Lamb and Tanuki

by AngelOfDeath10

Summary

Once every decade a sacrifice is chosen in Konoha. Somehow, Sakura drew the short straw, but when the demon seems MIA she's left on a mountain with questions and a very surly patient. Not sure that it's romance, but not sure that it's not...

Notes

Originally written in 2018-2019. A one shot that got out of control.

Disclaimer: I don't own Naruto. Shocking.
"Your bravery and sacrifice will be remembered." The elders read the official words quickly, but Tsunade remained stone faced to the side, disapproving but helpless. Sakura had come up here (mostly) willingly, and there wasn't anything to be done.

"Your name with be recorded on the monument to the fallen, and…” the man droned on, but Sakura only had eyes for the gaping maw of the cave in front of her. The demon kept to its own schedule, and it was rare of it to take the sacrifice in front of people. Sometimes, people would come up to check on the status of a sacrifice and they'd find a limb left over, or a splash of blood. There was one time, rumored by the village miles to the west, that they had lingered too long and he had killed everyone there including the elders.

So clearly nothing good was to be expected in the next few hours.

The bindings that Shizune was tying around her wrists were just a precaution, in case Sakura got cold feet. There was a 'sacred' paragraph for that to as they talked about the ties of blood and obligation that she had to the village and they to her. Tsunade's lips thinned out as did Sakura's when they got to that part.

_Utter bullshit._

"… and your family will be awarded a yearly tithe to compensate them for your loss."

Cold comfort. Sakura was pretty sure her mother would reject it on principle. What pays for a life? A haunch of beef and a bushel of apples? At least she wouldn't live long enough to discover how little the town council thought she was worth, journeyman medic notwithstanding.

It was midsummer, and the sun was scorching on this outcropping of rock. It had taken a couple hours since the morning to climb the mountain, and that was after two days journey on horseback at a brisk pace to get to the base of the trail. Sakura was tired, she was dirty, she was scared, but most of all she was furious.

All the villages in the province had their blood tithe and, while it roughly worked out to once every ten years for each moderately sized village, it loomed large in everyone's minds. Particularly the girls.

Particularly the _virgin_ girls.

The lottery excluded those younger than ten, but the odds simply were that the longer a girl remained in the village the less likely it would be that she wouldn't be married so this was often considered a child sacrifice. Standing there, drawing lots with shaking pre-teens, Sakura had almost sighed with relief when she had drawn the polished black stone from the leather pouch. None of those scared little girls would have to face this, while Sakura was no stranger to the face of death in her line of work. None of her friend group had been eligible. That had been a bit of a shocker.

If she had been sensible, she would have taken the practical route. It wasn't like Lee hadn't offered for her hand two spring's ago when she turned seventeen. But it hadn't felt right in her heart, and Sakura really wanted to hold out for better than vague appreciation as a basis for a lifetime commitment. Better, even if it existed, was moot now.

_Gods, this dress was HOT._ The bridal linen should have been cool, but instead it was soaked with her stress sweat and plastered to her frame. The long hem was completely covered in dirt from the trek up the mountain, and the high lacey collar made her neck itch. All the diaphanous white veil did
was partially hide how she was grinding her teeth and tickle her nose with its movement in the wind.

"Do you have any parting message to relay to your family and community?"

Sakura came back from her reverie, she had had weeks to consider this but she had also left her friends and family notes and small personal trinkets to remember her by. She spoke from her heart to the men and women in front of her.

"This is barbaric and you all should be ashamed."

There was shuffling and a low murmur. Tsunade's lips quirked up a moment, but she didn't allow herself to smile. They would have to carve her words on the stone that would mark Sakura's empty grave.

"Farewell, Sakura Haruno." The speaker finished, and bowed low.

As was custom, no more words were exchanged and each elder bowed to Sakura as they passed. Breaking with tradition, Tsunade touched Sakura's shoulder, and it was that more than anything that started the tears again despite Sakura thinking herself cried out. Her mentor was like a second mother, in a way, providing the guidance and discipline that hadn't come from her home. Sakura would miss her, wherever her spirit was commended next.

The shuffling and grunting of all those adults making their way down the narrow trail faded to nothing, and all Sakura was left with was the wind.

***

Given that the demon kept its own schedule, it sure took its sweet time. She had been baking in this sun for hours, with hours more to look forward to on the longest day of the year. Sighing, realizing she'd rather wait in comfort for her inevitable and probably messy end, Sakura began to struggle against the ropes. Between Shizune not wanting to bind her too tightly, and Sakura having angled her wrists out to create more room, it didn't take particularly long to get out of the ropes. First thing she did was tear the veil off her head, scattering pins everywhere. She stuck a rock on it near the sacrificial stone, and let it flutter in the breeze.

Examining the rope burn on her wrist with mild concern, Sakura then went about tearing off pieces of the dress. From mid-thigh or so down she tried to tear it across, but it wouldn't budge. The weave was too strong. Instead, she found the hems at the side and tore up and that allowed her legs some unfettered room. Next came the sleeves, which were easy enough to remove, and lastly she took a stone point and perforated around the neckline until the horrible diaphanous collar was gone as well.

Taking a steadying breath she wandered into the cave.

It was cool but not cold, with a hot wind blowing from inside. Curious, Sakura slowly made her way into the near darkness. There were breaks in the cave ceiling occasionally which allowed sunlight in, but nothing explained the hot air.

Sakura kept walking directly back until she was in utter darkness, and at that point she halted her steps. It would take more planning to find or make a torch, and just as she turned to go back and get the sleeves she had removed for that purpose she heard a groan.
As a medic she'd know the sounds of suffering anywhere and she rushed towards the person before thinking better of it. Collapsed on his side, near an outcropping in the dark, a body in rags seemed to be just holding on with shallow breaths. Sakura was strong from lifting bodies of men and women bigger than this pitiful heap, and so didn't hesitate to wrap her arms around the injured man and speak softly.

"I'm taking you into the light to examine you. I'm a medic, I'm here to help." Never mind that both of them were probably lunch, Sakura had a purpose beyond feeling scared for herself and she would take it.

Insensible groans were all she got. The man looked to be somewhere in between sleeping and waking, but maybe he understood her on some level because he didn't resist her even as she saw his limbs stiffen at her contact. Sakura carried the man as far as she felt was wise, until she found a shaft of sunlight closer to the mouth of the cave, and from there she moved aside wraps to find where he was injured.

What looked to be a vicious bite mark covered an entire side of his abdomen. No animal that large and with that bite pattern existed in this country, as Sakura was sure she had seen every kind of bite. It reminded her of a dog bite, in a way, but regardless it was festering and angry. Nothing else seemed to be wrong with the man, other than being rather pale and sweating profusely. The fever he was gripped with had to be related to the infected bite.

"I can treat your infection, but I warn you I don't have any of my materials here, so it will take some time to collect what I need and come back. This is very important… have you seen the monster? Is it here?"

"Monster..." the man stuttered. "Kurama," he spat with more energy a moment later, then curled into a painful ball. Light green eyes not too unlike Sakura's own widened as he finally seemed to uncurl and notice her. A hand reached out, which she grasped. Oddly, as soon as she touched him he seemed to try to pull away, but her grip was tight for reassurance.

"I'll be back, and if you aren't eaten by then, I'll try to keep you alive. Assuming I don't get eaten..." There was a tickling sensation, and she looked down at the sand moving on her hand near the ground. The wind in the cavern was blowing, but instead of coming from the back it seemed to be swirling around them. There must be openings to the side here, creating a cross breeze.

It was going to take most of the afternoon to walk down the mountain, and Sakura was hungry having skipped breakfast due to assuming she would be dead by lunch. Tsunade had forced her to learn survival tactics along with foraging so that she wouldn't be ill prepared away from the village, so she wasn't afraid of a little hunger nor was she unsure of finding the root she needed to make a poultice to draw out the infection. However, the idea that Sakura would miss her date with destiny and the beast would assume the blood rite had been ignored this cycle did fill her with fear.

Was she damning the country to be ravaged by the demon? Sakura quickened her steps.

***

"Hold on, this is going to hurt. A lot." Sakura had seen that the wound was already oozing so it didn't need to be lanced, and there wasn't anything to wash it out with, so the smashed root would have to do.
It had taken time to find the right plant, dig it up with the last of twilight, and then make her way up the hot mountain trail from memory alone after sunset passed her by. The mouth of the cave had only been recognizable from the flapping veil in front of it, and Sakura had grabbed that up along with rocks sufficient to her purpose.

The hot breeze wasn't as vigorous as earlier, and under the light of the half moon she pulped the root between two rocks. Next, she used a sharp stone to tear the thicker material off the front of her dress to make a binding. Sakura then used the thinner material of the veil as a way to tie it all on more securely.

Even with the warning, the man cried out, and she felt what she would have sworn was water rush around her ankles. She must have been imagining it because the feeling ceased and she was fully focused on her patient once more.

"I'll be right here all night, so you can rest knowing I'm here to protect you." It seemed futile, particularly with a demon coming to eat them, but she took strength from the fact that she was using her training to save a life. Giving up would be to no purpose. Tsunade would want her to fight until the end, so she'd try to do just that.

Sakura fell in and out of sleep all night, hearing the man groan and thrash next to her. He seemed to be in a lot of pain, and she wished she could do something for it, but all she could do was run soothing hands over his forehead and through his hair and talk about inane subjects: the festival that had taken place the month before to celebrate the children moving to adulthood in the village, the betrothal ceremony for her friend Ino that she was lucky to have witnessed prior to the choosing of the sacrifice, a fancy dinner that had been held in her honor not long ago to allow the village to send her on in style…

That last one was probably described with more bitterness than joy.

"They presented me with the dress we're both kind of wearing now. The fabric had been chosen ages ago, and as the seamstress made it she commented on how since there was so much savings on the bust the train could be extra long." Sakura chucked a stone towards the opening, where the dawn's light was breaking. She was exhausted between the frequent wake ups and the generalized anxiety about the monster finding them. "Why did they even put me in a wedding dress? Is the implication that I'm getting married?"

There was a groan next to her but it almost sounded like a word that time.

"And why does it have to be a woman, or a virgin for that matter? Is the monster going to check? Is this all some sort of stupid leftover tradition from after a war when there were fewer men? Do they pick virgins because they aren't leaving children behind?"

The words were faint, but it sounded like something above the wind that was whipping rather strongly this morning.

"Are you doing better?" Sakura leaned down to try to catch his words.

"Do you shut up?" was what she made out from the redhead's chapped lips.

Her first instinct was to pick up a rock to throw at him, but she thought better of it and tossed it to the side. He was already injured and Sakura had a powerful arm. Instead, she leaned back next to him and stared at the cave ceiling. The rocks were pretty, uneven and of different colors. It was nice to be able to appreciate something. It was nice to be alive another day.
"Are you hungry?"

There was silence except for his labored breathing for a minute. "Yesssss." Came the sibilant reply.

"I think I saw some berry bushes near the path up, and I'll see what I can bring. I can get enough if I rip off the back half of my dress as well. I guess all that fabric is getting put to use."

"Blood," the red-haired man murmured.

Sakura snorted, then sat up. "I don't have the time nor the means to set a trap for meat. You'll have to make due with roots and berries today, same as me. I'm not sure what to do about the water…" His fever was lower than yesterday but not gone by any means, and both of them would need water soon. Sakura never thought that not-dying would prove so inconvenient to her short term goals. "I'll get more roots to change out your poultice as well. Keep improving like last night and you might even live long enough to get your revenge on the thing that did this to you."

There was a snort from the man, which Sakura took as a good sign.

***

"Open your mouth, dammit, I can see you don't like being fed but you can still barely raise an arm." The berries were juicy and the water in those and the roots would help until she could go search for whatever water source existed around here. There had to be one with all the vegetation around.

Sakura had changed his poultice and the bite marks were already looking less angry, with the ones on the far edge of the bite having already scarred over. It was strange, really, but maybe it already been that way before she applied the first poultice. No one healed that quickly.

"There's no other water and I don't know how dehydrated you are. Eat this berry or I'm going to make you."

"… like to see you try…" he wheezed.

Sakura put on her most determined expression. "Here I was thinking you wanted to live. Especially since there doesn't appear to be any monster, yet. Our odds are looking better every day."

There was a huff of what might have been laughter. As soon as his lips parted she stuck the berry in between them. He responded by biting her fingertips.

"Ingrate…"

There was another laughter huff. "Should have let me die." The expression in his fever bright eyes was deadly serious even as the corners of his mouth quirked up.

"That's not what I'm about. And even if this is my last day on earth, I'm not going to let someone suffer and die if I can help it." She looked at him carefully. "But we're both going to die anyway if I can't find some water in this heat."

They sat in silence, Sakura munching on berries and flexing her sandals on and off her dirty feet. It was weird that she felt dirtier and more anxious than ever, but also really grateful to be alive and kind of happy. Clearly she was cracking under the pressure of the semi constant expectation to die every
second of the day. It would have been harder to wait for death if she had been truly alone, so she was grateful for her wounded companion.

"What's your name? I'm Sakura. Sakura Haruno, of the Konoha Harunos."

The man seemed thoughtful, and he stared above him at nothing. "Gaara."

"Just Gaara?"

He turned away from her, onto his uninjured side, and Sakura stuck her tongue out at him. "Ok Gaara, I'm going to look for water. Try not to get eaten while I'm away. And if the monster comes, tell him I'll be right back."

Sakura was well out of hearing distance when Gaara answered her. "He knows."
Chapter 2

(Fucking fox, telling me what to do...)

The dark mutters were faint, as they had been since the fight. Shukaku was still licking his metaphorical wounds in the back of Gaara's mind, and as a consequence he was more clear headed than he had been... ever.

He could feel strength returning to quivering limbs, and Shukaku was actually supplying some energy to heal, so even the tanuki demon thought Gaara was going to make it, perhaps subconsciously. In a few days the cultists would bring him his monthly supply of food, and if he wasn't strong enough to face them with sand swirling around his form, they might kill him and take the demon spirit to house in the next sacred shell. Experiment failure.

Housing the demon in a baby was the initial idea—to have the purest form of the demon to manifest (They thought they could control me, HA) for the cult. Shukaku had had his way for years, instructing Gaara silently in how to manipulate, destroy, possess... but it had been his caretakers and Gaara's only family that had taught him the most important lessons.

Love.

Betrayal.

Revenge.

He had settled into a pretty solid routine for the past five years or so (The span of a breath when you live for millennia): kill when he felt like killing in the borderlands where the compact with the consortium of villages was not in place, or any mountain bandits he spotted in his travels, eat when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, and typically come back to the cave to meditate. Sometimes meditation lasted for days at a time, while Shukaku crowed about his greatness and lived through epic battles in his mind. It had been almost peaceful, only punctuated once a year by the arrival of some scared woman in white who Shukaku would gleefully tear into for a blood soaked evening. Gaara wondered at the power of fear to convince these people to deliver their women to him rather than face him in battle. (It's been that way for decades, and they do right to fear me.)

Then in had stormed Kurama, the nine-tailed fox, and he had ideas about tradition and goodness and he wasn't going to leave until Shukaku saw things his way. The other tailed beasts he had approached had considered his words. The world was changing, and it would leave them behind or band against them if they continued on this course of death cults and sacrifices. It was time to change.

The avatar of Kurama this cycle was a loud blond teen who was all smiles as he spouted his ridiculous dream of a better world. It was almost like the idiot fox had forgotten the years when they were trapped in chains instead of worshipped as gods. Shukaku assumed the fox had gone senile. So when the blond boy had his back to him, Gaara had tried to put him in a sand coffin.

The resulting fight took days. They leveled part of a mountain. They dried up a river's mouth. And with Kurama's teeth in his side, puncturing through his sand and into flesh that Gaara found real fear for the first time. He was going to die, and all because he hadn't wanted to listen to the fox's ideas about coexistence.

"We won't belong in this world much longer if all we do is destroy." The boy had said, but the
words were from the fox.

"If you live, come find me. I'll need a friend to help me convince the others, and if you're with me we'll be unstoppable." Those words had definitely not come from the fox.

(Presumptuous! Ridiculous!)

But Shukaku couldn't hide the shame of losing to Kurama from Gaara, or the consideration he grudgingly gave the idea of a different way of life. Gaara, for his part, stared up at the late summer sky from the indentation his body had made when Kurama had slammed him down over and over with his teeth clenched in his liver.

So while Gaara lay slowly dying in the cave he barely managed to drag himself back to, days passed and Shukaku continued to brood. It wasn't even words in his mind, mostly thoughts: Maybe the problem was this shell was too weak. Maybe it was time to move on and start again. It would be years before Kurama would find him and in that time he could grow stronger. He was strong already!

Cool hands shocked him back to the present. Soothing words. Then more pain. More words.

(Kill her, she sees us as weak, show her our strength!) But for the first time in many years Gaara didn't move to obey even if the sands stirred with Shukaku's killing intent. The tanuki had abandoned him and this woman, his blood tithe, was bringing him back to life. Kurama's words rang truer than even Shukaku wanted to admit. Maybe all humans weren't total garbage.

"And why does it have to be a woman, or a virgin for that matter?"

That wasn't to say they couldn't be viscerally annoying.

***

"C'mon. I found a stream and we need to wash you off." They both needed a wash, but Sakura figured the less she said about her own stinking clothes the better. The white linen was grey after a few days of hard wear. "I warn you, it will be cold. But from what I can tell it's clean."

He hadn't slept since she had found him, or he had slept when she wasn't looking. The pronounced circles around his eyes weren't getting any better, but the wound was closing quickly and he no longer had a fever.

Gaara sat up on his arms, grimaced, then laid back down.

"I can carry you like before if you can't walk that far yet. It might be a little tricky in parts…"

"I'll stand." The suggestion that she again carry him, bridal style, seemed to light a fire under him. The day before she had helped him stand and walk a few steps so he could go to the bathroom (i.e. a steep drop to nowhere near the cave). That itself had taken time to convince him to do, and despite having helped dozens of people do this before (usually elderly patients) Sakura had felt stilted and awkward in his presence.

She assumed it was just because they had spent the better portion of a week dirty, thirsty, and stressed out. The main thing that had been causing Sakura stress—i.e. her impending dismemberment
—didn't seem to be imminent anymore. Maybe there was no monster after all. Maybe those girls had simply escaped and run off to another country to start their lives over. It wasn't like there were remains to be found in the cave, just sand. Sakura didn't care what you were, nothing swallowed people whole and left no evidence.

Gaara looked pale (more so than usual) as he sat up. Sakura offered a hand, and grimaced at her dirty nails, one cracked, all the green polish she had applied the night before her sacrifice chipped off but for ragged remnants at the cuticle. That's what happens when you dig up roots for hours a day with nothing but a pointy rock to help you. Sakura wondered anew at how Gaara lived up here with no discernible tools or supplies. It seemed lonely.

"How long have you lived up here?" Sakura felt his hand finally grasp hers, and carefully they maneuvered him next to her, her arm snaking around his hips for stability. The bone jutted out, and she thought about how to get more food in him. Food is love, her mom was fond of saying. She was glad she didn't have to meet Gaara's eyes as they stepped forward out of the cave mouth. He might see the hint of color dusting her cheeks.

"A while."

Was his eventual answer, strained from the pain of moving. Sakura had only seen a few serious abdomen injuries and she knew they were particularly painful because it was hard not to use your core muscles.

"Do you have any family?" she tried. She had been talking about her own almost nonstop, debating about the wisdom of wandering back home or not. Would they just march her back here to wait for the monster to return? Surely Tsunade would prevent it somehow, as she had served as village head for years before stepping down recently.

"Yes."

Another terse reply, but Sakura tried to chalk it up to being in pain and living alone too long.

Rather than waste her breath she sighed and steeled herself for a slow trek up the mountain and sideways down a ridge to get to the nearly hidden pool of water she had discovered yesterday. There was a tiny waterfall above, which collected in a pool big enough to stand in up to the thighs but then continued to run down the mountain after that until it dropped off into another waterfall. It was cold, far colder than she had expected, probably runoff from the high peaks above where you could still see snow even in summer. It was hard to imagine that even after hours of walking they were not even close to the summit. The world was so much bigger than her village, or even her country.

What had distinguished it from other puddles she had found was that it wasn't stagnant. She would take her chances drinking and bathing here, despite the cold.

"It know it's not comfortable, but we'll need to get those clothes off and clean them. Then we'll need to clean you and wait for the clothes to dry. And then I'll help you walk back again." Tomorrow she would make the trek to bathe herself. She had never quite managed to feel secure enough about her body to view her own nudity as a neutral state of being.

Gaara stared at her like she had spoken in tongues.

"You do bathe don't you?" At her incredulous and slightly mocking tone Gaara slanted his eyes and for a moment Sakura felt a shiver of alarm straighten her posture. "This will help you heal faster. I know a lot of people don't believe it, but cleanliness can mean the difference between recovery and relapse. I'm saying the as a medic and a friend."

That startled him out of whatever dark mood her initial words have provoked. He began to peel layers off of himself, while Sakura picked them up and took them over to scrub them in the water. Without soap she'd have to rely on the sun to help the smell. As she finished with each piece she laid
them on top of spindly bushes to maximize their sun exposure. Instead of the cold breeze from yesterday, a hot current surrounded them, and she was grateful because it would dry the clothes faster.

Soon everything was laid out, Gaara having watched the process carefully without comment, and Sakura reminded herself to behave professionally and not like a ninny who had never seen a naked man before. The difference here was that as she was more often working with the young and the elderly such that there had been few to no times in her memory where she had helped a peer bathe.

"The rocks are slippery so I'll have to go in with you."

It was like easing into a block of ice the cold was so intense, but it was good it didn't go much past their thighs. There was no way they could spend a lot of time in here without risking hypothermia.

"The hardest part will be washing your hair so we'll leave it until last." He was shivering already but Gaara didn't complain. He stayed away from the wound site, rubbing water and sand from the bottom of the pool over his skin. The sand looked rough but it seemed to do the work to remove the dirt from his body efficiently and Sakura made a note for later to emulate him.

When it came to his hair, he bent slightly and Sakura cupped her hands and ran them through after pouring the water out carefully. It wouldn't help the buildup of oil there, but it no longer had all the dust and sand mixed in making it seem more vivid than the rusty brown she had grown fond of.

Fond of? Used to.

"Let's get out of here. I don't think I even have feet anymore, just ice." The numbness would fade soon. "I'll clean your wound. If that's ok?"

Gaara gave a tight nod and Sakura got him onto the rocks near the pool again to dry off and warm up. Using a piece of the dress sleeve (how the linen creation she had abhorred had become a lifeline!) she dabbed at the wound, and saw how fast he was healing with something akin to wonder. Once, when she was still just an apprentice, Tsunade had been attending to a man who had sustained multiple dog bites and she remembered how he had come back to the connected buildings where Tsunade had worked to occasionally thank her and give her reports on his progress. The dog had almost severed a tendon in the man's leg, so maybe that was the difference.

This was still unnatural. Gaara was unnatural.

Dots connected in the back of her mind but she refused to entertain the idea. He had been nothing but distantly polite to occasionally annoyed at her. There was nothing to suggest anything, well, sinister.

It was doubly difficult to assume nefarious intent when the man was spread out naked in front of her, vulnerable in a way few people could tolerate. Meanwhile, Sakura tried to ensure she only glanced up and not down when out of the corner of her eye she felt her brain return a word outside of her own conscious will.

Uncircumcised indeed. Thanks, brain. Sakura sighed inwardly, forcing a fierce unflinching smile on her face to hide her mortification that she couldn't treat him with the impartiality she usually carried for her patients.

"It's healing nicely." Was all she commented as she replaced the bandage.
There was something to be said for freshly washed clothes, Gaara thought. They moved better, they smelled better, and the view hadn't been half bad of Sakura beating them against rocks. The violence of her actions had sparked an as yet to be identified feeling inside of him. It was akin to hunger, but alien to it. He compartmentalized, as usual, particularly because Shukaku would do nothing but cackle darkly when it cropped up. Clearly, this was something the demon didn't want to explain to him but was also deeply amused by at Gaara's expense.

The demon had stopped suggesting they kill Sakura as she slept, so clearly the demon was processing his own thoughts in a corner of Gaara's psyche. Gratefulness wasn't part of the sand demon, but there was a grudging admiration of Sakura's efforts to save them that verged on acceptance. She had waited on them hand and foot for a week and being served always appealed to the tanuki's vanity, so for now the pink haired medic was in favor with the beast. That was a first, but it had followed so many other firsts it seemed unremarkable.

Sensing them long before they crested the ridge, Gaara watched as the cultists brought his monthly offering of food. There would be meat, and Gaara was tired of living off berries and roots like prey.

His gut still stung, trying to process the fox's energy out of his system at the same time he was still repairing perforated organs, but he needed to project strength. More importantly, Sakura was returning from her own bath soon, and her presence could prove disastrous on multiple fronts. For all they knew, the blood tithe was in pieces in his sand, not merrily marching down the hill with a spring in her step. Protectiveness that previously had only applied inward suddenly had an external target, and Gaara felt weirdly exposed.

"We bring gifts for the king of sand and wind!" They hailed him as normal, and Gaara gathered his energy together for the usual terrifying appearance. Sand claws formed around his hands, wind whipping a circle of sand in oblong patterns across his body. It was about the least impressive display he had managed to date, but it proved a point that he was in control of his powers.

"Approach," He emerged from the cave and he saw with a twinge that it was Kankuro leading the party this month. He rarely volunteered for this, finding it distasteful and being unable to conjure the properly obsequious demeanor. Shukaku had killed one of his entourage last time for lacking proper respect. Today, Shukaku's thoughts were still inward and the presence of the cultists barely registered.

Kankuro recited out slowly what they brought while the other cultists dropped each wrapped item off: cow meat (raw), deer meat (cured), pig meat (cured), loaves of bread, dried fruits, one rabbit (alive and caged), and in return they asked for his continued condescension and favor.

It occurred to Gaara that Sakura would probably take a dim view to Shukaku's typical reaction to the live rabbit. It also occurred to Gaara that it shouldn't matter to him what she thought about anything. There was another dark laugh from the back corner of his mind before Shukaku retreated once more.

"Do you accept, great one?" There was an inflection which told Gaara that Kankuro considered him anything but great. Kurama's words about the world moving on without them came back in vivid focus.

"Yes." Gaara said simply. "You're dismissed." He didn't elaborate. He didn't demand they grovel. He didn't threaten them, their children, or their homes. It was out of character, and for a moment all the quivering cultists paused to give one another questioning looks.
"Surely the great one would like to remind us of his power?" a skinny boy said next to Kankuro, and Gaara saw Kankuro's hand fly out to slap him.

"You have not been given leave to speak in his presence," Kankuro hissed. People had been murdered for less in the past. He was trying to protect the kid.

Gaara saw the exchange and realized they probably weren't going to leave unless he did something to prove his continued domination. His eyes lighted on the rabbit unwisely turned away from him in its cage and munching on a bit of turnip.

"Gaara, I found some late strawberries!" Sakura rounded the corner to the tableau of the groveling cultists and his partial transformation. Her hair was still wet, droplets falling off of the strands and wetting her shoulders. There was barely any dress left after all the wound dressing and cleaning, and Gaara noticed for the first time how much bare skin gleamed in the sun. Her initial sunburn had turned into a light tan and she was the very picture of health.

This, Gaara thought, was exactly what he had hoped to avoid.

Shukaku, the rotten old tanuki, just laughed all the harder.
Chapter 3

Well, *there go the strawberries*, was the only conscious thought Sakura could conjure as she took in all the details.

Three robed figures in supplication at Gaara’s feet next to piles of food.

One standing robed figure who had just drawn a long and wicked looking knife from his sleeve.

Gaara looking like, well, himself but with piles of sand around that Sakura could have sworn moments ago were being used to some other purpose that was so ludicrous it couldn't be considered seriously.

What she knew for sure was she had just crushed those strawberries into nothing in her hand. They had been colorless, but flavorful, and she had found them secreted away on a rocky outcropping. Tenacious, they were bearing fruit far past when she would expect them to. There was an analogy there, but she tried not to think too hard on it.

The man with the knife was between her and the cave mouth and while turning around and running probably would have been a good starting point, all Sakura could think was how she couldn't abandon Gaara in a fight that uneven. A small but strident voice in the back of her mind was suggesting rather strongly that that wasn't the real problem here, but she actively ignored it.

*She couldn't have saved the life of the most horrible thing that had stalked her country for centuries.* Impossible. Gaara was only around her age, anyway. It didn't make sense.

"You will let her pass and sheathe your weapon," Gaara said with a finality that implied he didn't expect it not to happen.

To her surprise the standing hooded figure did just that, and quickly. Questions flashed through his eyes in her direction, and Sakura supposed he was just as startled as she was but for a slightly different reason.

"Come," he gestured at Sakura and then to the standing man, and as soon as they were all inside the cave he directed Sakura to stand behind him. "These people are dangerous. Don't speak unless I direct you to."

Being told to shush was right up there on the 'oh hell no' list she kept in her mind right along with directives from men that started with 'be a good girl and…' or similarly patriarchal bullshit. She was capable and strong, and while she didn't have a knife she certainly had a lot of rocks and given sufficient force those could be just as dangerous.

Still taking in the situation, the hooded man was too fast on their heels to give her time to respond to Gaara the way she desired.

"Has the great one taken a… concubine?" He had paused to find the word and she could tell he struggled to get it out without shock.

"Yes." Gaara said the same time Sakura blurted out "No!"

Gaara shot her a look implying she needed to *be quiet*. Given that she wasn't entirely sure what the dynamics were at play here she would humor him for now. But as the conversation between the two men progressed that got harder and harder to honor.
"Was this girl sent here as a sacrifice?" Sakura blanched and Gaara moved to stand in front of her more completely—protectively even. The robed figure moved his hood back to allow himself a better view of the situation, and Sakura was struck by the family resemblance she saw there between him and Gaara. Cousins at the very least.

"Yes."

"If the great one wanted a woman there are plenty among the flock that would have—" The man sneered a bit as he spoke, stating a truth he found obvious but distasteful.

Gaara visibly shuddered with disgust, not letting the man finish. "No doubt. They would not have been acceptable."

They fell silent as if disconcerted that they agreed on some point. The robed man gave an amused snort.

"Sakura sees to my current needs," the robed man raised his eyebrows at Gaara's blandly delivered statement. The man's eyes flicked back and forth to try to examine her once again, but then maybe he was just staring because she was making a peculiar gurgling noise.

Did Gaara know how that sounded? Did he care? She suspected the answer was a 'no' on both counts.

"Sakura..." The robed man seemed to have gone from incredulous to mystified. He collected himself after a moment of silence and then blew away even Sakura's pretense of denial. "Will the great one need an additional sacrifice?"

The stringy carrots and handful of berries that had made up breakfast turned sharply in Sakura's stomach. A tremor ran through her body as a switch was flipped in her brain and she was emotionally transported back to the morning of her sacrifice. Her state of mind was not at all helped by the hand that Gaara placed on her shoulder, ostensibly to comfort her. She shook harder, unable to look away from the ground. Sakura, more than fearful, felt so stupid. Shouldn't she have figured this out? Why did it have to take some weird monks that apparently worshipped him to be the clue that told her Gaara was something other than he appeared?

Suddenly the sandy claws she had been sure were a figment of her imagination minutes ago seemed all too plausible.

"No," Gaara said, but the pause had been substantial, and Sakura became aware that audible shuddering breaths were coming from her. His grip tightened, trying to be reassuring, but just reminded her of how he could have so easily have suffocated her in her sleep. The men in general appeared to be ignoring her and she wondered how many people had nervous breakdowns just from being in Gaara's presence. It was some non-zero number.

"Is it presumptuous to ask if the great one intends to continue residing here?"

Gaara considered the words. His hand dropped from Sakura and went to clutch at his head as if possessed of a sudden headache. Sands rose and swirled around their ankles. Unable to continue to look down, Sakura glanced at Gaara instead and saw he was mumbling something to himself. That wasn't a whole lot better, she decided, and instead locked eyes with the robed man. He was stoic, as if death would neither be surprising nor entirely unwelcome. Sakura wondered what terrible life he led that would make him so blasé. Eventually, the sands subsided.

"Kankuro," the man started, more fearful at the use of his name than he had been when Gaara had
been sweeping his sand through the air. "Ready a residence in Suna for… us."

"Surely the temple—"

"We will not be staying at the temple." Gaara's posture was still stooped slightly, as if the headache was not subsiding.

Both men appeared to be annoyed, but Sakura suspected that was for different reasons. The robed man, Kankuro, bowed at the waist and turned to go without another word. Before Sakura had time to take another breath, sand shot up from the ground and encircled Kankuro's neck. Gaara's posture had straightened and she realized that standing up straight he was actually a little taller than she was. It seemed silly that that made a difference in this moment.

The tips of his toes barely met the ground as Kankuro twisted and pried at the sand choking him.

"No, please," she put a hand on Gaara's shoulder and the eyes that he whipped in her direction seemed empty of anything but grim satisfaction.

"He needs to learn respect," and there was an inflection to Gaara's voice that felt foreign to her ears.

Gaara slowly turned to face the man again, and after the space of two more breaths the sand fell away and the man coughed and touched his throat to feel out the damage.

"You should come better prepared next time," Gaara told the man, but Sakura didn't know if it was an admonishment or a warning. "Her weakness saved your life today."

There was hatred in the man's eyes, but also fear and maybe a touch of regret. "As the great one wishes." The man coughed out and then bowed lower as he exited.

There was scraping outside indicating movement, and low murmurs, but before either of them knew it they were left alone again in the rocky cave the monster called home.

And Sakura too, now, she supposed. At least for the past week.

"Were you ever going to tell me on your own?" she asked, feeling the nervous tremors travel over her in waves.

Gaara began to stride away from her but paused before he was entirely out of earshot.

"No."

***

Sakura was pouting, Gaara decided. He liked it better when she was boldly ordering him around, as much as he thought it laughable even a few hours ago.

She was curled into a miserable ball and chewing on some bread he had offered her as he moved the supplies into the cave. Since there wasn't any reason to hide his abilities, and he still couldn't lift anything under his own power without significant pain, he used his sand to transport it smoothly to the cool dark corner he had been used to utilizing.

This morning, which seemed like a world away, she had popped up in a great mood and had
informed him, after checking on his wound again, that she was going to go mushroom hunting sometime soon. There had to be some sort of village nearby, and maybe she could trade something for clothes.

"It won't be summer forever!" she had informed him as if it weren't self-evident. She seemed to like to state obvious things to him as if they should be remarked on. Particularly about the weather. "One of us needs to be preparing for when the weather turns. I can't live forever in this one dress. Or what's left of it."

He didn't have any comment about that. He had rather liked her in that dress. It made Shukaku wistful for blood tithes of the past, and as for Gaara he couldn't pin it down except that he knew the thought of more dress seemed like the wrong direction to go.

"And at some point it's going to rain, and I don't think either of us is well equipped for that."

Gaara had at least made a sound of assent at that. Neither he nor Shukaku enjoyed it when it rained, as it bogged down the sand's responsiveness and gave Shukaku an itchy memory of wet fur that rubbed Gaara the wrong way as well. He'd owned an umbrella at least one time, probably more, but like every other possession it had been destroyed or lost in a period of madness.

"Wouldn't you like something beside rags?"

She had been smiling. It wasn't a criticism, it was an honest question, but he wasn't used to either. Truthfully, he still wasn't used to the smiling on top of it all. His heart had seemed to respond to her with a kind of arrhythmia. Using a meditative breathing technique he forced it to slow before he answered.

"I hadn't considered it. These weren't always this way. Perhaps there is something better fitted I can use."

Sakura had gaped at him. "I feel like I need to pinch myself. That was practically a whole speech from you. You'd think what you'd injured was your vocal cords the way you've been with me."

That didn't seem to need to be dignified with a response, but now he sorely wished he had had the capacity to engage in something lighthearted because he feared that the illusion he had been able to entertain of normalcy was out of his grasp forever. Shukaku didn't understand why he had thought it appealing in the first place, but he indulged Gaara in this current exercise in futility by simply continuing to ignore him. Their recent power struggle might also have something to do with Shukaku's withdrawal as well.

He was going to kill Kankuro. He almost had, but Gaara had stopped him. Not for anything sentimental like the fact that Kankuro was his brother. Family ties meant little to him. After days of being the primary decision maker in his own body he found he didn't want to give it up. More importantly, as the struggle for Kankuro's life had proven, he didn't want to give it up even when he didn't want to. Maybe it was the fox's energy still in him suppressing the tanuki, or maybe it was that time and meditative discipline had finally given Gaara the strength to resist. More importantly, he had never had the will to resist before.

If Gaara was allowed to feel happiness after all the horrible things he had done to people over the years, then he'd classify this new freedom from Shukaku's compulsions as happiness.

Not that any of this helped him with Sakura. He stepped up next to her and she seemed to shrink into an even smaller ball, as if she could do anything to hide herself with all that silly bright pink hair of hers.
"We'll leave for Suna tomorrow." It had come out harsher than he intended, an order to follow and not the peace offering he had intended it to be.

He forced his arms into a neutral position at his side, not crossed above her, and he sat down opposite her trying to catch her attention. Childishly, she turned her body to face the other direction.

"You wanted a real bath. Clothes. Food that isn't made for one of those," he pointed at the rabbit, still alive and in its cage. He wished he could point out to her how he had left it alive to please her, but he didn't want to say something so vulnerable out loud in case she turned it against him somehow. "Suna will give us those things."

Silence. Gods, how he hated it now, even though he had wished for it from her often enough in past days.

"You don't need to pick mushrooms."

"Were you going to kill me?" She didn't turn around.

At first perhaps, and the future always remained to be seen, but if they were talking about the majority of the time they spent together then, "No."

"Why?"

He could lie. Everything in him told him to lie, and tell her what she wanted to hear, but the truth found its way out instead. "At first I didn't have the strength. Now I don't have the inclination." It wasn't that manipulating her sounded like a bad idea in his head, it just seemed he consciously couldn't choose to do it in this instance.

Sakura turned to face him, less fear and more irritation in her demeanor. "So you weren't going to kill me, but you also weren't going to tell me about yourself. Were you planning on letting me go off on my own at some point?"

No. The answer formed in his mind, but it didn't make sense the way the other answers had. He had no use for her once he was healthy. She would just slow down his progress searching for Kurama, which was the only thing he knew he needed to do. If that was for revenge or some sort of unholy alliance he couldn't say yet.

Uh oh. He had waited too long to answer again. She seemed to have taken that as an answer of its own.

"Was I supposed to be like some sort of charming pet? You picked me off the mountainside and I'd be so grateful I'll be your thrall? I'll clean the bones off the cave front as you killed people?"

Gaara knew hyperbole when he heard it. "You're overreacting."

"Well, one of us needs to! You were almost dead from fighting something, which means not only are there more of you but one exists that can kill you! And then I come along and foolishly think 'oh hey, a boy on a mountaintop where a monster usually lives, that isn't suspicious in any way...'."

She was angry at herself as well as him then. It made sense. If he had been her, he would have let himself die. But then her entire motivation set seemed to run counter to his. Reach out where he pulled back. Fix where he would destroy.

"If you had known what I was, would you have let me die?" That paused Sakura in her catastrophic thinking and brought her back to the conversation at hand.
"Yes," and that admission seemed to deflate her, "I mean, probably. I don't know."

It should have made him mad. It certainly ticked Shukaku off, *(They're all garbage humans after all…)* but not the kind of hot anger he usually experienced. Killing him would have solved a lot of her problems, and it was the only logical choice. They all knew this.

"I'd like to think I wouldn't have made a choice that would force me to compromise my ethics." Sakura added. "I took an oath to protect life. I didn't say those words lightly."

No one had asked Gaara's opinion when a homicidal demon had been sealed into his newborn body. He'd been born to this, an object of worship and destruction, and if not for Shukaku's memories of other shells and other ways of being he might have even thought it right. And he knew from Sakura's stories of home and family that even if it sounded like something he should scorn, that human connection seemed to give her strength.

And both he and Shukaku were always interested in ways to acquire more strength.

"I'll let you leave," Gaara said finally, knowing it was a lie. "But I need your help with something first."

Sakura finally smiled again, and his whole body wanted to sag with relief even if he wasn't about to allow any outward signs of joy. She assumed he meant healing his wound. He wasn't about to disabuse her of that notion.

As a further gesture of goodwill he stood, walked over to the rabbit cage, and opened it up before heading back to the cave. She would find it meaningful, maybe even prophetic. From the way the rabbit had continued to sit in the cage and eat his turnip, Gaara almost hoped it was prophetic after all.
Travelling to Suna was remarkable for how mundane it was considering they were being trailed by uncanny sand carrying all their food. While Sakura had been sleeping rough in the cave, it took on a new meaning now that they were not on a relatively flat, covered surface. It had been a few years since Tsunade had dropped her in the woods to prove she could tell the difference between that berries that were safe to eat from the berries that weren't—among other things. Sleeping on dew damp, uneven ground with no blanket other than tree branches she broke off for cover simply led to more nights of bad sleep. At least it was summer, so she could suffer through the cold early morning hours without needing to address the possibility of sharing body heat with a companion she was still all too wary of given he could kill (and eat?) her at any moment.

They looked like vagabonds, and she supposed they actually were in truth since Gaara called no place home and she wasn't sure she'd be welcomed back if she returned. Given how Gaara seemed to be stuck to her most of the day she didn't particularly want to visit that kind of potential disaster on her people.

Her ceremonial sandals, at one time beautifully gilded, were now barely holding on to her feet by ragged leather straps and every step aggrivated already popped blisters. They were marginally better than walking in bare feet, though, and she would rather ache than complain and draw any potentially negative attention from Gaara. He was getting more broody, if that were possible, as they approached this "hidden" village. Before the long silence on the road stretched between them he had said he'd grown up there, and when Sakura had asked if he had had a good childhood and was met with a chilly negative she figured he was fighting his own mental battles as they got closer.

Gaara still wasn't feeling well, but having meat and fruit to eat vastly improved both of their energy and allowed them to spend most of the time walking rather than foraging. This much movement had to be aggravating his injury, and Sakura checked on him every morning before they started out, and every evening before she slept. Other than a mild, but not worsening fever, he had no outward signs that his injury bothered him. The tissue had already scarred over.

Ironically, it was encountering other people on the road that caused her the most alarm and embarrassment. Gaara always kept his sand at some distance, so outwardly they appeared normal, even pitiable. One merchant tossed a coin at them as he passed with a wagon full of produce. Most simply gave them a wide berth. A person on horseback came down the road so quickly, and so closely, that Sakura could feel the wind shift as he passed and she saw Gaara stop and hold his head. She wondered if that messenger's fate would have been different if Sakura hadn't been here with the demon. Something told Sakura that if she ever ran from Gaara she wouldn't get very far.

Their almost unnaturally companionable silence only split once when some person on a horse with all sorts of rich fabric draped from it, and surrounded by a contingent of guards also on horses, yelled at them to get out of the road. Entitled people pissed Sakura off, but she understood how she and Gaara looked and it would be better not to attract attention to themselves so she moved in the direction of the tree line. Gaara's lean arm shot out from his rags, grabbing her upper arm and preventing her from moving away. It was jarring not just because of the contact, but because of how he again protectively positioned himself in front of her.

Luckily, the men ignored them as they passed, with only one at the end spitting in their general direction. Even weakened, Gaara had nothing to fear from those men's swords, but he had darted his eyes in her direction more than once while the guards passed. The thought that consideration for her is what stayed his hand gave her a feeling inside that was a combination of a lot of things from
appreciation all the way down to worry.

"Just ignore them. If they knew who you were they would be pissing themselves." Sakura had said with as much humor as she could insert into her tone when the guard spat at them. She hoped that would keep him from snapping a stranger's neck, or splattering them on the road.

They had stood, watching the men move farther away, Gaara's hand sliding down her arm until their fingertips were barely brushing. His eyes were closed and his breathing ragged, and Sakura wondered yet again how close she came to death on an hour by hour basis.

"Let's stop and have lunch," she had eventually suggested to break the mood.

***

The road to Suna had been a test of Gaara's only recently claimed control over himself. He had stayed on roads for the sake of his pink haired companion, who wasn't prepared for a trek through the woods, but other people continued to be a real trial of will. Pity was worse than enmity at riling up Shukaku, and more than once his sand off in the woods had to snap a tree or five to let off enough steam to allow him to appear calm.

As they neared Suna, fewer people were on the road and that was a blessing. Despite Sakura's protests that she felt ready to drop, they made the last push in the evening to get to the village. It required taking a small offshoot path that didn't appear to be a path, but which would widen suddenly into a well maintained road if they could make it a twisting mile.

"How do you know where to go?" Sakura said after she had sworn a blue streak at yet another branch that had snapped back in her direction. "I can't see a thing."

Shukaku was naturally nocturnal and it hadn't occurred to Gaara that Sakura couldn't see their path. The most sensible thing to do would have been grab her hand to lead her forward but he had a feeling she wouldn't prefer that right now. Other times he had touched her she had gone stiff, and it created a strange sort of impulse in him to do it more as her fear pleased him a little too much. Wanting something that required willful cooperation from another being was a new prospect and Gaara didn't entirely trust his own motivations yet.

He ripped a piece of fabric from his outfit, giving a small smile in the dark as it reminded him of how Sakura had been divested of most of her own clothes.

"Hold on to this," he had stopped suddenly and she nearly ran into him, stumbling over more low bushes. Their fingers brushed in the dark as Sakura grasped the torn cloth tentatively, then more confidently as she realized what it was. If he had offered his hand would she have taken it? Too late now.

It didn't take long to get to Suna after that, just another hour's walk through twisting dense growth. When the trail broke into road he dropped his end of the fabric, but was weirdly gratified to notice how she not only kept hold of it but began twisting it in her hands nervously. Sakura had some interesting tics and he enjoyed how she always needed to keep her hands busy. Twilight had faded to night a while ago and ahead there was a soft glow of light from over the village's stone walls. Guards stationed at the entrance, which would have been closed for the night, took one look at Gaara and opened the gates without a word. Sakura glanced at them and tugged down at the short ragged hem
of her dress' remains. Carefully, the guards looked at her without directly looking. It was a technique that every person in Suna had been coached in since they were children since constantly bowing had proved annoying to Shukaku over time. If Gaara addressed them directly they had to avert their eyes and bow their heads, but he didn't bother. Shukaku grumbled happily at how well trained his followers were even after several years away.

Finding their residence for the night wasn't hard, as the High Priest met them just inside the walls. Sakura was marveling at the abundance of gas street lights and fine glasswork in every window, but at least her gawking had eased her tension which in turn made Gaara feel more relaxed. The High Priest bowed low as his companion priests fully knelt on the ground, but waited for Gaara to speak first as was proper. Sakura shifted her weight from foot to foot behind him. She was tired, he knew, and probably didn't want to take all night for the silly welcome rituals that the priests no doubt wanted to subject them to.

"Kankuro relayed my orders." Gaara said, so that they didn't have to remain in the middle of the street any longer than necessary.

"Yes, great one." Baki had never been effusive in his praise, but he had always been unwavering in his loyalty and to retain his title at this age was unusual. He was a good High Priest, particularly to have staved off the frequently deadly ambitions of younger priests for this long.

"We will rest without delay." Gaara's words didn't surprise Baki, but the younger priests couldn't help but slide speculative eyes over Sakura as they rose from the ground. Usually Shukaku would have expected to be feted all night long and then offered at least one thing to sacrifice around dawn's light. Breaking tradition wasn't sitting well with them. The frown that deepened on Gaara's face was involuntary, but he knew he hadn't liked the full body evaluation Sakura had just been subjected to and from her clenched and shaking fists out of the corner of his eye he understood she didn't like it much either.

"At once, great one. You honor us with your presence." And unlike Kankuro's words, which were barely believable, Baki's conviction was so reverent it put a blush on Sakura's cheeks. Gaara allowed himself a small smile at her reaction. Shukaku thought she could take a lesson from the old man.

***

Sakura had been taken aside by a priestess with a very deep frown, and Gaara trusted she wouldn't get in trouble in the few minutes they were apart because he knew he was going to have to sweep the room before she got into it and asked questions. There would be no preventing her from understandable hysterics if she knew precisely why he needed time alone in the room that had been prepared for them.

Just one room with one bed. That was the first surprise he supposed he'd get to hear all about. That was of no consequence. He didn't sleep. She'd see the logic eventually, even if the rest of the village was making assumptions about their association.

The first thing he noticed was the wine, which he uncorked and sniffed. Better safe than sorry, he poured it down the drain in the small bathroom and tossed the bottle carelessly out of the window. It had smelled so strong it would have been impossible to tell if it had been doctored. Reasonably sure the fruit and cheese left out for them wasn't poisoned, he checked the couch in the sitting room. Ripping out the back he found a spring loaded set of thin spikes, glistening with liquid he assumed
was poison. The overkill here was almost humorous.

After pulling out the trap, Gaara pushed the couch against the wall with his sand to hide its state and wandered into the bedroom. Poisonous snake in the bed would have been too obvious, he supposed, but the several large spiders he located would have been just as effective. They were smears in his sand for only a moment before their existence was erased.

Using his sand, he felt along every seam of the wall until he found what he was looking for and forced open the hidden panel near the small table next to the bed. A wide eyed woman in greys and blacks was curled into a small ball, clutching a garrote. Gaara stifled the urge to sigh.

"I'm not going to kill you. The blood would be too hard to clean up before my companion arrives. Tell the temple that, while expected, this is unacceptable."

The woman unfolded from her rather compact hiding spot and nodded slowly as she wandered out the door.

Gaara didn't even feel like searching out all the surprises in store for Sakura in the bathroom, so he walled it off with sand. This was all for her, after all. Gaara had proved too hard to kill, even as a child, and the village had largely stopped with the attempts except for the odd person with a vendetta. But Sakura was a different story. Most of what was here was designed to maim her, bring her to brink of death, and then her life would be in Suna's hands. It would be leverage, maybe even revenge.

Having a special friend was complicated, Gaara decided.

It got a lot more complicated when Sakura burst through the door in a spitting rage, a priestess on her heels.

"Was this your idea?!" She gestured down at her body and he took in the diaphanous red fabric that hugged her from neck to toe. He could clearly see her chest binding and underwear as the see through fabric put the rest of her body on display. The ragged dress that was no doubt in the garbage now had exposed her nearly as much but it hadn't been built to be provocative. There was only one thing a woman who wore a dress like that in public did. Even Gaara understood that.

"No." Gaara said simply. He wished that glowering priestess wasn't staring at them both with disapproval because he desperately wanted to be alone with Sakura. And closer. Much closer. "I take it the new clothes are unacceptable."

"I am not some whore and I refuse to be paraded around like a spectacle!"

The immediate solution seemed obvious, "Give her your clothes," he ordered the priestess, who looked like she was going to be sick as soon as Gaara said it, but began to disrobe anyway with shaking hands. If anything, this seemed to enrage Sakura more.

"Don't you bully her! I don't want her clothes!" She made a wordless noise of frustration and walked over to shield the still undressing priestess from Gaara's view. "Just go away, get me something with more coverage and some shoes that don't involve straps or heels."

Gaara glanced down at Sakura's feet, dirty and bare, and realized that while she hated the clothes passionately she must have hated the shoes that much more to have rejected them entirely.

"Do what she says," Gaara said, realizing that Sakura's words probably didn't carry the weight she wanted them to here.
The rumpled priestess exited the room quickly, poorly holding back a sob.

Still vibrating with rage at the entire situation, Sakura glanced at the open door to the bedroom and immediately her voice rose an octave. "Is that one bed?!"

It was the killing intent coming from outside the room that caught his attention now, over the gesticulating scantily clad woman, and it was unconscious will when his sand jetted up in front of Sakura to catch the crossbow bolt that would have slammed into her chest. That would need to be unpacked later, as his sand had never taken an interest in anyone else before.

While it wasn't directed at him, some things just couldn't be tolerated, even from a village of assassins. He was out the window before Sakura could do much more than call out his name. Based on the trajectory and force he had a good idea which rooftop to stop at, and he understood enough of their training to conjecture the escape path. By the time he caught the man by an ankle in the alleyway five streets up from the site of the attack, he and Shukaku were of the same mind for entirely different reasons.

"They said you had changed," the man gasped as the sand wound around him.

"Not as much as they think," Gaara replied with a feral smile before the blood began to flow.

***

Gaara came back to the room, through the window despite the furniture Sakura had stacked against it, and she didn't have time to wonder what he had been up to because the blood splatters on his clothes were still wet. She had curled up on the floor next to the bed, which she had turned on a side and pushed against the window in that room as well.

With the blanket from the bed wrapped around her, she should have been warmer than she had been in weeks but instead she shivered. It must be shock. No one had ever tried to kill her before. Sure, she had taken a few punches and got into her fair share of scrapes for fun or self-defense practice but nothing that had ever put her in real danger. The whole ideology of kill or be killed had been for the village security personnel, not a journeyman medic.

He was still a monster, and he had just killed again, but what resonated was that he had done it for her. Gaara had saved her life, too. Gratefulness in this context was a difficult pill to swallow.

"They're all out to get me..." she expected Gaara to correct her, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he came to sit nearby her on the floor, an arm's length away but it felt like miles. His lack of response told her she was probably closer to the truth than she suspected. Gaara had walked them into a death trap, but he seemed to be confident he could protect her. "I'd suggest a bath, but I couldn't find a bathroom."

Gaara slumped over, then cringed and straightened up again. It was so easy for her to forget he was still healing. He projected strength all the time, but he needed some care as well. And while they were here in this hidden village it seemed like they really only had one another. If this was representative of his life in Suna, then his childhood had been a shitstorm beyond her comprehension.

"You can share the blanket, if you want. But I'd appreciate if you at least wiped your face off." Sakura didn't look over, but after some long minutes a weight settled at her side. She pulled out one
side of the blanket from the tight wrap she'd placed herself in and Gaara settled in even closer before accepting and wrapping the blanket behind him. He was so warm, and finally her shivering stopped.

This was closer than they had ever been before, closer than Sakura had ever allowed another human being to get since she was a child, and so far as she was concerned it still felt like she was alone. After a short time, exhaustion set in and she felt her head fall onto his shoulder. He would be there when she woke up, as always, but somehow this time that thought didn't fill her with dread.
"Don't think, don't look," she took another glance in the direction of the back of Gaara's head, "Don't breathe too much, even."

A bath hadn't been first on Sakura's mind when Gaara almost literally dragged her from the minimal safety of their barricaded room out into the street that morning. She refused to relinquish the blanket she was in due to still being in the joke of a dress offered to her yesterday, but in her arms was a bundle of what she hoped to be better clothes that had been just outside the door once the chair she had used to prop it shut had been removed.

Her bare feet padded down the well-maintained cobbled streets towards what she quickly realized was a temple of some sort. She guessed whom to pretty fast when robed figures sprang out the meet them with the usual bowing and scraping nonsense.

Apparently, they hadn't been expected, but no one said no to Gaara. Before she knew it, they were being led back to a room where warm pools steamed. If anyone had been in there, cleansing themselves, the memo had been passed pretty quickly that they had better clear out. Seemingly satisfied that there wasn't anyone here to interfere, Gaara walked them back to a room where faucets sat in front of stone stools. Below the faucets were beautiful ceramic bowls and pitchers. Upon closer inspection these bowls showed scenes of what looked to be all sorts of ways to kill a person. Charming murder cult Gaara had here, she thought.

Setting herself down on a marble stool, Sakura felt immediate wetness seep through her barely there dress. Guess people had really cleared out quickly. It was cold, but the room itself was warm, and she figured she'd be soaking in one of those warm pools soon. What gave her significant pause was that Gaara presumably would be doing the same and it wasn't like there were different rooms for them to occupy.

From a nearby cubby draped in linen, Gaara withdrew soaps. He stared at them all, seemingly unsure if there was a distinction between the different shapes and textures. Sakura stood up and wandered over to help, wrapping the blanket around her middle like a towel. Modesty at this point may have been pointless, but the impulses remained.

"This is for your hair, this is for your body, and this cream," she reached into the cubby, past him, "is for after you bathe so that your skin doesn't get too dry."

Gaara sniffed each thing and grimaced.

"I'm aware of what they are for, I'm just trying to find one that doesn't… smell."

They spent a companionable few minutes locating the least smelly of the soaps and moisturizers and then moving chosen items to the water basins where they would soap up their bodies. There were lines of basins on either side of this anteroom and Sakura made it very clear that Gaara should pretend she didn't exist for the duration of the next activity.

As she started to lecture him on privacy he simply gave the mother of all eyerolls and turned away to start divesting himself of all his clothes. Sakura sucked in a breath and gave a quick about face as the pale skin of his back was exposed. She had seen more, she knew, but taking care of an invalid was very different than whatever this was they were doing. It also seemed unfair that she keep ending up in situations which forced nakedness. Briefly, she considered leaving and coming in after he finished, but her thoughts snapped back to last night and the crossbow bolt that nearly speared her. It was in
her interests to stay as close to Gaara as she could.

The faucet began to run behind her as Gaara systematically continued his ablutions, and Sakura galvanized herself. It took some wiggling and peeling, but she got out of the hated dress, while the bag of replacement clothes she placed off to the side so she could grab them up and take them into the bathing room afterwards. It took some time to get the water to flow at the temperature she liked, and then she filled up the basin and pitcher quickly.

Getting all the grease out of her hair took three washings before the strands gave her that resistant squeaky feel she associated with cleanliness. Getting the dirt off her body should have proved easier, but she kept finding places where tree sap had stuck to her arms, or uncovering scabs from scrapes that she hadn't noticed she had gotten while foraging. Sakura had always had callouses on her hands from working with them all day, but now that she noticed some on her knees and elbows from digging in the ground so much and she felt self-conscious. Any pretenses she may have had of being soft and perfumed like a rich noble lady seemed farther away than ever. Silly girlhood dreams.

She was trying to get the last of the dirt from under her nails when she noticed the silence. The dripping from her faucet broke it, and Sakura whipped her head around to check for Gaara automatically. There was deep relief at seeing him, seated and facing away from her, by his own station water droplets pebbling his skin. He was still here, she was safe, Sakura reminded herself.

"I'm almost done," she said, so that he knew he wouldn't have to wait much longer. Really, it had been rather considerate of him not to pressure her to move faster or to leave her alone in the room. "How long do we have in this place anyway?"

"As long as I want." Gaara replied. It wasn't said with arrogance. It was just another fact in his world.

"How did you come to have a…. religion anyway?" she asked because she was curious, even while Sakura half expected him to ignore her question.

There was a low murmur from his direction, and then he spoke louder so it carried to her ears. "I was born into what it is now. It was established generations ago. Originally they were a fighting force, and those who would be considered high priests were generals and similar. Once the ancient civil wars subsided, the soldiers needed new roles. It morphed over time."

"Do you like it?" She picked off the last scrap of polish on her thumb, glancing back at his sitting form, posture still perfect. It wasn't like someone could have coached him to do it, and the thought of a young Gaara having an etiquette teacher gave her an internal giggle, so that must have been born of some innate discomfort with his surroundings, she decided.

"I never thought about it," He stood and Sakura hastily grabbed up the soaking wet blanket from the ground and wrapped herself in it. She kicked the sodden dress in the direction of the linen cupboard and grabbed up her still dry clothing bag. Gaara was standing at the exit, waiting for her stark naked but at least not facing in her direction so he couldn't see her blush as she approached.

He seemed to sense when she was close because he moved through a small entrance and back into the room of hot pools they had passed by initially. This was the real way in, she figured. Trust Gaara to simply go whatever way seemed most convenient at the time. He settled into a pool in the dead center of the room and as soon as he was waist deep Sakura moved away from the arched doorway to get into her own pool. The sounds of water echoed in the domed chamber, as did the slap of her wet blanket as it hit the tile floor.

It was a relief to feel clean, but there was a tension in her now that she knew they were sitting in
"Other than worship you, what do the people of Suna do?" She leaned on the side of the pool, low marble borders cool against the skin of her forearms. Now that they were both immersed, she didn't mind looking in his direction. As Gaara heated up he turned vaguely pink, and the scarification that she had noted on his forehead ages ago seemed to stand out white against flushed skin. It didn't appear to be a random injury after all. If she didn't know better it looked like…

"Every ruler needs special warriors. Suna provides services to the nobility that fall outside the rules of warfare."

Sakura laughed, incredulous. "The whole village—assassins? Really?"

"Some are merchants. Some are farmers." He had moved to face her, mimicking her posture with arms folded on the lining of the low pool. She could see the scars on his head formed a clear symbol now. Sakura would have thought the symbol a joke given that "love" was just about the last concept that came to mind when she thought of him, but Gaara and humor didn't really go together either. "They are always looking for a way to be stronger, to survive more effectively in the world. It's admirable."

For someone that didn't always seem to be all there, Gaara seemed so pure somehow. Maybe growing up without shame and probably very little guilt would naturally produce someone like him.

"I'd find it more admirable if they had dedicated their time to saving lives rather than ending them. My village is renowned for its healers. I can't imagine how different life here is."

Gaara stared at her, unblinking, until Sakura flickered her eyes up to the ceiling where a mosaic depicted a great battle and quite a bit of blood. She closed her eyes entirely and sank back into the water up to her chin.

"People are the same everywhere." Gaara replied before going silent again. Sakura wasn't sure if it was a reassurance or an indictment.

***

It was a strange feeling to have new clothes. Until Sakura had commented on the state of his "rags", he hadn't considered them as much more than a barrier against environmental annoyances like bugs or the occasional cold wind. His layers had provided a cushion when he sat, as well, but he supposed he was satisfied to trade relative comfort for the greater mobility of the new clothes the priests provided.

"Maroon? With red hair?" Sakura's voice seemed loud in the empty room, and she was munching on the cheese that had been left out overnight. The plate was resting on the sideboard that was shoved up against the window, like the rest of the living area furniture. Gaara wished they hadn't abandoned the rest of their food outside the village walls. It seemed shortsighted now given how hostile the people of Suna had turned out to be to Sakura.

Gaara smoothed his hands down the jacket, fingering an embossed button at the edge before brushing off his matching maroon pants. It looked like a military uniform. There had been medals to go on it, but he had decided to leave those off. They were accolades for battles Gaara hadn't fought, his whole life having been lived in a time of relative peace. Maybe this was another part of what the
fox had been referring to when he said the world was moving on without them.

(The world needs me!) Shukaku's annoyed response came to a question Gaara hadn't asked him. He was broadcasting his thoughts too loudly if the tanuki felt the need to comment, but the response had been tinged with more desperation than the old demon suspected. (You want to talk desperate? Shut up and get to fucking your little toy already…)

That absolutely needed to be ignored.

"At least it isn't white." Gaara responded, gracing Sakura with a slight tilt to his lips which she correctly seemed to interpret as a smile because she laughed and popped another piece of stale cheese into her mouth.

Her new clothes were all white, from the impractical white slippers to the white short sleeved jacket that buttoned over the white knee-length sheath dress. It was essentially the opposite of what they had given her before, and she hadn't seemed particularly pleased at this either, but it fit all the criteria she had demanded technically so she had put it all on with minimal fuss.

"I think I'll never wear another white dress in my lifetime if I can possibly help it, but at least this one doesn't look like a wedding dress." She leaned back, stretching out on the bare floor with a pilfered couch cushion under her head. Newly cleaned pink hair practically shone despite the fact that all the light sources in the room had been blocked except for one glass lamp placed on the floor. "You almost look like a different person in those clothes."

Gaara didn't feel all that different. He still wanted to tear into flesh, now that his sand had tasted blood again so recently. He still wanted to hear screams as he demolished buildings and razed fields. He still wanted to pin Sakura down and feel her writhe against him in some combination of fear and ecstasy. But above all he was aware that those impulses might not be his own, and so it was better to do nothing until he understood what defined his own desires rather than Shukaku's.

"At noon they'll come for us," Gaara said, grabbing Sakura's attention more completely. She sat up, crossing her legs and leaning forward. It still amazed him that she would lean towards him so readily. Maybe saving her life hadn't been so inconsequential as he supposed. "There will be a… feast. It will involve some ceremony. The best thing you can do is stay close and play along as well as you're able."

"Play along?" Sakura looked unsure, given the lack of information, but Gaara wasn't about to share any details. It wouldn't help her state of mind.

"Yes. They are still trying to find ways to isolate you from me. They've tried to use people emotionally connected to me for nefarious purposes before. It's been years since they had an opportunity this tempting."

Sakura leaned back on her elbows with an odd expression on her face. "Emotionally connected, huh."

"You matter to me." Gaara clarified simply, and while he thought that self-evident given she was still alive, Sakura flushed from her hairline down to her neck. Unwilling to meet his eyes anymore, she stood and grabbed some dates off the sideboard. It was probably a wise move, Gaara knew she wasn't going to like what the feast held in store.

He took the time to tie up the polished boots that went with the new uniform and immediately missed his open sandals. There was something almost claustrophobic about having this much fabric this close to his body. Like every other new experience he'd had recently, he braced himself to accept it
Sakura approached him at his seated position on the floor and his body tensed, ready for an attack despite knowing that wasn't her intention. At least he assumed that's what that feeling of coiled anticipation was in his stomach.

"Your hair doesn't look right with that outfit." Sakura said with a smile. "Let me fix it?"

He gave her a blank stare, which she took as assent. Gaara purposefully stayed his hand, muscles flexing and releasing as he forced himself to go still while Sakura ran gentle fingers over his scalp. It left him with a tingling feeling that started in his scalp and ran down to the base of his spine, but that coiled tension in his stomach ran lower as well and he finally acknowledged to himself that the attraction that Shukaku taunted him about was all too real.

"That's a little better, but now you really look different," She was looking at him with something in the tilt of her head and the brightness of her eyes that made him think he wasn't entirely alone in sensing the current between them, but her next words were a cold wind. "How did you get that mark on your forehead?"

In smoothing back his hair she had touched it multiple times, so he supposed her curiosity about his scar was natural. And given the relative intimacy they had shared the past couple weeks coupled with not knowing his history here, she wouldn't know not to ask. Although given Sakura's forwardness even if she had known the topic was taboo she might have broached it anyway at some point.

The real point was that it reminded him that this moment with this person was something that a monster like him wasn't allowed to have. Trust was inevitably followed by betrayal because he was a liability to any sane person. Even if the evidence of weeks of interactions with Sakura contradicted that, he had been too permissive with her. She was so close. Too close.

But as he tried to bore into her with a disapproving stare he couldn't bring himself to take the steps needed to drive her away. A slither of sand would do it—encircling her bare thigh like a python and squeezing until the bone strained, or a firm push to knock her off her knees in front of him followed with a threat of violence and maybe a little blood for good measure. Of course the question he kept falling back to was did he want that? Did he want the inevitable way her eyes would dim around him again, or the loss of ready human contact?

He was saved a decision as a knock came to the door. Sakura stood up and opened it to find Baki and his entourage. Gaara saw Baki take in the turned over room and Gaara sitting on the floor next to the wall without even the least bit of surprise or judgement. He knew better than to give away his inner thoughts, if he had any that contradicted his total devotion to the eternal demon and his power.

"At your pleasure, great one, the feast will begin."

Gaara stood up and started out of the room without a backwards glance at Sakura, assuming she would follow. Hearing her start to ask Baki questions, which the priest ignored to her increasing annoyance, filled Gaara with an unwelcome amount of relief. She was still with him.

***

Sakura figured she was expected to be seen and not heard, but this was all getting a little ridiculous.
Gaara had gone from almost joking to stone faced right when the high priest had arrived and it all seemed very strange until they entered what looked to be an arena filled with chairs and tables. Turns out feast seemed to mean a good portion of the village was eating with them, with a raised dias containing the table they were seated at. Gaara was sat in the middle of the table at what looked to be a throne made of animal bones. She hoped to the gods those were animal bones. At Gaara's right was Baki, followed by the man that had visited them at the cave initially and a few more men she didn't recognize but who had enough scars and hard expressions she was pretty sure she didn't want to know them. Sakura sat at Gaara'a left, but to her immediate left was a blond woman whose hair was made up into four buns of wound up braids. More women carried on to the left, older than the two of them, and just as tough looking as the men.

Seemed like the thing to do would be at least attempt to be polite to her table partner, even as the rest of the village stared at Gaara while trying not to stare at him. Bread was being brought out to all by teens in brown robes.

"It's nice that the weather is cooperating. The day doesn't feel that hot, even if it's a little dry." The weather was innocuous right? Who could fault talking about the weather?

It seemed the woman could, because the sneer she gave Sakura telegraphed enough disdain to shut her up. Sakura, irritated and unsure of how to 'play along' as Gaara put it, shot out a hand to grab a roll from the bread basket. The blond woman's hand was quick to grab her wrist.

"We wait for him first," she gestured at Gaara who had just noticed their interaction.

Coldly he turned his gaze to the women. "Touch her again and you lose the hand."

The woman withdrew, now staring down at her lap. Sakura could tell that there was more anger than fear in the slight tremor of her arms. Her hands were balled into fists at her side. They weren't here to be cordial, she supposed. All of them were here because they had to be.

A hush fell over everyone present as two priests entered the floor of the arena and walked past the lined tables until they arrived at a small clearing before the main table. They bore between them a vat of something that sloshed as they moved. They were careful not to spill even a drop. It looked like wine, maybe, but as they approached it appeared too viscous to be wine and Sakura got a sinking suspicion she knew what it was.

The high priest stood and spoke clearly to everyone in the arena.

"You honor us with your presence after many years, great one. We honor you with a small offering, the blood of the livestock slaughtered for your feast."

To Sakura's unending horror, the priest descended from the table with his wine goblet in hand and dipped it into the vat of blood. He drank, and Sakura felt her gag reflex fire a bit so stared down into the vat instead. It occurred her that this blood had to be both fresh and warm not be congealed. She really hated how her mind worked sometimes.

"In good faith, I have demonstrated the cleanliness of the blood for you, great one."

Oh gods, Sakura thought, he drank first to prove it wasn't poisoned?! She slowly drew her eyes to Gaara who continued to look stern and preternaturally still, his posture as relaxed as a person could manage on a throne of bone. There wasn't even a cushion, and it wasn't like he had much fat on him.

Proving to her that it was going to get worse before it got better, the two priests who brought in the vat of blood produced golden goblets from their sleeves and dipped them into the liquid before
walking up to present them to Gaara and Sakura. She knew she was making a crazy face but she couldn't stop the horror of knowing that an entire village was going to stare at her until she drank hot blood. It was running down the side of the goblet from the edge that had been dipped and the dark red stain was spreading slowly on the white cloth that covered the table. No other table had a tablecloth. Lucky her.

A line had formed at the vat and some people were coming up to get their cup of blood. It was either by invitation only or according to if people wanted one or not for the masses, but the entire population of the raised table was given their very own goblet. As with everything else, once people were served they looked to Gaara.

He stood gracefully, unfolding to his full height with that perfect posture she almost envied, and she saw that behind them he was waving tendrils of sand in languid serpentine motions high enough for the people sitting in the corner of the arena to see. She could understand how, in simpler times, a person could think Gaara a pagan god. He grasped the goblet and brought it to his lips, draining the contents in one go. A thin stream escaped one side of his mouth and ran down his chin where droplets fell to the floor.

Gaara, finished, placed the goblet on the table once again, wiping his now bloody hands and face off on the napkin. It went from white to red streaked, and Sakura dragged her eyes away to see that everyone else was drinking now as well with varying degrees of determination or disgust on their faces.

Oh gods was she the only one not drinking?

Oh gods she was the only one not drinking!

Frantic, she realized that while she hated the idea of drinking blood she hated the idea even more of disappointing or embarrassing Gaara at this public event. She reached out and grasped the goblet, but a hand stayed her wrist.

"You don't have to drink," Gaara had stopped her, something concerned on his face which he ironed out into stony expressionlessness the moment she noticed it.

"I think I have to," Sakura insisted, irritated that now that she was falling on this gross sword for him for the sake of appearances he would undermine his own plea to her to go with the flow among these crazy people. She tried to bring the goblet closer, but he tightened his grip on her instead, eyes narrowing.

They were in a silent tug of war, only attracting the attention of the woman next to Sakura initially, when Gaara suddenly relented. Not expecting him to let up, Sakura felt the cup rush up and forward and before she knew it, hot blood was rushing down the collar and over the front of her dress.

Sakura snapped her eyes over to Gaara angrily as he regarded her with wide, innocent, mint green eyes. Then, incredibly, those black rimmed eyes of his squinted closed and his mouth parted as a wheezing laugh started with a cough and then grew stronger. She could see leftover blood on his teeth, and she wished she could punch him in his laughing face before submitting to the idea that this situation maybe was a tiny bit humorous.

"They're staring at you," that didn't seem to phase him as he glanced at her and continued to laugh.

"They're staring at me too, now. Can you just eat some bread or something so we can get on with this?" she tried to keep her words sotto voce, but she was pretty sure the woman next to her heard because she looked poleaxed. Sakura wondered if anyone had ever seen Gaara laugh and remained alive to talk about it later. It might be a first for him that didn't involve disemboweling something.
He finally subdued himself and gave her a funny look as he drew an index finger through a drip of blood that hadn't been fully absorbed by the white dress that was now decidedly less white. She gasped and reminded herself she couldn't slap him here as that finger brushed over her chest. Gaara brought the droplet to his lips, and Sakura tried not to feel scandalized as she reminded herself he was playing a part as well. Probably. Hopefully.

"You're twisted." She sighed, resigned to the rest of this horrible meal. The blood was getting cold against her skin, but it was a hot day with just a few clouds and it would get dry soon enough. Then she would have crusty, itchy fabric to contend with.

He leaned over and spoke words into her ear, tickling the sensitive hairs there, "Next time don't fight me when I tell you to do something,"

She wondered later why he had kept that comment just between the two of them.
Chapter 6

It seemed Sakura was done with modesty around him to a certain extent as, once the door was closed and the omnipresent temple presence was gone, she peeled off her bloodstained clothes and tossed them into a corner of their room. Her eyes darted over to him as if to gauge his reaction, but he remained impassive even as his fingers gave an involuntary twitch. In nothing but her cloth bindings, the top one being also partially bloodstained but apparently not coming off, she wandered over to the blankets and wrapped one around her loosely.

"You're going to have to request more clothes for me. I hate to think what all those people in Suna think considering how often I ruin my clothing."

Gaara blinked at her. "Their incorrect assumptions aren't your problem."

"You don't understand how it feels to have everyone assume the worst…" Sakura paused, the whine in her voice fading away quickly. She reconsidered her words. "You don't understand how it feels to be considered a loose woman."

"Our sexual interactions are none of their concern."

Sakura blanched at his bald wording, but couldn't quite refute him, and he could see his technical rightness was eating at her so she tried another angle. "You don't understand because you aren't a virgin." She picked up the half eaten leavings of the food plate and dropped them in the soiled dress as she couldn't find a waste bin. There was one in the sealed off bathroom, but Gaara saw no point in bringing that up at this juncture.

"You're incorrect."

Her mouth dropped open at his admission, empty plate slipping from suddenly limp fingers and smashing in fragments at her bare feet.

"Shit!" she looked down and began picking up fragments and tossing them in the trash corner. He could have done it in a moment with his sand, but she seemed to need to stay busy and not meet his eyes. Vaguely, he dredged out from the back of his mind that cultural expectations would dictate that adults their age would be paired off and already successfully breeding. He could care less about her previous interactions, or non-interactions, with others but the more he thought about it the more he realized he actually maybe did care a bit. What if she had been promised to someone? What if that had only been delayed by her being chosen as a sacrifice? Once her village knew she was alive she might have to honor a betrothal. Gaara's mood darkened. Shukaku suggested a discreet letter followed by an equally discreet assassination.

He was trying to find a subtle way to inquire without raising her suspicions, when Sakura boldly changed the topic entirely. Gaara supposed she wasn't prepared to discuss their mutual sexual inexperience for some reason, which seemed odd considering she was a medical professional and it was just a biological drive. It didn't mean anything. Her worth as a companion wasn't defined by his body's drives.

"So that whole feast thing was pretty bizarre. What's with the disgusting vat of blood thing? People looked like they hated it. All those faces as they choked it down!" She gave a full throated laugh.

Gaara felt a tiny arrow of irritation dart through him. Drinking the blood was an honor. But then he thought about Sakura's look of abject horror when she was trying to drink and how he thought to
spare her the experience if she hated it so much. Did he really think it was an honor to drink warm animal blood in his name or did Shukaku? It was another one of those blurry lines, and he hated that he wasn't entirely sure where he stopped and the tanuki began. He thought of the discarded military medals, and wondered what he would be remembered for as this avatar of the demon. What had he accomplished? What would he leave behind?

"It was practically barbaric. And given how modern it is here otherwise, it seemed like a relic of the past come to haunt them."

"I could tell them to stop." It might even be practical given that the village population could no longer fit entirely in the arena to eat. Shukaku didn't like the idea of breaking traditions, but he had also seen enough feasts to be bored sometimes at all the protocol and loyalty speeches. The demon wouldn't fight the dissolution of this tradition too much.

Sakura gave him a funny look. "It's that easy? I tell you I don't like it and you'll just cancel them forever? You can do that?" She was picking at bits of ceramic on the ground that were too small to get up easily. At this point Gaara slithered sand through the cracks in the window blockade to sweep over the floor and gather all the broken ceramic and other dirt in the corner she had dropped the rest of the pieces in. Sakura glanced down in surprise but only the faintest hint of alarm as the job was completed in a moment.

She had been more obviously disgusted by the blood than his sand. Gaara was perversely pleased by that thought. Sakura was getting used to him. As for her questions, he didn't have an answer so didn't give any. They spent a moment in companionable silence.

"How do you make it move like that?" Sakura stood and dusted off her hands, walking over to examine the blockade for stability. He had watched her do this multiple times previously, but he understood that she needed the reassurance there was still a solid mass between her and where the crossbow bolt had come that nearly ended her life.

"Sometimes I imagine what I want the sand to do, but sometimes it just responds to my intentions. I don't think about the how." Gaara tried to remember the last time someone asked about his powers, and drew a blank. Casual conversation wasn't something he or Shukaku had much proficiency in or inclination towards. "There is a lot of variety in texture and density depending on the soil, but I can also direct how tightly it packs together." He refrained from too many other specifics, as there were some abilities of his that no one needed to know about lest they compromise him strategically.

Sakura seemed interested so he called the sand back and concentrated just long enough to form a humanoid shape that mimicked her movements. First she paced clockwise, and he had the form match her speed and arc. Then she waved, and he had it wave back. Reaching out, she shook the figure's hand before he allowed it to melt in her grasp. Sakura gave a giggle as the hand-like thing she grasped lost its form even as she gripped it. She picked up a handful from the floor and let it sift through her fingers.

"It's really amazing. Can you dig tunnels by shifting specific sand? Can you build things that keep their form? How much weight can you shift at a time? Think of how useful you could be!" Those green eyes of hers shone at him, and he felt a swell of pride.

There was a distinctly wary and slightly displeased tone to the demon in the back of Gaara's mind as he remarked he wasn't a construction crew, but Gaara's own thoughts spun back to Kurama. The old gods didn't have a place in a world that simply absorbed their destructive tendencies, but maybe Gaara could be useful. Something like real understanding of what his place could become other than a as a destructive blood god was slowly taking form in his mind.
Gaara felt himself smiling, which is how he knew he was doing it, and Sakura was smiling right back. He suddenly felt stuffy in his clothes and thought about removing his stiff jacket, but decided against it as Sakura began to shift uncomfortably and clear her throat. Whatever easy mood had existed between them had morphed again, and he saw Sakura tug the sides of the blanket to seal it more tightly in the front. His smile dropped back into careful neutrality.

"Your shoes are still functional, yes? I think you should pick out your own clothes this time." On a whim, he extended his hand, and she grasped it as she had the simulacrum only Gaara wasn't about to melt under her touch.

"I'm dressed in a blanket, Gaara."

"You arrived in worse." Gaara could hear her grumbling at his comment, but again she couldn't refute him. She slid on her shoes as they reached the door, easing her hand out of his to adjust the fit of the heel.

He found himself so greedy for the feel of her skin against his that he had to stop himself from snatching her hand back. Instead, he opened the door and addressed the guards just outside with orders to direct them to a store where Sakura could procure practical clothes for travelling. They would need additional supplies if he was going to take her looking for Kurama's avatar.

This interlude was just that, and they needed to prepare to leave Suna.

***

The bedroll Sakura had procured was infinitely more comfortable than the floor she had slept on the night before, but the languid feeling she woke up to was the biggest difference. Warm hands skimmed over her belly and up her sides, firm and inquisitive. She arched as he murmured something to her and those soft hands were sliding across her bare back. This was much better than dreams she had had like this before—more specific, more vivid. It definitely didn't compare to the sad attempts at intimacy she had tried in the waking world with Kiba on a dare, who had been all aggression and immaturity, or that drunken midwinter kiss with Lee, which had solidified her decision to stop trying all together until she felt truly moved.

Fingers ran themselves methodically over her scalp, causing a pleasant tingle along her neck to her upper back. Down the side of her face, those same fingers ran themselves over the seam of her lips and carefully pushed aside her bottom lip and then her top lip, which was a little odd, but as they gently encouraged her teeth to part she found herself compelled to catch one and run her tongue around it. As soon as her lips closed around the digit, it stiffled, and Sakura started to wonder at how her desires had changed over time as her tongue caressed the pad of a finger. It used to be in her imagination she was receiving the heated touches, but now she felt inclined to give. A name hovered in her consciousness, where before it had just been the feeling of a dark stranger. She allowed the finger to withdraw, sighing to herself breathily.

A warm puff of air near her cheek made her turn her head away just enough and when a pleasurable nip from teeth at her neck turned into a tongue slowly massaging her tendons all she could do was moan. The hesitation from her partner was different from the confident searching hands, but she leaned in to encourage him to continue.

It was the feeling of a shaking hand moving from the outside to the inside of her bare upper thigh that
finally jolted Sakura into the realization that this was not a dream. This wasn't her room at home, and it certainly wasn't a dream man giving her a hickey. Her first reaction was to bring her knee up between the thighs of the man practically melded to her, but said thighs were like steel and easily trapped her movements. Gaara didn't even need sand to stop her physically, and she stored that information away carefully in her mind for later.

Now completely awake and ready to spit fire, she tried to control the rage consuming her. Fighting him wouldn't be effective, and struggling just seemed to be exciting him more judging from the shuddering breaths next to her ear. "Gaara, what are you doing?!" She was proud that her voice didn't quiver with either anger or fear because she was feeling plenty of both.

It was the middle of the night, and with the windows nearly blocked all she could make out in the darkness was a sinister smile as he pulled his mouth away from her neck. Perversely, she wished he would continue, but that was just her lizard brain talking and she shouted it down internally even as pressure pulsed in her throat and a needy ache radiated from her core.

Slowly, taking a few raking breaths to pull himself together, Gaara found his voice. "I smelled blood. Your blood. The temple has ingenious traps, poisons…” He took one deep steadying breath and he sounded like his normal monotone self again even as he was straddling her thighs, one hand braced on the floor next to her waist. "I was checking you for injury…”

He was up and across the room in a flash of movement, and Sakura felt the loss of his warmth long before her brain had processed a probable end to the sentence he couldn't finish. He had lost control and it seemed to have coincided with her sucking on his... well shit. As the ache of desire faded and her blood cooled, Sakura felt a pinching at her abdomen and with a groan realized what the source of the blood was.

"I'm not injured," She would feel better if he paced around or expressed his agitation in some fashion. Instead, he occupied the corner of the room and practically vibrated with whatever cocktail of emotions he was dealing with, while she could hear his sand slithering around in the darkness. It was really tempting to yell at him, to express the betrayal of her trust in expletives, slap him around a little, anything to establish how unacceptable this turn of events was.

But.

He was obviously deeply shaken and probably dangerous and Sakura, who should have been shaken, was mostly just frustrated. She was frustrated at getting her period. She was frustrated that her easy assumptions of his asexuality had been proven terribly wrong. She was especially frustrated that she wasn't totally upset at him for taking advantage of her while she slept, mostly because she hadn't quite realized it could feel that damn good but partially because that had clearly not been the original intention.

Action was always better than contemplation in moments like this. She dug out a cloth bandage from the supplies they had "purchased" (i.e. they walked into suspiciously deserted stores and took what they wanted) earlier that day for going back on the road and took care of the first bloody problem. It was a strange thought that while Gaara was more powerful than anyone she had ever met, there was a distinctive weakness of spirit to him and it tugged at her heart. Sakura didn't specialize in wounds of the soul, though, so she did the most normal thing she could think to do and pulled on her new clothes. Sturdy close fitting canvas shorts with utility side pockets and a breathable sleeveless shirt in practical black were a relief after nearly a month of silly impractical clothes. She left off the pocket bearing vest that she would be wearing tomorrow, and pulled on the moisture wicking wool socks and leather boots.

"You can't leave me, it isn't safe." Gaara ground out from the corner, and Sakura suppressed the urge
to punch the closest thing to her, which would have been a wall, and tried to remind herself that she was the wronged one here and he was acting crazy.

"Well, it's not feeling so safe inside either!" Sand slithered more audibly, and she was glad it was too dark to see because she was sure it would have scared her out of her boldness. It had seemed so harmless in the daylight, shaking her hand and cleaning the floor. It had always been a tool of death before all else and forgetting that had been supremely stupid on her part. "We, as in you and me, are going for a walk. Outside. Right now."

Sakura said it as confidently as she could manage. They needed to get out of this room and put some distance between them before one of them did something they would regret and she ended up maimed or worse from his instability. More troubling was the need to process the fact that they still had a week of travel to get her home, and now instead of sleeping next to a monster, or even a companion, she would be sleeping next to a man, with all the hormones and needs Tsunade had warned her about regarding the other half of the human race. Gaara had seemed beyond that up until this point, but now she knew the feeling of his mouth on her skin and it would be impossible to place him back in that asexual box in her mind.

She gave a voiceless scream into the dark room and began to walk out, since Gaara wasn't responding, only to feel her ankle catch on something. Her descent to the floor was stopped by pillowy sand, but seeing as it had tripped her in the first place, she wasn't feeling too charitable.

"Gaara, you may be able to keep me in this room, but I swear to you you'll regret it."

His silence continued, doing nothing to defuse her volatility. He didn't think she could make good on her threat.

"Ok, how about we talk about what just happened. I'll start—"

His words sounded almost strangled, and they cut her off. "We're going out!"

Victory was pleasing enough to quiet her, and when the sand withdrew from Sakura's body quickly afterwards she didn't react fast enough to prevent her knees from jarring against the hard floor. At least she knew he was similarly off kilter because the blast of wind he directed at the entrance door blew it off its hinges and into the hallway. The guards at their doorway scattered, and Sakura saw them just drawing their weapons in confusion as tendrils of sand incapacitated them.

"Are you going to hurt them?" she demanded as she blinked against the sudden light in the hallway. Gaara had grasped her arm with a sandy claw, leading the way, but it encircled her flesh feather light. She made token struggles against him, but Sakura was glad they were moving to a public space.

"Not this time."

The words that escaped next seemed inevitable even as they were ill advised. "Are you going to hurt me?"

The look he snapped back at her could have been a lot of things, given that he typically didn't emote much but if she could describe it as anything she would have had to go with her gut and call it what it was:

Hurt.
I highly recommend Catullus. He is one of the OG NSFW writers. That's who I mean by 'ancient songs' even if there's no Rome in this world. I like ancient Rome. I tried to write a Roman Naruto crossover once. I'm still not sure that was a success in retrospect, but it isn't totally out of the blue. I wanted Gaara's breakthrough to also resemble a fracture. This might not be funny. Humor is hard.

The dull panic of earlier in the evening had been replaced with urgent panic of a different tenor. Gaara trawled Sakura behind him like a reluctant barge as she occasionally dug in her heels and jerked them both around. It only caused her pain, as every time she did it she would hiss a curse in his direction. The late night streets were well lit, gas lamps flickering, but the few people that were about were giving them a wide berth. Word seemed to spread because soon enough there was no one but the occasional drunk stumbling home out in the summer night air.

How he arrived in this moment seemed anomalous, but probably should have been considered inevitable. When he had thought her injured from some unknown quantity he had told himself to calm, unsuccessfully, and approach it like Sakura would: perform an examination. Every tool he'd had before was a hammer, but he was pretty sure blasting her all over with sand wasn't the way to go in that case so hands it would have to be.

While he had looked her over, fearing the worst, Shukaku's insistent words were a buoy and a torment. *(When she dies we should have a good old fashioned inquisition. Rend some flesh. Separate the wheat from the chaff...)* He refused to believe she was dying, it wasn't possible after all his precautions. Even as his heart sped up at the intensifying of the blood smell emanating from her, a phrase from an ancient song he had heard once long ago and dismissed as nonsense filtered back into his consciousness, *nothing is left of me each time I see her...*

He felt like he understood for once, even if the timing was not ideal. And as soon as he understood one piece, it was a floodgate opened to other concepts. He was suddenly drowning in feeling. If that's how he felt when she was alive and present, how anguishing would her absence be? He wanted to lash out at someone, unsure of why an emotional pain would cause a physical ache. Pain, familiar to him only since shortly before they met, was still novel enough to be strange when the rest of his life had been devoid of it.

Then she tasted him and his world went sideways.

*Now he goes along the dark road, thither whence they say no one returns...*

It wasn't what he had meant to do and now it's all he wanted to do as he licked the salt from her skin. She was as tempting as a baited trap. *(Weakness!)* Shukaku cackled, thrilled by how close to blood lust they were, teetering in domains that Gaara had assumed were foreign to him. Then it all crashed together, from Shukaku's shrieking encouragement to her sharp words of protest and Gaara's still churning memory.

As she, unfairly in his opinion, raged at him, he tried to compartmentalize his problems with limited success.
I hate and I love…

If Shukaku had done nothing else, he had made Gaara decisive and strategic. The preponderance of evidence pointed to a single conclusion: love. It didn't take much in the way of mental gymnastics to accept it, but it led to the loaded question of what's next?

She couldn't come with him to find Kurama, because the inevitable journey to the other tailed beasts would put her in harm's way of a magnitude much greater than a village full of assassins. He saw that now as flashes of his battle with the fox replayed in his mind's eye. But neither could she be left alone, because as soon as he was out of her presence she would be easily compromised by his enemies. There was an option that suited their needs, but it wasn't a good one. (They don't consider you family, they are just as likely to kill her and spit on her corpse to spite you.)

She was his, and he knew that as a certainty even before he understood how deep the emotional tendrils had burrowed. But at the same time she didn't seem ready to acknowledge it. Like any good military campaign it was just a matter of suitable offensive tactics, though with Sakura it was probably more like a siege. It would take a week to get her home and he could use that time to his advantage.

Meanwhile, he needed to marshal his forces. After two decades of living a life devoted to himself, solitary and mad, taking up the mantle of leadership was going to be a shift. (We were born to lead; you had no drive for it.) Shukaku mumbled, almost encouraging. Change was not something the tanuki welcomed, but the chaos that was going to result from the changes Gaara was thinking about were going to be delicious to the demon.

To this point is my mind reduced by your fault, and has so ruined itself by its own devotion…

She was trying to walk out, so he stopped her. She was trying to antagonize him, so he let her. But enough was enough, and Sakura needed to understand her position in his life. So he marched them out into Suna proper, excessive force be damned, and now here they stood in front of the large residence that he remembered was much bigger when he was a child. It seemed sad, almost shabby, now that his father was no longer high priest, long buried and rotting. A single light was on in the upper level, probably Kankuro.

He didn't bother to knock, using a slim dense wheel of sand to slice through all the locks holding the door in place. When he pushed it open, Sakura sputtered about invading someone's home and something that sounded like a joke about how she thought he had to be invited in first. Their walk had cooled her temper just enough that he felt like he could let her go and she wouldn't be a bother and go storming back out into the street. Chasing her down could be invigorating, but it wasn't the time.

"I can sense you there, hiding is pointless."

Temari melted out of the shadows of the hallway in her night shift, casually fanning herself in the summer night's heat. It didn't fool him, he well knew that fan was razor sharp on the side and the tines dipped in a paralyzing agent. It was more weapon than prop and she knew how to use it, had spent her life devoted to the art of killing as their father had wished.

"Great one, you honor—" she started the formal words, grinding them out.

"Stop." Gaara interrupted her, "There's going to be no more of that. Get Kankuro. We all need to talk."

Languidly, Temari melted back into the shadows with an exaggerated yawn. It was all performance
as Gaara knew she was tightly strung from his presence, walking lightly balanced and ready to run or strike if need be. Overall, Gaara was pleased, she was a good candidate for Sakura's bodyguard. Now he just needed to conquer the minor issue of his biological siblings hating him.

...It can neither wish you well though you should become the best of women, nor cease to love you though you do the worst that can be done.

Tapping her booted foot impatiently, Sakura stood an arm's length away. No distance between them would ever be remarkable given he could control the ground she stood on, but allowing her the illusion of separation would be important for his campaign. He fancied he could feel her body heat from here, and stiffened his spine as he felt the urge to take a step towards her. She still didn't trust him, that had been made perfectly evident.

"Would you mind telling me why we came here, in the middle of the night? I said we should go for a walk, that's all."

"If you want to return to your village, we need allies. My brother and sister are the closest thing we have."

At the mention of his familial relationships her mouth snapped closed and she started to glance around the room with new eyes. If he knew her demeanor would have altered so suddenly, he would have mentioned his family sooner.

***

It was like he was a different person from the man she had observed before she slept. That Gaara had been rigid and silent, carefully packing a supply bag and emotional worlds away. That Gaara had been almost safe, not quite friendly, but definitely predictable. Sakura knew his routines: the position he sat in when he meditated, the unfocused look in his pale green eyes when people spoke to him (which she associated with him communicating with the other being he housed), the jagged abdominal scar that he had never exposed to any other human, and the feel of his skin under her palm.

The feel of his skin...

Sakura's fanned herself with her hand, mumbling something about the warmth of the night air, and took tentative steps to examine the room they were in more closely. She supposed he had had to grow up somewhere, but it never occurred to her that he would have family or that one of those family members would be the same person he threatened violence against earlier in the day.

The town's motif was reflected everywhere, carved into bookends on a shelf, etched into a bronze plaque over the door, and formed into the chair backs. An hourglass seemed too innocuous for a village full of assassins, but it made a certain amount of sense as well. Other than a small oil lamp, a couple of bookcases, and enough chairs to seat four people around a tiny table, the receiving room was sparse and nothing looked new. By contrast, Sakura imagined her own childhood home, and saw in her mind's eye plush chairs and all the knick-knacks her mother loved to collect. She had remarked at the time that ornamental dishes and cups were ridiculous clutter, but now compared to the barren living room in front of her she realized it was rather welcoming. The only outward sign of wealth was a large standing clock in the corner, pendulum swinging in a glass case. Its ticking amplified in her mind as soon as she noted it.
"So you grew up here?"

"Yes." Gaara didn’t turn towards her, keeping his focus on the still empty hallway. There was a faint sound upstairs, the rise and fall of voices in argument.

Sakura had already surmised it wasn’t a very happy childhood, so she didn’t press for details on that front. "Are they your older or younger siblings? Do you have any other family in town?"

"Older, and no." Gaara tilted his ear up a little as they both heard something crash. It sounded like someone just broke a lamp. "I think they’ll be down shortly. Just remember, stay in this room until I'm certain Temari won’t stab you. Don’t accept any food unless they eat it first."

"You said they were our allies." Sakura said admonishingly.

"There’s a strong possibility but.." His turned his head enough to catch her glance as he said the next comment with gravity. "You'll have to trust me in this matter."

It was tempting to heave a sarcastic sigh in his direction, but seeing as she wasn’t quite sure why they were there or what he could be thinking she refrained. Maybe this was necessary for some reason, as he certainly didn’t seem excited to be here. Sakura definitely wondered if it was so necessary to be here at this time of day, though, and why they hadn’t seen to it earlier. She figured she should just be grateful he hadn’t restrained and gagged her in the bedroom until they got on the road tomorrow. He certainly hadn’t seemed this collected even a few minutes ago.

"As you requested, great one" Kankuro appeared before them in the robes of his station, a too bright smile plastered to his face, and Sakura wondered what growing up with a little brother like Gaara would do to a person to make him seem so brittle. "We’re honored by your visit."

Temari, no longer in her night dress but instead in a loose fitting royal purple top and pants, sat down in a chair casually waving her fan. While the men addressed one another, she eyed Sakura carefully. There was a distinct impression Sakura got that the other woman found her detestable for some reason. Arrogance may have been an inherited family trait, then.

"No formalities. I'm not here for you to kiss the ring, I'm here to ask a favor."

Gaara’s words caused his brother to start and his sister to whip her head around from trying to murder Sakura with her withering stare. Kankuro took the temperature of the room and gestured for everyone to sit down. Seemed like the siblings, for all they didn’t like Gaara, were at least interested enough to listen to him. Sakura was getting more curious by the second as well and took a seat across from Temari. While Gaara at first looked like he wasn’t going to sit down, once everyone else was seated he pulled a chair closer to Sakura and across from Kankuro then took a slow breath before breaking the expectant silence.

"I need different favors from each of you. They are both difficult and time consuming, but you’re the only suitable candidates." Gaara gestured towards Temari, who flinched and then seemed to anger at her own display of weakness because a deep scowl took over her face. "Temari, I will need you to travel with Sakura and I to her village. There you will act as her bodyguard until I personally deliver new orders to you."

"Wait a minute…” Sakura, startled at this new development, liked the pronouncement about as much as Temari seemed to because her fan was moving a mile a minute before she snapped it closed and jabbed it point first into the chair arm, where it stuck.

"And Kankuro, Sakura has made it obvious to me that the temple is, perhaps, behind the times. It's
time for a reformation, and my gift to her is to have you take her evaluations to the elders and make some changes. Permanent changes."

It was the most Sakura had ever heard Gaara talk at one time. Everyone seemed nonplussed. "Hold on, let's get back to me apparently needing an indefinite bodyguard?"

The blond woman interjected, making her observations through lightly clenched teeth. "Do you think, now that Suna knows of your existence and the relationship you hold with the demon's shell, that they will ever forget and let you lead a normal life? This isn't just a favor, this is a life sentence."

Kankuro scoffed, "And mine is a death sentence! Do you think that for one second they would allow you to erase centuries of tradition on the whim of your concubine? It's unprecedented. They'd laugh at me, then drown me in the nearest mop bucket. What makes you think we'd be able to accomplish these impossible tasks...that we'd even want to!?"

"Sakura is no concubine, and this gift is important." Kankuro scoffed at Gaara's sincerity but soon quieted with a thoughtful look, while Temari looked even more disgusted if it were possible. "No one is more capable than Temari at spotting sedition. And you're the only heretic allowed in the senior clergy."

Kankuro had the presence of mind to turn red, but it seemed to be with anger this time.

Gaara casually added fuel to the fire. "Heresy isn't a crime. Shukaku has no problem with lack of belief so long as orders are followed. Your attitude was never subtle."

This seemed to be a family issue and Sakura, while curious and a little upset at the high handed way Gaara was assigning a human being to her care indefinitely, didn't particularly want to get in between them. She was also processing the idea of essentially reforming the death cult based on her opinions of how it should be. It was flattering that he had been listening to her and her constant criticisms, rather than ignoring her as she suspected. Sakura thought of the times she had been able to make small improvements at the clinic and the warm glow of praise from Tsunade when it had a positive impact on their day to day. What kind of impact could she have on a whole village? He didn't likely see it in her expression, but the warmth in her heart at the show of faith Gaara had plopped in her lap erased the lingering negative feelings from earlier in the night. Shame at her earlier words to him started to make itself known as he obviously trusted her.

"Say I move my life to this backwater village," Temari started,

Sakura interjected, "Konoha isn't backwater!"

"What improvements to my living standard could I expect?"

Kankuro protested immediately, "You can't possibly be considering this?!"

"Why not? Should we continue to live a high profile life in genteel poverty while we're both passed over for assignments due to the supreme gall of our family not to beat the drum for the demon god when we've been gifted so much honor?" She met Sakura's eyes and furiously ripped her fan from the chair arm. "The honor of being related to the demon god doesn't put food on the table or clothes on our backs. And don't tell me you haven't heard the whispers about us being cursed. Mother is dead. Father is dead. Uncle is dead. What's left here for us?"

There was some history here. Sakura could feel it pressing down on all of them, and Gaara was starting to get that glazed look more and more frequently. It boded ill. Unsure of how to get his attention unobtrusively, she reached out to gently pick up the hand that had gone limp at his side and
twined their fingers together. What she thought was a simple gesture seemed to scandalize his siblings even more. Gaara for his part, did focus back in on the environment and more specifically her with an intensity she wasn't ready for. Trying to pull back, his grip was almost painful; he didn't let her go.

"You'll have anything you need in Konoha. Anything."

Temari couldn't tear her eyes away from their linked hands and Sakura felt cold sweat break out on both her palms and upper lip.

"Well and good for her, but who's going to keep me from being put in a sack and dropped in a river?" Kankuro complained, half-joking.

Gaara finally relinquished Sakura's hand and smoothed fingers over his dark eye marks with a sigh. "I'll return before mid-winter to make sure the new directives are initiated correctly. I don't think I'll need to remind the temple that despite my recent change in demeanor that failure to comply will be immediate and terminal."

Sakura didn't like the idea of Gaara sweeping through his own village like a holocaust, but she wondered if maybe just the threat would be enough to make people comply. It was strange to think that she had come from expecting him to kill her to being incredulous that he would be the kind of person to indiscriminately kill others. The emotional whiplash she'd experienced since waking up this evening was wearing her down, and she failed to stifle a yawn.

"Unless you plan on having her sit here all night with me and outline this reformation, I might suggest that we all reconvene tomorrow." Kankuro glanced at Gaara, then Sakura. Clearly he expected sanity to win, which told Sakura that he probably didn't know Gaara as well as she did now.

"You better make a pot of coffee." Sakura said, with a weary smile. Gaara snorted next to her.

"I guess that means I better pack a bag," Temari said, "Since it looks like I'm leaving tomorrow."

Kankuro twisted a smile in his sister's direction as she stood up. "I'll make sure to tell all your boyfriends your new address."

"Go to hell," she called after, raising a rude gesture as she walked away, back to them. It seemed so normal, something siblings that cared about one another would do, that it juxtaposed his hooded gaze upon turning back to Gaara.

"Your old room is just like you left it, if you want anything out of it." Kankuro stood up and dusted off imagined lint from his robes. "I'll be in the kitchen starting the coffee. Seems like it's a night for cookies, too, what the hell..."

Before Sakura knew it she was alone with Gaara, listening to pots banging around in the back. Her whole life had changed in less than an hour. Again. Maybe next year she would have earned a nice boring vacation where all she did was read and sleep. Then again, it was harder and harder to imagine stringing a whole day together without Gaara nearby. That was a sobering thought.

"So, I get a bodyguard, do I?" it came out more sly than she meant it to sound. The reasoning Temari had spit out was sound, but Sakura didn't have to like it.

"There's something I need to do, and you can't be there with me. Temari is competent and motivated."
“I guess being mercenary is a motivation, but she doesn't like me at all. Doesn't that worry you?”

Gaara unfastened the top two buttons on his high collared military jacket, which for him was probably about as relaxed as he was going to get in this setting. “She knows the consequences of failure.”

There was a curse from back in the kitchen, and they both turned away to look down the hallway in silence before resuming their nearly whispered conversation.

“You’re really going to let me change everything?”

Gaara didn’t even need to think about it. “I don’t possess the necessary perspective.”

Sakura felt the urge to hug him, to fold that statue of a man into an embrace to show him she appreciated his gesture. He certainly wasn’t even within spitting distance of perfect, but he was clearly trying to be better than what she had thought he could be. In time would his past villainy be forgotten? Could someone like Gaara become respectable? Normal?

“It shouldn’t have to be said that you will not drink the coffee.”

Sakura sighed and crossed her arms across her chest defensively. Possibly not normal.

“First thing to go is the yearly human sacrifice.” Sakura mumbled.

Gaara allowed himself a low chuckle.
While it was necessary, because of all the things they had to bring with them, the horse and cart that Temari was driving full of food and camping gear was causing Sakura no small amount of consternation. The first problem was how, due to spooking any horse with his mere presence by being within a hundred feet of them, Gaara could do nothing but follow and glower (or so Sakura assumed, since it was hard to make out his precise facial expression at that distance). The second problem was that she was stuck next to Temari for this journey who, despite having signed away her life in Suna to protect Sakura for what she assumed was a ludicrous amount of money, hated her guts. Third problem was that the rocky motion on the hard seat was bruising Sakura's tailbone over and over no matter what way she contorted her body. The walk to Suna had been more pleasant than this, even with the bloodied feet.

"Hate this..." Sakura hissed.

"Princess having a hard time?" Temari cooed derisively as Sakura groaned at a particularly hard bump in the road. Having not slept at all, really, in the past day made Sakura touchier than she normally would have been around someone she vaguely knew she needed to be wary.

"If you tell me your ass doesn't hurt, you're a liar!" Sakura retorted with force, glancing to the side to see if she was about to be stabbed by the other woman for engaging conversation.

Sakura counted a dozen trees pass by before Temari spoke again.

"He probably can't hear us at that distance, probably, so I'll make this short: so far as I'm concerned this whole situation is like a cat playing with its food so the less you talk to me the better. For all I know you'll be a smear in his sand before we reach your stupid village."

Not exactly starting things out on the right foot, but Sakura wasn't about to allow someone to arbitrarily hate her. Sure, there were plenty of things she could do or say that could reasonably lead a person to be very angry with her (like when she poorly set her first bone, a finger, and Tsunade yelled at her for not coming to get her to observe so that they could have spared the poor farmer needing it re-set) but the difference was she had deserved most of the rest of the enmity she had received. This absolute disgust that poured off Temari in waves was unfair.

"I didn't do anything to you, or the people of your own 'stupid' village, so maybe you should get to know me before you decide I'm worthless."

Temari snorted. "You don't get it do you?"

"Enlighten me." Sakura crossed her arms and concentrated on the twitching tail of the horse directly in front of her.

"I have had to hear every fanatic twit priestess of a certain age go on and on about how she wanted the demon's babies. Years of that shit. Then days of the wailing and rending of teeth when you show up out of the blue and ruin their obsessive wish to be my little brother's chew toy. Pardon me if, now that we have to spend every waking moment in one another's company, I want to know as little as possible about your twisted romance." Temari finished her screed with a sneer and a flick of the reins that took them up just enough speed to make it feel like Sakura would not posses any tailbone by the end of all this.

"It's not like that!" Sakura tried to start.
"Nope, I can't hear you. And if you keep talking I'll just speed us up."

"Gaara and I—" As soon as Sakura opened her mouth, Temari flicked the reins again and Sakura felt the vibrations from the wooden seat all the way to her teeth. Maybe if they weren't clenched it wouldn't have hurt so much. After a minute or two of making her point, Temari slowed them down back to the manageably painful rocking they started with.

Sakura glanced back at Gaara and cursed in her own mind. He was walking, his maroon form keeping pace and distance no matter their speed. It was like he knew, with mathematical precision, how far away he had to be and he wasn't going to concede even an inch more. The wind whipped his hair around and Sakura shivered in the sun. Gaara was a force of nature, and he had said there were more of his kind. He'd used a word she hadn't totally caught for them. More demon vessels. Not all of them had religions, he had said, most were quite solitary. He had seemed wistful.

See that feeling in your heart you had just then? Gotta stomp on that before that thrown match catches. Sakura had been coaching herself in neutrality ever since she stepped out of that study with Kankuro at her heels. They had been laughing, Kankuro finally getting excited about all the ways he would get to boss around Baki and upset the staid upper echelons of Suna. Maybe both were a little punch drunk from too little sleep, but it was Gaara's expression that stopped Sakura cold. Like a lonely kid pretending to be busy, he had hastily stood from where he had been crouching nearby. He could have come in and talked with them, taken part of the plans, but instead he had hung around waiting for her to finish and for a flash she had seen wistfulness. Maybe it had been a hallucination, it was that fast.

He's not a stray puppy. He's a grown man housing an ancient malevolent being in his psyche. But Sakura felt her heart go out to him anyway. Her master wasn't the only legendary sucker in Konoha. Sakura truly wanted to believe the best of people, and it was getting harder every day to think of Gaara as anything other than human.

"I need sleep," Sakura mumbled to herself, and immediately Temari snapped the reins. "Oh come on!" Sakura exclaimed which earned nothing but another sharp crack of the leather.

***

How was Gaara going to influence Sakura's attitudes towards him from yards away? She was seemingly receptive under the right circumstances, but he wasn't sure how to engineer another chance to demonstrate their physical compatibility. Shukaku's mumbles about battling other males and nighttime excursions in spring seemed to be less for Gaara's benefit and more dredging up some long buried memories so he ignored them completely. The idea the tanuki had to wait until winter to see if she was more amenable hadn't seemed worth acknowledging either.

Meanwhile, Gaara had noticed itching and the occasional pain around the location of his scars. That he had scars still seemed amazing to him, the flesh feeling foreign. They had grown paler in the few days in Suna they had spent, but they were present and taunting him with every brush of his undershirt against them. This was the farthest away he had been from Sakura in weeks and Gaara realized that some of his discomfort was not generated by his scars alone. Loneliness had only been an abstract, but now that he wanted to be in someone's company he felt like maybe he finally understood.
Once Sakura and Temari had set up camp for the evening and tied the horses a safe distance away, Gaara joined them at their fire. Temari was resolutely chewing on some dried meat, but nodded to him as he appeared at the tree line. She wouldn't bother to take a watch while he was around, he knew. It only made sense for him to play lookout overnight.

Sakura was lying on her side on her bedroll and seemingly staring into the fire, lost in her thoughts. When he tapped her on the hip, she started then gave a low pained groan.

"I need to sleep, Gaara. You and that dratted wagon have kept me awake for more than a solid day and I feel like death warmed over."

He wasn't sure how to explain his problem to her, but then reminded himself she was the medical professional and hiding things wasn't in his best interest.

"There's something wrong. With me." Sakura huffed a quiet laugh at his words. He didn't need Temari knowing he'd been injured, family or no. Whether trusting Temari as much as he had was a wise investment was still to be determined. He pitched his voice for Sakura alone. "My scar hurts."

That got Sakura's attention. "Can it wait until the morning?"

Gaara waited, twin dark circles around green pools staring one another down. Did he always look as tired as Sakura did on so little sleep? He'd like to think he seemed more put together than that.

"That's a no, isn't it?" Sakura sighed. She made a face as she sat upright. "Ok. get that shirt off."

"I'm just going to go sit with the horses for a while," Temari said quickly and loudly, and Sakura mumbled under her breath about how she had the wrong idea. Slapping her own cheeks lightly to wake herself a little more, she blinked hard a few times and focused on the task at hand.

Gaara didn't even look in his sister's direction, he was busy undoing the many buttons that held on his jacket. His linen undershirt came next as Sakura still wiped at sleepy eyes. "You'll have to come closer to the fire, I can barely see anything out here it's so dark."

Laying down close to the fire, Gaara allowed himself to close his eyes and remind himself that her touches could only be this casual when she was doing what she had been born to do. If he had approached her, heavy eyes full of promise, and requested that she could touch him then he would no doubt have been getting an earful. This injury was at least proving itself useful. Keeping up a steady nervous commentary, Sakura asked him questions periodically as she examined him.

"You sister is convinced I'm just as bad as your fangirls in Suna. After tonight I think it's going to be impossible to change her mind. Does this hurt?"

"Oof." He nodded. It wasn't like the pain he had experienced while healing was even comparable, but he wasn't used to tolerating something he couldn't at least partially control.

"Does it itch too?"

Another slow nod from Gaara. How had she known that?

"I hate to say it, but it looks like you might need some massage to help the tissue break itself up more quickly. It already looks well healed, but scar tissue is a little different from regular skin." Her hands stilled on his abdomen, no longer inspecting him for injury, but neither was she withdrawing.

"So it's.... normal?" He propped himself up by his elbows and finally opened his eyes again. It was a relief to know that he wasn't lapsing into further weakness.
"Very," Sakura reassured him. "I…” her voice faltered but then she cleared out her throat and tried again. "I can show you how to massage it, but just once so pay close attention." His concentrated silence was an answer, and Sakura understood the silent assent as usual. Gaara felt satisfied that she knew him so well already.

Some pressure was applied to the half moon scar near his hip bone. The muscles there twitched as she dug into him ever so slightly with the pads of her fingers. She made little circular motions, keeping the pressure on as she moved around the entire half moon. Then she stretched the skin around the scar gently, sliding sure fingers up and down the area before starting from the bottom and making little circles going in the other direction.

Gaara had expected her to narrate what she was doing, but Sakura seemed to be in a trance, tracing the scars that passed over the muscles of his abdomen and working methodically to massage them all. It was uncomfortable, but not unpleasant, and with something akin to shock he noticed she was running the tips of her fingers over perfectly healthy tissue as well and tracing the line that ran next to his abs and down. Sadly, she seemed to come back to herself before her fingers encountered the edge of his pants. He wouldn't have stopped her for anything.

"I don't think I'll be able to do that myself very easily," he said, voice thick even to his own ears.

"I… I need to go to sleep," Sakura said, face aflame, "You should go get Temari. It's cold at night if you aren't by the fire. She should come back and get warm."

Gaara wasn't going to play at obedience without some concession from Sakura first. "How long will I need this tissue massage?"

Sakura's gaze was locked on the fire, her thousand yard stare attempting to fully bypass the half naked man in front of her.

"A normal person? Like two years. You probably only need it for a month or less based on how fast you healed."

Gaara liked this side of her. Angry Sakura was amusing but this bashful Sakura was cute and seemed much more controllable. "So I can count on you for the proper treatment?" He knew she couldn't say no, she might even have insisted on it once she gave it further thought. After all, she was the kind of person who would force herself to do something she didn't want to do just to prove she could overcome her own mental blocks. And touching his exposed torso was clearly doing something to her.

"I told you I would get you better, didn't I? I made a promise. Now go away and let me sleep!"

***

There was no way he was doing this on purpose, Sakura thought, right? It wasn't him that prescribed or asked for massage, she was the one who had suggested it. There were definitely bite marks on his back, too, that he would never in a million years have been able to properly see to but it was when he flipped over to expose his stomach that Sakura wished she could just sprint the rest of the way to Konoha.

She would have suspected him more if it weren't for the fact that he was his same neutral self every night he submitted to her, eyes closed and face peaceful. Without that stare of his, too often nearly
unblinking, he had a vulnerability to him. When his facial muscles relaxed he looked more like the young man he was, just out of his teens like Sakura would be soon enough. Sakura tried very hard to concentrate on his face, because the moment her brain slipped to the abs under her fingers she found she would start to get very sweaty with the mental force of denying any attraction for the redhead.

It had only been a few days and she had prescribed a month of this…. Long after they would have arrived back to Konoha. That was something to chew on.

Even worse, every night she gave Gaara a massage she had to deal with Temari's judge-y face when Gaara went to go get her after. Sometimes he would still be buttoning his jacket up as he went to get her and Sakura knew precisely how bad it looked. Sakura also knew explaining was not only pointless, but difficult since Gaara had confided in her that it would be prudent not to mention his injury even to his family. The exclusivity of the arrangement made Sakura feel special, but also silly.

"You need to wave to him again, the horses are getting edgy," Temari said to Sakura, startling her from her reverie. Once you had gotten used to the silence, as the blond woman hadn't said boo to her since the first day, it become comfortable.

Sakura knew very well that Temari could have given him the signal, a special wave with both hands, so she figured maybe even the Suna sibling got tired of silence after long enough. Expectant, Sakura gave the wave and then quirked a smile.

"I know Gaara is different, but you both have pleasantly surprised me. I expected far more vomitous public displays of intimacy." Temari was acidic as usual, but there was no vehemence in her words this time.

"We aren't like that," Sakura said, and noted with pleasure there was no snap of reins to shut her up.

Glancing at Sakura, then back at the horses, and then back at Sakura, Temari finally exclaimed, "Eff me… I'll bite, how exactly did you convince him not to kill you? I gotta know, since the demon is a creature of habit and it isn't like there haven't been sweeter or more beautiful women offered as a sacrifice before. None of them made the cut."

What makes you so special? Temari was asking, and Sakura knew she couldn't share the real story without giving away information about his injury. Then again, Sakura was not a great liar, so she did her best to step around the truth selectively.

"I happened to encounter him in a moment when he was… changing internally. I don't think if he had been his normal self we would be sitting here today. So while I think you all probably thought I cast some sort of psychosexual spell over him, really I just found him when he was already receptive and we've connected." Feeling defensive for Gaara, since she didn't think of him as the creature sharing brainspace with him, she added, "Everyone has the capacity for change, is it so hard to think Gaara might choose to be more human?"

Temari didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Sakura deflated a bit, resisting the urge to turn back and spot the maroon figure in the distance trailing them faithfully.

"But all the evidence seems to be pointing to him changing, so I guess I'll have to concede that, even if I think this is just the feint before he does something horrific. The tanuki will only let him be in charge for so long."

Sakura tried to imagine him how she had encountered him when she had discovered his nature, all
twisted grin and sand claws, but the only image her mind wanted to return was abs. Useless brain.

***

Sakura had been getting more and more nervous the closer they got to Konoha. Everything was so painfully familiar, from the verdant fields of wheat that were almost ripe for harvest to the orchards that looked so heavy with fruit she could almost taste it from her seat on the wagon. The closer they got to town, the smaller the land plots got and the closer to the road the houses seemed. Pretty soon they would be close enough that people would recognize her, and word would spread pretty fast.

She'd better warn Temari before it became a problem.

"I need to let you know something before we get into town," Sakura started, but Temari cut her off.

"I'm sure you have all sorts of quaint customs. I don't care."

Sakura rolled her eyes at the insult. She'd see soon enough Konoha was not only a thriving trade town due to the abundance of good farm produce, but also the center of medical learning for miles around thanks to Tsunade. Konoha probably produced as many medics as Suna did assassins, and someday Sakura would be a master among them. But that was years away yet.

"You need to listen to me, there are going to be people who will probably meet us at the gate," Sakura eyed the approaching border wall that marked old Konoha, before the suburbs had expanded out in various directions. Some parts of the wall were totally swallowed up, but this section still marked the main gate and it had been opened to allow early morning farmer's wagons so that the market stalls could go up and everyone could start their day. It was already mid-morning so the traffic was thin. "And I need you to play along with whatever they say. There are some things that will have to be straightened out…"

Temari was not taking this seriously at all. "Jealous lovers? Your father with a pitchfork?"

"I'm supposed to be dead," Sakura said, temper rising. "Once I prove to be obviously and vigorously alive, I'll have to stand trial for treason."

"Ha," Temari said, only half listening, but then the information seemed to seep through and her head whipped around. "What?! You know Gaara isn't going to stand for that. He'd be damned before someone locks up his property."

"Well, clearly, I was sort of hoping he would be a really good character witness so that I wouldn't be hanged in the market square…” Sakura tried to say it with a laugh, but she wasn't really sure how all this was going to go, which had kept her silent until the last moment. Her arrest was inevitable, and she wasn't going to fight it. She was pretty sure the elders would have everything cleared up before sunset and her neck would stay unstretched. "They made failure to comply to the terms of the sacrifice a capital offense to discourage girls from running away. The idea was that you were dead either way, right? So might as well be noble about it."

"What a crock of shit," Temari remarked, and Sakura emphatically agreed with her for once.

"No more sacrifices ever again, I've seen to that." Sakura mumbled. "Or I guess your brother will see to that."
The children made it to Sakura's wagon first, jumping and screaming her name. They were here to see the girl that should have died, and she wondered if one of the farmer's kids in the field had run in to the schoolhouse. Iruka was probably frantic looking for them. Sakura recognized faces that she had treated for fevers and sprains and tried to place names quickly, but the only one to leap to mind was Konohamaru. Cute kid, a little over serious sometimes.

The gates were wide open and so close she could make out the fading designs on the thick wood, and Sakura also experienced mixed feelings as she spied Shikamaru's scowling face. He would be there in his official capacity. As Sakura's friend he was best positioned to be efficient about the whole procedure. Shika had started on the security forces, joining his dad, around the time Sakura had started her apprenticeship with Tsunade. The shackles meant for her arms and legs were dangling from one of his hands. The wagon had slowed once the children had started surrounding them, so Sakura had a long time to consider her homecoming.

"That guy is here to take you to jail, huh?" Temari said, seemingly only just now truly believing Sakura. "You know that if he takes you there I'm going to go have to go with you right? Let me do the talking. I'm sure he's a reasonable guy."

"Typically," Sakura said vaguely, but she was more distracted by the children pulling at her dangling hand and the steadily approaching crimson form behind. "But it would be more helpful if Konohamaru down there had you park the wagon at my parent's place. Gaara is coming."

Temari looked at Shikamaru who was untangling the shackles, and then back at Gaara before she shrugged. "Your call. Hey kids, who wants a ride?"

It was the matter of moments to load the dozen children into the wagon, packed tight and moving extra slow, while Konohamaru solemnly swore to Sakura that he wouldn't fail to see her new friend to the Haruno residence. Sakura told him to be extra polite because this new friend of hers was dangerous and could kill bad guys just by looking at them. Temari glared at Sakura with an expression so like Gaara's she knew they were siblings at heart as the children clamored for stories. The blond surprised them all as she launched into a tall tale about invading the home of a giant and tricking him into giving up his lunch before she stole the nose off his face. Sakura climbed down from the wagon at the gate and waved them off, giving Shikamaru a weary salute.

"I really hoped the report was wrong. You know what comes next, Sakura." He sounded resigned.

Sakura extended her wrists, "Will I at least get a bath and a meal before I see the tribunal?"

"Unlikely," Shikamaru was fastening the last leg shackle with a snap when Gaara finally caught up. He seemed confused. After all, Sakura was being restrained, but she also wasn't protesting about it. She was hoping her calm would keep him even keeled, and so far it appeared to work. The question was in his eyes, and Shikamaru tugged at the chains before Sakura found her voice.

"There are some things I need to clear up. It's probably best if you just come to jail with me for the time being."

"Is this your accomplice?" Shikamaru asked, clearly annoyed since he'd only brought one set of shackles.

"He's not my accomplice," Sakura said. "Well, maybe he is? But it isn't what you think."

"I'm her betrothed." Gaara said, as if it were an explanation. Sakura immediately swallowed the wrong way at his calm statement, and coughed as she tried to quickly explain to Shikamaru that that was inaccurate also.
Shikamaru threw up his hands. "Look, I don't care what he is, you're both under arrest for treason and you can get your story straight while you're sitting in a cell. This is only going to get more troublesome once people hear you're alive and back home. Ino is going to beat me for not telling her before I arrested you. Gods, Sakura I never thought you would do something so dumb. How did you even escape the demon?"

Glancing at Gaara, who was still watching the scene placidly, Sakura tried not to allow the butterflies in her stomach to speak for her. "I didn't."
Chapter 9

Shikamaru had been nice and given Sakura the cell with a window looking out to the courtyard where the security force dispatched everything from fire brigades to emergency medical services. If Sakura yelled loud enough, Tsunade might even hear her on a quiet day in the medical compound just beyond the courtyard, but she wouldn't be dumb enough to try attract her mentor's attention right now.

Sakura was quietly telling herself to calm down as she watched the shadows slowly shift across the cold floor of her cell when Ino burst through the door with an accusatory finger pointed in her direction. A glance to the side showed Sakura that Gaara was still sitting with his back to the bars, totally ignoring her in favor of meditation or some other equally irritating version of complete lack of concern for their predicament. So Sakura backed away from the bars and sat on the floor to wait for Ino's tirade. Truly it would have been either Ino or Tsunade, and odds were that Tsunade was probably inside the council chamber at this very moment. Her teacher would flay her later.

"How can you be so stupid?!" Ino looked good, if a little thinner than she remembered, tired. That could have been from some sort of wedding planning but the wedding wasn't going to happen for more than half a year. Sakura wondered in the back of her mind if perhaps grief over her could have contributed to Ino seeming more haggard than usual. Regardless, she felt defensive as her best friend took a deep breath to berate her at full volume. "You, against all odds, survive being left to die and instead of running off somewhere like a sensible person you come back here?! What were you thinking?!

"Look, you don't have the full story," Sakura said, irritated. Weeks and weeks of rough living, grueling travel, having her life in danger, and nearly no private time away from one of the most dangerous people in the world were making her tolerance razor thin. These were the people who loved her, right? They should be at least a little happy to see her! "Let me explain…"

"Oh and a fiancée? What the hell! Was it like, you had a near death experience and now the nearest farmer's son will do? You are the pickiest person I have ever met when it comes to men, and now suddenly you're dragging some skinny red haired guy around with you? I see how you keep looking over at him every time you flinch, so I know I'm not totally wrong here."

She was looking over at Gaara? Sakura wasn't even aware she did that. Weird. "Damn it, Ino, let me get a word in for once…"

"Are you even a virgin anymore? Oh gods, is that why the demon wouldn't take you, are we all going to die because—"

"INO. STOP." Sakura was done playing around and the steel in her voice finally broke through Ino's increasingly panicked babbling. "First of all, the demon isn't coming for us."

Ino looked around the room and pulled a rickety wooden chair from near the door over in front of Sakura's cell as her words escape like lashes of a whip. "I am all ears as to your new miraculous connection to the will of the demon. Did you receive a vision on the mountaintop? Talking animals? Burning bush? Enlighten me as to your very practical and reasonable conclusion making ability when by all rights you should be dead right now." Her voice lowered and there was a stray tremble as she said. "I thought you were dead." She cleared her throat and those eyes that could pin Sakura to a wall not so long ago did their best to intimidate. Sakura was surprised to find that after so long in Gaara's presence, and after the experience in Suna that Ino's attempts to cow her just seemed quaint.
"I know this is going to sound crazy, but… the uh, demon and I became sort of, I don't know… friends? This is hugely hard to explain…” Sakura's use of the word friend actually seemed to catch Gaara's attention and he turned his head to regard her with that disturbingly acute stare of his before quirking his lips and going back to meditating or whatever it was he was doing. Clearly he wasn't going to interrupt her narrative.

"Friends." Ino said flatly.

"Yeah, you know how these things go." Sakura weakly supplied, stalling as she tried to think of what she should and shouldn't tell her friend.

Ino flicked her hair back, her long high ponytail so familiar that Sakura felt at least a little bit like she was home at last. Other than the jail cell, getting yelled at by Ino seemed like the kind of normalcy she had desperately missed without knowing she missed it.

"No, I really don't, Sakura. You're going to have to tell me. And it better include how you ended up with him." Ino gestured towards Gaara. "Shika told me he said you were betrothed."

It didn't seem prudent to just spill the beans about who Gaara really was, but Sakura could probably tell enough of the truth so that what she said wasn't a lie, precisely. "Well, you aren't wrong about how I was left on that mountaintop and I was all set to do my duty," Sakura spat the word like a curse, "But the monster never showed up as expected, and so rather than die of exposure I got free. It turns out he's not a monster, just a man."

Gaara hadn't turned to her at that, but she saw from the corner of her eye how his forehead creased in mild surprise.

"They elders won't believe you."

Sakura got closer to the bars, gently touching Ino's fingers. Her hand was cold from having been sitting in the cell for a couple hours, but Ino was the one shivering. Ino was terrified but holding herself together through anger, something with which Sakura could easily relate.

"He's a man with a lot of pain, and I just couldn't ignore pain. I can't ignore it." She knew Ino would at least understand that, Sakura was always the person who ran towards disasters instead of away. Sakura's impulse to help is what had impressed Tsunade enough to take her on as her apprentice after years of denying potential candidates. "It turns out he's more reasonable than people gave him credit for."

Ino was no fool, and Sakura couldn't help but stare in Gaara's direction while she spoke. "He's not just some farmer's son, is he?" As always, she was going to make Sakura say it out loud. Ino liked people admitting their truth in front of her, and she had always been good at helping Sakura find perspectives outside of herself.

"No."

"Is he really betrothed to you?"

Like with Shikamaru, Gaara's deep "Yes" came as Sakura said "No."

"Interesting," Ino said, the beginnings of a smile finally cracking her granite exterior. "Regardless, I meant it when I said the elders won't believe you. Shika came to find me when they stopped arguing about if they were going to kill you and instead moved on to how. I told him I just had to see you, before something…” The touch of desperation in Ino's eyes made Sakura's heart ache. This was her best friend and Sakura couldn't even think of how painful it had to be to go from thinking your friend
was dead, to alive, to soon to be dead again. And if Ino was this torn up, her parents were probably frantic. Plus who knows what crazy things Temari had said to them. This was a huge mess, and Sakura had no clue how to make her voice heard above the din of too much emotion. "Trust you to mess up dying. I should have figured."

The joke was lame, but welcome. It meant Ino wasn't really mad, not in a way that would last.

"Do you have any proof? Maybe if you had proof that the demon wasn't going to come rain fire on us in the night and kill us all then they would at least stay your execution until they could confirm it. I think they are just scared, Sakura. They think you doomed us."

Sakura felt her temper rise. "Do you think I could ever do that? You know as well as I do that I was ready to die for this village."

"I know that. All your friends know that. Tsunade knows it. But Tsunade is just one voice on the council, and she might be able to shout them down but she needs time to change minds and they are voting as we speak." Ino shifted her gaze to the shadows of the bars on the floor, expression bleak.

Gaara stood and both women watched as he regarded them with curiosity. "Your way has proved ineffective."

"Gaara," Sakura's heart sped up as alarm oozed over her, causing goosebumps to rise. "No, please. I'm handling this my way. These are my people, they won't harm me."

He knew she believed that, Sakura hoped, but he also wasn't inclined to continue to sit here and do nothing now that Ino had revealed her present danger. Ino, for her part, was sizing up the man claiming to be her betrothed while also observing their interaction with some puzzlement.

"This woman just indicated they had already decided your fate. That they need proof. I can provide that proof."

Ino let her hands fly up. "Gods Sakura, why didn't you just tell that to Shikamaru in the first place! You should go tell the council right away!"

"You're not helping, Ino, shut up." Sakura ground out, annoying her friend, before turning back to Gaara with pleading eyes. "Gaara, don't do it, it will only cause a panic. This won't help anything at all. You're not good at being discreet."

He didn't look affronted, but Sakura knew she was losing this battle as she heard the hiss of what she suspected was sand moving up the wall outside. "I'm adept at stealth when I wish to be. You, where would I find this council?"

"Don't tell him!" Sakura said, voice rising in pitch as she sensed she was losing control of the situation.

"There's a large circular town hall in the middle of town, but I don't see how you're going to get there when—" Ino stopped talking and jetted up from her chair as two wedges of sand rose up in front of Gaara and bent the thick steel bars in front of him until a large oval formed. She was clutching the bars of Sakura's cell with white knuckles as she began to shake in earnest from the fear based adrenaline dump she no doubt experienced as she realized who Gaara actually was. Sakura tried to reach through the cell and hold her friend, but it was hard to grip her. Meanwhile, Sakura started to yell at Gaara.

"This is exactly what I didn't want! Are you just going to march through town, bust down the door, and terrorize the council into letting me go?!"
"If necessary." Gaara snapped at her, and Sakura realized finally that whatever control Gaara had relinquished in this scenario he was reclaiming and she would just need to do damage control later. If that was even possible.

She grasped at straws. "What about my safety? Temari isn't here and without you I'll be a sitting duck again."

Gaara considered her for a moment and then with a tilt of his head that hissing sand filled up the spaces in the window and solidified, leaving them in total darkness. Ino started to groan, a low precursor to a scream that didn't seem able to leave her lips yet.

"I can't see in the dark, Gaara!" pinpricks of light appeared in the sand blocking the window, allowing enough light back into the room for her to see Gaara's self-satisfied expression.

"I'll be blocking up the door as well. I'll inform Temari to retrieve you." And with that imperious statement, he stepped out the door. Ino, now out of his presence, collapsed against the bars and slid to the floor with something like a sob. Sakura knelt next to the bars, trying her best to comfort her friend.

"He could have at least got me out of my cell too," she murmured to herself before turning her attention back to Ino.

***

As soon as Ino had put herself back together, Sakura was suddenly very grateful that Gaara hadn't gotten her out of her cell because her best friend looked like she was ready to beat her into the ground. Just because Sakura had won every physical fight they had ever had never stopped her before, and it had been years since they had blackened each other's eyes (the last time had been over a series of escalating misunderstandings regarding Ino's comments about Sakura's comparative beauty to her).

"You brought him here! The demon! Here!"

"Yeah, well, I thought he would behave a little better because I didn't think another village would want me dead."

Ino, even in the throes of panic, was sharp. "What do you mean another village wants you dead? You owe me an explanation right now. No, strike that, like ten minutes ago!"

Sakura cursed Gaara under her breath for being unable to keep his own nature secret for even one day, and took a deep breath before launching into her tale again, the full tale. The only part Sakura snipped out was accidentally molesting Gaara that night before their departure, as well as their continued arrangement massaging his scars. She told herself that wasn't relevant to Ino's understanding, but she knew that in normal circumstances she would have divulged that as well to her friend. Ino had known about every other terrible romantic encounter Sakura had had, but this one she needed to keep close to her chest. The thought that she was doing that because it might be more meaningful than those other experiences put a dark cloud in her mind she couldn't shake. Once she had gotten them caught up to the present, only interrupted by Ino's various questions, Sakura couldn't tell if it had been one hour or three since Gaara had locked them into the room with his sand. The pinpricks of light didn't allow any judgement to the position of the sun.
"Well," Ino said into the silence. "I'd call you a liar if I hadn't watched your fiancée bend those bars and lock us in here. With magical sand. Gods, it sounds stupid when I say it out loud."

"Don't call him that," Sakura said, sighing and leaning back on her elbows. The floor was hard, and it hurt to do so, but there was no possible comfortable position in this place. It was a jail after all.

Ino, back to the wall near the edge of Sakura's cell, smirked in the low light. "Why not? You should marry him you know."

"Shut up, clearly being locked in this room has made you lose your mind." It was so easy to pretend like things were normal, just for a moment, if she closed her eyes. Ino was next to her, they had been talking for hours, there was no sense of time or immediate danger, and with her eyes closed Sakura could almost pretend she was just laying on her floor in her room. Almost.

"I don't know, it doesn't seem that crazy. You saved his life. He saved yours. He took you to meet his family. He give you one hell of a betrothal gift: changing his whole religion…" Sakura didn't like where Ino was going with this one bit. "He clearly thinks you're going to get married."

"That was just a cover story for his village. Or I mean, they just assumed…"

"Why would a demon need a cover story?" Ino kept the body shots coming as she continued. "How could any other guy compare at this point? Maybe they could bring you flowers or cook you dinner? Please. And what do you think your new friend, ha, is going to think about some other guy taking you away? Face it, Haruno, you're stuck with him."

Sakura tried to cover her ears and hum loudly for effect. "I do not want to talk about this with you right now!"

"This is a lot more fun than thinking about if he's storming through the village right now," Ino said in a moment that was too real, too easily imagined, and made Sakura feel bad all in a rush. "Hurting people. Hurting our families and friends." Ino sounded like her mind was wandering away so Sakura made the sacrifice she hadn't planned on and entertained this ludicrous line of thinking.

"How can I possibly have a normal relationship with a man like Gaara?"

Ino took a moment to come back to earth and out of her catastrophic thinking. "Hmm? Oh I don't know, that's your problem. I'm just pointing out that I don't think anyone else will compare. Remember the list?"

"We were thirteen Ino," Sakura whined.

"Yeah, well, I don't think you're really looking for anything that different. Let's see if I can remember." Her eyes sparkled, reassuring Sakura that she had cheered her friend, but at a dire personal cost. "Taller than you, check. Mysterious, check. Strong, check. Handsome, well, I didn't get that good a look at him but that's a matter of personal taste anyway."

Sakura wished she could lunge through the bars and put a hand over Ino's mouth. "You are doing this just to torture me aren't you? Because you thought I was dead. Aren't you grateful you lost all that weight?"

"Good relationship with his family… he did just reconcile with his brother and sister right? That's not too bad."

"I should have stayed dead, clearly."
"It's hard to remember some of the others but I distinctly remember you also wanted him to have a nice body, and then you blushed a bunch because I made you describe what a 'nice body' would be. And while he was fully clothed, and a little skinny, your monster seemed pretty fit considering and I know you always liked watching the men in the fields harvesting the wheat when it was late in the day and they were all sweaty and shirtless—"

Sakura was saved from continued mortification by the loud sound of something hitting the doorway, making them both jump.

"Is someone there?" Ino yelled. "We're stuck in here!"

More loud noises started up and Sakura came to the conclusion that not only were the people on the other side probably taking mining picks to the door, but that that meant Gaara was definitely not with their rescue crew. He could have dismantled his sand with a thought. She hated the fact that she was disappointed by the fact that he hadn't come back to get them. This was the first chance she had had in ages to be away from him, and it shouldn't have felt so weirdly lonely. She needed to get her mind right.

"I told you we'd be ok from the start."

Ino sniffed in her direction. "That remains to be seen."

***

Shikamaru and Temari were on the other side of the door when they had opened up a big enough space in the rock-like surface to get through. Temari hefted her pickaxe to a shoulder, sweat drying on her forehead, as Shikamaru crouched through the large jagged hole and unlocked Sakura's cell.

"Took you long enough," Ino scolded. "Where's Chouji?" she looked around for her fiancé, expecting him to have been part of the rescue effort.

"Yeah, well, this little adventure was on a need to know basis, and I was told he didn't need to know." Shikamaru shrugged expressively as he opened up the cell door. His gaze wandered over to the bent bars of the cell next to Sakura's, but he just slowly shook his head in dismay. "I'm going to have a hell of a time replacing those. Ugh."

Ino, irritated, poked Shikamaru in the arm. "And I suppose my parents also didn't need to know, so they probably think I just ran out of the flower shop to play hookey all afternoon? You owe me for keeping my mouth shut about this debacle."

While Shikamaru and Ino discussed terms, Sakura wearily moved towards Temari. "So?"

"So." The blond woman replied. "I'm supposed to take you back to your parents. You're on house arrest until the council comes to a final decision about your status."

Sakura couldn't believe that after all that there would be any question that she deserved to come home and get back to her old life. It made her wonder what exactly Gaara had said rather than what he did since he had exited the jail.

"I'll say this much, I'm shocked that your little village isn't a ruin right now, but I suppose he has his own methods. Diplomacy is new. He's pretty shit at it."
Sakura hated it when Temari criticized Gaara like that, even more so because she never did it to his face. "At least he's trying."

Without another word, Temari turned to go, dropping her pickaxe with a clang on the ground and walking confidently towards the twisting path that would eventually exit them into the security services courtyard. Sakura turned to wave at Ino, who waved back, before scrambling after Temari. The air was hot when they exited the building, unbothered by any other security forces, and Sakura welcomed the heat after hours on a cold stone floor. She had felt chilled to the bone. Squinting in the much brighter light of outside she figured it was probably late afternoon. Her body reminded her she hadn't eaten since morning. Embarrassingly, she didn't need a toilet since there had been a bucket provided in her cell. Ino was never going to let her live that one down, either.

"Do you know the way back to my parent's house?" Sakura hazarded.

"Please." Temari said with condescension, before starting out in the correct direction. "But put this on first." She tossed a dark blue hooded robe in Sakura's direction. "People will stare, but it's better than announcing you're back to the world like you did this morning. That guy, Shikamaru, spent the better part of the day squashing and obscuring rumors of your return. Guy is clever, I'll give him that."

The walk home felt more like a walk of shame. This was no triumphant return home, not that she had expected that, but she had thought maybe she would have been allowed a little bit of happiness as opposed to the crushing worry of it all. Was Gaara going to hurt anyone? Had anyone followed them from Suna? Would the council expel her from Konoha? If she was allowed to stay would she be allowed to continue training with Tsunade? Would Tsunade even want her back? Doubts plagued her, and it wasn't like Temari was a good conversationalist to distract her from it all. They marched silently back to the familiar home with the line of tulips in front near the low wall that demarcated the tiny garden area.

It was far past the best season for the flowers and a single red petal hung off the naked bulbs. Sakura felt like she understood the feeling. The fact that her mother hadn't deadheaded them or weeded spoke to a level of sadness in her household that wounded her far more than she thought possible. Her absence was so inevitable that she had thought her parents would be able to function at some semblance of normal. Nothing about home looked normal judging from the terrible state of the garden. How had she not noticed this before she left? She had been a bit preoccupied by her own impending demise, to be fair.

"You going to stand there gawking, or are you going to come in?" Temari opened the gate that led to the short path to the front door.

Despite her grouchy companion and the unresolved circumstances, Sakura still felt like she was finally truly home and it felt good. Really good. This was the feeling she had been looking for since she had spied the city walls.

"Yeah, I'm coming." Sakura strode past Temari and confidently entered her new more spacious and comfortable cell.
Chapter 10

Gaara wasn’t sure which way to go, but he was reasonably sure he just needed to head to the tallest structure in the sprawling village. It was the work of a moment to scale the nearest building, Shukaku stirring in the back of his mind, reliving carnage from fifty feet up as a giant sand monster wading through wood and stone buildings while people ran in abject terror. That had been lifetimes before Gaara, but his lips curled into a smile all the same as if it were his own memory. Konoha in old times had been primitive, but now they were very nearly as modern as Suna itself and seemed to contain at least five times the population as his home village. This was a thriving hub, set smack in the middle of fertile farmland and adjacent to lush temperate forests. No wonder it had burst its walls so long ago. From his new vantage point three stories up he could see that the streets wound in various directions, rather than the neat city planning that characterized Suna. This was a place where new things were being added to the old, but the old was not torn down to make way for new concepts. He suspected, just from that observation, that this council would prove stubborn.

The blistering warmth coming off the roof tiles should have hurt, but his sand protected his hands for the initial climb, and gave an extra layer of traction and insulation on his feet. Leaning his head back he smelled the hot ceramic on the wind. It had been some time since he’d stretched his abilities, so when he allowed some demon augmented jumps to a rooftop a house away he was pleasantly surprised at the ease. His knees jarred at the impact, as he forgot to temper the landing, but the pain eased quickly out of his joints. Shukaku rumbled about how much more fun they could have if Gaara just relaxed and let him take the reins, so to speak…

Gaara stilled and for a moment their psyches battled it out silently, Shukaku struggling to eclipse him rather halfheartedly. It wasn’t angry, more obligatory. Gaara had found that remaining dominant had become easier and easier the longer the state persisted, but seeing as they were doing something more interesting than sitting on a mountaintop Shukaku hadn’t been mounting any true offensive. They weren’t working to counter purposes, yet, but Gaara was sure once he located the fox that they would have different goals at last. They would see who was the stronger when that moment arrived, and Gaara felt feral anticipation to prove his strength in a real test.

Meanwhile, both tanuki and human were in agreement that this village needed to get in line about Sakura's situation. She was theirs, and her safety was paramount so that the journey to Kurama was possible without perilous amounts of distraction.

From rooftop to rooftop, he slid quickly towards the large domed building he was reasonably sure was the town hall with no one the wiser in the city below. The multistory building was central-ish, or as central as something could be with all the sprawl around Konoha. Scaling the top of the dome was easy enough with his sand making each hand and foothold as sure as if he had glued himself to the surface. Twinges from his abdomen told him his scars were twisting and pulling as he climbed up, but it just reminded him more strongly that Sakura was waiting for him in the secured cell he had created for her. No doubt he'd be hearing about that later.

The top of the dome actually flattened out, revealing a very dirty glass skylight. Gaara wiped his sleeve over it, and through patches of dirt he made out two semi circles of figures. That looked enough like a council chamber to him to interrupt. Shukaku suggested crashing through the ceiling in spectacular fashion, but Gaara opted for the slightly more subtle intrusion through a fourth story window that had been opened to allow airflow through a stuffy office space. No one was there, just papers held down by large ledgers. Gaara wandered into the hallway, eyes adjusting to the sudden lack of sunlight.
Grim uniformed men gave him a curious glance as he passed through hallways, but they probably assumed he had passed through previous security checkpoints lower down. He exuded enough confidence that he encountered no real resistance until he found himself in front of grand double doors and two burly men guarding said doors who seemed disinclined to allow him to enter.

That wasn't acceptable.

"Council is in session, you'll have to deliver whatever message you've come with later." The one on the right looked him over dismissively. It was true the guy was head and shoulders taller than Gaara, and probably had at least seventy pounds of muscle on him, but Gaara wasn't used to disrespect. It made him think of the journey he had undertook with Sakura to reach Suna and how every encounter with other people had grated against his pride. *People were insects that should be grateful he didn't squash them.*

Perhaps Shukaku was getting more canny, Gaara mused as he forced his twitching muscles to calm. That last thought had almost felt entirely like his own.

"I said move it, kid!"

He must have just been standing there, staring at them. The men shifted on their feet, uncomfortable, and seemingly silently sending messages back and forth trying to decide who had to escort him back to wherever it was they thought he should go.

Sakura didn't want anyone hurt, he knew, but there was nothing wrong with incapacitation. It was almost an interesting test for himself to bind them without the accompanying bone-breaking squeeze. Both men were cocooned in sand up to their snorting noses and frightened rolling eyes before they could even shout or move in his direction. The temptation to squeeze just a little, just for the fun of it, blew through him but he resisted as the phantom Sakura of his imagination admonished him to act in good faith.

Whether she knew it or not, she owed him for this kind of self-control, and he'd extract a price for it later.

The doors opened easily, and Gaara surveyed the room quickly. The only person he recognized and who recognized him with a start was the dark-haired man who had locked him up in the first place. His jailer was standing off to the side with a deep scowl. Otherwise, there were two semi circles each made up of six people in the room ranging in age from perhaps early forties to a wizened little man who looked more like he had been exhumed to attend this. A balding man with prominent jowls was in the middle of making some sort of emphatic point, and most eyes were on him, but a few noted Gaara's calm entrance to the sealed chamber with mild interest.

The dark-haired man who had been slouched against the wall, peeled away and walked toward Gaara while Gaara finally tuned in to the shouted words from the balding man.

"… walls are undefendable, low and useless as they are, did I not say less than five year ago that new walls should…"

The dark-haired man spoke, so low Gaara had to strain to make out the words, "I don't know how you got out or how you got in here, but if Sakura is out too you should both have just made a run for it." If things went south and Gaara was forced to slaughter the entire room, he would make a note to spare at least this man, for all he had locked them up this morning.

"… and if my zoning charts had been honored, there would not have been so much residential construction at the edges which now pose a vulnerability has doubtless there will be resistance to any
reasonable evacuation plan that I…"

"Sakura is still in your jail." Gaara supplied, not bothering to whisper to the dark-haired man who looked at him with bare shock before schooling his expression again. "As is that blond woman," he added as an afterthought.

"Ino?"

Gaara nodded, assuming he had guessed correctly since he hadn't paid much attention to the woman who had argued with Sakura.

With a pinched look, the dark-haired man replied, "That doesn't even make any sense!"

"Nara, what is the meaning of this disrespect!?!" The bald man thundered behind them. While the dark-haired man started with a low groan, Gaara merely leveled his usual calm stare in the man's direction. Before anyone could stop him, Gaara strode easily to the center dais that would have been much better lit if the sunlight hadn't been caked with such grime above them. He thought he heard a weighty sigh from the dark-haired man, but his worry was misplaced, as he would see. Gaara didn't have anything to fear in this room. The gas lights that lined the wall burned balefully, and Gaara realized how stuffy a room felt when there were no windows.

"I'm here to inform you that your judgement of Sakura Haruno is incorrect. She should be released immediately."

There was a bark of laughter from a woman in the semicircle to Gaara's left, but otherwise the council seemed to regard him with haughty countenances.

"How charming that yet another one of her friends has come to provide a testimonial to her good character, but she knew the consequences of returning to this village." The bald man spoke, looking like if he could he would pat Gaara on the head like some pitiable creature. "She'll be hanging at dawn in front of this building without fanfare and buried in an unmarked grave while we prepare to defend this village against the onslaught that is to come!"

Shukaku reminded Gaara that it wouldn't take much to pop that man like a fat tick and as his blood splattered over the rest of the council it would be so much easier to get things done.

Gaara spoke with the utter conviction of the truth he knew. "I promise you hanging her at dawn will ensure your village's doom."

"Nara, who is this boy?"

"Councilman, he arrived with Sakura this morning." The man named Nara spoke, looking in Gaara's direction with something like an apology.

"Her so called betrothed? Why is he here? Is this some angle you are hoping to play, Shikamaru?"

Shikamaru Nara looked like he was fighting a swiftly growing migraine. "No, councilman. But I did say that you should speak to both him and the lady that arrived with them this morning before you came to any judgement about—"

"So it is an angle! Impertinence! If your father were still here he would—"

The woman who had laughed earlier spoke up, and Gaara noted her dyed blond hair and clear gold-brown eyes. "Do shut up Hatsuhiro! Can't you see Shikamaru was surprised to see him here?"
"We all know you can't be impartial in this matter, Tsunade."

Gaara took a second look at the woman he knew to be Sakura's respected teacher. She had spoken of Tsunade with a fondness bordering on reverence. All Gaara saw was a busty older woman who looked like she was about as close as he was to kicking every ass in this room. She sized him up as well, unimpressed with what she saw.

"The demon isn't interested in your village." Gaara's words broke through the internal tension of the council and brought their attention back to him in full force.

The bald man scoffed. "I would love for that to be true, but you must understand we can't simply accept the word of a random stranger when lives and property are in the balance."

"I can provide proof. Will you reconsider your verdict if I provide proof?" At the word 'proof' the woman he knew to be Tsunade seemed to come to life again, actually leaning forward in her chair to get a better look at him. Shikamaru, obviously more intelligent than the council members, was edging closer to the door with a nervous look on his face. He'd obviously put some suspicions together but perhaps hadn't quite arrived at the final conclusion because he didn't have the look Gaara had come to expect from his cultists. Something between awe and that fear that poured cold sweat down the sides.

"And I suppose you'll need to travel a very long way back to your home to find said proof and in the meantime we would be expect to stave off the death sentence while you lead us on a wild goose—"

His words clamped off in his throat with a gurgle as the skylight finally broke under the weight of all the sand Gaara had called on top of it. They hadn't noticed since it hadn't been providing much light to begin with, but they all shrank away as glass shards cascaded down with the sand.

Gaara turned his face up to the deadly rain, forming his most favorite tendrils even as he gathered enough around his body for a partial transformation. It felt so good, so natural, to feel the living sand slither against every inch of his skin. The wind whipped around everyone in the chamber, blowing hair and clothes as if they were all at the edge of a precipice. Which, in a sense, they were.

"As I said, I have no interest in your village, but I assure you if you don't release Sakura Haruno I will tear a path of destruction until everything you hold dear is razed." He couldn't hide his glee, his deep voice almost a cackle above the roar of the wind, feeling Shukaku's desires bleed into his. While tapping into so much of his power he almost felt drugged. "Stand there too long gaping at me, and I might just do it anyway to hear the screams…"

The bald man seemed to have lost his voice, averting his eyes and swallowing convulsively while grappling with his terror. Rather than watch his adam's apple bob around, Gaara's gaze swept around until his horrible grinning countenance landed on Tsunade staring at him with a thin lipped frown. Tough old bird. What horrors had she experienced that this little display just netted displeasure?

"While this is proof of your identity," she said in the room that was now silent but for the wind whistling around them, "I don't see this as proof of your intentions. Sakura's sentence was predicated on the assumption that by not dying she would bring your wrath on this village. What guarantee do we have that you won't kill us all?"

The winds died down. Gaara supposed if the whole point of this was to ensure them of their relative safety, and therefore of the uselessness of Sakura's sentence. Scaring them into submission would be ultimately counterproductive. Satisfying. But not comforting.

"You," Gaara let the sand bleed off of him exposing his humanity, such as it was. Shikamaru started as Gaara caught his eye. "Find the woman who drove the wagon that Sakura arrived in this morning.
Bring her here. She's well acquainted with… paperwork." This was going to require more discussion than Gaara was comfortable with, but Temari enjoyed a good argument. He was sure the more he had to speak to this lot, the more murderous he would become so she would be an excellent proxy.

The bald man seemed to have found his voice again, "And what are we to do while Nara goes running off to find this friend of yours?"

"Wait." Gaara said with finality as a tendril of sand pushed a stiff limbed Shikamaru out into the hallway before shutting the door firmly.

All those formerly haughty stares found him again, and Shukaku sent a pleased shiver through Gaara as he noted the abject, and poorly masked, fear. The fullness he felt in his heart should have been wrong, but Gaara knew he was a broken thing to derive so much satisfaction from it.

***

Temari wasn't particularly pleased to have been dragged into this, but she had enough sense to be respectful. Only her furious whisper in his direction about not being his secretary gave away her disgust at being called on to help draft some sort of peace accord with this village. Bald man wanted a five paragraph preamble, Temari wanted to stab him in the throat with her fan. All in all, it was going about as well as Gaara figured it would.

Half the council was working with Gaara and Temari to draft the language of the accord in broad terms, while another half led by Tsunade was drafting an amendment to the law that had required Sakura to be sentenced to death in the first place. His mere presence seemed to be speeding up a process that Gaara had a feeling would normally take them days rather than several hours.

Bald man, brave when arguing with Temari, still shot hateful looks in Gaara's direction with a tremble in his hands giving him away. He loathed him, Gaara knew, but that reaction was so pedestrian it was boring.

"The corollary must be present or this is useless. Read my lips, any discrimination against the direct descendants should be prosecutable. Blood relations will need protection from all the bigots that inevitably will refuse them service out of ignorance." Temari argued with passion. To the villagers, she appeared to be fighting for imaginary future children, but little did they know how personal this topic could be to her.

"How dare you impugn the good character of the people of Konoha! We don't need threat of litigation to do the right thing!" Bald man insisted.

Temari wasn't about to let it go, "Then if it will never occur it won't harm you to write it down, will it? I didn't even put up much of a fuss when you stipulated that if free housing was to be provided it had to be properly zoned. Really you meant segregated, and I could take it for the insult it was if you can't look past this one little thing."

As much as he enjoyed watching them argue, he enjoyed even more how things had turned out. If the fox needed proof of his good faith, this accord provided a template to the new way of life the fox had implied he needed to find. Destroyer to protector. And the insistence on using the term jinchuuriki was the icing on the cake. This was a model that could be farmed out to other communities, other demon hosts. Naruto had big ideas and lots of energy but no focus. The demons
were concrete thinkers, at least Shukaku was, and how hard could guarding one or two little villages be? So what if the tithe was money and food instead of blood?

_I rather like the blood…_

A seat on the council, and the power to veto motions that made his life materially worse weren't much to concede for protection from a demon host. Particularly when said protection was almost entirely from Gaara's own wrath.

_This won't work. They will come to fear me, revere me, as they did in the early days. The cycle will repeat and this village will become as Suna. Twisted as we are._

Shukaku's mood was dark. He was remembering a time when he had tried to be loved instead of feared. That particular incarnation had not lived very long. Assassination had been the inevitable end for every avatar that had shown weaknesses like trust and compassion. Shukaku was strong and cynical from so many lifecycles of seeing the worst, of forging his shells into bloodthirsty warlords and despotic demagogues. Gaara's response to betrayal so young had been suitably murderous, but he had grown tired of the death, withdrawn. Half a decade on a mountaintop had put things into perspective even if that time had not been spent in reflection.

He would have died on that mountaintop without Sakura, but more important than a second chance at life was a chance at reinvention. Hope was such a foreign emotion, Gaara wasn't sure if that tightness in his chest was hope in truth or just particularly sharp hunger pangs from not having eaten yet today.

Temari appeared to have been signaling for his attention while he was lost in himself.

"I said, do you want your own feast day? I think we can make a convincing argument that it could take the place of the sacrifice day."

The bald man whined in their general direction. "Budgets are only prepared for the sacrificial activities every ten years. I don't see how a yearly feast makes fiscal sense."

"Give him the damn day, Hatsuhirō. People like a reason to celebrate." Tsunade had apparently wrapped up the work with her own committee and she wandered over, cracking her stiff back. Considering how ample her bosom was, it was highly likely she suffered from a lot of back issues in general. "We'll find the money. That's the whole point of a budget."

"You're not even on the budget committee, Tsunade." The man said with a sniff in her direction.

Tsunade didn't say anything in response, she just narrowed her eyes and popped her knuckles one after another while the bald man's jowls positively quivered.

They got the holiday.

"I like her." Temari said.

***

Once the initial document was written, scribes were summoned to create additional copies. As there was no more work to be done for the day, Gaara told Temari than she and Shikamaru should
probably procure some mining picks and release Sakura and her friend before the day was over. He
would stay and sign the draft documents along with the council. Temari seemed more than happy to
leave the chamber, and dragged Shikamaru by the arm as if she were leading the way despite having
no idea where anything was in this village. Shikamaru for his part just look relieved to be getting out
of Gaara's presence.

Since people were busily pretending like he didn't exist as a defense mechanism to their confusion
and mild terror, as soon as the document had been inked and signed, Gaara found them all in deep
conversations with one another. He wandered out into the hallway with a shrug, noting how quickly
the guards at the door put space between him and them. It wouldn't have mattered, but seeing the big
men with lips quivering had at least cheered him.

The building was empty, he noted, as he made his way from the fourth floor down. They must have
evacuated the town hall at some point as a precautionary measure should negotiations sour. It was
wise, but it wouldn't have prevented much had he truly wanted to go on a rampage. He was
disappointed in how they underestimated his destructive capabilities. Finally exiting onto the street,
the afternoon light had him blinking, a sudden enough change that everything seemed whitewashed
until his eyes adjusted.

Imploding his cult. Signing up for local politics. Getting betrothed. It should all have seemed earth
shattering, but honestly the only thing that seemed important other than rubbing all of his progress in
that fox's face was Sakura. His pink haired catalyst. She was spitting mad in a jail cell at that
moment, no doubt.

You made us beholden to this place! Shukaku was still grumbling.

But like any demon he also saw how Konoha would be beholden to him as well as the years spread
out like a map in his mind. He liked the idea of tithes, of gifted properties and feasts in his honor. It
was the prestige the cult has given them, but probably fewer thrones of bone involved. And probably
no more vats of blood. Sakura had called it barbaric, in any case. Worse, old fashioned.

Tsunade came out of the building, hitting the street with her shoulders back, looking slightly
downwards at him from the extra height her heeled shoes gave her.

"Take a walk with me." It was the closest thing to an order he had ever been issued in his life, but
Gaara felt generous and so nodded his agreement.

They were briskly making their way down the street, Tsunade taking moments to wave to people
occasionally as they called out her name. With time to observe her, Gaara started to see where some
of Sakura's mannerisms had come from. Quirks of expression when she saw something that amused
her, turns of phrase as she replied to the odd question people stopped her with about their health.
Sakura presumably had a mother, but Tsunade was clearly the woman Sakura aspired to be.

"Just because you can level a block of houses with a wave of your hand doesn't mean you're good
enough for my student." The acidic comment came out of nowhere.

Yes, definitely who Sakura aspired to be.

Gaara wasn't entirely amused even if she had delivered the words with a half-smile. "You're either
brave or stupid to speak to me like this."

"This isn't an area I've got a lot of success in, and I'd like to spare my student heartache if I can. Back
in that room you spoke about her, your so-called betrothed, like she was incidental." Her expression
was wry. "And you just signed away your ability to attack citizens of Konoha without just cause, in
What he considered cause and what they considered cause were probably divergent, but he wasn't feeling like engaging any more on the topic of the accord.

"You think I intend to keep her as a trophy of sorts." He didn't need to prove himself to anyone, but Sakura respected this woman and her good opinion would help his campaign. "I changed as a result of meeting her. She's important."

Tsunade arched a plucked blond eyebrow at him. "You changed yourself for her? That's more than a lot of men would do." Not what he had said, but she had received her version positively so he didn't correct it. They took a turn off the main street and wound around side streets before she spoke again. There were no more people near to provide the illusion of safety. Maybe this woman truly had no fear, and he found himself admiring her arrogance. "Sakura has ideals, and she's stubborn about sticking to them—a quality that makes her a fantastic student and an increasingly formidable healer, but…"

Words seemed to fail the older woman for a moment as she readjusted her green jacket around her shoulders. She didn't like talking about this, but clearly she thought it necessary.

"Her expectations for her romantic life were never ideals built around reality. If you break this part of her, I don't think she'll be as effective in other parts of her life going forward. She already lost her life once, and your appearance in it will make it harder for her to return to her own version of normal."

Ah, there it was. Gaara understood selfishness. Tsunade was concerned for Sakura, but she also seemed concerned to lose Sakura's brilliant medical mind—her potential. They both wanted something from her, and there was a sliver of a possibility that there was no sharing.

"I am not forcing her into anything. She makes her own choices."

With a grunt, Tsunade accepted his words. "Good."

They seemed to be walking somewhere with a purpose, and another fifteen minutes passed before Tsunade stopped in front of a quaint family residence. He spied the cart Temari had been driving earlier parked next to it, empty of goods. This must be the Haruno family residence.

"I agree that her expectations are often unrealistic." Gaara provided, as close to casual conversation as he had tried with a near stranger. With his seat on the council he suspected he would see more of her in the future in a professional capacity.

"I found if you make her think it's her own idea, she comes around to your point of view a lot faster." Tsunade, for whatever reason, had just offered him advice about how to win over her pupil. It didn't make any sense to Gaara, and his expression must have made his confusion plain. "Just because I failed in this area doesn't mean she needs to emulate me. Not that I'm rooting for you, but I won't oppose you either. She makes her own choices, as you promised."

Was it a promise? If push came to shove and the only way to keep her near him was to trap her, would he do it? This whole acknowledging the free will of others thing seemed to get in the way of his goals more than he was used to, and he didn't particularly enjoy it.

Why be something you're not? You know the life you were built for.

Tsunade had already left without another word or backward glance. After a moment, Gaara slowly approached the threshold of the Haruno home. He nearly crushed his copy of the accord in his hand, ink possibly not even dry, as he contemplated if all this effort was worth it.
The door swung open and a tense woman with serious green eyes greeted him. "I thought…"
Something wistful evaporated behind her façade, and the woman's words became coolly polite.
"May I help you?"
Chapter 11

It was just like she remembered, only dustier. Knick knacks all over the place from smiling ceramic angels to dish after dish propped on its side to reveal painted scenes of various sorts. The odd vase. Everything was neatly laid out on shelves that lined the room. You couldn't shove any furniture against a wall, or it would disturb some sort of display. The couch she had sank into more than once for a nap in winter as a child seemed to call Sakura's name; after the day she had had she was exhausted emotionally and achy from sitting on the hard jail floor.

Temari was on her heels so there was no rest to be had just yet.

After the initial tight hug, Mebuki Haruno drew back to look at her with watery eyes and then hugged her again even harder. Sakura felt something in her back pop.

"Welcome home." Sakura's mother—emotionally controlled, sometimes dour—was on the verge of tears and it made her want to cry, too. That welcome home said everything from 'I love you' down the vocabulary of maternal affection all the way to 'are you warm enough' and 'can I fix you a snack.' "Temari." Mebuki acknowledged with a nod. The woman from Suna, against all expectation, nodded respectfully back to Mebuki and closed the door behind them.

As soon as they sat down it seemed like a food tray of sandwiches and fresh fruit miraculously appeared along with cold barley tea. Everything was perfect, Mebuki being the kind of person who approached homemaking like it was a test she administered to herself every day. Sakura remembered feeling stifled by it as she grew older, now she basked in it.

Temari gave the smallest of sighs as she bit into a triangle of sandwich and Sakura saw what might have been wistfulness on the Suna sibling's face before it smoothed out into the same slightly sardonic sneer she preferred to present. Growing up without a mother must have been tough. Sakura knew sympathy would be taken poorly, and any reminder of Suna was too dangerous anyway when she wasn't even really sure what her mother did or did not know from Temari's time with her.

"I missed you. I missed home." Sakura opted for the truth without specifics. "I thought of you every day. I didn't know if I'd ever get to see you again."

"I can't imagine what you've been through. I'm just glad you've come back. It's like the answer to a prayer I didn't know I could ask." The tears didn't fall out of the Mebuki's green eyes, but she did spend a moment or two looking at the ceiling to make sure of it. Her mother had always been made of stern stuff, and while there was no doubt she had cried when she thought Sakura dead, naturally she wouldn't think it seemly to cry because she was alive.

Temari shifted her cup of tea around in her grasp, swirling the ice. "I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more about your daughter, earlier. Your council hadn't come to a decision when Shikamaru came to get me." This was more than Temari had even told Sakura, and she listened to the words with a nervous tremor jiggling her leg. "She isn't going to be tried for treason, and but she also can't wander around like nothing has happened. The council is still trying to decide how to officially announce her return… and some other things."

Mebuki took the words in, air hissing from her smoothly in relief when she realized Sakura was safe from the village politics. "So it's to be house arrest, then. I assume no one outside the immediate family is to know."

Temari gave a quick nod and turned her attention back to the sandwiches before casually adding,
"You don't seem concerned about the possibility that the monster is going to descend on this village."

Mebuki gave a quick shake of her head, taking a drink of her own tea before dropping the bombshell on both of them. "Your brother informed me that it was unlikely, he said he's seen no evidence of destruction and you lived right next to the supposed demon."

Gaara was here. In this house. Somewhere. Sakura felt the panic wash over her, quickly supplanted by rage at how she didn't even get time to enjoy this moment. Temari meanwhile was coughing up sandwich that had gone down the wrong way.

"My brother?"

"He arrived a while ago, and told me that you were fetching Sakura from the jail. He looked so tired, I insisted he go upstairs to lie down. You all have had quite the journey."

Temari looked over at Sakura, both of them having the same worried thought: what did he tell her? It was a strange thing, to feel so kindred after days of animosity.

"It's very gratifying that you believe him… my brother, I mean. Not everyone would. The sacrifices have been going on for so long…” Temari didn't know what to say, what was safe to say.

Mebuki gave an unladylike snort, "Not all of us believe in something that we've never seen evidence of. Who's to say there's a real monster? All those poor girls could have just as easily been killed by a person, or several people, or even died of exposure or run away. All I knew is that my daughter was being sent to an uncertain fate and I didn't think I'd ever see you again," She grasped Sakura's hand briefly, and Sakura could feel the slight tremor from how hard she held on. "I can't be more grateful that your brother happened to find her while camping on that mountain, and that you made this journey to return her to Konoha. He said you had nearly died. You still look too thin."

"Yes. He often stayed in that direction." Temari said flatly, giving Sakura a sidelong glance. "I can tell you his family was shocked when he came back with… your daughter." Sakura wanted to sag with relief that nothing derogatory had exited Temari but more important…

"Mom, did Gaara say… anything else of note? Anything you might have concerns or questions about?" The wedding march played in her head like a dirge, but Sakura was getting the feeling like maybe the literal host of a demon hadn't done her dirty and said something weird to her mom on first meeting. It felt like a miracle. More of a miracle than her life being spared by the council.

Mebuki thought about it a moment, like it was a question she hadn't expected to be asked. But like she always did with strange requests, she considered it at face value. "He seemed like a very serious and grounded young man. He did say that there was some unfinished business he had in town before going on some sort of trip. I hope we can thank both him and you, Temari, properly. So please consider our home your home so long as you stay in Konoha. Once my husband gets home, and I explain everything to him, he will say the same."

Grounded. Her mother had called him grounded. What terrible alternate world had she fallen into while she and Ino had languished in that jail cell?

"Sakura, you look ill, are you sure you don't need to rest? I want to have a big family dinner to celebrate you coming home, even if we can't tell anyone but your father."

"You're looking a little green, Sakura." Somehow, Temari saying her name managed to sound like a slur. "Maybe you should go rest. Like my brother."

"Your room is just like you left it," Mebuki said, as she stood to pull Sakura into another hug. "I had
Temari take everything from your cart and put it in the guest room, but Gaara hasn't emerged so no doubt he's still sleeping. I've never seen someone look like they needed a good rest as much as that boy.

The hug wasn't ending, and Sakura gave a discreet cough. "Thanks, mom, I love you, you know. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know." Eventually with one last spine realigning squeeze, Sakura was free to go upstairs and dig through the boxes that had been her life before all this madness.

***

Sakura expected Gaara to be in her room, because how could he not? Personal boundaries were basically nonexistent to the man, and he didn't sleep so he had to be doing something on the second story. What she didn't expect was the tableau she entered to see with the sunset lighting the whole room with a golden glow, wind rustling those unfortunate dingy lacy curtains she had had her whole life and never bothered to replace when she had moved out at seventeen. Firmly, she shut the door behind her.

Gaara was stretched out on her neatly made bed, a stack of her *Doki Doki* books next to him (thank the gods that he hadn't made it to the bottom of that box where a few volumes of *Icha Icha* lay in wait to shame her even more). One arm was behind his head, and the other held open the well-worn romance novel. His sleeves were rolled back, shirt partially out of his pants that had two buttons undone to accommodate the strange scrunched position he was reading in. His jacket was nowhere to be found, probably because of the heat. She always hated how her room faced west. It was an oven in summer.

He shouldn't look like sex in the same room as her spelling bee medals. The dissonance was remarkable. Quickly closing the door, Sakura strode across the room to pull down the shade over the window despite how hot it was in there. All it succeeded in doing was making the shade clack instead of the curtains flap against the windowsill due to the wind, and darken the room perceptibly. The low light hopefully hid her burning embarrassment. Almost tripping over her boxes, hastily brought here when she had cleared out her studio apartment and moved back home before the sacrifice, Sakura tried to find some words. Any words.

"What are you doing?" She hissed.

Gaara didn't look up at her, he just turned the page before commenting casually. "These all seem remarkably similar. Given how many you own, I would have expected more novelty."

There was so much else to talk about: what had he said or done to the council, why he had had the temerity to lock her in a jail all day, what in the hell he had actually told her mom, but somehow fighting this fire took all the precedence in the world.

"It's not like I read them all in a row, or in one day. Why are you reading them?"

Gaara flicked his glance to her, then back down to the book. "Research."

She was not going to talk about this with him. He was baiting her with nonsense to get a rise, surely.

"What does turgid mean—"
Sakura snatched the book out of his hands, "I'm sure it made sense in context."

When he stood from her bed, his pants continued to stay in place on those slim hips of his but Sakura felt disgust at herself over what was obviously disappoint they hadn't slipped a bit to expose some skin. Clearly this was all just a confused response from him ambushing her by reading her romance novel collection that she should have incinerated before she went off to die. Sweat collected everywhere she didn't want it to as the room went from hot to sweltering in her opinion.

At the time it hadn't mattered. Who cared what kind of stupid romantic dreams she entertained in her own mind when she was just going to die a virgin anyway? Or at least that's kind of what she thought at the time. She had been collecting those books ever since she was twelve and her mother had just handed her a book in lieu of the sex talk after she got her period. It had been a medical textbook with a bookmark in the relevant spot, but that's when the scavenger hunt for a more practical manual had begun. The better part of a decade later and even though she had heard stories from her friends, and knew about all the plumbing from her medical studies, the closest thing she had experienced to true romance was…

Her gaze locked on Gaara, suddenly sharp. Oh gods.

"Are you ill?" Gaara never minced words, and he hadn't missed how she had gone from obviously irritated to white as a sheet. "Sit here." Hands that Sakura wished she didn't notice were gentle, led her over to the bed and sat her down. He knelt down in front of her, using the back of his hand against her forehead, which she slapped away. She wasn't sick, dammit! Or not that kind of sick, at any rate. That thought brought on a wave of vertigo.

"My mother thinks you're Temari's brother." She forced her body to stop rebelling by reminding herself where she was and who she was with.

"I am Temari's brother." Was the monotone reply.

Sakura blinked hard, trying to get her point across without sounding like so much of an idiot. "I mean, why would you tell her that and not… everything else?" She waved her hand around, as if a few loops in the air encapsulated all the insanity of their association.

"This is your family." He said, seemingly confused. "You control the narrative here."

Something in her snapped. For all his high handed and controlling behavior, the moment it counted the most he was handing her the power. She felt grateful. More grateful than when he had spared her life. More grateful than when he had saved her life. Exhausted, overheated, emotionally whiplashed, she leaned forward to catch his lips with her own. It was supposed to be a thank you, a quick peck on the lips and her hand on his cheek, and for a few heartbeats that's exactly what it was. Then the mood turned.

Sakura opened her eyes wide, pulling back with a hitch in her breath and unable to answer the question that Gaara's expression was asking her. Instead, she stared past him at the shelf that contained Puppers the stuffed wolf her father had given her as a little kid since she couldn't have a real dog. That familiar snout and fake lolling tongue disappeared as her world tilted and filled with Gaara who stared at her with all the baggage of lifetimes of loneliness and initiated their second kiss. She couldn't take the awkwardness of it all, staring into one another's eyes, so she closed hers and was submerged in the feeling of him.

All the Doki Doki novels they had just knocked over in their haste to connect had made it sound like desire would feel floaty, transport her to heaven, but this felt more like torture as nothing felt like enough. She couldn't kiss him hard enough, and then as soon as the pressure was satisfying there
wasn't enough tongue until there was and then she was acutely aware that he wasn't close enough. Being a woman of action, Sakura grabbed two handfuls of that fine linen shirt near his collarbone and pulled him closer. Sakura found herself on her back on the bed while Gaara scrambled to get on top of her from his odd pushed up angle from the ground, all while trying not to break their connection at the mouth but getting misaligned anyway, gasping for air.

What the hell was she doing?

A voice in her head, the one that urged her to eat nothing but pastries for breakfast or splurge on a new dress despite having nowhere to wear it, told her she was grinding her hips into a very interested man who she had been harboring impure thoughts about long enough already. Firm evidence of that interest was pressed against her, searing her through all their clothes, and her traitorous legs had already locked at the ankle behind him to press him even more solidly against her. And yes, that was indeed her own hand that had slipped under his shirt to wander over the corded muscles of his back, slick from the heat and their sudden aerobic activities. Her nails lightly skidded over the scars on his back and she swallowed the gasp he let out.

No take backs on this one. No pretending like she wasn't entertaining his pursuit of her—like the circling shark he couldn't help but be around her. How had she slid into this situation when she knew the risks? Did it need to mean something? Couldn't it just be lust?

The groan he gave when she boldly ran her tongue over the tips of his teeth vibrated her to her core, and her thighs clamped down on him all the harder. A lesser man would have tapped out, but Gaara was made of all kinds of steel.

The idea that she would engage like this with him, for all the danger he presented, just to scratch an itch didn't jive with what she knew of herself. So either her character had drastically changed since she had been tied up on that rock to be eviscerated by unknown forces, or she had caught feelings for this monster. Which was a really inconvenient thing to suddenly have to contend with and process considering she had skipped about eighteen steps with him to desecrate her childhood bedroom in this moment. Holding hands would have been a nice first step. A shy admission that she liked him. Maybe even something that approximated a date where they had a normal conversation.

This wasn't normal. He wasn't normal. But then he finally moved from her now bruised lips to latch onto her neck and she forgot why normal mattered as she grabbed entire fistfuls of that rusty hair and pulled less gently than she probably meant to. His response was to continue to grind into her, bed now creaking alarmingly under them as her simple twin wasn't constructed to support this much weight or this much movement.

"Gaara…" The word was practically a gurgle, but she had to get control of the situation before either her bed or her mind collapsed entirely. "Gaara."

He wasn't responding, merely continuing his exploration of her neck with his tongue and teeth. A hand had crept up at some point to cup her modest breast, and he hadn't even noticed he'd done it because if he had he would be gripping it like how his other hand was fisted in the blanket below them. Since she probably only had a moment of clarity to work with before he dragged her back down into this sensual fog, Sakura shifted her leg up and, with just a little bit of finagling, pushed his heard back and locked Gaara into a triangle grapple hold.

It took him a moment to realize she wasn't playing around, his pupils blown and chest heaving. Even when he realized her intention to stop them from continuing there was no way to prevent him from turning to the side and licking her thigh while that loose hand gave her breast a squeeze and a maniacal grin played on his lips. Sakura's breath came as a shudder.
"Gaara," and this time he seemed to hear her. "Not right now, not here." There was a slam of the door downstairs and she heard her father's laugh even if she couldn't hear anything else. "Please."

"Admit you want this," He said, intense, absently pinching her nipple through her clothes and forcing Sakura to arch her back like a taut bowstring. Totally involuntary and totally unfair. "Admit you want me." He looked like he wanted to devour her, his breathing almost strained even though she wasn't holding him tight enough to restrict it.

They stayed in their stalemate for minutes that felt like hours as she fought her inner battle. What was she losing to offer some words he wanted to hear? It wasn't a declaration of love, it could simply be an acknowledgement of the truth they were living in this moment. But even when she was reframing it to make it palatable to vocalize, she knew she was taking another step down a road to a destination she feared.

Sakura heard her father shout her name and there was some sort of scuffle, which told Sakura she probably had less than a minute left before an ecstatic parent rushed up to see if she was really alive and really home. Nothing her mom could say about Sakura needing her rest was going to stop Kizashi Haruno from running up here.

"Yes, yes!" Sakura said in rushed, low tones. Her alarm was scaling up exponentially.

It wasn't enough for Gaara, control freak that he was. "Say the words." It was stupid how confident and commanding he could be when she had him in a choke hold. It was only because he was allowing her, she knew, and that was beyond galling. He must be enjoying it, damn it.

"I want you, ok? You, Gaara. Happy? Now hide in the wardrobe right now or we are never doing this again!" She unhooked her triangle and rolled off the side of the bed, smoothing down her clothes and hair even as she moved in the direction of the door to flip the lock on quickly while 180 lbs of excited father raced up the stairs. "Wardrobe now!" she hissed as loudly as she dared.

There was pounding on the door once Kizashi realized it was locked. "Sakura!"

Sakura wished she really could throw daggers with her eyes as Gaara actually complied if slowly, stuffing his shirt down and buttoning his pants as he went. The look he gave her before climbing into the stupid wardrobe and closing the door was all promise and somehow obscene enough to make her shiver despite the heat. Oh gods she had just as good as told him they were going to do more of that, which meant that he would have expectations next time they were alone. And Gaara was quite excellent at engineering situations when properly motivated, she suspected.

Unlocking the door and throwing it open, she was greeted with a whoosh of colder air and the instant hug from an openly weeping father. "My baby girl!"

This close Sakura could see that his massive bouncy mass of hair, often styled in different ridiculous spikes, had been replaced with a close cropped bit of fuzz. She wondered if he had shaved his head when she had been sent off to die. The heart that had been beating a quick tattoo because she was afraid at nineteen of getting caught with a boy in her room now clenched with sorrow at the evidence of what she had put her normally dynamic parents through.

When Kizashi pulled away at last to look at his daughter, she saw that at least his facial hair remained. The short hair made him look older somehow, less fun loving, but he had the familiar sparkle in his blue eyes.

"Your mother said you needed to rest, but..." he choked up again, being the kind of man who let himself feel rather freely. "I'm so happy!"
"I love you too, dad." Sakura hugged him again even as she felt her eyes slide over furtively to the wardrobe and its illicit contents.

***

"So what does your family do?" Kizashi sat across from Mebuki at the small dining table, while the Suna siblings sat together on one of the long sides. Sakura sat by herself on the other long side, and picked at the cold soba with the dipping sauces in a bowl in front of each of them. It was a refreshing summer meal, and Sakura knew that her mother probably went out specially to purchase these at some point earlier today.

Gaara was just biting into a sliced marinated cucumber tentatively, and while his mouth was full Sakura tried to stall for time rather than let him say the first thing that came to mind. Who knew what madness she'd have to explain away?

"Dad is a chemist. The Haruno family have always run the compounding pharmacy. Best in town. That's how I first met Tsunade, ages before she was my teacher."

"We're just a simple drug store…" Kizashi tried to be modest, but Mebuki wasn't about to let him.

"Would a simple drug store have orders pouring in from other villages? I don't think so. We're the best of the best. I told Sakura she should have learned more from her father rather than read silly books in his lab all day, but she never listened to me."

Sakura didn't like it when things went out of her control like this. It seemed like her parents specialized in embarrassing her. "I ran the register most of the time. I only read on my breaks, or when things got slow. But that was before I got my apprenticeship."

"Freelance security." Was what Gaara said, once space opened up in the conversation.

Sakura almost choked on her bite of noodle since that was probably the most euphemistic way to say 'assassins for hire' she'd ever heard. Temari seemed to be amused, more interested in her food than providing any conversational buffer.

Lucky for Gaara, the elder Harunos knew how to fill a silence better than most. "Security! Just like your friend Shikamaru, Sakura! I wonder if you'd think about joining the Konoha forces? A job like that might be less lucrative than freelance work, but I hear they have some nice benefits and it's always a good way to meet people quickly. I think you'll find Konoha is practically idyllic." Mebuki was not being precisely subtle with her hopes that the Suna siblings would stay permanently.

"I'll consider it. I'm on permanent retainer, but I doubt that will occupy me sufficiently." Gaara's gaze slid from Mebuki to Kizashi but unlike just about every other person they encountered, neither adult flinched from his attention. For the moment, he was just a tired looking young man who had saved their daughter miraculously.

"If circumstances were different I'd insist that Sakura take you both on a tour of Konoha," Mebuki said with real regret in her tone.

Sakura wished she just wouldn't. "Mom—"

"All you've seen is a jail cell and city hall and I don't think that's very representative of life here."
As terrible as it all was, this still beat the hell out of Suna and Gaara's weird death cult. She wondered how Kankuro was faring with all the changes they had discussed. His own family hadn't seemed worried when they left, but Kankuro himself had been plenty worried. She wondered if this was some sort of sibling thing she'd never understand from being an only child.

"Your council has paperwork my brother needs to finish tomorrow anyway. It will take most of the day." Temari said the word brother like it was in another language and she was trying it on for size. Gaara was giving her a strange look while she announced his itinerary.

Leaning back in the chair, seemingly remembering that normal people slouched a little and forcing his shoulders down, he said all too casually, "I think you can finish the paperwork on my behalf."

"But what about our baggage? That has to be seen to." Temari gave a smirk as she stared at Sakura, and Sakura speared a cucumber with extra force at the word baggage. If the table weren't so wide Sakura would have given Temari a firm kick to the shin, or at least attempted it.

"I'll see to it." Gaara said shortly.

The older Harunos weren't really following the subtext, but they did seem to notice there was tension where normally one wouldn't find any. So they did what they always did when they were unsure of something.

Kizashi clapped his hands once, startling them all. "I'll take a sick day and we can make a family day of it! Maybe I can bring out the old card deck and we can have a game day."

"Oh that's not suspicious at all!" Sakura's mom said, voice absolutely dripping in sarcasm. "We're supposed to act normal, and Sakura needs to get some good meals in her and relax." She insisted.

"A family game day would be relaxing." Kizashi was sounding petulant.

Mebuki wasn't hearing it. "Last time we played you two smashed the card table. Breaking out the wood glue is not my idea of relaxing."

"How did that happen?" Temari asked with deceptive sweetness, clearly picking up on how little Sakura wanted them to talk about the last family game night.

Sakura remembered Gaara's words about controlling the narrative and tried to intercept the story before this got out of hand. "It was a while ago and I may have caught my dad stuffing aces up his sleeve. I only kicked the table leg for emphasis. I didn't think the whole thing would break apart."

"You've always had strong legs, you were such a sturdy little baby. So chubby and determined. Stubborn as anything."

"Mom!"

Gaara caught her eye as her mom mentioned 'strong legs' and the weird smile that briefly curled up the corners of his lips told Sakura volumes about what he was thinking about. None of that was appropriate table conversation. But then neither were weird reminiscences about her childhood.

"At any rate, you are not taking a sick day. We're going to act like everything is normal. You will go to work. I will go to my sewing circle. It's only for an hour or two, and then I'll be back directly. Just tell me what food you'd like me to bring home."

They all took a moment to eat and the silence was helpful as Sakura calmed herself again. It was like being assaulted on all sides: her mom and dad were infantilizing her, Temari was trying to get a rise
out of her, and Gaara was… being Gaara. There was a time, not that long ago, when she was in charge of her own fate. Practically adult, respected, working a difficult job with long hours and studying most of the rest of the time. Until she could get back to that place, she supposed she'd just have to make the best of things as they were.

"Since Ino knows I exist, maybe you could request some flowers be delivered tomorrow?" Sakura couldn't obviously seethe at the siblings without creating uncomfortable questions from her parents, but she could at least make her house arrest less unpleasant. It would probably be too much to specifically request delivery for the couple hours she knew her mother would be out of the house, given Gaara's goals were probably nefarious for their alone time. He was playing nice in front of others for the moment, and she could retreat behind that while she unpacked what she actually felt about him.

Her mom nodded, "That sounds like a lovely idea, maybe they will have some nice dahlias. Maybe I'll even spend some time on the garden."

"I still don't understand why we don't plant more things we can eat!" Kizashi gave the opening shot with a wide grin, knowing full well what would come next.

As her parents devolved into the age old argument that her mother would inevitably win, Gaara refused to take his eyes off Sakura. Worse yet, her mom seemed to be noticing his unnervingly focused attention with a little smile now and then even as her voice rose at the words 'esthetic value' and 'sentimentality' while arguing with her husband. Everyone knew if the Harunos weren't playfully arguing then one of them was either sick or dead.

"What do you think, young man?" The friendly hand that landed heavily on Gaara's shoulder caused both Temari and Sakura to react—though Sakura was much less successful at stopping the gasp of pure horror. Her father was in untold danger.

Gaara's eyes rolled back for a moment as he went unfocused, then after the silence had stretched a few seconds too long he locked eyes with Sakura with a grimace. "I believe in utility."

The hand left Gaara's shoulder and Kizashi picked up the argument with an "I knew I liked you! Don't you see, those flowers are a wasted opportunity!" while Sakura tried not to melt into a puddle of gratefulness to the universe at large.

While her parents continued to fire salvos, Sakura heard Gaara add, "With one exception." She couldn't even begin to unpack that. Her heart was confused enough as it was.

Ever the opportunist, Temari took seconds while everyone else was occupied.
Chapter 12

She went from asleep to angry in less time than he had expected. For all intents and purposes he thought he had remained at a fairly respectful distance once he noticed she had exited the deep stage of sleep. Apparently, being in her room all night—which he knew she would correctly assume—wasn't the overture of good faith he had hoped it would appear.

Sakura looked over at him with bleary eyes, then dropped her head back to her pillow with a sigh. "I should have figured."

"I thought this would be preferable to you over me wandering the streets, or remaining in your sitting room." This way he got to finish a few more of her novels, as well. They seemed rather instructive on some points she didn't seem to want to discuss with him, even if they were fiction.

That seemed to have put things in perspective for Sakura. She glanced over at the door, still locked, boxes still pushed against—the very definition of weak attempt. "Did you come in through the window?"

"Yes."

Clearly she was still waking up, having slept in on the first night she had had the chance to be in a real bed in many weeks. "You didn't touch me while I was asleep, did you?"

There was no good answer to that, she would need to be more specific. The way she turned purple then red told him that the silence with which he had greeted the question was an answer in of itself.

"You didn't do anything inappropriate to me while I was asleep, did you?" This question came through clenched teeth.

That was easy to answer. "No." Holding her while she was sleeping wasn't really on the spectrum of inappropriate so far as he was concerned. The bed was small and uncomfortable at any rate, so as soon as she stirred a bit he had withdrawn. Gaara hadn't even meant to do that much but the idea that he couldn't touch her felt like it was an impossible ask.

"I hope no one saw you come through the window last night. The last thing we need is security being called because some nosy neighbor thought they saw a suspicious character."

"While there often isn't a need, I am capable of stealth." And since he wanted to remind her of how her family supported their union, he added. "But even if your family suspected something I don't think they would object."

Sakura gave something like a growl, and Gaara felt his lips twitch. Being around her made him feel what he could only assume was happiness. He had replayed their little interlude so many times in his head that Shukaku had fully retreated with maximum disgust. It was too bad he had steeled himself for the journey to the other demon hosts. There were things to accomplish before coming back to Konoha and "playing his sick little version of house" as the demon phrased it. If Shukaku had really hated it he would have actively sabotaged him, though, so he sucked back the internal grumbles with his usual stoicism.

"My mom has tried to play matchmaker before. She knows well enough to not push the issue. If you were worried."

On the contrary, having the Haruno matron's good opinion was a valuable weapon in his arsenal. He
gave no indication to Sakura, understanding that the Haruno relationships was foreign and probably complex. Parents, and how a child would normally relate to parents, was outside the scope of either his or Shukaku's realm of experience. Shukaku may have sired children, but he never precisely stuck around to see to their raising.

"You are aware I have no objections to that outcome." Before Sakura could snap something back, he took the opportunity to remind her of an obligation he was rather fond of lately. "My scars have been stinging since last night." The rapid subject change prevented her from exploding.

Slowly sitting up with what looked to be a mix of contrition and aversion, Sakura leaned over to grab at the half full glass of water she had brought with her to bed and drank the rest down. She had changed into some strange frilly white top and bottom combination that left a strip of pale skin exposed from the bottom of her ribs to her hips. He hadn't really noticed when he had been loosely clutching her in the night, but he doubly regretted his resolve to let her guide the situation. The salivating was instinctual, and he swallowed several times in succession.

Sakura folded the covers back onto the bed with her medic's precision and gestured for him to lay on it. "Let's be clear, your scars are all I'm rubbing this morning."

He knew exactly what she meant, he'd read at least four of those Doki Doki books at this point, but feigning ignorance seemed more productive. It didn't take much to convey innocent confusion, which clearly made her feel mortified. "What do you mean?"

"I-I-I, that is to say…" She settled for a cranky. "Just take your shirt off and lay down."

The pillow smelled like her, he thought as he pressed his face into it. Methodically she worked on him, and while at first her motions were quick and angry, they became smooth soon enough. Evenings of this had created the muscle memory, and she relaxed into familiarity. They were at peace. It was a good time to mount an attack.

"I've been placed on your city's council." He grunted as she practically jabbed him in a kidney.

There was a pause and he could practically hear her talk herself down so that her motions were once again steady. "Great, have fun debating festival setup details and adjudicating disputes between farmers. Tsunade always said council meetings were a waste of time."

"It's largely ceremonial. A concession to make it feel as if I've gained something, when the real prize was free land and a guaranteed residence."

There was a hmm from Sakura as she worked in a methodical pattern down his scars. No lingering touched this morning, but then he hadn't expected any. She was like a bucking horse, or how he would imagine a bucking horse would be if he could get near one of the blasted animals.

"Temari indicated a strong preference to set up the domicile."

Sakura whipped out a response. "Great, she can nest all she likes."

It seemed prudent to let that sink in for a while, so he relaxed into the feeling of being touched. Sakura's hands were firm, calloused, and he appreciated all over again that she wasn't soft. A soft woman wouldn't survive the hardships that his attention would bring her both personally and socially. Sakura was strong. Gaara flipped over when Sakura tapped him to indicate his back was done. As their eyes met, despite her best effort not to, his next words were a gentle trap. "Of course she can't live there if you choose not to join her."

In the Doki Doki books the men did all sorts of 'alpha' things to the heroines that they protested
against but secretly later admitted were a good idea. There was no man threatening to marry her against her will to fight. There was no evil landlord threatening her with eviction he could pay or threaten. She was otherwise not in some precarious situation involving her virtue, excepting yesterday with him. Giving her a place to live, another way she could be indebted to him, was just another strand of web. Sakura seemed to be processing his last statement with a grim set to her jaw.

Speaking of the *Doki Doki* books. "How about tumescent?"

Wherever Sakura had mentally been, she came crashing to earth with that question. "What?!"

"From your books. Tumescent."

"Ugh, no. Go find a dictionary." It must have been really good, because she was beet red. "I take it you found the *Icha Icha* novels."

Gaara nodded as Sakura carefully worked on the scars farthest from his partially unbuttoned pants. "Well don't take everything you read literally in those. Some things people write about are a terrible idea. Like," she faltered, seemingly trying to come to grips with talking about this to him but also unable to stop the direction of her thought. "Like sex on a beach. It isn't romantic."

She continued, "Or a ladder." Sooner or later her fingers had to move down, and he supposed she was retreating behind humor to dodge other feelings. "And before you ask me any more questions about those stupid books, let me just say that they aren't supposed to be a blueprint for anything. As many smart, feisty women find people as silly, passive women, it's all just a big gamble that anyone will like anyone. If I'd had any sense, I should have just gotten an arranged marriage last year or something. Even if it would have have been Lee…"

He should say something to her to indicate how relieved he was that she hadn't, most of all because he probably would have died without the medical attention she provided let alone what followed. But Gaara felt like such sentiment would be taken as insincere. Since most of those stupid novels simply outlined elaborate misunderstandings, actions always spoke loudest since they were rarely as ambiguous as words.

Brushing her hands away, Gaara sat up to see a very confused Sakura who turned into a very wary Sakura when he slid his hand into the hair at the base of her skull. Telegraphing his motions so slowly she couldn't miss his intention, he brought their faces together. She was stiff but not pushing back, and Gaara was pleased. She was starting to give in to the inevitability of their union.

Unlike yesterday, which had been all clumsy heat, this kiss was calculated. There was a challenge in Sakura's eyes that he quite liked, and as their noses nearly bumped her only concession was to delicately tilt her head to the side just enough to allow their lips to meet. Her lips were pursed as if she were determined not to like it, to prove something to herself, and Gaara allowed her a moment of virginal superiority before he did the thing he had read about in all the books and slid his tongue over her tensed lower lip.

He could faintly taste blood, as if she had been biting her lip or if they had been extremely chapped, and it encouraged him to probe more aggressively until her teeth parted and with what could only be described as a growl Sakura delved her own hands into his hair. It had to be unconscious on her part, but the pressure she was exerting encouraged him to lean back again, and he didn't resist. Sakura had only seemingly abandoned all propriety, because as soon as his hand brushed against the bare skin above her pajama shorts she shot back like she had touched a hot stove.

In a sense, she had.
Eyes rolling frantically in her head she mumbled something about breakfast and frantically dug the door out from behind her boxes before exiting. Moments later, Sakura stiffly walked back in, pulled out clothes from her wardrobe and then then equally stiffly exited while completely ignoring Gaara still laying on her bed.

Slowly, without Gaara even noticing, a smile spread across his face.

***

So they were physically compatible! So what!

Sakura was buttering her toast for what had to be the third time because when she glanced down at it, it was inedible. Maybe some sliced fruit would be better, but she didn't trust herself to wield a knife at the moment. Her father was already at the shop, having given her a tearful hug goodbye when she had descended at last from the bathroom. Sakura knew she had taken too long in the shower, but it felt like she couldn't scrub her feelings off of her, like the travel dirt, no matter how hard she tried.

Maybe she wasn't broken. Maybe she just hadn't tried kissing enough guys to know if that's how it would feel with anyone, but that voice in her head she wished she could squish lately was pretty adamant about how even thinking of kissing random men put her off her food. Comparatively, the thought of kissing Gaara…

"Why there you are, I suggested Temari should wake you but she said you had atypical sleep habits and it was best not to disturb you." Mebuki gestured to the table where Temari was finishing breakfast and Sakura was over buttering her second piece of toast.

Really, Temari hadn't actually answered Mebuki's request, she had simply offered up some factual information thereby sidestepping that she knew he was neither asleep nor in the guest room. Sakura was grateful for the moment she was minding her own business, but suspected blackmail in her future.

"I'm heading over to the town hall," Temari said with an air of nonchalance. "The sooner the arrangements are handled the sooner my brother and I can stop imposing on your hospitality. I need to write to my other brother as well, Kankuro will need to hear news of how our purpose here has altered."

"Don't worry on my account, I said you're welcome as long as you would like to stay and that offer is a promise. Harunos don't promise things lightly."

Gaara looked meaningfully in Sakura's direction as he took the seat opposite to hers and pulled a cup of dark unsweetened tea towards himself. Dark like you soul! Sakura wanted to scream but it was a little too close to truth to be funny, and a little too unhinged even for her so it stayed in her mind.

"You might take some time for self-care, since you have the day Sakura." Her mother said it like she was on a vacation, instead of house arrest. "Your nails…"

They did look terrible, and her hands and feet were always points of pride with Sakura before. They were her tools, along with her brain after all. If you didn't take care of your hands and feet then a job where you were touching, mixing, examining and walking around all day would get pretty uncomfortable. Sakura was aware it was also a subtle jab, as Mebuki's eyes flickered over to Gaara
and back to Sakura before she gave a lopsided smile to her daughter. At least she wasn't pushing Lee as the answer anymore, but this was ever so subtly worse.

Maybe Gaara's powers included mind control. This was just too aggravating.

"She ruined them scavenging to keep us alive." Gaara pointed out, stunning Sakura's inner voice into silence. Sakura felt her heart flutter, irritatingly.

"Oh really?" Mebuki said, grabbing the last piece of toast before Sakura could over butter that one too. "You said you encountered her while you were camping. That you saved her." Her mother was no dummy, she was sniffing for inconsistencies in the fragments of information she'd been given.

Gaara was unruffled as he drank his tea. "I had been injured by a beast before we encountered one another. I was unable to provide food for a time."

"Lucky for you both then, that you found each other!"

Sakura snorted and rolled her eyes even as Gaara sincerely answered with a "Yes, I'm grateful."

It seemed improbable, but Mebuki didn't see anything amiss. How was she to know that Gaara was the poster boy for stoicism—perfect marks in an advanced program of study in emotional constipation. Sakura wasn't sure if this was a show for her mother or not.

"Sakura has always been a fighter, I've never known her to give up. Maybe that's why I still had hope she'd come back to me." Mebuki didn't look Sakura's way while she spoke, uncomfortable expressing so many deeply true feelings so early in the day. To alleviate her awkward feelings, Mebuki made an excuse to go grab some juice in the kitchen despite there being a pitcher of apple juice out already.

She was glad her mom wasn't watching Gaara as his green eyes practically burned holes in Sakura. Gaara spoke once more, clearly just for Sakura to hear. "I admire you more than any other human I've met." And with that weird statement he shuttered and became taciturn once more, drinking a second cup of tea.

For being so early in the day it sure was hot in the dining room already. Sakura pulled at the collar of her old red dress and felt how tight it was after all these years. It had been the first thing she had grabbed before storming out of her room. She wasn't so little anymore.

***

Nails trimmed and buffed, cuticles on her hands and feet cut back, Sakura was just about to head into her room to find the small box that contained her various polishes when her mom came to find her.

"I'll be at my sewing circle for the next couple hours. I did ask your father to order a large arrangement of flowers, to be delivered, but this is a busy time so I don't know when they could possibly arrive." Mebuki perhaps noticed how her daughter froze like prey as she took in all this information, but it wouldn't have been meaningful to her. Sakura, so notoriously virginal she had been chosen for the village sacrifice despite being nearly twenty, was not someone Mebuki ever worried about while unchaperoned around young men. Plus Sakura was studying to be a medic, and she was alone with young men all the time. The trust had been well earned.
Sakura wished, suddenly, she had been a little less steadfast about men in the past.

Putting on a brave face, Sakura waved at her mom with a smile, "Have a good time, I'll see you soon. It's not like I've got anywhere to go."

"There's plenty of leftovers from yesterday in the icebox, so you won't go hungry while I'm gone." Mebuki kept pushing food, and Sakura wondered if she really looked that thin. Probably not, this was most likely some mother thing born of worry.

And with a groan from her door as the pressure shifted as her mom left, the last flimsy barrier between her and Gaara was eradicated. She tensed as if he would storm her room, but when her vigilance started to make her feel silly she proceeded to dig around in the boxes for her nail polish. It was harder to find than she had expected since she hadn't exactly packed her place up carefully when she thought she was going to die.

Finding that it had spilled out into the bottom of a box full of unfolded clothes, Sakura fished out a handful of small sealed pots. Lavender assaulted her senses first, but she didn't want to go pale colors today. Henna was in another pot. Bergamot scent indicated black. She dove in one more time, she knew she had some green in there somewhere.

At last she located the last pot of color, smelling the beeswax delicately, when out of the corner of her eye she spotted Gaara. He wasn't even pretending to be casual, he just stood in her doorway staring at her. Or rather, from the way his eyes darted to her face at the last moment, staring at her recently elevated posterior. Gods, he looked smug.

She raised a finger up in warning. "I'm going to set up downstairs and paint my nails. If you want to talk, by all means join me. If you're just going to stare at me, then you might as well read another stupid novel." She felt assured that he would sooner go horseback riding than have an actual conversation, and confident in her knowledge, she stood up and brushed past him. Maybe she did a little more than brush, she thought with a little guilt as her own shoulder ached with the force she had put behind it to make him move. He was like a brick wall.

The unstoppable force had met her immovable object, she supposed.

Listening about as well as he ever did, Gaara followed Sakura downstairs to watch her apply the green tint to her nails. All the shades to the windows were drawn to allow Sakura the run of the house, but the kitchen felt dark and nearly claustrophobic because of it. It was the only place she could apply the tints, her mother would much rather spilled polish on the tile instead of the carpets.

Gaara pulled a chair from the table over to watch her carefully brush and set the color. He went unfocused for a time, but then seemed to come back to the here and now with some memory of Sakura's ultimatum.

"Long ago, Shukaku's warriors would paint their nails green and black before heading into battle. The generals would use real gold."

Warriors, not assassins. It must have been an old memory. Sometimes it was easy to forget the dark passenger Gaara held in him. Maybe the fact that she could forget at all had doomed her no matter how hard she protested.

"I started painting my nails when Tsunade finally took me on as her apprentice. She always painted red, and I didn't want to look like I worshipped her too much. She did anyway, the woman was a master among masters. "I used black until I realized it was too hard to tell if my nails were clean or not after a hard day at the clinic."
She had meant to scare him away with the threat of conversation, but he seemed well able to rise to her challenge, and in a way it was better than being alone with her thoughts. Away from the danger of her bedroom she had to admit he seemed less intimidating, even if her skin felt like static every time his chair leg so much as scraped the tile.

"Some of those early days at the clinic I would come home so overworked or emotionally wrung out I didn't think I'd ever go back. But then I would think of what Tsunade would say if I quit, and eventually it shifted to how could I face myself every morning if I quit. Eventually, the hard things about working with sick or dying people became so normal that it was just when it was sudden or seemed so unfair or cruel that…"

The mechanic motion of applying the color to her hands, and the closeness of the dim light in her childhood home must have lulled her. She was talking to him as easily as she might talk to Ino, not a care in the world. She was a fool.

Gaara didn't seem to either pick up on or care about her sudden self-consciousness. "You know how to persist. To survive." He was nodding at her in approval. "I spent so many years feeling dead, but when death came I fought to stay."

He certainly could have succumbed to those injuries she had found him with prior to her arrival. They had looked so bad, she remembered how shocked she had been that he had lived. "I can't say I've seen a more miraculous recovery. I assume the other... person, was similarly torn up."

Gaara's mouth quirked then stilled.

Sakura was applying color to her tiny pinkie nail when he spoke again, "I'll be leaving tomorrow to find him." She slathered her finger in green from the nail bed up to her first knuckle in shock. Quickly trying to wipe it away before it stained her skin, Sakura tried to find the sense of elation she knew she should feel but all there was in her heart was panic.

She should say something smooth, dismissive. Don't let the door hit you on the way out, or somesuch. But after scrubbing as much of the green as she could get off of her little finger, she turned her angry countenance towards him. "A little more notice would have been nice!"

As if sensing her alarm, he was a rock emotionally if not in actuality. "Temari is capable of guarding you. I'm paying her a small fortune to do so."

He said it so casually, and that just made her stomach twist all the harder. Sakura knew it wasn't an idle threat. Gaara would no doubt slaughter his sibling for failing to protect her, and maybe only hesitated in doing so out of pique because she didn't like him being murderous around her. It was a terrible responsibility.

"This should not need to be said out loud, but unless she is the one to in fact kill me, I'd much rather you didn't murder your sister." What could that possibly be followed up with? Let's have some lunch and wait for Ino? Need any help packing? "And you're going after the person that nearly killed you?! Are you crazy?!" Wrong phrasing, she regrouped with a cough. "Are you sure that's a good idea?!"

Gaara didn't like her tone, it seemed, as he unbent his rigid posture and stood to pace at the border between the dining room and kitchen. "He and I have unfinished business."

"You aren't going off to try to kill him, are you?"

Tilting his head, seemingly considering it, "Possibly, but not probably."
Sakura's final words in this discussion were far too vulnerable for her liking, "What if you don't come back?" Would she be hunted by his cult indefinitely, stuck being shadowed by an increasingly irritated Temari? Forgotten? Killed by his demon's next avatar?

Stalking over to her quickly, still seated in a chair she had pulled next to the sink, Sakura felt his hand cup her chin far too gently. She needed him to be a brute, to remind her that he was despicable, not some improbable white knight in a black knight's armor.

"Any of us could die at any moment."

Well, at least it wasn't some romantic drivel, Sakura thought sardonically. She was already emotionally unstable after this little chat.

Pounding on the door which was, hopefully, Ino had her jerking her face out of his grasp. Sakura rushed over to the door and didn't sense Gaara following. It was just as well, she had a mind to throttle him, and her nails were still drying.
"Seriously?!"

"Look, it's not my fault suddenly so many people absolutely need me to deliver flower arrangements to the Harunos. Trust me, by the time your father came in my mother just shoved me in his direction without a word." Ino brushed her bangs out of her eyes as she brought in the last armful of flowers.

They had had to make a whole show of Ino pretending not to find anyone at home and going around back to deliver bundle after bundle of flowers. Their angry whispered conversation through the mail slot next to the front door had been exactly the kind of normal that reminded Sakura not all of life was Gaara's life or death struggles. Meanwhile, the man himself had cleared out to the gods knew where, clearly uninterested in justifying to her why he needed to find the monster who nearly killed him. All those cryptic statements he had made in the past about needing to 'do something dangerous' made a lot more sense now, but even a week ago she would have said good riddance. Now she had enough self-awareness to hope that he didn't, you know, do anything too disastrously permanent like go off and die on her.

Not that she cared.

"I can't stay very long," Ino said wiping actual sweat off her forehead with some disgust. The day was too hot and she had moved too many bundles of flowers after riding the delivery bike with trailer, and physical exertion had never been her favorite. "I do actually have other deliveries to do, and the day is already too hot." The complaints were expected but the way her friend's eyes darted around told Sakura the real reason she wasn't going to linger.

"He's upstairs." Sakura said, trying to reassure her that he wasn't nearby, then immediately realized her concept of 'near' was a bit skewed to think Gaara being a few rooms away would be a comforting thought. Ino's grimace flattened out as she silently talked herself out of her own fear. "Don't worry, he won't interrupt us." Sakura said the words with more confidence than she actually felt.

Ino slid into the chair that was still sitting next to the sink while Sakura grabbed some fruit to cut up and offer to her overheated friend. Splashing some water on her face to cool down reddened cheeks, Ino didn't comment until Sakura pulled over her own chair, fruit neatly plated and deposited on the counter.

Grabbing an apple slice, Ino drawled, "Shikamaru told me some crazy stuff on the way home yesterday."

"Yeah? If it's about how Konoha has apparently made Gaara 'monster in residence' I already got that message."

"And the seat on the council?"

Sakura nodded. "I heard about that, too." But only because he was trying to annoy her this morning. She fully realized that he only imparted information to her on a need to know basis, but often she only needed to know when he wanted something—be it a reaction or otherwise.

"Did you know they are going to give him his own holiday?"

"Now you're just telling lies to piss me off." Sakura grabbed a slice of apple and bit into it with a snap.
Ino's smile was practically evil. "Oh no, he gets his own holiday all right. Instead of a sacrifice, it's going to be a big party in his honor. And I suppose as his fiancée you'll be right there with him, holding a big oversized key to the village gates…"

"…I wish you would stop saying I'm his fiancée…"

"…And then there will be speeches, and I'm sure the kids will put on some sort of play. It could be all about how a beautiful young maiden from Konoha—they will take artistic license with it after all—went to the sacrificial mountain and nagged the monster until he realized it was less annoying to stop the sacrifices forever than to listen to her complain about it all day." Ino had cheered herself up with Sakura's misery.

Unbelievable! Free property, free housing, a seat on the council, and a day in his honor?! For someone that was trying to get away from all the weird feudal trappings he had left behind in Suna, the very trappings he encouraged Sakura to dismantle with Kankuro's help, it sure seemed like he was constructing similar social structures in Konoha. What a hypocrite.

"I suppose it's too much to hope that this stupid holiday happens once every ten years?"

Ino's expression said it all.

"What else did Shikamaru tell you, since he apparently felt like opening his big mouth to you yesterday."

Ino patted Sakura on the arm with real sympathy. "Mostly just that you'll be stuck in this house until the council finds a way to announce that you're back. Half the council members sent flowers, with notes."

"Great, so now I get to play a fun guessing game about who is trying to butter me up because they want something." It wasn't the first time people had tried to use her. The darker side of medication wasn't lost on the Haruno family, and even after she had escaped the immediate vicinity of people trying to get to her father through her Sakura had leapt straight into Tsunade's world—and plenty of people wanted her mentor's attention as well. Unscrupulous people with designs on her nearest and dearest was not a new experience.

Ino laughed in that way she had perfected to fill silences. It wasn't that she found humor in the situation, more that she knew Sakura felt distinctly uncomfortable and it wasn't in her nature to provide much comfort. "You're a smart girl, you'll figure it out."

Being clever and plucky only got you so far. Sakura looked down at the little finger that still had traces of green dye all over it. Anything anyone wanted out of Gaara, well, they would get what they deserved if they approached him. Talk about deals with the devil.

Meanwhile, Ino kept looking in the direction of the stairs as if Gaara was going to emerge at any moment and she wanted to be ready to bolt. It wasn't fair to have asked her to come here, Sakura realized in a guilty rush. Ino was brave, loyal and loving in her own fashion, but after the experience of being locked up yesterday she was obviously still shaken.

"He leaves soon, out of Konoha. I mean, just so you know." Sakura offered up the information she had learned just minutes ago, hoping it would help Ino sleep better at night.

Surprised, Ino dragged her eyes away from the base of the stairs. "You really think he'll go?"

"He doesn't tend to change his mind, once he decides on something." That truth resonated as she thought about the care Gaara took with her.
And as if to draw a firm line under how little she wanted to talk about the guest upstairs, Ino changed the subject entirely. "Maybe once you exist again you can go back to being my maid of honor. You conveniently died to get out of it once, but you can't use the same excuse twice."

"Isn't Hinata doing that? She's the most socially important of all of us at any rate."

Ino finally gave a real smile, without the nervousness Gaara wrought. "Yeah, well, important doesn't always mean fun."

The Akimichi family had the best livestock and consequently the best meats for miles around, and the Yamanakas had been florists for generations so food and flowers were covered. Location wasn't ever going to be a problem, as the fields where the Yamanakas cultivated their flowers always had something beautiful blooming every season. Logistics weren't the problem, Ino wanted a really good party and they both knew that the only parties Hinata had ever thrown were formal. Formal might as well be synonymous with stiff.

"What had she planned for the hen party?"

Ino groaned. "I asked her about it once and she turned red as a beet. My guess was either she hoped I'd forget about it, or she hoped we could just sit around and drink tea and tell stories or something. She probably would want to hold it at her family's creepy sprawling mansion. The only person who would be excited for that would be TenTen."

Sakura began to fidget, grabbing an apple slice, then scratched at the side of it with a nail rather than eat it. "Did you, you know, have reservations about getting married? Like you thought maybe you're too young? Or that you might not suit after all?" Or maybe, hypothetically, that he was a homicidal schizophrenic?

"Um," Ino narrowed her eyes in Sakura's direction, clearly realizing this was not a question for her in all honesty. "I think lots of people probably get married hoping they will fall in love without being in love already. This was arranged ages ago when my grandad was trying to solve the whole 'gotta stop those damn Akimichi cows from eating our flowers' feud, as you know. I like Chouji fine as a friend, and the rest will fall in place."

Normally Sakura hated bringing this up, knowing that dreams of a love match for Ino had always been just that. It was fun to talk about when they were younger, but now those conversations seemed both nostalgic and silly.

"When you have history with someone that can count for a lot." Those were Ino's last words on the subject. It was a sore point, that she would never be able to choose for herself, but she was too stubborn and proud of her heritage to think of backing out on what was essentially a nearly twenty-year-old business deal.

"Once I can exist again, I'll go talk Hinata into maybe sharing the maid of honor duties, how about that? She'll probably be hurt if you just snatch it away. I mean, Hinata is still a Hyuuga, with Hyuuga pride."

"It's still my wedding." Ino said sharply.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Yeah, well, maybe I don't want to alienate the few friends I have once I get to start existing again."

With a sniff, Ino took a slice of apple and bit into it delicately. "We'll see. That was Ino for 'yes' but she needed to make Sakura twist in the wind for a while over it first."
In the end Ino stayed to visit longer than Sakura expected she would last but not nearly as long as she hoped, about an hour, while Gaara mercifully stayed upstairs. The second her friend exited, Sakura cut a sharp glance in the direction of the upstairs and stomped her way back up to her room. Shockingly, no Gaara was there, and it was with quick steps and what she realized with a grimace was a sigh of relief that she found him in the guest room. He appeared to be meditating on the neatly made guest bed, legs crossed, eyes unseeing and half open. The key here was appear because as she paced at the foot of the bed he was clearly tracking her movement.

"Well?!"

Her ill fitting red dress felt suddenly hot under the collar as he unfolded languidly and leaned back on the bed to regard her regally.

"Do we marry now or when I return from my travels?"

Before Sakura could process how bad an idea it was, she lunged at him with her freshly painted nails outstretched towards his neck.

***

Gaara knew she was already on edge and it hadn't taken much to get a delightfully unhinged reaction from her. Usually people were so guarded around him, watching what they said and did in case they even toed a line where disrespect could be misconstrued. Sakura obviously didn't give a damn about what he thought and it was so refreshing for him that Shukaku was even starting to have a sense of fun about them teasing her. If someone had suggested to him last winter, as he gnawed cold meat off of animal bones while sleeping in a cave, that he would be engaging in playful banter with a pretty girl he would have laughed himself hoarse. Assuming he let them live long enough to suggest anything to him.

As Sakura lunged at him it didn't take much to call sand slithering around them to restrain her. Unmoved from his position propped up by his elbows on the bed he watched her rage and pull against the sandy restraints. He gave her just enough slack to struggle, feeling his breath speed up in his lungs. Sakura fighting and spitting while bound in his sand like this was something he could watch all day. His blood quickened.

"Fighting dirty as usual, you freak! You deserve whatever ass kicking this enemy of yours will give you when you find him!"

Shukaku suggested breaking her wrist to take her down a peg or two, but instead Gaara pulled her against the wall slowly with the sand and watched with immense pleasure as she tried to dig in her heels to the smooth hardwood to no effect. He made no move to get up from the bed and allowed her rage to peter out against her restraints.

Chest heaving like a bellows, nearly popping the seams on the side of her too small dress, Sakura glared pure venom in his direction.

"In another place and time you would have made a fine warrior." He meant it as a compliment. The tenacity she had, the instinct to go for the throat, the unusual strength for her build—all of it recommended her to him and spoke to his inherent respect for strength.

"In another place and time you wouldn't be able to hide behind your sand." Sakura snapped back.
She didn't fear his sand, even when she was disabled by it, or at least she was able to hide her fear behind anger. Gaara couldn't be more pleased. As she appeared to be calmed down enough to talk he melted the sand from around her, returning it under the floorboards in case he needed to call some back quickly. Calm for Sakura didn't precisely mean she had abandoned her plan to cause him moderate harm as a way to illustrate her displeasure.

Rubbing her wrists dramatically first, Gaara well knew he hadn't used enough pressure to cause more than discomfort no matter what Shukaku called for, Sakura then pointed at him accusingly. She jabbed it in his general direction like a weapon.

"You can't leave like this. You have responsibilities now. Commitments. Which you signed up for and Temari is apparently finishing clarifying the terms of as we speak."

It was a tactic he hadn't expected. Gaara blinked once, hard, and tried to parse her argument.

"Even if you obviously don't seem to care about setting up a household that you clearly expect me to live in with your sister, you are the one that joined the council. You're the one that decided you would be the protector of Konoha, as ridiculous as that is!"

No longer indulgent, Gaara felt a spark of real anger ignite. His tone was gravelly. "And why would I be ridiculous?"

Sakura, taken aback by his sudden change, seemed to rein in her scathing tone to something a little more measured. "Taking part in local politics, really being involved, is about service to the community. Tsunade would be the first person to tell you it isn't so much an honor as an obligation because it's not about your personal needs but the needs of the people. I can't picture you as a public servant."

She thought him selfish, he realized, and based on her view of the world she wasn't wrong. He hadn't seen this council thing as service to the village but as a way to ensure the village served him. This shift in perspective was somewhat dizzying. Sakura wasn't done, either.

"And you being the town's protector? You've bound yourself to every single life here, promised to protect them. You can't even protect me from your sister's contempt. And now you're going to run off for the gods know how long on some weird revenge quest…?"

Gaara had had enough of her little lecture. "Temari's words don't cause you lasting harm. If you can't shrug off a few unkind words then you're weaker than I thought you to be." He slid off the bed and stalked towards Sakura, wishing he just had a couple more inches on her so he could properly tower over her head. "If you're so worried about my obligations to your precious village then I will return by midwinter regardless of the state of completion of my objectives."

His stupid quest was inspired by her, not that he would tell her that right now. His willingness to engage with Naruto, his codifying of a new way of life for the jinchuuriki, his own personal transformation—it all started with her.

"I just want to keep you safe!" The angry words were out of her mouth before she could examine them closely, and she blushed not long after saying them, tilting her chin up proudly. "As your medic, I mean."

It was getting harder for her to lie to herself, Gaara saw it plainly. The knowledge softened him, making the black mood that had been narrowing his vision recede. Taking the last step that bridged the gap between them, he cupped her upturned face in his hands and kissed her as if that could provide her with all the explanation she needed for why he had to leave her.
His attack had been swift and Sakura melted in his hands for the barest of moments before her own defenses asserted themselves and she push him away as hard as she could manage when their bodies were so close together. Gaara allowed the separation, but only a couple steps.

"Why are you doing this?" She could have been referring to any number of things. The answer was the same to all, so far as he was concerned. It was so simple he was surprised she didn't know at this point. Only one kind of insanity could account for his actions these past weeks.

He felt his scar itch but refused to scratch it, "Love, I assume."

The way Sakura drew back and curled into herself as if he had physically struck her made him hurt in a way not unlike when his abdominal scars bothered him. Sharp. Surprising. He touched his forehead now, feeling as if it had gone from a persistent itch to a burn along the ridges of his symbol. He hadn't known what love was when he had disfigured himself as a child, although he would avow that familial love was its own distinctive brand of love and one he had abandoned aspirations towards.

It was that simple for him to just throw around a word like that because it was true and he wasn't embarrassed by it the way Sakura seemed to be by her own emotions. Gaara couldn't afford self-deception at this point. Having one voice, not his own, that had its own agenda was quite enough without adding fractures in his own thought patterns.

"I'm not having sex with you just because you said you love me." Her eyes darted around.

"Why would you?" Swiftly followed by, "Is that how it works?"

She was off balance again. "Of course not! But some men think it does, I just…" Her mouth snapped shut, eyes burning him alive with the force of her stare. Sakura was searching the planes of her own mindscape for why he would say something like that to her. She was trying to find the angle, and normally there would be one but this time she was chasing clouds. "You!"

Turning on her heel, Sakura marched back to her room and closed the door with a slam. Gaara let her go. Clearly she needed to get her mind straightened out and if it was one thing Gaara understood it was competing voices making it hard to engage with the outside world.

***

Before it even registered, Sakura realized she had been tearing page after page out of her Doki Doki collection as if they were at fault for what she was starting to think was a psychotic break. She would burn all the damn things if it weren't the middle of the summer and already hot as furnace in her room now that the noon hour had passed.

Love indeed! What did Gaara know about love!!?

What did she know about love?

He didn't love her, she was certain of that. Maybe he thought what he felt for her was love, but how could that even be possible when they had barely known one another for a couple months. That's not how it worked, it just wasn't! Love took time, mutual understanding, friendship, trust—but when she thought of all those things all she could picture was Rock Lee and Sakura certainly didn't love him even if she liked him as a friend a great deal.
Clearly Gaara was just confusing lust with something deeper, as if connecting their mouths—and other things—connected their souls or some other nonsense. She was a woman of science, of medicine, Sakura had observed enough couples go through an infatuation stage. How long until Gaara realized that's all his feelings were? And why did that thought ache? She smoothed clammy hands down the short pants she wore under her dress.

Maybe a week, maybe six months, but he'd realize this weird fantasy he'd built around her was just that. Come to think of it, maybe him leaving town was just the thing!

Sakura had been pacing, pulling at the side of her dress where the slit went all the way up to nearly her waist (it used to be it sat closer to her hip, but her torso had elongated since she had last worn it) and heard a ripping sound. It was well and truly trash now, as she examined the rip that didn't just go along the side seam. Sakura would be throwing away a piece of her adolescence today and it seemed almost fateful.

What if sleeping with him was the actual answer? How many times had she seen guys lose interest in women once they gave away their body to them? She'd comforted a handful of crying girls at the clinic who had come to be checked out for possible pregnancies, and all the stories were sadly similar. The timing would be suspect, even if Sakura had the guts to go through with it. She had just blurted out that she wouldn't sleep with him; for all that was holy, she couldn't jump him out of nowhere.

Nothing about this situation was rational: Gaara was some sort of supernatural creature bonded to an evil entity and he had fallen in love with her when really he should have killed (and eaten?) her about two months ago. Every single word in that thought seemed like it was in a foreign language. This wasn't something that happened to anyone, let alone Sakura. Sakura's life was a routine, or at least it had been until she had been chosen for that stupid sacrifice and ended up on that stupid mountain only to begin treating that stupid man…

Who was standing in her now open doorway. Watching her tear apart her precious book collection while wearing a ripped dress for a tween. Looking at her like she was the mad one here.

"You don't love me," Sakura blurted out. Gaara's lip twitched up. "It's just lust, it will fade."

He tilted his head at her, observing her like a cat might an interesting new prey animal. He shut her door and walked over to pick up a few torn out pages. Appearing to casually browse one or two, he was really watching her out of the corner of his eye.

"I'm leaving tomorrow."

For all her bluster, her half certain arguments with herself that there was no way he could be in love with her and she didn't want him to be at any rate, she didn't want him to go. She had already told him that in so many words and it wasn't worth repeating.

"If by midwinter my suit is unwelcome, I'll withdraw it."

That was nearly six months from now, with time apart to allow the proximity to fade this terrible intimacy they had developed. He would come back cooled of his ardor and they could shake hands and part as maybe friends but certainly as medic and patient. She would always be happy to see him in her professional capacity, or so she thought, after all he would be Konoha's official protector. But would she be able to draw her fingers over the lines of his scars without thinking of the way his own burned a path across her skin? Could she be dispassionate when he inevitably baited her with blunt statements? Could she forget that he had offered her something she had craved since she knew what romance was?
"That's so, uh, reasonable." She finally said, realizing she had allowed the silence between them to stretch and warp.

Gaara smiled at her, indulgent, confident. He didn't think he would change his mind, she realized.

More horrifying, if she were really honest with herself, she didn't want him to.
"Pull yourself together!" Sakura was in a stifling room with Hinata, Temari, TenTen, and Ino. They had just kicked out Ino's clucking mother, a seamstress fixing a burst seam on Ino's dress, someone who had come in asking about flowers in the reception area, and a random aunt crying about how beautiful everything was. Sakura, who had noticed the glazed look on Ino's face, had kicked out half the room, told Temari to open a window, and was shaking Ino by the shoulders.

"Breathe dammit! You look like you're going to pass out!" She had pulled medical rank on the room to get this far, and she didn't know when that slim line of authority was going to collapse in on itself. "We have to walk out of this room looking like we know what we're doing in less than an hour! So stand up and walk over to the window and take a deep breath."

Mechanically, Ino did as she was told while Hinata tried to wrangle the huge train to the dress and follow. Temari, immensely enjoying the chaos, sat on a table in the corner with her legs crossed and nodded at Sakura's efforts. There had been a bit of tone and tenor to her words that seemed familiar, and that was probably because Temari had said similar words to Sakura not even a month ago when Sakura had discovered their brand new central heating furnace was full blast in the basement in the middle of the night so that Temari could dispose of the most recent assassin from Suna.

The 'conversation' that followed had been ugly. The revelation of Temari's oddly specific gardening hobby in fall and what might lie under the flower beds had been even uglier. They had agreed by unspoken consensus to ignore one another since then, but today had brought them together under a sort of truce because Temari had an obligation to protect Sakura and Sakura was going to be spending a lot of time around strangers thus it was a perfect opportunity for deadly mischief.

"All I have to do is stand there and smile. I don't understand why I feel like this." Ino was finally responding as cold winter air blasted her from the open window, even if her words laid bare the edge of panic she had been outright ignoring right up until today. Two entire dynasties were joining and Sakura knew her friend felt the weight of that far more than knowing she'd be heading to a different bedroom in a different house than the one she had grown up in. Ino was practical, above all, but that didn't mean she couldn't be brought to the edge by the expectations of dozens upon dozens of Yamanaka and Akimichi relatives or the weeks of going over various related business arrangements for the family empires.

"You planned this out to perfection ages ago. If anything goes wrong then it's an act of the gods and not due to you. I need you, Ino Yamanaka, to look at me right now and give me my orders. What am I doing with this bouquet?!" Sakura could count on her friend's instinct for bossiness to override whatever panic attack she was having. Thrusting one hand forward, clutching Hinata's bouquet, Sakura watched Ino's gaze visibly sharpen.

"I told you about a thousand times, I have all your flowers labeled. Can't you do the simplest thing? Find your bouquet and stop messing around."

Sakura smiled and Hinata sighed in relief, Ino was back. It was just in time, too, as the seamstress was knocking on the door again to finish her work. All that stress eating that Ino had done had seriously put a strain on the one size too small dress that her mother had insisted on ordering. Meanwhile, Sakura knew a similarly frantic tailoring job was taking place on the other side of the house as she had heard Chouji had lost a staggering amount of weight prior to this event.

"I need some air," Sakura looked to Hinata. As maid of honor, this was her job to keep Ino level now that the initial emergency had passed. When Hinata had pulled her into the room in a blind
panic, TenTen following Sakura out of sheer curiosity, Sakura had been relieved that this was all it was. The Hyuuga heir made it sound like Ino was having an actual medical emergency. "You've got it from here, I'll make sure everyone's in place for the walk."

Temari jumped off the table and exited after Sakura, as had been their habit these past months. Everyone in the village had seemed to come to accept the blond bodyguard, but most people were under the assumption that the council had ordered it due to the fact that Sakura's life could be in danger from other villages who were displeased that they had unilaterally decided to stop the sacrificial practices. It wasn't entirely a lie, but most of those protests had come through envoys and ambassadors. Sakura was notorious now, branded as a travel risk and banned from visiting most of the surrounding country. Everyone waited to see what the demon would do in retaliation to Konoha despite assurances from leadership that the problem was well in hand.

Sakura wondered if the council was having second thoughts about allying with Gaara, particularly when his inconvenient disappearance meant they could not provide proof of his reformed behavior or generalized lack of menace. They were pretty close mouthed about the whole thing, and Temari hadn't been very forthcoming about how the process had—

"Do you know what helps someone who may be, I don't know, vomiting from nerves a lot or something?" Shikamaru had sauntered up out of nowhere, but only Sakura had been surprised. Temari knew where everyone was in relation to both of them at any point in time. It was one of her skills Sakura found highly useful as well as moderately disturbing. Shikamaru held up a hand to acknowledge Temari, his smile for her a little warmer than the mere smirk he offered to most people.

"A piece of bread and some water will probably be all you can do for him. Is Chouji really that nervous?"

"Did I say that it was him?" Shikamaru looked shifty for all of a moment but gave up fast when Sakura gave him a dubious glare. "Yeah, he's that nervous. How's Ino holding up?"

Sakura shrugged. "About the same. They'll both be ready, they're adults and they know what they're doing."

"They're the same age as us and I can't imagine getting married." Shikamaru's eyes darted over to Temari briefly and then he seemed to get nervous in a way Sakura didn't fully understand. "I'm going to go find that bread you recommended. See you in an hour." He was moving faster than she had seen him go in a while and Sakura sighed, her breath a puff of vapor in the cold air.

The chocolate colored furry stole that Sakura had been gifted by Ino to go around the deep boatneck of her long-sleeved indigo dress didn't completely erase the chill of the snowy day. Midwinter had been a month ago, but that merely meant they were at the peak of the chill. The ground was frozen solid and spring was a distant memory with all the white powder dusting Konoha. A large barn on the Akimichi property had been cleared out for the wedding ceremony and reception, and Sakura knew it was a short walk from the house to the relative radiant warmth of the barn. Temari was shivering softly under layers of coats, and glaring at Sakura for lingering in the cold longer than strictly necessary.

"My brother's fine. Stop brooding and let's get warm again."

The harsh words broke through layers of Sakura's mind to remind her that just because Gaara was a little later than she expected him that there was absolutely no reason to think something terrible had befallen him. He was practically indestructible by any human means and probably quite a few inhuman ones, so worrying about him was pointless. It didn't mean she didn't do it on nearly a daily basis ever since he had left to go confront the other demon host. Not even resuming her medical
training months ago had fully distracted her from her erstwhile fiancée.

Maybe it was because reminders of him were everywhere, from Temari’s very existence to the home that was his but not really his that she lived in, or the strange questions about her missing time that the council had asked her not to disclose but which were still posed to her on a weekly basis by her patients.

"Who said I was thinking about him?"

Temari rolled her eyes. "Don't piss me off today, Haruno. At least not until I get some wine in me."

Usually Temari wasn't this surly, but Sakura chalked it up to the bitter weather and started back towards the barn with purposeful strides. The path had been cleared by various Akimichi cousins, but it was still slick and Sakura had to concentrate on where she was placing her booted feet. Temari was directly behind her, even pushing her forward as they entered the barn turned event space. Before Sakura knew it, she was smiling over at how Temari was crowding next to the radiant stove that had been installed to provide relief.

Sakura had to keep reminding herself that the woman hadn’t even been displaced from her home for a year, and given the culture shock over differences between the pace of life in Konoha and Suna she actually did pretty well. Shikamaru had been a large help in that regard as the two of them spent enough time together exclusively that Sakura felt like she could maybe risk teasing the assassin about it here and there. Sometimes she couldn't help but say something snarky because every time Temari went on a date Sakura had to hide in a secret panic room that Temari had had constructed in Gaara’s house. Easiest thing to do when that happened was to catch up on her reading.

All her Doki Doki books had gone into the furnace straight away, though, so there wasn't much besides medical scrolls and textbooks. Sometimes instead of reading she would think about her future, or come up with outlandish scenarios. You could take the romance novels away from the girl but their legacy persisted and the only real target of it all was the one man Sakura had any romantic experience with, even if that man was not entirely human. If the thought of Gaara riding into town on a white horse and demanding her hand in marriage before the whole village made her laugh to herself, then the more realistic imaginings of him staring up at a starry night sky and thinking of her made her sigh.

Separation had, oddly, made him feel closer. Without all the messiness of hormones, of course. She often wished she could ask his advice when she first began running into villagers that feared her. Everyone knew she should be dead and while they agreed that sacrificing girls was abhorrent, many people saw her as a precursor to doom for Konoha no matter what the council said. Every so often she was spat at, or people made signs to ward off evil when she passed. Once she was denied service in a small restaurant on her lunch break. Temari and Tsunade both were of the mind that she should either ignore the idiots or mess with their heads. That wasn't Sakura's way: first she got angry, then—later, privately—she got sad. Gaara would have understood, having had a lifetime of fear and reverence directed at him, and she figured he had interesting insights about it. Assuming she could get him to say something, but in her fantasy scenarios he was a bit more approachable.

"Sakura, right? I asked that guy over there who the pink haired girl was and they knew right away. You're a lot cuter than I expected. Especially in that dress." A smiling blond man, probably around her age, looked down at her with an eagerness that confused her. She saw what had to be the most interesting dimples on either cheek before taking a step back to put some distance between them. Close talkers were a minor pet peeve for her. Getting a good look at him, his dark clothes were a bit rumpled given Ino’s request family come dressed at least semi-formally.

"Uh, thank you?" She was used to being known, at this point, but usually the reaction was a bit less
exuberant. Frankly, most people who didn't know her already weren't going out of their way to find the failed sacrifice. If it weren't for Tsunade, some of her patients would have asked for a different medic as well.

"Like, you don't even know! I've tried to imagine what you looked like and I figured you'd be a lot tougher. But wow, now that I see you…"

This was getting less charming as he continued talking. He was blond haired and blue eyed so he might be a Yamanaka, but Sakura thought she had met just about every one of those over the years that were even vaguely close in age to her and Ino.

"And you are?" Sakura backed up another step and grabbed her stole with both hands to make sure the man didn't try to shake hers.

The smile he continued to give looked warm and friendly, but also oddly sharp. "Oh sorry, Naruto Uzumaki. I see people all over the place and they all seem to have jobs. Is there anything I can do to help? Carry a table? Stir a pot? Help people to their seats? I get antsy if I don't have something to do."

With all that energy he would probably be a menace if she didn't give him some busywork. "Um, I suppose you could be an usher, since TenTen is probably going to stick with Hinata and Ino… just help anyone who looks confused to a seat. I guess."

"Yes, boss!" Naruto said with a grin, rubbing at his short spikey hair, and Sakura found herself smiling back despite herself. Weird guy.

***

The ceremony was a blur. Sakura had already been through the rehearsal of it the day before and after reaching her spot she found her mind wandering. People in the audience blubbered, others looked on with a mix of boredom and vague happiness. Maybe some were remembering their own wedding, or meditating on how much stronger this would make both families commercially.

Sakura wondered if, had she been in Ino's place, would she be able to marry someone she didn't necessarily love but definitely was friends with and respected a great deal. There was also the non-minimal issue of the question she had to answer once Gaara returned. Most certainly she respected (and feared, always a touch of that) Gaara. Given the experiences they had shared and the time they had spent together, they weren't precisely friends but there was a bond there that was much closer than she felt to most people.

Was it love? If not, could it become love? Ino had pointed out practically from day one that a normal date with a normal boy couldn't compete with the intensity that marked her interactions with Gaara. She had been mulling these questions over for months and on any given day the answer fell on a spectrum that was broad enough to carry it either way. As the officiant droned on about the nature of love, Sakura found herself ticking off boxes in her mind slowly. Patient, kind, generous… that wasn't the love Sakura knew. More like covetousness, persistence, and hunger—but perhaps that was merely the dark side of the moon. Gaara had proved both to her and himself that he could be more than the monster he had been branded, so why couldn't he find greater capacity in himself to relate to others as well? The lighter side of love was possible for him.
A shiver that had nothing to do with the draft coming from a nearby shuttered opening into the barn rocked Sakura and had her snapping her head to attention and subtly scanning the crowd. Did she wish him here so strongly that he had appeared? No glimpse of rust red hair greeted her, just a tiny wave from that weird Naruto dude who seemed more interested in staring at her than at the bride and groom. She rolled her eyes and tried to come back to the present. Straightening her spine, she formed the vacant smile and relaxed posture that Ino had demanded of her bridesmaids to the point of forcing them to practice standing for hours on end last week. At the time it had been an easy thing to humor her, but now she was glad she could do it without thinking.

Thinking was going to get her in trouble.

Before she knew it, Ino and Chouji were marching hand in sweaty hand down the aisle and back into the house while people clapped around them. After they had made it nearly out of the barn, the rest of the wedding party made their way out. The barn was going to be converted into a reception area as soon as the clapping and general buzz of interest passed. Weirdly, Sakura realized a rather serious looking Temari wasn't moving from her position near the stove that she had immediately resumed as soon as people stood in their seats. Sakura, last of the bridesmaids, linked arms with Kiba and tried to keep him from walking too fast and stepping on the heels of TenTen and Lee down the narrow path through the snow. TenTen, bless her, was patting the hand of a very emotional Lee and Sakura was glad she didn't have to deal with that mess.

As soon as it was socially acceptable, Sakura dropped Kiba's arm and he immediately jumped the line of groomsmen to punch Shikamaru in the arm and in general successfully make Hinata extremely uncomfortable as she politely listened to his plans to prank Chouji during the reception. Having been abandoned to the end of the line and without her normal escort, Sakura felt oddly exposed. So when someone pulled her to the side, hand immediately covering her mouth, she didn't have enough time to even scream.

She did, however, bite down as hard as possible on the hand covering her face until she tasted blood. The world was a mass of white as she was dragged somewhere dark and then suddenly let go.

"You've made a huge mistake! Kill me now or bring me back, you're going to die either way." Sakura said, panting from the exertion of flexing her whole body against her captor. She wiped what was no doubt his blood from her face, and spat on the ground.

Pinpricks of light allowed Sakura's eyes to adjust and finally note that she was in a small toolshed, which seemed a strange place to kidnap someone to given it was full of weapons.

"It's an unconvincing argument." Gaara's distinctive voice caused Sakura to feel light headed on top of her rapidly beating heart. "There are far more alternatives than killing you or bringing you back."

***

He had allowed her to break through his defenses and pierce his skin. A bit of pain was only fair given he had been forced to delay his promised return. Kankuro's difficulties in Suna had been complex and simply murdering the opposition until everyone came around to his way of thinking wasn't going to be a successful application of force. There were debates, spaces for elders to express their doubts and displeasure, and then—as with all things Suna—a few highly public battles to the death. Kankuro, who had always been dismissed as the weakest of the siblings, had proven himself a deadly opponent and that had gone a long way to winning the respect of the senior clergy as they
stood at the moment. What was left of them.

Gaara knew it was going to take more than a simple pronouncement to change decades upon
decades of tradition, but he had had some recent practice at diplomacy that didn't involve blood and,
as much as it galled him to say, Naruto was also a help. For the people that couldn't be intellectually
appealed to or physically dominated by the Suna siblings, sometimes the fox would step in and flip a
moral switch that he particularly had access to in others. Naruto's mercy and Gaara's brutality made
for the ultimate push and pull, and the village of assassins was finally on the right track.

Which left one other task before Gaara could decide which next steps were necessary in his life. He
licked blood from where Sakura had torn his flesh on the inside of his middle finger and Shukaku
trilled in happiness in the back of his mind. She was still strong, attacking with her whole body even
when the odds were against her, and she wore a dead prey animal around her shoulders. He spoke to
drown out the cheerfully bloodthirsty nonsense the tanuki was spewing.

"You look well."

Apparently, she wasn't in the mood for pleasantries. "Why, and I really hope you have a very good
reason, would you kidnap me and not just come up to me at the reception like a normal person and
let me know you had come back?!"

There were so many people out there and there would have been no way to secure her attention
privately. It had made sense in the moment as the opportunity arose, but then Naruto had been telling
him for months that he needed to think more like a normal human man and less like a militaristic
demon host. It was hard to unlearn the training of a lifetime.

"Is there anywhere on this property that isn't crawling with people?" He felt like that question
encapsulated his dilemma. Sakura softened her expression slightly, but she still looked incredibly
displeased, arms crossed. "I've been surrounded by the people of Suna for weeks on end. I'm not in
the mood for more people."

"And yet you needed me right here at this very second."

He didn't hesitate on that note. "Yes. Precisely." That answer went a long way to mollifying her as
she gave a deep sigh and took a step towards him.

"Let me see that finger. I know I drew blood, somehow." Gently, she bridged the last of the distance
between them and turned his palm over in her hands to find the already partially healed tear of flesh.
He was stronger than she had seen him last, his body knitting skin together practically as she
watched with a fascination he was happy to provide to her. "Your body is incredible," she murmured
and then looked up at him with pink cheeks in the half light.

What he wanted to do was kiss her, and gather her body to his own with a crushing pressure. The
desire to simply absorb her into himself was so strong he knew he had to continue to let her make the
moves. Too long away from Sakura had given him an edge of desperation he didn't like, and it was
testing his control more sorely than he had counted on.

"Your hair is shorter..." she said, reaching out to touch the unruly strands before realizing what she'd
done and withdrawing her hand with a start.

"A compromise," Gaara murmured, eyes flicking down to her lips before meeting her eyes again, "I
didn't wish to shave my head."

Sakura smiled to herself, "Who wanted you to shave your head? Kankuro?"
"Naruto." Gaara was swaying towards her, even as she took a step back. This isn't what he wanted to talk about. He didn't want to talk at all.

"Not a Yamanaka, then..." She didn't take long assembling the information and arrived at the endpoint with a sick look. "He's like you, isn't he?"

Gaara scowled, displeased the intimate mood was dissipating all because of the fox. Naruto knew how to be annoying even when he wasn't physically present. "He's not like me. But he is a demon host."

She was brooding on the possibilities of Naruto loose among the wedding guests, judging by how she kept looking off into the distance. Her hands were clenched in determined fists, but she could just as easily have been steeling herself against the cold. A gust of wind blew through the shack and Gaara was tempted to seal it up with sand. The ground was frozen and his powers would be sluggish to respond in these conditions, but he could do it in a matter of moments regardless. They would lose all the light though, so he refrained. It might bring up bad memories of the last time he had locked Sakura away with her friend.

"I can't do anything about the both of you being here, crashing my best friend's wedding, but swear to me that neither of you will cause any harm."

"Define harm," Gaara countered, wondering if she was implying they had poor control over themselves. Clearly, if he and Naruto were going to destroy one another it would have happened prior to this event.

Sakura, shivering visibly from the cold, drew her stole closer to her throat. "Don't do anything... supernatural. I'd say act normal, but I don't think I'll get much value out of that considering I have no idea what normal is for your friend..."

"... he's not my friend..."

"... and normal for you is, frankly, weird."

This is not how he imagined their reunion. To be fair, there was probably no way it was going to be touching given Sakura's temperament. She didn't have a tendency towards sentimentality in regards to him, which was fine by Gaara as that softness would have been foreign to him. But perhaps, buried deep, he'd hoped she would have shown at least a little bit of overt affection. He had no idea if she was going to reject his suit or not, and while he was confident she would make the correct decision, he couldn't be absolutely certain until it came to pass. His feelings had not changed.

In fact, his feelings had intensified to the point of pain.

"Are we going to stand here all day, or are we going to head to the reception?"

He hadn't actually planned on joining the crowds. When he had caught Temari's eye and signaled for her to hold position he had figured that was an much contact as was needed. Originally, he was going to grill Sakura for an answer as to the nature of their relationship, but the interrogation had gone awry as soon as she had bit him and gotten his blood pumping. She accused him of acting erratically, but all his moves were calculated and only she created anomalous reactions in him.

"I would rather stand here."

"I didn't really mean—" Sakura sighed and continued to shiver. He watched her try to keep a cap on her growing ill temper. "If you don't want to come to the wedding, what do you plan to do?"
"I was going to examine the residence you and Temari have been gifted."

It was her next words, clearly ripped from a reluctant place in her mind, that caused him pause. "Maybe I would like it if you joined me, tonight. At the party, I mean. You might even enjoy yourself. That Naruto guy seems to have made himself at home already. And if he gets out of hand you're the only one who could do anything about it."

She ended her offer with an argument towards practicality, but the way she was red in the face and unable to meet his eyes told him there was probably more emotional sincerity there than as a mere check against Naruto.

Naruto had asked him once what drove him to make peace when the demons inside of them were demanding one another's blood? The fox and tanuki had always been in opposition to one another and it was accepted as the way of the world in their circle. They were sitting by the entrance to a system of caves where Saiken's host was currently hiding away from the world and knew it was going to take a lot more than a show of force to get the slug to rejoin the world and participate in the new society that Naruto and Gaara were building for the tailed demons.

Gaara had shrugged at the time, unwilling to mention Sakura in case something befell him and he couldn't return. It wouldn't do to make her even more of a target than she already was. It was Kankuro, his idiot brother, who had mentioned to Naruto "Gaara'a pink haired betrothed". Then the damn fox wouldn't shut up about her, and precious people, and love taming the most vicious of beasts, until Gaara was closer to fighting him than when they had met again in summer.

But even as he had scoffed, there wasn't a good explanation why Gaara was about to agree to sitting around a bunch of people he had no interest in merely because Sakura asked it of him. Was this being tamed? He didn't particularly like the thought of that, and neither did Shukaku. "I'll join you."

Pleased, and possibly also motivated by her shivering, Sakura slid closer to him until he noted how she smelled like floral soap, but she seemed unable to take that last step. "Thank you."

"After your party, when we are back at my residence. I expect an answer." He appreciated that she didn't pretend ignorance to his demand, but he didn't like the alarm in her eyes that rivaled the moment he had grabbed her from outside.

She couldn't meet his eyes. "What if I need more time?"

"Would more time change the outcome? Whatever you decide this evening is sufficient. Lack of an answer will be considered a no, in case you felt like a technicality would save you trouble." He turned around to open the door to the shed, and the blast of cold air didn't seem to bother Sakura anymore now that he'd given her a deadline to decide if she accepted him or not.

Usually the closure Gaara got was rather deadly, so this had its own novelty to it.

***

"Sakura, dance with me again!" Naruto grabbed her by the hands and swung her around, surprising her into taking an awkward breath that made it hard to follow him at the speed he was going.

Naruto, as it turned out, was as sociable as Gaara was reticent. Gaara, while agreeing to come to the reception, had taken up a spot in the corner next to a now empty table and seemed content to watch.
Sometimes his eyes were on her, sometimes Naruto, but more often than not he was simply observing life as it unfolded. From the kids sneaking sips of wine from drunken relatives, to people dancing to the band made up of Yamanaka relatives that sometimes played reels for spring festivals, or even any number of conversations happening over the food—there was lots of people watching that could be done. There had already even been a fight as two Akimichi uncles got into it over who said what about who's mother.

Oddly enough, it had been Naruto who broke the fight up, easily separating the two stout men as if they were scrapping children. Sakura hoped no one would find it weird.

"I need to catch my breath!" Looking over, spotting Hinata fretting next to the dessert table, she dragged Naruto over to forcibly join his hand to Hinata's. "Hinata, you should dance with my friend here. Don't worry if you don't know the steps, neither does he!"

"Hey!" Naruto laughed while Hinata seemed to find the floor far more interesting than she had before Sakura had approached.

Just because her friend was feeling shy, wasn't good enough for Sakura to save her from the situation she had planted her in. "Have fun! I'm going to go check on someone." Naruto's eyes flicked to Gaara and that sunshine bright smile of his broke out before he dragged an only partially willing Hyuuga to the dance in progress.

"Did you eat anything at least?" Flushed and sweating in her long-sleeved dress that had seemed so practical in the cold weather earlier, Sakura sat heavily in the chair next to Gaara.

"No." Gaara blinked slowly, and Sakura wondered if he was tired. It seemed he had stamina for days, maybe even weeks, of grueling sustained travel but put him in a room full of people and he looked like a shriveled plum after a few hours.

They watched the lines of dancers weave around one another and Sakura thought about how when—if—she got married that it probably wouldn't be like this. There would be confusion, acceptance, then probably fear and years of careful interactions with the people of Konoha after the truth of Gaara came to light. Some people would pity her, others might envy her, but everyone would have opinions and feelings and mostly likely they wouldn't be simply happy for her.

When she was sinking into her own mind at work sometimes Tsunade would loudly slap a surface near her to see if she would jump out of her skin. Then she would scold Sakura for thinking about herself too much. There was no Tsunade in front of her to wake her up out of her brooding here, but even she knew she was thinking too hard on this.

Yes or no. It should be simple.

It occurred to her that her relationship with Gaara only had two speeds, and fast had been too fast while his absence had been as troubling. There had never been a time where they took things at a normal pace. What would normal even look like?

Edging over, curious in spite of herself, Sakura covered the hand that Gaara was resting casually on the tabletop. He looked over at her with questions in his eyes, slightly accusatory. "What does this mean?"

"Does it need to mean anything? Can't I try to hold your hand?"

He shook his head briefly, "It means something; you're being disingenuous."

And he was right, damn him, but she didn't want to be caught out so quickly. On the bright side, he
wasn't pulling away. "You could still let me enjoy it a moment. Is it unpleasant?"

"No," he sighed slightly, more a huff of air in this drafty corner. And Sakura wondered if perhaps his feelings had never diminished despite the separation. Given their associations and her close observation of his body language she'd almost think he was a bit forlorn.

Lacing her fingers with his, she asked him a question that chilled her more than the sweat on her body. "What would you do if I said I didn't want to marry you?"

Gaara watched the dancers laugh and stomp their way through the song. Naruto was pulling Hinata along about as aggressively as Lee was pulling TenTen and it occurred to Sakura that those two men would probably get along well. Gaara's voice was flat but sure as he answered her question.

"I would find another residence to claim for myself, and Temari would continue to be your guardian. I would perform my duties to Konoha as per the contract and split my time with Suna when needed. There's additional correspondence I'm obligated to as the rest of the jinchuuriki establish themselves in their territories. There's much I can accomplish while others sleep." He paused. "I would attempt to avoid interfering with your life, but I'm unsure if I'd be successful. I wouldn't want to be successful."

And essentially, that's what it boiled down to for Sakura as well. Being with him made her uneasy in more ways than one, but if he lived in Konoha could she really stay away? Did she want to?

"I'd like it be a long engagement at least." As she withdrew her hand, she found that Gaara wouldn't let her. Instead, their hands dangled between them, tightly entwined in Gaara's shaking grip. "Ow, ease up a little bit. It's not a competition."

He was breathing deliberately, like he was trying to calm himself, and his eyes were opened too wide. This was a moment to be happy, but Sakura wondered anew if she had signed her own death warrant instead. This arrogant, powerful, confusing man that she was connected to was never going to be normal.

"I'd suggest going home, but the last wagon full of people left ages ago so I'll probably have to spend the night here or at the Yamanaka's." It was late and Sakura was suddenly tired, all her tight emotions draining now that the focus of them had been essentially resolved. New problems and worries were for tomorrow. "Ino's mother told all the bridesmaids they were welcome to set up in Ino's room tonight since she'd be staying here at the Akimichi farm from now on. And while I would think it wouldn't need to be said, I will absolutely say that you cannot be in that room with us."

He refused to let go of her, and he also wasn't saying anything or even looking Sakura's way and it was disturbing her deeply.

"I didn't expect you to gush about how you're the luckiest man in Konoha, or sweep me up into your arms, but it would be nice to know that you have at least a little bit of emotion regarding the fact that you win and I agree to—"

Since they were already joined at the hand, when Gaara pulled her to her feet and kissed her she didn't have any time to do much besides let him. The dance was reaching its finale and as soon as people broke away from the floor no doubt they would be spotted. Sakura, kissing some strange man in the corner. Another log to fuel the bonfire of her infamy. There was a strand of social anxiety in her mind that told her there would be repercussions from this. However, the dominant part of her mind was telling her that if she moved her fingers just so with her free hand then she could pull up the side of his jacket and possibly feel some skin near his hips.
Chemistry was a good enough place to start, Sakura thought, when it came to finding the lighter side of Gaara's love. Whatever he thought love to really be. Seemed to be a little backwards to her, starting on a path to romance through engaging herself to a near stranger but then she had never taken the easy way.

He didn't want to let go of her hand even when she yanked on it none too gently to reclaim it, and Sakura thought a little sadly that maybe he wasn't so much a stranger to her as she thought. She knew this man, even if he had secret parts to him that were ferocious and frightening. There was plenty about her that he didn't know yet, either. Maybe he wouldn't like what he learned; maybe he would change his mind. It was hard to tell what was a legitimate worry and what was invented through catastrophic thinking. Glancing over, she saw he was smirking as she failed to extract herself. Everything had to be a battle. The prospect was tiring and exciting in equal measure.

"If you're going to make a spectacle of us, the least you could do is let me sit down. Or get me a drink."

"Again," Gaara said, expression bland but still betraying an inner intensity through the stiffness of his posture that she hoped she could match someday soon. More than anything she wanted to approach him with close to equality in all things, being competitive by nature. "There are more choices, than letting you go or getting you a drink."

From the way he finally let her hand go to instead trace a meandering line along her exposed clavicle, she could guess where his thoughts had strayed.

"I may have said you won, but I don't believe I implied I was surrendering." Sakura said, swatting at his hand and sitting with folded arms. But the slightly coy smile she gave him softened the rejection. Maybe some things could be less a battle and more a game.

"Semantics," Gaara said, but he didn't push the issue even as his eyes raked over her. He sank back down into his own chair, only to reach over and drag both Sakura and her chair closer until their thighs were touching.

Laughing to cover her awkward fluttery feelings, Sakura wondered why she had missed this at all when he was always going to be the one setting the pace despite her protests. Rocking her head to the side, she rested on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](https://wwwarchive.org) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!