a pointed snout, a fang peeking out from under its lips. "We're mujina!"

Dark vertical strips covered both its round eyes, and the ears on its head were fluffy and bear-like. They stood the same height as ordinary badgers, their hefty coats doing nothing but making them soft. Haruno sat the one in her arms down.
"What're those exactly."

"They're us." The one she'd been holding graced her with a dopey smile, ears twitching. "I'm Ubagabi and that's Tsubute!"

"No, stop!" Tsubute slashed at the loose-lipped mujina, and he leapt away. "Are you really going to tell these fleshlings we don't even know our identities?"

"I thought it'd be okay." Ubagabi sniffled, looking worried. "You told them we were mujina…"

"Talking rodents." Tobirama sighed. "This is already tiresome."

"Oi, you're in our domain." Tsubute got down on all fours, puffed the fur along his back, and bared his fangs. His eyes glowed silver and for the first time, Tobirama felt something ominous. "Show us some respect. We're powerful shapeshifters and masters of trickery. We could be anything. You're seeing our true forms, but it doesn't mean we can't be something ferocious enough to eat you whole."

"Don't do that." Ubagabi begged, clasping his paws together with pitiful eyes. "This is only the second time I've ever seen fleshlings."

"Stop calling us that. We're humans." Tobirama wasn't about to take lip from overweight raccoons with an identity crisis. It wasn't that kind of day and he refused to lose any more ground.

"Right. Fleshlings, like we've been saying." Tsubute snickered. "You sure don't belong down here, eh?" He moved to sniff at them, until the Senju reared back his leg, the silent threat of bunting him away should he get too close.

"That's exactly why we're looking for a way out." Haruno told them, her hand twitching as if she wanted to reach out and touch them. If she knew what was good for her she'd keep her hands far away from such shifty creatures. "You're the first sentient creatures we've seen."

"Not everything down here's as smart, that's why." Tsubute got back up on his back paws, a proud glint in his eyes. "Some monsters down here only know how to chomp, chomp, chomp. But not us. We know what's what."

"We know a way out," Ubagabi volunteered, his tail thumping the ground.

Haruno gasped, kneeling down close to the rodent's face. "You do?"

"Sure do." Tobirama eyed the smug one that seemed to be the leader. He didn't trust its beady amber eyes as far as he could smell the thing. "We won't be showing you, though." he cackled.

Reaching down, Sakura snagged the creature by the scruff with a stern look, raising him to be eye level. "It's in your best interest to rethink that answer."

"Are you serious? We haven't had entertainment in millennia and we're supposed to let you leave?

"Well, we did use an illusion to get them confused so maybe we cou—"

Tobirama wasted no time in seizing the second one, his chatter stopping abruptly. "That was because of you shits?" He knew it. He knew his sense of direction hadn't left him.

"We were bored!" yelped Tsubute. "You don't understand what it's like, being stuck down here for millennia. And sure we know the way out, but it's impossible without a deity's power."
"We have that." Haruno assured, dropping him unceremoniously. "I'm a godslayer."

Ubagabi wriggled until he had craned his neck to sniff the air in Haruno's general direction. "I smell it now! At first all I smelted was Pale Neck saliva, but—"

"Don't…remind me."

"The real deal, huh? Last godslayer came through here was in a rush, and we kept out of his way. Scent that tainted never belongs to nobody good."

"What did he look like? A sword? A mask?" Tobirama all but shook the doe-eyed rodent.

"-No sword!" Ubagabi cried. "I…I feel dizzy…" He clasped his paws over his snout like he was fighting down nausea. Afraid the beast might vomit, Tobirama dropped him to land on all fours.

"He came through harvesting material. A long time ago, lots of gods and goddesses did. There's a lot of raw iron ripe for the taking if you want a divine weapon. Ores and jewels too."

Haruno eyed Tsubute in interest. "Alright. How about this: if you lead us to the iron, and then the exit, we'll let you come along."

"Guide humans around? How's that benefit us?" Ubagabi frowned, nose wiggling.

The kunoichi gave him a conspiratorial look, and he had to admit he admired her acting. "Don't you want to get out?" she bribed.

They stared at her like she was the talking rodent. Tobirama threw in a disbelieving glance of his own. She'd better have no intention of keeping that promise…

The animals were bizarre and crafty and there was no telling what they would try to do topside. He'd have too much to do once he returned to the surface world to chase down crazed badgers.

"You'd let us out?" Ubagabi crawled closer, his tail swishing slowly.

"As long as you show us the way." Haruno reminded.

"…You'd let all of us out?" Tsubute clarified, a twinkle in his eyes.

"All of you?" The Senju didn't like the sound of it. The look of it. If this situation had a taste he was positive he'd hate that too.

"You thought we were the only two around?" Ubagabi laughed, numerous heads popping out of the foliage.

Chapter End Notes

The first creature our two heroes encounter is strongly based off a khezu from the Monster Hunter franchise. When I was trying to determine the appearances of some of what they'd find, that one strongly stood out.

Tobirama finally gets a chance to kind of talk and explain why he is the way he is (to an extent). To me it'd be inevitable that they get to the bottom of the frostiness settled
between them, even if a lot of that comes from one grouchy red-eyed source. I really felt it was important for Tobirama to explain to her in his own words about his history with the Uchiha clan.

It's going to be pretty important soon and Sakura making her own decision about whether or not she thinks his feelings are fair may lead to whether they grow closer or further apart in the ordeal. But, as promised TobiSaku will walk away from all of this closer and with mutual respect, and that's all I'll say.

An ubagabi is normally depicted as a type of fire ghost yokai, and it has its own tale. But, I chose it as a name here. More on that later. Mujina in general are supernatural animal-like yokai in folklore. In real life they're basically Japanese badgers, sometimes they're mistaken for raccoon dogs. But in the lore they're badger-like creatures that have powers. They're shapeshifters and can play cruel tricks on humans when they want to. But they were introduced in Tobirama's POV and he thinks they're talking rodents, so that word was thrown around. Doesn't mean they really are rodents per se.

Thank you for all the support loyal readers continue to show. It's a major reason I continue to try and make time to keep updating despite my schedule.
Phantasmagoria

Chapter Summary

The dangers of The Under extend past the threat of physical dismemberment. Tobirama finds himself under a different kind of assault, one he wishes Sakura wasn't privy to.

Chapter Notes

This update came as a surprise even to me. After all, work has progressively gotten busier as things out there have continued on the course they're on. But as I said up above, writing has been a nice escape (and I guess I do it much faster than I realized when I'm focused on it), and since I'm guessing the vast majority of readers are now under some type of lock down orders, hopefully this was a pick me up from them too.

There’s talk of child abuse (??) but it’s non-explicit. You kind of just see the aftermath, and injuries are also non-explicit.

Of all times for her to get pulled into protecting humans against a rogue godslayer on the warpath, this was the worst. She had her own godslayer to guide, and she wasn't currently on a rampage either. Mizuchi sighed, thrusting a palm toward the divine sword flying at her.

The cloud of blights threw off his aim, allowing her to sweep under the weapon's reach. So much unnecessary rage packed into a mortal. It practically singed the air.

This, the goddess reminded herself, was precisely why she avoided certain bloodlines at all costs. A determined, sincere "no one" without ties to any special lineage suited her much better.

"You're Mizuchi? I've heard about you." he spoke. It didn't take him much time at all to recover, and he was already gearing up for another strike. Anticipating him, she waited for the sword to draw close. Taking to the air at the last moment as the tip pierced deep into the ground.

Drawing it back to him with a grunt, the godslayer slashed upward now, the glistening segments separating to enhance the sword's reach. Twisting through the smoke-filled skies, she evaded, diving down at him with talons outstretched. Flapping her wings vigorously generated the blast of wind she expected, ripping chunks of ground up and throwing him backwards.

The poor human village had almost been in shambles by the time she'd arrived, shortly after she felt the connection to Sakura stretch dangerously thin. Getting Hitotsu to hide somewhere didn't take much convincing. The irony of his legendary blacksmithing skills being that he was never much help in a fight beyond crafting instruments of destruction.

Not giving him time to right himself, Mizuchi zoomed at him in a straight line, turning last minutely to hit him in the stomach with her thick tail. He met the dirt with a choked noise of pain,
the grip on his sword loosening. Keeping him pressed firmly in place, the half-transformed deity plucked it from his hand and tossed it absentely to the side. Trailing a clawed finger down the side of his mask, she took note of the way he didn't flinch. "I would guess...you belong to Kanayago. She always favored the ones like you."

"I belong to no one," he spat. "Our goals happen to align for the time-being."

"Oh, but she doesn't bestow her divine weapons on just anyone." Mizuchi applied steadily growing pressure to his chest, and he finally squirmed.

"It's because..." One of his arms managed to work itself away from his side, and he carefully lifted his mask enough to reveal his mouth. The shock of being blasted directly with a ball of fire made her laugh.

She felt her captive shove her away, reclaiming his sword as she was engulfed in his attack. Any human would have been finished, seared to ashes in an instant. "I have what it takes to destroy you, your godslayer, and anyone else in our path." Mizuchi shook herself off, relatively undamaged. Such confidence. A bit grandiose though. "You thrust her into The Under because you couldn't destroy her in a direct confrontation." she goaded, unable to stop herself. "You're sadly mistaken if you think that realm will do what you couldn't."

"Tch," Expecting another outright onslaught, Mizuchi eyed the boy sheathing his sword with skepticism. "There's a slim chance your godslayer will survive, and if she does...I'll deal with it myself. Now, tell me where the One-Eyed God is!"

"All this fuss over little ol' Hitotsu," she clucked. "Kanayago always was a bitter one."

"Her fire makes her a brilliant blacksmith. Better than the coward who hides in the mountains, living so depraved." Mizuchi stood her ground, her eyes sharpening. Hitotsu was many things, but he was also one of the few in the pantheon who had never treated her as the black sheep the rest of their 'siblings' did. They were two imperfect immortals who understood each other.

"You find his work so inferior and yet you seek him out." The change was beginning to ripple over her in anticipation. This angry, sword-wielding mortal had something up his cloak.

"He can't be allowed to get involved with you or your godslayer. Kanayago-sama made that perfectly clear. But you're more in danger of dying than he is. She wants a word with him. You she just wants dead."

A toothy smile split her face into a morbid imitation of glee. "Does she think she's the only one? Or has she forgotten I know her guarded secrets?" Glancing around, Mizuchi frowned at the destruction to half the town, the villagers nowhere in sight as they had all wisely chosen to hide away. "Tell Kanayago she's welcome to try defeating me herself. Sending you in her place is a pity."

The ground shook as pride took hold of the boy. Roughly Sakura's age if Mizuchi were to estimate, and yet he lacked so much of the finesse she saw in the kunoichi. That would be his undoing. Skills meant nothing if he was too inexperienced and hot-headed to use them well. 'It looks like I've done the better job preparing my godslayer after all.'

Although, as wicked energy encased him tightly and he grew to stand above the smoldering buildings, she saw this godslayer had mastered one ability Sakura had yet to reach.

Huffing, she would have to put in more than minimal effort to subdue this threat now. The things I
do for humans.' Mizuchi gave in to her own change, scales covering her entirely as she took to the sky, a ferocious dragon once again.

The two mujina had taken up positions walking along at her feet, their thick fur brushing against her ankles every now and then. Behind them, above them, all around them, a pack containing dozens and dozens more followed closely, disguised as miniscule insects.

Sakura had inwardly cringed, wondering why they couldn't have at least been something like butterflies. Instead, droves of black beetles tracked them as if commanded by an Aburame. Eager to show off their shapeshifting abilities, when Tobirama complained that having such a big group following them would slow them down, they had transformed at Tsubute's command. All except Tsubute himself, and the easygoing, talkative mujina named Ubagabi.

Since Tobirama didn't do more than glower their way—probably rethinking his calls for a truce—Sakura had time to converse with the creatures, and find out more about their surroundings.

"This place is huge," she whispered, watching the sway of the fluffy tail in front of her. "But, the terrain here is much different than the cave where we got attacked. How do you navigate?"

"You have a lot of time to explore when you've got nothing better to do for centuries." Tsubute replied, slightly bitter. "How were we supposed to find the way out if we didn't look around?"

Sakura slowly nodded. It was common sense.

"Besides, The Under goes on forever, technically." Ubagabi added. "No way you ever would have escaped without help."

A familiar scoff interrupted. Tsubute half-turned, staring up at Tobirama, who had been walking a short distance behind them, possibly wanting distance from the mujina. "That's physically impossible."

"Oh, it's impossible!" The badger-like creature mocked. "Did ya hear that everyone? The fleshling that couldn't see through our illusion trap thinks he knows more about our territory than us." Little clicks and buzzes came from the bugs scurrying everywhere, as if they were all responding.

Wanting to prevent a possible argument, Sakura clapped her hands once in placation, smiling. "Would you mind explaining some things. You're the best source of knowledge we have right now."

That seemed to do the trick. Calmed, they motioned to a break in the trees. "This way,"

After skipping across a shallow stream, giggling all the while, the mujina turned to make sure the humans were still following. "First things first," Ubagabi climbed a nearby tree, diving down to land on Sakura's back with a squeal.

She shifted forward to accommodate his sudden weight as he climbed to rest his head on her shoulder. The rest of him latched onto her like a backpack. "We were all made to survive in different environments best. The Pale Neck's skin is sensitive to bright light, so it likes to be in caves where it's moist and dark. It can't see much, so it hunts a lot through smell and heat. You almost got gulped!"

Sakura reached up to push away hair tickling her neck, only to realize it was fur. Ubagabi giggled and she quickly retracted her hand. "I don't need the reminder..."
"Sorry," he whined. "But, now you're with us. And we can protect ourselves."

Tsubute looked back, rolling his beady eyes but leaping across uneven ground and rotted out logs. Sakura picked up the pace, too, refusing to lose their new guides. "Don't keep thinkin' about us like we're cute and defenseless. We didn't choose these base forms!"

Gulping, the kunoichi smiled awkwardly. "I never saw you as defenseless...."

"Good. Because we're not." Ubagabi's face unexpectedly popped up to completely obstruct her field of vision as he leaned over her head. The pinkette jumped, making the playful mujina laugh gleefully.

"That brings me to my own question. What are you if not rodents with a penchant for mischief?" Tobirama hadn't been saying much, but she had no doubt in her mind he was absorbing every word.

"We ain't rodents!" Tsubute growled, stopping to turn and face the Senju defiantly. "We ain't badgers! We're mujina, fleshling. Get it wrong again and we'll see how much of you there is for the next Pale Neck to eat once I take a bite first."

As if to make sure the warning stuck, he flashed teeth that had Sakura stumbling away. They were monstrous, much too big for the mouth they fit in. As if they were the result of a strange experiment to implant a wolf's jaw.

When they spoke, no one would have ever guessed. There was a healthy dose of apprehension at having Ubagabi's face so close to her neck. Sure, he had proved to be the friendliest so far, but these were unpredictable, unknown 'animals' from The Under.

Tobirama said nothing at the threat, only sizing them up.

"Don't mind Tsubute. He's just a little sensitive." Ubagabi whispered. "I mean, we came first. But, the deities said we were too dangerous to stay up top." Sakura could hear the pout in his voice. "We got booted down here and those animals they call 'badgers' got to live upstairs."

"That...makes sense. Uh, why Tsubute doesn't like the comparison I mean." They passed under the shade of a tree with low hanging yellow fruit she had never seen, pale blue spots dotting its skin. It reminded her that her stomach was beginning to make her aware of her impending hunger.

Sakura fussed at herself, but it's not as if she knew this would be the day someone tossed her into a creepy dimension.

"Ohh, my favorite!" Ubagabi stretched himself, batting a fruit down with his heavy paw. There was a fragrance that made her a little light-headed emitting from it as soon as he bit into the skin. "Mm, this is perfectly ripe." Some of the sticky juice ran from his claws and dripped onto her skin.

"H-Hey," Sakura squawked. "Get down if you're going to eat that." Though he huffed, the mujina quickly obliged. She watched him set in to feast with a pear-shaped fruit between his front paws, munching eagerly.

"The hell are you doing now?" Tsubute called over, backtracking. Standing under the same tree Ubagabi had stopped to sample the fruit from, he sighed through his teeth. "Is this snack time to you?"

Cheeks stuff and the fur of his face sticky, Ubagabi nodded in delight. "Pwea?" he offered his companion the half-eating polka dotted fruit.

"Ugh, you think I need your slobber?" Even as the bigger mujina batted the fruit away, he stared up
at the branches containing more.

"If you'll tell us more about The Under and what lives here, I don't mind taking a break." Sakura bargained. She'd already made herself comfortable resting at the base of the tree anyway.

One big event after another took a lot of energy, even if she was healed from her run in with the Pale neck monstrosity. The mujina appeared relaxed enough to deem the area safe to rest, and who knew when they'd get another chance?

Tobirama paused, his shadow falling across her as he looked down with barely masked disapproval.

She shrugged. "They don't seem like they're going anywhere until they eat." Already, most of the mujina had switched to their cuddlier forms, scampering to pull fruit down for themselves.

Tsubute's head popped up from the treetops. "Here," Two ripe pieces of fruit were deposited into her lap. "Can't have you frail fleshlings collapsing later on. It gets rough on the way to the iron mines."

Picking it up between both hands to examine, Sakura tried to gauge how safe it would be to eat. Sure, the mujina were having a blast scarfing it down, but they weren't exactly normal.

"What exactly is…"

A mujina so light she was almost ashen brown tripped as she tried to carry off a fruit bigger than both paws.

"Uzuki, you're as clumsy as always."

"I-I'm not usually this bad!" she defended, her meek voice cute. Sakura wanted to lean over and rub the rounded ears twitching on her head, but figured that would be an invasion of personal space.

"I'm not use to…to humans and they make me nervous so—" She picked up the fruit and hugged it to her body, her damp nose pointed down as if she wanted to bury it in her chest.

It was too much, Sakura couldn't hold in her coos, and by Ubagabi's delighted squeals, she wasn't the only one. "So cute!" they said in unison.

Uzuki moved her tail to curl around her face, timidly nibbling her fruit.

"Is it good?" The kunoichi directed the question at the shy mujina in a bid to get her to open up. Peeking her face in Sakura's direction, her tongue darted out to swipe the juice on her face and she nodded.

"Um…These are some of the early fruits that never grow on earth. Kuebiko found ones he liked better to plant topside, but he didn't want to destroy his hard work with the orchids. So he moved them to The Under and said we could have as much as he wanted."

"Kuebiko would be another crazed god?" Tobirama asked, sarcasm dripping from every word. Truthfully, she couldn't blame him for not thinking highly of deities.

"He's not cr-crazed." Uzuki protested, her voice small.

"He's the god of agriculture." Tsubute scurried back up the tree and three more fruits fell in quick succession.
"So you need to eat, just like anything else?" Sakura had finally worked up the courage to take the smallest bite possible of fruit. An indescribable burst of flavors flooded her mouth despite the miniscule piece. Warm, a bit tart, honeyed, and a blend of other things she couldn't name that made it irresistible. Her next bite was larger, and she took her time to savor chewing.

"We eat 'cause we like it." Ubagabi clarified. "In The Under nothing needs to eat. If you stayed long enough you wouldn't need to either."

Needless to say, the pinkette would have choked if there was anything she hadn't swallowed.

"Explain that." Tobirama took the second fruit from Sakura's lap and turned it over again and again. It was almost like he expected to find an explosive tag stuck to the bottom.

"T-The Under is living, so, staying here means we all get some of its life energy," Uzuki mumbled. Despite her earlier reservations about eating around humans, she was on her second piece of fruit, if Sakura wasn't mistaken. "It's enough to sustain us. On earth, we needed to eat and drink and sleep, but I-less frequently than what's considered normal."

Sakura wouldn't dare express her desire to study their metabolisms for fear that they would be wary. But, they were correct that they were far and away more complex than badgers. "You use to be on earth?"

Tsubute held up a twig and began picking his teeth, scoffing. "Still don't get it flesh—human? We all were, early on. It was great. We got to run free: do what we want, take what we wanted. Scare and trick who we wanted!" A chorus of yips sounded from the others, who voiced their agreement. "But none of us passed the trial in the end. When it came down to what was stayin' topside, we got shoved back in the chest with all the other rejects."

"Why's that?" Sakura could see they were inclined to trouble, but maybe being around Naruto so often had unwittingly made her sympathetic to pranksters.

"Hm…maybe we got a little too creative with our tricks sometimes. The deities seemed to think so." Ubagabi deflated. "They made our beautiful Benzaiten-hime lock us up."

"Benzaiten…" Tobirama murmured. "I've heard the name."

"You should've," Uzuki added, refusing to make eye contact. "She's one of the Seven Lucky Gods, and very famous and revered by mortals. The goddess of flow. She created us."

"Words, music, speech, eloquence, even time!" Ubagabi sat up excitedly. He didn't notice the way Sakura stared at him with wide, awed eyes. "Anything that flows, she controls. But," he scratched behind one ear thoughtfully. "She's not the only deity that has a hand in controlling time."

The kunoichi shot the surly Tobirama a pointed look when the mujina went back to eating. Like them or not, he couldn't deny how knowledgeable they were. Getting the information from them so easily was a nice change of pace from prying cryptic answers out of deities.

"I have to say, I'm curious about what Tobirama asked you myself." Since she had gotten a better reception among the creatures, they tilted their heads in interest. Continuing, Sakura motioned around them. "You're not really…you know…so what are—"

"You get to know when we trust you." Tsubute said with finality, mashing fruit between his teeth with deliberate savagery. She couldn't get over the power in the jaws of these creatures. There was no way their intended diet had just been soft fruits with a mouth like that.
Ubagabi threw down the core of the fruit he'd consumed, tail thumping anxiously. "We're mimic yokai."

"What!" Tsubute roared, tackling the oblivious mujina. "Did I just say?!!" His paws were pinning him down by the neck, but none of the many other mujina clustered around even batted an eye. So Sakura guessed it wasn't cause for concern.

"Y-You said when we trusted them, they could know what we really are. And I trust them. They're gonna let us out." Struggling, the gullible beast managed to look up at Sakura with hopeful, twinkling eyes.

Her heart sank. Could she really make the mujina a means to an end if they led them to freedom? It seemed cruel, but right now pondering the morality of that could wait.

Tsubute continued to scold Ubagabi, going as far as smacking him in the face and knocking on his head, asking if there was a brain present. Uzuki watched in silence, sucking at her fruit.

She sensed him move before she looked up and saw it. Tobirama was wandering away from the grove where all the snacking mujina were gathered, tossing a single look over his shoulder.

Understanding the meaning, Sakura arched a brow, waiting. Was this really even the time?

Apparently so, because Tobirama did not turn back around, or give any indication that he was willing to wait. Slipping away after him, she set what was left of her fruit near Uzuki. The mujina seemed to understand, her eyes grateful as she let Sakura go.

ASiT

Getting a safe distance from the rowdy bunch of beasts leading them around helped his nerves immensely. Haruno seemed almost lulled into trusting them, citing that the goddess informed her not everything in The Under would try to hurt them.

How she could believe that when she herself had almost become victim to the appetite of the hideous creature from the caves, he wasn't sure. At times like this Haruno's good sense fled her, and she was too open to the suggestions of her heart.

If he wasn't used to it from Hashirama, it would have made him incredibly uncomfortable to see in such a strong shinobi. Instead it made him frustrated.

This was exactly why he had every reason to believe that she was a perfect target for these gods, so wrapped in her good intentions that she'd inadvertently oblige them in whatever nefarious schemes they plotted.

Before they went any farther into the depths of the hellscape, Tobirama felt it was prudent to broach the topic one last time. "You can't get too comfortable with the notion of releasing them." he asserted, already anticipating objection.

"What've they really done so far besides offer us fruit and play a few jokes?" she responded. "I understand where you're coming from, but they seem like they're willing to hold up their end of the bargain. We both have to get back to earth as soon as possible."

Tobirama was ever-aware of that. It was Haruno who seemed to have found time to entertain the mujina and their antics. She also seemed to forget the teeth they'd both seen, and the way Tsubute had swiftly become incensed enough to flash a glimpse of dark energy lying underneath the cute surface. "Then why make unnecessary detours?" he leaned against a tree, looking her in the eyes.
"Getting what I need to make a divine weapon and completing the Rite once I get out of here isn't a detour." Haruno gasped, "It's our best bet in case that guy from before is lurking around."

"I'll be handling him." He meant it. The "Cat" and whoever was beneath that mask, would pay. Shamelessly taunting him about finishing the Senju off on a whim had triggered a very specific rage in Tobirama. He had disposed of countless vengeful enemies to protect his family before, what was one more? Fancy sword or not.

"He's a godslayer. That means he's made contact with some deity and he probably doesn't just have the sword." She held out her wrist calmly and rolled up her glove so he could see her pale wrist. The Senju was at first unamused, until he noticed the mark on it. Unable to stop himself, he snatched her arm, drawing the wrist closer to examine. "This was one of the first things Mizuchi did when she made contact. It infused me with her unique divine essence, and that's what creates our link and lets humans become godslayers at all."

"So this 'Cat' is teetering between divinity and humanity?" His thumb roughly stroked over the odd pattern and for a second, he felt her pulse speed. Withdrawing his hand, he started to work through how he could take the mysterious warrior on without Haruno's involvement.

"That's right." she said quietly. "I know why you want to stop him yourself, but it wouldn't hurt to have backup if we're after the same things. I...I want to protect the Senju too."

Clasping her hands together, she stared down at them. "I know what you think, but this isn't something you can do alone. And stopping deities that want to target clans like yours is half the reason I'm doing this."

Tobirama took a step closer, his chakra curling out in tendrils. He couldn't detect any lies from her, and maybe that was what he had found so infuriating in the Hokage's office that day.

Sensing an ulterior motive would have given him vindication, a reason to eradicate the threat by any means necessary. Instead he was dealing with a nosey but well-meaning girl housing incredible divine power, who said she wanted to safeguard everything he held dear too.

Tobirama had honed his sensor abilities from early childhood partially because it gave him an edge on the battlefield as a tactician, but also largely because he preferred the same upper-hand in dealing with people.

It was favorable to discard emotions behind an iron mask that couldn't be moved, but be privy to the sincerity in someone's intentions by flexing his chakra. And never before had he wanted someone to lie to him so badly.

"You said we make a good team," she began cautiously, "That doesn't just have to be while we're trapped here." Her green eyes were again far too open. The Senju had pulled her to the side with a clear goal in mind. Now he found himself at a loss.

"You're willing to go forward with trials that could ultimately destroy you."

Though they remained clear and reflective, the color of her eyes seemed to shift a shade when her lips pursed in determination. "Yes."

"The Senju are not your concern. If you're doing it for the sake of remaining allies with the clan, save yourself the trouble. Hashirama thinks highly of you already, as does Toka. Even Mei-san is convinced..." There he stopped himself.

"I'm grateful to everything they've done for me. I was a lost stranger and they helped me make
Konoha home again—make it feel like I had a home again." Haruno rubbed bashfully at her arm, smiling softly. "But actually, it's not just them I owe a lot too. I understand the danger, but a deity thinking they can twist humans around their whims doesn't mean it'll work. We're more resilient than that."

Fractionally. His eyes only widened fractionally, Tobirama assured himself. While he still couldn't puzzle together what Haruno thought she would gain by defending his clan and the village with such fierce loyalty, she had already made up her mind.

Blowing an errant strand of hair from her face, the girl began muttering to herself absently. "I'd thought about what Ippon-Datara mentioned. He said these trials are for testing the worth of non-divine beings…that, along with Cat showing up, had me thinking that gods have been using godslayers to advance their goals for a long time. Otherwise why design the Rites to ensure humans could wield weapons meant for gods? Mizuchi made it seem like it doesn't happen too often, though. It takes time to find the right people and train them."

Following with her train of thought, Tobirama could see it from her perspective. Armed with a divine weapon, divine essence, and exclusive training from a goddess, Haruno would be in a unique position once it was said and done.

If the deities counted on the humans they chose serving them obediently, an insurrection from said humans was probably the last thing they were expecting.

A rustling through the bushes had them both shifting to raise their guards. Kunai (and in Haruno’s case fists) at the ready. But what stumbled through was only the shy mujina from earlier. Uzuki. Averting her watery black eyes as she approached, she stopped several feet short of Haruno and tilted her head questioningly. "E-Everyone's ready to keep going if you are." she informed.

Tobirama watched wordlessly as Haruno made to crouch, presumably to avoid unnerving the skittish creature. "That's fine. We'll be right there."

Nodding, the bushy-tailed rodent wasted no time bounding off again.

"Think about it." Haruno said calmly. Tobirama brushed by her, going after the fleeing mujina.

His muscles were the best kind of sore, and he lifted his shirt to swipe at his sweaty face a bit. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw his sparring partner pop a dislocated shoulder back into place with a grimace.

Okay. Maybe at some point he'd gotten a little too excited.

"Why don't you come inside?" Izuna offered, holding his hand out toward the Kaguya catching his breath on the ground. "It's the least I can do."

Taking the help, Jun'ichi lifted himself back onto his feet with a small nod. "I wouldn't mind that."

The two walked out of the training yard in comfortable silence, sunlight streaming through the trees and birds chattering animatedly. It was another sunny winter day the Uchiha had decided to make the most of. Originally, that had meant inviting Jun'ichi Kaguya over for tea and snacks, hoping to show his appreciation for the time he'd offered him comfort and advice.

But, maybe because he had been feeling just a little stir crazy, it had evolved into an impromptu spar. One in which they both got somewhat carried away. The bone projectiles launched at him did
more than just leave superficial scrapes. The one he wrenched out of his shoulder nearly went deep enough to take his arm out of commission for a while.

They were bruised, bloody messes, and hopefully when they washed up no one would see Jun'ichi and have a fit. If he had to deal with a line of inquiry from the council right now when all he wanted was to wash up and eat, Izuna wasn't sure he wouldn't pull a sword on someone.

"Thank you for coming over," Izuna said, "Sorry about the…" he gestured to Junji's person as a whole.

Accepting the apology with a hint of a smile, the Kaguya blinked. "My apologies for your shoulder…and your pants."

Izuna laughed, rubbing at the side of his sore neck. He'd come out to the yard in pants and now might as well been wearing shorts for all the slicing they'd taken.

His shoulder throbbed but with some bandaging and salve he would be alright soon enough. One of many benefits to living in Konoha was that there was no need to rush off into ceaseless battles tired and half-healed. Between missions he could recover at his leisure.

Opening the door to his house, Izuna slipped off his shoes and stepped aside for Jun'ichi to enter and do the same. "We can wash up this way," he directed, motioning with his good shoulder.

Junji followed quietly, his footsteps nonexistent. It was because the two of them moved so noiselessly that the clanks from the kitchen were especially pronounced. Sticking his head around the doorframe revealed the sight of Madara setting out what looked to be a spread of fruits and tea. Izuna drew himself closer, too curious to move along without questioning what he was seeing.

"Madara…"

His elder brother hardly looked up, though when he did, his dark eyes lingered on their guest.

"You're going to bleed on the floor. I don't feel like cleaning that."

Izuna stifled an eye roll. Madara tracked dirt, bled, and sometimes tossed dirty clothes on the floor immediately after a rough training session. And he was not the one who cleaned it up unless hounded about it.

"Alright, if you clean your mess when you're done, I'll be sure to clean mine." the younger brother taunted.

Madara took a large bite out of one of the sliced fruits, unamused. "Who do you think you're talking to? Go change, it's starting to smell like iron in here. Let a healer know you need your shoulder looked at."

Gingerly touching the injury, Izuna grimaced, pretending he couldn't see Junji looking away sheepishly. "I can manage. It just needs to be cleaned and bandaged."

"Haruno's not around to look after you." Another bite followed Madara's pointed reminder. "Any treatment is better than none." He felt Sakura's absence just as strongly, but was always trying to play it off as if Izuna was pining by himself. Well, 'pining' was maybe too strong a word. It wasn't like he couldn't function.

There may have been some truth to the fact that he often took the long way home just to pass her
house, or that when he visited the tea shop and was served something sweet he knew she'd enjoy it took him a while to take a bite…He might have searched tirelessly for Usamaro, dreading what would happen if Sakura returned and he wasn't around. But that didn't mean he was pin—

Madara was shoving at him, muttering about how he smelt awful.

"I didn't pass any flower fields to roll in on the way home, sorry," Izuna feigned disappointment as Junji followed him the rest of the way out. The two went on to the more private bathroom in the house.

"I see you and your brother have made amends," The Kaguya noted.

"If you mean he's back to being a cheeky pain in the ass, you could say that." he smiled. Whipping his shirt over his head, the Uchiha was relieved that the wound at least had stopped bleeding. Though flushing it out was a top priority. "We can wash the grime off and then go get patched up."

Jun'ichi hesitantly plucked at the strings tying his shirt closed. His shoulder length white hair sluiced down his chin as he bent his head. "Are you sure your clan healers wouldn't object to treating me?"

Izuna paused, biting the inside of his lip. He hadn't thought about that. There were some that would definitely…make an issue out of it, to say it simply. But, Hikaku's younger brother was a healer, and he kept to himself. If asked to use discretion, Izuna knew he'd get it.

"I'll ask a friend to come and look us over, but feel free to wash off in the meantime."

Jun'ichi's eyes warmed in gratitude as he finished removing his shirt, sun-browned skin as sweaty and dirty as the Uchiha's. While he sponged himself clean with soap and hot water, Izuna walked down the hall to his bedroom, and then outside. Luckily, Madara's aviary was attached to the side of the house. It didn't take much to get Tama to fly over and attach the message to his foot.

Now, while they waited on Yugo, he could wash off the day's training, and speculate with Jun'ichi on where Madara was going with enough fruit for a banquet.

**ASiT**

He had his offering. He had his objective. It was time. Madara tossed everything he'd prepared into a sack and tied it shut. If the dragon goddess's directions didn't work, she would never stop hearing from him. For her sake, he hoped it was successful.

While Izuna and the Kaguya he'd brought into their home were preoccupied—he wasn't sure if they were bathing together or not but if that was Izuna's true preference, Madara would give his blessings, one less person to compete with for Haruno—he slipped out the back way.

Light footed and confident, he broached the edge of the forest in no time, no one stopping him to inquire what he was doing. For all they knew he was scouting out new places to hunt to return to later.

They just wouldn't guess he was on the hunt for something far more valuable than a pheasant.

The wood floor that had once felt soothing against his sore, sticky body now felt uncomfortable. His bare skin adhered to the floor by sweat made it hard to move, not that he was trying.
One of the healers had placed a folded cloth under his chin, but his hands remained tied in an intricate series of knots up to his forearms. Trying to wriggle free would make the rope chafe and tighten.

The faint light streaming into the room alerted him to the approach of sunset. After dinner had been had by everyone else, if his father permitted, someone would bring in something light for him. The realization made him huff. He'd rather miss the meal entirely than suffer through the indignation of someone feeding him.

Letting his eyes close and breathing carefully through his mouth, he forced his mind to empty. Today wasn't the worst. He'd survive like he always did.

The prison of his surroundings had all but faded into all-encompassing, silent whiteness behind his eyelids. Nothing existed in his mindscape of meditation, not even himself.

Exhaustion threatened to drag him under completely, his consciousness on the precipice of surrender. Then, a bright, blinding presence he would recognize anywhere shattered the disassociation. Red eyes opened to soft footfalls in the hall, and then his door slid open and shut just as quietly.

"What're you doing here?" he rasped.

Warm hands gently lifted him by the shoulders as his brother propped him up. Hashirama's clothes smelt like sunshine, earth, and a little like sweat too. The feeling of a clay cup against his lips preceded the water tipped down his throat, and Tobirama couldn't fight the hearty gulp.

Normally animated, the older sibling didn't say a word as he continued to allow him careful sips until the cup was empty. Setting it aside, he eased Tobirama's bruised body down, leaning over his bared back.

"Tending to this," Tobirama resisted a groan as nimble fingers wedged their way between the tight bandaging and began to unravel it. "You know if you leave it like this it'll scar."

His mind urged him to close his eyes again, but he batted the persistent urge away to address his meddlesome brother. Butsuma had been thorough in the day's "spar", and his back had taken the brunt of the attacks. Imagining the mess it was underneath the bandages made him swallow. "It'll scar anyway."

"I've been practicing," Hashirama insisted. "So for once, don't be so stubborn!" The last of the once-white cloth was removed, stained red and discarded as the cool hum of the Shōsen at work filled his ears.

"Anija," he warned. This was the problem with Hashirama's reckless behavior. If he thought it was to help someone else, no amount of reprimanding was going to stop him. Although Butsuma expressly forbid anyone from using Mystic Palm on his wounds… here was his brother, ready to defy their father only hours after being hit for doing it the first time.

For a time, it was deathly silent as Hashirama studied the lacerations with deep concentration. Tobirama felt his muscles loosen in spite of knowing they could be caught at any time. His chin lowered back to the floor.

"This wasn't the plan, Tobi." Hashirama sounded on the verge of tears, his voice warbling out his name. "I told you to stop intervening."

Lazily cracking an eye open, he shifted his head around. "That'd be easier if you stopped shooting
"It shouldn't be you!" The older boy spat. There was a pause, the hands moving over his torn skin stilling. The telltale sniffing echoed the vehement declaration, Tobirama almost able to feel the bounce of his brother's shoulders. "Seven," he gasped, the word anguished on his tongue. "In what world did Kawarama deserve to die so young?!" he bawled. "Like that?"

There was a short burst of indignation that the white-haired boy smoothed down, not wanting his words to come across as callous. "He was my brother too…" he sighed. "We're all mourning him."

"I…I know," The muffled sound of his voice told the younger Senju his brother was scrubbing his face with his sleeve. "What a lot of good the cycle does. We mourn for dead children but then adults send more out to die and replace those,"

The bitterness tinging the sadness Hashirama was expressing made his blood run cold. Not many things could bring his brother's mood so low. All his life he'd wondered how he continued to do it, so optimistic and friendly in the face of burden after burden. "How can I not speak up? It's wrong! I'll swallow mud before I hide the way I feel."

Sometimes, at times like these, Tobirama wondered how deep blood really went. He and Hashirama viewed the world so differently, processed their emotions so differently. They were meant for different roles. His brother was never afraid to speak from his heart, regardless of consequences. In that way, he needed protection from himself.

Tobirama saw what the world did to dreamers who wore their hearts on their sleeves, and he walled his most tender feelings away.

When the Mokuton revealed itself shortly after Hashirama turned eight, their father proclaimed it was a sign their ancestors wanted them to emerge victorious over their enemies once and for all. The Mokuton would grow into an unstoppable force, its roots watered by the blood of their enemies until an entire forest grew. He had, however, gravely underestimated the force of Hashirama's determination.

"Has speaking out really done you any good?" he asked. "The adults are going to punish you—"

"Then let them!" Any words he had yet to speak retreated in the face of his brother's raging chakra. It filled a room at any other time, as attention-commanding and unforgettable as Hashirama's personality. The rare times he succumbed to anger—true anger—anyone in close proximity could surely feel their stomachs flipped inside out. "I'll be the one punished from now on. Every time. No more taking up for me."

"He'll kill you one day." No, Butsuma wouldn't, because none of his other children had the Mokuton. Hashirama was chosen as the vessel from which all his realized ambitions would spring, or so their father thought. He thought it was just a matter of making his eldest son fall in line once and for all. Butsuma Senju had no idea. "You're too much of a reckless moron."

"I'm also the oldest!" Hashirama ranted, far from pacified. "You're my little brother, Tobirama. I…" Flesh met flesh as the brunette hit his own thigh with a closed fist. "I couldn't protect Kawarama but I should be protecting you and Itama." Drawing an unsteady breath and blowing it out, he grit his teeth. "I don't like anyone hurting my little brothers. Even Fath—" his speech devolved into hiccups.

A dull headache in back of his skull almost kept him from noticing a chakra signature he hadn't felt
in over a month. Along with Itama's more timid signature. When his door opened again, Hashirama tensed, nearly done with his work. But the warm honeysuckle and freshly flowered pear scent was not Butsuma's.

"M-Mother," Hashirama straightened, his voice full of reverence.

"This is where I find you?" she swept in like a warm summer breeze, the swish of her silk kimono a lullaby. "Itama has told me what's happened."

"Hashirama, why do you always wait until I'm gone to cause such fuss?" From the corner of his eye, if he twisted uncomfortably, Tobirama could see one of her long-fingered hands smoothing out Hashirama's fringe.

"Ka-Kawarama's…" The name was enough to break his older brother all over again.

"I know." His mother didn't sound like she was grieving, and really who could say. Part of his aloofness Tobirama had inherited from her. Her emotions were perhaps more guarded than his own, unless she allowed them glimpses. "I'll speak to your father about all this." Her eyes trailed to his healed back. The boy knew it was still littered with light pink scars despite Hashirama's best efforts.

"How was the trip to the capital, Mother?" Itama tugged lightly on her sleeve.

"Enlightening. We'll speak of it later. For now…" She crouched beside her son, her eyes meeting Tobirama's.

"Mother." he said.

"Tobirama…of all my children, you I expect to find this way least of all."

She didn't elaborate, but he knew instantly what she meant by it. Shame bubbled through him suddenly, and if he'd eaten yet, he may have vomited.

…!

…!

…!

His body sprang from the ground, his face wild-eyed with nostrils flaring. Haruno was in front of him on her knees, one hand reaching for him. She was frozen in astonishment, and drew back to give him space.

The mujina were watching, some with apprehension, as he got to his feet. "What the hell was that?" he demanded. Tobirama knew he didn't just dream of those days. His head knew better than to drift there, even subconsciously.

Haruno's mouth opened and closed, speech escaping her. Impatiently, he rounded on and snatched up the nearest chubby weasel. "Answer me!"

"Hypnosis, alright?" The creature winced, its claws scratching at him futilely. "Put me down, fleshling! You smell as angry as a fire demon."

"The mujina noticed we were slowing down, and they wanted us to rest." Haruno volunteered, still looking shaken herself. His heart throbbed angrily. She'd seen. Prone and unconscious, gripped in
the throes of that memory, there was no way he would've been able to stop her from witnessing his facial expressions. Had he groaned? Had he trembled? Each possibility increased his level of self-disgust.

Knowing the kunoichi still watched, Tobirama gave one stiff nod. He remembered that conversation. The creatures had claimed they would watch and protect them while they slept. But not trusting them, he had refused. That was the last thing he recalled.

"Tsubute said we wouldn't have another chance to sleep until after we reached the enchanted iron mines." Haruno whispered. There was no reason for her to, except that she was trying to avoid further agitating a trapped animal. And it wasn't one of the talkative badgers they were surrounded by.

"Yeah, you weren't budging, but I'm not dragging some half-asleep human to the mines." The mujina leader in question pushed his way forward, "So we used hypnosis on you."

"There's just a little problem," Ubagabi continued, holding up his front paws and making a small space between them. "Our hypnosis is for trickery too. Sometimes, it makes you see the thing you want most. That's funny because you wake up and when you don't have it, you're sad." he giggled. When the Senju's eyes snapped to him, all mirth fled his furry face, and he stepped back. "Uh, but not always. Sometimes what you see under our hypnosis is the last time you felt really scared and helpless. W-We don't control it."

Tobirama flung the mujina he held captive down, and it scampered away as quick as it could. Advancing on Tsubute, he got eye to eye with him. "Let's make one thing clear," His carmine gaze narrowed heavily, "If any of you intend to survive this and journey back to earth, you'll stay out of my head. There's no trick you could play that'll be funnier to me then acquiring a new set of furs to wear through the rest of winter."

The tension had formed a bubble as the two continued to stare each other down. Tsubute broke it with a hoarse laugh. "I've never met a human that makes me fear piss before. I think I'm gonna get along with you after all."

"Since we're all okay now, let's go!" Ubagabi lifted a paw. "To the mines!"

Excited chatter mellowed the mood, and most of the mujina resumed travel as insects. Tobirama made eye contact with Haruno, but she only shook her head with a weak smile, walking away.

Sakura refused to talk about the visceral reaction Tobirama had displayed in his sleep until he did. And she had the feeling that would be never.

In his own way, he'd opened up considerably in the short time since this had started, but she knew there were limits and she wouldn't push. This Senju was not his brother.

He was not Toka, who didn't mind being exposed if only someone trusted was patient enough to bear with her awkwardness. Tobirama despised forced vulnerability, and whatever the hypnosis had dragged to the front of his mind was not something wanted.

His withdrawn posture hadn't changed, and she had a feeling it was the worst possible time to attempt so much as small talk. The faint noises that had prompted her to try and wake him in the first place echoed through her head. Initially registering that they came from him and what they meant tore through her like a close range blast from an explosive tag.

In her head, Sakura had convinced herself that there were limits to Tobirama's range of emotion. He
felt, but to a halved degree. Anything but anger or scorn or caution and mistrust. Those he felt twice as much as anyone else, her brain said.

The problem was she had been abruptly proven wrong and it disturbed her to see that someone as immovable as he was, could be so defenseless against his will. She was sure he resented her more than ever now.

He would think she thought less of him. That wasn't the case, of course. Discovering he had deep emotions that haunted him was as reassuring as it was disquieting.

It gave her a lot to reconsider about the reasons behind his cool demeanor—

The irony of that thought was that it was suddenly sweltering! Sakura plucked at the top of her garment, puffing. She peeked around to see if she was the only one effected by the rapid heat. A sheen of sweat had appeared on the visible portion of Tobirama's neck. And the mujina weren't moving as swiftly anymore.

"Almost there," Ubagabi yelped, the only one seemingly cheerful about this latest development.

He dashed through the thinning line of trees, then turned and came right back. When the group had caught up, Sakura nearly took a step through only to have the excitable mujina ram into her, forcing her back. "Wait, you don't want to do that."

It only took a glimpse down to see why.

Chapter End Notes

Shit gets real now that the goddess Cat is linked to has been revealed. Lemme just say strap in because the reveals aren't stopping and she's a bit, eh, messed up if I'm honest. XD Cat's agenda will also slowly come to light, along with his identity and why he has it out for Tobirama so badly. By the end of it you may or may not think it's even really Tobirama's fault this time.

In the meantime, Sakura and Tobirama still have to survive The Under with only the mujina as their allies thus far. Is there more peril in store? Most definitely. I also didn't realize what a snarky ass dear Tobi can be until I started looking at the lines of dialogue I had set aside for him. Sort of makes up for the feels-trip he was forced to take this time. #LetTobiramaTellEveryoneOff I guess.

I continue to get questionings wanting to know what Naruto, Sasuke and co are up to and how close they are. Well, you may not like the answer once you get it. They're returning pretty soon though.

And I don't know who needs to hear this, but, pairings are tagged, so please don't ask for or insinuate the story should have pairings you and I both know won't happen. *coughHashiMitocough*

Lastly, I encourage everyone to follow what they're being told by their government
officials to remain safe. If you aren't on the frontlines then don't take unnecessary risks. Thank you for reading, and please remember to let me know what you thought of the chapter.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!