How Long is Forever?
by aoutrance

Summary

Time Travel AU. Sakura has come back to do good deeds and fix some shit. Not posted in chronological order.
A Plan Is Set In Motion

Chapter Notes

so this went from a small idea to a giant ... thing. it is a nonlinear narrative, written as a series of scenes rather than a singular, cohesive plot. all the irritation of an experimental structure without the fun of footnotes and different font colors.

See the end of the chapter for more notes


"Henge!"

In an instant she was taller, bigger and certainly bustier. Her target was Jiraiya and Sakura felt that it was necessary to use a modified version of Naruto's sexy-no-jutsu for ultimate success. Her transformation didn't include flirtatious clouds, but she now had all the necessary bounciness required to get any old pervert's attention.

Sakura left the narrow alleyway she had ducked into, doing her best to fix her now awkward center of balance as she ambled toward the civilian marketplace. Jiraiya was there now, hosting a book signing and she didn't think she would get a more perfect opportunity to approach him. She had a copy of Icha Icha Paradise with her, hastily purchased earlier that week once she gotten wind of his book tour.

Ignoring the wolf-whistles from a construction crew across the street, she entered the bookstore and affected an excited look as she looked around the small space. A middle-aged man approached her in greeting.

"Welcome, miss! Can I help you find anything?"

"Ah, well, I had heard there was a special book signing happening here today ..." Sakura bit her lip nervously, hoping she had timed it correctly.

"Oh, you're here for Jiraiya-san! You're in luck, he was just about to pack up. I'm sure he wouldn't mind one more book." With this, the shop owner directed her to the far corner of the building, where Jiraiya was nearly napping against a table filled with copies his newest book.

"Jiraiya-san! You have a fan waiting for you!" He twitched and snorted himself awake. Sakura internally grinned.

It's a good thing I have seen in him action or I would never believe he was one of the Sannin.

She allowed herself to smile widely and leaned forward over the table to shake his hand in both of hers, trying to restrain her giggles as she saw his gaze zero in on her prodigious cleavage.

Men. It's like taking candy from a baby.

"Jiraiya-sama, it is such an honor to meet you! Icha Icha Paradise has been my number one favorite book since it was published. I would love for you to sign my copy."
He blinked in surprise at her enthusiasm. "A-ah? Really? I don't think I've met a prettier fan of my work. What's your name, sweetheart?"

She forced herself to giggle coquettishly. "You can call me Misaki, Jiraiya-sama." She handed him the book, which had been carefully broken in to preserve her cover of his biggest fan. Sakura was nothing if not thorough in everything she did. She even managed to splash a few tear stains on pages with the saddest scenes.

"Misaki-chan. What a beautiful name for a beautiful young lady!" He scribbled his signature on the first page with with a large, looping hand. "You wouldn't be interested in telling me all about your favorite parts of the book over tea, would you? A good author is always interested in feedback from dedicated fans ..." Jiraiya waggled his eyebrows at her in an exaggerated leer and it was all she could do not to burst out laughing.

"He's done all the hard work for me - I never thought it would be so easy to get him alone!

"Oh! Would that really be possible? I wouldn't want to impose. I'm sure you must be so busy," she said, trying to look uncertain.

He leaned back against the table and smiled widely at her. "I was just about to leave, Misaki-chan. It's only my good fortune that such a lovely companion would come along at just the right time." Sakura felt a quick jolt of fear at his words - did he suspect? She peered at his face under her henge'd bangs and saw only sincerity (and lust) written there. Still, she would proceed with as much caution as she could.

"In that case, I accept. Where would you like to go? There's a good teahouse in this neighborhood, not too far from here ..." She glanced at the shop owner who was now bustling around trying valiantly to pretend that he wasn't eavesdropping.

Ah, village gossip. New scoop, Jiraiya hit on a woman and it actually worked!

"Lead on, my beautiful blossom. I am at your disposal." He stood and held out first her book and then his arm for her. She gingerly took it, making sure to lean in closely and accidentally brush her breast against his bicep. She could feel his muscles tense and she hoped it was only because of the sensation and not because he felt that there was anything amiss.

They left the bookshop behind, strolling through the streets as she casually steered him toward a very discreet teashop she had scoped out earlier in the week. Sakura was not a woman who cared for tea ceremony, but she was a talented shinobi who understood the necessity for hiding in plain sight. This particular shop was nicely hidden between two residential buildings and the service was deferential and polite.

She just hoped it would help her avoid a confrontation once she dropped her intel right into Jiraiya's lap.

Chapter End Notes

In this instance, the tea house is more of a very relaxed ochaya. Not quite catering to only exclusive clientele with geisha entertainers, but quality in a way that means very few shinobi would stop by.
Jiraiya was generally not a man to look a gift horse in the mouth. He had a date with a beautiful young lady who professed to be his biggest fan. There was nothing at all suspicious about this encounter - except for the fact that it never, ever happened to him. While his books did relatively well (he suspected that Kakashi was a good third of his sales), it was more of a hobby and a cover for his constant wandering. His book signings were usually a way for him to establish a short term stay in a village. He didn’t necessarily need this excuse in Konoha, but Sarutobi had all but insisted that he keep up the ruse while he was here to deliver one of his infrequent reports.

So when he was approached by Misaki, he was overjoyed and slightly wary. They arrived at the teahouse she had mentioned and were ushered to a table by a serene older woman wearing an exquisite dark blue kimono.

He appreciated the value of her choice in venue and hoped that his hunch was wrong. “So, Misaki-chan. Who is your favorite character in Icha Icha Paradise?”

She laughed softly behind her hand. “Why, Jiraiya-sama, that is such an unfair question! How could I just choose one?” The older woman returned, setting down a tray that carried a ceramic teapot, matcha and two small cups. She politely inquired about their need for anything else and when they demurred, she left them with a smile.

Misaki smiled at him and said, “Well, to be honest, I was always more of a fan of your background kunoichi, Mitsuko. She was always a source of support for Kimiko when she needed it and that sort of relationship is something everyone should have and value.”

He was taken aback at her response. While he did not expect her to extol the virtues of his written eroticism, he had never once thought that anyone would consider background characters important to them. Jiraiya considered this as he watched her pour the water into their cups, whisking the matcha into its desired whipped state.

“I don’t think I have heard that one before. Most of my more, ah, exuberant fans are taken by the whirlwind romance and ninja intrigues.”

“Well, I imagine many of those fans aren’t actually shinobi. Or women.” Misaki grinned, looking like she was laughing at a private joke as she pushed his finished tea across the table to him.

He looked down at it, but didn’t drink. “You’re right. In fact, you might be the first woman who has admitted to reading Icha Icha at all. So tell me why you’re really here.” He watched her eyes narrow and then his gaze was helplessly ensnared as she crossed her arms under that impressive set of breasts. He idly wondered if she was related to Tsunade-hime.
“I’m not sure I understand your meaning, Jiraiya-sama.”

“No woman, especially one as beautiful as you are, has ever approached me without an ulterior motive, Misaki-chan. I’m just wondering what yours is.”

She huffed, blowing her bangs out of her face with a breath. “Is is so hard to believe that I may actually enjoy your books?”

“Actually … yes. They make good money, but I know they’re no great feats of literature. I write them that way for a reason.”

She leaned back into her seat and smiled. “I’m glad to see you’re not as foolish as your appearance would indicate. I have something for you, Jiraiya-sama. Something you may be more interested in than these.” She motioned at her breasts and then started searching through the pouch attached to her leg.

At her admittance, he was tense and slightly disappointed. He knew that this meeting was too good to be true, but it had not stopped him from hoping otherwise. He was expecting an attack, perhaps genjutsu due to their location and was startled when she exclaimed, “Aha! There it is.”

Misaki looked triumphant as she extended a scroll toward him, hands placed palm up in a non-threatening manner.

He didn’t take it. “What’s this?”

“This is a scroll containing all the information I have acquired about the group known as Akatsuki. I’m sure the great Jiraiya-sama has heard of them.” She smirked at him, green eyes glowing with humor.

He let his face go blank. How did she-? Who was she?

“Jiraiya-sama, let me be frank. I am an independent contractor. I left my village because I did not want to be party to the political maneuvering that happens to any higher level shinobi. Despite this, I find myself constantly bumping heads with these guys and their motives as just a mercenary force are suspect. The only family I have left live here, within the protection of Konoha. I want to keep them safe.”

It was hard to believe she was telling the truth, but when he looked into her eyes as she spoke of her family, he felt the sincerity in her tone. No matter what other hidden agenda she may have, this was a woman would do anything for those she cared about. Apparently “anything” included deceiving a Sage-level shinobi into a tea house on false pretenses.

He took the scroll and unraveled it, scowling as he only uncovered a large seal and blank space. She rolled her eyes as his annoyance and bit her thumb, wiping the blood across the length of the seal. A quick hand motion and the ink on the page began to run together into a more legible format.

“I’ve never seen this sort of seal before. Who taught you how to do this?”

“I made it. I have had a lot of time on my hands to study my fuinjutsu, Jiraiya-sama. It’s a hobby.”

The list was extensive, covering names, Hidden Village affiliations, known abilities and-

“Favorite foods? How the hell did you get that?”

“What? Oh, Hidan? Would you believe that he hit on me while I was having dinner at an inn in
Hidden Waterfall? He’s such a loathsome little cockroach, but he was quite the talker as he tried to get me into bed. It’s too bad his creepy partner showed up when he did - I’m sure I could have gotten more out of him.”

He stared at her, slightly wide-eyed. “You do know how dangerous these men are, right? Every one of Akatsuki is an S-Class criminal.”

She let out an unladylike snort, at odds with her delicate features. “I know that. I have not engaged them physically because I’m actually pretty fond of living. There are other ways to gather information, as I’m sure you well know, Jiraiya-sama.” She was teasing him now.

He could get used to this, but- “Why me? Why now?”

Misaki sobered quickly, her face becoming as blank as his. “Because Konoha is home to the strongest bijuu and he needs to be protected. Akatsuki has something planned for all the jinchuriki, something I have not yet been able to discover. You are the best bet I have for getting this information to the right people.”

“How can I trust you?”

“I have nothing to offer you but my word. Verify the information I have given you if you can. I want to help.” She looked him calmly, knowing that he had little choice but to do just that. If this intel was accurate, it could be a world of difference to the defense of his beloved village.

“What are you going to do now?” He needed to be able to contact her - someone with this level of infiltration skills would be invaluable to his spy network.

“I’ll be … around. I will send my summons to you if I find anything else of use. I don’t think it’s a good idea for us to meet in person again.”

“Summons? How will I know it’s you?” Misaki just grinned at him and made several hand seals, disappearing in a cloud of smoke. She left behind a swirl of leaves and a very affronted looking Siamese cat.

“Ah, hello.”

The cat glanced at him briefly and then began washing its paw. “Tch. Figures she just dumps me here with another creepy old man. I bet she left the bill too.”


“Whatever. I’m Yasutomo. I’ll be your point of contact with … Misaki.” Jiraiya noticed the pause before the kunoichi’s name, but didn’t comment. He wasn’t surprised that she had given him a false one.

“So, Yasutomo. How do you feel about toads?”

Chapter End Notes
Maybe Sakura's/Misaki's cat summons is channeling Arakita. Maybe. The world will never know.


How Do I Begin to Explain Haruno Sakura?

Chapter Summary

Sakura-chan is so great! One time, she punched me in the face. It was awesome.

The door to his office slammed open with bang.

“Hey, jiji!” Naruto rushed in and launched himself onto the desk, landing in a crouch and smudging the trade agreement documents from Iwa. “Can our talk be really fast today? I have to go meet Sakura-chan! She’s going to show me and Sasuke something really cool! Did you know Konoha has a library full of ninja stuff?” Naruto looked up at Sarutobi with wide blue eyes.

He looks more and more like Minato every day.

Sarutobi sighed and ineffectually tried to pull the papers out from under Naruto’s foot without tearing them. “Hello to you too, Naruto. Yes, I did know we had a library ‘full of ninja stuff’. It’s been there since before you were born.”

“How come you never told me? I have to know all this stuff if I’m gonna be Hokage someday!” He toppled backwards when Sarutobi gave a particularly violent tug on the paperwork, landing on one knee. Naruto gave a huff of annoyance and sat down next to the desk. “Sakura-chan says I hafta know everything that goes on in the village and be the strongest ninja! This is really important, jiji.”

Sarutobi was surprised, to put it mildly. It had been nearly a month since he had last seen Naruto for their “chats”, but the majority of them had revolved around ramen, admonishment for his pranks and how his academy lessons were going (abysmally). He had not anticipated anything different this time around.

“You’re right. These are very important things that are covered in your Academy lectures. Do you have your progress report? And who is Sakura-chan?”

Naruto threw a crumpled envelope up onto the desk. “Sakura-chan is my best friend! She’s really smart and she has really pretty pink hair and she lets me come over for dinner sometimes …” Sarutobi allowed Naruto’s babbling to wash over him as he broke the seal on the envelope and removed the report inside. He stared at it. And then stared some more.

“No! Like you would be able to tell even if I did open it!” He stuck out his tongue. “Sakura-chan has been helping me train, anyway. The work is really easy when she explains it!”

“Is Sakura an older student? A genin, maybe?” Sarutobi hadn’t heard of any pink-haired graduates recently, or pink-haired kunoichi at all.

“Nah, Sakura-chan is in my class! She is totally my best friend, even though Sasuke says she’s his best friend! She said that I had a lot of uh, potential, I think?” Naruto’s face screwed up in thought,
trying to remember her exact words. “When I told her that I was gonna be Hokage one day, she
didn’t even laugh like everyone else does. She just believed me.”

His voice was quiet by the end, reveling in the fact that he had someone with that much faith in
him. His first friend! Now he had to doubly make sure he was Hokage!

Sarutobi sat back in his chair, looking at Naruto as he was lost in thought. “She sounds like a
special girl. I’d like to meet her sometime.”

“W-what? Oh, sure. But not today! Sakura-chan said she had a surprise for us and I don’t want to
make her wait. I gotta go!” With that, Naruto stood and rushed back out the door, no doubt heading
toward the library.

Sarutobi heard a laugh from behind him. Jiraiya stepped through the window, where he had been
waiting until Naruto had left. “Sakura-chan, huh? Sounds like my godson is starting early.”

“Jiraiya, he’s eight. Let us hope he is more like Minato than he is like you.”

“Sensei, you wound me.” He held up a scroll, covered in blood and ink. “Speaking of ladies, I met
a very interesting one this afternoon …”
The Bystander Sees The Best of The Game (岡目八目)

Chapter Summary

This takes place after Chapter 3, but not immediately so. Future!Sakura in bb!Sakura's body meets more of her precious people for a second time.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“You’re going to lose, you know.”

Shikamaru looked up, squinting at the sunlight coming from behind the figure that spoke. A girl his age stood half-turned towards him and his father as they played their weekly shogi game. She was dressed in a dark red vest and black shorts with bandages wrapped from fingertip to elbow, looking for all the world like she was entitled to be there.

She came by that entitlement honestly; Shikaku chose to play in this area because it was part of a public venue and therefore made it more distracting for Shikamaru to focus on the necessary strategy to win. Even at eight years old he knew not to underestimate how devious his father could be.

There was something familiar about this girl, though. She turned entirely to face them and blocked out the early morning sun shining in his eyes, allowing him to see her bright pink hair for the first time. He only knew of one person with hair that color, but it was definitely not her usual look. Instead of the long, flowing style he remembered from class, her hair was neatly wrapped into a braided bun with two senbon piercing it.

“Sakura-san? What are you doing here?” He frowned. “And how can you possibly tell I’ll lose?”

“I’m waiting for someone. And your opponent’s Yagura Castle defense is too strong for the meager amount of pieces you have left. You’ll lose in less than ten moves.”

His father laughed. “She’s got you there, Shikamaru-kun. I was waiting for you to see it yourself.”

Shikamaru scowled down at the board and then dropped his shoulders in defeat. “Ugh, it’s true. How troublesome.” He looked toward Sakura. “How did you know?”

“I read a lot, Shikamaru-san. Call it a hobby.”

He looked skeptical. “Reading about shogi strategies? That doesn’t seem likely.”

Sakura just scoffed at him, idly fingering the senbon in her hair. “Well, Shikamaru-san, you don’t know me. How would you know what’s likely or not?”

Shikaku’s eyes gleamed as he observed his son interact with the girl. He knew that Shikamaru would have figured out his game plan eventually, but he was very interested in how his classmate had managed it in a glance. Shikaku knew that there were quite a few exceptional characters in Shikamaru’s year at the Academy, not the least of them being the Kyuubi’s jinchuriki. He had never heard of this Sakura girl before, though. Surely a mind like hers would appeal to even his
lazy son? Shikamaru was just like him; he seemed to accidentally surround himself with brash, aggressive members of the opposite sex.

He interrupted their cute little snarkfest with an inward grin. “Sakura-chan, would you like to join us for a game? I can sit out if you’d like to show Shikamaru-kun how well you play.”

She looked startled to be addressed by him. “Ah, no. No, thank you, Nara-san. Like I mentioned before, I’m waiting for someone. I have to get some training in before classes start.” She motioned to her bandaged arms. “I’m looking to improve my taijutsu.”

Shikamaru looked even more skeptical now. “And you got up this early just to do that?”

“Well, no. I’ve been up since dawn training solo. This is the only time my teacher has available for my use.”

Shikaku felt a familiar chakra signature moving quickly toward their location. He said nothing, but he saw Sakura tense slightly.

*She already knows how to detect at her age? That’s impressive.*

He saw a flash of green dart in Sakura’s direction and rose to intervene, but she had already dropped in a crouch and blocked a kick with her glowing blue forearm. The green form backflipped smoothly and stood. Shikaku sat back, slightly bemused.

*Was that a chakra-charged defense? What in the world has this girl been working on? That sort of chakra control is far outside the realm of Academy lessons.*

“Ah, Sakura-chan! My most precious student! I see that I have kept you waiting! I will have to run 500 laps around Konoha for the delay!” Gai beamed at her, teeth sparkling merrily. Shikaku could swear he saw a rainbow form over his shoulder.

“Gai-sensei, I’m your *only* student. Don’t worry about being late, Shikamaru-san was keeping me entertained with his terrible shogi maneuvers.” Shikamaru’s eyes widened at the comment. Shikaku didn’t think he had ever seen his son look so insulted. He found it quite amusing.

Sakura had risen out of her crouch and gestured between the two at the shogi table and the smiling, posing man. “Shikamaru-san, this is my teacher, Maito Gai. Nara-san, as jonin commander, I’m sure you’re already acquainted.” Shikaku knew that Shikamaru was not one to brag about his father’s accomplishments, so Sakura’s comment was unexpected.

*This girl is just one surprise after another. I should keep an eye on her.*

“Shikaku-san! Are you and your son going to join Sakura-chan and myself in our youthful training on this beautiful morning?” Sakura’s eyebrows rose, but she just sighed in resignation at Gai’s overall being.

He was about to decline, but thought better of it. If he took advantage of this offer, he could further observe Sakura’s chakra usage. It didn’t hurt that Shikamaru looked absolutely horrified at the idea of training so early in the morning.

“Sure, Gai. Why not? I’m sure it would do Shikamaru-kun good to work up a healthy sweat every once in a while.”

Gai and Sakura agreed to meet them at training ground three and nimbly hopped away across the rooftops. Gai was chattering merrily at her about his “eternal rival” and Shikaku could only wonder
at what ridiculousness he had coerced Kakashi into this time.

“Dad, why did you agree to this torture?” He looked down at his son as they leisurely made their way toward the training grounds. “I’m pretty sure you hate extra training as much as I do.”

“Sometimes, Shikamaru-kun, we have to make a short-term sacrifice to gain a long-term advantage.”

Shikamaru was baffled by his father’s vague words, but he just followed him to the allotted training ground. This was going to be agony.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. I love the Naras, so uh, expect them to pop up whenever I can work them in.
Chapter Summary

Shikamaru learns a lesson. Girls rule, boys drool.

Chapter Notes

Honorifics are kept and changed and left out with specific purpose.

“Yosh! Sakura-chan, why don’t you spar with Shikamaru-kun? It will be a good way to see how you have progressed against your peers!” Gai gave her a thumbs up and gestured widely toward the middle of the training field.

Sakura huffed and finished her stretching with practiced ease. “Whatever you say, Gai-sensei. Yo, Shikamaru-san! I’m gonna go easy on you and keep my weights on, okay?”

She bounced on the balls of her feet, grinning in anticipation. Shikaku could see that that she was clearly excited about the prospect of a good fight. It was really no wonder that she got along so well with Maito Gai, who was the most enthusiastic shinobi he had ever met.

Shikamaru slouched toward her. “Meh, like I would be beaten by a girl.”

His father groaned internally when he saw Sakura’s eyes narrow at the taunt. Normally his son was very good at keeping his mouth shut until he had a better feel for his opponent’s abilities. A jonin like Gai didn’t have time to teach just anyone and Shikamaru should have known this. Something was off. He looked between Sakura and his son and was amused to see actual irritation on Shikamaru’s face; he was pretty sure it wasn’t just because of the impromptu training.

Sakura stared at Shikamaru for another moment before turning to Shikaku and bowing slightly. “Nara-san, please do not be offended when I beat your son into the ground for that comment.”

He snorted. “If you win a fair fight, how could I possibly take offense? Shikamaru-kun will have to take responsibility for his own words.”

She grinned at him and mimicked Gai’s thumbs up pose. “Hah! Even your dad is on my side, Shikamaru-san. Let’s do this. Taijutsu only!”

With that, Sakura blurred out of sight as Shikamaru’s eyes widened and he stuttered out, “H-hey! You didn’t say-,” when she appeared behind him mid-sentence and swept his legs out from under him.

“An enemy shinobi is not going to play by the rules, Shikamaru-chan.” He tumbled and rolled into a crouch, now looking exceptionally wary. Sakura stayed where she was, hands on her hips. “Are you ready to spar now? You’re lucky Gai-sensei is insistent on a sense of fair play when in training or this would be over already.”
“Don’t count me out just yet, Sakura-san. Everyone knows that men naturally have more strength and stamina. A shinobi will always win against a kunoichi.”

“The only men I see here are Gai-sensei and your father. You’re not even on my level, little boy!” Shikamaru’s mouth flattened into a thin line at this, but he did not respond.

Shikaku could see that they were intentionally baiting each other, but he was surprised that Sakura’s words were actually working against Shikamaru. It had been a while since he had seen his son spar against anyone outside the clan, but he was normally as level-headed as any Nara.

*He must still be annoyed by that shogi comment. Ah well, he’s only eight. He’ll grow from this experience. I’ll make sure of it.*

He could see Shikamaru considering his limited options. The Naras were not known taijutsu users, so his clan training would be relatively useless right now. He circled Sakura, looking for an opening where his slightly longer reach would give him an advantage. She let him complete one circuit before she lashed out with one arm, making contact against his blocking forearm and sending him back several feet. She stomped the ground, creating a massive fissure that Shikamaru had to jump to avoid. Before he could react, Sakura was *right there* and starting to pull back her arm to punch him in his *face* and she was going to *break his nose, oh my god-*

Sakura flicked him in the forehead and swept around his body, pulling his arms backward and forcing Shikamaru to his knees, his face inches from the crevice she had put into the earth.

“How is this girl still in the Academy? Normally they push talent like hers out as soon as possible.

“Sakura-chan, you have shown such youthful enthusiasm and sportsmanship this morning!” Gai looked like he was on the verge of tears and Shikaku shifted awkwardly next to him. Sakura dropped Shikamaru’s arms and smiled indulgently at Gai. “To celebrate, let me show you how to perform a Dynamic Entry!”

“Yes, Gai-sensei!”

Two blurs, one pink and one green, swept toward the training posts on the grounds, the Naras momentarily forgotten. Shikaku could see that Gai was working with some sort of weaponry, followed by a high roundhouse kick that landed against the posts with a loud THUNK. Sakura excitedly pulled one of the senbon out of her bun and waved it around, making large swooping motions with her arms. She grinned as Gai threw his head back and laughed until tears were running down his face. He pulled a large handful of senbon out of the pouch on his thigh and they both settled in to do some serious damage to the training ground.

Shikaku contemplated the usefulness of this technique and felt slight relief that Gai had decided not to require *his* participation. Shikamaru heaved himself up from the ground and limped over to the cherry blossom tree his father was standing under.

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“What a troublesome girl.”

“Shikamaru, you should never underestimate an unknown opponent. That was a very poor
showing.” His son winced slightly at his words, despite knowing the truth of them.

Still, he protested, "She's not unknown! I see her at the Academy all the time. I usually sleep through our taijutsu lessons, though ...”

Shikaku rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Don’t let your mother hear you say that. She’ll beat the both of us.”

“Meh. I think I need to train more. There’s no way she can beat me at sparring and shogi.”

*Who is this boy and what has he done with Shikamaru?*
The Grief That Does Not Speak

Chapter Summary

Before she jumps back in time, Sakura is not a happy camper. Things do not go well in the future.

"Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great sorrow, but this same necessity of loving serves to counteract their grief and heals them." - Tolstoy

Sakura crouched on a highly-seated tree limb and looked down on the cave entrance, the wind gently rustling the leaves around her. She closed her eyes and allowed her senses to reach outward, searching for traps, seals, other nin, something hidden, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. This made her even more suspicious, as her last contact had mentioned this location in particular as one of Orochimaru’s many hidden bases.

*Or more likely, laboritories of excruciating torture and exciting discoveries,* she thought wryly.

She stayed in the tree for a few more moments, suddenly feeling violently weary. It had only been two weeks since she had heard about Kakashi’s death, killed ignominiously at the hands of a mutation from the Kaguya clan that had been terrorizing outer villages in Fire Country. This mission had been his, looking for Orochimaru’s cache of hidden knowledge to bring back to Konoha. She missed him desperately.

Ever since Naruto’s death at Pein’s hands years ago, she and Kakashi had drifted together whenever he was home from missions. This was never all that often, mostly due to the fact that he had thrown himself back into ANBU with something like suicidal glee. She constantly struggled to keep him in Konoha when he returned broken after one too many missions without proper healing or rest.

One day, Pakkun had come looking for her at the memorial, where she had been tracing her friends' names with scarred fingertips. He approached, concern shining in his oversized eyes, but said nothing. She followed him to Kakashi’s apartment, only to find the man “sleeping off” four broken ribs and a hastily stitched kunai wound that had jaggedly torn a large hole in his shoulder. After alternately yelling and healing him, Sakura made him promise to come to her after every mission. If he didn’t want to visit the hospital, she would fix up his wounds at her home.

“*So help me, Kakashi-sensei, if you don’t come here, I will find you. I will heal you and break you and then I will heal you again!*”

“*Maa, Sakura-chan, don’t be so mean to your poor old sensei! It’s not that bad, I’m still alive, aren’t I?*”

After that, he would stumble in through her bedroom window once he finished reporting to the Hokage, passing out on her bed or floor to wait for her to come home. He never sent any messages to let her know and his niniken weren’t always around to be useful. After the third time returning from the Hokage Tower to see Kakashi unconscious and bleeding onto her duvet, she devised a seal that she placed on her windowsill to notify her whenever his chakra signal entered. She tattooed the corresponding alert seal on her wrist and it would burn slightly whenever he dragged
himself in.

He noticed it when he literally fell into her bed in the middle of the night, startling her into wakefulness. The burn on her skin was the only thing that saved him from the instinctive senbon she had nearly tossed in his direction. He had eyed the seal as she forcefully man-handled him around on the bed, running glowing green hands over his torso.

“Sakura-chan, are you going through a rebellious phase? You don’t need tattoos to attract a bad boy, you know.”

She snorted and said, “Kakashi-sensei, I’m not looking to attract anyone. This seal tells me when you’re too much of an idiot to let me know that you’re bleeding to death in my house.”

She efficiently removed his flat jacket and cut off his black shirt before he could reply. Propped up on her pillows, he looked down at the fist-sized hole in his stomach knitted together quickly under her skilled hands. Broken bone and ruined organs were made new against the unrelenting surge of her tingling chakra.

“Besides, you’re the only bad boy I need, Kakashi-sensei. Caring for any more might very well kill me.” She said this lightly, but he recognized what she didn’t say.

He didn’t question the seal again, pretending to take her healing and her caring for granted. But gradually, there was food on her counter that he made and left for her the day he started a mission and there was a shelf full of the trinkets he brought to her, little ceramic statues that she knew he left, though she had never caught him in the act. Sakura didn’t question these things, pretending to take his nonchalant attitude at face value. It was a dance of silent understanding. A shinobi had to look underneath the underneath, after all.

Life wasn’t good, she had lost too much for that. Still, she managed to plod on through it. She took whatever small comfort she could in the people she had and dully carried on when they, too, were stolen by death.

Naruto and Tsunade were the first to leave her, one right after another as Pein had been defeated. Naruto’s indomitable will had slipped through her fingers as she frantically tried to heal his body, chakra coils burnt beyond recognition. Sakura had begged with him to pull on the Kyuubi’s strength, but he had only looked at her with sad blue eyes.

“Sakura-chan, I used everything I had. Everything. But Konoha is safe and so are you and baa-chan and Kakashi-sensei. It was worth it.”

Naruto died never knowing that Tsunade wasn’t as safe as he thought, having fallen into a coma after using releasing her seal to heal thousands of Konoha’s injured. It was a masterful undertaking, something no one else could have duplicated, but the technique had required too much of her own reserves. Tsunade died quietly, in a direct contradiction to the way that she had lived.

Danzo had been nominated Hokage in the aftermath. Sakura’s grief had been too cutting for her to immediately understand how this would change everything she knew, but she learned quickly enough. He had called her into the office the day after Tsunade’s funeral.

“Sakura-san, as Tsunade’s apprentice, you also worked as her assistant, correct?”

“This is partially correct, Hokage-sama. But Shizune is more experienced with the workload than I am.” It galled her to call someone else Hokage so soon after her shishou’s death, but she remained politely neutral. Medicine was not the only thing time with Tsunade had taught her.
He waved his non-bandaged arm negligently. “Shizune is needed to head the hospital during the rebuilding. I need an assistant and you are qualified. You start now.”

Not too long before she died, Tsunade had revealed to Sakura and Shizune her suspicions about the Council’s drive to protect Konoha. She didn’t think that they were above using anything and everything necessary to create a better military village and damn the ethical consequences. Tsunade had given Sakura a long-term mission to quietly poke through the archives, mission reports and any paperwork she could get her hands on from T&I, to create a dossier against the Council in general and Danzo specifically. Her access to most of this information was well within her rights as the Hokage’s apprentice, though she had gotten a knowing look from Ibiki when she questioned the usage of a specific Sand Country poison on a run-of-the-mill border dispute interrogation.

Even though Tsunade was dead, Sakura did not consider her mission complete. Her beloved shishou had essentially entrusted her with Konoha’s safety and she wouldn’t, she couldn’t, give up. Sakura worked as Danzo’s assistant, logging time in the hospital whenever she could and sneaking peeks at the classified paperwork he refused to let her touch. She kept all her meticulously written and coded notes in a sealed scroll on her person at all times. She trusted very few people anymore.

Because of her position as his assistant, Danzo rarely gave her leave to take missions out of the village. The report of Kakashi’s death gave her the impetus to change that.

“Hmm, so the Hatake brat finally bought it, huh? And without completing his mission at that. Konoha shinobi these days are too soft. We’ll have to start changing the Academy procedures if this is what we get from them.”

Sakura stood beside his desk, white-faced and shaking. Another one of her precious people, gone. It wasn’t fair! It wasn’t right, that she should be here and healthy when so many of their lives had been cut short.

She took a deep breath and tried to control her trembling hands.

“How, so the Hatake brat finally bought it, huh? And without completing his mission at that. Konoha shinobi these days are too soft. We’ll have to start changing the Academy procedures if this is what we get from them.”

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“Hokage-sama, if I may be direct?” She waited until he nodded imperiously. “I know that Kakashi-sensei’s mission had to do with Orochimaru’s bases. Might I be the one to take over the remaining locations? Surely a background in medicine would be useful …”

Danzo looked vaguely thoughtful. “That could work. Orochimaru’s information is too important to Konoha to leave in an uninformed shinobi’s hands. You certainly have the most direct experience with him and his work now that Hatake is dead.” He saw her flinch at his last words and grimaced. “There’s no use crying over what’s done, girl. There is only the mission.”

Sakura looked down at her hands, steady now. “Yes, Hokage-sama.”

“Find Nara Shikamaru, he’ll do for your replacement. Head out to Sound Country tonight.”

Sakura realized that she had been sitting in the same tree for hours, staring into nothing. She tried to clear her thoughts of the past and hoped that Shikamaru was getting by all right. At least as the Hokage’s assistant, he would be relatively safe. He and his father were the only other people left in the village that she spent any of her negligible free time, playing shogi and trying to drink away the inevitable grief that the quiet nights brought on.

The three of them had a standing date to meet in the Nara forest at the end of every week, bringing sake and their weary bodies. Ino and Nara Yoshino had both died not too long after the rebuilding of Konoha had commenced, during the smaller battles that had cropped up once other Hidden
Villages realized that Konoha’s strength had wavered. The men had never once mentioned their names to her, but she knew they were suffering just as much as she was.

Sakura dropped down from the tree, landing noiselessly. She shunshined quickly toward the cave’s entrance while something small and ominous in the back of her mind hoped she never came out.
You Are Eternity And You Are The Mirror

Chapter Summary

Ibiki is probably not as bad as everyone thinks he is. Probably.

“Excuse me, nin-san?”

Ibiki kept walking toward Yakiniku Q, assuming she was talking to someone else. People generally took one look at him and decided against approaching; children and dogs were the same way.

“Hello? Nin-san?”

He stopped. Maybe if he didn’t make any sudden movements, his face wouldn’t completely terrify her. Ibiki slowly turned toward the young girl who looked up at him with big, earnest eyes. When he faced her completely, he was a little stupefied at what he saw. She was dressed in training clothing, with her arms wrapped in bandages, but her hair …

What sort of shinobi has pink hair?

She blinked at him and then pointed at the tanto he had absent-mindedly shoved through his belt as he left the T&I offices. “Nin-san, may I ask where you got that?”

“My name is Ibiki.” He had not meant to say that. In fact, he had meant to turn and leave as soon as he saw that atrocious hair color. In some vague way, he knew that girls tended to experiment with their looks starting very young, but he was still surprised to see it in an Academy student.

The girl squinted at him, looking dubious. “O-okay, well, then. Ibiki-san! May I ask where you got that tanto?”

“I took it.” If she was going to ask personal questions, he might as well return the favor. “May I ask why you dyed your hair, girl? A shinobi’s best asset is their ability to hide in the shadows.”

She grinned at him, not at all thrown. “Be that as it may, Ibiki-san, I can’t help what I was born with. Think of it as my own bloodline limit.”

“A genetic abnormality that allows you to broadcast your location wherever you go?”

The girl huffed at him. “More like a curse that makes people underestimate my abilities.” She pointed at the senbon poking through her bun. “Plus, it’s booby-trapped.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. The sound carried through the marketplace they stood in and a few of the chunin who knew him stared, wide-eyed. They looked torn between investigating the cause and running away as fast as possible.

“I like you, kid.”

“My name is Sakura, not kid. I would say the feeling is mutual if you stopped refusing to answer my simple question about your tanto!”
“What’s it to you? I don’t see a headband - you’re not even a genin yet.”

Sakura hummed thoughtfully. “Fine. How about a trade? I’ll treat you to lunch if you tell me more about that weapon. Equal exchange.”

_This girl is unreal. She can’t be more than nine and she’s trying to weasel information out of me? Still, free lunch is free lunch._

“You’re on, kid.” He laughed again when she scowled at him.

“So,” he said as he placed another piece of beef on the grill between them, “why are you so interested in this tanto?”

Sakura snatched a finished piece of meat out of the reach of his chopsticks, stuffing it into her mouth triumphantly. “Mmph. I need a weapon for close quarters combat. My taijutsu is improving, but I don’t want to limit myself. It is important that I become competent as an offensive shinobi.”

“Important for what?” It was his turn to scowl as she snagged another piece of beef away from him. At this rate, his free lunch was going to turn into a free snack.

“For myself. For my precious people.”

_The way too serious for a kid. Why is she in such a hurry?_

“You have years left to do worry about that, kid. Wait until you’re a chunin before you ride off to play war.”

She paused in the midst of stealing more food from his side of the grill and glared. It was a pretty spectacular effort for a girl who looked as offensive as a kitten. “I’m not trying to play at anything, Ibiki-san. I read, I observe. This world is not a nice place filled with fluffy clouds and rainbows. I won’t watch my friends die when I could have done something to prevent it!” Sakura flushed pink as her namesake, green eyes sparkling with murderous fervor.

_What the hell? She seems pretty convinced that her friends are all going die without her help._

She looked at his impassive face and guessed at his thoughts, “A shinobi must prepare before it is too late. Those are the rules, I’m just doing my part. All knowledge is worth having.”

Ibiki hated to admit it, but he was impressed. Sakura burned with the Will of Fire, but it was tempered by a cold, ruthless appreciation for the power of words and manipulation. He could only imagine what she would be like as an adult.

_No one could stop her._

He needed to keep an eye on this girl.

“Say, kid. Do you know what I do for Konoha?”

Sakura pointed her chopsticks at him rudely. “Does it have something to do with taunting people with information that you refuse to provide?”
“Hah! Actually, that could actually be a portion of my job description. Why don’t you come along with me after we eat and I’ll tell you more about this tanto at my office.”

“Hmm, fine. I agree, but only if you also introduce me to someone who can teach me how to use one of those things.”

He grinned widely at her, not reacting to the neighboring table’s wince at the sight. “Kid, if you can deal with my office, I’ll teach you.”

The scarred jonin and his little pink shadow ignored the looks and whispers as they walked through the doors of the Intelligence Division.

“What is she doing with Ibiki? She looks a little young for kunoichi training.”

“Surely he’s not starting that program up again?!”

“Maybe he’s training her in information extraction?”

“Who even allowed him near kids?”

Sakura kept pace with him, her short legs working overtime as she tried to glance at his face. “It must be hard.”

He kept his eyes forward. “What?”

“Knowing that not even your subordinates trust what kind of person you are.”

She was right, but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing that. He was too professional to let a nine year old rattle him - even if she was a creepily omniscient nine year old.

“And what kind of person am I, kid?”

Sakura was nearly jogging now to keep up with his quick stride. “Right now, I’d say you’re the type of man who enjoys making people run for no reason.”

Ibiki slowed and then stopped in front of the door that had “Torture and Interrogation” engraved on it. “Are you ready for this?”

She crossed her arms and frowned at him. “What? A doorway? I think I can handle it.”

“You can read, right? You know what that says.”

“I’ve known where we were going since you told me your name. Despite my age, I’m not actually an idiot. All Konoha’s shinobi should know Morino Ibiki by name, if not by sight.”

He opened the door and ushered her inside, not holding back his laugh this time either. The girl was something else. He wanted to keep her as an office mascot.

All the members of his unit had turned toward the door, recognizing his unmuted chakra. They
froze at the sound of his laughter. Ibiki supposed it was probably in poor taste to laugh in this particular unit, but he was the leader. He could goddamn laugh if he wanted to.

Inoichi raised an eyebrow at the sight of the girl with him. “Sakura-chan? What are you doing here?”

“Hello, Yamanaka-san!” She greeted him cheerily. “Ibiki-san promised to train me.”

Inoichi sputtered a bit. “Ibiki-san is going to train you?”

She blinked, a bit nonplussed at his reaction. “What? Oh! Well, with the tanto. I imagine anything else he wants to impart is up to him.”

“I didn’t promise anything, kid.”

Sakura waved him off airily, pretending not to notice the blatant stares from the other shinobi in the room. He could see that she was aware of their scrutiny and had just decided to ignore it. “Pft, as if I couldn’t handle this office. You owe me now! I bought you lunch!”

“So you did, so you did. Come, let’s go to the weapons locker. I’ll allow you to choose a tanto from the ones we’ve confiscated.”

“Aha! So that’s what you meant when you said you “took it”. Sneaky, Ibiki-san.”

Ibiki dragged Kotetsu with them to help with her selection. He knew of the chunin’s interest in weaponry and allowed him to distract the girl with the pros and cons of each tanto as he left the room in search of Inoichi.

The blonde was staring at a requisition form when Ibiki came to stand by his desk.

“How do you know Sakura?”

“Sakura-chan was friends with my daughter.”

“Was?”

“Ino-chan is … exuberant with her affections toward a particular boy in their class. Sakura has become very close friends with this boy. Ino-chan did not take it well.”

“She didn’t seem all that upset to see you, though.”

Inoichi sighed. “Sakura-chan has always been level-headed. I don’t even think she’s interested in this boy as anything but a friend, but Ino-chan won’t see it that way. She is only a child.”

“So is Sakura.” Ibiki paused, thinking of the best way to word his question. It was clear Inoichi had developed a fondness for the girl and he wanted to tread lightly. “Tell me, has she always been … this way? Her intelligence is unusual for her age.”

“When I first came to know her, she was nearly cripplingly shy. It’s taken years for her to get to where she is now. Who knows how brilliant she was before she would speak to anyone?”
“Kotetsu-san, what do you think of this one?” Sakura had her back to the door, holding up her ultimate selection, a twelve inch blade with no guard in an understated blue sheath. If he remembered correctly, it had been taken off the body of an Iwa missing-nin only a few months ago.

“That’s a good choice, but it seems kind of big for you, Sakura-chan.”

“Eh, I’ll grow into it. I’m going to have to find a way to carry this thing.”

Ibiki appeared in the doorway silently. “Ready, kid? I don’t have all day.”

“Yeah, yeah. Places to go, people to torture. I get it.”

Kotetsu’s eyes widened at her remark. He had never heard anyone speak as casually to Morino Ibiki as this little girl did. He was astonished when Ibiki only smirked and said, “That’s right. So move your mutant ass outta here.”

“Such language from a respected elder, Ibiki-san! My ears are hurting.” Sakura slid the tanto into its sheath and walked toward the door, only to stop and bow slightly at him. “Thank you for your assistance, Kotetsu-san.”

He waved her off and watched the two of them disappear toward the T&I training space.

*I think things are going to get interesting around here.*
'You are hereby relieved of your duties as ANBU and will assume a new position.’

“Yes, Hokage-sama.”

“You will become a jonin-sensei.”

“…what?!”

“Here are your new genin students.” Sarutobi handed Kakashi three Academy files. “They have graduated two years ahead of schedule in an effort to stay together as a team. I think you’ll have a good influence on them.”

“A team? That’s unusual. It’s not another iteration of the InoShikaCho clans coming together, is it?”

Sarutobi had a disturbing glint in his eyes. “No, nothing like that. I think you’ll find these three to be very … unique.”

Kakashi had a bad feeling about this. When he opened up the first file and saw Uchiha Sasuke’s mutinous face staring back at him, he knew he was right. He shuffled through the others, seeing a pretty little girl with pink hair and the third was-

“Minato-sensei’s son? Why?”

“Kakashi, I’m surprised at you. I thought that maybe you would want to see the boy.” Kakashi flinched minutely. If he had wanted evidence of his failure to protect his sensei every day, he would have sought out Naruto sooner. He stared at the photograph, seeing ghosts. There was barely any Uzumaki in the boy’s face; the blonde hair and blue eyes were a punch straight to his gut.

“Regardless, the Council has requested you as Uchiha’s instructor, for obvious reasons. His Academy instructors have indicated that he becomes very belligerent when separated from Naruto-kun and Sakura-chan. Nakajima has credited them for his recovery after Itachi … happened.”

“Are you sure that he is? Recovered, I mean. Something like that doesn’t just go away.”

Sarutobi looked at him knowingly but only said, “Those two have been very good. Sakura-chan is
especially gifted with him. Naruto-kun is more likely to punch first, but sometimes that works in its own way.”

“So I have an emotionally troubled boy, a jinchuriki brawler and a soft-hearted girl? How do you think I could possibly help them?”

“I think you’ll be surprised, Kakashi. You meet them tomorrow. Try not to be too late.”

Kakashi stared at Obito’s name carved into the stone. He didn’t notice the sun moving overhead, didn’t notice the hours he has spent in silence, just standing and remembering. He traced the characters of Obito’s name, of Minato’s and Rin’s.

“Looks like Hokage-sama has decided that I would be more useful as a jonin-sensei.”
Kakashi swears he can hear Obito laughing at him.

“This is clearly a terrible idea. I don’t know what he was thinking.”

Now he knows Obito is laughing at him.

“Minato-sensei, your son is on my team. I can only hope I could be as good to him as you always were to me … I’m sorry I never met him before or even talked to him. Naruto looks so much like you. He goes by Uzumaki now, you know? I think Kushina-san would be proud to hear it.”

Kakashi stepped away, giving their names a last lingering look. “I miss you. I hope I see you soon.”

He shunshined toward the Academy, three hours later than the appointed meeting time.

Kakashi slouched toward the classroom where he was to meet his genin. A harried chunin with a scarred face had pointed the way, scowling at the time. Kakashi just smiled and the other man had pointedly turned and left.

He slid the door open to see a kunai headed at his face. It was snatched out of the air by an pink blur and thrown at a blue blur that ran across the desks to toss it at the blonde boy bouncing up and down in the corner. He assumed this was Naruto.

“Ahem.” The boy caught the kunai and whipped around in an instant, eyes wide. Kakashi saw a seal tag hanging from the weapon and asked, “Uh, is that an exploding-”

SPLAT.

Naruto was still wide-eyed, but now he was also covered in ink from head-to-toe. The Uchiha
snickered while the pink-haired girl (Sakura, he recalled. Her parents certainly were unimaginative) had burst into full-blown laughter.

“Naruto, you lose again!”

“Aw, c’mon, Sakura-chan! That’s not fair, that old guy distracted me!”

Kakashi was about to protest the “old guy” comment when Sakura continued, “Doesn’t matter! A shinobi must always be alert to his surroundings. Therefore, you lose!”

“Oh, hello? I assume you’re the three I’m supposed to teach.”

The three children now looked at him with varying degrees of “yes, obviously” written on their faces, though Naruto’s expression was harder to read under all the ink.

“Ah, well. My first impression is … I hate you.”

Both Naruto and the Uchiha scowled while Sakura burst into peals of laughter again.

What a strange girl.

Kakashi leaned against the railing as Naruto stripped off his shirt and tried to wash the ink of his face and hands at the outdoor faucets. Sakura and the Uchiha stood away from his splashing, all of them watching with slight disbelief as he managed to get water everywhere.

“Sasuke, take off your shirt.”

“What? No!”

“Sasuke, I know you’re wearing at least two, probably three shirts, for some reason known only to you. Just give Naruto one of them.”

He crossed his arms and frowned mulishly. “He’s the one who lost. Why do I have to suffer?”

“Sasuke …” Sakura sighed. She stood there, hands on hips, staring at him with such a look of disappointment that Kakashi himself nearly felt guilty enough to offer up his own shirt.

“Hn, fine.” Sasuke took off his outer shirt to reveal an identical one underneath. “Just … stop looking at me like that.”

She beamed at him and threw the shirt at Naruto, who had been carefully using the backside of his old shirt to dry off. It landed on his head.

“Hey!”

“Get dressed, Naruto. I’m sure our respected sensei has more important things to do than wait for us.” Sakura winked at Kakashi and laughed again, lost in her own private joke. Sasuke and Naruto shared a look and shrugged, used to her weird behavior by now.
The three of them trooped over to the stairs leading to the atrium. The boys naturally flanked Sakura, with Naruto on her right and Sasuke on her left. She sat down several stairs up from the ground and stretched out her legs, while Sasuke and Naruto chose to sit one step below her, close enough to touch.

*Interesting formation. They move like a unit and don’t even seem to notice.*

“Let’s start with introductions. What you like, hate, your hobbies and your dreams. Or something like that. You, pinky, go first.”

She looked surprised and vaguely annoyed. “Pinky, really? Why don’t you go first, sensei?”

“Maa, that’s fine. I’m Hatake Kakashi. I have no intention of telling you my likes and dislikes. As for my dreams …” he looked up at the sky. “I have few hobbies.”

Naruto muttered, “So basically we only learned his name.”

Sakura laughed again. “Sometimes that’s all you need.” She gave him a thumbs up and a blinding grin. “Yosh! You are Gai-sensei’s Eternal Rival, Copy-Nin Kakashi!”

If he were a lesser shinobi, Kakashi would have fallen off his perch on the railing. As it was, he slightly stuttered, “Gai … sensei?” Now that she mentioned him, he thought that the black leg warmers he had noticed on her earlier may in fact be ankle weights.

Naruto answered him. “Yeah, he’s that weirdo in green spandex that Sakura-chan works with sometimes. I joined them once for sparring.” He shuddered dramatically. “Never again!”

Sasuke grunted in agreement.

“You two are just missing the springtime of youth! Gai-sensei is a very accomplished jonin, you know. He’s also going to be very excited that I am on Kakashi-sensei’s team.” She sparkled at him merrily, still channeling her old teacher.

With a slowly growing sense of dread, Kakashi tried to move the conversation onward. “Enough of that! Introductions, now. We’ll start with you instead, blondie.”

“I’m Uzumaki Naruto! I like cup ramen, my team and making traps! I hate waiting for anything.” Sasuke and Sakura both rolled their eyes at this. “My hobbies are training and going to the library with Sakura-chan! My dream to become Hokage with my best friends at my side.”

He’s certainly grown up to be interesting.

Kakashi pointed at the Uchiha. “Now you.”

“I’m Uchiha Sasuke. I like training, my team and gardening. I dislike most everything else. I have an ambition that I have no intention of leaving a dream: I will find my brother.” Sakura put her hand on his hunched shoulder and he slowly lost the hunted look in his eyes. Naruto’s grin had faded into a thin, determined line.

Not what I expected. I suppose the Hokage was right about their influence. Still, “finding” his brother leaves a lot to chance.

“And the last, pinky.”

“I’m Haruno Sakura and you’d better use it now that we’ve been officially introduced, Kakashi-
sensei!” She scowled at him and he had vague thoughts of a snarling kitten. “I like training, my team, reading and politics.” Naruto made a face at the last. “I hate snakes and anyone who would try to hurt my boys. My hobbies are fuinjutsu and shogi. My dream is to protect my precious people.” With this, she ruffled first Naruto’s hair and then Sasuke’s.

Naruto was visibly pleased at the touch and Sasuke moved away from her hand and turned his head, but Kakashi could see the small upward quirk of his lips.

They get along so much better than my old team. The bell test won’t be difficult for them. I’ll have to change it up if I want to get out of this.

“Now that we’re all acquainted …” he ignored Naruto’s mutters about how they already knew each other, “tomorrow we will start with a special mission!”

He had expected excitement, from Naruto at the very least. He seemed to be the most excitable one.

Just like Obito …

Instead, the three of them just stared at him blankly.

“Guys? Special mission?”

“We’re genin. You can’t take us on special missions, even if you are Copy-Nin Kakashi. We know the mission rankings.”

Kakashi grumbled to himself inwardly. This must have been what it was like to teach me. I’m so sorry, Minato-sensei. This is not the cute baby team I was expecting.

He allowed his demeanor to sharpen and said, “Special in that it will be survival training for all of you. Meet me at the east bridge at 7 and don’t be late!” He ignored their disbelieving stares at that and grinned as maliciously as he could through a mask. “And don’t bother eating breakfast. It won’t last long.”

With that, he left them in a swirl of leaves, intent on catching up on his Icha Icha reading.
Kakashi made his way to the bridge at 9 sharp the next morning. He hoped his team appreciated how much reading he was giving up to be there almost on time, but somehow he doubted it.

He masked his chakra as he approached the training ground through the trees. He wanted to see how they dealt with waiting and wasn’t quite surprised to see no one on the bridge.

*Did they already leave? Doesn’t speak very well to their ability to take orders from a commanding officer.*

He was about to drop to the ground when he felt three chakra signatures running up the river toward the bridge. Kakashi stayed put and watched his team racing on top of the water, with Sakura in the lead. It was clear this was partially due to the fact that the boys were slip-sliding around as their control wavered. Sakura did not seem to have the same trouble. She slapped a hand on wooden supports and crowed, “I win! That means its you both have to do dishes tonight.”

Sasuke was bent over panting while Naruto just collapsed on the riverbank. “Sakura-chan, we always do dishes, because you won’t let us cook!”

“Do you remember what happened when I did? Because I don’t want to relive that night.”

They all made a disgusted face and Naruto muttered to himself, “Well, natto sardine ramen sounded like a good idea at the time.”

“Whatever. Up, up! I’m sure Kakashi-sensei is going to be here soon and we don’t want him to think we’ve just been standing around.” Sakura pointedly looked at the tree he was perched in, shocking him as she met his one exposed eye with her knowing green ones.

“Like we could possibly stand around with you here, Sakura-chan! You’re obsessed with training.”

“Hn.”

“See, even Sasuke agrees!”

Apparently they had worked out a way to decipher the Uchiha’s series of grunts. If he was going to keep this team, Kakashi would need a crash course. Since Sakura was aware of his presence he decided to vacate the tree.

“Yo.”

“Kakashi-sensei! You’re late!” Naruto leapt to his feet, pointing accusingly. “We’ve been here for two hours already!”

“Maa, I’m sorry. I just got lost on the road of life …”
Sasuke snorted. “That’s the worst lie I have ever heard.”

Kakashi pretended to be offended. “Lie? I would never lie to my cute little genin!” Naruto made a face at being called cute, while Sasuke struggled valiantly with his irritation in an attempt to keep his face blank. Sakura, as usual, laughed at him.

“Let’s go over to the training ground, kids.”

He surveyed them as they walked over together in the same formation as yesterday. Sakura was wearing the same red vest and black shorts, but now she had senbon poking through her pink bun, a dull blue tanto strapped across her back and a pack fastened around her waist. Her black weighted leg warmers were armor plated over knee high boots.

Sasuke was wearing another dark blue shirt with the Uchiha crest, but he had added a kunai pack to his leg. Naruto’s orange pants seemed even brighter than the ones he had ruined with ink the day before. He had one pack strapped to each leg.

“Sakura, you seemed to be dressed for war. Are you that worried about simple training?”

Naruto scoffed at his question. “Sakura-chan always looks like that. She just didn’t wear it to meet you yesterday because she didn’t want to scare you away.”

Sasuke smirked at Sakura’s rapidly reddening face. “That is not what I said, Naruto!”

“I’m pretty sure that’s exactly-” he was cut off as she slapped her hand over his mouth. She smiled at Kakashi toothily and said, “Please, sensei. Feel free to ignore him. I’m sure we have a lot to cover today.”

He was already starting to feel very out of his depth. Sakura was nothing like Rin and he didn’t have any other point of reference for girls of her age. Was this normal? Naruto was struggling against her grip and Sasuke just stood to her left like nothing out of the ordinary was happening.

Kakashi soldiered on into his prepared speech.

He set a timer on one of the training posts and held up one bell.

“Today’s object will be to get this bell from me. Those who fail don’t get to eat lunch. I’m going to tie you there and eat it in front of you.”

Kakashi heard Naruto loudly whisper to Sasuke, “It’s a good thing Sakura-chan made us eat breakfast at her house, eh?” He narrowed his eyes as she smiled innocently at him, looking for all the world like she hadn’t heard a thing.

“Hey, hey! Why is there only one bell?”

“The two who don’t get the bell will fail the mission. They go back to the Academy.”

Naruto scowled at him and sat down. “Nope. Not gonna happen.” Sasuke and Sakura nodded in unison, sitting down next to him. “We all pass or we all go back, Kakashi-sensei.”

“You know that you’ll have to wait another year to graduate if you go back, right?”

Sasuke shrugged, but said nothing. Sakura idly played with the senbon in her hair as she said, “That just means we’ll have another year of practice before they unleash us onto the world. We are a team and that’s non-negotiable.”
I don’t think I even need to talk to them about teamwork. Clearly they have a better idea of it than most adult shinobi.

“Fine. You all … PASS!”

He threw his hands up in simulated theatrical enthusiasm that he didn’t feel. Now he was stuck with them, damn it all.

The three genin looked at him with varying degrees of disbelief. Kakashi sighed. “While those who break the rules of the shinobi world are trash, those who abandon their comrades are worse than trash. It was my intention to teach this to you, but it seems unnecessary under these circumstances.”

Naruto jumped up with glee. “Does this mean you’re gonna train us for real, Kaka-sensei? Will you show us all one thousand jutsu you know?”

“One thousand jutsu? Where did you hear that?”

“Thanks to Gai-sensei, we probably know more about you than you know about us, Kakashi-sensei.” Sakura waggled her fingers at him and grinned insolently.

He felt that familiar sense of dread creep up on him again. Gai was his oldest living friend, but there were things he knew about Kakashi that would make him very uncomfortable if his team found out. He was sure that Gai was trustworthy, but these children looked sneaky …

“Maa, I can’t teach you guys before I know what you’re capable of. I want to spar each of you individually so I can be familiar with your abilities.”

He knew that the each had to be capable of performing the Academy basics. He was expecting the most out of Sasuke, who had been consistently considered the “Top Rookie” in his file, but Naruto’s jinchuriki status would give him an unreasonable amount of stamina and chakra. Kakashi had no idea what Sakura’s talents might be, as her file had only the standard high marks required of an early graduate. Her abundance of weaponry might be her way of overcompensating.

“Okay, Sasuke, you first. Come at me with the intent to kill or you’ll never get anywhere.”

To his credit, the Uchiha didn’t hesitate. He immediately flung himself at Kakashi, striking with a with his right foot and twisting to kick with his left when it was blocked. Sasuke drew a kunai out of his pouch as he backflipped out of Kakashi’s hold, tossing it at him with unerring accuracy. He made three quick hand seals before drawing in air for a katon jutsu that he should not have had the ability to produce.

“Katon: Gokakyu no Jutsu!” Kakashi nimbly avoided the enormous fireball, impressed despite himself. He used the fiery distraction as a way to hide his own seals, weaving a quick genjutsu that would effect his opponent’s sense of where he was by seconds and inches. He felt Sasuke coming at him again through the smoke and blocked the incoming kick, surprised that he had connected even through the illusion. Sasuke smirked at him, three tomoe swirling in his bright red eyes.

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“He’s gained control over his Sharingan already? This was not in his files. Why did he keep it to himself?

Lightning quick, Kakashi grabbed his wrist and twisted it behind him. “Okay! So we know what Sasuke can do. Let’s try not to burn down the entire training ground.”

The Uchiha stopped struggling as Kakashi spoke, realizing that his fight was over. When Kakashi
let his arm go, he deactivated his Sharingan and slumped over to Naruto and Sakura. She fussed over him, putting her hands up to his forehead as Kakashi called out for Naruto to go next.

*Looks like he doesn’t have enough chakra for continuous usage of it yet.*

“Kage Bunshin no Jutsu!”

*He can barely walk on water, but he can make shadow clones?! What a weird kid.*

Three Narutos immediately charged at him and were destroyed easily, though Kakashi noted their exceptional taijutsu forms - his was just faster and better. He spun around to see four more Narutos trying the same tactics, though they managed to duck a bit better and were gone nearly as quickly. The original Naruto was holding back, fiddling with something in his hands as he constantly made more and more shadow clones to keep Kakashi from reaching him.

After a minute of this, Kakashi was getting bored and substituted himself out of the melee. He shunshined behind the real Naruto, only to have him throw a kunai laced net to a clone rushing toward them, in an attempt to snag him.

*Ah, he did say he liked traps. This was a good attempt. Not very subtle, though.*

Kakashi laid another genjutsu, one that showed him getting caught in the wires and pierced by kunai in a suitably gory fashion. Naruto’s clone burst out of existence as he looked down in horror at what he had done to fake-Kakashi.

*Not great at genjutsu, I see.*

He released the illusion and clapped. “That was a good try, Naruto. But you’re way too obvious about your traps.”

“Kaka-sensei! You’re not dead!”

Kakashi looked up at the sky wistfully. It was such a nice day for reading. “This is true. You might be, though, if you keep yourself out in the open while being attacked.”

“It almost worked, didn’t it?!”

“Not even remotely.”

Naruto made a rude gesture and ran over to his teammates, where Sakura was removing glowing green hands from Sasuke’s temple. His face was much less strained than it had been prior to Naruto’s fight.

“Sakura! You’re the last.”

He thought he heard her mutter, “like always,” but he couldn’t be sure. Kakashi thought that maybe she would have appreciated not having to go first and being shown up by her more powerful teammates, which is why he chose the order he did. Now he wasn’t so sure. Kids were too complicated, he never even understood them when he *was* one.

She stood in front of him. “Should I remove my weights?” Naruto and Sasuke both whipped their heads toward the two of them when they heard this, but Sakura smiled at Kakashi innocently. He was beginning to distrust that look.

“Maa, I need to see what your true potential is. It would be a good idea.”
Her smile widened to a grin as she unstrapped the metal plates, letting them fall to the ground with a solid thump. Before he could say anything else, she flickered into his personal space and threw a flurry of blows at him, adjusting minutely as he blocked each one. He bent backwards to avoid a punch and felt the wind from her fist blow by his mask. Unbelievably, the fabric on his cheek split, just a hair.

*Her speed is incredible. Even if this is all she has, we can work with it.*

Sakura’s fist lashed out again and he thought she had miscalculated the punch when she dove toward the ground, but changed his mind when he felt the earth tremble beneath his feet. She created a perfect crater right underneath them and flipped upward immediately, trying to land a kick at his face as he moved to more stable ground.

They faced each other across the hole she left in the training ground. Kakashi was feeling a little faint at the level of destruction his cute little genin was capable of.

Sakura was just flushed and grinning.

“You don’t have a bloodline talent you’re hiding, do you?”

She scowled at him. “All I have is chakra control, Kakashi-sensei. I’d thank you not to assume I didn’t work for it.”

*That level of control at this age is ridiculous. No wonder the Hokage had such a smug look on his face when he gave me this team. They all have absurd power.*

“I … see. How did you learn to use it like that?”

She shrugged. “I’ve read about the Sannin and Hokage-sama has told me a little about Tsunade when I asked about her strength. She has Senju levels of chakra, though. I’ll never make it to her level.”

He smiled at her through the mask. “Now, now. There’s no need to put yourself down.”

“Ah yes, because comparing myself unfavorably to a *legendary* woman is really badly done of me. My apologies, Kakashi-sensei.”

“No apology necessary. When I’m done with you three, the Elemental Countries won’t know what hit them.”
Meet Sakura's summons! Also, Kakashi.

Sakura shot a look behind her, stepping noiselessly through the forest. She had no trouble sneaking out of the tent and away from her boys as they slept innocently, but she was wary of Kakashi’s interference. She had indicated a bathroom break with hand signals as he kept watch with his Icha Icha. Sakura hoped he had assumed she needed privacy for “girl things” and would leave her alone.

Having traveled far enough from her team, she found a nice enough stump to sit on and unwrapped a portion of the bandages covering her right arm. She quickly drew blood over the seal she had tattooed there and was unsurprised when her entire motley crew of felines decided to arrive at her call.

“Report.”

Yasutomo gave her a dirty look and huffed noisily. “Not even a hello from our esteemed contractor? It’s good to see you too, Misaki-chan.”

She threw him an amused glance. “Hi boys. How are you? Did you do anything fun this summer?” Yasutomo snorted and washed his paw daintily, ignoring her laughter.

The twin lynx brothers, Noya and Ryu, bounded up to where she was sitting, nearly dislodging her from the stump in their enthusiasm. They came to a stop at her feet and rubbed up against her legs like giant housecats. Ryu whined at her pitifully. “Sakura-chaaaaan, it’s been so long! We thought you had forgotten us toiling away in Snow Country!”

“Ryu, I saw you last week, when you told me nothing was happening and that there were no girls around to play with. Don’t you start with me.” His brother laughed at his scolding and butted his own head against Sakura’s hand. “Noya, anything?”

“I have noticed slight, but strange, chakra signatures in the forests of Snow Country. It might indicate Zetsu’s presence, but I have not been able to substantiate it so far.” She nodded and absently stroked his head as she looked up at the caracal lounging indolently in a branch above their heads. “Keiji?”

“I tracked Sasori to the far reaches of Wind Country and witnessed him meeting two disguised Suna jonin on separate occasions. I was unable to get close enough to hear their conversation or their names, but I could give a description.”

Sakura clasped her hands together tightly, looking both happy and distraught, an odd combination on her ten year old face. With a sigh, she pulled a scroll out of her pack and asked Keiji to dictate his information to her as she recorded the information by moonlight. She carefully worded her questions so that she could independently conclude that the men matched the description of the
sleeper agents she knew to be in *her* version of Suna.

“At least this timeline is going the same as it was before. Once we start changing the big things, I’m going to lose my advantage.”

Ryu perked up. “But Sakura-chan, you have us! We’re the biggest advantage you could ever have!” She laughed then and fondly scratched behind his ears, to his great delight and his brother’s disgruntlement.

Sakura turned to the last of her summoned group warily. Gintoki was an enormous golden tiger with glowing eyes and overwhelming chakra that simmered like an impending eruption. Sakura was exceptionally glad that he had hidden his presence before arriving in the forest with the rest, because there was *no way* she could conceal him from Kakashi.

Out of respect for his age and wisdom, she had requested his help instead of the pushy demands she had foisted on her other boys. Gintoki had surprised her by agreeing easily and so she had tasked him with locating and observing Hidan and Kakuzu.

“Greetings, Gintoki-dono. It has been some time since you joined us all.”

He nodded his head regally. “I have been very busy of late. Your wayward shinobi are very powerful and not given to staying in one place for long. I have just come from Earth Country, where the large one has been collecting an extraordinary amount of bounties.”

She frowned. “And no one cares that he is the one collecting all of them? You would think that a singularly powerful individual like that would catch the attention of at least Iwa, if not the Earth Daimyo.”

Gintoki bared his teeth and hissed, a terrifying sight to those who weren’t inured. Noya moved against her legs uneasily. “I cannot account for what those humans are thinking. I can only tell you what I see.”

Sakura bowed her head. “This is true. I apologize for questioning you. I was merely thinking aloud.”

“It is no matter. I will return now, lest they move and I lose the trail.” Gintoki disappeared as he finished speaking, leaving their group in silence. Sakura quickly added a few lines to the scroll about the bounty hunter and his partner and looked to Yasutomo.

He had been given dual assignments: to skulk around Ame in an attempt to gain information on Pein’s base of operations as well as liaise with Jiraiya when she had intel to give. She had tasked him with infiltrating the village as a stray cat, something he took immediate and loud exception to.

“Well?”

The cat sighed irritably. “Confirmation of Jiraiya’s former apprentices Nagato and Konan as new leaders of Ame, to no one’s surprise.” She nodded and scribbled this down, her brush moving quickly through the strokes. “Uchiha Itachi and Hoshigaki Kisame were in town this week. It is the first time I have seen any of the other members in Ame.” Her movements stilled and she frowned.

“Sasuke graduated last week with me and Naruto. Itachi’s concern has always been his little brother, though I doubt Pein knows the full extent. I wonder how this two year bump has changed their plans from what I know.”

“It’s likely you made everything harder on yourself, Misaki-chan,” He hissed when she reached out
a hand to swat at him, sounding more petulant than angry. Yasutomo’s bad attitude was likely to
get him more than a half-hearted wallop one day, she just knew it. At least Jiraiya wouldn’t hurt
him; she knew he’d had plenty of experience with poor attitudes with Tsunade as a teammate.

Sakura rolled up the scroll and painted her own seal on it, binding it with more of her blood.

“Brat. Here, take this scroll to Jiraiya and let me know through the usual channels if he has news
for me. Ryu, Noya, Keiji, keep vigilant in your locations and be careful. I don’t want to lose you
guys to something foolish.”

After a quick affirmation and a belly rub for Ryu, her summons dispersed. Sakura slumped down
on the stump she was sitting on, anxious about the news she had been given. She drew several deep
breaths and tried to center her mind in meditation. Anxiety would get her nowhere and doubt would
lead her precious people straight to death. She cleared her mind using her favorite method: naming
off the ways she could kill someone with a chakra laced finger, starting from one hundred.

Ninety-eight, ruptured kidney via violent poking. Ninety-seven, strike to the nasion, sending bone
splinters to the brain, Ninety-six, crushing the hyoid …

This was how Kakashi found her, sitting by herself and breathing evenly. She felt him before he
spoke, but pretended not to.

“Sakura-chan?”

She opened her eyes in false surprise, looking at her sensei who was peering at her with real
concern.

God, I miss my Kakashi. He’s here, but not here at the same time.

“Oh! Hi, Kakashi-sensei. Is it my turn for watch?”

“No, Naruto has independently decided that he was going to take your shift and his together,
because, and I quote, ‘Sakura-chan doesn’t sleep enough!’ When I left, both he and Sasuke were
squabbling over who got to take your turn.”

She giggled fondly. “Those are my boys.”

“It seems like was right, however he went about it. What are you doing out here? You need to
sleep too, you know.”

“I can sleep when I’m dead,” she said, flatly. Kakashi gave her a sharp look and she felt annoyed at
herself for being so defensive over nothing. “I … look, Kakashi-sensei, the boys snore something
awful and I needed some time alone.”

“The snoring part I can believe. I think Naruto is actually quieter when he’s awake.”

“Yeah,” she said and smiled softly. “He’s something else.”

“So what is it?”

“You’re so nosy, sensei. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

He looked up into the sky, mocking a thoughtful pose with a hand on his chin. “Hmm, nope. Can’t
say anyone’s ever been so forward in their backtalk to me.”

“Seems like it’s about time. It’s a good thing you have me around to beat your ego down.”
“You are definitely not the cute little genin team I was expecting. I should make a complaint.” He shifted from foot to foot and looked pensive. He finally came to rest on his haunches in front of her. “Sakura-chan, stop deflecting. Why are you out here?”

She absolutely couldn’t tell him that she was a thirty year old time traveler with the overwhelming personal task of changing the world, but letting go of a little bit of her emotional baggage couldn’t hurt. She sighed heavily and curled down into herself, wrapping bandaged arms around skinny armored shins. “It’s just … Naruto and Sasuke are special, I can see it and I know others will be able to see it soon. Special people get recognition, but in our world, they’re also in danger. Constantly. I worry about them. Constantly.”

Kakashi patted her arm awkwardly. “Maa, Sakura-chan. Don’t take so much on yourself. I won’t let my team die.”

She slapped his hand away angrily and his uncovered eye widened in shock. “Don’t patronize me! I’m not some idiot child who can’t see the world for what it is! Sasuke’s brother is still out there! And Naruto …”

His eye narrowed. “What about Naruto?”

“You know what he is, Kakashi-sensei. I have dispensation from Hokage-sama to know as well, but I still can’t tell Naruto himself about what he holds.”

“This … doesn’t bother you?” Inwardly he was cursing Sarutobi for not making him aware of her prior knowledge. When he came out here to find Sakura, he had been reluctantly expecting some awkward conversation about hormones and women’s troubles, not an angry tirade about the state of shinobi world.

“Why would it? Naruto is just a boy who was used as a tool of his village, like all of us are. But the power he contains is something many will try to use as their own. That is what has me worried.”

He couldn’t deny the truth of words, but felt that as an adult, as her teacher, he had to say something comforting. This sort of thing had never been his forte and again he railed against Sarutobi for ever taking him out of ANBU. He didn’t want to care about these kids, but they were wiggling into his heart like thieves in the night.

“Sakura.” At his unusually serious tone, she looked up from staring at her toes. “We will protect them. Together.” If it was abnormal to treat a ten year old as his equal, well, Kakashi had never been a normal man.

She smiled at him and sprung up from the tree stump, shaking out her limbs. “Yeah, we will. And each other too, right, Kakashi-sensei? You have too much to teach us to die on us so soon, old man.” Her tone was teasing and her eyes were losing some of the darkened gloom he had glimpsed earlier.

He affected a shocked voice and placed his hand on his chest theatrically. “Old man?! You and Naruto both are going to get the worst of this survival training. I’m only twenty-four.”

She led the way out of the forest toward their small base camp. “Is that in dog years?”

Kakashi let his shoulders slump and he sighed. “I never should have let you meet Pakkun.”

Her happy laughter rang out in the dark forest, entirely unbecoming of a shinobi, but he was too relieved to say a thing about it.
Chapter End Notes

Guess where I got the summon names from! It's not that hard.
Sarutobi decoded the message Misaki had sent via Jiraiya. It only contained one short line: Beware the Mizukage.

He was relieved that his gut feeling about Mist's leader had been correct, though he was equally annoyed that their contact did not offer any source of proof or extra information. As it was, all he could do was proceed as cautiously as he had been prior to knowing for a fact that something was amiss. He lit his pipe and considered this newest development when his office door slammed open.

Ah, must be that time again.

"Hey, jiji! We're heeeeere!"

Naruto's entrance was as loud as ever and Sarutobi sometimes wondered if he would ever become a proper shinobi or if he was destined to be this generation's Jiraiya.

"We, Naruto? Did you bring your friend Sasuke-kun with you?"

The blonde boy grimaced at the very thought. He strolled through the doorway casually and made waving motions to the presence Sarutobi could sense in the hallway. "Ugh, I would never. I brought Sakura-chan with me! You said you wanted to meet her and today's her off day."

A small pink-haired girl stepped up behind Naruto and bowed to him formally, hands behind her back. "Hokage-sama, it is an honor to meet you." She straightened and her green eyes flashed keenly, taking in the surroundings. The bandaged forearms, armor plated weights and senbon through her tidy bun made her look like a tiny doll geared up for battle.

"Sakura-chan, it is nice to meet you as well. Naruto has told me about you, extensively. You're quite the tutor."

She smiled at Naruto fondly as he rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "I'm sure he means well, Hokage-sama, though I doubt I could live up to the tales he tells. I merely provide one-on-one instruction that is more geared toward his learning style."

Sarutobi blinked. When Naruto said "smart", I did not anticipate "adult level intellect". I'm amazed the Academy instructors have not mentioned her at all.

"Ah, yes. Naruto is quite the storyteller, isn't it?" He ignored Naruto's whoop of outrage. "What did he mean by 'off day'?"

Naruto jumped in before Sakura had a chance to answer. "Sakura-chan trains all the time, jiji! Sometimes Sasuke and I hadta drag her off the training grounds way past dark, so we made her promise to take one day off a week." She frowned and made a small noise, fingers flexing in irritation.
"You disagree with him, Sakura-chan?"

Her spine straightened. "Training is important, Hokage-sama. There's no way for me to protect anyone if I cannot first protect myself." Sarutobi felt like there was an undercurrent to her words, something that bordered on accusatory. She met his stare dead on and he was startled by how serious her gaze was.

*I have not seen such a face since Itachi came to me speaking of clan warfare.*

"While true, you are still young, Sakura-chan. We have many shinobi in our forces that keep Konoha safe." *Do you trust me to care for your loved ones?*

She seemed to understand his unspoken question and appeared to consider it longer than he was comfortable with. Why was she so wary? Konoha had been peaceful since she was born.

"You make a valid point, Hokage-sama. However, when it comes to those most precious to me, I will not leave their protection to an impartial party." *I trust only myself with that which is important. All else can be left to you.*

Naruto was, unfortunately, more observant than Sarutobi had given him credit for. He could see the boy's brow furrow, realizing that the conversation had taken a strange turn, but not knowing what it was. All the spoken words were normal, if somewhat serious. Sakura seemed to sense this as well and broke her gaze with him to look at Naruto, her face instantly conforming into a cheerful smile. "Naruto, why don't you show Hokage-sama your progress report? I think he will be pleased."

He brightened and dug around in his garishly patterned shoulder bag, pulling out a folder. "Nakajima-sensei sent this instead of the usual envelope. I didn't look, promise!"

"I wouldn't let him, Hokage-sama." Naruto stuck his tongue out at her and she laughed, swatting his arm playfully.

Sarutobi eyed her change in demeanor thoughtfully as he took the portfolio from Naruto. She seemed sincerely happy speaking to Naruto as if she had not just been indirectly accusing him of … something just moments ago. It was clear from everything the boy had told him that Sakura was a lifeline for him, a bright spot in an otherwise confusingly hostile world. She had befriended him, taken care of him and even introduced him to his only other friend in the world, though Sarutobi doubted Naruto would ever admit as much about the last Uchiha. So what was her goal?

He was wary of treating a nine year old with suspicion, but Sarutobi had lived this long only because of his keen instincts. Something told him that this girl was unusual.

He opened the folder expecting a one page summary of Naruto’s work, but instead he was faced with a recommendation for early graduation, with an outline of the few standards Naruto would need to achieve perfectly before he was allowed to leave the Academy. To say he was shocked was an understatement, despite knowing that Naruto had improved leaps and bounds since he became acquainted with Sakura.

He felt her eyes on him as he read through Nakajima's comments, but when he looked up, she was engaged in a game of janken with a red-faced Naruto.

"No fair, Sakura-chan, you always win! Can we please, please, *please* have ramen for dinner tonight?"

"Nope! You want to win, you best get better at janken. Plus, ramen isn't a food group, you know."
It’s bad enough you eat it for every meal when I’m not around.” At her last sentence, Sarutobi felt her eyes on him again, this time much closer to an accusatory look. He was impressed by her tenacity, though it would take more than a death stare from a little girl to make him quail.

*She must have seen the state of Naruto’s apartment. Perhaps she blames me for his misfortune, even if she doesn't know the cause.*

He interrupted their argument. "Naruto, did you know that your teacher has recommended that you graduate early?"

"W-what?! No way! I knew I was gonna beat everyone else!” He puffed up with pride at the idea, but deflated when he looked at Sakura. "But what about Sakura-chan? And … Sasuke?"

She smiled at him and flapped her hand at him teasingly. "Oh, Naruto. We qualify too, you know. I'm sure Hokage-sama knows what a great team we make. After all, he's kept such a close eye on his protégé." Sarutobi heard: *We will graduate together, because we are the only ones who can keep Naruto safe in all ways. You have failed in this task.*

"His what?” Naruto’s face scrunched up in confusion while Sakura just smiled again.

"His protégé, someone who will succeed him. As Hokage."

"Oh! Yeah, I've spent so much time in this office it might as well be mine!"

Sakura’s smile was suddenly mischievous. "You had better brush up on your handwriting, Naruto. The Hokage does a lot of paperwork, you know. Hours and hours of it.” Sarutobi looked at the state of his desk ruefully, the contents proving her correct.

"Sakura-chan will be there to help me with it, though, right?” Naruto peered at her with big blue pleading eyes.

She just patted his arm. "Of course. Where else could I possibly be? We'll even wrangle Sasuke in for bodyguard duty, just to see that look on his face." Naruto mimicked an exaggerated petulant frown that looked more like a pout. "Yep, that's the one."

Sarutobi cleared his throat and the two children looked up from their conversation. "Naruto, this accelerated plan allows you to graduate from the Academy this summer. Will you be ready?"

He gave a thumbs up and struck a pose that looked entirely too familiar. "No worries, jiji! The springtime of my youth has only begun to flower!” Sakura cracked up laughing, nearly falling to the floor as Naruto looked intensely pleased at her reaction.

She gasped for breath and burst into giggles again. "G-Gai-sensei would have loved to hear you say that." Sakura took a deep breath and contained herself enough to say, "He was so disappointed when you never came back to our training sessions. I had to endure fifteen extra minutes of him crying, you know."

"Once was enough! He's crazy.” Naruto rolled his eyes and then looked horror-stricken as a sudden thought came to him. "Saaaay, jiji, when we graduate, can we pick who not to have as a sensei?"

"I'm sure Hokage-sama would pick the most suitable jonin for our team's special circumstances, as befits the leader of our village." **Whoever is chosen had better treat Naruto right.**

He couldn't find it in himself to disagree with that.
"I will do my best, of course." *Message received.*

She nodded once, sharply. After a moment, the look in her eyes became softer. "Hokage-sama, if you would excuse us? I need to go to the market to purchase *vegetables* for dinner tonight." She placed a strange emphasis on the word "vegetables" and Sarutobi realized with amusement it was because of Naruto's tendency to glower at the very thought.

"Of course, it is no trouble at all." He scribbled his signature at the bottom of Naruto's paperwork.

"Here, Naruto. Bring this to Iruka-sensei's office at the Academy now, so you can get started on your new curriculum tomorrow."

Naruto offered him a quick salute and shouted, "See you at dinner, Sakura-chan!" before rushing out on his errand.

She was about to turn and leave herself, when he spoke. "Sakura. Please stay for just one more moment." Her unnatural focus came back immediately, tensing when she heard his tone. Sarutobi stood from his desk and she eyed him warily, but he only closed the door and activated the silencing seal on the threshold.

"Hokage-sama?"

"Sakura, what I am about to tell cannot leave this room. You cannot tell Naruto, or Sasuke or anyone else in your class."

She looked troubled. "Will keeping this secret hurt the boys?"

"Not exactly."

She huffed irritably, the first open sign of disrespect she had shown him the entire meeting. "That is very much a non-answer, Hokage-sama."

"This secret is about Naruto, but he cannot be informed. He must find out for himself."

"And Sasuke?"

"Once Naruto discovers it, who he informs will be left to his … for lack of a better word, discretion. I will not attempt to influence him."

She folded her arms. "Fine. All knowledge is worth having, even if I have to keep it to myself for a short time."

Somehow, this statement did not surprise him. He did not attempt to insult her by sugar-coating what he was about to reveal. "Naruto is the vessel of the nine-tailed fox demon. It was sealed into him as a infant by the Yondaime. Only those who were alive at the time know about it. A law was passed prohibiting the discussion of his status as a jinchuriki."

Sakura went very still. Suddenly, the tension she had been carrying was amplified and her frame nearly vibrated with energy. He had been expecting several reactions, but the absolute *ferocity* that she was radiating was not one of them.

"Thank you for telling me, Hokage-sama. It is good to know what we will face in the future." This was said in the steeliest tone he had ever heard on a child.

"You seem angry about this news, Sakura-chan."
"Hokage-sama, it is no secret that the adults despise Naruto. They aren't necessarily violent about it, but it's there and it's damaging because their kids mimic their actions without the knowledge, however uninformed, to back it up. I knew something was wrong, but I just didn't know what." She looked him in the eye again, her gaze sharp. "I went looking for a reason, you know. You'll be happy to hear that no one would tell me why."

"The law is there for a reason."

"The reason is flawed, Hokage-sama. I'm sure Naruto's parents would not want Konoha to treat their son as a pariah." She placed an odd significance on the word that Sarutobi did not trust; he had not intended on telling her Naruto's background, just his status. He decided to redirect the conversation. 

"So you're not afraid? Most people would be, in your position."

"Naruto is Naruto, no matter his tenant. Nothing could make me afraid of him."

He nodded at her and released the silencing seal on the doorway. "Good. He has a valuable friend in you, Sakura-chan."

"I can only hope to live up to the name, Hokage-sama."
"Hey, hey, Kakashi-sensei! Teach me this jutsu!"

"Two things: no and never."

Naruto pouted mightily and whined. "But why?"

"Because I don't want to."

Before Naruto could complain again, louder and with more terrible whining, Sakura butt into the conversation. "You need to sign a summoning contract before you can perform the kuchiyose jutsu, Naruto. Otherwise who knows where you'll end up?" She scratched behind Pakkun's ears and the little pug closed his eyes in grumpy delight.

"A contract?" Naruto's eyes brightened and then he looked toward Kakashi again. "So, sensei, could I sign-"

"No."

Sasuke snickered at Naruto's predicament, but said nothing. He was carefully stroking Bull's head, his small form dwarfed by the mute bulldog's large frame. Naruto let out an exaggerated sigh and fell to the ground, where he was playfully attacked by Shiba and Bisuke. He rolled around on the grass, half-heartedly trying to get away.

"Argh, Kakashi-sensei! This is your fault!"

"Maa, Naruto-kun. My ninken have minds of their own. I don't control them."

Pakkun spoke for the first time since they had been summoned, his eyes still closed as Sakura cooed over him. "That's right, kid. We're not some dumb animals."

Naruto (and Sasuke, to a lesser extent) was openly shocked at his gruff, deep voice and Sakura laughed. "You boys really should go to the library more often! There's plenty of supplementary information on summoning if you just look for it."

"Why would we do that when we have you, Sakura-chan?"

She huffed in mock annoyance and rolled her eyes heavenward. "Why do I even bother with you two?"

They both shot their most angelic look in her direction, appearing as innocent and sweet as babes. She grimaced and pointed at Naruto. "You! How dare you teach Sasuke your bad habits!"

He grinned. "But it works every time! You can't resist us!"

Sakura snorted, but did not refute the statement. Pakkun looked up at her from her lap and said, "I didn't notice it until now, but you … use the same shampoo as me. Floral green."

She heard a muffled sound from her sensei. He had turned away from the children, his shoulders shaking. Pakkun continued. "Though my hair is much glossier."
I knew there was a reason I stopped using this! I still can't believe I use the same shampoo as a dog.

Sakura let out a long-suffering sigh, resolving to switch her shampoo again. "Well, Pakkun, we can't all win beauty contests. You can have the rest of my new bottle. Something tells me I'm due for a change."

Another noise escaped Kakashi, sounding like a strangled cough. She narrowed her eyes and glared daggers at his shaking back.

Pakkun hopped down and said, "You also smell like cats, many cats." She shrugged casually, trying to push down her panic. Damn his nose.

"I like cats. Many cats. Konoha has no shortage of strays." There was a knowing look on his puggy face, but he said nothing. With a short command, Pakkun had rounded up the rest of the ninjens and they disappeared in puff of smoke.

By this point, Kakashi had gotten a handle on himself. He turned around and widened his one uncovered eye in false shock. "Why are you all just laying around? I thought my cute little genin team was here to work hard?"

They all shot him a dark look and stood up, brushing paw prints off their clothes.

"You three need to continue to build up your core strength. You're already at a disadvantage by being smaller and younger than all other genin. Today will be all about basic physical training." He rubbed his hands together deviously. "I have many ideas."

Four hours later, the three of them were laying together in a heap at the training grounds, but only because they could not bear to stand a moment longer. Even Naruto had to reluctantly concede defeat in the face of Kakashi's sadistic regimen, which had included carrying boulders back and forth to the Hokage Mountain.

"Is this all you've got?" Their sensei stood towered over them, omnipresent orange book in hand. Sakura could see why Kakashi was always ahead in his rivalry with Gai; he may project laziness, but his physical conditioning was no fluke. "Sakura-chan, you made it back first, you get to choose your next punishment-er, activity."

Sakura knew he had not actually misspoke. She tiredly glared at him from the ground, where she was pined down by Sasuke's heavy leg over hers and Naruto's sweaty forehead pressed against her shoulder. "Kakashi-sensei should join us so we can really be a team. Surely we're interrupting your own training with our sad, pathetic attempts." She punctuated her emphasis with an angry hand movements from her leaden limbs.

He chuckled. "Oh? What did you have in mind?"

She pointed dramatically. "The boys challenge you to a push-up contest!" They groaned in dismay and Sasuke muttered, "why just us?"

"And what will you be doing, Sakura-chan?"

"I will be your handicap!" She smiled triumphantly. "I'm going sit on your back. The boys can combine their numbers against your one, plus my weight. I'll be like the monkey on your back."

Kakashi hummed thoughtfully and tucked his Icha Icha away into a pouch. "Sounds like you have
this all planned out. Naruto, Sasuke, are you ready to lose?” Sasuke groaned and feebly twitched, but Naruto had already bounced up in outrage at his words.

"We're gonna beat you so bad your ninken are gonna be ashamed of you!" He dragged Sasuke to his feet and they all arranged themselves to Sakura's satisfaction, the two boys facing their sensei. She jumped onto Kakashi's back and ignored his grunt of disapproval. She sat crosslegged and made sure to dig her bony knees and shin armor into his spine as she pretended to get comfortable.

"Okay, the first to complete five hundred or the last one to stop, whatever comes first, wins!" At hearing the challenge's limit, Sasuke's face regained the mulish look she knew so well while Naruto just yelled enthusiastically. "…. And go!"

The boys immediately dropped to the ground, counting aloud. Kakashi hadn't moved. "Kakashi-sensei? What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I just thought I would be nice and give them a head start."

She snorted. "I didn't know you and "nice" were on speaking terms, sensei. Don't underestimate my disruptive potential!"

"You can't feel it, Sakura-chan, but inside I am shaking with fear." She leaned forward, knees pressing harshly against his shoulder blades. He didn't react and just started his own set of push ups, movements steady and swift. She had started this contest knowing that the boys would probably lose terribly, but she wanted to include Kakashi in their team as something other than the insane taskmaster he had appointed himself.

As Naruto and Sasuke neared their seventieth push-up, they started to falter. Sakura shouted encouragements to them, right in Kakashi's sensitive ears. She knew he had very acute senses, so she took advantage of it whenever possible to distract him. He tensed at her loud tone, but never faltered.

Kakashi had already broken two hundred and fifty by the time the boys had gotten to their individual one hundred marks and she was getting tired of poking at his ribs with no reaction, so she tried another tack. With a nasty grin, she opened the pack attached to the back of his belt and removed his garish orange book. Kakashi could tell she was rummaging, but probably assumed she was looking for weaponry to continue venting her annoyance. She looked at the "over 18" warning on the cover with amusement.

Hah! It's probably a good thing I'm actually thirty …

"Listen up, boys! I'm going to tell you a story." Naruto and Sasuke didn't reply, too concentrated on huffing through the challenge she had imposed on them. Kakashi passed three hundred without breaking a sweat and she tried not to think about the muscles of his back bunching attractively under her negligible weight.

Don't be gross, Sakura. You're technically ten. You have plenty of time to hit on your sensei later, when you're sure everyone will live through the coming war.

With that mental slap, she opened up the well-worn book and her grin returned. She thumbed through the pages, looking for the scene she remembered as being particularly lurid when she had purchased her own copy to meet Jiraiya years ago.

She cleared her throat. "Hmm. 'Oh, T-toshiro-san! We can't do that here!' Kimiko flushed prettily, the pink of her embarrassment running down her swan-like throat and spreading over her lush—"
Sakura was cut off as Kakashi nearly threw her off his back in panic, his fingers plucking the book out of her hand. He was as shocked as she had ever seen him and she burst into giggles from her spot on the grass.

"Hah! Kakashi-sensei, you lose! You stopped before you got to five hundred!"

He carefully tucked his precious volume away again, eying Sakura rolling around in the grass, chuckling to herself. "So I did. I should have known you would cheat."

Naruto gasped in indignation and Sasuke scoffed disdainfully before he said, "A good shinobi uses all resources available to him."

They all looked at their pink-haired teammate and he continued. "Or her. Nice job, Sakura." She stood and bowed with a flourish, still grinning. "You couldn't have used that trick fifty push-ups ago?"

"Eh, you boys needed the exercise. I already did five hundred push-ups with Gai-sensei this morning." Kakashi let the words sink in for a moment.

"You trained with Gai this morning? When? We met at the bridge at seven."

She rolled her eyes at him. "No, Kakashi-sensei, the three of us met at the bridge at seven. You met us at the bridge at nine."

"You know how those black cats can be, it's not good to cross their path …"

"Yes, yes. All those cats haunting the path of life, it's a wonder you get anything done the way you carry on about them."

"Maa, Sakura-chan, you shouldn't be so mean to your poor sensei. I'll die of a broken heart."

Her own heart felt heavy at his words, remembering her Kakashi, the last of their team to die on her, alone. She looked away from his teasing face, knowing she couldn't quite affect the same genuine cheerfulness now. Sometimes it was easy to forget her mission, when she was surrounded by her team and those she loved most. She just wanted to enjoy them being here and alive and happy, or their closest approximation of the emotion.

"Sakura-chan?" Naruto's tentative voice reached through her dark reminiscence. "Are you okay?"

She tried to smile at him, but she could tell he wasn't convinced. "I'm fine, Naruto." The rest of her team raised their eyebrows in disbelief and she laughed at their identical expressions of skepticism. "Really! I'm just thinking about dinner, I'm starving."

As if on cue, Naruto's stomach growled loudly. "Me too! Kakashi-sensei, please tell me we're done for today! It's almost dark!"

"Fine, fine. We'll meet here again tomorrow at the same time." He was about to form the seal for shunshin when Sakura latched onto his arm like a limpet.

"Nope, Kakashi-sensei! You're having dinner with us." Her eyes gleamed. "Think of it as team bonding."

He looked at her apprehensively. "This isn't another ploy to see under my mask again, is it?"

"Sensei! I am ashamed of you! To be so suspicious of your own cute little genin." He said nothing
and she slumped against his arm. She muttered, "I promise we won't try anything. Plus, I'm already making dinner for these two black holes." Sakura waved vaguely toward Naruto and Sasuke, who were not at all insulted by the nickname. Once upon a time Sasuke might have put up a token protest, if his teammates hadn't once seen him inhale an entire basket of cherry tomatoes. "You might as well join us!"

Kakashi thought about his empty apartment with its even emptier refrigerator. He meant to go grocery shopping, but time kept running away from him, first with ANBU and then his current assignment. These kids had wrecked his routine already, it wouldn't hurt to have dinner with them just once. It saved him from having to pay for dinner out, anyway.

"Are you sure this will be okay with your parents, Sakura-chan?" The boys immediately looked away, clearly uncomfortable with the mention.

She smiled at him and just said, "My parents will not be home, Kakashi-sensei, so I'm sure it will be just fine."

After a quick trip to the marketplace, where she forced all the boys to carry her groceries, Sakura led them to a small two-story house near the edge of the civilian district. She made an unusual combination of hand seals at the doorway, running three fingers over a blemish on the brightly painted red door. The blemish became an overwhelmingly large seal that glowed with chakra and disappeared again in the space of a few seconds. Kakashi blinked as Sakura then removed a key from her pack and opened the door traditionally, ushering them into the front room.

"Ah, Sakura-chan …?"

Naruto jostled him from behind and he looked over his shoulder at the boy, who loudly whispered, "Don't ask, Kakashi-sensei. She won't even tell us what that is." He wondered if he should be insulted at the idea that he was less trustworthy than two ten year old boys, but shrugged it off. His surprisingly mature little girl was allowed her secrets. For now.

He raised his left arm, indicating the bag she had pressed him into carrying for her. Kakashi wasn't sure how it happened, but he was sure there was blackmail involved. He had to speak to her about saving that sort of leverage for more important uses. "What should I do with this?"

"Bring the food in here!" Sakura called from the next room, which he assumed was the kitchen. They all trooped in and laid down their packages and the boys immediately left, to his confusion. Sakura laughed and offered him a knife, handle first. "They have been banned from the kitchen after one too many 'cooking competitions'. I only allow them to wash the dishes now." She handed him three eggplants. "Make yourself useful and chop this."

Sakura had removed her weights and weaponry and tied on a garishly loud orange apron covered with little narutomaki swirls. It clashed terribly with her pink hair and the red vest she had on underneath. The entire combination was a little hard on the eye.

"I didn't realize that I would be drafted as scullery maid when I agreed to come here, Sakura-chan." Nevertheless, he set to chopping the vegetables, wondering if she knew it was his favorite. Something told him that she had a way of knowing these things. Women's intuition? How did it work? His student was younger than Rin had been, but her emotional depth reminded him of her occasionally.

"You certainly would make a terrible servant with that lip, sensei." She busied herself with setting up the rice cooker, her movements practiced and at ease in the kitchen. He noticed a worn little
blue step stool on the floor in front of the open counter, the small red and white uchiwa painted on the side nearly faded with time.

"How often do you have Naruto and Sasuke over for dinner, Sakura-chan?"

"On average? Every night. They don't have anyone to look after them." She was picking the bones out of the broiled tai, tongue stuck out in concentration.

The answer was exactly as he had expected. In the past month of his acquaintance with the team that had been shoved upon him, he realized that Sakura was fiercely protective of "her boys". She trained obsessively to protect them, she healed their wounds (a talent that had surprised the hell out of Kakashi when he had first witnessed it) and she was their emotional crutch. Sakura was an adult in a little ten year old body; her devotion inspired some deeply buried feelings to emerge in him, emotions he thought he had died with the last of his original team.

"They are lucky to have such a little mother hen as a teammate." She glared at him half-heartedly and grabbed the sliced eggplant from him. She slid the foot stool over in front of the stove, where she deftly placed them in a large saucepan to cook.

Kakashi turned and leaned against the counter, listening to the vegetables sizzle as she prepared a miso glaze. The silence was not uncomfortable, but it made him think …

"It's too quiet for Naruto and Sasuke to still be alive in this house. What do you suppose they're doing?"

Sakura looked unconcerned, flipping the eggplant and covering the pan. "They're probably passed out on my futon. You pushed them pretty hard today, Kakashi-sensei."

"But not you? You're still cooking dinner for all of us."

She had finished shredding the tai and washed her hands, wiping them on her apron when she couldn't find a towel. "I am tired. I did wake up at sunrise for training with the dulcet sounds of Gai-sensei bawling in the background. I swear he creates genjutsu out of sheer emotion."

Kakashi barked a laugh at the idea, surprised at himself. She grinned to herself as she brushed the miso mixture over the eggplant slices and slid them into the oven to broil.

Oh, Kakashi. You can be happy sometimes too, you know.

"Gai is a most unique individual. How do you even know him?"

"That is a long story, Kakashi-sensei, and it involves me narrowly avoiding death at the hands of an enormous leech."

"… what." The only enormous leeches he knew of were in the Forest of Death and he knew that his sensible little Sakura-chan would never go in there by herself. Unless she considered it a training exercise or she read about it or the boys were in danger … okay, there were many reasons she would actively go into that death trap. Kakashi sighed in resignation at the tangle that was his current life.

She waved it off. "I'm fine, Gai-sensei was there. He really showed those leeches who was boss! Though I think the Aburame Clan might have been a bit upset …"

"That reminds me - as the one who is outwardly considered the responsible one on our team, I feel like I should ask where your parents are today."
He could see her freeze for a second as she reached for the oven door, but continued on to take the pan of eggplant out. Sakura tossed the oven mitts on the counter and turned toward him with shadowed eyes. "My parents are shinobi who take long-term missions together. They are rarely home due to the demand for their infiltration skills."

"I see." He did, really. Sakura didn't really have anyone to take care of her either, but she turned those feeling into constructively taking care of the boys instead. Kakashi wondered if this dinner was her way of adopting him too, like a lost puppy.

She smiled at him sadly. "It's hard to be lonely with Naruto and Sasuke around, sensei. I'm fine the way things are." She slid her footstool over to the rice cooker and started spooning it into a large serving bowl. "The food is just about done, can you go make sure those two aren't silently breaking things?"

Kakashi gratefully escaped the room, slightly miffed at himself for ruining the light-hearted tone that had pervaded their conversation until he stuck his foot in his mouth. He was just being the responsible one, that's what a jonin-sensei was supposed to do, right? *I have no idea what I'm doing. But I'll keep trying.*

He wandered through the lower level of the house, finding them dozing together on a futon in a sunroom that faced a heavily neglected garden. He stared out the large picture window at the sunset and then noticed a small new plot that was nearly hidden by the weeds encroaching on the rest of the backyard. Kakashi would bet his next mission pay that they were medicinal herbs, carefully and meticulously tended.

He turned on his heel, quietly snuck up on the boys and crouched down to ear level. He drew a deep breath and bellowed, "DINNERTIME, BOYS!"

There was a confusion of movement as both Naruto and Sasuke jerked bolt upright, going from dead sleep to panicked awareness. The blonde rolled off the futon with a thump and Sasuke held a palm over his own heart, trying to slow his frantic breathing. After a moment they realized the source of their trouble and pined him with twin scowls.

They grumbled irritably as he herded them toward the table with a sense of amusement that was slowly growing to be familiar again. It had been so long since he had dealt with a team, with all the complicated emotions that came with it.

These kids were worth keeping, for now.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all your comments. I'm actually pretty amazed that anyone kept reading past the first short chapter. I appreciate any and all reviews.
Sakura stewed over the information that the Hokage had given her, allowing it to fester in the back of her mind as she prepared food for Naruto and Sasuke. After dinner, they relaxed in the sunroom and Naruto shared his big graduation news with Sasuke, who only replied, "it's about time." She huffed a laugh as the blonde tackled Sasuke and the two of them rolled around grappling on the floor until they knocked into a lamp, nearly sending it crashing to the ground. They froze, wide-eyed and looked at Sakura in alarm. She didn't have to say anything, just stared until they picked themselves up and sat on opposite ends of the room.

They didn't ask to stay, but kept making excuses as to their continued presence until it grew too late for her to do anything but roll out the futon for them. Sakura would never have kicked them out, but she also knew that some sort of misplaced pride would also never allow either of them to ask her outright.

The next time my parents are home, I'm going to speak to them about Naruto and Sasuke moving in. I have the room for it and I would love for them to be safe under one roof every night.

Satisfied that the boys wouldn't murder each other in their sleep, Sakura readied herself for a long night of staring at the ceiling. She lay in her own bed and mentally picked through the conversation she had with Sarutobi earlier that day. She finally had a valid reason for knowing about Naruto's fuzzy tenant, but she had been trying to protect him for two years now without officially being aware. Had anything changed? Sakura had a feeling that while she had gained trust with the Hokage, her loyalty was still being tested in a round-about way. She just hoped that it would not come down to choosing between Konoha or her boys, because Sarutobi would not appreciate her decision.

Nor would another person, a man who had been more difficult to keep tabs on than the Akatsuki, though for entirely different reasons. Based on the information she had been able to obtain in her own past, Danzo's ROOT faction had been officially disbanded when Itachi had fled Konoha. This just forced him to bring his movements underground, with a level of paranoia that made it nigh impossible for her to both infiltrate and keep her position in the village. She was amazed that he had not approached either of the boys, considering their level of power at an early age and Sasuke's bloodline limit. Sakura had felt for sure they would be prime targets, so she had consistently and subtly tried to question them about their interactions when they weren't together. After two years, she had come to the conclusion that Naruto or Sasuke's inclusion into ROOT would draw too much attention to Danzo. It was something he could not afford while Sarutobi was still alive. Even though she strongly disagreed with the Hokage's decision regarding Naruto's jinchuriki status, she was relieved that he still stood between Naruto and the worst of Konoha.

Still, that didn't mean that her home was entirely safe for the boys. She needed a way to ensure their protection and Sakura knew just who to ask.

"Ibiki-saaaaan!" Sakura sang out his name as she strolled into the T&I offices, not even bothering
to glance at Kiri-nin who was in a chakra dampening cell awaiting processing. The man snapped his sharpened teeth in her general direction and she sent him the most withering glare she could create. "You have terrible manners, nin-san."

Kotetsu was at his desk and could only roll his eyes at her behavior. At this point most of the members of T&I were used to Ibiki's strange and occasional shadow, though Inoichi remained slightly wary of her presence whenever they openly had prisoners. Must be a dad thing.

Ibiki grunted in acknowledgement, but kept writing the report he was working on. She skipped over to his desk and stood at attention, staring at him with bright eyes, clearly determined to be there as long as it took. He scratched through several sentences, appearing have forgotten her presence. Sakura remained still, a picture of absolute patience. Kotetsu reluctantly turned back to his own work when nothing happened, slowly and painfully decoding the message they had liberated from their prisoner.

Fifteen minutes of silence had passed, with the Kiri-nin staring unnervingly at Sakura while she blithely ignored him in favor of staring unnervingly at Ibiki. He signed the bottom of the document and finally, finally looked up. "Whaddya want, kid?"

She smiled blindingly at him. "What do you know about seals, Ibiki-san?"

"Enough to know you shouldn't be playing around with them."

Sakura placed a hand on her chest in shock. "Me? Playing? Perish the thought. I have an idea, but I need someone with more knowledge than I can currently find in Konoha's main library."

Ibiki leaned back in his chair. "I bet those fancy Hyuugas probably have something in their own library, considering that damn cursed seal they put on their branch house. Good luck trying to get in there."

"That was an entirely unhelpful answer, Ibiki-san. If I wanted to know who wouldn't be useful, I would have just asked a toddler to help."

"Brat. Why do you need to know about seals so bad, anyway? Give me a good reason and I might help you."

She pouted. "You know I'm good at them, it's not like I'm some amateur waltzing around with a scroll and a brush."

Ibiki ignored the fact that she was ten and therefore unlikely to be anything but an amateur, skill-wise. Sakura had never been a normal child, not since he had met her. He knew she was unusually talented in whatever she set her mind to, mostly because she never let herself stop until she had perfected every aspect to her satisfaction. Their lessons with the tanto had proven that many times over. She had once told Ibiki that "never give up" was a mantra of a friend that she had lost, so she tried to live it for him. The heartbroken look on her tiny face was enough to forestall any other questions.

"I know you're good. But that's not what I asked."

"I have a very valid reason, but I can't … tell you here." Facing away from their prisoner, she signaled to a room outside the main office. Intrigued, he allowed her to lead him to an interrogation room, after first checking to make sure the privacy seals were in place.

"All right, kid. Spill."
"Hokage-sama informed me yesterday about Naruto." Ibiki felt a knot form in his stomach at the simple statement. He knew that she considered Naruto one of her precious people, the ones she worked so hard to protect. He hoped that her heart, so contradictory of everything they taught in the Academy, was open enough to accept the news. Ibiki did not want to think less of Sakura, but Naruto's continued existence was a point of contention with many villagers.

"I see. What does this have to do with fuinjutsu?"

She sighed in exasperation. "Don't you see? He needs my protection even more than I originally thought! Jinchuriki are exceptionally powerful tools in the hands of the wrong person and I will not let Naruto be taken."

The tight feeling loosened. "So it doesn't bother you?"

Sakura gave him a narrow look. "Hokage-sama asked me something similar. I will tell you what I told him and what I will tell everyone when this knowledge becomes known. Naruto is Naruto and nothing will damn well change that. This changes nothing but the scope of danger."

"So it seems." Inwardly, Ibiki was strangely pleased with her reaction. He was not generally considered a caring man, but Sakura had managed to worm her way into his life and he would have been very put out if she was harmed, even emotionally.

"So? Seals, people, help?"

"Let's go to the dango stall. Someone you should meet should be there around this time. Keep your wallet ready. You might need it."

Sakura sighed heavily. "Can't I ask you people for anything without having to buy food first?"

Ibiki led the way and Sakura trudged beside him, preparing herself. She knew who he was going to introduce her to when he mentioned dango and Mitarashi Anko was a woman anyone needed to fortify themselves for. Sakura had gotten to know her briefly in her own time period, on one of the few times Danzo had allowed her out of the village on a mission. The two of them had separated from the rest of their team and Anko had spent the entire time trying to provoke a response out of Sakura, poking and prodding all her sore spots before she had snapped and punched her through a tree. Instead of being pissed, Anko had laughed in delight and said, "Finally! I was beginning to think you were made of ice, Princess."

After the mission was complete, Anko showed up at her doorstep and bluntly said, "You're being wasted in the tower. Come fight with me."

This started a strange pattern of sparring and bickering that reminded her of the good old days between Naruto and Sasuke, except Anko was far more explicit and creative in her insults. Sakura gave back as good as she got, letting loose all her frustration at what her life had become. One day, Anko hadn't shown up for their predetermined fight-date for dango and a beating, so she went searching for her. The trail led her to Danzo himself, who was unsurprisingly unsympathetic.

"Mitarashi bit off more than she could chew in Kiri. They sent us back her head."

One more dead friend I get to see again. Try to be positive. Also, try not to call her an asshole immediately.

Ibiki looked down at the girl moving silently beside him. She seemed inordinately pensive, with none of her cheery sarcasm fighting their way. He hoped she had enough mental fortitude after Sarutobi's revelation to deal with Anko's own brand of insanity.

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They arrived at the stall and Ibiki spotted Anko's brown trench coat immediately. It seemed that she had just gotten started, only two empty skewers in on the plate in front of her.

"Anko."

She spun around on the stool, half a dango in her mouth. She chewed obnoxiously and swallowed. "Ibiki! I didn't know you like dango. Or that you liked anything."

He snorted. "I'm here to see you. Or rather, Sakura is." He motioned to the still quiet girl at his side.

"Eh? Who's this? Some poor creature you abducted?"

"Sakura is a … friend. She has a query for you." Ibiki waved between the two. "Sakura, this is Anko. She has significant experience with seals." Anko narrowed her eyes at this and stared down at the pink-haired girl menacingly.

"What's a kid like you doing with fuinjutsu? They don't teach that at the Academy."

Sakura just crossed her arms and frowned. "Obviously, Anko-san. Otherwise I would have not needed to ask you."

The older woman laughed. "Oh, kitten's got claws, huh? Well, Anko-san doesn't work for free, Princess." Sakura grimaced at the nickname, annoyed that she was unable to be free of it no matter which time period she was in.

"I think my project will be of academic interest to you as well, but I will also pay for your dango today, with possible dango purchases in the future upon completion of the seal I need."

Anko's eyebrows had steadily risen as she spoke and she stole a quick glance at Ibiki's face, which revealed nothing. "That was quick, Princess. Looks like you need my help real bad."

Sakura shrugged. "I can always make more money. I can't reanimate dead friends." Anko's lips formed a thin line. Sakura wasn't sure if she knew about Orochimaru's edo tensei techniques, but it was clear the idea of reanimating dead people did not bring forth pleasant memories.

"So what do you want from me? I have more skill with fuinjutsu than your average shinobi, but I'm no master."

"I already have much of the seal composed, but I need an outside perspective. Would you be willing to work on it with me at my home?"

"Why not? It's been a while since anything interesting has happened."

Ibiki interrupted, only slightly incredulous. "Anko, you stabbed one of the diplomatic envoys on your last mission. With a fish."

"So? Par for the course, he was a traitor. I was supposed to off 'im."

"A fish!"

"It was the closest weapon! I got the job done, Ibiki."

Sakura had slid some money to the purveyor of the stall while they argued, indicating that she was paying for Anko's current food and an extra platter. She grabbed two skewers and pushed the rest of the plate towards the woman, hoping to distract her from her very visceral reminiscence of a
"Thanks. When do you wanna meet up?"

Sakura offered one of her skewers to Ibiki, who eyed it suspiciously before grabbing the end. She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Hmm, I have to make dinner for the boys again tonight, but I'm sure I can distract them with some errand afterward. How does seven sound?"

Anko was already half-way through her food and just nodded, cheeks bulging. "Mmph."

"Good. See you tonight, Anko-san." She left her address on a napkin and strolled back toward T&I with Ibiki, fully intending to enjoy her dango in peace.

Anko wandered over toward the civilian district, following the neatly printed instructions that pink haired girl had left for her. After she and Ibiki left, Anko had finished her (free) food and filed her mission report, complete with death by mackerel. She had casually made her way to T&I. Upon seeing the team leader gone, Anko had pounced on Kotestu for more information about this Sakura girl who was supposedly Ibiki's friend. What she got was a weirdly in-depth description of a strangely intelligent girl colored by a barely concealed fondness and slight exasperation. It had only served to further her curiosity.

She was about to knock on the bright red door when it opened, revealing a casually dressed Sakura, who greeted her with muted enthusiasm. "Anko-san! Right on time. I've told the boys to stay away for two hours without killing each other. That should give us a good start."

Anko stalked inside and blatantly looked around, seeing a large scroll unraveled on the middle of the front room. "Start on what, exactly? You weren't very forthcoming earlier."

"I need to place a seal of protection on my house, one that admits only people I have added via chakra signature."

"That's a tall order, Princess. Wouldn't a general barrier and alert seal do?"

Sakura stared at her unblinkingly. "My best friends in the whole world basically live here and I will do whatever it takes to keep them safe. That includes inventing new ways to do so if necessary."

"Fine, fine. Don't get your panties in a twist. What have you got so far?"

Sakura waved her over to the scroll on the floor and Anko studied it. It appeared to be an amalgamation of many types of seals she was familiar with, lines drawn tightly together in series of swirls. She saw barrier, alert, chakra, transportation and something she didn't recognize.

"What's this?" She pointed to a section of sharp strokes ending in points. "How does this fit in with your overall pattern?"

"That's the key I've built in. I will need a way to add people I want to the barrier so they can get into the house."

"And where does the transportation jutsu lead?"

Sakura smirked. "To an unmarked cell deep in the bowels of T&I. I had to bribe Ibiki with two weeks of barbecue for that." She hummed thoughtfully. "I think he would have done it anyway, but he likes to have company for lunch, so I let him have his way."
Anko laughed loudly and smacked Sakura on the back, nearly sending her sprawling across the scroll. "You're fun. I like you."

"Gee, thanks, Anko-san." The woman didn't respond to her sarcasm, having gone back to concentrating on the brushwork of the seals. It was incredibly impressive work for a kid and she couldn't find any catastrophic faults in it, except - "I don't see anything that would stop a summoned animal from crossing the threshold."

"Wouldn't they still be stopped by the lack of familiar chakra presence?"

"Their chakra coils are slightly different than ours or a regular animal's, due to their increased use of space-time jutsus." Anko grabbed a brush and quickly relooped an open circle on the seal, adding several wavy lines and a series of tomoe. "This would exclude them as well without interfering with the rest of your conditions."

Sakura was looking concerned now. "Will I be able to add summons using the key with this in place? I know I plan on entering in a contract later and I'm sure my boys will want to as well."

"There's no reason it shouldn't work with them too, with their cooperation. Other than that, this looks nearly ready to go. I don't see why you really needed me."

"I need help figuring out how to implement it. If I traditionally activate the seal with just a burst of chakra, there is a risk of it the key becoming functional for someone other than me if they know how to do it."

"True, but the hand seals required for the key are incredibly specific. It seems like a non-issue to me."

Sakura shook her head. "No, that's not good enough. I need it to be impossible to get past this seal if you're not me or my selected guests."

Anko sat back on her heels and regarded the girl carefully. "Tell me. Who are you trying to protect so bad? Did they do something?"

"My best friends are Uchiha Sasuke and Uzumaki Naruto. I'm sure you've heard the names."

To her credit, the woman didn't ask the question Sakura was already getting tired of hearing. She just murmured to herself, "Ah. Now I see." She sat there silently and Sakura was hesitant to speak, but she didn't have to wait long. "How's your chakra control?"

"Excellent."

"Oho! Princess is a bit smug about that, huh?" Anko poked her forehead teasingly. "That's good, because I had a idea. I've heard about this style from Uzushio, but you know, that's gone now. It's too bad your Uzumaki friend is an orphan, I bet his clan would have been a great help in your little hobby."

Sakura just nodded solemnly. "Yes, too bad."

"Anyway, if you have good enough control over your chakra, you can use it to carve a seal into a surface. That would definitely imbue something of this magnitude with the protection you seem to need."

"That sounds good, but I was hoping that that the seal could stay hidden unless reactivated to add more signatures. There's no need to broadcast what I've done."
"You could always add a "hide me" seal on top of your original, that sort of thing is easily done. But your control really needs to be as good as you say, or it could blow up in your face."

"I'm confident in my abilities, Anko-san."

"Right, sure. I just don't want Ibiki on my ass if his precious Sakura-chan gets hurt, y'see?"

Sakura widened her eyes and affected a patently false innocent expression. "I'm sure a massively talented kunoichi like Anko-sama could save me from one tiny little seal implosion."

"You know, Princess, it's kids like you that stop me from having my own."
"Oi, Sakura!"

Sakura smiled at the vendor as he handed back her change. She grabbed her newly sharpened weapons off the table carefully and turned to face the boy who had called out to her.

"Ah, Shikamaru-san. How are you?"

He stopped a few feet in front of her, hands in pockets and a determined look on his normally bored face. "Play shogi against me."

"Yes, hello, good to see you as well." Shikamaru rolled his eyes dramatically and Sakura idly wondered if they would one day fall out of his head. This particular habit was something that had followed him into the adulthood of her time.

"I want you to play shogi with me."

Sakura was busy packing her kunai into the pack on her leg and she nodded distractedly. "That's nice, Shikamaru-san. I want one million ryo."

"… what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought we were arbitrarily naming off things we want. Is that not the game?"

He sighed and asked through gritted teeth, "Sakura-san, would you please play shogi with me? I would very much enjoy the pleasure of your company."

Finished with her weapons, she gave him a blinding smile. "Why, Shikamaru-san! I would be ever so delighted." She motioned with her hand ostentatiously. "Lead on, good sir." He turned on his heel, grumbling under his breath, not looking to see if she followed. She did, laughing the entire way out of the marketplace.

Shikamaru brought her through the Nara Forest as a shortcut, aiming to get at the board on the outdoor porch before his father knew they were there. He had already endured enough pointed comments about "Sakura-chan" in the past several weeks since she had soundly trounced him on the training grounds. He didn't want to bring down more trouble on his head, but he could not get the way she had easily seen through his father's strategy out of his mind. Shogi was his only real hobby outside of cloud watching and Shikaku was not always available to play when he wanted. If Sakura was as good as he hoped, Shikamaru wasn't going to let her just fade away.

They stepped out of the forest and he chanced a quick look around for his father, hoping for the first time that he was still working. Sakura followed him with an amused look on her face, stepping quietly so she wouldn't spook the deer nearby. They had stopped grazing to stare at the two children curiously, but didn't seem overly anxious by their presence. Shikamaru was surprised by the behavior; generally the deer were skittish around strangers.
He waved her over to the board and they each took a seat. Sakura was the first to speak. "So who were you looking for earlier? You seemed pretty relieved when there was no one here."

His shoulders tensed, but he kept setting up the pieces with a practiced ease. "My father has been bugging me lately. Apparently you impressed him and he's nosy."

Sakura snorted in amusement. "The greatest military mind in Konoha whittled down to "nosy" in his own son's words. That's harsh, Shikamaru-san."

"I agree. I'm hurt, son. Truly." Shikamaru's head whipped up at Shikaku's voice, annoyance warring with wariness on his face. His father leaned against the doorway casually, an unopened bottle of sake dangling in his hand. "I was just coming to see if you wanted to play, but it looks like you've already got yourself a little friend!" He lowered himself down on a cushion not far from them and relaxed. "A friend who is generous with her compliments. I'm not sure I would say "greatest", Sakura-chan, but I appreciate it nonetheless."

Sakura giggled behind her hands as Shikamaru finished setting the board, frown now firmly in place as it became clear that his father was not going to leave. "You're welcome, Nara-san. I spoke only the truth."

"Are you two done? We can start now, Sakura."

"You're so touchy today, Shikamaru-san." She had black, so she made the first move, intending to win as quickly as possible. As an adult, when she played against Shikamaru she lost more often than she would like to remember and had never won against Shikaku. If she couldn't manage to beat an eight year old Shikamaru, Sakura was going to scream, quietly, in her own head.

The porch remained quiet as they contemplated strategy, the only sound being the soft clicks of the wooden pieces as they were placed with confidence. Shikamaru was intensely focused on the board, pointedly ignoring his father's existence.

Shikaku himself was highly entertained by the proceedings, for all that they were being deliberated in silence. He sipped his sake as he watched his son trying desperately to understand his classmate's strategy and losing, though he wasn't quite aware of it yet.

*Sakura-chan is as good as she said she was. I've definitely used that technique on Shikamaru before.*

He watched as she made a series of drops around the board and saw Shikamaru's eyes widen as he finally realized what she was doing. He made a valiant effort to fight back, but within thirty minutes his king was in check and the game was over.

Sakura stretched her arms over her head and rolled her shoulders. "That was fun, Shikamaru-san, but I have go home now. I'm sure the boys are wondering where I am."

He was still staring at the board with a slack face, but looked up in alarm when he realized she was leaving. "I didn't know you had brothers. Can't they wait for you to have one more game?"

"Brothers? Hah! They wish. Naruto and Sasuke are more like … quarreling puppies who eat my food. I have to leave now so that I can prepare dinner for us."

Shikaku knew those names. He would have to pester Shikamaru later about her relationship to the Kyuubi jinchuriki and the last Uchiha. To make sure the village was safe, of course. It had absolutely nothing to do with his natural paternal instinct to smush Sakura and Shikamaru's faces together and demand "now kiss!" They were eight, after all. He'd wait a few years before he took
any drastic action.

TWO YEARS LATER

Sakura watched Shikamaru drop a piece onto the board and sighed. He had always played exceptionally well and her win/loss ratio was quickly approaching something embarrassing for her, being an actual adult with more experience. With the proper motivation, Shikamaru had turned into a monster, soaking up all her best strategies and turning them against her to great effect.

"The boys and I met our new sensei a few days ago. He's kind of strange."

Shikamaru moved his gold general one more spot closer to her king. "Oh? That's a bit of a hypocritical statement coming from you, Sakura."

She stared at the board and huffed, both at her dire position and his comment. She made a token effort of retreat. "I am simply unique, Shikamaru. It's not my fault you can't appreciate it." Sakura watched in despair as he captured her bishop. "He reads porn right in front of us! And he kept calling me Pinky."

Shikaku was in his normal spot on the porch, pretending like he wasn't listening to their conversation. At this point, Sakura was forced to agree with Shikamaru's assessment - he was nosy.

Shikamaru laughed at her disgruntled expression, unhealthily delighted at the nickname. He opened his mouth to comment, but she interrupted. "No, you may not call me that." He looked as if he was going to argue when she continued, "Or would you like to adjourn to the training grounds? I'm feeling a little frustrated right now and I'm sure you'd love to be my sparring partner."

Shikamaru let his mouth close with an audible click of teeth, not willing to continue that line of conversation. No matter how many times he had bested her at shogi, she had always trounced him when it came down to a physical battle.

There was a knock on the door and it slid open immediately after to reveal Ino, who was clearly at ease in the household. Sakura stiffened, awkward in the presence of her once best friend. She had not needed the boost of self-esteem that Ino had originally provided her this time around and their friendship had fallen by the wayside as she busied herself taking care of Naruto and Sasuke, building up necessary allies and maintaining her summoned spy network. Sakura hadn't spoken to her in months and even then it was barely civil, Ino's anger at being left out had been clear. She wasn't sure how to repair the damage, or even if she could.

"Shikaku-san! My dad sent me with a message for you. I guess it was urgent enough to use me as a carrier pigeon." Ino rolled her eyes and handed him the scroll in her hand. She then noticed the two shogi players. "Shikamaru! And … Forehead?"

She waved hesitantly. "Hi, Ino."

Ino put her hands on her hips and nose in the air, addressing Shikamaru. "I didn't know you were friends with her."

"We play shogi. Obviously." Shikamaru was bewildered at her attitude. He knew that Ino and Sakura weren't best friends since she had taken up with Naruto and Sasuke, but Ino's behavior suggested a falling out rather than a fade away. "Don't be rude, Ino."

"That's rich coming from you!"

"I'm not the one who barged into someone else's house and started insulting their guests."
Ino crossed her arms defiantly. "It's her fault that Sasuke-kun is gone from our class! She *stole* him from us."

Shikamaru groaned. "Is that really what this is about? That sour-faced Uchiha?"

"Don't insult Sasuke-kun!"

"Ino." The two kept squabbling like the childhood friends they were. "Ino!" The blonde started and looked at Sakura like she had two heads. "You know that Sasuke is one of my best friends. You can't steal someone like a piece of furniture. He graduated early because he *deserved* to."

"Still! You weaseled your way into his good graces, pretending to be his friend so you could kiss up to him!" Shikamaru made a disgusted face at the image.

"You know that isn't true!" Sakura closed her eyes and took a deep breath, wondering if there was a way to fix this. Isn't that what she came back for? To fix things? If she couldn't figure out how to work around her oldest friend's insecurities, how could she possibly take on the Akatsuki? This was a simple matter of a girl wanting the attention of a boy, surely she could manage that. An idea formed in her head and she wondered if Ino would take the bait.

"I just want Sasuke to be happy. I'll make you a deal." She paused for dramatic effect, something she knew Ino would appreciate in the back of her mind. "If Sasuke ever displays any sort of romantic interest in you, I will not interfere, no matter what."

Her friend gaped at her, flabbergasted. "W-what?"

"I'm a genin now and I'm going to have my hands full enough trying to keep those two from killing themselves - or each other."

"Eh." He moved his hand lazily, as if shooing the thought away. "Did you mean it?"

She moved his hand lazily, as if shooing the thought away. "Did you mean it?"

"Mean what?"

"That you're not interested in him. Or were you just saying that for Ino's sake?"

She moved her king out of the danger zone triumphantly. "You know, I never actually said I *wasn't* interested." Shikamaru paused, his hand hovering over the board. "But I'm really not. He
and Naruto are like family to me."

"Ah." He didn't sound particularly convinced.

Sakura sighed, resigned to the fact that no matter what time she was in, she was taken as a Sasuke fan girl. "Shikamaru, we're ten. I'm not about to tie myself down to a man before he even hits puberty." Her friend's cheeks tinted red at her blunt statement and Shikaku coughed suspiciously. It sounded more like terribly muffled laughter.

Shikamaru stared at the board, feeling inwardly pleased at Sakura's response. He knew that she was too smart to fall for the Uchiha's pretty boy looks, but they were such close friends that he had doubted Ino's proclamation that "Sasuke-kun couldn't possibly be interested in such a big forehead and weird hair." He thought Sakura had a pretty normal forehead, all things considered and her strange hair color was just a natural complement to her eccentric personality.

Shikaku eyed his son's pensive face.

*Maybe there's hope for the boy yet!*

Sakura suddenly grinned mischievously. "Besides, who says I wouldn't want to go for an older man? I bet Kakashi-sensei is pretty handsome under that mask of his." Her smile widened as both Naras choked at the thought, Shikamaru with shock and Shikaku with blatant amusement.

He couldn't wait to talk to Inoichi tomorrow.
Your Princess Is In Another Castle

Holding in a laugh, Sakura said, "It was a pleasure doing business with you, ma'am."

Head high, she swept out of the room. A second later, head even higher, she swept back in, snatched up the money and was gone again.

Tsunade blinked. "Did I just lose to a ten year old girl with pink hair?"

"You lose to everyone, Tsunade-sama," Shizune responded automatically, preoccupied with feeding Tonton.

Tsunade quietly seethed while nursing her third bottle of sake. She finished it quickly and stood, intent on finding the girl and her money, fair win or not. She stalked down the street in pursuit, figuring the little brat would be easy to spot with her horrendous hair. After a few false starts, she finally saw her next to a fountain in the middle of town. The girl was talking excitedly to two boys her age while an older shinobi with grey hair looked on indulgently over the pages of a very familiar orange book.

Tsunade stomped in their direction. She heard Shizune behind her, calling out. "Tsunade-sama! Wait up!"

The older man of her targeted group looked up in alarm when he heard her name and she grinned to herself. Good, he knows trouble's comin'.

"Oi, brat!" She pointed with emphasis. None of the children looked up at her words, still seriously listening to the girl tell her story. She could make out the last few words as she came to a stop in front of the fountain.

"... and now we can finally pay off the damages done to the training ground! I knew a this town was the right place to stop for the night."

The blonde boy was ecstatic at her tale while the darker haired one just crossed his arms and smirked. "It's mostly your fault the training ground was wrecked anyway, Sakura."

"Ah yes, I am the one who is known for their clan specific katon jutsus, aren't I?" The boy's smirk disappeared under a deep blush and petulant pout and he looked away. The blonde smacked his arm hard and laughed heartily at his expense, to which he reacted by flicking the other boy's forehead painfully. This eventually devolved into a shoving match that landed both of them in the fountain. Sakura just stood by and watched, a resigned look on her young face.

Tsunade was still annoyed, but also vaguely entertained. The grey haired shinobi approached her warily. "Tsunade-sama? Can we help you with something?"

"I was here to get my money back, but now I find myself more interested in this." She waved her hand toward the fountain, where the dark haired boy was now forcing the other's face into the spouting mouth of the fish sculpture.

Sakura had retreated to a bench nearby to avoid the splashing, calling out calm reprimands. "No drowning each other! I don't have time to train another couple of idiots!"

The man just shrugged. "My team is unique. What money?"
"That girl took my money!"

"Maa, Sakura-chan is a good girl, a nice girl. She wouldn't steal from anyone." An unholy gleam had entered the man's one visible eye as he lied directly to her face.

"Tsunade-sama!" Shizune had finally caught up to her, Tonton in tow. She scowled at her mentor and bowed slightly to the man. "I'm sorry, nin-san. Your student challenged Tsunade-sama to a double or nothing bet and won. There was no stealing involved."

"Oh? What was the bet?"

Sakura piped up from her bench, having been eavesdropping. "I bet her that I could drink a whole bottle of sake in one minute!"

The boys in the fountain paused in their roughhousing and the older man just closed his eye and sighed heavily. "You know we're in the middle of a mission, Sakura-chan. That is not to mention that you are ten."

The girl waved away his concerns. "Pft, I technically became an adult when they gave me this." She knocked lightly on the metal of her hitai-ate tied around her forehead. "Plus, I just metabolized it after I took her money." She grinned cheekily at Tsunade, who felt her ire rise again.

Shizune spoke before she could get too riled up. "Metabolize the alcohol? You can do that?"

The girl looked confused. "Yeah, it's not hard. Otherwise I definitely would be suffering from alcohol poisoning now, since, you know, ten."

"I'm not surprised it's possible, I'm surprised you can do it." Shizune had made an excellent point and Tsunade allowed her curiosity to override her sake-fueled anger.

"Sakura-chan knows how to do anything!" The blonde had given up fighting the other boy and was dragging himself out of the fountain, dripping everywhere. "She's way better than some drunk with a pet pig!" Both Sakura and the man were trying to shush him now, but he would have none of it. "When I'm Hokage she's going to be my head medic and my advisor, so you shut up!"

Tsunade wanted to laugh and cry all at once. This kid was just like Nawaki, filled with unrealistic ideals. "You, Hokage? The title is a fool's dream." The boy's eyes widened in outrage and his teammate and teacher had to bodily restrain him from charging at her. Sakura whispered something in his ear and he stopped resisting, shooting an annoyed glance at Tsunade.

"You're wrong." This was said by the dark-haired boy, who was now sitting on the edge of the fountain. He somehow managed to drip disdainfully. "Naruto might be an idiot, but he's not a fool. He'll become Hokage." The blonde gave her an annoying grin and then muttered, "I'm not an idiot, you jerk."

"Oh? Has Konoha fallen so far that they would allow a brat like you to take charge?"

In a flash, Naruto was up and charging at her, hands already forming the tiger seal. He was stopped by the older man's hand on the back of his shirt collar, lifting him up in the air. "Maa, Naruto. You can't be so reactive when people insult you. This is why Sakura-chan has to keep bailing you out of situations like this."

"But Kakashi-sensei~" He whined piteously, obviously unaware of how close to serious injury he could have been by attacking her.
The dark haired boy spoke again. "That woman would have flattened you, moron." Tsunade was inwardly pleased to hear someone had some respect, even if it was a snooty little kid. Shizune shifted closer to her, clearly trying to convey her desire to leave.

"Sasuke! I thought we were friends!"

He scoffed. "Does anything ever penetrate that skull of yours when it's not literally beaten into it?" He started trying to wring out his shirts, plainly done with the conversation.

Kakashi sighed, still holding onto the boy. He lifted him to eye level and said, "Do you remember what I said to Sakura after the bell test? Who her skills reminded me of?" She could see understanding dawn on the boy's scarred face and he looked at Sakura for confirmation. The pink haired girl just nodded and Kakashi let Naruto go.

Skills? So far all Sakura had done was annoy Tsunade out of her money and claim to perform a minor medical jutsu. She was not impressed.

"This girl looks like a strong wind could knock her over. I think I might actually be offended." Kakashi just looked at her balefully and Shizune heaved a great sigh, knowing her chances of persuading Tsunade to leave were as good as buried now that she had scented a challenge.

Now both boys were eying her with dislike, clearly unhappy with her assessment of their teammate's strength. At least they always have teamwork to fall back on.

"I'm sure Kakashi-sensei didn't mean to compare the two of us equally, Tsunade-sama." Sakura was staring at her intensely with an alarming grin her face. "After all, you've had years and years of experience."

Tsunade clenched her fists. "Are you calling me old, you little-!" Shizune grabbed her arm and pulled her back before she did something foolish, like beat up a certain irritating child. Sakura had retreated behind her sensei, giggling quietly while he just looked up toward the sky in supplication.

"Tsunade-sama, I apologize for these children. Clearly they're all terrible people. I'll make sure they're adequately punished when we return to Konoha." The way he emphasized the word made the boys blanch and Sakura had stopped laughing, but she still peeked around his waist and stuck her tongue out at Tsunade.

She couldn't help but snort in amusement, pulling her arm out of Shizune's grasp gently. This was turning out to be one of the more entertaining encounters in her journey. "What sort of punishment did you deserve to get these three brats assigned to you?"

Naruto answered before he could respond. "I bet it's 'cause he's late to everything!" to which Sakura and Sasuke sagely agreed with, even though it indicated that their team was punishment after all.

He just cheerfully said, "Better late than never, I always say! You have no idea how many old ladies I've helped cross streets …"

*Clearly this entire team is deranged. What has happened to Konoha since I left?*

"This is ridiculous. What are you doing here, anyway? This is a long way from the village for three little genin."

Said genin eyed her warily, but said nothing, looking toward their team leader. He affected a put-upon expression and said, "We're here because you're here, Tsunade-sama."
"Hokage-sama would like to retire." Kakashi paused, awaiting her reaction. She said nothing and Shizune shifted uneasily next to her. "He wants you to take his place."

"Impossible!"

"That's right, it's impossible! Kakashi-sensei, I can't believe you didn't tell us why we were lookin' for this old lady when we left!" Naruto was working himself up into a fine temper again, annoyed that Tsunade would just be handed the position he was gunning for.

"Be quiet, Naruto." At Sakura's low demand, he whined a bit, but fell into an uneasy silence.

Tsunade looked the group over and asked, "Why you? I'm surprised he didn't send Jiraiya to ask." Silently, Shizune was amazed that she hadn't already said no outright. Maybe they would get to go home after all these years …

Kakashi lifted a shoulder. "Who knows? Maybe he thought we could annoy you into it." He placed a large hand on Naruto's blonde head and ruffled his hair. "It was worth a shot."

"I should do it just to save the village from your idiots." He looked hopeful at her words. "But the position is not something I want."

"Ah, well. Hokage-sama will be very disappointed in us."

Tsunade flapped her hand at him. "That's not my problem."

Sakura peeked around Kakashi again. "Tsunade-sama, if it helps … our medical field is in terrible shape since you left."

She had turned to leave, but the girl's words stopped her. "Oh? And how do you know that?"

Sakura had the nerve to huff at her. "Because I have eyes? We got the bare minimum of basic first aid in the Academy and I had to supplement my reading by ordering scrolls from Suna, of all places. Every time I have been to the hospital, it seems short-staffed and under-maintained. What passes for a field medic in Konoha is still outnumbered forty to one. You could change that if you come back."

It was a blatant play, but one that Tsunade could appreciate. She had been a champion of field medicine since her baby brother had died and it was a well-known fact.

She looked at the girl suspiciously. "What do you know about medicine? You're just a kid."

Sakura poked at Kakashi's side and then motioned to the two boys. "I can never convince any of these idiots to go unless they're unconscious, which can always be arranged," she said, in a dangerous tone. Tsunade was starting to like this girl, despite herself. "So I learned and it turns out I'm pretty good at it. All knowledge is worth having."

"… How good are you?"

"What?"

"Keep up, girl! What is your current skill level with medical ninjutsu and chakra control?"

Sakura was looking at her strangely, but said, "I know a fair bit. I've been studying myself for nearly three years."
"Fine, that's fine." Shizune made a concerned noise and Tonton oinked with displeasure. "I'll make another bet with you. If you win, I'll come back to Konoha."

"And if I lose?"

"You give me back the money you took, brat."

Sakura pouted, clearly irritated with the idea of losing the money. The boys had watched the entire exchange in silence, something she could see was a habit. This girl had them wrapped around her finger. "What's the bet?"

"Fight me."

The girl's jaw dropped open in shock and the boys immediately jumped to her defense. "That's not even a fair bet, you cheat!"

"Tsunade-sama, if you don't intend to return with us, I'm not going to allow my student to be beaten for the journey home …"

Tsunade ignored them and focused on Sakura. "If you can touch my forehead," she motioned to the rhombus seal, "then I'll call it a win for you."

Sakura was slightly more content with the modified rules, but she was still pretty sure she was going to lose badly. In all her years of working with the woman in the past, she had never once been able to beat her in a spar. Sakura's efforts, which would have decimated lesser shinobi, had barely made her shishou exert herself. But she wasn't going to come back to Konoha otherwise, right? Might as well try.

"I accept." At her words, the boys eyes had nearly bulged out of their heads and they turned their arguments to her, with Kakashi adding in his two cents. Sasuke didn't say much, but he radiated intense disapproval. She ignored them and looked over Naruto's head at Tsunade. "Where should we go?"

The woman's eyes lit up, already seeing the future where she spent her winnings. "I know a place."

Tsunade's "place" turned out to be a massive open field a mile outside the village they were currently in. Sakura hopped in place, strangely anxious about fighting her old mentor. She knew one sure fire way to stop Tsunade in her tracks at this point in time, but she didn't consider it a viable option yet. It would not do to slit open her wrists and traumatize their new Hokage into coming back to the village, even if it did work.

Still, Sakura was a professional. She'd do what was necessary for the sake of her (personal) mission. She fiddled with the ties of her weights, taking them off and tossing them to Sasuke, who grunted at their mass. Kakashi and Naruto looked on with concern, but she smiled at them. "Cheer up, boys! I'm not about to be executed."

Tsunade stood twenty feet from her, as relaxed as if she was still in the bar. Almost one hundred percent likely she'll wait for me to make the first move. This particular game of "keep away" was one that Sakura was familiar with in her old training and Tsunade had always let her attack, rather than defend.

How should I approach this? My speed is better now than it was when I trained under her, but will that be enough?
"Well? Come on, then!" Tsunade crooked a finger at her with a smirk on her face. Sakura grit her teeth and threw several kunai, all but one with explosive tags attached. Tsunade leisurely dodged them, moving in the direction that Sakura was hoping she would go. In the ensuing smoke from the explosions, Sakura formed the seals for a replacement jutsu. She switched spots with the single kunai she had tossed in a secondary direction, appearing directly behind Tsunade. Sakura tried to jump on the woman's back like a wild animal, but she was evaded with infuriating ease. Tsunade hadn't even turned around to see her.

Sakura growled in frustration. Okay, so that element of surprise is gone. What's next, Sakura? Remember, deep breath in, deep breath out. You can do this.

"Is that all you got, kid?"

She replied in a sickly sweet voice. "Of course not, Tsunade-sama. I was just making sure you were ready for me." The woman raised one fine blonde eyebrow in disbelief. "Such a mouth on you."

Sakura quickly formed the seals for a doton jutsu, sliding underground. She moved in Tsunade's direction and gathered chakra in her fingertips, punching upwards toward the surface to create painfully hard earth projectiles to shoot in all directions. Sakura was hoping to distract the woman from her real attack, but knew that that was likely to be a fruitless endeavor. She heard Tsunade's foot crack down on the ground. Ah, finally. She's taking me a little seriously now. Good and bad news.

Sakura erupted from the ground and made a grab for Tsunade's ankle to drag her down, but she was again handily evaded. Sakura used her left hand to pound at the earth, creating a large crevice that threw the older woman off balance for a split-second, time that she used to throw herself bodily at Tsunade. If I had been any further away, this never would have worked

Sakura made impact with a grunt and climbed her old mentor like spider monkey, intent only on getting to that damn seal. She flailed against Tsunade's monstrously strong arms and slapped a palm directly on her face. "HAH!"

She slid to the ground triumphantly and then sat, arms and legs feeling like rubber. She wasn't really physically tired, but battling against a woman she knew to significantly overpower herself was draining nonetheless. Sakura squinted up at Tsunade. "I won, Tsunade-sama. You know what that means."

She scowled. "I can't believe I lost to a ten year old girl with pink hair. Again."
Ye Olde Debate

Chapter Summary

Not your mama's C-Rank.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Team 7's next mission is … well, it looks like Tora-chan has gone missing again." The Hokage was slightly smug as he read off the request. Sakura knew she should have stopped Naruto from using the sexy no jutsu on him last week, but her teammate had made those horrible puppy eyes at her and she couldn't resist. How bad could it be? Now she knew.

Inside her own head, Sakura made a horrible sound. She had somehow managed to suppress how boring D-Rank missions were until she was faced with a multitude of them all over again. She would rather fight Sasori every day than find that damn cat one more time.

"No! No thanks to that!" She could always count on Naruto to say what everyone was thinking. Sakura was impressed, though. It had taken seventeen truly tedious missions before he had reached a boiling point. She liked to think she had some small part in building up his meager reserves of patience.

Iruka spoke up from the missions desk. "Don't be ridiculous. You're genin, you have to build up experience."

"All we've been doing lately are D-Rank missions! I know we have enough experience to do a C-Rank now!"

"Ah, so you already know about mission rankings." Iruka looked surprised, but assumed that Kakashi had explained it to them when they started taking on D-Ranks. He shot a quick glance at the masked man, but all he received was a shrug.

Naruto looked insulted. "Of course I do! Sakura-chan told us about that stuff years ago."

"I'm surprised it managed to register in that thick skull of yours," muttered Sasuke.

Naruto wheeled around, fists raised. "You wanna go, jerk?" Sasuke smirked at him and tilted his head up in a superior manner.

"Boys." Sakura stood between them, placing what looked to be a gentle restraining hand on each of their shoulders. They both gasped in pain as she looked straight forward at the Hokage and Iruka, smiling innocently. "Please, Hokage-sama. We would really love to broaden our horizons with a higher-ranked mission. I think we're ready, right, Kakashi-sensei?" She let go of Naruto and Sasuke and they slumped in relief.

"Aa. Sakura-chan is at least ready for one. I'm sure I can manage with these two dead weights somehow." The boys glared at their teacher as they rubbed their sore shoulders.

The Hokage heaved a great sigh and said, "Fine. You can have this mission." He scratched it off
the C-Rank list and handed Kakashi a scroll. "It's an escort and protection deal for a couple who are meeting a cruise ship in Wave Country. The mission parameters require you to accompany them onto the ship, with it ending after redocking in Wave." He raised an eyebrow at Sakura. "Does this fit your needs?"

She smiled sweetly. "It sounds just lovely, Hokage-sama."

"Who are we escorting, huh? Is it a royal couple?" Naruto yelped as Sasuke smacked the back of his head, hard.

"Idiot, there's no way that would be a C-Rank mission in the first place. It's probably a couple of civilians."

Kakashi read over the mission details. "Looks they need to leave by tonight to make it on time for their cruise. I hope none of you get seasick."

"AREN'T YOU JUST THE MOST DARLING THINGS I HAVE EVER SEEN?!"

The three children jumped at the screeching voice and whirled around to see a middle-aged couple in the doorway. The man who had spoken was in a voluminous kimono, obi drawn tight across a similarly voluminous belly. The bright red of the cloth, cut with golden yellow and orange chrysanthemum, was overwhelming against the drab background of the Missions Office. He was followed silently by his partner, a tall severe-looking woman, who was dressed in a more subdued and seasonally appropriate yukata.

"Ah, Matsumoto-san, Ichikawa-san, you are just in time. Your mission has been accepted by a fine team of Konoha's best graduates." The Hokage gave the group a sharp look as he spoke, daring them to do anything to contradict him.

Ichikawa just inclined her head in their direction while Matsumoto jiggled up and down with sheer delight. "I never expected our escorts to be so cute!" He sidled up next to Kakashi and squeezed his bicep appreciatively. "Or so muscular~" Sakura bit her lip hard in an effort to keep in her laughter. Kakashi was trying not to move as Matsumoto continued to violate his personal space while "inspecting my purchase!"

She was not so amused when their noisy client moved onto her, cooing over her hair. "Darling, is this natural? You are so blessed!"

"Thank you, Matsumoto-san. Your kimono is lovely, by the way." He beamed at her and babbled about silk weaves and the agonizing decision of gold vs. silver threads; she was sure he would have gone on forever if Ichikawa hadn't interrupted.

"Dear, we need to go."

He pouted, an extremely off-putting expression on a man his age. "But we haven't even gotten to know each other!"

Kakashi was now on the far end of their group, under the pretense of conferring with the boys. "Matsumoto-san, the journey to Wave will take three days by civilian travel. I'm sure we'll have plenty of time to become acquainted. For now, we are Kakashi, Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura," he said, pointing to himself and then each of them respectively. "I am the squad leader."

His pout was exchanged for a sunny smile. "We're going to have so much fun! Ichikawa-chan has been so excited for this cruise." The children looked discreetly at the woman, whose expression had not changed since they entered the room.
If that's "excited', I'd hate to see what "happy" looks like.

Their journey to Wave Country was simple enough, though Sakura had been on edge the entire time, expecting Mist shinobi to be jumping out of bushes at them whenever she dropped her guard. She only managed to sleep because the boys refused to let her take watch, knowing how little time she allowed herself to relax without knowing why. She complained to Kakashi about their stubborn behavior and he had only given her a wry look before going back to reading his book, side-stepping a stone she had tossed at him in frustration.

"Sakura-chan, you're setting a very bad example for our clients."

She looked back at the wagon Matsumoto had hired, where he was currently snoring away a storm next to a stoic Ichikawa, who taken out a thick book on ocean history at the beginning of their trip. Sakura had only seen her put it down for meals and rest, ignoring their entire group otherwise. She could not possibly see how this couple had gotten together, but she reigned in her curiosity. The last time one of them had posed a polite question to Matsumoto, he had regaled them for an hour on the exquisite mouth-feel of pork belly. Sakura was pretty sure Naruto had just inquired about their hometown, which was not Konoha.

"I'm sure they will not tell tales of our incompetence, Kakashi-sensei."

They reached the coast in good time, arriving some hours before the cruise ship would leave the harbor. Naruto and Sasuke were tasked with carrying their client's luggage aboard while Kakashi and Sakura met with the ship's captain to explain their presence. Sasuke was pleading with his eyes not to leave him alone with Matsumoto, who had decided that despite Sakura's hair, Sasuke really was "the cutest of the whole group!" Naruto had been alternately annoyed and relieved at this decision, but any hurt feelings were alleviated every time Sasuke's cheeks were pinched with delight. She just waved at them tauntingly and followed Kakashi toward the bow of the ship, where the officers were conferring.

"Excuse me? Where can I find the captain?"

The group turned toward them and looked at Sakura, then Kakashi. She was instantly dismissed, something she never got over, even when she used it to her advantage. She played along, for now.

A stocky man of middling height stepped forward, a practiced smile on his face. "I'm the owner and captain of this ship. Can I help you?"

"Ah, we're just here to introduce ourselves. Two of your passengers hired my team as escort detail for the duration of your cruise."

The captain frowned. "Why would they need you? We have security on the boat already."

Kakashi just shrugged. "I don't ask questions. They requested and paid, so here we are. I'm just letting you know you have four shinobi skulking about."

"Four?" The man's eyebrows rose. "I only see two of you here." As if on cue, Sakura heard a loud thump and Sasuke's sharp voice, berating Naruto.

She spoke up for the first time. "That would be the other two. They'll behave, I promise."

He ignored her and spoke directly to Kakashi. "I don't have time to babysit your kids. Just stay out of my crew's way." The captain turned back to his officers, dismissing them from the conversation rudely. Sakura sent a questioning glance at Kakashi, but he gave away nothing and signaled for her
to leave ahead of him. She went in search of Naruto and Sasuke, passing several crew members on her way. She smiled at them in greeting, but they all looked at her stony-faced when they noticed her hitai-ate. *Wow, do they just hate me or is it all shinobi?*

Sakura found the boys laying on deck chairs on the starboard side of the ship. The blonde waved at her in greeting.

"Sakura-chan! Isn't this great? It's like a vacation mission!"

She stood over them, hands on hips. "Lazing about is fine way to prove to sensei that we are capable of taking on higher-level missions."

Naruto pouted at her. "Matsumoto-san said we could! Besides, bandits aren't likely to attack a ship in the harbor."

Sakura huffed and sat down on Sasuke's chair, ignoring his grunt of annoyance as she leaned on his legs. "I'm not really worried about bandits. The captain and his crew are not happy that we're here. At all."

"Maybe they're just insulted that we were hired in the first place." Sasuke didn't even open his eyes as he replied, looking for all the world like a cat basking in the sun. She should really introduce him to Yasutomo one day; they were two peas in a pod.

Sakura shook her head. "No, I don't think that's it. I just have a bad feeling about this. It's not going to be all fun and games. Keep an eye out for anything weird, guys." Based on past experience with Team 7, she knew that if something terrible was going to happen, it was going to happen when they were around. That was just how her life worked.

Kakashi poked his head up from behind Naruto's shoulder. "She's right."

Naruto flailed in surprise. "Gah! Kakashi-sensei, don't *do* that!"

The man looked mournfully down at the boy, who had fallen off his chair to the deck floor. "You should have known I was there, Naruto. I must be a terrible teacher if you failed to register my presence." The blonde just stuck out his tongue.

"Kakashi-sensei, you and I both know you could sneak up on nearly anybody in the world without them knowing."

"*Nearly* anybody, Sakura-chan? Damning me with faint praise, I see."

"I'm the self-appointed ego buster of this team, sensei. You know that." She poked Sasuke in the stomach and he let out a squawk of dismay. "Though it works better on some of you than others."

Kakashi pulled Naruto up off the floor and slouched against the ship wall. "Hmm, it's a good thing you're so centered and modest. We'll need that to deal with this issue, whatever it may be. We weren't hired to find out what is going on with the crew, but we *do* need to make sure it isn't a danger to our clients."

The three listened intently as Kakashi outlined the plan for the journey, keeping two of them with their clients at all times while the other two alternated between resting and walking the ship, watching for anything unusual. He looked at Sakura narrowly. "I mean it when I say we should all sleep when we get the chance. Fatigue can be a killer if it comes down to a real conflict. We're lucky to have a relatively safe place for us to rest. Not all missions will be this easy."
"Yes, Kakashi-sensei." They all spoke in unison, eyes fixed on him trustingly. Despite his years as a leader in the field, this team's faith in him was honestly terrifying. His rotating ANBU squads had been comprised of already battle-hardened shinobi who were well capable of handling themselves. He knew his kids were talented and smart, but they were still inexperienced kids. Kakashi had no idea how Minato-sensei had handled sending his team off to an actual war; clearly his fortitude was stronger than Kakashi's own.

"Good. Naruto and Sasuke, you'll be partners for the first shift. Go find our clients and stick with them. If they separate, I want Naruto to go with Ichikawa-san and Sasuke with Matsumoto-san." Sasuke scowled and rubbed at his cheeks, probably already feeling the abuse they were going to take. "Sakura and I will meet you in six hours. If we're late, do not leave them to search for us. Understood?" The boys nodded and scurried off, leaving Sakura and Kakashi alone on the deck.

Sakura shooed away a curious seagull and looked at him expectantly. She was surprised at the team arrangements, assuming that Kakashi would have paired either one of them with Naruto, in an attempt to keep the blonde's antics to a minimum. Putting the two of her boys together with no supervision was an interesting, and perhaps dangerous, choice.

She could tell through his mask that he was smiling and he answered her unspoken question. "Think of it as a hands-on training exercise, Sakura-chan. You can't coddle them forever."

"It's a hard habit to break, sensei. Plus, we'll have to pay for any damages they cause."

"Ah, now I see the real cause for concern." He was smirking at her, she just knew it. Annoying man.

With a moue of discontent, she stood and went to the railing. Before she reached it, the ship lurched slightly and she automatically countered with a surge of chakra to her feet. She could see that they had set sail without any fanfare, the harbor and shoreline quickly receding. "Is it usual to leave to suddenly on a cruise?"

Kakashi was watching the harbor as well. "Having never been on a cruise, I can't answer that. Still, we are moving at a much faster pace than I had expected for a week long journey that only takes us through the northern bay by Lightning Country." He pushed away from the ship wall. "Come on, let's get some food and map out the ship before we have to meet the boys."

Cruise buffets are the best, Sakura thought, nibbling on her last crab leg. I'll have to see if I can finagle more of these types of missions in the future.

Kakashi eyed her plate with disbelief, piled high with discarded shells. "Sakura-chan, are you sure you aren't related to the Akimichi Clan?"

"I'm not sure what you're implying, Kakashi-sensei." She smiled dangerously at him, cracking open a lobster tail with one hand. Can't a girl enjoy a good meal? I dieted enough for three people when I was originally this age. I deserve a treat.

He shook his head and just leaned back in his seat, having finished with his own meal some time ago. Sakura had still not managed to see under his mask in this time, but she wasn't bothered by it, no matter how she acted to the contrary. After her Kakashi's constant forays into her home-turned-personal-hospital, she had seen his face once when she shoved him into her bathroom for a shower.

Sakura had been muttering about how much her dry cleaning bill was going to be again with all this blood on her duvet and had opened the door without knocking to leave him clean clothes. He
had poked his head out of the shower to thank her and it had taken all her willpower not to react to his unusually uncovered face. The power of his trust in her at that moment had been overwhelming. Sakura knew it was not something he did lightly, despite how casually he had pulled it off. That was just Kakashi's way. She got a little starry-eyed thinking about it.

Still, sometimes she wanted to poke his chin right where she knew he had a beauty mark; its location had been burned into her memory. She hoped that one day she and the rest of the team would be worthy of that trust once more.

Sakura daintily wiped her mouth on the fancy cloth napkin, finally satisfied. *So much better than rations."

"Shall we go?"

"Are you sure you can move?"

She rolled her eyes. "I'm sure you are capable of rolling me out of here if need be, Kakashi-sensei. This is just the first time in a long while that I've been able to eat something I haven't cooked. A good shinobi takes advantage of every opportunity," she said smugly and moved quickly toward the exit. She missed Kakashi's slightly guilty face, as he had been a regular guest at dinner with the boys since the first night she had dragged him home. His contrite thoughts were brought to a halt when three sailors slammed open the door of the crew restricted dining area and rushed out.

They both watched the men dash down the narrow corridor, faces pale and sweaty. "Strange. Food poisoning?"

Sakura shook her head doubtfully. "Food poisoning doesn't normally set in so quickly. I doubt they were just lounging around in there for hours."

"Just one more unusual circumstance in our 'vacation mission'." She didn't bother to hide her laughter as they strolled leisurely down the same corridor the sailors had fled. "Let's go see if Naruto and Sasuke managed to keep our clients alive."

"We haven't heard any explosions or seen *any* fires. That's practically a miracle, if you ask me."

"Just try not to mention that in front of Ichikawa-san or Matsumoto-san. Konoha has a reputation to uphold."

"Then why did the Hokage send *us*?" She grinned cheekily up at him. "You know, if Team 7 has any specialty at all, we're demolition and destruction."

"Even you?"

Her green eyes were sparkling with mirth. "*Especially* me." Kakashi couldn't deny the truth of that. The past few months of his ruthless training had shown him that Sakura's chakra control was terrifyingly precise, even if she didn't have the natural strength that Tsunade also possessed. Many a training ground had been sacrificed to her short temper or an intense sparring battle. There was one giant crevice by the Nara Forest that had led directly through the trees, but she refused to let Kakashi use a doton to fix it and neither had she told him how it happened. Sakura had just smiled smugly and said, "I want him to remember." Kakashi hadn't asked again.

They searched for Naruto's chakra presence and found him on the upper deck near the stern with both of their clients and Sasuke. Even when he attempted to cloak it, Naruto's burning energy was like a beacon to those who were familiar with him.
Ichikawa was enjoying one of the smaller hot tubs that were dotted around the larger pool area while Naruto stood guard nearby. At least, Sakura assumed she was enjoying it; Ichikawa's placid face made guessing her emotions highly difficult. Matsumoto was seated nearby, resplendent in a light-weight robe of peacock blue, the silver threads of the feather motif glowing in the late afternoon sun. Sasuke sat in next to him stiffly, allowing the man to braid his long fore-locks with ill-concealed unease.

Sakura's eyes widened, but as a professional kunoichi, she did not burst out laughing like she wanted to. She did, however, notice Kakashi move his hitai-ate slightly and saw the spinning of the Sharingan's tomoe memorizing the scene in front of them before Sasuke looked their way. He slid it back down just as Matsumoto greeted them cheerfully.

"Hello, hello! Is it your turn now? Your fine young teammates have clued us in on your shift schedules. Very thorough of you." He patted finished the last braid and plucked one of the tropical flowers off a nearby planter, sliding it deftly into the top. He patted Sasuke's shoulder happily. "There you go! Don't you look pretty?"

Sasuke got up from the chair and bowed to Matsumoto robotically. "Thank you, Matsumoto-san."

The man just shooed him off, "Go eat and have fun with your little friend!" Naruto was nearly vibrating with the effort to contain himself over in the corner near Ichikawa and once Kakashi nodded in dismissal, he shot toward Sasuke and dragged him out of sight within seconds.

Matsumoto just laughed. "My, they were hungry after all!"

Kakashi took Naruto's spot by the hot tub. "They're growing boys, always eating." He looked at the small gathering of people sunning themselves and splashing in the pool nearby, noting all of their appearances and dismissing them as threats. "Of course, the same could be said of my Sakura-chan, here."

She wrinkled her nose at Kakashi from her own deck chair, where she was sitting cross-legged as she dealt cards out to Matsumoto. They had discovered he had a keen fondness for hanafuda and had successfully used it to distract the man whenever necessary. "The buffet here is excellent, Matsumoto-san. You will be not be disappointed." He was delighted and asked her many pointed questions about the type of food she had seen there.

They passed away the afternoon quietly and escorted their clients to dinner and some sort of strange puppet show, after which they were met again by the boys. Sasuke removed the braids from his hair, but Sakura saw the flower poking out Naruto's pocket. She could feel the fight brewing between them, but before she could say anything, Kakashi was steering her away toward the quarters they had been assigned for the duration of the journey. He dropped her off at their door with strict orders to sleep, and then left to patrol the rest of the ship.

The next days passed very much the same, with only slight disturbances to report. Every instance they had noticed was due to an unhealthy looking crew member, something that was becoming more frequent as the week progressed. Kakashi had approached the captain about the problem, couching it in concern for their own clients' well-being. He was rebuffed angrily.

The captain was so worked up, he nearly spit at Kakashi, eyes unnaturally bright on his pale face. "It's none of your damn business. There's nothing wrong with my men. Now get the hell out of here!" He had quietly taken his leave, determining that there was clearly something wrong with the men and their captain was at a loss as to how to fix it. From the team's expanded observations, none of the other passengers had caught ill, outside of the singular case of seasickness that had plagued a nice elderly gentleman from Wind Country.
Sakura was silently pacing the upper deck that night as Kakashi caught up on a quick nap, enjoying the cool breeze. To her disappointment, it started to die down. She tensed when she realized it was because the ship had slowed to almost a crawl. Sakura froze in indecision, caught between wanting to get back to Kakashi and her team or finding out if this circumstance was worth panicking over in the first place.

She didn't have long to question it. Several quiet thumps sounded against the deck immediately ahead of her and she could see the gleaming heads of a dozen grappling hooks piercing the starboard railings. Without staying to see who had decided to crash the party, Sakura shunshined down to their cabin, waking Kakashi with a touch to the shoulder. He was instantly alert and intensely focused on her face.

She didn't waste time. "We're being boarded."

"Where?"

"Upper deck, starboard. I didn't see them, but nothing about their presence indicated shinobi."

"Alert the boys and then the captain. I'll go greet our guests."

She smiled humorlessly at his joke. "Be careful, sensei."

He tapped her hitai-ate affectionately and was gone in a swirl of leaves. She dashed to meet the boys, who were quietly ecstatic to "finally see some action!" Sakura only had time to give Naruto a quelling glance and an admonishment to stay with their clients. He saluted her enthusiastically and Sasuke frowned, annoyed that she was able to move freely and he was stuck with civilians. Sakura just sighed. They wouldn't understand that she would rather they be trapped in that room safely than dealing with the possibility of killing someone tonight. At least she had already come to terms with that reality.

Sakura stalked the darkened corridors of the crew area, headed towards the captain's quarters. 

Odd, normally I see at least a few sailors around at this time of night.

She didn't bother to knock on his cabin door, figuring a hostile takeover took priority over potentially seeing the grumpy man in his underwear. She froze as she sensed two people in the dark room, one hulking figure hunched over the second on the bed, appearing ready to strike. Quickly, she flashed over the standing man, pulling his arm behind his back and forcing him down with a knee in his spine. She didn't recognize the sliver of his face that she could see in the moonlight, but the pale sweaty visage on the bed belonged to the captain.

She threw the dagger she had confiscated across the room where it stuck neatly into the wooden wall. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

The man cursed in anger, trying fruitlessly to struggle out of her chakra-laden grip. He didn't answer, but the captain had been roused from his dazed sleep at the commotion. "T-that's our cook." He looked away. "He's also my brother."

"Ah." Now she understood why he had reacted so strongly to Kakashi's questioning earlier; it was hard to believe someone you love could do such awful things. She was well-versed in that experience. Still, this man had obviously managed to poison nearly the entire crew of the vessel. She hated the fact that she hadn't been allowed to investigate earlier; she was good at poisons!

Sakura shook the man like a rag doll. "Who are you working for?"
He sneered at her, face pressed into the floorboards. "Akumu-sama will never let you live." He looked up at his brother blankly. "Our crew will overwhelm this ship and take everything you have, but your men will survive if they don't resist."

She was not impressed by his easy capitulation. "That's it? You're already giving me your boss's name and agenda? You're a terrible subordinate." She looked at the captain who was staring at her with wide eyes. "Do you mind terribly if I knock him unconscious? I have to go."

"N-no, but-" She hadn't even waited for his response before pinching a nerve in the junction of the large man's shoulder and neck. He slumped under her knee and she stood, ready to leave. "What if he wakes up? I can barely stand, I won't be able to stop him."

Sakura grinned and performed several hand seals. "Nawajutsu!" Coils of rope slid around the unconscious man's body, securing his arms and legs tightly. Ever the thoughtful medic, she ensured that he wouldn't lose a limb to lack of circulation and saluted the captain cheerily, heading back out toward the upper deck.

She fairly flew the rest of the way, knowing that pirates weren't likely to even tire Kakashi, but still worried all the same. Two men intercepted her on her way up the stairs and she quickly subdued them with the senbon from her hair, cutting off their ability to feel anything below their necks. Sakura left them there and saw Kakashi fighting around a pile of groaning bodies. He threw his last opponent on the top of the heap and greeted her.

"Sakura-chan! I'm sorry, you missed all the fun."

She eyed the unfortunate pirates with detachment as Kakashi just restrained them all by tying them in a tangle of arms and legs and rope burns. "Not entirely. I caught the cook trying to assassinate the captain, who incidentally, is his brother."

"Are you okay?" He actually sounded worried.

"Sensei, that's insulting. Do you really think I couldn't handle a single man?"

"Sakura-chan!" Kakashi whined at her while simultaneously threatening the struggling pirate under his foot with a kunai. "I just want to make sure my cute little genin stay safe."

She rolled her eyes and kicked the nearest man, who had been trying to discreetly reach for a discarded sword. He gasped in pain as she cracked several ribs accidentally. Whoops, I forgot how fragile civilians are.

"Speaking of your cute little genin, let's go see how the terrible twosome made out in this fight."

After all the injured pirates were trapped to Kakashi's satisfaction, they backtracked their way down the stairs and stepped over the sprawled bodies of the men she had paralyzed. Kakashi sighed with pride as he noticed the precise aim of her senbon. She looked at him with mild concern. "You're not going to start blubbering at me, are you? I get enough of that from Gai-sensei."

Kakashi sniffed imperiously. "What? I can't be happy to see the culmination of the tireless labor that is being your teacher?"

"Pfft, I could do that before I met you. Stop taking credit for other people's work, Kakashi-sensei."

They bickered quietly the entire way to Matsumoto's cabin, where they saw three badly beaten pirates slumped outside the door like macabre decorations. Sakura noticed that they were all
breathing and felt a wave of relief sweep over her. She didn't particularly care for the lives of these men, but in the back of her mind, she feared for her boys' psychological state once they had to start making kills. She knew it would happen, it was a reality of becoming shinobi at such a young age. Still, she wanted them to put it off as long as possible. Kakashi gave her a knowing look, but only pushed the cabin door open to catch the kunai thrown as his face.

"Ah, Kakashi-sensei! Welcome back." Naruto sheepishly took his weapon back from their teacher. "Just like old times, huh?"

"Did you have any trouble?"

"Nope! Those guys weren't even worth using chakra for!" Sakura silently thanked anyone who would listen for that, otherwise the entire ship would probably simultaneously be on fire and sinking. Her boys were powerful, but they had yet to acquire a true level of restraint.

Unbelievably, Matsumoto was snoring noisily on his own cabin bed, appearing to have missed the entire commotion. Ichikawa shocked Sakura by gracing her with a brief smile before she turned back to sip her tea and page through another enormous book.

"Sakura-chan and I took care of everyone else that was aboard, but I'm certain the crew has been incapacitated. Are you boys able to stay here for a second shift while we do rounds?"

They nodded together, any earlier fatigue wiped away with the adrenaline of a fresh fight. She gave into the urge to hug them that she had tamped down earlier. Naruto accepted his gladly, always welcoming affection from her. Sasuke was surprised, but didn't stiffen or shy away. She relished the fact that, even if she didn't change the world enough to fix everything, she was able to help change Sasuke enough to keep him by their side.

She left without another word, not explaining her unusual display of emotion. Sakura was pretty sure Kakashi understood anyway, even if he didn't realize the reasons behind it.

Sakura spent the rest of the night checking up on the crew, who were suffering from mildaconite poisoning. Most of them were only laid up with general symptoms of nausea and muscle weakness, but the captain had been consistently double-dosed. Kakashi dragged his bound and still unconscious brother out of the room as she started to repair the extensive damage to his lungs and heart. She was concentrating so deeply on the delicate process of reinflating individual alveoli with chakra that she did not notice Kakashi's return and thus his careful study of her methods. When it was complete, she wobbled side-ways, drained. He caught her and said, "I think that's enough, Sakura-chan. You weren't hired as a medic."

She smiled weakly at him. "It's not like I could have let him die, Kakashi-sensei. Who would steer this great big barge?" He carried her on his back to the team's room and let her sleep and left to meet up with Naruto and Sasuke. The boys were understandably concerned when he gave them a short summary of Sakura's efforts and he gave them leave to go check on her and rest as he stayed with their clients. He passed the early morning hours wondering if the Hokage knew what a gift he had given Kakashi when he pulled his sorry ass out of ANBU.

The boys woke before Sakura. It was a moment of great pride for them and she allowed their teasing for a short time before ordering them to clean up and escort her to breakfast like gentlemen. "Or at least, like something slightly more civilized than a monkey."

Sasuke looked mortally offended at the very idea that he was uncivilized and Naruto was not at all concerned by her insult. They arrived at the main dining area before most of the other passengers had arrived and loaded up their plates. Sakura discretely checked the food before she allowed the
boys to dig in and they all ate quickly, eager to status with Kakashi.

Three days later, the ship was gliding back into the harbor and Sakura looked at the trees peppering the shoreline with relief. She hadn't realized how much she had missed solid ground until it was nearly in her reach.

"Sakura-san! There you are!" She groaned inwardly. After the captain had recovered, his attitude toward the shinobi on board had changed entirely. He was astounded at how immediate his recovery was ("like magic!") and the enormous pile of pirates they had tied up for the authorities ("like terrible presents!") of Wave Country. The man was especially grateful to Sakura and she had taken to avoiding him whenever possible, uncomfortable with his effusive thanks.

"Hello, Captain. I see we're just about ready to dock."

He beamed at her, face flushed with excitement. "Yes! And I have a surprise for you." He ushered her through the ship toward the top deck, where her team was waiting with annoying grins on their faces. She couldn't see Kakashi's face, but the twinkle in his eye was just as irritating. *They know something.*

The captain motioned impatiently to the two sailors who were holding up a sheet against the large wall of the observation deck. They dropped it and revealed the enormous and gaudy script surrounded by flowers, ostentatiously announcing its name-

"I present my ship, The Cherry Blossom!"

*I'm going to murder everyone.*

Chapter End Notes

check out the fanart the gracious [AthanatosOra](http://example.com) created for this chapter - a cute little sasuke with [braided hair](http://example.com)!
A wild Shino appears!

Sakura was on the hunt for a boy. Or rather, she was on the hunt for a bug, but she figured this boy might have a better chance than she did to find it. She never knew Shino that well when they were younger and the Aburame had all but disappeared once the dust had settled after Danzo's assumption of the Hokage title. She had seen him while they were all in the Academy together for the second time, but he was as distant and she had been distracted by many other demands on her time. She hoped that he wouldn't hold this against her when she asked for his assistance.

She first went to see Shikamaru, interrupting his shogi game with his father.

"Aburame Shino? What about him?"

"You're still in the Academy with him. Do you know if he hangs out somewhere other than his clan compound? That's totally off-limits to outsiders and I wanted to ask him something."

"I don't know where he is. I can ask your question for you when I see him tomorrow?" Shikamaru sometimes reacted strangely to her talking to the other boys in their age group, which she found hilariously cute.

"No, no. This would really require more of a discussion. Can you just ask him to meet met outside the Academy after classes end tomorrow? I might be a bit late because of our team training." She had clasped her hands together, looking pleadingly at him. He had folded like a deck of cards, much to his father's amusement.

The next day she had managed to trick Kakashi into letting her leave slightly early by pretending to need time to get to the market for extra fresh eggplant for dinner. Sakura figured that it was a win-win scenario: she used his favorite food against him whenever necessary and he got his favorite food, cooked by someone other than himself for free.

Sakura arrived at the Academy just as classes were letting out and she saw Shikamaru walking uncomfortably with Shino. She caught his eye and waved.

"Shikamaru! Shino-san, thank you for agreeing to meet with me."

He nodded at her. "I admit that my curiosity got the best of me. Shikamaru wouldn't tell me any details."

Shikamaru looked irritated. "Couldn't tell you. She didn't tell me, either."

"I need some help locating a specific rare species of insect. I know it's endemic to Fire Country."

Shino perked up considerably. "That does sound like something I can help you with. What do you need it for?"

"I'm going to extract their poison for personal use."
Shikamaru immediately protested, "What? Sakura, you can't be serious."

"Why not? My research indicates that the tarrat beetle has exceptionally strong poison, but because it is usually so unattainable, no one has bothered to synthesize an antidote for it. That would obviously be my first goal after the extraction."

Shino was very still, his hands slightly shaking. "You're looking for the tarrat?"

"Yeah. Do you think it's possible? I've looked into, er, private traders, but the prices of those who claim to have some are ridiculous."

"Nearly everyone who has come in contact with that beetle has died, Sakura-san. I don't think you understand how dangerous your request is."

She pouted. "So you won't help?"

"I didn't say that. I'm just making sure you know what you're asking."

Shikamaru looked between them. "Are you two insane? Shino, didn't you just say that almost everyone dies when they go looking for this bug?"

He nodded. "Yes, almost."

Sakura beamed at him. "See? No worries, it's not one hundred percent positive we'll die!" She patted Shikamaru's arm comfortingly. "If there's anything I'm good at, it's avoiding weird and unusual deaths."

"The fact that you have enough experience to make that statement is not at all reassuring."

Sakura shrugged, palms up in the air. "What can I say? I lead a crazy life."

"You just go looking for crazy. Like this, right here. Crazy."

"Sure. So what do you say, Shino-san? Are you up to the challenge?"

He adjusted his sunglasses carefully. "Of course. When would you like to start?"

"Tomorrow, same time? I have to make Kakashi-sensei his bribe dinner tonight, otherwise I'd be all for it."

"That is acceptable. I will meet you here after the Academy classes end." He nodded to both of them and left, quickly being swallowed by the crowd of people who were out and about.

"Thanks for asking him to wait for me, Shikamaru. I'll let you know how our search goes." She turned to leave herself, but he caught her by the elbow.

"No, I don't think so. I'm coming with you tomorrow."

"Uh, what?"

He frowned at her. "I'm not going to lose my shogi partner to some bug. You're not going alone."

"Shino will be with me, remember? Plus, I've definitely faced worse than a poisonous insect, Shikamaru. I am a shinobi, you know."

Shikamaru's frown intensified. "Still. I'm going."
Sakura sighed. "Fine, but if you complain the entire time, I'm going to tell your father that you're the one who hid his sake."

His mouth flattened to a thin line. "Sometimes I get the feeling you like my father more than me."

She grinned at him. "What can I say? Maybe I've got a thing for guys with scars."

The next day after their usual routine of soul-crushing training with Kakashi, Sakura had pressed bentos into the hands of her team, telling them that she would be away for the evening and to behave.

Naruto took the food, but whined at her. "Sakura-chan, we're not babies!" She just looked at him unblinkingly until Sasuke dragged him away muttering, waving over his shoulder. Kakashi stood there, looking at the box she had put into his hand curiously.

"This isn't necessary, Sakura-chan. Technically, I'm an adult who can feed himself without your intervention."

"Oh, really?" She eyed him narrowly. "Tell me, sensei, what does the inside of your refrigerator look like?"

He rubbed the back of his head and laughed sheepishly. "I never should have let you monsters into my apartment."

She smiled smugly. "Admit it, you love us."

"Aa, you're all very tolerable most days." He tucked the box under his arm carefully. "What's so important this evening that you sent the boys away?"

"I have a project that I'm working on with Shikamaru and Aburame Shino." She stared over his shoulder, refusing to look him in the eye.

"Should I be worried?"

"Of course not, Kakashi-sensei! I am a very responsible person."

"I actually meant worried for you more personally. Shikaku has been telling me some very interesting stories about you and his son."

She frowned, hands on her hips. "That man is a menace. I swear, he's convinced that Shikamaru and I are going to get married any day now."

"Hmm, maybe I should chaperone your little trip."

"Sensei, that's really not necessary."

Her insistent refusal made him feel more insistent that he come along. "Sakura-chan, you've pretty well convinced me that it is now very necessary."

She sagged in defeat. "Fine, but you're probably not going to like it."

He nodded sagely. "I assumed as much."

"Let's go. I'll explain once we meet up with the other two. Shikamaru insisted on being there. So troublesome, to borrow his catchphrase." They hopped the rooftops, making it to the Academy in
no time at all. Shikamaru's eyes widened when he saw Kakashi with her, but Shino was as impassive as always.

"Shikamaru, Shino-san, this is Kakashi-sensei, the jonin that the Hokage leashed us with."

They nodded politely and he waved a hand. "Yo. Sakura-chan, that was a very unkind introduction."

"I'm not feeling very generous."

"Maa, always so mean to your poor sensei!" He clutched his chest, faking pain. "So what are we doing here, kids?"

Shino spoke up, to her surprise. "Sakura-san has tasked me with finding the tarrat beetle. I took the liberty of sending my kikaichu out last night for tracking purposes."

Kakashi turned to his student. "And what does Sakura-san need this particular insect for, hmm?"

"I'm just going to make an antidote! And tip my weapons in its poison? And maybe start building up my resistance to the poison?" The sentence was said very quietly, because she knew it would not be received well.

"What?!" Shikamaru fairly screeched at her as Kakashi stood in silence, radiating heavy displeasure. Shino, however, nodded approvingly.

"I thought as much when you mentioned your research. You've already started with other poisons?"

Sakura's eyes lit up with excitement, eager to share. "Yes! It's not a difficult process to put yourself through if you know how to control your bodily functions through chakra! I mean, it's not pleasant, but so incredibly useful …"

"I've been working on something similar, but it's specific to my clan's techniques. Do you think you'd be able to share your antidote processes with the Aburame if you're successful?"

She scoffed. "You mean when I'm successful. I don't do things half-assed, Shino-san."

"Hey!" They both turned to look at Shikamaru. "There was no mention of you poisoning yourself yesterday."

She shrugged. "Mostly because I knew you'd react like this. You never noticed any other time I did it. Why should this be different?" Shikamaru sputtered, unable to reply in the face of his extreme disbelief.

Kakashi said, "So when you tried to train through "the flu" three weeks ago?"

Sakura winced. "That was the last and largest dose stage of a poison I discovered from one of the scrolls I ordered from Suna. They make them real nasty there." Kakashi sighed, uncomfortable with the entire situation but feeling powerless to do anything useful. He had discovered over the past year that she could be remarkably stubborn and Kakashi knew that ordering her to stop was essentially telling her to hide it from him.

"Do the boys know?" Sakura didn't answer and that was enough for him. "I know you'll keep it up no matter what I say, but please keep me in the loop when you do. Otherwise I'll tell Naruto and Sasuke and then you'll never hear the end of it."
Her tiny face screwed up in a mulish pout. "Blackmail, Kakashi-sensei? That's a low blow."

"A good shinobi always makes use of any available resource."

She sighed. "Fine. But I don't want you to interfere when I do! If I don't work through the entire process, my tolerance to them will be unrefined."

Shino nodded approvingly again. "You are very thorough, Sakura-san." He looked off to the side for a moment. "My kikaichu indicate that there may be a nest of tarrat several miles outside the walls."

Sakura grinned. "At least someone appreciates me!" She hooked her arm through Shino's, to his great surprise and Shikamaru's badly-hidden frustration. "Shall we go?"

They traveled by ground to accommodate the two Academy students, with Kakashi taking up a rear guard position naturally. He watched Sakura interact with them, amused to see that while she treated Shikamaru just like she treated her boys, she was more bubbly and personable with Shino. Looks like I was worried about the wrong boy.

Uncharacteristically, Shino had asked her about the missions she had been on now she had been a genin for a year. Shikamaru cut in before she could respond, "She managed to get attacked by pirates on her first C-Rank."

"You act like I personally invited them to invade the ship I was on." She frowned at him.

Shino was intrigued, but trying not to show it. "Pirates?"

"They barely qualified, as far as I'm concerned. Right, Kakashi-sensei?" She craned her neck to look back him, where he was reading his ever-present book.

"True enough. But you did have the ship named after you."

Her eyes widened and she hissed. "We were never supposed to speak of that again!"

He looked at her innocently and said in a flat tone. "Oops."

Sakura grit her teeth and turned to Shino, smiling dangerously. "It was an unusual mission, Shino-san. When you graduate, you'll mostly have D-Ranks to look forward to for quite some time. I hope you like cats."

Kakashi snickered and Sakura whipped one of her senbon at him without looking, aiming for his neck. He caught it, of course, like she expected. Still, it would be very satisfying if she managed to hit him just once. One day.

Kakashi moved forward and threaded the weapon back through her messy bun, tapping the top of her head affectionately. "One day, Sakura-chan."

The two boys looked at each other, both slightly confused by the strange relationship. Shikamaru filed it away with all the other odd things Sakura has done since he came to know her and Shino was quietly starting to form his own opinions on her eccentricities.

They came to the end of the beaten trail and stopped for a moment. "Which way?"

Shino tilted his head, listening. "If we turn left here and travel south for approximately two miles, we will be close to the possible breeding ground my kikaichu scented."
Sakura smiled appreciatively. "So precise! That's incredible, Shino-san." The boy turned to lead the way, but not before Kakashi saw the slight flush on his cheeks. *Ah, young love.* Shikamaru cut off Sakura as she moved to follow behind Shino, leaving her to walk with Kakashi instead.

He leaned down to whisper to her, "What are you playing at, Sakura-chan?"

His student looked up at him guilelessly, an expression he knew by now not to trust. "I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"Hmm." He didn't press, but he made a mental note to keep an eye on her non-team interactions when he could. Sakura-chan was a trouble magnet, worse than Naruto and Sasuke put together in some ways.

The group trooped together in silence for a short time before Shino called a halt. Sakura took a look around at the near swampy conditions of the area around them with satisfaction. "This environment is exactly what I had anticipated from my research. I'd say your kikaichu are on the right track."

Shino couldn't help but be curious. "Where did you get your information? Not many people have the ability to find them like my clan does."

She waved her hand airily. "Oh, I have my sources. I'm pretty good at getting what I want."

Shikamaru coughed in the background, sounding annoyingly like his father and Kakashi grinned behind his mask. She glared at both of them briefly before turning back to Shino. "I would be willing to work out an exchange with you, Shino-san."

"If we are successful at this venture, that sounds acceptable."

"You're so negative, Shikamaru! I even brought Kakashi-sensei as protection for you against the big, scary beetles." She teased him mercilessly as they slowly picked their way through the wet, mushy earth.

"Is that why I'm here?" Kakashi had stowed his book away, more entertained by his companions at this point.

"Well," she whispered in a conspiratorial tone that everyone could hear, "It was better than saying that my jonin-sensei doesn't have anything better to do than follow his students around."

"So your options were to insult Shikamaru or insult me?"

She grinned at him and swiftly used chakra-balanced feet to catch up with Shino, where they discussed trapping and extraction strategies with a disturbing fervor. *Never a dull moment with any member of Team 7.*

Shikamaru grunted beside him and he looked down to see the boy frowning irritably, an expression that seemed to have been grafted on his face. "Something wrong, Shikamaru-kun?"

"This is a terrible idea."

"Yes," he said agreeably. "It probably is."

The boy looked at him, perplexed. "Then why are you allowing it?"

Kakashi shrugged. "Something I've learned about Sakura-chan is that if I put down a barricade, she
will find a way around it. Even if that means she has to punch through it forcefully." He winced slightly, remembering the training ground they had left in shambles last week. He had gotten a half-hearted scolding from Tsunade, whose eyes were shining with mirth as she read the report. "Though I'm pretty sure that's her favorite way to do anything. It's just better to be here in case something does go wrong."

Shikamaru just huffed testily and stared Shino and Sakura, squinting at something that was just beyond them.

"There's something weird about that tree, guys." They looked at it questioningly, a feeling of unnatural resonance suddenly permeating the general area.

Shino waved his arm to send out kikaichu to investigate and Sakura's eyes widened. "No, Shino, don't-"

**WHUMP.**

Suddenly the four of them were mashed together inside a damp, dripping cell, the abrupt transportation knocking the breath out of Shikamaru for a moment and then again when Sakura landed heavily on his stomach. Kakashi had managed to keep his balance, keeping Shino from face-planting directly onto the muddy floor. The Jonin surveyed their surroundings in the dim light emanating from the corridor outside the cell door.

"Well. This is new. Sakura-chan, do you think-"

Sakura glared up at him from the floor. "Do not even finish that sentence, Kakashi-sensei. Team 7 will go on strike if you try to add this to our training." She rolled off of Shikamaru and held out a hand to help him up. He took it, but gave her a strange look. "What?"

"We were just subjected to an unknown jutsu and are trapped in what looks to be an underground jail. Why aren't you more concerned?"

"Meh." She shrugged and pointed a thumb at Kakashi. "If he starts taking it seriously, I'll worry." The man was humming as he placed his hands on different spots of their small cell, looking for weak spots.

Shino was brushing off his grey overcoat, looking curiously excited. "This is already much more than I was expecting. We must stay in contact after this excursion is over, Sakura-san."

"Of course, Shino-kun." In the low lighting, Shikamaru could see Shino flush at the change in honorific. For some reason, his hands felt tingly. He looked away from them and noticed several bones protruding out of the floor. He fervently hoped they were animal in nature.

Kakashi was considering using a doton to just *move* the compacted earth that their cell seemed to be made of, but if they were really that close to poisonous beetles, he didn't want to take the chance of encountering them mid-jutsu. Sakura poked him in the side as he was thinking. "Sensei? There doesn't seem to be any chakra compression seals here or even anyone else around. I could just break the door?"

He spread out his senses to corroborate and also felt nothing but the usual wildlife. Why had they even been taken if there weren't any jailers to watch over them? He tried to remember the details of area they had last been in. The tree had seemed to be the focal point, but he hadn't sensed anything out of the ordinary right until Shikamaru had pointed it out. Was that a feature of the jutsu? A notice-to-me-not unless they *did* notice?
"Sakura-chan, did you see anything unusual before we were dumped here?"

"Yeah, I think so." She looked thoughtful. "I didn't catch it until it was too late and I barely saw the patterns before we were whisked away, but I think it was a seal."

Shino bowed to them briefly. "It was clearly my actions that brought us here. I apologize."

She waved away his apology. "No worries, Shino-kun. It's not a big deal."

Shikamaru felt the need to interject. "We are still in a cell, Sakura. That's slightly a big deal." He pointed toward the bones, expression saying "That could be us."

"Meh," she said again and looked at Kakashi in question. He nodded so she went over to the door and plucked it off its hinges like a flower. "I think we'll manage."

Kakashi took point and she ushered both bewildered boys out in front of her, after she set the heavy iron door against the wall. Shikamaru trudged along stewing in anger, because Sakura had never shown that sort of strength when they were sparring, which meant that she was holding back on him and still winning every time.

She poked him in the shoulder and smiled when he scowled, understanding dawning on her. "Don't think so hard, Shikamaru. You still have shogi."

Kakashi lifted his fist in the air, calling for a halt. With a series of hand signals to Sakura, he left them and disappeared further into the corridor.

Shino looked at her. "Should we follow?"

"No, he wants us to wait here while he investigates."

Shikamaru squinted at her. "My father has gone over signals with me that aren't taught in the Academy and I still didn't recognize anything Kakashi-sensei used."

She snorted quietly. "Naruto and Sasuke made up their own system through a series of arguments and bets and broken furniture. We've adopted it as a team thing."

"You have a very unusual team dynamic, Sakura-san."

Kakashi's head poked back around the corner. "That's a nice way of putting it, Shino-kun. Coast is clear, let's head out."

They followed him single-file through the winding path, with Kakashi stooping slightly when the ceiling became uncomfortably low. The children inched around a horse-sized centipede, recently dead but with disturbingly twitchy legs. Shikamaru hadn't even heard Kakashi kill this thing. The corridor became brighter as they finally rounded the last curve to see the open air and they emerged, blinking in the late afternoon sun, still standing close to one another.

"Ah, that's it!" Shikamaru was pointing at a tree not barely twenty feet from where they had surfaced from their underground adventure.

"At least it didn't send us to Iron or somewhere equally nasty." The boys started, the thought of being sent across miles or even borders having never crossed their minds.

"Iron Country is that bad?"

She shuddered and Kakashi laughed. "It's a long story, Shino-kun. Maybe I'll tell you when it's
socially acceptable for me to drink."

They circled around the area where the seal was, having realized that it was the kikaichu's chakra that had activated it the first time. Shikamaru was trying to avoid a large swampy patch of ground when he heard a squishy crunch under his feet. He looked down to see several shiny purple leaf shapes skittering around him, quickly climbing up his legs.

"Uh, Sakura? What do the tarrat beetles look like, anyway?" He stood stock still and tried to calm his panicking heart, knowing she was going to confirm his worst fears.

"Ah? They actually kind of look like magnolia leaves, but all the scrolls I had could never confirm their color. Makes me think that maybe it's dependent on their diet. Biological studies on them are pretty scarce for obvious reasons."

_Crap_, he thought.

"Well, the good news is, I think I found them. The bad news is, I definitely killed about six of them and they're kind of all over me." From the corner of his eye, he could see Shino's head whip in his direction. He could feel, rather than hear, Kakashi and Sakura move closer behind him.

Shino stopped several feet in front of him. "Don't move, Shikamaru-san."

"Yes, obviously." He was sweating with the effort. "Any ideas?"

Kakashi spoke up behind him. "One, but I don't think you're going to like it."

"I haven't liked anything we've done since we left Konoha."

The man sighed. "Sakura-chan was right, so negative." He could hear his voice closer behind him, perhaps only a few feet away. _What is he going to do?_ Shikamaru kept his mind thinking of possible strategies to avoid thinking of his precarious position. He felt another beetle skitter over the top of his toes.

"Shino-kun, can your kikaichu pull chakra out of the tarrat?"

"They can do that with anything that has chakra."

"Please direct them to all the beetles currently on Shikamaru-kun's clothing." Shikamaru saw a swarm of appear out of thin air in front of Shino and they were redirected toward him with a nightmarish swiftness. The beetles were quickly subdued thanks to the kikaichu's sheer volume and as the last one fell from his pant leg, he was thrown in Sakura's direction as Kakashi performed a modified replacement jutsu on him. He dropped to his knees, intensely nauseated by the second abrupt seizing motion in one day.

Sakura worriedly patted him down, either looking for injuries or more beetles, he couldn't be sure. Shikamaru just laid there and let her fuss over him, feeling exhausted by the short-lived ordeal.

"All clear?"

"Yes, Kakashi-sensei."

"Good." To her and Shino's horror, Kakashi set fire to the entire area, including the mysteriously sealed tree. Shikamaru watched the beetles burn with intense satisfaction.

"What are you _doing?!_"
"Removing a danger to Konoha, Sakura-chan," he replied, cheerfully applying a suiton jutsu to put out the raging inferno he had caused.

Shino sidled up next to her, with a glass jar in hand. "Sakura-san, my kikaichu were able to salvage two carcasses before your sensei decided to indulge himself in pyromania." Her eyes brightened and she peered inside curiously. The beetles were obviously dead, but intact. She stowed the jar away in her pack, mind racing through the ways she could carefully portion out the small amount of poison she was able to obtain.

Shino asked her about her dissection procedures and they had a rousing conversation about internal organs and cooling techniques, while Shikamaru and Kakashi just listened in slightly dismayed silence. Sakura promised to trade notes with her brand new friend once they returned home.

She was all smiles on their journey back, exhilarated despite the fact that Kakashi had just murdered her closest supply of a rare poison. Now that she had gotten Shino interested in them, Sakura knew she could count on him to help find another location in the future. She bumped shoulders with a grumpy, silent Shikamaru. "See? Wasn't that fun?"

He gave her a sideways glance and sighed. "Life is never boring when you're around, Sakura."
She felt his presence a second before she was swept up into a bone-crushing hug. Gai shouted, right into her ear, "SAKURA-CHAN! IT IS HAS BEEN SO LONG!" She could feel his tears dripping onto her shoulder and she tried to pat him on the back comfortingly.

She managed to wheeze out, "Gai-sensei, air. I require it." His arms loosened and she dropped to the ground, only a little worse for the wear. Sakura smiled up at him, "You know, I saw you a week ago."

"Ah, but every day I see your youthful face makes it that much brighter, Sakura-chan!" He beamed at her and then motioned to the three children standing behind him, waiting in various stages of impatience. Sakura was happy to see that he had been assigned the same team, knowing that his influence had been good for all of them in different ways. "This is my brand new team of excellent students. Neji, Lee and Tenten."

Intellectually, she knew that they were alive in this time, but it was still thrilling to see her once dead friends again, even as children. "Hi, I'm obviously Sakura."

Neji snorted imperiously and said nothing. I forgot how snooty he was before Naruto beat it out of him. I wonder if that job falls to me this time?

Tenten and Lee were much more polite in their greetings, though she could see that the kunoichi was slightly bemused they were meeting her at all.

"Sakura-chan is my precious first student. When we met in the Forest of Death so long ago, I knew that she was destined for great things!" Lee's eyes were shining like stars, already in awe of his great and powerful sensei.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Yes, I was really a great hero then, covered in leech guts."

Tenten wrinkled her nose. "Sounds horrible."

She nodded. "Yeah, I was working on some agility training before class at the Academy and managed to get myself entangled in a nest of them. I'm sure I would have made it out just fine, but Gai-sensei showed up and practically obliterated them." The man in question just gave them a thumbs up.

Lee was astounded at the tale. "Sakura-san! You fought off giant leeches years ago? You must be as powerful as you are beautiful!"

Ah, Lee. I see he hasn't changed a bit either.

"That's very kind of you to say, Lee-san."

Neji just stared. "Why aren't you at the Academy now? It's past when classes start."

She widened her eyes dramatically. "You look like a smart boy, Neji-kun. I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually." Tenten muffled a snicker and winked at Sakura approvingly while Neji just scowled. She hadn't actually worn her hitai-ate today, so perhaps she was being a little unkind, but
enabling a bad behavior was the best way for it to get worse.

"Sakura-chan graduated two years early, Neji-kun! She is truly a credit to Konoha's Will of Fire."
He raised an eyebrow, his milky white eyes taking in her short stature and pink hair skeptically. Like he can judge! Look at all that hair he's got.

She smirked at him obnoxiously. "Yes, feel free to address me as Sakura-senpai. I'm sure I have lots I could teach you." Tenten was outright laughing now, slapping Lee on the back while he whisper-yelled, asking her what was so funny.

At her statement, Gai's grin got impossibly wider. "My thoughts exactly, Sakura-chan! We should all strive to learn from each other with a passion that befits a shinobi of Konoha. Will you join us for our training?"

She smiled at him fondly. "Of course, Gai-sensei. I made a deal with your Eternal Rival to be here just for that." He wibbled at her words and she braced herself for another brief, but fierce hug.

Several years with Gai and an entire year of Kakashi's sadistic punishment training had meant that the morning with his team was actually relatively easy for Sakura. Gai may have been enthusiastic, but he was peripherally aware that limits existed for other people. It wouldn't do to break his brand new team after just one week.

Sakura surveyed the three others as they gasped on the ground, though Neji was making a valiant effort to look as if he weren't. Tenten was fanning herself tiredly, sitting in the shade against the one tree on the edge of the training ground. The five of them had spent most of their time with speed and stamina exercises, with Lee's eyes becoming more and more determined as he fell behind Neji in everything their sensei had assigned them.

"Sakura-chan! Would you like to spar with me while my team regains their youthful vigor?" She looked up at the sun, calculating how much time she had left before she had to meet Ibiki for lunch. She shrugged. He always makes me wait, anyway. Might as well indulge myself in a good fight.

"Sounds good, Gai-sensei. Any conditions?"

He smiled at her. "Of course not, Sakura-chan. Come at me with all you've got!"

"You asked for it!" She blurred out of sight and attacked him head on, knowing that she could never match him in taijutsu, no matter how hard she trained. Still, she'd give his team a good show.

Gai met her blow for blow, their familiarity with one another lending them an unusual grace. At times their speed was so great that their audience of three could only make out blurs of green and pink. When she had initially moved on Gai, Neji had sat up in astonishment and activated his Byakugan to watch. He could see that while Gai's chakra was moving normally through his body, Sakura's was changing constantly with her movements, almost as if she were performing a modified style of the Hyuuga house.

Tenten and Lee had nudged themselves closer to him. "What do you see, Neji? They're so fast!" Lee was too captivated by the movements to look away, but he echoed her curiosity with a small noise.

Before he could respond, the earth shattered beneath the combatants with a bone-shuddering crack, startling the three of them into a shocked retreat. Sakura was on one knee in the middle of the crater with her fist against the ground and a grin on her face, while Gai looked over the edge at her.
"So close, Gai-sensei! One day it will happen!"

He threw his head back and laughed proudly. "Your spirit is beautiful this morning, Sakura-chan!" He immediately punctuated his statement by launching himself down into the crater with a kick aimed at her head. She blurred out of sight again and landed in front of his team, panting and smiling. Sakura pulled on the ties of her leg weights and tossed them to Lee. She said, "Hold these for me, eh?" before Gai was throwing another flurry of blows her way, faster than before.

Lee had caught the weights and immediately dropped to the ground with them, falling on his face painfully. The three looked at them curiously and Tenten recognized the fuinjutsu imprinted on the inside. "Ah, this must be a way to make them heavier without bulk! Very clever work." She tapped her chin thoughtfully. "I should ask Sakura where she got this."

Neji snorted. "Does it matter? Ultimately, she will always lose to Gai-sensei." The three of them looked at the still fighting pair, Sakura still failing to have landed a single significant blow on the older man.

Lee was immediately up in arms, warring between praising Gai's prowess and defending Sakura. "Neji! Do not insult Sakura-san that way!"

Tenten smiled at him dangerously. "I remember someone who didn't last five whole minutes against Gai-sensei, just a week ago. At least we could still see him beat you down then." She motioned to where the subject of their conversation was just a blur, with Sakura managing to match his speed enough to catch his powerful hits.

He scowled at her and she continued. "Plus, I've never seen either of you do that sort of damage to anything. Sakura is obviously strong. I'm glad Gai-sensei introduced us." She fiddled with the ties on the weights. "I would be nice to have another kunoichi around, even if it's only occasionally."

In the back of his mind, Neji felt a little badly about Tenten's obvious loneliness, but he said nothing. He had no comforting words for the inevitability of life's pain and suffering, having never received any during his own inescapable desolation when his father was sacrificed so many years ago. Neji only understood what it was like to endure, but he knew that Tenten would not find the sentiment reassuring. He himself was only resigned to it, rather than comforted.

They watched as Gai danced away from a punch that Sakura threw at his midsection, her fist obliterating the training posts that were behind him. Through falling shards of wood, she squinted up at the sky and called a halt.

"Sorry, Gai-sensei, I have to go meet Ibiki-san for lunch. He gets cranky if I don't visit often enough."

"I understand, Sakura-chan! Your presence is like a balm to the soul. You should share it with everyone!" She rolled her eyes and waved goodbye to him, intent on picking up her weights and leaving.

Lee jumped up at her approach. "Sakura-san! You're an angel of the training grounds! Please be my girlfriend!"

Her eyes widened, but to Neji and Tenten's surprise, she smiled. "Yep, he definitely hasn't changed a bit. At least he's got more to go on than my looks this time."

"I'm sorry, Lee-san, but I'm not interested in dating right now."
Lee nodded vigorously and said, "I understand. I will train until I can become worthy of your love!"

"That's not exactly-" she was cut off by Gai's raucous laughter. *He's going to encourage this, I just know it.*

"Lee! My student, how the springtime of your youth shines! Come, team, let's celebrate this new love with a lively race around Konoha!"

Tenten handed Sakura her weights with a smile. "Feel free to come around whenever you like, Sakura. Your company is more than welcome, considering what I've been stuck with."

Sakura snorted. "I totally understand. One day, I'll take you to meet my team and maybe then we could run off together instead." Tenten giggled and left to meet up with Lee and Gai, who were already running in place. Sakura felt eyes on her back and turned to see Neji staring at her unblinkingly, his Byakugan still active.

"Don't be creepy, Neji-kun. If you have questions, *senpai* is always here for you."

He frowned. "Your chakra is strange."

"How rude, Neji-kun! Next you'll tell me my hair is ugly."

"I meant that you use it strangely. Who trained you?"

Sakura faked a concerned look. "Weren't you listening when Gai-sensei introduced me as his precious first student?" He kept frowning and staring. *God, those Hyuuga eyes are unnerving. "A girl has her secrets, Neji-kun. I can't give everything away."*

If anything, his frown intensified and she was tempted to warn him against premature wrinkles. "I will find out."

It was getting late and she really needed to see Ibiki, so she just let it go and shrugged. "Okay, whatever you say." Her blasé attitude was exactly the opposite of what he had expected and it annoyed him even more. "Your team is waiting."

He pointed at her and said, "Next time we meet, you're going to fight me."

*Was he always such a drama queen as a kid? God, maybe I should leave the sense-beating to Naruto again.*

"Mm. Goodbye, Neji-kun." Sakura shunshined out of the training ground toward T&I, leaving him dramatically pointing at a swirl of leaves.

"You're late, kid."

She whined at him. "Ibiki-san, take pity on me! I just had my first encounter with the Hyuuga kind and he was all sorts of awful!"

He chewed his barbecue slowly, savoring the fact that he hadn't had to fight her for any of it yet that day. She had thrown herself into the booth minutes ago with her head in her hands and hadn't even picked up her chopsticks. He knew it was only a matter of time before she was snatching up all the best pieces.
"Did he do anything I need to murder him for?"

"What? No," she looked up from the table. "And I can do my own murdering, thanks."

"Then why are you whining at me instead?"

She rolled her eyes and finally broke apart her chopsticks. "Because for some strange reason, killing indiscriminately is heavily frowned upon in Konoha." She snagged a piece of beef away from his side of the grill with practiced ease and then said thoughtfully, "And most places, really. Except maybe Mist."

Ibiki grunted. "So what happened?"

"I met Gai-sensei's team today. He's got a little mini-me, a really nice kunoichi and a snotty Hyuuga. What were they thinking when they matched them up?"

"I hear that Gai's little doppleganger can't use genjutsu or ninjutsu at all. They probably needed to balance out the obvious genius of the Hyuuga."

Sakura muttered, "And poor Tenten was just shoved in there with no consideration for her talents, I'm sure."

Ibiki shrugged. "You're probably right. The number of kunoichi who stick through the Academy is pretty small compared to the boys who are just raring to go out and fight things immediately. Many times the girls are used as a buffer. Almost all of the jonin chosen to be teachers are shinobi too."

Sakura considered his words, thinking about her generation's set of teams. Ino's team had been the only one with a truly polarizing kunoichi and she had attributed that more to the village's insistence on creating another powerful Ino-Shika-Cho combination squad rather than any sense of "balance". Even Sakura's younger self hadn't been too concerned with being a true kunoichi until reality had knocked down the door to her idyllic fantasyland and shown her death and betrayal.

Ibiki had taken advantage of her thoughtful silence and stole a slice of pork belly. He pointed his chopsticks at her rudely. "It's too bad, y'know. Kunoichi are generally better with my department. Unless they're like Anko."

"Ibiki-san, I don't think there's anyone like Anko."

"And the world should be grateful."

A week later, Sakura was taking a break while watching Naruto and Sasuke attempt to work together with their elemental affinities. It had been her idea, but it had been weeks since she could remember a day without some sort of scorch mark or burn to heal. She was honestly starting to hate herself for the suggestion.

"Sakura!" She saw Tenten's hair and eyes peeping out of one of the bushes near her. "Help me!"

Curious, she looked around before crouching down and whispering, "What's wrong, Tenten?"

"Gai-sensei put me and Neji against himself and Lee in an Epic Shinobi-Style Hide-And-Seek Battle of the Century." Sakura could just hear the capital letters as Tenten imitated her sensei's dramatic voice. "Neji just skived off without me and I figured, I'm kunoichi, why not use every
resource I know?"

"That resource would be me, yeah?"

"Of course! Will you help?"

Sakura grinned. "Let's do this." She stood up and shouted to the boys. "Hey! I'm going to do girl stuff now! Stay here unless you wanna hear all the details!" There were general shouts of horror and frantic agreements sent her way. She bent back down and said, "That ought to keep them away for a while. They're such babies about it. Honestly, you'd think a shinobi would be used to the idea of blood."

Tenten giggled, a little embarrassed. "I hate to think about Gai-sensei's reaction ..." They both shuddered and Sakura clapped her on the shoulder.

"Okay, first I'm going to use a genjutsu on us as we move, because I heard Lee is terrible at seeing through those. It will just be a light one, since I don't have anything strong enough to fool Gai-sensei and I don't want to waste my chakra." Tenten watched as she formed four hand seals quickly and felt the illusion slide over her smoothly. "Don't move more than ten feet away from me or you'll fall outside my range."

"Got it. Can you teach me that technique after we win?"

Sakura grinned at her confidence and said, "Of course! I'm all about sharing with my fellow kunoichi." She tapped her temple and said, "But don't bother using it on Neji. Those creepy eyes of his will unfortunately see right through you."

Tenten sighed. "He isn't called a prodigy for nothing."

"Bah, being a prodigy is no excuse for such a poor personality." The brunette tried to stifle her laughter as Sakura nudged them in the direction of the Nara Forest. She knew that Shikaku wouldn't mind if they took refuge there for a short time, especially if she fed the deer before leaving. Tenten hesitated at the edge, aware that it was off-limits and Sakura waved her in. "C'mon, I know a guy who knows a guy. We're okay to be in here."

Tenten brightened. "I knew you'd be the perfect resource!" They walked through the forest quietly and Sakura signaled her to stop when she felt the herd close by. She pulled out one of her oat-based ration bars and split it in half, giving one part to Tenten.

"Hold your hand out and just stay still. Let them come to you." She stood next to her, hand in the same position. A large doe approached Sakura first, obviously familiar with her presence. Once they determined that Tenten wasn't a threat, her fawns arrived on coltish legs and nibbled at their fingers. The girls stroked their downy necks carefully once the ration bars were gone, until a loud shout spooked them into fleeing.

Sakura raised an eyebrow and said, "Sounds like Gai-sensei and Lee are within oh, several miles of us."

Tenten was slightly panicked. "I'm sure Neji hasn't been caught yet! What do we do?"

Sakura just tugged her arm further into the forest. "Don't worry, I have a plan. How good are your bunshins?"

"I graduated, didn't I?"
"Fair enough. Make as many as you can and I'll create some henge'd ones as well. Show me all the weapons and equipment you have on you - we're going to hide some surprises."

Tenten's eyes gleamed. "I like the sound of that!"

"Gai-sensei, it's been two hours and I haven't found either of them! Our team is strong!"

"It is indeed, Lee! I have been very blessed with such a youthful team as my first!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Lee spotted a fast moving pink blur and recognized Tenten's shirt. "Ah, but it looks like Tenten's luck has run out now!" He moved to intercept her, but before he could, Gai-sensei was pulling him back his collar and Lee watched in disbelief as his teammate exploded all over him, raining down kunai and- "Cherry blossoms?"

Gai laughed loudly. "Looks like Tenten has enlisted Sakura-chan as an ally! Now we're really in for a vigorous chase."

Lee clasped his hands together joyously. "Sakura-san is playing? Today really is a great day!"

Gai let Lee lead them on a merry chase after Tenten for several hours, with his student never realizing that his real teammate was on the Hokage monument, watching herself explode with interest. In that time, they had accidentally stumbled on Neji, who Lee had forgotten about in his excitement.

Neji had entered into a meditative state to stave off the boredom of hiding and was startled by Lee tackling Tenten's bunshin, where it dissolved into a heavy fog and started to strangle him. The Hyuuga had activated his Byakugan automatically when surprised and dismissed the obvious genjutsu, alerting Lee to his presence. "Neji! I have found you out!"

He sighed. "It's more like I let you find me. This was getting tedious."

Gai appeared as if out of thin air. "Ah, but that is only because you did not participate with the same spirit that young Tenten has employed! She has even found a partner!"

Lee nodded in agreement. "Sakura-san is truly a great kunoichi, to aid Tenten in our most glorious battle for Hide-And-Seek Champion!"

Neji grit his teeth at the mention of the girl, the new bane of his existence, though she was unaware of it. He had suffered through Lee and Tenten's conversations about the pink-haired annoyance for the entire past week, until he thought he would explode. Tenten was interested in the tanto that she had seen Sakura wear and wondered about her fuinjutsu weights. Lee was interested in Sakura's everything, alternately sighing disgustedly and determinedly training to "gain the right to her heart!"

He used his Byakugan to look through Konoha for Tenten's now familiar chakra presence, scanning for a few moments before spotting her sitting on the Yondaime's head. "She's over there."

Gai clapped him on the shoulder, tone serious for once. "Ah, Neji-kun. It's not good to turn on your teammate like that. You were supposed to help one another."

He felt frustrated. "This game has gone on long enough, Gai-sensei. Besides, our presence together would have been twice as obvious a target. It was a better strategy to split up."
His teacher nodded, "Yes, that seems logical. Tell me, would you have helped Tenten get away before Lee saw her?"

"Only if I could do it without getting caught."

"Ah. I see." Gai was still uncharacteristically quiet and Neji actually felt slightly nervous, uncomfortably so. "It seems we still have a ways to go as a team, Neji-kun."

Gai turned and pointed. "To the monument!" Before Neji could question him, Gai and Lee were gone. He sighed and followed. When he arrived, his teammates were talking excitedly, with Tenten using large arm motions to punctuate her conversation. Gai and Sakura were nowhere in sight.

"Where's Gai-sensei?" They still needed to be dismissed by their superior before they could technically leave for home.

Tenten answered, refusing to look at him. "He dragged Sakura off to have a 'Very Important Discussion of Team Dynamics' as soon as he arrived with Lee." She crossed her arms impatiently. "More importantly, Lee tells me you gave me up to them using your Byakugan. What gives, Neji? I know you didn't want me around, but you didn't have to tell them where I was!"

He was startled. "Didn't want you around? Tenten, it was better if we split up. We agreed on that at the beginning."

His teammate pointed a finger at him angrily. "No, you agreed on that at the beginning and then disappeared! I didn't even get a say in it." Lee was looking between the two of them helplessly, not sure how to solve the dilemma in front of him. Tenten continued. "Did you ever even think that I could be helpful to you in this at all?"

Neji didn't want to lie, though he knew it would be what she wanted to hear, so his answer was a little weak. "Yes?"

Tenten was not appeased. "Yeah, right. Neji, we're supposed to be a team! Lee gave his all to this exercise and you probably just went and did whatever it is you do, not that you tell us anything about yourself!"

Now he was starting to get a little angry too. "What about you? If this was a team exercise, why did you go off and find Sakura immediately? She's not even part of this!"

Tenten sniffed. "There were no rules that said I couldn't use any resource I had available. I did what I needed to win, since my teammate was no help."

"Neji! Tenten! Please don't fight!" Lee was wringing his hands now, clearly upset.

Tenten patted him on the arm consolingly, though she still glared angrily at Neji. "It's okay, Lee. Sometimes fights have to happen, if people aren't willing to talk about their issues before it becomes a problem."

Neji snorted. "Oh, did Sakura-senpai tell you that?"

"Actually, I figured it out all by myself, but thanks for the vote of confidence, Neji-kun." Tenten sagged, clearly exhausted by the argument. "Look, can we just agree on working together the next time Gai-sensei throws us into one of these things?"

"If it gets you to stop badgering me, fine."
From behind him, Neji heard, "Well, it's a start." Sakura and Gai had managed to sneak up on them as he and Tenten were arguing. He eyed them suspiciously.

"A start of what?"

Sakura grinned at him just as obnoxiously as he remembered and shouted, "Why, the start of beautiful, youthful teamwork! It is truly wonderful to see the power of friendship and love!"

Tenten rolled her eyes, but Gai and Lee nodded fervently. "Well said, Sakura-chan! We will become greater than ever!" The older man smiled at her. "We will definitely beat my Eternal Rival with our teamwork!"

Sakura wagged a finger at him. "Don't you start with that, Gai-sensei. Team 7 is the best around, even if they are a bunch of idiots."

As if on cue, they could all hear someone shout "SAKURA-CHAAAAAAAAN!" from below the monument. The group looked down to see Naruto waving frantically at her while Sasuke and Kakashi stood nearby, watching the blonde with variations of resignation and amused annoyance.

Sakura just laughed. "Oops! Looks like it's dinnertime. I'm going to make the boys take me out tonight." She nudged Tenten and stage-whispered. "See? There are some benefits." Sakura turned to jump, but looked at Gai seriously for a moment. "Don't forget what I said, sensei. I think it will help in the long run."

He nodded back to her just as solemnly. "Of course, Sakura-chan. You are wise beyond your years." She disappeared over the edge of the monument and Lee skittered over to see her hop gracefully on the rocks to land beside Naruto, where she pinched his cheeks fondly, if somewhat painfully. The four of them headed toward the restaurant area of town without much further discussion, already anticipating Sakura's request.

"I say we celebrate our newfound collaboration!" Tenten and Neji groaned, already knowing that Gai's idea of celebration usually included handstands and races and sore muscles. Lee's eyes were sparkling as usual, but even he was surprised when Gai said, "To Yakiniku Q!"

Tenten boggled at him for a moment and then grinned at Neji and Lee, her earlier ire replaced by happy enthusiasm. "This could be the start of a beautiful team after all."

Chapter End Notes

neji is hard to write, you guys.

As always, comments & reviews are highly appreciated.
A slither of sand alerted Sakura to his presence. She had slipped out of bed for just this reason, hoping that her unusual appearance in a village he knew so well would make him curious enough to investigate, but not enough to immediately kill her. She was taking an extreme risk being out here by herself, knowing exactly how powerful and unstable Gaara was before he had the sense beaten into him by Naruto.

This time, Sakura didn't have the luxury of waiting for her teammate to perform his unique brand of therapy and excessive violence on Shukaku's jinchuriki. Team 7 was attending the Chunin Exams now, at the age of eleven, where Gaara would only be an observer.

When she had heard that the Exams were going to be held in Suna, she had pushed Kakashi as subtly as she dared to enter their team. The boys were thrilled at the chance and she used that to her advantage to convince their reluctant leader. Sakura honestly did not care about her promotion; Gaara ascending as Kazekage and becoming a strong ally of Konoha was her ultimate goal. To achieve that, he needed to change his entire worldview. It was a tall order, but Sakura knew she at least had to try. She know that her Naruto would have wanted it for Gaara, who had been like a mirror of "what could have been" for him.

He appeared in a swirl of sand, looking much like he had when Sakura had first encountered him. "What are you doing here?" His voice was still unusually deep for a child, something she had initially found extremely off-putting.

"Couldn't sleep." This was certainly the truth. "Who are you?"

"I could ask the same, Leaf." He held himself very still. "This is my village."

"Yep, still testy. "My name is Sakura. I'm here for the Chunin Exams, obviously. Now can I have your name, mysterious stranger?"

He didn't react to her sarcasm. "Sabaku no Gaara. You should not be out here."

Sakura pretended to be confused. "No one mentioned anything against it."

"I am mentioning it."

"Wow, cranky much? Sounds like someone needs a nap." Prior to coming to Suna, she had decided to approach Gaara as if he were a normal person rather than a young child with a frankly terrifying aura. Sakura wasn't sure if it would work or just get her killed faster.

"You are out of bounds. Leave this area now or I will remove you." She held up her hands in supplication and jumped down from the outer wall of the village, where she had been waiting for him. She landed quietly on the sand and in a moment, he materialized next to her, still staring.

"Off the wall now, Gaara-sama. Are you satisfied?"

"I would more satisfied if you were dead."

"Ouch. You don't even know me. I could be a good person."
"What does that matter?" The fact that he was still standing with her and speaking without making any threatening motions was encouraging. She had thought long and hard about how Naruto had approached Gaara's problems and tried to adapt it into a method that she thought might work coming from her.

She shrugged. "Fair enough. I'm sure at least one of the shinobi I've had to kill was probably a good person." Sakura looked up at the night sky, the stars shining brighter in the desert than they ever had in Konoha. She could feel Gaara twitch at her last statement.

"Had to kill?"

"Sometimes we have to make choices we don't like, especially as part our village's military structure. It's hard to be a good person in this world. I struggle with it."

He was silent for several moments while she star-gazed. "Why bother?"

"What?"

He sounded frustrated. "Why bother be a good person when it brings you such hardship?"

"That's a hard question to answer, Gaara." He made a dismissive noise and she continued. "But, I think being a good person means that you're a benefit to those around you, to your family, your friends, your village. If you care for those people … the joy you feel around them is worth anything bad that came before."

"Can you not find joy in yourself?" He really asks the tough questions. How did Naruto manage this?

"That is a pretty personal question. I can't answer that for you."

He was silent again, but she only felt his baseline level of malice that she attributed to Shukaku's badly sealed form. She itched to take a look at Gaara's seal, sure that if she were able to study it, she might even be able to help him control the bijou without losing out on sleep. She still hadn't found a way to extract them without killing the vessel, but she wanted him to be as prepared for the Akatsuki as possible. With the changes she had made already, Sakura had no way of knowing when they would approach him this time.

"You should return to your lodgings. It is almost dawn."

Sakura smiled. "So it is." She stuck out her hand. "It was certainly interesting meeting you, Sabaku no Gaara." He stared down at it with a strange expression and hesitantly took her forearm in a firm grip. She knew this was how they exchanged greetings in Suna. He was obviously just copying the motions he had seen. Possibly his first ever handshake. The idea made her sad beyond measure. "I'll be here for another four days before the Exams even start. Maybe I'll see you around."

He stared at her expressionlessly and as close as they were, she noticed that instead of no eyebrows, his were just an exceptionally fine blonde. Gaara eventually nodded. "It is possible. I live here." Sakura snorted and let go of his arm. She had to get back before Kakashi realized that she left. He would be merciless about her "sneaking out to meet a boy!"

The next day she had her hands full keeping Naruto and Sasuke from killing each other. They had an excess of energy because Kakashi had banned them from training, not wanting to give any information to their opponents prematurely. She had approved of this plan until she realized that he was leaving it up to her to entertain the boys without letting them beat each other senseless or blow
"Kakashi-sensei. I am begging you. Please take them off my hands. I will buy you tickets to the Icha Icha premiere. I will give all your ninken baths. Please."

Her sensei looked at her pleading eyes with amusement. "Didn't you want them by your side? I remember a cute little genin team so long ago who refused to be parted."

"Ugh." She flopped down on the futon he was reading on and heavily laid her head on his left thigh, gesticulating her general disapproval to the air. "I would happily send them both to Snow Country right now." Naruto and Sasuke were wrestling on the floor over some imagined insult, but paused when her comment floated over to them. She summarily ignored their protests.

Kakashi patted her head. "It's only for a few more days, Sakura-chan. Weren't you the one who wanted to be here?"

"Not like this! I thought it would be come in, beat some faces, get our vests and go. I didn't realize we would have wait forever for the exam to even start!"

He shrugged and turned a page. She wiggled around and tried to crane her neck to read the book, more to annoy him than any interest in the subject. She had already read this one, after all. Kakashi closed the book and gave her a stern look, tapping at the "over 18" label on the front.

"A little hypocritical, don't you think, Kakashi-sensei? I'm allowed to kill people but not read your porn?"

"It is adult literature, Sakura-chan. I am a classy man, I do not read porn."

"Semantics, sensei. You can't fool me, I'm practically a genius." Kakashi muttered to himself, but Sakura caught the words "menace is more like it" and grinned. Her smile faded when she caught an elbow to the face courtesy of Naruto, who had flailed his way onto the futon in an effort to escape Sasuke's glowing hand.

Her eyes widened and her voice became very, very quiet. "Sasuke. Is that lightning chakra I see in your hand? In our room? That you both promised not to destroy?"

The chakra immediately dissipated and he looked anywhere but Sakura's face, choosing the coward's way out. "Naruto started it!"

She rubbed a hand over her face in exhaustion. "I'm not saying I doubt that,-," she cut off Naruto's protesting "hey!", "but need I remind you that we will have to pay for damages? If I have spend any more of my mission pay on another broken room, I am not making any more tomatoes or ramen." She glanced at Kakashi. "Or eggplant."

Naruto and Sasuke had twin expressions of horror on their faces and Kakashi was surely pouting under his mask. "I need some air. Sensei, I'm leaving them in your care."

"Technically, they're always in my care, because you're eleven and not actually their mother, Sakura-chan."

"Sure, whatever works. Just make sure there's a room to come back to."

He waved. "Don't go too far. Be alert. This isn't Konoha."

She left the small inn and happily breathed in the clean, dry air of the late afternoon. She headed
toward the middle of Suna, knowing from past experiences in her version that they had clustered their restaurants into one district.

Sakura was surprised to see Temari, Kankuro and Gaara sitting stiffly with one another in at an outdoor table of a seemingly empty restaurant. She paused mid-stride, wondering if she should approach and her sudden cessation of movement caught Gaara's eye. He turned and stared directly at her and she figured that constituted an invitation in his mind. She smiled and waved at him, to his siblings' obvious surprise.

"Hi, Gaara! Who are your friends?" Their eyes were wide with shock and if she hadn't been on a mission to rescue their brother from his literal and metaphorical internal demons, she would have been highly amused.

He nodded at them. "These are my siblings, Temari and Kankuro."

"Hello! I'm Sakura, from Konoha. I met your brother last night."

Kankuro squinted at her suspiciously through his heavy makeup. "What were you doing last night?"

She shrugged. "I guess it's against the rules to hang out on the outer wall. No one said so, but Gaara was kind enough to inform me." She inclined her head. "I don't want to interrupt your meal. It was nice to meet you!"

Before she could leave, Gaara said, "Join us."

"Is that a demand or a request?" she said, challengingly.

"Both." Temari's eyebrows couldn't travel any higher up on her forehead as Sakura just laughed at Gaara's flat statement.

"Sure, stopping here for dinner won't kill me," she said, looking Gaara in the eye and after a moment, he nodded.

"True."

She grabbed a chair from one of the empty tables around them and pulled it up next to Temari so she was directly across from Gaara. She waved at the empty table. "Looks like I have good timing, you guys haven't even ordered yet."

Temari nervously shot a look at Gaara, who was just sitting there calmly. "Yes, we were just discussing the menu when you showed up."

Sakura smiled at her encouragingly. "So what's good here in Suna? This is my first time to the village."

Kankuro perked up. "This place has great hamburgers!"

Temari sighed, "She can get hamburgers in Konoha. You should try the kenshin soup, we make it differently here."

Sakura fanned herself and whined, "Soup on a day like this? Temari-san, are you trying to get rid of Suna's competition through food?"

Kankuro laughed, "No, she's more likely to whack you with that thing." He motioned toward
Temari's fan where it was leaning against the back of her chair.

"Oh, are you a wind user?"

Temari smirked at her. "Like I would tell you before the exams."

Sakura held up her hands in false surrender. "Can't blame a girl for trying. At least now I know you're a violent offender with an enormous weapon." She picked up the menu. "What about you, Gaara? What food do you like?"

Sakura pretended not to notice the chilly silence that permeated the group when she addressed her question toward him. *Really, this poor family. They never had a chance to grow up normally.*

"Tanshio."

She brightened. "Really? If you're ever in Konoha, I should take you to my favorite barbecue restaurant. They do the best tanshio there!" His siblings seemed to be holding their breath at her simple invitation, but he inclined his head a fraction and Sakura went back to reading the menu happily.

"Sakura-chan." She craned her neck backwards to see Kakashi standing behind her, looking overly relaxed.

"Ah, Kakashi-sensei! I made some new friends on my walk. Gaara, Temari, Kankuro, this is my jonin-sensei, Hatake Kakashi." She saw that Temari openly recognized his name, but they all nodded at him in greeting.

"I see that. I need you to come back to the room now, unfortunately."

She pouted and then a terrible thought came to her. "The boys didn't break anything, did they? I told you that you were responsible for them!"

"Maa, Sakura-chan. They're still alive."

She huffed and placed the menu down. "That's not saying much." Sakura smiled apologetically at the group. "Sorry, guys. It was nice to meet you. Maybe we can try for lunch again later this week before the exams!" She waved and was off with Kakashi in a flash, peppering him with questions about Naruto and Sasuke and the state of their room.

As soon as he determined they were far enough away, he grabbed her by the arms, startling her into silence. "Sakura! Do you know who they were?"

"Uh, I'm pretty sure I just introduced you to them, so yes?"

"Did they happen to mention that they're the Kazekage's children?"

"No, but I already knew that."

"Of course they-what?" Kakashi stopped, perplexed. He had gone looking for his errant student, only to see her gleefully sitting with the Suna leader's brood, one of which was a boy with such cold eyes that it made him shudder. To think she wanted him to keep Naruto and Sasuke out of trouble when she was out cavorting with the enemy.

"Politics are a hobby of mine, remember? I'm not an idiot."

"So what was your goal?"
"Actually, it was to really just to get to know them. They are no doubt going to be important in the future."

Kakashi drooped and sighed, something he never did as much as when Sarutobi had assigned him Team 7. "Sakura-chan, please try to keep your political machinations to a minimum until the Chunin Exams are over."

She smiled at him and winked. "I make no promises, Kakashi-sensei."

That night she slipped away from the room again, deciding to take a walk around Suna instead of perching herself on the highest point. She had made herself as approachable as possible for Gaara; now she just had to wait and see if he would take the bait.

After twenty minutes of aimless wandering, she felt him fall into step with her. She waited for him to speak. If they spent the entire night in silence, she felt it would be worth the knowledge that he had chosen to seek her out for the purpose of company, rather than bloodlust.

"The people around me do not bring me joy."

*What? Oh, we're playing that game again.*

"Do you care for them?"

"No?"

"There's no one you love, at all? What about Temari and Kankuro?"

"They exist around me, but I love only myself."

"But is that enough for you, Gaara? Are you *living*?" He looked at her with the slightest hint of confusion, indicating that, yes, obviously, he was alive. "We can *survive* alone, Gaara. But without others to share with, even just one other, we fail to *live*."  

"An empty existence is still preferable to a shortened one."

"Perhaps. Look, I understand the fear of emotional pain, the need to take care of your own well-being before others. Ultimately, people are pretty selfish. But we can be so much more when we strive for happiness."

"Why? What is happiness like?"

*God, if that isn't the most depressing thing I have ever heard.*

"I think that's different for everyone, but for me, I feel happiest when I accomplish something I worked for. Nearly everything I work on is for other people and therefore they also benefit from it. It's a way to satisfy a natural selfish urge to do something for yourself while also being good. Think of it as a cheat."

"And if I feel accomplished when I kill?"

"Do you kill in service to Suna or for your own pleasure?"

Gaara looked straight ahead. "Sometimes I'm not sure."

Sakura shrugged. "Like I said, I don't think it's the same for everyone. But I also find happiness is
just being in the same company as my loved ones. The joy they bring can help erase that intrinsic feeling of loneliness that can creep into me during the darkest hours of the night."

"Why aren't you with them now, during these darkest hours?"

"I carry them with me, in my mind and my heart. Plus, I now have a new friend to talk to." She turned to smile at him.

"Perhaps the companionship of an evil person is better than loneliness."

"Are you evil, Gaara? I haven't seen it in you."

"You would be the only one."

On impulse, she touched his arm lightly and said, "I'm sorry." She meant *I'm sorry this happened to you* and *I'm sorry I can't help more*, but mostly *I'm sorry that life will continue to be difficult for you, even past this*. His sand defense reacted automatically, covering his skin before her fingertips touched him, but it didn't lash out at her.

"Why?"

"There's something about you. It's like a weight of sadness that drags you down. I can see it in your eyes."

"My eyes?"

"I see the sadness most when you talk about killing."

He jerked away, reacting more to her words than he had to her touch. "You have no idea what you're speaking of. That is not the emotion you see."

Sakura just dropped her hand casually. "You can't be the judge of what I assume, Gaara. Are you saying beneath the anger and the bloodlust, there's nothing else?"

His hands were shaking. "Yes, exactly! There's nothing!"

"I don't believe it." She locked her hands behind her head and looked up at the sky, giving him time to calm. It was nearing dawn again.

He whispered to her. "You should go." Sakura touched his arm again, gently. The ever-present sand still prevented her from reaching him completely, but he didn't move away.

She smiled at him. "I'll see you tomorrow, Gaara."

The next night, he sought her out. She was barely twenty feet from their lodgings when she felt his presence.

"Good evening, Gaara."

"Sakura."

*A greeting! This is an improvement, surely.*

She nodded toward the village gates and they left Suna past the wide-eyed guards, with her leading him toward a large dune. Sakura flopped down on her back to look at the stars and patted the sand
next to her invitingly. He hesitantly sat, spine stiff. "So tell me more about yourself, Sabaku no Gaara. All I really know is that you like tanshio and late nights."

"I don't sleep."

"At all? Ever? That sounds like a medical condition."

"You could call it that."

*Not exactly a nickname I would ever give to Shukaku, but fair enough.*

"So you just wander around all night, every night?"

"I could ask you the same."

Sakura laughed. "Fair enough. Back in Konoha I could at least train or study. I'm restricted to simply wandering here."

Gaara tilted his head. "Study?"

"I will pretty much read anything I can get my hands on, but lately I have been into poisons. You know, Suna is pretty renown for them."

"You are interested in poisoning people?"

"Well, no. Maybe. Mostly I'm interested in how to *heal* them. I have medical training." She laughed to herself. "Oops, don't tell your sister that."

"I will keep your secret."

"Thanks. So what do you do for fun?"

"I cultivate cactuses."

Sakura sat up on her elbows. "Really? That's so cute. I never would have guessed." His brow furrowed at her phrasing and the sand around him stirred uneasily. She looked at him for a moment and decided to ask. "So what's with the giant gourd?"

"It carries my sand."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, obviously. I meant, what can you *do* with it?"

Gaara's eyes widened slightly. "I kill people with it."

Sakura flopped back onto the sand with a sigh. "Again, *obviously*. What else can you do with it, though?"

He stared at her, startled as always by her nonchalance at his killing. It was not a reaction that happened often. "I don't do anything else with it."

"That seems like a waste of a good skill, Gaara. I bet you could do anything! Can you make shapes with it?"

"Yes."

"Good. Make me a kitty." He turned his head slowly to look at her and she frowned. "What? I love
my cat, even though he's a big jerk."

"… what does he look like?" Sakura grinned, excited beyond measure that he was going along with her idea. She described Yasutomo to him, fondly reminiscing about how twitchy he was.

Gaara lifted his hand and sand swirled around it, twisting and molding itself to his unspoken direction. Sakura watched with fascination as a small form took shape in front of them, looking more and more like the cat she described. She jumped slightly when it opened its eyes and stared at her unwaveringly.

"Oh, wow! Gaara, that's amazing!" Sakura reached a hand forward and touched its head, stroking the grainy texture behind its ears. It yawned and stretched and then started washing its paws with a useless tongue. "It's so lifelike. Do you have a pet as well?"

"No. There are many strays." He paused, watching her play with the sand cat. "Does it look like your Yasutomo?"

"It is a pretty uncanny likeness, actually." It curled up into her lap, purring. "Except for the eyes. They look like yours." He shifted his hand, looking like he was about to change it. "No, no. Keep them."

They sat in silence for a long moment while she stroked the cat's back, its gritty texture tickling her palm.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?"

*I wish he would stop springing these questions on me.*

"You haven't given me reason to be scared."

"I have mentioned killing many people. Without reason."

Sakura shrugged, tickling the cat's belly and laughing inappropriately when it swatted at her. "We're shinobi, Gaara. Death and killing come with the territory. I'm not so naïve as to believe otherwise."

"Everyone I know is a shinobi, but they do not react to me as you do."

She turned to him, careful not to dislodge the cat and grinned at him obnoxiously. "I'm just special like that." Gaara was silent and Sakura worried that she had made a mistake retreating back to her usual personality quirks. He was sensitive, just as Sasuke had been in the wake of his brother's betrayal, but so much more volatile.

"Perhaps that is it."

"Hmm?"

"You are unique."

"Well, I'm not going to object to that." She said it teasingly, hopeful at his tone and his words, hopeful that this hadn't been a huge waste, that Gaara wasn't a lost cause. He didn't respond, so she attempted a new topic. "It's so beautiful here at night. I love looking at the stars."

"You say that a lot. Love." The cat woke up and stretched again, disturbed by its creator's roiling chakra.
"It's a big part of my life."

"What do you do with it?"

She shrugged, unsure of how to describe her feelings for her team, her friends, her village. It was what drove her to use the sealed scrolls she had found in Orochimaru's lair, it was the basis upon which she lived every day in her second life.

"Love is powerful, Gaara. It gives you strength when you had previously felt as if you could not move one more step. It's like being infused with a chakra boost, warm and tingly and exciting. Though that's only how I feel about love as I have experienced it." Sakura smiled at him. "Romantic love is not my forte."

"You rely on others for this."

It was a statement, but she answered as if it were a question. "It would have no meaning if I kept it to myself."

"Others can make you vulnerable. Anything that can be taken from you so easily is a weakness, not a strength."

"Nothing worth having comes easily, Gaara. Those I love are worth it to me. I will fight anyone who tries to take them from me and that gives me strength as well."

She stood and yawned, looking at the sun just barely attempting to peek over the horizon. "It's time for me to head back. Kakashi-sensei will worry if I'm not there when he wakes up."

Gaara followed her back into the village, where a shift change had taken place. She waved her traffic pass at another set of wide-eyed guards cheerfully, though she doubted they would have stopped her while in Gaara's company. He followed her directly to her door, sand cat in tow.

She nodded to him and smiled. "Good night, Gaara. Or maybe good morning, at this point."

He inclined his head slightly. "I will see you tonight." He left in a swirl of sand, but the cat remained, staring at her unblinkingly. Sakura opened the door to the inn and it followed her in naturally.

Sakura looked at it in disbelief. "Oh, Kakashi is going to have a fit."

She was right. Kakashi was not happy to wake up and see his student cuddling with a chakra construction that resembled an unpleasant Siamese cat, brimming over with the same dangerous energy that he had felt from the Kazekage's boy.

The boys, however, were fascinated by it.

"Sakura-chan! Where did you get it" Naruto's bright eyes were filled with curiosity as he reached out a hand to the cat, which hissed and swatted at him angrily. He pouted and withdrew his scratched hand while Sasuke laughed at him.

"He's a gift from a friend that I met here in Suna."

Naruto jumped on that. "Who? When did you meet someone? Do we know them?"

"Yes, I met him days ago when I left you two to Kakashi-sensei's tender mercies."

Sasuke looked skeptical. "And he just gave you this? It looks very complex for someone you just
met."

Sakura fluttered her eyelashes at him coquettishly. "Why, Sasuke-kun! Don't you think I deserve nice things?" He grumbled, but didn't say anything more. Kakashi cleared his throat behind them.

"Sakura-chan, that boy is from Suna. He could have given you this to spy on our team." The boys immediately drew away from the cat and Sakura huffed, cradling it in her arms.

"Gaara doesn't need a cat to spy on anyone if he wanted to, I'm sure." Kakashi looked at her narrowly and she regretted her words. "He's just powerful enough not to need to!" That wasn't any better. "He wouldn't?"

"None of that is reassuring, Sakura-chan. The cat has to go." She felt a slight hint of panic. If she abandoned this gift that Gaara had made for her, would he just take it as another betrayal? Sakura couldn't let that happen.

"Fine, fine. I'll return it. Let me go out and find him." She slipped out of the room before they could protest, not wanting to belabor the point. She placed the cat on the ground and it followed her sedately as she considered where to go. How in the world was she going to find him instead of the other way around? Sakura stopped and looked down at her erstwhile companion and squatted down to eye level.

"Say, Yasu. You wouldn't happen to know where Gaara is, would you?" It regarded her with curious eyes and abruptly turned around, heading south. She followed it slowly, realizing that they were headed toward the restaurant district once more. Sakura saw Gaara sitting with Temari and Kankuro again, his two siblings looking no less bewildered than they had the first time.

She snuck up behind the two older nin and tapped Kankuro on the shoulder, laughing delightedly when he jumped and nearly fell out of his chair. She grinned as he grumbled to himself like an old man. Temari looked vaguely happy to see her and Gaara's face had twitched, so Sakura took that as a win.

"Hello again!"

Temari nodded to her. "Sakura, was it? You have a knack for disturbing our meals."

She pouted and looked down at the menus. "You don't even have food yet! Plus, I'm here on a mission." She motioned to the cat, which jumped on their table nonchalantly, to the surprise of Temari and Kankuro. "Kakashi-sensei won't let me keep it with the team, because he's a paranoid old man. Can you keep Yasu with you during the day, Gaara?"

"What the hell is that?" Kankuro was pointing at it in horror.

Sakura narrowed her eyes. "Surely you've seen a cat before, Kankuro-san."

"Not a cat made out of sand!"

"You live in Suna and your brother has the most amazing techniques with sand. I can't believe this is such a strange thing for you."

"You" group was went quiet when she brought up Gaara's abilities, but Sakura didn't let that phase her. She was a kunoichi, if a little awkward silence was the worst thing that happened today, she'd count herself lucky.

Unbelievably, Gaara was the one to break the silence. "Yasu will be fine here."

She smiled at him brightly, happy he didn't seem offended. "Thanks! I'll see you tonight." He
nodded and she waved goodbye to his flabbergasted siblings.

Sakura decided to bring back some treats for the boys on her way back to the inn, in an attempt to forestall awkward questions that she couldn't answer. She still harbored suspicions that Kakashi wasn't as unaware of her nightly excursions as he played, but the fact that he still let her go was all that mattered right now.

Yasu met her at the door when she opened it quietly later that night. Gaara was nowhere to be found, so she followed the cat. It led her right back to the same area they had been the night before, on a high dune surrounded by nothing but cool sand and an open starry sky. The redhead materialized there once she settled down next to Yasu and sat next to her without prompting.

Sakura tickled under the cat's chin and said, "Tonight's the last night before the exams. Are you excited?"

"I'm not participating."

She cocked her head. "Oh? Why not?"

"I don't want to."

"Good reason. I had to threaten my boys into sleeping tonight, they were so wound up."

"Your boys?"

Sakura smiled. "My teammates. They're my best friends, but sometimes they're very hyperactive. Comes with being an eleven year old boy, I guess." She looked at him, still and placid. "Or maybe it's just them."

"They are the ones you love?"

"Some of them, yes. There's also my sensei and my other friends back home too. I love my village, even if I don't know everyone in it." She sighed. "It's nice to have a sense of community."

"I wonder." Gaara sounded almost wistful and her heart ached for him.

"Well, no matter what happens in the exams tomorrow, we can still be friends."

"We're in different villages."

"So? I'm a great penpal. Plus, Konoha and Suna have an alliance. We should preserve that for a new generation!" She dramatically spread her arms wide and Yasu growled at her playfully. Sakura laughed and fell backwards onto the dune behind her.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I just reminded myself of someone I know. He's very dynamic."

He made the sand twitch beneath Yasu's feet, causing the cat to jump and look at him balefully. "You seem to have a lot of friends."

"I'm pretty good at getting to know people. Most can be pretty interesting if you give them a chance." She looked at him. "So? If I write you a letter, will you send me one back?"

"I've never written a letter before."
"Then I get the honor of being your very first letter receiver!" She saw the corner of his mouth tip up in the slightest of slight smiles and crowed inwardly.

Yes!

"Aa. That sounds acceptable. I do not know what I will write."

She shrugged, still smug with her emotional victory. "Whatever you want, I'm pretty open-minded. Tell me about your cactuses or your siblings or how you feel about the color orange."

"Orange?"

Sakura made a face. "My teammate is obsessed with wearing it. I try to tell him that it's not very discrete for a shinobi, but then he gets all uppity about my hair." She waved at her own head.

Gaara nodded. "Yes, you have a very conspicuous color." He regarded her carefully for a moment. "It suits you. You are a very conspicuous person."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment."

"You should."

They sat together, the silence now a little more comfortable, and looked at the stars.

Chapter End Notes

how do you convince a traumatized little boy that the world is not actually terrible and filled with people who will only hurt him? the power of love and cats, maybe.
And So It Goes

Chapter Summary

And here we begin at the beginning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Inside her own mind, Haruno Sakura was arguing with herself and losing.

"This is my body, you creepy old woman! I won't let you have it!"

"You goddamn brat, I am not old! Also, I am you, so this is technically my body too!"

"Hah! Like I would believe anything you said. Get out!"

"Look, I didn't want to do this to you-me-whatever, but I've got things to do and no time to play games."

"Wh-what are you doing? Stop! Don't come near me!"

"Sorry kid, it's for the greater good."

Sakura placed her palm on her younger self's forehead, slowly absorbing her, grimacing at the integration memories. When the last wisp of her new-old psyche passed into nothingness, the entire blank mindscape sagged with her exhaustion and she saw spots and finally darkness.

She surfaced to consciousness with a groan, pressing a hand to her throbbing head. I'm pretty sure I wasn't with the Naras last night, so no sake for me. What the hell happened?

She sat up, only to blink rapidly once she noticed that she was surrounded by violent splashes of pink everywhere. "Wha?" She squinted her eyes. This is my old room at my parent's house.

Her sluggish brain finally caught up to her reality and she leaped off the bed, landing awkwardly in a heap on the floor. It worked! Sakura patted herself down, taking stock of her new-old body. Once she assessed her exceptionally low chakra reserves, she huffed a sigh. Looks like excessive training is in my new future.

She glanced at her calendar, noting the day with unease. I couldn't make it back far enough. Just a few weeks until the massacre. I have a lot of work to do.

Though it was not even dawn, Sakura was anxious to get started with everything. She dug through her closet looking for something, anything that was not a dress. She needed practicality with the amount of training she was about to put herself through. She found a pair of old black shorts and a red zip vest with a Haruno symbol embroidered along the bottom hem. It had been a gift from her father for her last birthday, though his constant missions meant he had given it to her weeks late. She stared in the mirror and nodded in satisfaction; these clothes would do. She frowned when she took in her lengthy pink strands. It had been nearly fifteen years since her hair had been this long and she found herself strangely hesitant to cut it.
Sakura compromised by braiding it tightly and wrapping it into a bun on the top of her head, securing it with two senbon that she found on her dresser. They were nearly the only weapons she had in her possession. She left down the stairs rather than through the window, not certain of the true extent of her abilities yet.

Less than thirty minutes later, she was face down in her backyard panting and cursing. All that remained of her previous formidable abilities were her knowledge and the innate chakra control she had been born with. She would be starting from scratch all over again.

At least I know what to do. Hopefully that will speed up the process.

She stretched carefully and started going through her katas again from memory. She would need to think about building up her Yin Seal again, but placing it elsewhere on her body. Tsunade's seal was entirely too well known for Sakura to pass it off as her own work. There was a chakra point in the sternum that would work well enough. Especially considering how little chakra I have to use right now.

She continued training until she could barely move, then dragged herself in to clean up and eat breakfast quickly. It was time to head to the Academy and start her new life.

Sakura strode confidently into her classroom, not hesitating to seek out Naruto and sit next to him instead of her usual seat. Internally, she was wary of throwing off the adults with her abrupt change in routine, but she knew that Naruto would respond best to overt and obvious friendliness. Sakura was a woman on a mission and no shadowy figures would stop her this time.

"Good morning!" She fairly sang it, ecstatic to see her best friend, young and alive again after nearly a decade of mourning his loss. Naruto was wide-eyed beside her, frozen at her greeting. He slowly looked around suspiciously, wondering if someone was pranking him this time.

"G-good morning, Sakura-chan." She just smiled brightly at him and he returned it after a moment of staring. "Your, um, hair looks different today."

She reached up to her bun self-consciously and laughed. "Yeah, long hair such a liability in the field, but I just could bear to cut it."

"Liability?" He questioned it without thinking and then leaned away, ready to be yelled at for being stupid.

"Oh, yeah. Hmm, a disadvantage?" His face was studiously blank. "Well, it can cause problems because anyone can grab it and cause me harm." She pointed at the senbon. "Now I've kept my hair and booby-trapped it!"

His face lit up in a smile and her heart ached at the sight. "That's good thinking, Sakura-chan! I always knew you were smart." She laughed and Naruto kept on smiling, confused at her strange behavior but willing to go along with it. Sakura was talking to him and even if she stopped tomorrow or after lunch, he was going to remember.

Nakajima-sensei chose that moment to walk in and begin class. He was quickly lost as the man swiftly went through the hand seals and chakra required for a classic henge form. The students were called up to the front of the classroom one by one to demonstrate their ability and Naruto could feel a knot form in his stomach, heavier and heavier as Nakajima got closer to his name. When his name was finally-too soon-called, Sakura put her on hand on his arm with a smile and said, "Good luck, Naruto."
Buoyed by her words, he bounded up to the front and tried to concentrate on his chakra just like Nakajima had said. The power came to him in such a rush that he was overwhelmed when he formed the three seals to transform him into his instructor, but he could tell by the horror on everyone's faces that he had failed miserably once again.

Nakajima looked at him sternly. "Were you even listening when I gave the instructions, Naruto?"

He frowned petulantly. "I did everything you said, sensei!"

"Clearly not." He sighed. "Go back to your seat, Naruto. We'll try again later and maybe you can do it then."

Naruto trudged back to his shared desk with Sakura, intensely disappointed that he couldn't even do the simplest of jutsus. How was he ever going to be Hokage at this rate? No one would ever take him seriously!

Sakura eyed his unhappy face and poked him in the side, whispering, "Do you want to work with me after school? I think I can help."

"Yeah? You think so?"

She put on her most superior face and then giggled. "I know so."

The rest of the day passed like always. Naruto struggled to keep up with their lessons on geography and genjutsu and got entirely too excited when taijutsu lessons were canceled in favor of letting them go home early. Throughout the day, Sakura observed him and the rest of the classroom, only keeping the barest thread of her attentions on the lessons. Her memory of the first time this had happened was hazy; she had spent so much of her time fawning over Sasuke that it had pushed all other memories out of her mind.

She tugged Naruto out of the classroom as soon as they were excused and led him to her house. Eventually she would commandeer a training ground for herself, but today she wanted to work with him in more seclusion, hoping it would help him focus.

"Ah, Sakura-chan? Where are we going?" He asked her fearfully as they passed through the marketplace and into the edges of the civilian district, where he saw adults giving him dirty looks. She glared at the closest man staring at Naruto with disgust and grabbed her friend's hand to drag him along faster.

"My house! It's quiet there, so we'll be able to fix your jutsu issues no problem!" Deep down, Naruto doubted that, but he didn't argue. He had nothing better to do than go home to his tiny apartment anyway and Sakura was still being nice to him. She still hadn't let go of his hand and he savored the feeling.

She ushered him through a bright red door and immediately out to the backyard. "Will your be parents okay with me being here?" Naruto hated to ask, but it was better to know what sort of reaction he was going to get. As far as he could remember, adults had treated him with varying levels of disgust and hatred and at this point in his life, he didn't question why. It was an exhausting endeavor that never made him feel good about himself. He just wanted to brace himself for the worst if Sakura's parents were on the more extreme spectrum.

"They're not likely to be home for weeks." She shrugged casually, though her eyes were slightly sad. "Besides, we're friends now, right? Friends are allowed to visit each other!"

_Friends._ Naruto grasped the feeling that word created within him, holding it close to his heart.
Before today Sakura had just been a classmate who treated him no better or worse than anyone else. He wasn't sure what caused her to change, but he was hesitant to ask in case it broke this fragile peace he was suddenly feeling.

"Yeah," he said, uncharacteristically shy. "We're friends, Sakura-chan."

She gave him a grin and tugged him down to sit with her in the grass, away from the overgrown garden by the sunroom's window. "Okay, so I think the best way we can do this …"

Two weeks later, Sakura was stuck. She had no idea how to approach Sasuke and time was running out. Her initial plan was to come back even earlier, to stop the massacre entirely, but it was too late for that now. If everything was the same here, Itachi would sweep through the Uchiha compound in just over a month and she was helpless to stop it. The information that she had uncovered at Tsunade's behest had given her much needed insight into Itachi's behavior that night, though she disagreed heavily with the mission he had been given. Sakura understood the nature of psychological warfare, had engineered many manipulations herself throughout the years.

Still, she could feel sick when she considered the choices the Hokage and Danzo had pressed on a thirteen year old boy. In her heart, she wanted to lay the blame exclusively on the current elder, knowing full-well the extent of his ruthlessness and martial drive. But the Hokage's soft heart had done as much damage as Danzo's icy pragmatism and Sakura couldn't let that go unpunished, even if it was only in her mind. The were both complicit in the tragedy. To ask Sasuke's brother to murder his entire clan to save Konoha from an ongoing war, to brand him as a traitor for life? To push him to such damaging extremes that he would feel the need to torture his precious only sibling with their parents' death?

In her original time, Sakura had managed to gain access to Danzo's private residence on a single occasion, not quite knowing what she was looking for. She had quite frankly stumbled upon the knowledge of his involvement in the "Uchiha solution". It just a singular scrap of paper, written in barely distinguishable code and did not outline any singular plan or even give commands, but Sakura could read between the lines.

It had been incredibly demoralizing when Sakura had finally pieced it together, out of that tiny paper and the fragments of information she spent years collecting. Sarutobi had been nearly deified in the village, the "Professor" who had saved them from Orochimaru's wrath before dying a hero's death.

_The Hokage had known. He had known all along. Maybe he wanted a better solution, but he stood by while this happened …_

She could respect him for the many things he had done for the good of Konoha, for his skills as shinobi. But Sakura could no longer entrust him with her friends' lives. Not while they could be used like tools.

"Sakura-chan! Are you okay?" She looked up, startled. Naruto was poking at her side, still a little hesitant in his welcome. It was lunchtime and the classroom had cleared out, the students intent on spending their break period outside in the sunshine. She gave Naruto a smile, partially because she was still so happy to be with him, but also because she knew how well he responded to them.

"Of course! I was just lost in thought. You know how I get." He nodded, having roused her multiple times over the past few weeks from what probably looked to be intense daydreaming. "Let's eat!" She grabbed the bentos that she had packed and handed him one, which he took with careful hands, eyes wide.
"Sakura-chan, you don't have to keep making me lunch …" Naruto was torn between devouring the food immediately and savoring the idea that someone cared about him, cared enough to go out of her way to make sure he's fed.

She shrugged. "I already pack my own. It's no trouble to make one for you too." She stretched, sore from her morning spent retraining her aim with a shorter reach. "Do you want to eat outside?"

Naruto looked troubled. "If that's what you want to do. Where ever is okay with me."

Sakura understood why he didn't want to go where their peers were, but she dragged him along anyway, glaring at anyone who looked at him strangely. They settled down in the shade of an old oak tree at the far end of the Academy's training field and Naruto immediately started in on his bento, shoveling the food into his mouth quickly. Between bites he crowed, "Sakura-chan, this is great! You're such a good cook."

She laughed at him. "Slow down, Naruto. I promise no one will take it if you decide to breathe between chews." Sakura made a note to invite him to dinner again tonight. Clearly he wasn't eating enough for him and his extra tenant if he was so ravenous just by early afternoon.

She poked at her own food, mind still on how she would be able to get close to Sasuke. He was quiet in class, but not with the same brooding attitude that had attracted her infatuation the first time around. Sakura grimaced when she thought of her long faded crush, knowing she had been attracted to his pretty looks and bad-boy persona without even knowing the reason behind it. Still, Sasuke had started gaining the attention of the girls in their class and she knew that was the wrong way to go about it.

Sakura should have known that being friends with Konoha's most unpredictable shinobi would do the work for her.

Her bento was knocked out of her hand and Naruto jumped to his feet. "Oi, watch it! You just ruined Sakura-chan's lunch!"

She stared at the food mournfully and then looked up into the wide-eyed and apologetic face of Uchiha Sasuke. Now that's an expression I have never seen on him before.

"Sorry! I didn't see you here. I was just practicing …" He motioned to the blunted kunai on the ground next to her bento and she cursed herself for not realizing that he had even thrown it. She had to be more aware of her surroundings or she'd be dead before she changed a goddamn thing. Sakura resolved to work on her sensing abilities after school while she forced Naruto to work on his assignments.

Naruto snorted. "The training ground is over there." He waved at the posts that were littered with pockmarks from years of Academy students. "You must have really bad aim."

Sasuke's face scrunched up with anger. "I bet I'm better than you, moron!" At the insult, Naruto marched right up to him, gesticulating wildly.

"No way you're better than me! I've been getting special training!" He preened at his own idea, elevating Sakura's status from helpful friend to elite shinobi.

Sasuke looked unimpressed. "Oh yeah? Who would train you?"

"Sakura-chan! She's way better than anyone in our class!" Now Sasuke just looked even more unimpressed and she didn't blame him. Her physical abilities at the original age of eight had not been anything spectacular and she knew no one but Naruto and Nakajima had seen her enormous
increase in skill level.

Their sensei had questioned her earlier that week about it and while she had felt a jolt of hot panic, she forced herself to shrug casually. "It's time I took this career seriously. I've been training outside of the Academy." The man had looked at her proudly, something she found strange at the time. *Teachers just love overachievers.*

"She couldn't beat me." Sasuke sounded infinitely sure of this, so much like his former-future self that Sakura had to hide a wince. *Ouch, way to hit a sore spot.*

Naruto, loving and supportive friend that he was, immediately challenged him to a contest on her behalf. "You're going down, jerk. Sakura-chan will wipe the floor with you!" Sakura sighed, not even part of the conversation they were having *about* her. It seemed that no matter what time she was in, Naruto and Sasuke would find a way to fight, argue or otherwise disagree with one another.

"Fine," Sasuke said, giving them a small smirk. "Let's meet at one of the empty training grounds after class is over. I can beat you both then."

This time it was Naruto dragging her, eager to get to the training grounds so that she could really "show that jerk who's boss, Sakura-chan!" She was happy he was starting to be more comfortable around her and faintly amused that it, of course, took Sasuke to get him there. Sakura wasn't going to disappoint Naruto by losing so she took advantage of this opportunity to get Sasuke's attention.

He was waiting there for them, smirk still on his face like it had been drawn there. "Ready to lose?" Sasuke had addressed Sakura, but stared Naruto down as if he were the one in the contest. She rolled her eyes, resigned to their eternal behavior problems.

"I'm here to win, Sasuke." She smiled at him sweetly, dangerously as his eyes swiveled to meet hers. "Don't get overconfident."

He huffed. "Shouldn't I be saying that to you?" He pointed to the five posts on the training ground and said, "Each one is marked with a red dot. Those are our targets." Sakura could see that the dots ranged from dead center to near the bottom of the post and nodded at him.

"From here?"

"Why?" He smirked at her again. "Do you need to get closer?"

"Don't be a brat, Sasuke-kun. I just want to make sure I understand the parameters of our challenge." He looked slightly confused and a voice behind them said, "She means the rules, little brother." Sakura briefly closed her eyes in fear? panic? giddiness? She wasn't sure how she felt about meeting an Itachi before, well, *everything.*

Sasuke had spun around in delight. "Nii-san! You're back!" He wavered between wanting to compete with them and his clear desire to spend time with his brother. "How was your mission?"

"Complete, as always." Itachi was a person of few words even as young teen. His face was strangely gentle as he looked down at Sasuke's adoring face. "Why are you here?"

Sasuke's face transformed into a mulish pout. "That moron said that this girl had better aim than me, so we're having a contest that I'm gonna win." Sakura was not amused to be reduced to "this girl". Since she was mentally an adult in this situation, she held her temper, though her eyes flashed warningly. Naruto protested loudly, to no one's surprise.
Itachi poked his brother in the forehead. "How do you know that? You haven't even started yet." He waved a hand at them all. "Go on, I'll be your referee."

Naruto pointed a finger at him. "No fair, he's your brother!" Sakura put a hand on his shoulder and he stopped yelling, but still obviously annoyed.

"It's fine, Naruto. I'm sure Uchiha-san will be impartial." She smiled at Itachi politely and he inclined his head in response. "Besides, I intend to win so conspicuously we won't need judging."

Sakura gestured to Sasuke magnanimously. "You can go first, Sasuke."

He threw his five kunai one after another with a practiced ease and then cast a glance at his brother, who looked on impassively. He hit each target nearly perfectly; the kunai on the post with the lowest red dot was only a hair off. Sasuke looked at it and then her, triumphantly. "Beat that, Sakura-chan."

"With pleasure." She strode up next to him and withdrew five of the kunai that she carved seals onto, ones that allowed her to channel chakra into them discretely. In her past, Kakashi had once told her of his broken tanto that had done something similar, intriguing her enough to research the possibility of creating more weapons to do the same.

Sakura tossed her kunai with quickly, using the chakra coating to slice through Sasuke's weapons. All five made a solid thunk into the wooden posts perfectly on target, with the pieces of Sasuke's kunai falling to the ground.

She turned to his and Naruto's gaping faces. "Looks like I won!" Naruto recovered first, throwing his arm around her shoulders and whooping with glee.

"Sakura-chan, that was amazing!"

Sasuke stomped over the posts to look at his broken kunai and his brother moved to join him. Sakura smiled her exuberant friend and teased him. "Thanks, Naruto. You should have expected that, since you were the one who signed me up for this contest to begin with!" He gave her a sheepish look and she just hugged him fondly. He tensed for a second, before relaxing into a puddle of happy blonde. They were interrupted immediately by an angry Uchiha.

"What are these? You cheated!" Sasuke waved the sealed kunai in her face as his blank-faced brother stood behind him, but Sakura could swear she saw a flicker of amusement in his dark eyes.

"Cheated? I hit all of the targets perfectly, which is not something you can say."

"You used some sort of technique on these! They're not regular kunai."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Ah, right, the famous Aim no Jutsu, meant to win ridiculous contests." Sasuke's cheeks darkened and his brother's mouth twitched upward. "I placed those seals so I could channel chakra into them. I still throw them the ordinary way." She poked him in the forehead just like his brother had before, to his consternation. "And I still did it better than you."

Itachi smoothly blocked his brother before he could go on another tirade. "You placed the seals? Where did you get them?"

Sakura's eyes brightened at the question and she forgot to be afraid or nervous or whatever it was that Uchiha Itachi made her feel. "I made them. Seals are incredibly versatile. I think all shinobi should have a better understanding of fuinjutsu."
"I told you Sakura-chan was way better than anyone in our class!"

Itachi looked down at Sasuke and nodded. "I think you could learn a lot from her, little brother."

Sasuke just crossed his arms and pouted petulantly. "I could just learn from you."

Sakura saw Itachi's eyes grow distant and shivered, still wondering if there was anything she could possibly do to stop the massacre, to stop the Uchiha's planned coup. It wasn't right to ask of anyone. Itachi smiled softly at Sasuke and Sakura felt impossibly sad.

All she can do is hold them here with her in the moment, outside the uncertainly of a thousand tomorrows. She smiles at Naruto and turns to Itachi and his brother. "We could learn a lot from each other, Sasuke."

Chapter End Notes

this whole chapter is butt. enjoy~!

p.s. i really have a hard time not incorporating specific japanese terminology because the translation is relatively awkward. i could get away with "little brother" for itachi because it's an endearing term, but just using "big brother" seems weird to me. nii-san it is!
The next day, Sakura found herself in an unusual situation: Sasuke was staring at her. It was surreal to sit in her eight year old body and be the one who was watching the instructor, feeling his eyes on her. She had not expected him to take the challenge and surprise meeting with Itachi so seriously, but clearly he was still thinking about it. She could also feel Ino staring at her enviously, a situation she wasn't sure how to deal with.

"Sakura-chan?" Naruto was whispering to her, quietly.

"Hmm?" She didn't stop what she was writing, making coded notes on her research about seal tattoos. She needed to try for her summons again soon, to see if she still could. Because they were connected inter-dimensionally, she assumed they would be connected to her via her chakra laced blood contracts and not hindered by the timeline she currently resided in.

"That jerk is staring at you again."

"I know, Naruto." Sakura glanced behind her, where Shikamaru was dozing peacefully and grinned to herself. He hasn't changed a bit either. He hasn't changed a bit either. "It's not a big deal. He's probably curious about my weapons. We left in a hurry yesterday."

"You promised me ramen! I couldn't let you change your mind!" Sakura had been on a campaign to get Naruto to eat a healthier diet and it had kept him from his beloved ramen for nearly a week before she broke down yesterady in the face of his sad blue eyes.

"Ahem." They both looked up to see Nakajima looking down at them disapprovingly. "I'm sorry, was I interrupting?"

Naruto was gearing up to bluster out some excuse that would probably land them in more trouble, so Sakura cut him off smoothly. "No, Nakajima-sensei. We're sorry for being disruptive."

The man just raised an eyebrow at her, not believing it for a moment. "But not sorry for not paying attention?"

Sakura smiled at him. "Of course we were paying attention, Nakajima-sensei! Basic geographical knowledge is very important for a shinobi to have, after all."

"Ah, so you can tell me the names of all the lesser Elemental Countries?" Sakura was about to answer, but he looked directly at Naruto. "Naruto? Since you were also paying attention with Sakura-chan?"

To her internal surprise and Nakajima's obvious amazement, he rattled off the list of countries that she had bullied him into studying last week with a bored look on his face, "… Claw, Fang and Bear. I think that's all of them?"

"… Very good, Naruto-kun. I haven't even mentioned some of those."

He beamed at the man toothily. "Sakura-chan is very smart, Nakajima-sensei. I guess it rubbed off a little." Their teacher nodded at them and moved back to the front of the classroom and their classmate's attention on them waned after a few moments.
She went back to working on her private notes, but whispered to Naruto without looking. "I can't believe you remembered all those! Now that I know you can, I'm going to make you work harder."

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him grimace and smiled to herself.

Throughout the rest of the morning lessons, Sasuke's startlingly intense gaze was only broken when he was called upon by Nakajima, who looked at him indulgently. He clearly had the wrong idea about why Sasuke was so fixated on her and Naruto, but he didn't call the boy out on it.

He sought them out at lunchtime, making a beeline for their desk before Sakura had even handed Naruto the bento she had packed for him.

"Sakura."

"Hello, Sasuke. Would you like to join us for lunch?" She could see that Naruto was making an ugly face at her offer, but she ignored him.

"… Sure." He followed them out to the tree they had been sitting at the yesterday and sat awkwardly with his own lunch. Naruto was devouring his food as usual and Sakura wondered if he would ever stop eating as if someone was going to take his food away at any moment.

She picked through her vegetables, wondering why she had packed so many cherry tomatoes. Sakura saw Sasuke eying her bento. "Want to trade? I'm not a big fan of tomatoes, even though I made my own lunch." He nodded and she happily handed over her lesser vegetables for his more delicious ones. *Win-win for both of us!*

Sakura munched happily on her new snow peas and watched Naruto finish his food with something that resembled sadness. *Maybe I should start packing a double lunch for him.*

"Why were you staring at Sakura-chan all day, jerk?" Sakura rolled her eyes. Leave it to Naruto to be tactful.

Sasuke was immediately defensive. "I was not! I just wanted to know if she would train with me after class! Nii-san said it was a good idea." Sakura nodded knowingly. If Itachi had suggested it, Sasuke would do it. Even when he had hated his brother in her time, she knew they had an exceptional bond. *But why did Itachi suggest it to begin with? What is his motivation?*

Naruto pointed a finger at him accusingly. "No way, me and Sakura-chan train after school every day! You can't just march over here and take her away!"

Sasuke just frowned at him. "It's not like you would be much challenge, moron."

Sensing a fight brewing, Sakura intervened. "Boys, we can all train together. That's fair, right?" Naruto sat back grumbling and Sasuke agreed with her reluctantly, clearly unhappy that he had to spend more time around Naruto.

After classes ended, the three of them met up on the same empty training area for Sakura to beat them both into the ground, using mostly her chakra control and previous experience at fighting their older selves. She hadn't yet regained a fraction of her own abilities, something that frustrated her every day, causing her to wake up earlier and earlier to train before heading to the Academy. Still, what she had was enough to impress two eight year old boys and she left them wrestling in the dirt with a fond goodbye, promising Naruto that she would find him later for tutoring.

For now, she had another Uchiha to find. She wasn't interested in revealing her time traveler status
to anyone, not even her closest friends. That way only lead to more complications, something she had been firmly convinced of before she had even considered using the jutsu that brought her back. However, she was willing to share knowledge of considerable intellect with someone who would appreciate how she could put it to use to protect his precious little brother.

Sakura spread her senses out, looking for the chakra signature that matched the one she had met yesterday. She hoped he hadn't been sent out on a mission again, though it was likely given his status as ANBU captain.

Turns out, he found her first.

"Sakura-san."

She jumped and then was immediately annoyed that he had snuck up on her. He moves like a ghost. "Uchiha-san. Just the person I was looking for."

He raised a thin eyebrow at her in response.

"I had a question for you."

He nodded in understanding, still not saying anything.

She sighed, resigned to the fact that this was going to be a double conversation, filled with undertones and Uchiha-specific body language. "Why did you tell Sasuke it was a good idea to train with me?"

"He needs someone to train with."

Sakura restrained her temper, barely, and decided to lay her cards on the table. "But why me? I'm interested in your motivations."

He stilled, dark eyes regarding her curiously and shrugged gracefully, casually. "He needs more friends his own age. You seemed willing enough yesterday."

"My willingness isn't in question, Uchiha-san. Sasuke is a little prickly and wont to argue with my own best friend, but I am capable of getting along with nearly anyone." She put her hands on her hips, wording her next question very carefully. "Why did you decide now was a good time for him to start moving away from the familiarity of home?"

Sakura thought she saw a flash of red in his eyes, but it was gone in a second. She reminded herself to look at his forehead or his chin, anywhere else. His hand clenched into a fist once and then he forcefully relaxed. This obvious show of emotion told her how stressed he was. He wasn't quite the composed young adult she had met once upon a time.

"Is there ever a good time?" Answering questions with more questions? I won't be so easily dissuaded, Itachi.

She shrugged just as casually as he had, though perhaps not as gracefully. "There's no real way of knowing. That would require more foresight than I'm capable of." They were silent for a moment, regarding one another thoughtfully. "I will take care of your brother."

His shoulders tensed minutely. "He has many people to take care of him."

"Then I will be just one more to add to the list. That's what you wanted, isn't it?"
He didn't answer.

She smiled at him softly and intensely sad, a feeling that had never really left her when thought of his plight. Itachi's story was already written in stone and she was helpless to change the narrative, but she could change Sasuke's. "I promise, Itachi."

He nodded, not even bothered by the use of his given name, and then left swiftly in a gust of wind. Dramatic and slightly rude. Must be an Uchiha trait.

The weeks passed by quickly, too quickly for Sakura, but she didn't see Itachi again. She assumed whatever preparations he made the first time were taking place again, but she couldn't be sure until it was all over and that kept her on edge constantly. Naruto had taken to shooting her worried looks when he thought she wasn't looking and Sasuke was silently concerned.

He had shown up every day after Academy for training with them and she happily allowed him to join, much to Naruto's consternation. Sasuke had always been a quick learner, so it frustrated him to realize that Sakura was consistently better than him. He had no idea that she had run into Gai the third week of her arrival and had asked him to train with her, dramatically ramping up her own improvements.

To soothe Naruto's ruffled feathers, Sakura made sure to spend some quality alone time with him. She knew it was important to him to actually have friends and she loved him like a brother, so it wasn't a particular hardship for her. The time they spent together allowed her to momentarily forget the upcoming tragedy, but when he was gone, it all came back to her in a rush. She spent many sleepless nights reading or training, anything to get her mind off what she couldn't change.

The night of the original massacre arrived and she was nearly vibrating with tension. She had grabbed takeaway from a nearby restaurant for herself and Naruto, knowing she would be too wound up to cook for them. Sakura wanted Naruto to stay the night and he happily agreed. She needed him close to her so she could at least keep him safe.

Naruto was asleep on the futon in her sunroom and she crept downstairs to make herself another cup of calming herbal tea when there was a quiet knock on her door. Sakura's heart leapt to her throat when she recognized the chakra signatures on the other side, but she opened it calmly to face a blood-splattered Itachi carrying an unconscious Sasuke on his back.

"You said you would take care of him."

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak just yet. She motioned him toward the sunroom, where he laid Sasuke down next to Naruto. Sakura thanked every god she knew that her best friend was a heavy sleeper, because seeing Itachi in full ANBU gear covered in blood was not a cheery sight to wake up to.

When they moved out of the room, she caught his arm, heedless of the gore. "What should I say to him?"

Itachi stared down at her hand. "When he's ready, tell him to find me."

"And when will he be ready?" Sakura gripped his arm fiercely, not letting go.

He gave her an empty smile and echoed her words back at her. "There's no real way of knowing."

Sakura nodded and dropped her hand. "He will recover, Itachi. I'll make sure of it."
He turned to leave and Sakura knew that the ANBU stationed near the Uchiha compound were probably close to discovering the massacre. Itachi stopped, considering, and then looked back at her seriously. "If you happen to meet a man named Danzo, do not trust him."

Sakura could only nod again and then like the ghost she had once compared him to, he was gone. She stared out into the cool night for a long moment and shut the door, walking to the sunroom to keep guard over her boys until they woke up to a different future than either of them had imagined.

As it turned out, Sakura didn't even have the chance to drink all of her cooling tea. Just a half hour after Itachi had left Sasuke in her care, ANBU was knocking on her door, much less politely than her previous guest.

She opened the door and peeked out, seeing an eerie cat mask staring back at her forebodingly. She recognized Yamato immediately, but did her best not to react. "Yes, ANBU-san? Can I help you?"

"Have you seen Uchiha Itachi tonight?"

Sakura had considered her options as she sat watch over the boys, deciding that lying with the truth was the ticket to not get sent to T&I for suspicious behavior or treason. "He was here about thirty minutes ago and left his brother with me."

She could see the eyes behind the mask widen. "Sasuke is alive?"

She affected a perplexed look. "Of course he is! Itachi would never let Sasuke get hurt."

Yamato was silent, probably thinking of the piles of dead bodies Itachi had left behind on his way out of the village. She tried not to look like she was thinking of the same thing.

"Did he say where he was going?"

Sakura shook her head. "Nope. He brought Sasuke here, said he needed to leave Konoha and then he was gone."

"Where is his brother now?"

She frowned at him. "He's sleeping, ANBU-san. If it's not necessary to wake him up, I'd prefer if you didn't."

"He needs to be questioned."

Sakura sighed and waved him inside, having kept him on the doorstep the entire time. She brought him to the sunroom, where the boys were still sleeping peacefully and tried to gently shake Sasuke awake. He rolled away from her grumpily and Sakura placed a firmer hand on his shoulder. "Sasuke. Wake up."

His eyes opened blearily and he blinked at her. "Sakura? W-what are you doing here?"

She smiled at him sadly. "I live here, Sasuke. Do you remember anything that happened tonight?"

While confused, he answered her easily enough. "I was talking to nii-san about our training today and I must have fallen asleep early. I don't know how I got here, though." Yamato shifted behind her and Sasuke's eyes became more alert when he finally noticed him. "What's going on, Sakura?"

She sat back on her heels, satisfied that Sasuke hadn't been unduly traumatized by Itachi's Mangekyo this time. He must have used a genjutsu that allowed Sasuke sleep through the entire
ordeal instead. She wondered what had forced this massive change from her original timeline, but it came up with only relatively shallow reasons. She never had a very clear idea of his original motivation to torture Sasuke in the first place, considering what his true mission was.

Sakura answered his question with a shrug, not admitting to more knowledge than she had to. "I'm not sure. Your brother brought you here to me and then left the village."

Yamato cut in. "The Uchiha Clan is dead to a man, thanks to Itachi. You are the only one left in Konoha now, Sasuke."

She winced. **Damn, way to break it to the kid, Yamato.**

Sasuke stared at both of them with wide eyes. "That can't be true! I just saw them today, my mother and my father … my cousins, they were all okay!" He pressed himself back against the wall by the futon, pointing an accusing finger at them. "You're lying! Nii-san would never, ever k-kill our family!" His voice had gotten consistently louder until he was yelling, which finally woke up Naruto. Sakura cut the blonde off with a shake of her head when he opened his mouth to sleepily ask a question. Thankfully, he just rubbed his eyes and stayed silent.

Yamato just stood there dispassionately. Sakura put a hand on Sasuke's knee comfortingly, only for him to jerk away. His eyes were filled with tears. "I don't believe you, I don't believe you, nii-san would never …" She crept up onto the futon herself and pulled him into a hug, which he resisted. She was firm and stronger and eventually he relented, crying into her sleep shirt.

Naruto moved closer to her back, confused, but wanting to help. Sakura looked behind her and mouthed "later" at him. She rubbed Sasuke's back as he sobbed and looked over his head at Yamato viciously. "Are you happy now, ANBU-san?"

"I have determined that he does not know anything more than could help."

She jerked her head toward the door. "Good, then get out." She would feel bad about being so mean to Yamato later, but now she had a terrified little boy to comfort. He left silently and soon Sasuke's sobs quieted as he fell into an exhausted sleep against her side, with one hand clutching onto her shirt. Naruto had uncharacteristically still throughout the entire process and she whispered to him when Sasuke's breaths evened out. "Sorry for shushing you earlier."

His blue eyes were scared. "What happened, Sakura-chan? Why is Sasuke here?"

She let out a tiny sigh and Sasuke whimpered as she moved, clutching her shirt tighter in his fist. She wondered how to word it and felt that with Naruto, it was probably best to be blunt. "Sasuke's brother killed his entire clan tonight and now he's gone."

"W-what? That's awful!"

Sakura nodded and grabbed his hand with her free one. "He only has us now, Naruto." She stared him down, willing him to understand the gravity of the situation. She hated to use his own abandonment against him. "You know what that's like."

"Sakura-chan …" He squeezed her hand so tightly she felt her bones creak. "He's still a jerk."

She smiled and nodded. "True and he's probably going to be more of a jerk for a while. But we'll make it through to the other side, because we're friends. Right?"

He nodded earnestly and she pulled him against her. "Go back to sleep for now, Naruto. Morning will be here soon enough."
Sakura stayed awake the rest of the night and into the early morning hours, forcing her mind into a meditative state whenever she got too restless. Dawn had come and gone when Naruto stirred again. It was a school day, but she wasn't planning on trying to force either of her boys to go if they didn't want to. Quietly, she asked him to deliver a message to Gai to explain her absence and she sent him on his way with a description of the man. "You can't miss him, Naruto. Just look for green spandex and rainbows."

While important, in truth she also wanted Naruto out of the house for when Sasuke would wake up again and realize that his horrible nightmare was not kept solely to dreams. He stirred against her side and rolled onto his back, opening his bloodshot eyes to slowly to look at her face. Sakura smiled at him uncertainly and he closed them quickly, taking several deep breaths. She could see the beginnings of a panic attack and laid her hand on the his hand on the his arm, channeling calming chakra into his pathways to help ease him. After several minutes, his heavy breathing subsided and she moved her hand away slowly.

"Sakura. Will you … I have to go see." He opened his eyes and stared at her beseechingly. "I have to know for sure."

"Whatever you need, Sasuke. I'll go with you."

Slowly they made their way out of the house and she pinned a simple note for Naruto on her front door. Sasuke clutched her wrist, wanting to hold onto something, and she let him set the pace toward the Uchiha Compound.

Even as they approached, she feel its emptiness within. Itachi had been as thorough as his reputation had claimed. She noted that there were at least two ANBU present, watching them enter, but they did nothing to intervene. Sasuke's grip became tighter and tighter as they walked through the deserted pathways around the houses. She could feel his fingers crack against her skin and realized that he had fractured his own hand with his desperate hold. Sakura didn't mention it, allowing him to walk in silence and making note to heal him later.

There were no bodies to be found, but there was still blood everywhere she looked. She could see it painted across the sides of buildings and the interior of rooms through open windows, there was even some on the leaves of the trees outside. Sasuke came to a stop outside one of the large houses, staring at it with a white face. He opened the door with a lost expression that tugged at her heart. She could see the desperate hope he was clinging to and hated that it would never be realized. They were greeted by an enormous bloodstain in the front room, easily seen from the entranceway. Sasuke let go of her wrist and dropped to his knees, body wracked with silent, heaving sobs. He bent forward until his head was touching the ground and wrapped his arms around his body protectively.

Sakura could only offer the comfort of her presence, hoping that eventually, it could be enough for him. She rubbed his back again as he cried himself out and then she coaxed him to his feet, pulling him out of the house.

"You can stay with me for now, Sasuke. Until you're ready." He didn't respond, just leaned heavily on her as they slowly walked back. She felt eyes on her back, but she ignored them easily, considering she wasn't even supposed to know they were there. She did it well enough for Naruto's erratically assigned guard, she could do it for Sasuke's as well.

Naruto was waiting for them on her front step, tapping his toes anxiously against the steps. He jumped up when he saw them. "Sakura-chan! I talked to that weird green man for you. He said something like," Naruto scrunched up his face, trying to remember the exact words, "'Sakura-chan
"That sounds like Gai-sensei, for sure. Why don't you boys come in and I'll make us all breakfast." She smiled encouragingly at Sasuke. "You'll have to help us eat all the tomatoes I bought at the market, Sasuke."

He looked at her blankly. Naruto made a disgusted face. "Ugh, I can't believe you eat those slimy things. They're so gross."

"Don't be an idiot, Naruto." His voice was quiet, hoarse from all his crying, but they were the first words he had spoken all morning. No matter what, Sasuke would never let a chance to insult Naruto go past. Thank god for universal constants.

"Hey!" Naruto followed them inside, babbling insults and idle chatter to Sasuke and Sakura respectively as she moved around the kitchen making food. Slowly, Sasuke's body let go of its lingering tension and she was relieved at Naruto's ability to talk his way through anything, be it tragedy or murderous psychopaths. No matter what, he was still her number one unpredictable ninja.

Chapter End Notes

I tried to save Itachi too, in a way. Save him from feeling the need to torture his baby brother.
A Letter Always Seemed To Me Like Immortality

Chapter Summary

Takes places over a series of weeks after the Chapter 19.

Chapter Notes

Gaara has always seemed to be a strangely formal and intelligent boy for his age, in spite of his apparent insanity. He became Kazekage, with all that entails politically and intellectually, at a very young age. This is what I have based his level of conversational correspondence upon.

Dear Gaara,

I'm sorry I couldn't take Yasu with me back to Konoha, but you know how older shinobi get, so paranoid about spies and leaking sensitive information! You can't see it, but I'm rolling my eyes.

I wish we could have talked more before I left after the Chunin Exams. I'm sure you're very interested to know that I was promoted, but my boys were not offered the same opportunity. I hold it over their head now as a way to get them to work harder. They're so easy to rile.

So! How are Kankuro and Temari? I saw your sister during the Exams and I'm glad that I never ended up having to fight her! She's a menace.

I hope your cactuses are thriving,

Your friend,

Sakura

Sakura,

As I understand it, spying and the protection of sensitive information is one of the standards by which shinobi operate, so I am not surprised by your village's response to Yasu. Nevertheless, I am sending him to you to deliver this message.

My siblings are alive and functioning. You have no need to fear Temari. I saw your skills during the third round and I know that you were holding back. I would like to fight you someday.

Your "boys" sound like they are a lot of trouble for little gain.

My cactuses are growing at an acceptable rate.

- Sabaku no Gaara
Dear Gaara,

I know I shouldn't have been surprised to see Yasu, but I was anyway. He's still as prickly as ever. Maybe I'll introduce him to his counterpart and send you a picture.

You saw that I was holding back? Interesting. My teammates were the only other ones who really noticed. I just figured there was no need to go all out and advertise myself if I could win with less than one hundred percent. The promotion wasn't really a big concern of mine, if I am completely honest. Though the bump in pay is nice! These boys will eat me out of house and home, I swear.

Speaking of them … I think it's like we talked about before, Gaara. Sometimes you have to deal with little annoyances to get those big feelings of happiness. They are the culmination of my happiness and I would put up with all the loud noises and constant healing of scrapes in the world for them.

Your siblings are just functioning? Tell me about them. I didn't get to learn much when I was there.

I'm sending Yasu with a second scroll that has a gift for you. I hope you like it!

Your friend,

_Sakura_

Sakura,

Someone once told me that it is good manners to offer thanks for a gift, so consider this a thank you. I don't know where you found a planter so hideous, but you must have put in considerable effort. I have planted my favorite species of succulent in it.

My siblings and I do not have a relationship like you do with your boys. We barely speak. Temari tries from time to time. They are afraid of me, much like the rest of Suna. Maybe they have reason. You're the only exception.

Kankuro is a puppeteer. He is always in his workshop with them. I have never been inside. You saw Temari fight so you know what she does.

Why enter the Chunin Exams if you didn't care about promotion?

-Sabaku no Gaara

Dear Gaara,

Enclosed is a picture I snapped of Yasu and Yasutomo. You see what I mean about being a big jerk? He was so grumpy at me the whole rest of the day after they met. What did I ever do wrong to deserve such an uncute pet?

You were right about that planter, I saw it and thought maybe you would find it amusing. I'm glad to see I was (possibly?) right. Naruto and Sasuke looked at me like I was crazy when I bought it! Clearly their sense of humor is not as sophisticated as mine.

I don't know why everyone is afraid of you, Gaara, but I can see based on everyone's reactions to you that you're not exaggerating. I have a fair idea of what you could possibly do with your sand
ability, but I haven't felt unsafe around you. Maybe you just need to cultivate that sense of safety with your siblings, like you do with your cactuses? Eventually they'll open up. Maybe Kankuro will even invite you to see his puppets!

I bet they're creepy, though. Maybe avoid the puppets after all.

Mostly, I entered the Chunin Exams because the boys wanted to and it's a team activity. They're very talented and will become very powerful. I'm not going to hold them back. Did I tell you that Naruto wants to be Hokage one day? He's very interested in making everyone acknowledge his existence. Sound like anyone you know?

Your friend,

Sakura

Sakura,

Thank you for the photo. I put it in my room near the ugly planter you sent. Yasu hissed when he saw it, which made me laugh. That doesn't happen often. Thank you for that as well. Your sense of humor is appreciated, sophisticated or not.

I am trying. I am trying to be a safer person, if a safe monster is possible. This scares Kankuro and Temari more. When you saw us having dinner, it was the first time we had been together for a meal in months. Maybe even more than a year. I want to feel what you do. Your concept of happiness is appealing, but it may be out of my reach.

I don't know if the puppets are creepy, but they do make an annoying clicking noise when in use.

-Sabaku no Gaara

Dear Gaara,

Sorry for the delay! I know Yasu was prowling around here for days looking for me, but I was on testing something dangerous and the process was delicate. I couldn't risk the contamination. Top secret stuff, but I promise I'll tell you if it all pans out.

I'm sending you my team photo, so you can get an idea of what the people I talk about most look like. Well, except Kakashi-sensei. You can at least get a good glance at his eye, anyway. Naruto is the blonde and Sasuke is the other boy, the one with the pouty face. He denies it, but we're onto him. I assume you remember what I look like!

I told them about our letters. Naruto said "hello" and Sasuke said his own approximation of "hello" as well. He's not a people person. Kakashi got a pained look on his face, but I know that just means he loves me.

People are wary of change, you know. When you drastically change a course of action like you're doing, you have to give others time to adjust. You also can't go back to previous behavior or they won't trust you in the future. It's a hard road to travel when all you've known is their fear of you.

I have faith you can persevere, Gaara.

Your friend,
Sakura,

Thank you for your team photo. I put it with the one of our cats. I think I see now what you mean about "culmination of your happiness". It is almost tangible in the photo.

Do I say hello back to your team? I am unfamiliar with this strange way of passing social niceties through third parties. If this is correct, then tell them greetings from Suna.

Your sensei is infamous in the shinobi world. Did you know? He is not treated the same way I am, despite his larger amount of kills. Why do you think this is?

I have kept up with my safety. I have not killed anyone outside of orders since before the Chunin Exams. Temari and Kankuro still fear me, but Temari made me a cup of tea when I came back to our quarters in this morning. Maybe you're right.

-Sabaku no Gaara

Dear Gaara,

Of course I'm right! That's pretty much one of my defining features. I am really, truly glad to hear that maybe your relationship is getting better with your siblings. Being completely alone is never better than having someone to share your life with. You're not a monster, Gaara. No matter what.

I conveyed your hellos to my team, as is proper. That means you need to tell Temari and Kankuro hello from me! Eventually I'll come back to Suna and con you all into dinner with me.

Kakashi-sensei has been a shinobi for a very long time, he's a genius you know. But he only ever kills when it's necessary and never Konoha shinobi unless they are irredeemable. So far, we haven't ever come across any of our own who fit that label. Whatever you've done, you're not either.

Your friend,

Sakura

Sakura,

I have conveyed your hellos to Temari and Kankuro, since you indicated that was the correct way to proceed. This made things very confusing. They both forgot to be afraid again in their curiosity of our correspondence. I showed them the planter and photos you sent.

Temari cried but she said she wasn't sad or hurt. Kankuro smiled at the ugly planter and insisted that we send something back to you. He said "we".

Enclosed you will find a gift for you, to repay your friendship.

I am a monster, Sakura, but I find myself feeling less and less alone.

-Sabaku no Gaara
Dear Gaara,

Wow, I don't even have words for what you guys sent! It was way too much, Gaara. I don't need anything to pay for my friendship, just knowing you is worth it to me.

Still, the boys really enjoyed all the Suna delicacies and I even saw Kakashi-sensei sneak some, so I think he's really warming up to the idea of friends from outside the village! You're making alliances all by yourself. I'm proud of you.

Temari was probably happy, you know. When someone cries, but they're not sad or hurt. It's just an overwhelming feeling of emotion that sometimes spills out the eyes. Happens to me all the time, but I might just be a giant crybaby. Who knows?

Your friend,

Sakura

Sakura,

I am happy to know you enjoyed the gift we sent. It is a strange feeling, like a bubble in my chest.

The choices were made by Temari. She has the best understanding of the world outside Suna. They wanted to see the letter you wrote back, but I did not want to share all of your words with them. Do you think this will negatively impact my relationship with them?

The succulent in the planter you sent is growing well.

-Sabaku no Gaara

Dear Gaara,

I think Temari and Kankuro will understand your need for privacy. Most people don't like to share their letters with others, so you're not alone in that. I'm glad that I could contribute to your happiness, Gaara. That's all I ever want for my friends.

Well, and perhaps for certain friends to stop dragging me out of the training grounds after dark. I mean, it's not like I'm about to get abducted or anything. It's just impossible to do everything I need to when there's only twenty-four hours in a day, you know? Naruto and Sasuke are so stubborn when it comes to my training and sleep schedule. It's like I acquired two extra mothers. And Kakashi-sensei stepping in when I least expect it!

Here's a question that has been on my mind for a while. Get ready, because it's serious.

Does Kankuro make up those designs on his face? Or does he have a guide?

Your friend,

Sakura

Sakura,

It is only fair that I share something important with you, now that you have helped me understand what could be important to me. Then I will answer your serious question and hope that you will
continue our correspondence.

This is a state secret that I am revealing, but you deserve to know. I am the jinchuriki of the Ichibi. It is the demon they see when they look at me and know fear.

Kankuro designs his own.

-Sabaku no Gaara

Dear Gaara,

The only monster is the one who improperly sealed the beast inside of you. Did you really think I would abandon you now? Sorry, buddy, you're stuck with me as a friend for life.

I'll tell you our own sort-of state secret, one that I have permission to share with you. Naruto is the Kyuubi's jinchuriki. Never once have I thought to be afraid of him. He was only made aware of his special tenant a year ago, same as us. It hasn't changed our team a bit. Naruto is Naruto.

Before, though. All he knew was that it seemed like the entire village hated him and no one would say why. Konoha isn't perfect. This is the reason he's so gung-ho about becoming Hokage. He wants to be acknowledged by everyone as a strong shinobi, someone who can protect himself and others.

So you're in good company, Gaara. You two should meet some day.

Your friend,

Sakura

P.S. Kankuro is talented! I can't even apply eyeliner in a straight line.

Dear Sakura,

Thank you.

Your friend,

Sabaku no Gaara
"Guys, we don't have to do this."

"Of course we do, Naruto! It's your birthday."

He shifted uneasily. "Yeah, but still. Can't we have dinner at home?" Sakura smiled at his word choice. She had forcibly moved the boys into her house after a single discussion with her parents on one of the rare occasions they had been home, just before they left again. She was convinced that they would retire soon, just so they could travel without mission parameters. It seemed as if they had eternal wanderlust.

"We could, but I know you love Ichiraku's ramen more than mine. Why are you so against going out?" She had her suspicions, but she wasn't going to voice them.

He rubbed the back of his head uncomfortably, looking at Kakashi and Sasuke waiting by the pathway into town for them. "I was born on the same day the Kyuubi attacked, Sakura-chan. People don't like to see someone celebrating on a day like today."

Her suspicions confirmed, she pulled him into a hug, which he accepted with confusion. "People are welcome to mourn their dead on this day, but we also have the right to celebrate our good fortune that you were born, Naruto."

His blue eyes were watery. "Sakura-chan …"

"Hey, are you two done gossiping like girls?" Sasuke was smirking at them, but it faded when Sakura slowly turned to him with a deadly look on her face.

She smiled sweetly at him. "What did you say, Sasuke-kun? I'm afraid I was so busy being a girl that I couldn't hear you."

Sasuke looked up at Kakashi for help, but the man waved his hands to ward him away. "Oh no, don't get me involved in this. You should know better." His eyes widened as Sakura approached him, daggers in her eyes. Without further consideration, Sasuke ran toward Ichiraku like there was a demon nipping at his heels. Sakura tore after him in hot pursuit.

Kakashi sighed and waited for Naruto to join him before they made their way to the stall in a more leisurely fashion. "Everything okay, Naruto?"

The boy smiled, though it was a little empty. "Everything is fine, Kakashi-sensei."

"Smile! You're about to eat your body weight in ramen and you don't even have to pay for it. I can't imagine a better birthday present for you, honestly." He pretended to think, hand on his chin.

"Yeah. It will be fun." Naruto didn't sound like he believed his own words. Kakashi considered his options and then grabbed him under the arms and lifted him onto his shoulders. "Kakashi-sensei, what-!"

"Special birthday privileges. Can you see your trouble-making teammates from way up there?"
Naruto's hand gripped his hair painfully at first, but it lessened as he relaxed a little. "I see that jerk getting his face beaten in by Sakura-chan!" He laughed and Kakashi felt his own tension abate at the sound. Naruto covered Kakashi's one open eye playfully and then snorted in entertainment when he didn't even stop walking. "Even I know better than to say stuff like that."

Kakashi was amused by his comment. "But do you know why?"

"Because then Sakura-chan will beat my face in!" He said it cheerfully, still watching Sakura pinch Sasuke's cheeks comically as they approached the stand themselves. She waved at them with her free hand and then let go of Sasuke, who rubbed at his abused face with a pout.

"Good enough for now, I guess. Sakura-chan will educate you further, I'm sure."

"Educate him on what, Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura sat next to Sasuke as he took the end seat. Kakashi plucked Naruto off his shoulders easily and placed him on the stool next to her and taking his own seat next to the birthday boy.

"Life, Sakura-chan. You seem to have a good handle on it." He smiled at her behind his mask and she stuck her tongue out at him, before calling to Ayame for their order. They all tucked into their bowls eagerly and then Sakura and Kakashi chatted while Naruto kept eating, with Sasuke offering his opinion when prodded.

"Hey, old man! Gimme a bowl of pork ramen, extra spicy!" An middle-aged civilian man fell onto the stool next to Kakashi, smelling strongly of sake. Sakura made a face, though she couldn't judge him. Years as Tsunade's apprentice had certainly cured her of the idea that there were specific times of day for drinking.

He leaned heavily on the counter for a moment, before blearily looking up at Kakashi and the kids next to him. His eyes widened when they landed on Naruto's bright hair and brighter clothes and Sakura immediately got a terrible feeling in her gut.

"Oi, demon brat. How can you show your face so easily today?" The man's own face was getting redder as he spoke angrily. Naruto froze in middle of slurping his noodles and then looked at him uneasily. "Yeah, you! This is all your fault!" He made clumsy motions at his whole body, indicating possibly his drunken state or maybe his drunken life.

"W-what? I don't know you …" Naruto trailed off uncertainly, while Sakura frowned at the man. Kakashi laid a hand on the civilian's shoulder, in an attempt to stop him from saying more, but he was shrugged off.

"Don't pretend like you don't know! They should have destroyed you when you were a baby! My Mitsuko … you killed her." He was unsteadily pointing at Naruto, but the anger and grief in his eyes were unsettling. Sakura didn't know what to do, unprepared for the man's vitriol.

Kakashi gripped the man's shoulder, harsh and deliberate. "It's time for you to go." He tossed him backwards without a second glance to where he landed, his concern only for the shaking boy sitting next to him.

Naruto looked at him with eyes bright with tears. "Why are they like this, Kakashi-sensei? What did I do? I never killed anyone!"

He sighed. "We should go back to Sakura-chan's house. This is not a conversation we want to have in public." Or at all, he thought. Kakashi looked at his oldest student, wondering if she wanted to share in this part, but she shook her head. It's better this way, if he's only mad at me for knowing.
Sakura slapped down money for their food and silently led the way home, with Kakashi lifting a scarily quiet Naruto on his back. The boy just buried his face into the back of his neck. Sasuke followed them, confused by the intense change in atmosphere.

Ensconced in Sakura's cozy sunroom, they all sat facing one another tensely. Kakashi dug through his memories, trying to figure out what to say and what to leave out. After he found out that Sakura knew of the Kyuubi, he had approached the Hokage to see what else he had told her. He was assured that Naruto's parentage was still a secret, but by this point, he knew better than to underestimate her knowledge.

Naruto had drawn his knees up and wrapped his arms around them and looked at his teacher. "You know why, Kakashi-sensei. You know why everyone is like this to me, all the time."

He let out a heavy breath. "Yes, Naruto. It is … a long story and technically there's a law against discussing it." Kakashi held up a hand to forestall the arguments that he could see brewing on his team's face. "Still, you deserve to know. You've always deserved to know. I'm sorry it took me this long to tell you."

Sakura slipped her arm through Naruto's tense one and Sasuke shifted minutely closer to him. He almost smiled, looking at them. They will get him through this. Sakura stared at him unblinkingly, urging him to get on with it.

"You know the basic history. Ten years ago on this day, the Kyuubi attacked Konoha and the Yondaime died to defeat it. What we're not supposed to mention is how he defeated it. He gave his life to seal the Kyuubi into a baby born that day." There was a short silence as what he said began to sink in.

Naruto eyes were wide and he began to shake again. "You mean I'm the demon?" Sasuke gave him a sharp glance and then leaned against him slightly.

Sakura cut in before Kakashi could say anything. "No! It sounds like he is saying that you are the one the Yondaime chose to help Konoha." She looked up at Kakashi, her fierce glare brooking no argument.

Kakashi didn't disagree. "He wanted you to be seen as a hero, Naruto. It was a secret because the Sandaime was afraid you would be in danger if it became known."

Sakura had real venom in her voice when she said, "So he just let Naruto be ostracized instead. What a great decision."

Kakashi felt the distant need to defend the decision of his superior. "It was the best he could do at the time, Sakura-chan."

She muttered to herself, "That remains to be seen," but didn't say anything else. She squeezed Naruto's arm, trying to project support and comfort.

"How can I have Kyuubi sealed in me and not know? Maybe you're wrong, maybe it didn't work." Naruto was desperately grasping at anything that would make this life-changing information not apply to him.

"It was confirmed by a sealing expert after everything was done." After Minato-sensei was dead, after Kushina-san was dead.

The tears that had been threatening since Ichiraku burst free and Naruto's shoulders shook as he brought his hands to his face to cry silently. Kakashi was unsure of what to do in the face of his
student's uncharacteristic grief, so different from his loud exuberant self. Sakura murmured nonsense to him as she rubbed his back and Sasuke looked as awkward as Kakashi felt, though he poked at Naruto's side to get him to look up.

Sasuke looked at his friend's tear-stained face seriously. "All this means is that you've been crap at training, idiot."

Naruto sniffled. "W-what?"

Sasuke shrugged. "All the extra chakra you must have from that thing and Sakura and I still beat you most of the time."

Naruto gaped at him and then astonishingly, he began to laugh. It was harsh and hiccupping from his leftover sobs, but it was a genuine sound of amusement. Sasuke looked immensely pleased with himself and Kakashi was so proud of his taciturn student. Glancing at Sakura's shining eyes, he could tell she felt the same way, like a tiny little mother hen.

Naruto shoved Sasuke a little. "You're still a jerk." He looked at the rest of them. "So what now? I still don't get how I have this, this thing and not know about it."

Sakura's eyes brighten and her whole demeanor straightened. The boys stared at her in fear as a devious grin grew across her face. "This sounds like it calls for more training and research!" She rubbed her hands together. "This ought to be fun."

The next day, Naruto was face down on the training grounds with Sakura standing over him with her hands on her hips. He whined at her through a mouthful of rocks and earth. "Sakura-chaaaaan. You're gonna kill me!"

"Don't be such a crybaby. It's not becoming of our future Hokage." Behind her, Sasuke snorted in amusement and then was immediately punished for his inattention by Kakashi solidly hitting him in the solar plexus. He wheezed and fell back a few steps, before narrowing his eyes and focusing on the spar once more.

Naruto turned his head and squinted at her. "You really think I can? Even with … everything?"

"I have no doubt you'll be the best Hokage that Konoha has ever seen. If you do what I tell you."

This time it was Kakashi that muttered behind her. "That sounds familiar." He raised his voice to carry. "Sakura-chan, when were you promoted to leader of this team?"

She didn't bother to turn around. "I've always been the leader, Kakashi-sensei. You're just here as a decoy."

"Ouch, my self-worth."

Sakura ignored him and prodded at Naruto with her foot. "Up, up! You have more chakra and stamina than all of us put together! No excuses now, Naruto-kun."

Naruto grumbled into the ground.

"What was that?"

"I love your training schedules, Sakura-chan."
"That's what I thought." She watched him slowly pick himself off the ground and smiled to herself. "You're going to be great, Naruto. And one day, everyone will see that."

Chapter End Notes

I've always found Sarutobi's law about Naruto's parentage and status to be incredibly unrealistic. Ninja and civilian adults alike knew that Naruto was a jinchuriki and somehow he was only ever told on purpose by a malicious traitor when he was twelve? Yeah, right. Honestly, I think it would have been much sooner than even when I've portrayed it, but for the purposes of this story that's when it happened.
"Iron Country? That's a far away mission for a genin team, Hokage-sama."

Tsunade gave Kakashi an highly unimpressed look. "I seem to remember encountering Team 7 in Lightning a few months ago. Is that not just as far?"

"Those were special circumstances, Hokage-sama." He didn't flinch at her glare, but she noticed his orange book was nowhere in sight.

She sighed. "It's not a particularly difficult mission for genin." She reconsidered. "It's not a particularly difficult mission for your genin. It's still C-Rank, despite the lengthy travel required. A simple robbery investigation."

Kakashi's single evident eyebrow rose in disbelief. "Why can't their local police force deal with it?"

Tsunade shuffled the papers around casually. "The item that was stolen is too dangerous for civilians to handle and you know Iron does not have an active shinobi village to turn to."

Kakashi snorted. "I've been to Iron, Tsunade-sama. Their samurai are more than equipped to handle threats, despite lack of shinobi arts. Their neutrality in our affairs, if you'll forgive the pun, is ironclad. What is this mission really about?"

Tsunade rubbed her forehead, wishing Shizune hadn't stolen her last stash of sake from Rice Country that Sakura had "found" for her. She was really starting to like that girl, despite their ignominious meeting.

"Mifune himself has specifically requested a team from Konoha deal with this issue. He insists it's necessary, which makes me believe that the item stolen is shinobi in origin and that he was unaware of its existence. He's trying to protect their policy of non-interference."

"Then why us? Why not an older, experienced team, just in case?"

"I would never want to send my people into danger uselessly, but I also can't afford to make Iron nervous about multiple high level jonin scouring their countryside either. Your team is a compromise, though less of one than Mifune knows." She smirked at him as he nodded in understanding; Team 7 was only genin level on paper. They have already utilized their somewhat harmless appearances to their advantage in past missions.

He shrugged at her and took the mission scroll. "I hope you're making the right choice, Hokage-sama, sending my cute genin into a neutral country. They might just end up accidentally conquering it."

Kakashi left out the window, an annoying habit she hadn't yet been able to break him of. Tsunade muttered to herself in despair. "That probably wasn't even a joke."
rather, he thought, they're in the training ground. He squatted down between them, where they were stuck in the earth up to their necks looking like macabre bushes. "Should I even ask?"

Sasuke and Naruto were refusing to look at each other and him, with Sasuke's trademark pout threatening to overtake his face. Naruto was looking annoyed and amused at the same time, so Kakashi made some well-placed assumptions. "Sasuke did this accidentally, huh?"

Naruto's head whipped around toward him and his eager grin was full of teeth. "Hah! He was tryin' to do one of those doton jutsus you and Sakura-chan use, but he wanted to test it on me first. Like I was gonna just let him do that!"

"And how did you two end up like this?" Kakashi poked them both in the head.

Naruto's blue eyes were wide and seemingly innocent. "I may have interrupted his hand seals with a floating exploding tag. May have."

Their teacher just sighed and started digging them out, using his own doton to force the earth to release them. Sasuke was still pouting, though more of his attention was spent on watching Kakashi form the seals with red eyes. He shook his head at the boy. "You might want to perfect the one you just used before you go stealing more from me."

Sasuke stared at him incredulously, pout forgotten. "Really? A lecture on stealing jutsu from the Copy Nin?"

Kakashi stared up at the sky in a mute plea for patience and guidance. Minato-sensei, I'm sorry for all the trouble I caused you. "You've been spending too much time with Sakura-chan, Sasuke. She's been a bad influence."

Sasuke just snorted and brushed dirt off his clothes. Naruto did the same, though he was not nearly as successful. "So what's goin' on, Kakashi-sensei? I didn't expect to see you for hours and hours today!"

"Tsunade-sama has given us a mission. We're to leave as soon as we're done packing." He looked around. "Where's Sakura-chan, anyway?"

Naruto grinned and Sasuke's face affected a blank look that meant he was trying very hard not to look annoyed. "It's Thursday!"

He nodded. "Ah, shogi. Shall we go fetch her, boys?"

They arrived at Nara Compound within no time and were about to knock on the door when they heard a low yell from around the back of the house. Naruto and Sasuke took off toward the sound without a second thought and Kakashi just followed them leisurely. He had a pretty good idea of what they would find.

Indeed, when he rounded the side of the house he saw Shikamaru sprawled face down in the dirt and Sakura sitting on the porch steps with a grin on her face. Kakashi could see Shikaku trying to hide his own grin behind his bowl of sake, eying his son with amusement.

Naruto and Sasuke had skidded to a stop, taking in the scene. "Sakura-chan! Are you okay?"

She raised a single eyebrow at them. "Do you really think I'm in danger from Shikamaru, boys?"

There was a muffled sound from the ground. She ignored it. "Well?"
Naruto puffed up his chest. "Of course not, Sakura-chan! But we're allowed to be worried anyways. You always say that about us!" Sasuke agreed with a grunt and folded his arms grumpily.

Sakura sighed. "Fine, fine. But as you can see, Shikamaru is the one who deserves all your concern." She called out to the prone form on the ground. "Isn't that right? You boys have to stick together, yes?"

Kakashi winced. Sakura did not tolerate her abilities being maligned in general, but if the boy had implied she was somehow lesser because she was a girl … Well. Kakashi thought he was fortunate that he was still conscious. Naruto hefted Shikamaru up to his feet and he rubbed at his reddened cheek with a frown. "I didn't mean it in a bad way, Sakura."

She didn't look convinced. "Think of this experience as a reminder to consider your words carefully. Free career advice."

The children continued with their pointed squabble while Kakashi joined Shikaku on the porch and looked at him curiously. "You just let Sakura beat on your son right in front of you?"

The man took a sip of his sake and smirked at him. "She does it often enough that it's not a surprise anymore. And never without good reason." He sighed wistfully. "She reminds me of my Yoshino-chan when we were younger." Kakashi felt his insides freeze. His cute little genin team were still only children, he didn't want to think about what they would be as hormonal teenagers. He eyed the group of them with trepidation, inwardly cursing Shikaku for forcing him to imagine his future hell.

In a weak voice, he said, "A little soon for that, isn't it?"

Shikaku was still amused, damn the man. "Shikamaru has been nursing a crush on your girl for two years now with no signs of it abating. She might be interested one day."

He suddenly felt the need to leave immediately, away from this scheming man and his son who wanted to steal away one of his team. Thankfully, he had a very good excuse. "Sakura-chan! We have a mission. Let's head out."

She stopped in the middle of her conversation-argument with Shikamaru and gave him a sharp salute. "Aye-aye, sir." She patted the boy's bruised cheek with a glowing green hand and the mark soon faded to nothing. "Next time, I won't be so gentle."

Kakashi quickly ushered her and the boys out of the backyard, Shikaku's laughter following him like a phantom.

"Iron Country? That's pretty far away, Kakashi-sensei." He caught Sakura's brief frown as they picked their way through the trees.

Naruto also looked confused. "Aren't they neutral? Why are we going there?"

Sasuke grunted from Sakura's other side. "The better question is why are we going there?"

Kakashi sighed. It was actually very exhausting for him to deal with such smart children. None of his usual tricks worked on them, which made him work so much harder. He had sacrificed so much of his Icha Icha time to keep them out of mischief.
"Konoha was requested by the leader of Iron Country himself. We are going to be investigating a robbery." They traveled in silence for a short time, his team digesting the information and he braced himself for the litany of questions he knew would follow. It was nearly time to find a place to make camp for the night and he hoped they would wait until they had settled.

Amazingly, his prayers were answered, as he signaled for them to stop in a good area. They immediately fell into their usual tasks, with Sasuke gathering wood and creating a campfire, Naruto setting the perimeter traps and Sakura setting up their tent.

In the beginning of their official tenure as a team, he had brought three separate tents for himself, Sakura and the boys, respectively. She had taken one look at them and scoffed at him. "Why separate our forces? It's easier to plant a defense seal on just one tent, Kakashi-sensei."

His meager excuses of propriety had not impressed or swayed her and he had marveled again how unlike she was from the only other younger girl he had really known. When he was younger, he had never questioned the fact that Rin and Minato had their own tents on their missions, sure in his knowledge that he could protect himself and that his sensei could protect everyone. And that had turned out so well, hadn't it?

It wasn't until they were all sitting around the fire chewing on their rations that his students decided that it was high time he inform them of what he knew. Naruto looked ready to explode from curiosity. "Kakashi-sensei! You haven't told us anything about our mission! What gives?"

"We're going to Iron Country to investigate a robbery." He repeated his earlier words, mostly to annoy them. It worked on Naruto and Sasuke, who had identical mulish pouts on their faces. Sakura just laughed at him.

"What was stolen?"

He scratched at his cheek over the mask. "The mission parameters don't actually state that. We're to meet with the leader of Iron Country to get specifics. He gave us very little information."

Sakura stared at him in disbelief. "Tsunade-sama sent us out to a relatively unknown region without so much as asking Mifune-sama for, I don't know, an actual mission request?"

Kakashi was startled by her use of the name. "How do you know-?"

Sasuke huffed. "One day you'll stop being surprised by what she knows, Kakashi-sensei." He gave her a surprisingly fond glance. "Sakura's right, though. This sounds like a trap. Why do they even want us there in first place?"

"Tsunade-sama believes that the item is of shinobi origin. Mifune-sama would not want to involve his samurai any more than they already are."

Naruto had quickly consumed his rations and looked longingly at the food Kakashi hadn't finished. He handed it to his student without a word and Naruto smiled at him gratefully. Eating for two? Now that gives me terrible images.

Sakura looked thoughtful. "So we're her way of fulfilling the mission, but not in a politically threatening way. We're harmless." She smirked happily and after a moment, the boys had caught on, grinning. "Or at least, that's what they're going to think." She stretched her arms over her head and then stared at Kakashi critically. "How are we going to explain you?"

"Respectfully? Because you are my obedient little genin team?"
"You kind of ruin our whole 'shinobi wouldn't hurt a fly' routine. You're infamous, Kakashi-sensei."

He whined, unbecoming of a man of his age and status. "Don't you mean famous, Sakura-chan?"

She poked at the fire with a stick and looked at him blankly. "No. But maybe they will not have heard of you, since they're so removed from shinobi affairs." Sasuke snorted in derision next to her. "Yeah, I know. Long shot. We'll just have to make do with what we're given."

"Now that you're done undermining me and my whole career, we should sleep. We'll hit the border of Iron Country tomorrow and take a train to the capital, where we'll meet Mifune-sama. Watch shifts in the usual order. Shoo." He waved them off toward the tent, where Sakura watched the boys step in first and then activated the protective seal on the front flap.

The night passed quickly, with no major incidences. Kakashi didn't think that there would be any, but he hadn't been truly relaxed since they left Konoha. In the morning they broke camp and made for a small border town to catch their train.

Once aboard, he ordered the team to change. "It will be much colder there than Fire. I'm sure Sakura-chan packed half of her house into her sealing scroll, so she should have your warmer clothing."

Sakura grinned at him unrepentantly. "You know me so well, Kakashi-sensei." She shoved a bundle of cloth first at Naruto and then Sasuke and busied herself with her own clothing. To all of their surprise, she took the senbon out of her hair and shook it out of her usual tight bun, the pink waves reaching half-way down her back. "What? I need to look as useless as possible." Sakura looked up at Kakashi with an alarmingly accurate guileless look, her green eyes big and sad. "Does it work? Will I pass?"

He made a face behind his mask. "I'm sure it will work on anyone who doesn't know you, Sakura-chan. Otherwise, it's just disturbing." The boys smirked as they wrapped their cloaks around themselves and then yelped as she thumped them both over the head.

Kakashi presented their traffic passes and mission statement to the samurai guarding the capital building, his team standing behind him like the tractable students he knew they were not. At least their acting has gotten better.

The guard squinted at the scroll in the dying light of day and nodded gruffly at the other guards, allowing them to pass. Kakashi slouched forward, intent on projecting his usual lazy air while the children huddled together and followed closely behind him. He came to a stop as a long-haired older man strode up to them confidently. "You must be the Hokage's team. Welcome to Iron Country. I am General Mifune."

Kakashi bowed to him. "Greetings from Konoha, Mifune-sama. We are Team 7, here to assist with your request."

The man stared at them with keen eyes, but no outward expression. "Indeed. Let us adjourn for tea so that I may explain why you are here." They were shown into a side room, where a plain middle-aged woman was already waiting to prepare and serve the tea. Sakura eyed the beautiful black silk of her kimono as she placed the their cups in front of them efficiently and smiled at the woman, while the boys and Kakashi were focused on Mifune in silence. The woman's eyes met the
general's and he nodded slightly at her and she withdrew out the same door they had entered.

Mifune sipped at his tea, seemingly at ease with their situation. Kakashi could tell that Naruto was going to get antsy very soon if their discussion did not begin soon.

Sakura demurely held her tea in two bandaged hands, taking a delicate sip. "Your wife makes excellent tea, Mifune-sama." Kakashi was tempted to scream. While he was well able to look underneath the underneath as befits a shinobi, he hated social niceties and political bargaining. He wasn't sure how long it would take to get to the information they needed. *Is she guessing about that woman? I didn't know he was married.*

Mifune looked at her directly. "Yes. Sachiko is a talented woman. I am fortunate that she chose me."

Sakura smiled at him. "I'm sure she feels the same about you." The man narrowed his eyes at her, his face slightly twitching to a questioning expression before dismissing the thought.

He looked at Kakashi. "You know that we are neutral. Your appearance here is unorthodox."

He nodded. "Konoha is honored by your trust in us."

Mifune looked at him evenly. "Do not take it lightly. The item you are to find is from Fire Country originally. I dislike acknowledging that I was unaware of its existence until it was stolen. *Tsunade-sama was right. Maybe this won't be too dangerous after all.*"

"Who was the owner?"

"Technically, no one. The curator of our capital's historical museum claims to have received it mixed in with a shipment of other Iron Country artifacts last month. He was in the process of establishing provenance when it disappeared."

Kakashi raised an eyebrow. "Disappeared? There were no signs of a break in?"

"None. Before you ask, the curator has been cleared as a suspect."

"We will still need to speak with him. Especially if he is the only one who seems to know more about what this artifact is and what it can do." His team was suspiciously silent. When Mifune picked his tea up again, Kakashi chanced a look at them. Naruto and Sasuke were both doing their own versions of polite interest, staring unwaveringly at Mifune while Sakura's eyes were wandering around the entire perimeter of the room.

"That is acceptable. I will bring you to him."

He felt the need to protest. "Mifune-sama, that is unnecessary. I'm sure we can find our way there. You don't need to trouble yourself."

"Nonsense. I want this matter settled as quickly as possible." Kakashi heard the unspoken implication. *You want us gone too. Fair enough.* "The artifact was taken five days ago. There are no suspects outside the curator, who had an alibi that many people can substantiate. The room it was previous stored has not been touched." He stood smoothly, belying his age. "I will take you to the museum now."
Mifune led them through a maze of corridors in the capital building, ending up in a shared courtyard. He nodded at everyone as he passed and the citizens gave Kakashi and his team wide-eyed looks, noting their hitai-ates. After many more doors and corridors, they stood in front of a small middle-aged man with glasses, who twisted his hands together nervously. Habit or circumstance?

"Mifune-dono! How can I help you?" He glanced at Team 7 curiously.

Mifune motioned between them. "This is Ito Hajime." Kakashi nodded his head to him and saw his team do the same. Mifune turned back to Ito. "They are from Konoha. You are to assist them with whatever they need to find the artifact that was stolen from the museum."

Ito bowed shakily. "Of course, Mifune-dono." Without further ceremony, Mifune left them to their own devices, his booted feet clicking quietly in the tiled hallway.

Ito watched him leave for a moment and then clapped his hands together cheerfully, clearly more relaxed now that Mifune was gone. "So! Let's get started, shall we? What can I do for you?" He frowned and then said, "But first, what do I call you?"

Kakashi was suspicious of his change in demeanor, but answered readily. "I'm Hatake Kakashi and these are my students, Naruto, Sasuke and Sakura."


Kakashi could see Sakura resist the urge to roll her eyes and wanted to sigh. "I'm not sure what you mean, Ito-san."

Ito leaned forward into Kakashi's personal space and whispered to him loudly. "If I can tell you a secret? I have a big interest in shinobi history in addition to our own samurai archives. It's not quite the thing here in Iron Country, you understand. But your adventurous exploits have reached even here!"

"I'm sure the students of such an esteemed shinobi are just as impressed by your prowess!" Ito had turned to the three children and Sasuke stepped on Naruto's foot, breaking him out of his daydreams.

"Huh? Yeah, we're thrilled." The man beamed at them and Kakashi could feel a headache coming on.

"Ito-san, if we could-?"

He was cut off by the man's flapping hands. "Oh, of course, of course! I'm sure you want to get right down to business! Let me take you to the processing room that I have for new artifacts." Ito led them to another featureless door and he unlocked it with a flourish. "Welcome to my home away from home!"

The boys' interest was immediately taken by the imposing mannequin in the corner dressed entirely in ceremonial court armor, though they did not move away from the group. Kakashi took the lead in questioning. "So, Ito-san, please tell us the history of the artifact as you know. Perhaps, also, what it was? We've been referring to it rather vaguely since being assigned this mission."
"Right, right." Ito leaned against the large sorting table that dominated the room. "Last week I received an expected shipment of pieces found at a dig site up north, close to the border of Taki. In addition to the usual shards and armaments, there was also a perfectly preserved oil lamp, gilded in gold and beautifully designed, marked by Fire Country's symbols. It was clearly dug up from the same area."

"An oil lamp." Kakashi said it flatly, almost not believing what he was hearing. _Mifune really sent for a team of shinobi to recover an oil lamp?_

Ito seemed not to notice his lack of enthusiasm. "Oh yes! It was a beautiful piece, the engravings were quite stunning. It was in an older language that I am relatively unfamiliar with, though I could see that it was some sort of poetry or verse. I didn't get to examine it as well as I would have liked before it was taken."

Sakura had finished her perusal of the room. "Who has access to this room, Ito-san?"

The man looked thoughtful. "Other than me, only my two assistant curators have the keycode, but they haven't been here for days."

The boys turned their attention to the man as well and Naruto decided he had enough of being quiet. "Why?"

Ito grinned at him. "They just got married! To each other, I mean. They're on a wedding trip up at the same dig site I mentioned."

Sasuke looked at the man oddly. "A wedding trip to a giant hole in the ground?"

The man shrugged. "It might seem a bit odd to outsiders, sure, but they are passionate about conserving history. I'll have a hard time choosing between them as my successor in the future."

Kakashi felt the need to move the conversation along. "So no one but you had access to this room at the time of the robbery?"

"Nope!" Ito looked entirely too cheerful at the idea that he had handed them no information whatsoever.

Sakura looked how Kakashi felt. "Ito-san, could you please gather all your security guards for us to question? We will wait here for you."

He nodded and adjusted his glasses. "Right! Be back soon!" He left swiftly, whistling on his way out the door.

They all looked at each other and sighed. Naruto sat down on the floor and Sasuke just stared up at the ceiling. "An oil lamp, Kakashi-sensei? I feel like there's some sort of cosmic joke being played on us right now."

Sakura just stared after Ito with disbelief. "Remind me to poison Tsunade-sama's sake when we get home."

Kakashi sighed. "No assassinations until you're at least a jonin, Sakura-chan. Especially not in our own village."
After Kakashi questioned the fourth security guard and came up with absolutely nothing of value, he was starting to think this was going to be the first C-Rank mission that he had ever failed.

"Kakashi-sensei, can I make a suggestions?" Sakura looked at him curiously.

He waved his hand at her magnanimously. "I don't think I've ever heard you ask such a thing, Sakura-chan. Normally you're all commands and bossiness."

She made a face at him and the boys laughed at her expense. "Shush. I'm still trying to work under the whole harmless little girl façade." She leaned against the wooden table of the conference room Ito had secured for them. "Why not summon Pakkun? He could at least scent the processing room and tell us if there was anyone in there who shouldn't be?"

Kakashi's brain halted and then restarted sluggishly. *Why didn't I think of that?* He chalked it up to having to tip-toe around the all the security guards' personal enmity of shinobi. One of them had actually snarled at Sakura, thinking she was the weakest and most vulnerable in the room. Naruto and Sasuke had immediately jumped to her defense and she kept her head down as if scared. Kakashi could tell the shaking of her body was due to repressing her laughter than any sense of fear.

"Ah," he said tiredly. "Good idea, Sakura-chan." He formed the seals and drew the required blood, aware that Sasuke was watching him with red eyes again. "Do not try this, Sasuke-kun. Remember what Sakura-chan said about summoning without a contract."

Sasuke's eyes faded to black and he sat back in his chair frowning. "I just wanted to see it. For future reference." Sakura gave him a venomous look and he hastened to add. "Supervised by you, Kakashi-sensei." Naruto poked his side with a grin and mouthed something insulting at him, which resulted in a tussle that ended as soon as Pakkun appeared.

"Yo."

They brought him back to the processing room, where Ito was carefully brushing off what looked to be a large clump of dirt sitting on a mesh screened part of the table. He was surprised by their entrance. Kakashi was not surprised by the fact that the door was left unlocked.

"Ito-san, Pakkun is just here to gather scent information. Please feel free to go back to your work." The man's eyes were nearly as bugged out as Pakkun's when he looked at the little dog.

"You have ninkei! Oh, I had heard of summoned animals, but I've never seen them before in real life!" Ito's face was suffused with pleasure and Pakkun preened a little as he sniffed around the room. Sakura rolled her eyes and then patted her hair self-consciously and Kakashi had to turn his laugh into a muffled cough.

Ito stood stock still as Pakkun sniffed his pant leg and then trotted over to Kakashi. "There are two more obvious scents in here, but they're older. Spend a lot of time here though, for it to permeate like they did."

Naruto piped up. "Probably the weirdoes who went to go see dirt on their honeymoon." Sakura poked his side sharply in admonishment, though they could all see her mouth curled up in amusement.

Pakkun eyed him dubiously. "Sure, kid. Anyway, there's one other scent that was here within the last week that's not him." He pointed a paw at Ito, who squeaked.

"Just one?"
"I just said so, didn't I?"

Sakura cooed at him. "Aw, is someone grumpy today, Pakkun-chan?" He stared at her balefully, but she scratched behind his ears and apparently all was forgiven.

Kakashi stood. "We'll go check out the security guards we questioned, just to eliminate them from our list." The men were all still waiting in the second conference room where they had left them and Pakkun walked around them, sniffing at their ankles as they looked on disdainfully.

"Cleared." Kakashi let them out of the room with a falsely cheerful voice, thanking them for their time and patience and looked down at Pakkun, knowing he had something to say.

"The third man, the one with the ugly moustache. It wasn't him, but it was definitely someone he knows. The scents are very familiar."

"Family? Spouse?"

Pakkun put his paw up in the air in his approximation of a doggy shrug. "Likely as anything else. He's the one to watch."

Kakashi went over their plan at the inn and the boys were highly upset about the whole thing. Naruto was the first to whine at him with Sasuke sitting next to him with crossed arms and a frown. "Why are we the decoys? Why can't Sakura-chan be the decoy for once?"

She raised an eyebrow at them. "For once? Need I remind you what happened in Hitoyoshi, with the birds? Or maybe Esashi, when I had to henge into a geisha and was dragged back to an okiya by an actual geisha?"

Naruto quieted, momentarily forgetting his own annoyance. Kakashi took advantage of his silence. "Naruto, you will create two clones and henge them into Sakura-chan and I and enjoy a lovely dinner together as a team. We will find our target and see if Pakkun's nose was right."

They reluctantly did as he ordered and he sent them down to the inn's dining room, with instructions to have a long, conversation filled meal. It would put more strain on Naruto, but Sakura had been beating training into him and his clones for months now that his jinchuriki status was an open secret to them. He was capable. Kakashi was more worried about Sasuke's ability to hold a believable conversation for longer than five minutes.

He turned to Sakura, who had put her hair back up in its usual bun and senbon. "Why don't you just cut it?"

She shrugged, looking slightly sad. "I can't explain it. It just doesn't seem like the right time yet, sensei. I've minimized the danger it could put me, since it's so long." Kakashi wanted to tell her that it had been curiosity, not a condemnation of her choices. He wasn't sure what put that occasional grief in her eyes. Nothing in her file or her history indicated trauma or loss, but that look - it was the same one he saw in the mirror. But now was not the right time to ask. He wasn't sure if there was a right time to ask.

He tapped her hitai-ate affectionately, as was his habit and she smiled brightly at him. "We'll go under cover of genjutsu. Do you have enough chakra to maintain it for our surveillance?"

Her smile became secretive, but she just agreed. "Yes, don't worry about me."
"You know, every time you say that, I can feel another ulcer forming." They each formed hand seals to weave their genjutsu over themselves and then slowly crept out the door and down the stairs, taking note of Naruto, Sasuke and his disguised clones having a lively chat about the benefits of ramen.

He sighed internally. At least no knows us enough to realize how absurd it sounds to hear Sakura-chan agree with Naruto on ramen cooking techniques.

Slowly they made their way to the house where their target lived, as indicated by Ito's personnel files. After taking stock of the exit points, they decided on waiting out in the slim alleyway between his house and the neighbor's fence. They sat in silence for the next four hours in the blistering cold, watching the man through a window as he read and then made food for himself, getting some of it trapped in his truly hideous moustache. Eventually, he turned off his lights and went to bed without a single sign of another person in the house.

Kakashi nudged Sakura and they silently shook out their aching muscles, releasing their genjutsu in another alley away from potential watchers. He stared up at the stars. "Well, that was a bust."

Sakura shivered violently, flexing her fingers in an attempt to warm them. "Can Pakkun make distinctions between those who share blood and those who are similar in scent because they live together?"

"It's not usually a problem for him. Even I can tell when someone is similar in scent because they live together."

She grinned at him. "Are you part ninken, Kakashi-sensei? Do you have sharp teeth like they do under that mask of yours?" She knew that he did, actually, but couldn't help teasing him. His exceedingly keen senses were always something of a mystery to her, since she didn't know much about his family history.

"Maybe I do, but you'll never know. You and your little teammates can keep on guessing all the horrible things I might be hiding."

Sakura waved a hand casually. "Pft, we're done with that game, Kakashi-sensei. We're older now and wiser. We've matured."

"Right." He sounded entirely unconvinced.

"Besides, I'm pretty sure the only thing you're hiding is an atrocious tan line."

She entered the inn ahead of him, grinning at the annoyed sound he made at her back. Naruto and Sasuke were nowhere to be found in the dining area, so they went back to the room to look. Before she opened the door, Kakashi stopped her. "There are three chakra signatures in there."

"Not a clone?"

"Doesn't feel like Naruto at all, but he and Sasuke are in there with it. Low, civilian level."

She looked at him in askance. "What do you want to do?"

"I'll go in first, just in case. Can you cast another genjutsu on yourself after our surveillance?"

"Got it." With a few quick seals, she made herself unnoticeable, blending into the background. Kakashi turned the doorknob, ready to see what trouble his students had gotten into this time. He did not expect the first thing for him to see was a man tied to their room's only chair, blind-folded
and gagged with a suspiciously ugly oil lamp on the room's only table.

Sasuke was keeping watch while Naruto snored on one of the beds, dead to the world. He greeted Kakashi with a smirk and then threw a kunai at Naruto's head, (hopefully) intentionally missing him by inches. It was enough to wake him up in a panic. "Huh? W-what? What's going on?"

Sakura had followed Kakashi in and taking in the scene, canceled her genjutsu. Naruto fell off the bed as he saw her appear as if from nowhere and whined when he landed heavily on the hard wooden floor.

The man in the chair struggled against his bonds weakly. Kakashi and Sakura stood next to each other in silence, waiting for an explanation. Naruto popped up from the side of the bed and grinned toothily at them.

"Looks like you guys were the decoys after all! We caught this guy tryin' to sneak into our room with that thing." He pointed at the lamp and then shrugged. "He said he was gonna wait around for you to come back, but Sasuke tied him to the chair anyway. He kinda looks like that one security guard from before."

"I … see."

"I can't believe we wasted four hours of our life in an alleyway." Sakura echoed his own thoughts. She inclined her head toward the man. "Shall we get on with it?"

"Might as well." Sasuke took the blindfold and gag off the man. He blinked fiercely in the low lighting of their room and stared fearfully up at Kakashi, the most obviously imposing one in the room.

"P-please don't kill me! I was going to return it eventually!"

Kakashi didn't blink, but leaned forward slightly. "You stole an oil lamp. We're not likely to kill anyone for that."

The man shrank down in his chair. "I know what you shinobi are like! But I-I promise, I just wanted to see if I could use the lamp!"

Sakura was bemused. "Do you not have electricity in your house?"

He was thrown by her comment. "W-what?" She looked at him expectantly. "That lamp is supposed to have a djinn! It says so on the engravings!"

The room was silent for a long moment, but like the professional he was, Kakashi was not long deterred. "The djinn are legends, not real creatures. What made you think you would actually find one?"

The man scoffed at him, his certainty at the djinn's existence overriding his fear momentarily. "I have seen the things you people can do. Why would a djinn be out of your reach?"

Sakura muttered to herself. "Can't really argue with that." Kakashi sent her a warning glance as the man looked at him smugly, clearly having heard. She shrugged and went over to inspect the lamp. Not sensing anything amiss, she picked it up with both hands. At her touch, it emitted a high pitched whining sound that made Naruto and Kakashi blanch and started shaking violently. Sakura hurriedly put it back down on the table, wide-eyed, but it didn't stop moving.

There was a sudden surge of enormous chakra that made all of them tense, even their civilian
captive. In a cloud of smoke and was that glitter?- a teenage boy appeared on the table, sprawled as
if he were dead. They all froze, eyes glued to the boy as he sat up groaning. His olive skin was
decorated by white tattoos that covered the left half of his body and he only wore a loose pair of
ostentatiously bright violet pants. He rubbed his eyes and then waved, eyes zeroing in on Sakura.
"Hi. I'm Taiki. You must be my bride."

She could hear the twin shouts from the boys behind her, but she was too busy being
uncharacteristically dumbfounded. Kakashi pushed her behind him protectively and glared at Taiki.
"Where did you come from?"

The boy shrugged casually and waved his hand at the lamp. "There, of course. I've been waiting
for ages and ages for my bride to finally appear." Sakura peeked around Kakashi's arms and Taiki
smiled ruefully. "Though I was hoping for someone older."

Naruto growled at him. "What makes you think she's yours, asshole?"

Taiki was unconcerned by his behavior. "Technically, it's any woman who touches the lamp. She
was the closest, so I just assumed." He looked at Sasuke thoughtfully. "It wasn't you, was it?"

Naruto was now torn between righteous anger and intense amusement that Sasuke had been, not
for the first time, confused for a girl. As usual, he couldn't resist. "Too pretty for your own good,
Sasuke-chan."

Sasuke's face was pink. "Shut up, idiot."

Kakashi said, in a tone that he thought was very modulated and cooperative, "You may not have
any of my students as your bride."

Taiki pouted at him attractively. "But it's already been done! She and I are bonded spiritually."

Sakura leaned her forehead against Kakashi's back. "I hate everything." She peered around her
teacher. "What does that mean, exactly?"

Taiki smiled happily. "Mostly it means that I get to stay outside of this stupid lamp! But for you,
not much." He grinned at her teasingly. "At least, not until you're much older."

"Ugh. I meant, does that mean you can just … go away? I have no interest in marriage to some
strange boy who lives in a gaudy lamp."

Taiki hummed thoughtfully. "I suppose. The curse wasn't actually very specific. I've always
wanted to see the world. It's probably changed so much!" His eyes brightened. "It will be an
adventure!"

"Yes," Sakura said flatly. "An adventure indeed."

Taiki hopped down from the table gracefulty and grabbed the oil lamp with disdain, pressing it into
her hands. "I'll go have my fun, but you have to keep this." His form started to dissipate, like he
was being pulled away and Sakura could definitely see glitter this time. He grinned at her, white
teeth gleaming. "I'll see you again."

With those last words, he was gone.

Kakashi turned to look at her. "Well." There was a beat of silence as they contemplated the series
of events that just took place. "We found the stolen oil lamp."
Sakura slumped down next to the bed by Sasuke's legs. "Why is it always me?"

Chapter End Notes

poor sakura-chan, channeling neville longbottom.

also, fanged kakashi is inspired by [this fanart](#), which really captured all my attention. dog ninjas, am i right?
Sakura tried to stifle her growing anxiety with a mental recitation of all things that had gone right so far. Because of her advanced knowledge of ROOT, she had managed to stay away from Danzo, though she knew he had spies in the village that she couldn't always avoid. She had tried to create a better Team 7, one they always had the potential to be if the world hadn't broken them beyond repair. She reached out to as many of her peers as she could, knowing strong bonds of friendship could be the only way to see them through a war that might still be on the horizon.

However, there was one person Sakura was dreading to meet again.

Yakushi Kabuto.

If things went the way she planned, there would be no joint invasion of Oto and Suna next year during Konoha's Chunin Exams. As Misaki, she had put Jiraiya on the scent of the Wind Daimyo's chronic under funding of his own hidden village and once Tsunade had become Hokage, she had hammered out an alliance for the two villages. Sakura knew such treaties tended to be worth only the paper they were written on, so until Gaara became Kazekage, she would still tread lightly.

The lack of invasion also meant she was fumbling around blindly, wondering each day if it would be her last peaceful one before Orochimaru slipped into the village to find the last free Uchiha.

It was imperative that Sasuke be protected from the cursed seal. He was not the same psychologically fragile boy she knew in her own time; she knew that while he craved answers, it wasn't also paired with a craving for revenge. Sakura just didn't want him to suffer the emotional turmoil the seal would place him under, she needed to save him from that just like she needed to save Naruto and Kakashi and all their friends from their untimely future deaths. While she had been enjoying her second life, her primary mission was never far from her thoughts.

Kabuto was slippery. When she had known him before, she was always uncertain of his actions and his words, never knowing where his loyalties lay. Orochimaru had been Kabuto's master when Sasuke had killed the Sannin in her time, but the medic-nin had disappeared instead of seeking vengeance. He had popped up on Konoha's radar over the years, reports on the most vicious slaughters or strangest mission situations, never fully taking responsibility for any carnage, but never denying it either.

Kakashi had been sent out after him once and returned after a month, more haunted than usual and empty-handed. "I don't know if he's even human anymore, Sakura-chan." He had said it after laying in silence for several minutes while she was healing his Sharingan induced migraine, rubbing his temples soothingly. "The things he could do … It was like seeing death itself."

She had paused in her ministrations, chakra flow never easing and then resumed, running her fingers through his hair. "In that case, I'm glad you made it back to us, Kakashi-sensei." Back to me, she meant.

Sakura knew Kabuto's abilities couldn't possibly be as advanced in her new timeline as they were when he had already surpassed Orochimaru, but she still felt chills whenever she thought of him. If he was someone Kakashi had feared, even a little, she wasn't confident in her ability to take him on. She definitely didn't want to expose her boys to him ever, but for now she would settle for putting
off the confrontation between them for as long as possible.

 Apparently, as long as possible ended was today, because he had deliberately run right into her at the marketplace, even as she stepped to avoid him.

"Oops! Gosh, I'm sorry! I didn't see you there!" He rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. "I didn't mean to tread all over your feet."

Her insides were ice, but she just smiled politely. "It's fine, really. It happens." She hugged her bag closer to her body and nodded at him, hoping to leave him behind as soon as possible.

"No, totally my fault! Look, I even made you drop some of your tomatoes." In her panic, she hadn't noticed that Sasuke's favorite food had toppled out of the top of her shopping bag. Shit. He's going to notice if I don't have those when I come back.

She quickly picked them up and dusted them off, shoving them back in the bag, still smiling politely as sweat trickled down her back. "No harm done, see? I must be going now."

Before she could turn, he was in front of her again, glasses glinting in the sunlight. "Nonsense, it was very unbecoming of me to essentially assault another Konoha shinobi. Let me make it up to you. Could I treat you to dango?"

If this were any other situation, Sakura would have laughed and called him a pervert preying on young girls. As it was, she didn't know how to gracefully extricate herself. If she said she had to leave to make dinner, would he "insist" on walking her home? She didn't want Kabuto anywhere near her house or the team that was currently waiting for her in it.

"S-sure. But only one. I can't stay too long."

"Excellent." He smiled at her easily, but Sakura still didn't trust him not to slit her throat with that same smile on his face. They walked toward the dango stand and he pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Oh! I've been so rude. My name is Yakushi Kabuto."

She was positive he knew who she was, but it wouldn't do to tense up or lie in this situation. For all intents and purposes, she was a normal, if gifted, eleven year old. "Haruno Sakura. It's nice to meet you, Yakushi-san."

He laughed, sounding just like any average teenager who didn't plot his village's destruction. "So formal, Sakura-chan. Just call me Kabuto."

"Of course." Sakura figured she might as well confirm that his cover information was still the same, at the very least. She couldn't trust much else he would tell her. "Are you a jonin, Kabuto-san? I don't think I've ever seen you around Konoha."

He laughed again, though this time it sounded embarrassed. He's so good at this game. I cannot slip up, even for a moment. "No, Sakura-chan, I'm just a genin like you."

"Like me? Was he testing her? Tsunade had just promoted her last week when they had returned from Suna. Did he know? "I'm actually a chunin. But that only happened recently." She tried to look proud of herself.

He pounded a fist into his palm. "That's right, there were exams in Suna last month. I missed those. Congratulations, Sakura-chan." He smiled again, still creepily normal. "This can be an apologetic and a celebratory dango, then!"
They arrived at the stand and ordered, with Kabuto cheerfully pointing to a nearby bench for them to sit on. "So, Sakura-chan, how were the Chunin Exams? Did your teammates get promoted too?"

Ah, my teammates. Almost certainly your real target. You already know who they are.

"My teammates did not make it, but I'm sure they will next time." There, simple and vague, proud of her team but not bragging about how strong they were. If promotions were just about strength, Team 7 would consist of four jonins at this point. She didn't need the recognition. She definitely didn't need to give Kabuto any more information on them than she had to keep her cover as a normal kunoichi.

"Ah," Kabuto chewed on his dango. "I bet they were disappointed. I've taken part in five of them so far, but no luck. Were they very excited to go?"

"Five? Wow, that's very persistent of you. I hope you do well in the next one." So far everything is matching up. I wish I knew more about where he came from before the Chunin Exams.

Kabuto shrugged helplessly, not calling her out on her evasive reply. "If they handed out promotions for just perseverance, I would be Hokage by now. I'll gain the skills I need to advance eventually."

"That's a positive way of thinking." Sakura finished her dango in record time, the sticky sweetness not even registering on her taste buds. "I should probably go. Thank you for the dango, Kabuto-san."

He looked up from his own treat in surprise. "Already? We were just getting to be friends, Sakura-chan!"

She motioned to her bag of groceries casually, not allowing her anxiety to show. "I have to get started on dinner."

Kabuto smiled at her good-naturedly and Sakura fought her sudden nausea. "Of course, Sakura-chan. I'll make sure not to literally run into you when we see each other again."

She smiled at him and slipped away, his words echoing through her head. when when when we see each other again! What happened, what did I do to make him sit up and take notice now? Orochimaru must still be plotting to take Sasuke's body.

Sakura took the longest route possible home, with as many side-trips as she could fit in while looking like she was just shopping instead of evading any possible tails. She had honed her sensor abilities in order to detect most of Konoha's ANBU, but she would not fall into the trap of underestimating Kabuto. She had done it once, during her original Chunin Exam and it had been the beginning of the end for her team. Sakura would not make that mistake again.

She was on edge for the next week, snapping at the boys more frequently than usual and then apologizing profusely when they turned hurt eyes in her direction. She was thankful that they accepted her excuse of insomnia as a cover for her cranky demeanor, coupled with many affectionate hugs that were accepted happily (Naruto) and with feigned reluctance (Sasuke). Kakashi was not nearly as easy to fool, but she did her best with misdirection and sarcasm.

"Sakura-chan?"

"Hmm?" She was reclining on his back again while he did push-ups, watching Naruto and Sasuke make a mess of their third training ground in as many days. She was going to have to smuggle
some more sake from Rice Country soon to keep Tsunade happy enough to turn a blind eye.

"Is there anything wrong?" He was disgustingly even-keeled, even as he approached his three hundredth push-up.

Sakura inspected her nails, wondering if they had ever looked this terrible when she was eleven the first time around. Taijutsu was murder on her cuticles. "Of course not, Kakashi-sensei. Except for the fact that you've hidden your Icha Icha from me."

He huffed in annoyance. "Just because you're entirely too smart for your own good does not mean I'm going to let you read adult material, Sakura-chan. I am responsible for your well-being."

He continued his exercise in silence and she turned her attention back to the boys, where she saw Sasuke flat out throw Naruto into an enormous fireball with glee in his eyes. His happiness morphed into a disgruntled frown when Naruto turned out to be a log with blonde pigtails. Idly, she puzzled over when Naruto had time to tweak the kawarimi jutsu for something so ridiculous and laughed at Sasuke's misfortune as Naruto tossed an excessive amount of wired explosive tags in his direction.

Kakashi paused as the explosion rocked the ground, but did not turn to face the boys. "They've still got all their limbs intact, yes?"

Sakura peered through the smoke to see the two of them still sparring, having now fallen back to basic taijutsu maneuvers instead of elemental attacks. "Yup. They didn't even stop. The springtime of their youth is blossoming beautifully!" She grinned at the back of his head and stretched out her legs. He grunted as one of her sealed leg weights made hard contact with his left kidney. "Do you miss being young, Kakashi-sensei?"

"Now you're just being deliberately irritating."

"It's one of my many talents, sensei. If I don't hone it on a willing participant, I could lose my edge."

His shoulders shifted as he switched to one-handed push-ups and she applied chakra without a second thought to readjust her hold on the back of his flak vest. "Who says I'm willing?"

"Your continued tolerance, mostly."

She was sure she could hear him hold back a laugh as he said, "Sakura-chan, you should take up a new hobby. Have you tried knitting?"

"When would I have time for knitting? I barely have time for sleep." Ah, shit. Should not have brought that up.

"Speaking of sleep, Naruto tells me you're having trouble."

She grumbled to herself. "Naruto has a big mouth."

Kakashi's voice was quiet. "Sakura-chan, I hope you know that you can talk to me if there's anything bothering you, right? I know you won't tell the boys, but you can let me share your burden in their stead."

Sakura let out a gusty sigh, knowing she couldn't share her suspicions with Kakashi yet. She had no proof and only an alternate timeline's worth of memories. Who would believe the excuse of a gut feeling? "Just a lot on my mind." She shrugged, knowing he could feel it against his back. "I do
wonder if I was correct in taking the promotion."

"You deserved it. You have been chunin material since you graduated."

Praise from Kakashi as a teacher had been so rare in her past and even now he wasn't particularly forthcoming, for all that he was so much closer to them. She allowed herself to bask in the warmth of his compliment for a few moments before replying. "Maybe. But what about the boys? Who is going to be their third when it the next exam comes around?" What if Orochimaru still attacks, even without Suna's aid? I won't be around to help them. Was it a mistake to get promoted? Can I step down until next time?

"You let me worry about that, Sakura-chan. You don't have to shoulder everything yourself."

"Maybe." Sakura couldn't commit to more than that without deliberately lying to him. There was a lot she needed to keep to herself, but it was easier to tell most of the truth than create another deception. On the nights where she really couldn't sleep, she allowed herself to wallow in a deep sea of guilt for the calculated manipulation of her friends and makeshift family. Her benevolent intentions only assuaged so much of that shame.

Sakura could tell he was starting to wind down in his push-ups and she slid off his back onto her feet, wincing as gravity dragged at her weights. The extra mass she had sealed that morning was not making her feel any less sluggish, especially when Gai had only amped up their sparring when he had noticed hours ago. Has it already been that long?

She glanced up at the sun, surprised to see how much time had passed as she took her turn as Kakashi's personal dead-weight. She stretched and said, apropos of nothing, "I think today's a ramen day, Kakashi-sensei. Cooking sounds very tedious right now."

He rose to his feet, clapping his hands together to rid his gloves of the dirt. "Naruto will be thrilled." Kakashi looked at her, still trying to understand her strange emotional resonance after a year's time. "I'll pay for dinner if you tell me what's really bothering you."

"Resorting to bribery now, sensei? You know I'm just a worrier by nature. It's nothing serious."

He tapped his masked chin with a finger, ignoring her words. "It's not boy trouble, is it? I don't know how much help I can be, but I'll do my best."

Sakura sighed and rolled her eyes heavenward. Flatly, she said, "You caught me. I'm planning on tossing Shikamaru over my shoulder and running away to Mist, but I just don't know how to break it to the boys."

He made an indecipherable noise. "Don't joke about things like that, Sakura-chan. Shikaku might hear you."

"Good. While he's busy planning the wedding, I'll sneak away to my real target, the Kazekage's son. It's fool-proof."

Kakashi's shoulders slumped in defeat. "Why can't you be the cute little genin your Academy photo said you were?"

Sakura grinned at him. "Because I'm a chunin now." She whistled to the boys, who were startled into flinching as they flew at one another. They collided mid-air and landed in a rather undignified heap. "Wow. You need to train them about being more aware of their environment, Kakashi-sensei. You're really falling down on the job, here."
He called out to the boys. "Did you hear that? Sakura-chan has just volunteered you three for extra survival training tomorrow! We'll start at dawn!" Kakashi raised his visible eyebrow, challenging her to say something about it.

Inwardly she cursed him, but Sakura knew how to play this game too. She just smiled sweetly at him and said, "Dawn? It's so nice of you to include Gai-sensei in our training! I know he would love to see his Eternal Rival interact with his team since he'll be assigned his own genin squad soon!"

Sakura would swear that she saw his whole body twitch, but only for the slightest portion of a second. "Yes, that will be … something."

The boys had untangled their limbs and trotted over to join them, looking dubiously excited. Despite their extensive experience with Kakashi's training, they still enjoyed the thought of getting stronger with a single-mindedness that Sakura remembered from her own time. After all the things I changed, they're still the same people underneath. It's kind of a relief.

Naruto scrunched his face in thought. "Sakura-chan definitely didn't say that, Kakashi-sensei. The last time we had survival training, she called you some pretty horrible things."

Kakashi perked up, looking very interested all of a sudden. "Oh? Like what?"

Sasuke snorted and recited a list while Sakura cursed his perfect memory. "I think 'insane sadist with a torture fixation' was said the most. There were lots of other, worse things." He smirked at her annoyingly. "We learned a lot of new words that day."

She refused to meet Kakashi's gaze as Naruto burst into badly stifled snickers. "Those were all meant in a completely friendly, affectionate way, Kakashi-sensei."

He just shook his head sadly. "I knew nothing good would come of your association with T&I and I was right. Such vulgarity from my precious little Sakura-chan!"

She pursed her lips. "It's better than punching someone every time I get annoyed, isn't it?" The three of them, having been punched by her many times, winced at the thought of Sakura on a rampage through Konoha.

Naruto grinned at her. "I don't mind, Sakura-chan! I'm always learning something from you!"

Sasuke was still smirking at her, agreeing silently.

Sakura massaged her forehead. "When did I become the bad influence all of a sudden?"

Kakashi patted her on the shoulder. "You always were. It's just taken you time to see it." He turned to Naruto and Sasuke. "Sakura-chan said she would buy us all ramen for dinner. Are you boys ready?"

She grumbled to herself, not really annoyed. "I've apparently said a lot of things today, sensei. Don't you worry about the long-term effects of lying to impressionable young children?"

He stood, having grabbed both boys around the middle and tucked them under his arms like sacks of flour, much to their bleating protests. "Nah. Consider it extra training." Kakashi set off toward Ichiraku with Sakura following behind in amusement.

She poked at Sasuke throughout the walk to the ramen stand, laughing at the fact that he couldn't do anything more than attempt to swat her away. The boys were really too old to be dragged around
like Kakashi was doing, but he seemed to derive some weird joy out of it. *He probably just likes to embarrass them, like the world's worst dad.* She sighed and poked Sasuke in the ribs again, snickering when he squawked in complaint.

Sakura froze for just a moment when she spotted a familiar silver head of hair sitting at the ramen bar, before falling into step beside her team again. *Why is he here? I haven't seen him in three years and suddenly he shows up on my radar twice in one week?*

Though she hated being anywhere near Kabuto, she slid into the stool closest to him to shield her teammates from his very presence. She tried to nod politely and dismissively. "Hello, Kabuto-san."

Her teammates all gave her variations of a questioning look, but it was forgotten once Sasuke and Naruto started squabbling over who would sit where. Kakashi silenced them by plopping them both down on stools before seating himself next to Sakura.

Kabuto looked up from his bowl with a sincerely pleased smile. "Sakura-chan! I didn't expect to bump into you here. Ramen doesn't seem to be your thing." *How could he possibly know that?*

She shrugged casually. "Cooking seemed like a chore today, so here we are."

He leaned forward to see the people she had come in with. "Ah, is this your team?" The boys snapped to attention, eyeing Kabuto with curiosity.

She forced a smile onto her face. "Yes. Kakashi-sensei, Naruto, Sasuke, this is Kabuto-san. I met him in the marketplace last week."

Kabuto chuckled. "It's more like I ran her down in the marketplace last week. I'm probably the clumsiest shinobi in Konoha." He poked through his bowl, snagging a piece of egg happily.

Naruto and Sasuke stiffened, but Kakashi decided to head them off before they went into overly protective mode by breaking into his own instead. "Sakura-chan, you didn't mention this at all."

*Someone save me from defensive men.* Sakura ignored him momentarily, smiling at Ayame as she ordered pork ramen with extra green onions. After she finished, she said, "Not a big deal, Kakashi-sensei. I would hope I could handle my feet being stepped on."

"Of course, but we worry anyway." He smiled at her through the mask, but all she could feel was numb. She was sick at the idea that Kabuto had a front row seat into their team dynamics, analyzing how they interacted with one another. She had no illusions that he was seeing and hearing everything, despite the fact that his gaze was still trained on his ramen.

Ayame set down their own steaming bowls, to Naruto's great pleasure. In an effort to seem like all was well, Sakura said, "No more than three bowls, Naruto. I mean it."

He pouted around his mouthful of noodles. Sasuke's disgusted face would have amused her at any other time. "But Sakura-chan! I'm a growing boy! I need ramen to live!"

"If you get hungry later, there's plenty of healthy food at the house. You already sneak enough ramen into your diet as it is." *I sound like his mother. I am his mother. What is my life, sitting next to a potential psychopath and lecturing a ten year old boy on the nutritional benefits of ramen."

Kabuto apparently had similar thoughts. "You're like a little caretaker, Sakura-chan! How cute. Does your whole team live together? That's an unusual situation." She wished there was a socially acceptable way to tell him to get lost, but he was waiting on a reply. *Every time I try to avoid answers, I end up giving him more ammunition. I'm surprised I haven't accidentally outed myself as*
"We're an unusual team, Kabuto-san. Kakashi-sensei has his own apartment." She could tell that Kakashi was starting to pick up on her strange demeanor, but she was hopeful that Kabuto would assume she was always politely curt to unwilling acquaintances.

Kabuto looked them over as the boys busied themselves with their food, Sasuke apparently hungry enough to eat without complaint, picking out all his favorite parts first. Sakura had managed to get Ayame to add tomatoes to their ingredient list, because she knew their team would spend a ridiculous amount here no matter how she felt about ramen. "Are you all related? I don't see a resemblance."

A cold shiver raced down her spine. Sakura leaned toward Kabuto and spoke in a low tone, modulating her voice to sound secretive instead of threatening. "They do not have any family, Kabuto-san. I would appreciate it if you didn't question them about it."

His eyes widened behind his glasses and he nodded his head once, whispering back to her. "I understand. I didn't mean to make things awkward, Sakura-chan."

She turned back to her ramen, appetite entirely gone. "It's okay. Like I said before, no harm done." "Yet."

Sakura ate her noodles mechanically, listening to Kabuto engage Ayame in light conversation as he finished his bowl. He stood and slipped some money on the counter, waving good-bye to them in a friendly manner. "I'll see you around, Sakura-chan! Maybe you can give me some pointers on how to finally pass the Chunin Exam."

Sakura nearly snapped her chopsticks in frustration, knowing this meant he was going to find more ways to see her around Konoha. Still, better her than the boys while she wasn't around. She managed to give him a civil nod goodbye. "Yes, maybe. Have a good evening, Kabuto-san."

He walked away whistling, not a care in the world. She stared down at her half-empty bowl, the broth growing cold and the noodles soggy. Lost in her doomsday thoughts, she was startled when Kakashi nudged her carefully. "Everything okay, Sakura-chan?"

She gave him a weak smile. "I guess I'm just daydreaming today."

He glanced over at the boys, who were discussing something seriously in hushed voices. Kakashi was surprised Naruto even knew how to whisper, but he didn't interrupt them. They had a way of making their plans and interests known eventually. Sakura was much more close-mouthed, for all her witty quips. He turned his back on them and faced her completely. "Did something happen with that boy, Sakura-chan? You seemed … off."

This time she froze visibly and his gut clenched, wondering if he was going to have to petition Tsunade to kill one of their own shinobi. Sakura shook her head distractedly. "No, I met him just as we said. He ran into me last week and insisted on buying dango as a way to apologize."

He wasn't satisfied with her answer. "And?"

Sakura pushed her bowl away, giving up on the rest of her food. "And that's it. I haven't seen him since then, until today."

He looked at her tense shoulders and sighed, wondering if she would ever trust anyone enough to share her whole thoughts with them. She was an excellent shinobi in that way, but he worried that she would become too much like him eventually, too damaged for normal relationships.
There's something else."

Sakura leaned an elbow on the counter and propped her chin up on a hand, staring at him with an alarming intensity. "I don't trust him." She seemed to be trying to convey something with her eyes. "I have nothing to substantiate this feeling."

Kakashi vaguely wondered if he could go back to his student possibly having boy problems instead of a blossoming paranoia about the people around her. He went along with it, hoping to understand her feelings better. "Why were you so polite to him, then? Anyone who knows you would realize it was totally out of character."

She heaved a sigh so heavy the boys paused in their conversation to look at her in concern. She waved them off and they went back to whispering, with Naruto's arms flailing about. "I don't know how to act around him. I don't want him to know anything about me at all, including my character. Like I said, it's just a feeling."

"He's what, seventeen, eighteen? And still a genin? And from Konoha, no less. I don't think you have anything to worry about."

Sakura frowned at him, looking highly disappointed. "I don't think I need to remind you that there are some notable Konoha shinobi out there who are certainly cause for worry." She glanced at Sasuke for a quick moment, her eyes softening. "Though perhaps not in the same way."

Kakashi persisted, trying to assuage her concern. "Still, a genin at his age is no match for you or our team."

Sakura idly played with the black gloves she had taken to wearing over her bandaged hands, clearly done with the conversation. "Maybe you're right." Her flat tone made him feel as if he had failed something, though he still wasn't sure at what. Sakura called over to the boys. "What are you plotting over there, you two?"

Naruto's arms froze mid-flail and he whipped his head around so quickly, Kakashi winced. "Uh, nothing! We're just talking about … sparring?"

Sasuke slapped him upside the head and muttered, "Great, now they definitely think something's going on. You are absolutely the worst liar I have ever met."

Sakura smiled him fondly. "I'm thankful for that." She slid off the stool and tossed some money onto the counter, paying for the ramen just like Kakashi said that she would. He felt somewhat guilty, an emotion that happened far too often with this team for his liking. She threw an arm around both of the boys and said menacingly, "There won't be any property damage or broken bones from whatever you've got in mind, right?"

Naruto grinned at her. "Of course not, Sakura-chan! We're professionals."

She rolled her eyes and steered them toward her house, with Kakashi following quietly. He was still concerned about her mental well-being. Paranoia starting at such a young age could grow to be a terrible problem if left unchecked.

The three of them were now murmuring together and he could hear bits and pieces of the conversation. His name, "glitter" and "pants" were repeated often enough to make him feel slightly worried about the future state of his wardrobe. He resolved to tighten his apartment security tonight after he left, on the off-chance his mischievous team was up to something truly heinous.

Sakura unlocked the front door and the boys bounded inside, still whispering about their secret
plans. While her back was turned, Kakashi lifted his hitai-ate and peered at the cheerfully painted red wood, noting the crackling of chakra that indicated something was there. Over the past year, he had questioned Naruto and Sasuke multiple times to no avail. Sakura turned to see him staring at the door forlornly and snorted.

"Why don't you just ask me?"

He covered his Sharingan with practiced ease. "Would you tell me if I did?"

She stepped over Naruto's sprawled form on her living room floor. "Probably." She nudged her teammate and then looked at Sasuke. "We should sleep, since I was nice enough to suggest survival training tomorrow." Naruto groaned and rolled to his feet and they disappeared upstairs to the rooms she had cleared out for them.

Sakura headed toward the kitchen and Kakashi drifted after her. She stood in the middle of the room for a moment, thinking and then finally grabbed her teapot and container of chamomile leaves. She shoved her little stepstool up against the counter to reach the cabinets and poured a cup for him without asking. "So? You want to know?"

He held the cup with both hands, feeling the warmth seep through his worn gloves. "If you want to tell me."

"There's a seal on the door. Actually, there's two seals." She motioned him toward the sunroom, where she sank down onto the futon there with a sigh, setting her tea cup aside in favor of removing her leg weights and gloves.

Kakashi settled on the opposite side of the futon, still feeling awkwardly out of place after a year's worth of visits. Sakura always seemed to be strangely serious when the boys weren't around to poke, prod or otherwise tease. He was never sure if this was because she changed for them or because of them.

"I know that much, Sakura-chan. I saw it once, as I'm sure you remember."

She sipped at her tea and stared at the floor, her thoughts a thousand miles away. "I had the idea for it bouncing around for a while, but when Sandaime-sama told me about Naruto, I knew I had to do something." Sakura smiled tightly. "It's important that they're protected. You too, sensei."

He ignored the unintended insult, knowing he could very well protect himself and that she was a chronic worrier. "What does it do?"

"If I have not added you to the seal's wards and you attempt to breach the walls of this house, you will be transported to the deepest chakra-blocked cell in T&I."

He hummed thoughtfully. "So I was right about Ibiki's bad influence on you."

Waspishly, she said, "Ibiki-san is a good man. You leave him out of this." Kakashi wondered how the fearsome torture specialist would react to being called a good man. If it was Sakura, he'd probably take it. Theirs was an odd relationship, from the little of it he had witnessed. "All I had to do was buy him barbecue for him to agree. Besides, it was Anko-san who helped me implement it."

Kakashi could feel a headache starting behind his eyes. "You know Anko? Of all the kunoichi you could choose to become friends with ..."

"Anko-san is a talented woman, Kakashi-sensei."
"She's also quite possibly crazy." He felt the need to point it out, as if she wouldn't have noticed it within minutes of being in the woman's presence.

"She just has a very forceful personality. You know, calling a woman crazy just for acting like a man is encouraged to is very telling, Kakashi-sensei." Sakura did think Anko was probably a little unhinged, but she attributed that to her Orochimaru-induced trauma and not because she enjoyed fighting like a wild animal. That sort of thing was par for the course for shinobi, after all. Why not kunoichi too?

Kakashi knew he needed to change the subject very quickly, if he were to leave this conversation unscathed. "What if someone just tries to destroy the house with you in it?"

She blinked, taken aback by the question. "The wards strengthen the overall integrity of the foundation, but if someone is that determined, I have worse problems than my seal's effectiveness. I am mostly worried about spies and silent assassins."

He set his cup aside. "Sakura-chan, have you always been so suspicious of everyone? It's very … unusual for a girl your age, who has grown up in a time of peace. Take Kabuto, for instance. He seemed like a normal shinobi."

She sighed and lay her head back against the futon, closing her eyes. "I don't want to talk about Kabuto. I get that you don't believe in my feelings. I wouldn't either, if I were you."

He reached over and flicked her hitai-ate. "I don't believe you. Hunches can save your life in the field. I just don't want you to see enemies every time you turn around. That's not a good way to live."

She didn't open her eyes. "Speaking from experience?"

Kakashi should have guessed she would turn the conversation back on him. She was not like Naruto or even Sasuke, who would just complain or grumble about his wise teaching moments. He hated to even think the term "old soul", but it fit Sakura like a glove. "Maybe. You don't want to turn out like your insane sadist of a teacher."

She snorted and rolled her head to look at him. "If I had to be like anyone, it would be you, sensei. Just punctual and with better hair."

He pouted at her through his mask and she laughed. They settled into lighter conversation, though Sakura knew it probably wouldn't be the last time he tried to broach the subject. It was difficult for her to hide everything from people she spent the majority of her time with. She hoped her candid expression of anxiety would make him think carefully about Kabuto and what he might represent. Sakura just hoped she hadn't pushed him into taking on something far more dangerous.

Chapter End Notes

kabuto might not be as physically powerful as some of the other antagonists in the naruto series (madara, kaguya, etc.), but to me he has always been the most interesting and the most lethal. he is a man who doesn't understand who he is and is willing to rip through others in his journey of self. his continued use of psychological warfare is a
terrifying glimpse into how he views the world. this won't be the last time he appears.
After a quick meeting, the rest of her summons departed, though Noya was clearly very reluctant to trade the head scratches for the barren wasteland of Snow Country. She turned to Yasutomo with a raised eyebrow. "Well?"

"It's been a while, Misaki-chan."

"Oh shush, you knew where I was. And don't call me that! You know better."

Yasutomo just licked his paw, looking unrepentant. Sakura was never sure if that was his face or if all housecats were just naturally giant assholes. "You know, while I was in Suna, Gaara made me a sand cat that looks like you. Maybe he'll be your replacement." She perked up. "Maybe you'll even meet one day. I bet you'll regret that shitty attitude."

He stopped his grooming and gave her a dead eyed stare, ignoring her insults. "The Kazekage did what?"

Sakura sighed. "You know he's not yet. He's only eleven right now and definitely not ready." She smiled to herself, thinking of the letter she had sent to him earlier that day. "But I think he will be."

Yasutomo scoffed at her. "You're eleven right now and that hasn't stopped you from doing hardly anything."

Sakura waved her hand and took a seat on a comfortable looking stump, a bit relieved that she was able to get away from her overprotective teammates for a while. She had left Sasuke and Naruto snoring away a storm at their house, content that the seal would keep them safe. Kakashi had stopped watching her so carefully once they had left Suna. Sakura was almost certain he knew that she had snuck out to meet with Gaara at night, but he hadn't mentioned it to her directly.

Now that they had finally arrived back in Konoha, he was sure in his assumption that she wouldn't see any of the Kazekage's children again. She smirked to herself. Poor Kakashi, outsmarted by a child. Sort of.

"What I can do doesn't count. I'm not particularly remarkable, given the circumstances."

She saw him stretch in the moonlight, tail swishing irritably. "False modesty isn't a good look on you, Sakura-chan."

She frowned. "You're impossible. Why do I even keep you around?"

"You need someone to talk to that old man. Can you imagine sending Gintoki-dono to him?"

Sakura giggled, covering her mouth with both hands at the very idea. "I don't think there would be anything left after such a meeting."

He sighed. "If only. He's been particularly irritating lately."

"Gintoki or Jiraiya?"

Yasutomo looked more affronted than usual. "Jiraiya, of course. Gintoki-dono is always a paragon.
Sakura laughed. "Right, right. It's easy to forget that you actually like him, since you hate literally everything else in the world."

He sniffed. "I enjoy tuna as well. Maybe you should keep that in mind if you want to hear more about your erstwhile spymaster."

Sakura held up her hands in protest. "Do I look like a rich woman who has money to buy the kind of tuna you prefer every time I need a report?" Yasutomo just stared at her and she sighed, grabbing a scroll from her pack and unsealing it, revealing the sushi she had prepared before her journey outside the walls.

Yasutomo jumped from his perch and made his way over to her. "I don't eat rice, Sakura-chan."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "That's for me. Just eat the sashimi and be happy about it, brat." They settled in to eat a midnight snack with Sakura silently lamenting the fact that she was technically too young for alcohol. A cold beer would have been a perfect complement to her strange meal in the middle of the forest, in the middle of the night. Tsunade would have been both proud and disappointed that Sakura had taken up her drinking habits. She pointed her chopsticks at Yasutomo rudely. "So tell me what's going on with Jiraiya."

He rolled his eyes, something she was sure normal cats did not do. "What isn't going on with him? Every time we meet, he asks questions about you, your location, what you're currently doing. For someone in his position, he's pretty shit at being subtle."

Sakura chewed slowly. "Don't underestimate him, Yasutomo. He hasn't lived as long as he has for no reason."

He waved a paw at her. "Yeah, yeah. I don't tell him anything except what you give me to say. He's just nosy."

She grabbed the last sushi roll and then sealed all the dirty dishes back into the scroll to deal with later. *Thank god for fuinjutsu.* "I can't say that I blame him. I pretty much dropped all that information on him and ran."

"Today he asked if you were even a woman."

She snorted. "Of course he did, the pervert. Probably wondering if my boobs were real."

Yasutomo gave her a look. "He asked that too." Sakura rolled her eyes, not even surprised at Jiraiya's actions. Sometimes he was such a gross old man. "His toads are disgusting."

Sakura laughed at the abrupt change of subject. "Don't say that to Gamabunta, he'll squash you like a bug!"

He was about to reply when they both felt an intense chakra presence headed in her direction. Her eyes widened when she recognized it, wondering if his partner was nearby. Yasutomo shot her a look and stage-whispered to her. "Should I get Gintoki-dono?"

Sakura shook her head. "No, it's not worth it. Maybe I can talk my way out of a fight. Maybe he won't want to fight, since I'm, you know, a kid." He snorted, but didn't leave her alone. *I must be growing on him.* "Yasutomo, you go. I'll be okay."

"I don't like it." She glared at him and he hissed uncomfortably. "Fine. But summon me back when
you're done, so I know you're alive." He disappeared in a cloud of smoke and leaves just as Hoshigaki Kisame strolled through the path that led right to her tree stump.

The tall man stopped, looking surprised. Sakura figured affected ignorance might be her best bet to get out of this encounter alive. She waved at him. "Hello."

Before Kisame could respond or even attack, Itachi stepped out from behind his bulk. Sakura cursed his annoying ability to completely mask his chakra. Playing dumb was going to be impossible now. She only hoped that her affinity with Sasuke would get her out of this ridiculous situation; she had never dreamed Akatsuki would venture so close to Konoha so soon in the timeline.

"Sakura-san."

She smiled weakly at him. "Itachi-san. Such a lovely night for a walk in the woods."

Kisame grunted. "Itachi, what the hell? You know this kid?"

She could feel him gaze at her intensely, though she knew better than meet his eyes. "Sakura-san is friends with my little brother."

Kisame smirked. "Ah, of course, what else? Little Sasuke-kun." Sakura was surprised that Itachi's partner knew about Sasuke, but maybe they were closer than she realized. The personal details she had gotten from Hidan had obviously been skewed by his own bias, since she was pretty sure the weirdo hated Itachi.

"Sakura-san, why are you here? Were you looking for us?"

She waved her hands in front of her frantically. "No, no! Absolutely not. If I had known you would be here …" she trailed off, not sure how to phrase 'I'd be hiding in my closet' without sounding idiotic. She decided to just tell him part of the truth, it was easier to remember than straight up lies. "I was just talking to my summon. It's less complicated outside the village." She motioned to the seal tattoo she kept wrapped under her arm bandages. She had managed to hide it from the boys for three years now and Kakashi never noticed the fact that she never showed her wrists.

Kisame squinted at it in the moonlight. "Pretty advanced stuff for a kid."

Sakura drew her mouth into a thin line. "I'm pretty advanced for a kid." She immediately regretted her words as his eyes widened, but he threw back his head and laughed, slapping Itachi on the back. "Your brother sure does know how to pick 'em."

"Indeed." Itachi had not stopped looking in her direction. She stared at his necklace, unwilling to look any further upward when he was so focused. "How is Sasuke?"

She smiled at him. "Sasuke is doing just fine, Itachi-san. Someday, he would like to discuss things with you."

Kisame snorted. "That's a diplomatic way of saying he wants to fuckin' murder your ass."

Sakura shook her head. "No. He knows Itachi-san had his reasons for doing what he did." She chanced a look at Itachi's face, not seeing a change in expression. "He just wants to understand what they were."

Itachi was deathly silent for a moment. "And how does he know this, Sakura-san? Has someone
from the village talked to him about it?"

She pursed her lips, annoyed at the memory. "ANBU came to question him and me that night, you know. He didn't remember anything." She smiled softly. "Thank you for that."

"That doesn't quite answer my question." Itachi’s voice was flat, with no affect. She could get nothing out of it or his very stiff body language.

Sakura frowned. "I told him you must have had a good reason for it. He has come to trust me enough to believe in the possibility."

Kisame was clearly confused by the way the conversation was going. "Why aren't you freaking out, kid? You know what he did, obviously. You don't even know what I'm capable of." His chakra presence flared like a beacon and Sakura did her best not to wince at the sheer amount of it.

She shrugged. "I'm not an idiot. Itachi-san obviously didn't snap under the pressure of being a prodigy, which, by the way, is the "official" story. Considering his actions that night, something else happened that I'm not aware of. As for you, well …" Sakura played with the moss by her hand, thinking of her words carefully. "I can guess. I'm not likely to win a fight, so I might as well relax if I'm gonna die."

Kisame laughed again, the noise loud against the quiet of the forest. "You got that right."

"Sakura-san, how did Sasuke do in the Chunin Exams?"

She was faintly surprised at the question. "Wow, you're well informed. Um, he didn't get promoted? But he won all of his fights! I think Hokage-sama wants him to work on his leadership skills before he becomes a chunin."

"He always did follow me around." Was that amusement she heard in his voice? Maybe she wouldn't die here after all. Maybe she could strike a bargain with Itachi, non-secret information about his little brother for more information on the Akatsuki? No, that won't work, I'm not about to out myself as Misaki to them. She put the idea aside to mull over later. She may never see Itachi again after today.

She smirked. "If his team were made up only of kunoichi, I'm sure they would follow him just fine."

Itachi sighed. "He's not even eleven yet, Sakura-san."

She shrugged. "The Uchiha genes are pretty, Itachi-san. He's been mistaken for a girl more than once on our missions."

Kisame snorted, amused. "Poor kid."

She grinned at him, willing to believe that he was starting to warm to her. She wasn't able to magically beat friendship into people like Naruto, but she could get along with nearly everyone if she tried hard enough. "He's weathered it fairly well."

"And Danzo?" Well, that's out of left field. It's like he doesn't know how to read the room. We were almost having a good time, Itachi.

"He hasn't approached me or Sasuke since you left." She kept silent on Naruto presence in their lives, unsure of Itachi's plans for her best friend. She knew he cared about his brother and might be inclined to spare his friends, but Akatsuki's goals where the jinchuriki were concerned made her
wary. She couldn't actually trust him to do more than keep Sasuke safe. "If he's that much of a threat, it seems like he was warned away …"

Itachi didn't react, but she hadn't expected him to. Sakura had her own suspicions when it came to the harsh man who had once been her Hokage. No, a Hokage. Never hers. If everything went according to plan, Tsunade would be theirs until Naruto was ready to take the mantle himself.

She shifted on the stump uncomfortably. "So, uh, what brings you guys here? To be honest, I'm surprised that you're so close to Konoha, Itachi-san."

Kisame narrowed his eyes at her, feelings of goodwill apparently forgotten. "We can go wherever we want, kid."

"Well, yes, obviously. I was just curious. It's a flaw of mine."

Surprisingly, Itachi answered her. "I come back occasionally."

Kisame grumbled. "Too much. This is a scenic route and you wouldn't let me fight anybody." His chakra flared again irritably.

Sakura frowned. "You keep doing that and you'll have plenty of people to slaughter. You're like a giant spotlight of chakra."

He peered at her curiously. "Oho, a sensor?"

She sighed and stretched out her short legs from the stump, wondering if she'd be taller this time around. "Not really, you are just-" she waved her arms around wildly, unable to quite capture what she felt, "excessive."

Kisame grinned at her, his sharp teeth glinting in the moonlight. "Excessive is a very good word for me."

Now that Itachi had gotten assurance that Sasuke was well, Sakura wondered how this meeting was going to wind down. As her mind raced through the possibilities, an idea came to her, vaguely formed and quite likely suicidal, just like when she was in Suna. She was going to do it anyway.

"You know, there has been this one guy following us around lately …" She could feel Itachi's attention sharpen, though he had not moved. "I don't think he's one of Danzo's." How could she tie this back to Orochimaru without sounding too suspicious?

"Sounds like you got problems, kid. Doesn't bother me much."

Itachi's voice was low. "Be quiet, Kisame. I would like to hear this."

Sakura felt simultaneously terrified and triumphant and scrambled for the right words. "You ever get that creepy feeling about someone, though there's no real proof? This guy is like that. He's managed to accidentally bump into us many times over the past few weeks. It's suspicious."

Kisame was still amused. "Maybe he's just got a crush on Sasuke-kun's pretty face."

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Creepy, but possible, I guess. It seems more likely that he's after something else. Like his eyes. Think Itachi, who other than Danzo would want Sharingan eyes?"

"Like what?" Itachi wasn't taking the bait. Or perhaps, he wanted her to be obvious about it. She was toeing a very fine line.
Sakura shrugged casually and went in for it. "Last week he "just so happened" to find us during training and watched Sasuke spar with our other teammate. He asked me some very awkward questions while trying to seem normal. Questions about the Sharingan." The weight of Itachi's gaze was nearly tangible.

Kabuto had been very normal, actually. It was only her prior knowledge that made his questioning seem anything but innocuous curiosity. He had approached her while she was cooling down from her chakra building exercises, cursing the fact that even with her built up reserves, she would never have as much as her male teammates. She had watched Kakashi instructing Naruto and Sasuke on their elemental techniques, shoulders tensing as she could feel Kabuto loudly approaching from behind her.

*Everything he does supports his clumsy genin persona. He is forcing himself to walk like that.*

"Sakura-chan!"

She turned around, a polite smile on her face. "Hello, Kabuto-san. You are not working with your team today?" *Who the hell even is his team? I never saw them again after the invasion. I hope they died.* Her anxiety was making her spiteful.

Kabuto just rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "Ah, no. Our sensei gave us the day off."

*Pft, sure he did. Spies don't get vacations, Kabuto.* "That sounds nice. What are your plans?" *Hopefully it involves being far, far away from us.*

He smiled at her. "I was hoping for some tips from you, actually." There was a flare of fire in the air as Naruto and Sasuke tried to force their katon and futon jutsus to work together. "Wow, your teammates are pretty good."

She cursed his timing. Elemental techniques were flashy and used up a lot of chakra, something Kabuto and ultimately Orochimaru would be interested in. "Kakashi-sensei has been working on that with them a lot."

"I didn't notice that Sasuke had red eyes when we met at the Ichiraku. Wow!" He watched them with sincere awe.

Sakura's insides froze and all she could do hear was *no no no no* repeating over and over in her head. "That's just his bloodline limit. It's not permanent."

"Oh? What does it do?"

She tried to be as vague as possible, though it was unlikely that Kabuto didn't know the properties of the Sharingan inside and out. "It allows him to track movements quickly and see through genjutsu."

"Nice." He looked at Sasuke appreciatively. "If I had something like that I bet I would get through the Chunin Exams no problem."

He had left not too long afterward, once she had given him sincere advice about passing the exams. Sakura figured it would be more normal if she gave him real answers. Kabuto had waved cheerfully at her teammates, who had been looking at them curiously when they realized that she hadn't rejoined them for some time. Once he was out of sight, she released a deep breath, one she felt like she had been holding for the entire conversation.
He's scouting Sasuke. Just like the Oto team in our first exams. I need to be alert.

The silence surrounded them like a heavy blanket and Sakura struggled out of her memories into her current, present danger. Itachi had not said a word after she mentioned Sasuke's eyes, but she did actively start to feel his chakra leaking out angrily.

Kisame's eyes widened, not used to see Itachi express any sort of emotion. "Whoa, man. You okay?"

"Sakura-san." Itachi's voice was as icy and angry as chakra. "Who is this boy?"

She picked at the moss. What if Itachi just killed Kabuto without going after Orochimaru? Sure, the older medic-nin would definitely be out of the picture, but the Sannin might send in another spy that she wasn't familiar with. "He's a Konoha shinobi named Kabuto. Look, this is going to sound weird, but I think he's working with someone outside the village." She shrugged. "I don't know why anyone would want to know about Sasuke other than you, though."

"What proof do you have?"

She winced. There it is, that whole proof thing. It really messed with her ability to convince people of things. "Nothing solid. Just a feeling Sasuke's in danger from an outside source."

He seemed to consider her words carefully. "That is sufficient for me."

Sakura stopped herself from gaping at him unattractively, but it was a near thing. Kisame was not quite as restrained. "Seriously? You're gonna take the word of a little girl that some nutso is after your brother's eyeballs?"

Itachi spoke in an alarmingly calm voice. He had already contained his emotions with a level of control that made Sakura envious. "I have experience with a number of people who would be, as you say, 'after his eyeballs'. The Sharingan is not as widespread as it once was." He looked over at Kisame. "We should go."

Kisame grunted in assent. "What about this kid?"

Sakura quailed internally, but bravely kept her serene composure. "If you're not heading toward Konoha, I'm not going to say anything. Not my business." As a Konoha shinobi, it was definitely her business to track and hunt down missing-nin from their village, but she wasn't particularly bothered by that rule.

Kisame had already walked away. "Not worth it to kill you anyway."

_Gee, thanks._ Sakura sat still as Itachi approached her, trying to breath normally. He squatted down until he was level with her and she looked at his forehead fearfully. He sounded almost amused when he said, "Sakura-san, you can look me in the eyes."

She did, noticing that he hadn't even activated his Sharingan. _Was it like this the whole time? He always had it on when I saw him before._ She tried to divert the conversation away from her obvious aversion. "What will you do with this information?"

She saw his mouth quirk, slightly. "I'm going to pay a visit to an old friend. He might be very familiar with your new found stalker."

He stood to walk after his partner and she called out after him, wondering if she would ever see
him again. Orochimaru's strength was no joke. "Good luck, Itachi-san."

Itachi looked over his shoulder at her, his long hair fluttering around his face. "Thank you for taking such good care of my little brother, Sakura-san."

She waved her hand negligently and shot him a wry glance. "Eh, he's worth it."

Itachi smiled at her and vanished, leaving her astonished at how much a simple expression could transform someone's face.

Chapter End Notes

boom goes the dynamite!
"I've a really attractive identical twin."

Up until now, Sakura had really been enjoying taking on the guise of a woman her actual age. She looked at the man blankly, hoping he would go away if she didn't respond. Unfortunately, he was drunk and annoyingly persistent, a terrible combination. She barely held her temper when he started spouting more lines and swaggered further into her personal space. *Patience, Sakura. You're undercover, no property destruction allowed.*

He leaned on the bar with an elbow and stuck his face far too close to her own, giving her his best leer. Uncharitably, she thought he looked like an oversized shaved rodent. "Nice legs, what time do they open?"

Sakura raised her eyebrow at him and waved a hand in front her to disperse the sour liquor odor coming from his gaping mouth. "Do you really think *any* of this works? Go sober up, asshole."

He reared back, looking both elated at getting a response and irritated at the response. "I might not be the best looking guy here, but I'm the only one talking to you."

"I'd rather you weren't. Get lost."

He slammed his empty glass down on the bar and muttered, "Bitch. You're ugly anyway." The man attempted to retreat with angry dignity, but mostly he just managed to walk slightly sideways toward a large table of rowdy men who were watching the proceedings with great interest. His dejected withdrawal was met with jeers and boos as they heckled him for failure.

Sakura watched him go with detached annoyance, hoping no one else in the group would be tempted to try their luck.

A voice behind her said, "That was no way to treat a lady."

She rolled her eyes and swiveled on her bar stool. "I doubt your method is much better, Jiraiya."

"And *that's* no way to treat an old friend, Misaki-chan." He leaned closer to her and she heard the men in the corner booth yell, thinking Jiraiya was about to get rejected and eager to witness it. "What's with the locale?"

Sakura looked around at the dingy bar, taking in the cracks in the wall, the dirty floor and the oppressively smoky atmosphere. Guilelessly, she asked, "Is Snow Country not to your liking?" She herself had only arrived in two hours prior.

It had taken her almost five years in the past and an additional two off and on after she came back to recreate something that worked like the Nidaike's hiraishin seal. It had been incredibly complex; she had essentially been working only from theory and legends of him and Naruto's father. Sakura wished that she could have met either man, she would have loved to talk to them about her fuinjutsu experimentations. She had placed the seal on all her summons except Gintoki. Sakura was still working up the courage to ask the ferocious tiger about it.

Earlier that night she had sent the boys to bed, closing her own bedroom door with a heavy sigh. It
had been three weeks since she had encountered Itachi in the woods. She had formed the hand seals and was caught in a shudder as she felt her body fall apart and be put back together instantaneously. It was a deeply disconcerting sensation, one she would ever get used to. Ryu and Noya had been ecstatic at her arrival, even if she had almost toppled onto them from thin air.

"You stick out more here than you ever did in the teahouse. I thought you claimed it wasn't safe for us to meet again."

Sakura gestured for him to have a seat next to her. "Things change. I never claimed to know the future." She grinned at her own joke. "It's still not a good idea for us to meet, but this news is something I wanted to deliver in person."

The smile slid off her face as she contemplated how to start a conversation about the Itachi and Orochimaru issue. Was Itachi one of Jiraiya's agents or did the Hokage keep that from him? If Jiraiya was in contact with Itachi, Sakura would have to tread carefully. She couldn't allow him to make a connection between Misaki and Haruno Sakura, though it would be difficult to know for sure if he did. For all his flamboyant attitude, Jiraiya could be surprisingly difficult to read.

Meanwhile Jiraiya was mentally sweating the possible news Misaki could have, news that would draw her out of hiding after three long years. He had tried to locate her secretly, but every avenue he attempted broke down before he ever got close to pin-pointing a direction, let alone a hideout. Her damnable summon refused to answer even the most basic of questions all while shooting him dirty looks. "So?

"I have come into some information that may be useful to you, but it doesn't concern Akatsuki."

She huffed in bemusement. "Well, not directly."

Sakura signaled to the bartender for her favorite microbrew and carefully tilted the pint glass to pour it herself. The availability of this particular beer was part of the reason she had chosen the otherwise run-down establishment. She missed being able to drink when she wanted, so she was going to take advantage of her henge'd appearance in a foreign country. After a long sip, she turned to Jiraiya who had been eyeing her speculatively. "What?"

"You're a very frustrating puzzle, Misaki-chan. I don't know what about you is real."

She snorted. "Yasutomo has told me plenty about what you think is real, Jiraiya-sama." She batted her eyelashes at him mockingly and then set her glass down on the counter. "I promise I'm not pretending to enjoy this to confuse you. Shiga Kogen IBA is great to have during shitty weather like this."

Jiraiya didn't look particularly reassured. "You're starting to sound more like Yasutomo than the Misaki-chan I met three years ago."

She lifted one shoulder gracefully, not concerned. He watched the fabric of her embroidered blouse pull tight across her generous breasts, helplessly mesmerized. Sakura flicked him the forehead hard enough to hurt, but not enough to send him flying across the bar. No property damage. You promised yourself.

"I was on my best behavior then, Jiraiya. No need for that now that we're properly acquainted."

He rubbed his forehead with a pout that was unseemly for a man his age and Sakura looked away, not willing to let him see the grin pulling at the corner of her mouth.

Jiraiya knew he wasn't going to get a definite answer, but he asked anyway. "How do you manage
to get the intel you send me? None of my sources have ever heard of you and they have hands everywhere."

She just stared at him silently for a moment and said, "So like I said, information that you might want to hear. It concerns an old friend of yours."

He sighed, allowing her avoidance because he didn't have much of a choice. "I don't have many of those left."

"True. So it should be easy for you to guess who I mean."

Jiraiya drummed his fingers on the counter in agitation. "Why are you being so mysterious about this?"

Sakura shrugged, not willing to tell him she knew how painful a teammate's betrayal could be, even decades later. "It's a touchy subject."

He grunted in displeasure. "Just spit it out, Misaki-chan. This isn't the time for playing games."

"Very well. Rumor has it Uchiha Itachi has tracked down and assassinated Orochimaru."

Jiraiya froze in his seat. "Impossible." Itachi had been sent out to Akatsuki to keep Konoha safe, something that Jiraiya was still having difficulties coming to terms with. He had lived through two wars and had seen unspeakable acts, but using children in that manner was still a hard pill to swallow.

"Clearly not, though I don't have confirmation yet." Sakura had pulled Keiji away from Wind Country to track down Orochimaru quietly almost as soon as Kisame and Itachi had left. The caracal had been unable to find the Sannin dead or alive so far. "Though with that man's reputation, anything is possible. He's a slippery one."

"He is," he said distractedly, still dazed by the news. Jiraiya had tried to keep tabs on his former teammate but after a few years he had disappeared into thin air, never leaving so much as a single trail. Much like Misaki, actually. He could feel his old paranoia pumping through his veins. Is it possible she was connected to Orochimaru? One of his human experimentations? "Misaki-chan, how much credence can you give this rumor? What is your source?"

She took a sip, allowing it to linger over her taste buds before answering him. "A lady can't reveal all her secrets, Jiraiya-sama."

He slapped his hand on the counter angrily and she jumped, just barely able to save her beer from sloshing all over her front. "I'm serious! Don't bullshit a bullshitter, Misaki."

She set her glass down and sighed. "I can't tell you my sources any more than you can tell me yours. Have I ever led you wrong in all the years we've known one another?"

"We don't know each other, Misaki. Or rather, I don't know you. I'm sure you've got your own dossier on me." Sakura could hear the frustration in his voice. I guess he's been trying more than just pestering Yasutomo. Who knew I would be such a good spy?

"You're a bit infamous, Jiraiya. I like to keep to the shadows. I don't know how to prove myself to you anymore than I already have without compromising that." Sakura continued to enjoy her beer slowly, since she had no idea when she would have the next opportunity. She wasn't about to henge in Konoha just to have a drink; it wasn't worth Kakashi possibly finding out and scolding her on age appropriate activities. Joke's on you, sensei. I'm older than you are!
"Fine," he ground out. "Does your esteemed source have any insight as to why a member of Akatsuki would go after Orochimaru? Are they still taking missions from private sources?"

She swirled the beer, thinking. "No mission. Hoshigaki wasn't a part of this. I think it was more personal than that." She shrugged, slightly uncomfortable with the information she was withholding from him. "Who knows why the Uchiha does what he does?"

Jiraiya was still wondering how he was ever going to get Misaki to trust him. He was sure there was plenty more that she wasn't sharing, for reasons known only to her and it rankled. He had nothing to offer her that would give him leverage in this situation, not even the names of her supposed family that lived in Konoha. When he had first met her, he had combed any record available with Sarutobi looking for a family who may have had an elusive female relative, people who had moved to Konoha after leaving other villages, refugees from the last war, anyone. Both of them, after investigating possible leads, had come up with nothing. Either Misaki was lying or she was able to destroy any evidence of her existence without being caught. Honestly, Jiraiya wasn't sure which option was preferable.

Sakura drained her glass, looking longingly at her empty bottle. She shook herself out of hopeless mental wanderings and slid off the bar stool. "So long, Jiraiya. I'll send word if I find Orochimaru's corpse." Her tone was as cold as her words.

His eyes widened and he grabbed her arm. "Wait! That's all?"

Her eyes narrowed and she looked down at his hand severely. He removed it sheepishly and she said, "That's all I can tell you." Sakura sighed. She really did hate having to explain herself. "I know you have a history with the man, I thought it wouldn't be … right to just send a casual memo about it."

At the thought of his former teammate's betrayal and descent into madness, Jiraiya only felt a hint of the hurt that had once blazed through his body like an inferno. Time and experience had tempered his emotions, though he doubt the aching feeling would ever truly go away. He knew Orochimaru was no longer redeemable, though it pained him to admit it.

"I-thank you. Where are you going to now?" Jiraiya knew he was fishing, hoping she would give more away in person than she did in her detached written reports.

"Wherever the wind takes me." She smirked at him. "Did you really think I would tell you?"

He slouched back against the bar counter. "I'll figure you out eventually, Misaki-chan."

She was busy zipping up her jacket, the heavily lined wool straining to cover her most generous assets. "Perhaps. But I think you have more important things to worry about right now."

Jiraiya scowled. "I'm capable of multi-tasking."

She tsked disapprovingly, hands on her hips. "Who or what I am is not important in the scheme of things. You have an important role to play. I'm just a background character. Like Mitsuko."

"You really did read all my books, didn't you?"

Sakura grinned, amused despite herself. "I have a good friend who is enamored with them. He got me into the series." When Jiraiya perked up, clearly interested, Sakura could have slapped herself. *I probably shouldn't have said that.*

"Oh? Do I know this friend?"
"Like I would ever answer that question. Honestly, Jiraiya. How did you ever get so far in the spy business?"

He just smiled crookedly at her. "Sheer dumb luck, Misaki-chan."

Jiraiya sat at the bar after Misaki left, his mind spinning with the complex knot of thoughts she had left him with.

Despite the fact that Itachi had been sent to Akatsuki to monitor them, he was never given a handler, someone he could trust to impart his information with. He had been thrust into an entirely alien world with no support. Jiraiya did not have the first clue how to contact him without jeopardizing his position. His sensei had been entirely no help in that regard; on the eve of his retirement nearly a year ago, he had just calmly recited the Uchiha's destruction to both Tsunade and Jiraiya's horror.

"I can't believe you just let this all happen!" Tsunade's eyes were blazing accusingly. "A thirteen year old boy forced to murder his whole family? There was no other way?"

Sarutobi looked at them sadly. "I held out hope to the very end that I could talk the Uchiha Clan into some sort of resolution between them and the village. In the end, Danzo and Itachi concluded that only a complete eradication of the bloodline would save all of Konoha from civil war."

Jiraiya snorted. "Right, Danzo and Itachi. I'm sure our venerable Council member did nothing to push him in that direction. He just came to the conclusion naturally."

His teacher could only sigh. "That is what he told me before he left, along with a demand for Sasuke's safety." He looked between them. "Uchiha Itachi will do anything for his little brother, never doubt that."

Jiraiya ordered a beer from the long-suffering bartender, the same microbrew that Misaki had so enjoyed. He was curious about her tastes, since it was one of the very few personal things he knew about the woman. He snorted to himself. He could count the things he knew for certain about her on one hand.

He allowed the beer to roll across his tongue, the dark bitterness surprising him. He wasn't sure what he expected, but the earthy, roasted tones did not quite fit the image he had of the beautiful and cunning woman. As Jiraiya was contemplating the flavors of the beer and comparing them to Misaki's personality, she rushed back into the bar, grabbed his arm and he felt his entire body break apart.

"-fucking asshole, I can't believe I didn't realize he was there. I hate that goddamn thing." The cursing continued on uninterrupted as the feminine voice railed about her spectacularly plagued life.

Jiraiya was sure he had passed out or died or something, because he was currently on the floor of a very warm dwelling of a type he was sure he had never seen in Snow Country before. In fact … "Misaki-chan? Is that you?"

The voice paused and then there was a sigh and she leaned over him in concern, her dark eyes boring into his. "Yes, Jiraiya. Apparently you get to learn more of my secrets tonight."

"Ah," he said weakly. "Good for me."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be such a baby. You lived, didn't you? You're the first one I've had to
take with me, so congratulations on an experiment well done."

Jiraiya sat up in alarm, all thoughts of nausea replaced by abject terror. "You mean you just subjected me to an unknown jutsu?" He frantically patted himself down, making sure all his parts were present and where they should be.

She sat back on her heels looking amused. "Not unknown. Just never with a passenger."

He breathed a sigh of relief when he realized everything was accounted for. "What was that? Where are we? What's going on?"

"Ah, finally an intelligent question. Or barrage of questions." She stood up in the small dwelling and spread her arms theatrically. "Welcome to Wind Country, Jiraiya-sama. Enjoy your stay."

Sakura sighed as she prepared to set fire to the hiraishin seal affixed discretely on a windowsill. She rather did like this place. It was very nice as far as safe houses went. She had asked Keiji to scout abandoned buildings while Sasori was otherwise occupied and he had come up with some delightful options. *Really, I should do something for him. He's been so helpful lately. A nice steak maybe?*

Jiraiya saw her make the hand seals for a katon jutsu and scrambled to his feet. "Wait! Don't!" He shuffled closer to her to squint at the seal in the moonlight. "Is that …"

She elbowed him in the ribs, pushing him away from her work and set it alight before he could see it too clearly. "Perhaps. And now I have to destroy it."

"How do you know how to make that seal? There are only two people who could such a thing!"

Sakura tried to shrug it off casually. "It's fuinjutsu, not a bloodline limit. With enough ingenuity, any shinobi can make these seals."

He watched the flame die out as it consumed the last piece of scroll paper, trying to commit the portions he saw to memory. "No one has since Yondaime."

She smirked at him, wiping the ash off the windowsill with a sweep of her hand. "You mean no one you know has achieved it. If I didn't have to drag your ass back here, you would have kept on believing only two people in history have had this knowledge."

Jiraiya couldn't imagine a shinobi having the ability to essentially teleport themselves and not exclaiming their prowess to the world. "Why burn it?"

She crossed her arms defensively. "You really have to ask? I can't come back here now you that you know where it is."

"Why did you bring me here if you wanted to keep it a secret?"

Sakura scowled, annoyed at herself for such a slip-up. "Zetsu was lurking. I didn't want you to be stuck dealing with him alone."

His eyes widened. "How did you know? Didn't your reports say he was impossible to detect?"

"He is, if he's not actively standing around in a crowd like some tourist!" She muttered lowly, "I'm just lucky he wasn't facing in my direction. Maybe. We'll see if he shows up sometime in the future to eat me."
"You know, Konoha could protect you if you just come back with me …"

She glared at him. "Not interested. I'm doing the protecting, remember?"

"Misaki-chan, is it so bad for me to know you?" He had tried angry, he had tried his own version of charming, perhaps if he were disarmingly genuine, she would give in.

She ran a hand through her dark hair, disheveling it more than their impromptu atomizing had. "It's better for everyone if I stay anonymous, Jiraiya. Please trust me with that, if nothing else." Her voice was weary, her expression strained.

He sighed, defeated. "Fine, but answer me one question."

Immediately she tensed, wary of his curiosity. "What?"

Jiraiya waggled his eyebrows and leered at her. "Are they real?"

Chapter End Notes

shiga kogen iba is a lovely seasonal craft beer from japan.

the man's horrific pick up lines and insulting parting shot are all things i have heard in the real world, not just on the interwebs. i like to keep my mystical ninja fanfiction as realistic as possible.
"Sakura-chan! Have you and Shikamaru-kun come to join my most youthful team in our daily training?"

Sakura felt Shikamaru freeze where he was walking beside her and tried to bite back a grin. She was tempted to say yes to Gai, just to see what her lazy friend would do. She needed something to cheer her up after the disaster of a meeting she had with Jiraiya last week, where he had found out about her seals and one of her favorite hideouts and now Zetsu might just show up to eat her in the middle of the night.

She shuddered and put the thought out of her mind. She couldn't change what had happened, so it was best not to dwell on it.

"Sorry, Gai-sensei, I'm just-"

"Sakura-san! You look beautiful today!" Lee had rushed up to them in a handstand, grinning at her blindingly.

Shikamaru frowned.

_He never changes._ "Thank you, Lee. How is your training going? Have you beaten your sourpuss teammate yet?" Sakura could feel Neji's glare on her back and heard Tenten giggle while she skewered yet another dummy.

"Neji is a most worthy rival, Sakura-san. But if I do not defeat him today, I will run five hundred laps around Konoha!" He flipped smoothly back onto his feet and looked at Shikamaru for the first time. "Ah! Are you my rival in love?"

Shikamaru's eyes widened and he darted a look at her for a quick moment before intelligently answering, "Uh, what?"

Lee pointed at the other boy with a dramatic flourish. "Are you Sakura-san's boyfriend? I will fight you for the honor of her hand!"

_Oh my god._ Sakura was torn between being horrified and amused, with the horror edging into first place as Shikamaru actually seemed as if like he was contemplating Lee's challenge. She waved her hands at both of them and hissed, "Don't be ridiculous, Lee!"

He only gave her a thumbs up and a brilliant smile, looking eerily like Gai. "Never fear, my beautiful blossom, I will prevail!"

She sighed heavily and muttered, "That was not at all what I was worried about."

Shikamaru nudged her petulantly. "You don't think I can take him?"

Sakura threw up her hands in defeat. "You know what? Do what you want, you lunatics!" She was done playing nursemaid to the feelings of preteen boys for the day. Sakura whipped around and called out to the person she had originally planned on seeing before she had run into Shikamaru on the way there. "Tenten! Let's ditch these guys before I murder every single one of them."
The girl laughed and gathered up her weapons while Neji scowled indignantly at the very idea that she could possibly kill him. "All right, all right. We're just about done here anyway right, Gai-sensei?"

The man was blubbering behind her, eyes sparkling with happiness. "Oh Tenten, it makes my heart so happy to see how close you are with Sakura-chan! Konoha is strong with the power of love and friendship!"

Tenten edged away from him, waving her hand through his genjutsu rainbows like she was swatting flies. "Right, well, I'm going now." She waved to Neji who barely deigned to acknowledge it and jogged over to where Sakura was blatantly ignoring both Shikamaru and Lee's antics. Tenten took in the scene with amusement and bumped shoulders with her friend, pointing to a man who was sauntering toward the training ground. "Who's that?"

To Sakura's absolute mortification, Shikaku had come looking for Gai, but he seemed to be slightly more interested in eavesdropping on the conversation his son was having.

"Sakura doesn't need someone to fight for her. She's capable of doing more damage than either of us." Shikamaru's slouch was nearly aggressive.

"While true, only the strongest of shinobi is worthy of being her heart's desire!"

"You barely even know her!"

Lee was indignant at the implication. "To meet Sakura-san is to know the true power of love at first sight! I will not be defeated by a long standing association!"

"Association? We're good friends, not a corporation."

Sakura latched onto Tenten like she was a lifeline and dragged her away to a much further training ground. "I have a present for you! That was the whole reason I even showed up. I was not anticipating any of that." She wrinkled her nose. Shikaku was going to be even more ridiculous now.

Tenten sighed. "Lee will be unbearable tomorrow and it will make Neji even worse. Gai-sensei will just encourage it." She tilted her head in thought. "Come to think of it, they're like that every day, so I guess I can't blame you for it."

"Gee, thanks," Sakura said dryly, unraveling a generic sealing scroll that she had purchased on Team 7's last C-Rank mission. She tried not to show the true extent of her fuinjutsu skills to anyone. It was bad enough Anko and Kakashi were aware of her protection seal on the door. She just hoped that if Jiraiya ever got wind of it, he would still never connect the buxom and well-traveled adult Misaki-chan to the precocious eleven year old Sakura. She was lucky he hadn't come around to introduce himself as Naruto's godfather yet, though she was sure it was only a matter of time.

Tenten looked at the scroll with interest, but continued to poke at Sakura. "Neji is really gung-ho about defeating you, Sakura. He's nearly as bad about it as Lee is about him."

Considering how powerful she knew Neji would grow up to be, Sakura found it hard to believe he would think her a worthy opponent, especially when his fatalism was all mixed up with in a competition with a girl who wouldn't fight him. "I have no idea what to do with that information."

The other girl shrugged. "Just figured you should be aware of a crazed Hyuuga who may or may not be stalking you in the near future to look for weaknesses."
"Great, just what I need." Sakura sighed in resignation and then bit her thumb to spread blood on the seal, pulling out a two-handed golden battle axe.

Tenten's eyes were wide as she took in the weapon and asked breathlessly, "Sakura! Where did you get that?"

Sakura grinned at her. "On our last C-Rank, we ran into a gang who had the misfortune of splattering mud on Kakashi-sensei's newest copy of Icha Icha. While he was educating them on the importance of great literature, I saw that one of them had this and thought of you. So I, ah, liberated it."

Tenten ran her hand reverently down the handle. "You have the weirdest mission stories, Sakura. It's beautiful." She tried to lift it, but struggled. "And heavy, damn!"

Sakura shrugged. "You'll learn how to use it and use it well. I have faith in you."

Tenten carefully placed the axe back on the scroll and then threw herself at Sakura, hugging her tightly. "Thank you! No one's ever given me such a nice present before!" Sakura was startled, but accepted the affection happily.

Sakura had never been that close to Tenten in her time before the girl had manage to fall foul of another weapons master who used poison blades on a solo mission. She had cut off a portion of her own leg to minimize the decay and dragged herself back to Konoha, only to be forcibly retired by Danzo. The man had no use for what he considered to be broken tools and Tenten had faded into the civilian sector with haunted eyes.

She patted the girl on the back and then held her at arms length. "You need to get used to this heavy thing so you can scare the crap out of everyone just by summoning it. I'll help you train."

Tenten's grin was just on the edge of feral. "Let's do this."

Sakura sat in her sunroom later that evening after a long afternoon of sparring with an excitable Tenten. Her friend had taken to the heavy axe with an enthusiasm that would make Gai weep with joy and they practiced until Tenten could no longer lift her arms, let alone the weapon. Sakura knew her friend would regret the excess tomorrow during her team training, but she wasn't going to discourage such blatant happiness.

She stared out the window blankly through the curtain of her long hair and pondered her new future. How long would she have to play this game? She had been on edge one way or another for over four years and it was wearing on her. Her mistake with Jiraiya should have never happened. Maybe I should tell someone.

Sakura hugged her knees. It wasn't the first time she had considered the idea, but all her reasons not to do so hadn't changed. Sakura was in no hurry to be forced through a Yamanaka interrogation. While it would bring an end to this secretive portion of her stressful burden, it would do so by placing another worry on her shoulders. She did not trust that the information wouldn't find its way to Danzo. He had fingers in too many pies.

I wonder if Itachi is okay …

Sakura huffed. She actually trusted an S-Class missing-nin more the Council of her beloved village and if that didn't say something about the state of their government, she didn't know what did. Tsunade's ascension had certainly caused waves, but she was heavily embroiled in picking apart
their medical corps and was not likely to pay too much attention to covert political disputes had started before she was even born.

"Sakura-chan?"

She startled, having been so lost in thought that she hadn't heard Naruto, of all people, sneak up on her.

_Some kunoichi I am_, she though wryly. _Good thing that seal is there or I'd be murdered in my own house._

She didn't turn to look at him, just continued staring at her overgrown backyard. "What's up, Naruto? I thought you boys went to bed?"

He rubbed his eyes sleepily. "Yeah, I just wanted to grab a drink of water and saw you in here when I walked by. Are you okay?"

She smiled at him. "Of course, why wouldn't I be?"

He shrugged, looking away from her face. "Dunno, you just seemed pretty … far away the past few days."

Sakura just hugged her knees tighter. "I just have a lot on my mind. You should go back to bed."

He hesitated. "Do you want to talk about it? You always manage to make _us_ talk about our problems." He crossed his arms and pouted at her.

She snorted a laugh and rolled off the futon to stand. "I'm just gearing up for my future career as Ibiki-san's replacement, obviously." She pulled Naruto into a tight hug, surprising a squeak out of him before he wrapped his arms around her in return. "I'll be fine. Thank you for worrying about me, Naruto."

His reply was muffled in her hair. "You're my best friend, Sakura-chan. There's no way I'm _not_ gonna worry about you when you're so sad all the time."

She held him for another long moment before gently pushing him away. "Go to bed, Naruto. I'll be on my way up soon."

He nodded, trying to be understanding of her mercurial mood. "Good night, Sakura-chan."

She smiled him out the doorway and then felt her mood sink once again. _I need to get out of this house._

Sakura quickly tied her hair up and grabbed her gear before slipping out her front door quietly. She made her way past Kotetsu and Izumo, who had drawn the short straw for gate duty night shifts for the past month. They nodded in greeting and Kotetsu gave her a small smile. Sakura had established a history of insomnia that she used as an excuse to get past Konoha's walls, claiming meditation in the forest was helpful. A small lie, as _nothing_ actually helped her insomnia, but it gave her plenty of leeway to speak with her summons when necessary.

She spent several minutes laying false trails through the forest before she hiraishined herself to a seal in a cave she had found on the eastern side of Fire Country, near the Haran Bay. She had stumbled upon it directly after the disaster of a mission in Esashi with an entire okiya full of assassin geisha.
Sakura cautiously felt around for chakra signals, but felt nothing, so she walked to the entrance of the cave and sat down with a sigh of relief. She was about to unwrap the tattoo on her wrist to summon Keiji when Itachi stepped into view.

She stared at him with wide eyes, completely frozen. In his own way, he looked equally surprised to see her, though it was only shown by his lack of movement and a partial twitch of his eyebrow.

"Sakura-san."

"Itachi-san."

_That's one more hideout I have to get rid of_, she thought hysterically.

They stayed where they were for several long, tense minutes while Sakura desperately prayed that Kisame was not around. While Itachi's loyalties were skewed toward keeping her alive for Sasuke's sake, she knew he had a cover to protect. Kisame would not find her presence here to be coincidental. He would kill her and Itachi could not intervene.

She had to say something to break the awful silence, so she might as well ask about her biggest concern. "Is Kisame-san with you?"

"No." He was studying her carefully and she did her best to look him over while not meeting his eyes. Itachi had not had his Sharingan activated the last time, but it didn't mean she would trust that to be true now.

_Well, if he found Orochimaru, he came out of that fight pretty well. Not even a hair out of place, in the middle of the woods._

Irrationally, Sakura felt annoyed at his incredible poise when she couldn't even manage a halfway decent job at fooling a couple of eleven year old boys that she was just fine. "Well, that's probably for the best. I get the feeling he would have been … even more excessive this time around."

"Indeed." She saw his mouth move upward the tiniest bit and allowed herself to feel slightly more positive about her situation.

_It's like he doesn't know how to use his own facial expressions._

"I see your meeting with your old friend went … well? I noticed that I haven't see Kabuto around lately."

Itachi coughed politely. "Sadly, my friend is now deceased."

She froze again, not quite believing what she heard. "Are you sure?"

He actually looked vaguely amused this time. "Quite sure, Sakura-san. I have some experience with this sort of thing."

_Sasuke is free. She had a grin on her face and she couldn't stop it from growing. He's safer now than he ever was the first time around._ "At the risk of sounding rude, I'm relieved to hear that."

Itachi was definitely amused now and Sakura was starting to think she'd live through this meeting without nightmares. "Somehow I find myself unsurprised."

Sakura shrugged, not willing to apologize for her relief at another's death. _Especially not Orochimaru's death._
Itachi took a step toward her and she tensed. He noticed and just gave her a mild look. "Sakura-san, I'm not going to hurt you."

She just smiled weakly. "I just have an appreciable respect for your skills, Itachi-san. They are considerable."

"I see." He didn't make another move toward her. "Why are you here? I do not sense my brother or your sensei in the area."

Well, shit. Should I lie or tell a half-truth? Sakura wondered how he got his information on Akatsuki back to Konoha. She didn't think it was through Jiraiya, considering how little information he had on their movements or how shocked he was about Orochimaru. Was he able to send anything at all, being so consistently paired with Kisame?

She had been silent for too long, she knew. "What if …" she blew out a breath, wondering if she was about to blow her whole mission. "What if I told you that I know about the Uchiha coup?"

Suddenly, Sakura felt a kunai at her neck. She hadn't even heard him move. "I would suggest you think carefully about your next words, Sakura-san, no matter your relationship with my little brother."

Through her panic, Sakura thought, He didn't go to immediate genjutsu, point for me.

Doing her best to stay still as to not slit her own throat she said, "Through a variety of circumstances that I am not at liberty to discuss, I have come into knowledge of your status. I would like to extend an offer to you as a handler."

The pressure of the kunai didn't lessen and Itachi's voice was smooth and quiet. "What exactly do you know, Sakura-san?"

Better just go for the whole thing. If he kills me now, at least Sasuke is safe. He'll be able to help Kakashi keep Naruto alive.

With these thoughts in mind, she recited the barest summary of the information she had been able to cobble together during her decade of serving as Danzo's glorified secretary. "The Uchiha were under suspicion after the Kyuubi attack on Konoha, which bred mistrust and dissent among the clan. The council elders and the Saindaime were aware of the budding coup, but negotiations broke down time and time again. Danzo made the claim that the only way to avoid civil war was a wholesale slaughter of the entire clan." Sakura did her best to keep her voice level. After acquiring the intel and having the time to mull everything over, she could no longer find it in her heart to blame him for what had happened, despite the pain it caused Sasuke.

Through her recitation, he had been silent, almost as if he had forgotten to breathe. She continued. "He essentially ordered it done. You now have a secondary mission to keep an eye on the Akatsuki."

"How did you come by this information?" He had stepped away, the kunai no longer at her neck. Sakura was under no illusions that she was any safer than before.

She closed her eyes. "I don't suppose you would believe that I'm from the future?"

"You would suppose correctly."

Well, so much for telling the truth. "I was truthful when I said Danzo had not approached us. I did not say that I wasn't investigating him myself."
Itachi's iron control over his body language meant she had no idea how he took this information and Sakura wasn't likely to risk looking at his face. His continued silence prompted her to elaborate. "I put the pieces together. It took some time." She swallowed heavily. "You know who my other teammate is. I have a vested interest in keeping apprised of Akatsuki's movements."

"You are not a normal eleven year old."

She snorted. "Neither were you, Itachi-san. See the messes we got ourselves into?"

*One day this flippancy is going to get me killed.*

Thankfully, he did not seem to take offense. "Too true. How would you get any information back to Konoha?"

*Is he considering it? I'm not dead yet, so there's a positive.*

"I have a … contact who is a trusted go-between to the Hokage, who is unaware of my true identity. I am a nameless asset."

She could see that his mouth had turned down fractionally. "You are already looking into the Akatsuki." It wasn't a question.

Sakura could only shrug. She wasn't going to lie to him if she didn't have to. Itachi had so few people to trust and if she wanted to get help and be helpful in return, she would have to show herself worthy of that. "I mentioned the last time we encountered one another that I was speaking to my summons. They help with monitoring."

Itachi's voice was oddly fierce when he said, "And your team knows nothing of your activities? Not even Hatake?"

She shook her head. "I would never involve them. I told you I would keep Sasuke safe, Itachi-san. That is my entire goal, with all of them. Even Kakashi-sensei."

After a nerve-wracking moment he sighed, a weary and uncharacteristic sound. "You make it sound so easy, Sakura-san."

"Compared to what you do, I do have it easy." She could see that now. All her self-pity earlier had vanished. So what if she didn't fool the boys with her acting? She would just have to get better. Their lives depended on it and Itachi's would too, if he agreed. Sakura didn't have time for self-recrimination, not when Konoha was slipping further onto the path of destruction.

His voice was dry. "What I do. What I did."

Sakura found herself unexpectedly angry. "Konoha was wrong to use you that way! To ask you such things … it's beyond my comprehension."

"There was no other way for it to end."

Sakura hissed in annoyance, nearly forgetting where she was. Forcefully, she put her emotions in check and took a calming breath. "What's done is done. Would you trust me with this task?"

Instead of answering, he said, "Who is your contact?"

She saw no issue telling him the truth here either. "Jiraiya."

Sounding almost thoughtful, Itachi said, "Is he aware of … everything as well?"
"If he does know, it was not through me. You are the only one I have told." She gave him an awkward smile that felt more like a grimace. "And it wasn't news to you."

"How would this work?"

Considering she had not put any thought into the concept until she had seen Itachi standing in front of her, Sakura was somewhat at a loss. "Well, I give Jiraiya reports through my most inconspicuous summon whenever there's need."

"That would not work. Kisame is with me too often." He sighed again, this time the noise sounding strangely thick. Was he getting sick? Sakura couldn't imagine Itachi being anything less than perfectly level, perfectly healthy.

_That's not fair. He's human too, Sakura. Don't forget that._

"Where is he now, anyway?"

She saw a small smile curl at the corner of his mouth. "My partner is enjoying the finest sake the nearest seven bars can offer."

Sakura thought of the trouble she had in Esashi. "Well, that's one way to get rid of him." She suddenly had a terrible idea. "I am a fair hand with fuinjutsu. Would you consent to a tattoo?"

"With good reason, perhaps."

"After far longer than I would like to admit, I've puzzled out the Nidaime's technique. It's how I got here," she waved her hand to the cave, "without my team."

She could tell he was looking at her with interest now, though she still stubbornly refused to look him in the eyes. "You are the one who placed the seal in the cave. That is the reason I came back here without Kisame." Sakura flinched, realizing she would have to be much more circumspect with her placements in the future. "I see. You'd like to have one on me."

Sakura winced at his flat tone. "I can play with the arrays for it to allow you to pulse chakra through the seal. It would allow you to contact me rather than waiting around for my summons. I can't promise that I will instantaneously respond, though."

He seemed like he was thinking about it. "It would make things more expedient." Itachi crouched in front of her. "Sakura-san, please look at me. It gets tiresome to speak to someone who will not meet your eyes."

She twitched slightly and screwed up her courage to see his dark eyes looking at her intently. "Like I said, appreciable respect." Sakura listened to him breathe for a moment and said, "Itachi-san, your lungs sound horrific."

She could see his eyes shutter. "Recently I have not had time to take medication for them. Now that my schedule is cleared, it will resume."

She had already gone into her medic headspace. "May I?" Before he could answer, she placed glowing green hands on his chest, her chakra leaking through the thick Akatsuki cloak he wore. His hands encircled her wrists immediately in alarm, but she was paying more attention to what her diagnostic scan was telling her and her eyes widened. "Itachi-san, how are you still standing? This is not just a mere cold."

"I am aware."
Sakura looked at him warily. "Will you let me heal you? As you can see, I have medical training."

He gave her an unreadable glance. "Some other time, perhaps."

She frowned. "My social calendar is free, Itachi-san. It's better to do something now."

"I must return to Kisame soon. It would not do to make him suspicious when we have just come to an accord. He is more intelligent than he appears." Sakura thought of the tales Lee had told her of the man. She wasn't likely to underestimate anyone these days, least all someone with such monstrous skills and tools.

"Still." With her hands still on his chest, she coaxed her way into his chakra pathways, healing as much damage as she possible before Itachi could tug her away. Sakura could feel his posture relax minutely when she fixed his cracked ribs, something that come from coughing and not brute trauma.

*And he still managed to kill Orochimaru in this condition.*

When he gently pushed her away, she allowed it and opened her eyes. "That was just a treatment for the symptoms, Itachi-san, not the cause."

"It was enough, for now. You need to return to Konoha."

She bit her lip and nodded, hating to leave any patient in such a half-healed state, but understanding it was for the best. Hurriedly, she unsealed her storage scroll and took out one of her precious hiraishin seals painted on a bit of paper. "Here. The next time you can, contact me and we can talk more about that tattoo." She held up her uncovered wrist. "I do have experience with that, you know."

Itachi nodded gravely. "Of course. You're a singularly talented girl, Sakura-san."

She grimaced. "It might be best if I come to you in the same guise I use as Jiraiya's asset, if only to avoid suspicion that I've been seen out of the village." She assumed the henge form. "This is Misaki."

He looked her over clinically and nodded. "Exactly his type. You think of everything, Misaki-san."

She crossed her arms and frowned before dispelling the henge. "Now if only he were so polite."

"Until we meet again, Sakura-san." Itachi turned and silently slunk back toward Esashi. She watched him disappear and then flickered back to the forests outside of Konoha, landing on one knee. The use of hiraishin and the healing had fatigued her, but she sped toward the gates with a lighter heart.

*Maybe we can do this after all.*

Chapter End Notes

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this story is now likely to follow a more traditional path, as far as the chronological plot goes, but i will go where the muse takes me. did you notice a distinct lack of kabuto? well, perhaps that is on purpose. or maybe i just forgot? ~stay tuned~
Sakura jolted when she felt the tug of chakra from one of her scattered hiraishin seals and recognized the signature as Itachi’s. The low-level bandit she was battling took advantage of her minute distraction to slash at her with a kunai. She dodged, but not quickly enough to avoid it entirely, gaining herself a healthy slice across the top of her thigh. The man grinned at her cockily, thinking she was easy prey. Gritting her teeth against the pain in her leg, she planted a fist in his face, collapsing his nose and sending him across the clearing into a tree, where he did not get up.

Somehow I did not anticipate Itachi calling me this quickly.

It had only been two weeks since they had run into one another and agreed on a shaky alliance. As soon as she had gotten home that night, Sakura had worked with a single-minded intensity on a new hiraishin seal that could also work as a simple communication system. After several sleepless nights, she was satisfied with her work. It would require her to tattoo the seal on herself as well, but she figured it was a small price to pay for such large benefits.

It helped that I had nearly a decade to learn the damn thing. She was still grumpy at how long it took her to figure out the hiraishin sealing technique. Sakura valued her intelligence above all her personal qualities and it was embarrassing to admit being slow on the uptake, even to herself.

She absent-mindedly healed the gash on her leg just as the boys were running up to her with alarm on their faces.

Well, Naruto looks alarmed. Sasuke just looks constipated.

She did her best to keep the amusement off her face, though it was difficult when they were just so damn adorable.

Now I sound like Kakashi, with his cute little genin comments. I'm an old lady before my time.

"Sakura-chan! Are you okay?" Naruto rushed up and scanned her with worried blue eyes. "I thought I saw you get hit! That never happens."

Sasuke didn't say anything, but Sakura felt his worry all the same. It was a gift, this ability to parse his silences and noncommittal noises, something Naruto and Kakashi had also mostly picked up over the time they spent together. Their teacher dropped out of the trees behind the boys, his demeanor relatively serious. "Naruto is right, Sakura-chan. You were distracted by something." He pointedly looked at the rent in her shorts that showed unblemished, healed skin.

"It's nothing to worry about, boys."

Kakashi raised his visible eyebrow at her. "I'd say one of my team getting hurt by someone who is entirely below their skill level is cause for concern."

The boys agreed, nodding their heads solemnly. Naruto said, "You're way too fast for that guy to get the drop on you!"

Sakura sighed and looked Kakashi straight in the eye. "I'm sure you don't want me to regale you with tales of my menstrual cycle."
Naruto and Sasuke blushed so red she was afraid they'd faint and Kakashi put his hands up defensively, starting to stammer. "A-ah, no, that's okay, Sakura-chan. We understand." He shooed the boys along the path they were traveling on before they were set up by bandits. "Just try to be careful, okay?"

She watched them shuffle away with amusement, wondering if they'd ever catch on that she used that excuse far too often for it to actually be true. Then again, she was the only one with medical training and it wasn't like they had any other female influences in their life. She just couldn't wait until Kakashi had to give the boys a talk about sex. It would be gloriously embarrassing for all parties and she hoped to have a front row seat. Given he was the only adult in their lives and sex could be used against them in higher class missions, she was sure it was only a matter of time.

Oh, it's going to be priceless. He'll probably use examples from Icha Icha.

Sakura followed her team at a more sedate pace, keeping to the back of the formation. She was glad they were so close to Konoha, so that she could sneak away hopefully unnoticed to meet with Itachi. She hated the necessity of using the seal within the bounds of the village, but she didn't think it was smart to leave through the gates by herself immediately after returning from a mission.

After they handed in their entirely uninspiring mission report, she waved the boys away. "Go find your own dinner, boys. I'm probably going to head to the library for a few hours."

Naruto pouted. "We always have a meal together after a mission, Sakura-chan! It's tradition."

She knew this and felt terrible about breaking it, but Sakura wasn't sure how long Itachi would be available to meet. The sooner she could get a communication seal on him, the better. "I know, but I'm just … not up to eating right now." She made a general gesture to her torso area and he backed off again. "I'll see you at the house later, okay?"

Sakura watched the three of them walk away, Naruto fiercely proclaiming the would go to Ichiraku's for dinner while Sasuke muttered disapproval of the food under his breath. Kakashi wandered behind them, looking lost in his book. When they were out of sight, she took to the rooftops until she made it to her sealed house and slipped inside, heading to her room.

With a quick breath, she henge'd into Misaki's form, masked her chakra as best she could and pulled on the seal she could feel attached to Itachi's chakra presence. After a dizzying second of feeling a larger than normal chakra drain, she tensely stood before him in what looked to be a small room of an inn. Sakura dropped her eyes and did her best to sense any other chakra-heavy presences in the area. Finding none, she sighed in relief.

Itachi's voice was dry. "I'm surprised you came if you expected to be attacked, Misaki-san."

She shrugged and stood, having appeared in the room in a defensive crouch. "I couldn't get away immediately and I was unsure of how long you would be available."

"And you took the chance regardless?"

She stared at his hitai-ate, assuming eventually she'd break herself of the habit of not meeting his eyes. "I want this to work, Itachi-san. The safety of my family depends on it."

"Family." He repeated it slowly, like it was an unfamiliar word.

"Sasuke, Naruto, Kakashi-sensei. I would die for them." She considered what had probably happened to her adult body in her previous timeline and thought that maybe she had already done so.
"I see." He sat on one of the twin beds in the room, his stiff demeanor looking entirely out of place in the cozy surroundings. "We should discuss our arrangement."

"I agree." She looked around and grabbed a small chair that had been abandoned in the corner of the room, turning it backwards and sitting down. She leaned her arms on the back of it. "How long do we have?"

"Kisame is on a mission three towns over. Even if he is done and moves at his quickest pace, it will still take him two hours to reach this inn."

She would just have to trust in his knowledge of his partner's abilities. "We may be able to do the tattoo today, then. If you're still amenable."

His voice was level. "Tell me about your seal."

_Cagey bastard._

"The hiraishin seal, as you may or may not know, is specific to the user. The Yondaime and the Nidaime had completely different patterns and arrays, despite the fact they had the identical purpose of teleportation." Sakura saw him nod, so she continued. "After a bit of work, I've developed something of a dual teleportation and communication seal, though the communication bit is mostly rudimentary. Light chakra pulses can be used to transmit a code we can hash out together."

"You've done all this in two weeks?"

She scoffed. "Making the original was the hard part, Itachi-san. That took … way too long." She had nearly said "seven years", but assumed that would be taken for an outrageous lie, as it would have her start at age four in this timeline. "I have a talent for patterns."

He shifted slightly on the bed, looking vaguely uncomfortable. The fact that she could tell meant that Sasuke and his brother were more alike than she had guessed. "So you will also be able to come to my location if I contact you?"

"Within reason." She grimaced. "Today, your summons caught me off guard in a fight, so we should use it sparingly."

Itachi sounded almost concerned. "I hope nothing untoward happened."

She shrugged. "Got stabbed, got over it. My fault for getting distracted." Sakura looked at his still form and said, "Sasuke was fine. He's a strong shinobi and the bandits were barely worth our time."

"And yet you allowed one to hurt you."

His tone annoyed her, but she tried not to show it. "I healed my wound and probably killed him accidentally, so it works out in the end."

"Probably?" Without looking at his face, she assumed by his voice he was raising an eyebrow at her mockingly. Maybe she was projecting.

She decided to get back on track. "Almost certainly dead. Anyway, the only way for this particular seal to work is if I also tattoo a corresponding one on myself."

"And will that allow me to come to you?"
"Hmm, no, because the seal is still not attuned to your chakra. I'm pretty sure the way I have it laid out allows me to pull you to me, but I'd rather not test it. Could get quite messy."

Itachi's mouth curled into a reluctant smile. "We'll leave it as a last resort."

She snorted and leaned forward, balancing the chair on only two legs. "Taking you out of a situation is the only help I can possibly give if you were ever to find yourself against someone even you can't fight." She looked pensive. "Though I'm not sure anyone like that exists, considering you killed Orochimaru."

"You seem to have a lot of faith in my abilities, Misaki-san. We barely knew each other before I left Konoha."

Sakura could only shrug. She had seen what he could in the future, to Kakashi and Sasuke and anyone else he chose to fight and if the timelines were the same, it was all with that horrible lung disease she could still faintly hear rattling around. "I've read your ANBU mission reports."

Now she had his attention. "How? Those are surely classified."

Sakura couldn't help but grin. "I was determined to find out why you distrusted Danzo and I have enough friends in the administration to make it seem usual for me to be where I was not supposed to be, even if I were caught."

"Which you were not." Another of his non-questions.

"Of course." She had only really looked at a few select scrolls to make sure the information she had from her past corresponded to the things in this timeline. She had snuck into the locked records room after telling Ibiki that she needed to use the bathroom. For such a hardened torture specialist, he really was a big teddy bear when it came to her and she milked it for all she was worth. Everything she did was for the betterment of Konoha, so Sakura didn't let herself feel too guilty about it.

"I did not tell you about Danzo so that you could do all that, Misaki-san."

"I know." Sakura wasn't going to apologize for it. "But I'm not the type of person to take information like that at face value."

At least I'm not anymore. Sometimes I wish I could be that little girl again.

"Know thy enemy."

She smiled slightly. "Something like that. Do you want me to tell Jiraiya?" About you, about the Uchiha, about everything, was left unspoken.

He was silent long enough for her to chance a look at his face and she saw that his eyes were once again dark. Itachi seemed to notice her glance but only said, "It may be best to keep my name out of it. If you are truly an unknown asset to him, he will not believe that your information is viable."

She frowned. "I see the sense in that, but I don't like it."

He appeared unconcerned, examining his fingernails. "There are many things to dislike about our situation."

Sakura huffed. "You have a talent for understatement, Itachi-san." She watched him for a moment. "I have a ridiculous question."
He looked at her blankly. "Yes?"

She waved at his hands and said, "Do you all actually paint your nails black? Because that seems … very frivolous for an association of incredibly powerful shinobi. I can't see Kisame sitting around waiting for his nails to dry."

"Ah." He was definitely amused now, she could tell by his slightly relaxed shoulders. It was like playing the advanced version of the 'how does Sasuke feel today?' game. "Consequence of the rings."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do they do?"

"The real meaning seems to only be known to Leader, but I have my suspicions it has to do with how the tailed beasts are extracted."

Sakura barely hid a wince, remembering Gaara's limp body after they had rescued him from Akatsuki's clutches. When she had run a diagnostic on him to see if there was any chance of healing, she was appalled at how blown his nerve endings had been. He had died in excruciating pain. "We'll have to talk more on that later. We should get the seal out of the way first."

She grabbed her storage scroll out of her leg pack and unsealed the blood-laced ink and brush she had created after years of observing Sai's techniques. Sakura would never be an artist, but it was exceedingly helpful in fuinjutsu. She held up the bottle for Itachi to see. "I will paint a seal on both of us and infuse it with chakra at the same time to link them together. It will burn the pattern into the uppermost level of the dermis." Easier said than done. Sakura figured the most unobtrusive spot for was going to be her unadorned wrist, so it was going to take some maneuvering to get it a hand on both simultaneously.

He looked only mildly curious that she was going to be permanently etching something on his body. "Where would you like to put it?"

She shrugged. "You know what would be the best spot, Itachi-san. You just need to be able to touch it easily for communication purposes."

He was silent for a moment and then said, "Torso would be best. I do not want to raise suspicion by changing gear or wearing bandages like you do." He stood and removed his stiff cloak, laying it carefully on the other bed, hesitating before he removed the tunic and fishnet shirt he wore as well. Sakura was unmoved by his shirtlessness, though she noticed with some concern how thin he was. Considering he was a member of a very exclusive club, she doubted his appearance had anything to do with missing meals and everything to do with that damnable lung issue she had patched up last time. Promising herself that she would heal him more before she left, Sakura sat on the bed next to him and gently pushed him into a reclining position.

Over his left hipbone she carefully painted the concentric circles that she had refined over the past few days, its exact pattern burned into her memory. Itachi was completely still, barely even breathing as she dotted a single tomoe in the center and let it dry as she unwrapped the bandages on her left wrist.

She repeated the process on herself, making sure all her strokes were even and unhurried. Itachi stayed where he was and just watched her work. He made an amused sound when she started waving her arm around carefully in an attempt to dry it while packing her supplies back into the storage scroll with the other hand.
"Does that work?"

She gave him a self-conscious smile. "Probably not. Makes me feel better, though." After a few moments, Sakura placed her left hand on the seal she had painted on Itachi and her right hand over her left wrist. "This is going to hurt, Itachi-san."

He murmured, "I expected as much," but didn't move. Taking a deep breath, she rushed chakra into both of her hands, taking care to make sure her left hand was connecting to both the seal and Itachi's chakra pathways. Sakura grit her teeth through the interminable burning in her wrist, feeling it down to her bones. She concentrated on Itachi's pathways to distract herself from the pain, wondering how long it had been since he had seen a real healer. Did Akatsuki have medics?

Itachi had tensed when her chakra flooded his system, but didn't otherwise move. When the last array had been activated, her shoulders slumped and she removed her hands, grimacing when she saw the blood on her right palm that was leaking from her ink. She wiped it off on the underside of the tunic she was wearing and inspected Itachi's seal.

Itachi eyed her bloody hand dubiously. "Are you okay, Misaki-san?"

The skin around his seal was just barely pink, looking more like a partially-healed tattoo than something he had just gotten. She waved off his concern absently. "Hmm? Yes, that's expected."

She prodded her wrist with a finger tip and injected the tiniest amount of chakra into the seal, smiling when his eyes widened minutely. "Looks like it worked, Itachi-san."

He rose up onto his elbows. "Were you doubting your abilities?"

She snorted. "Not likely." Sakura was about to make a quip about her prowess when Itachi tensed again. She extended her senses rapidly and felt the enormous chakra presence moving through the building. She hissed at Itachi, "I thought you said it would be hours before he came back?"

Itachi was calm, though his eyes were slightly unnerved. "Something must have gone wrong on his mission."

She thought frantically. No doubt Kisame could already tell there were two people in the room, if she used the hiraishin to escape, she was unsure of what kind of situation that would leave Itachi in. Sakura looked down at Itachi and said, "I apologize for what I'm about to do. Play along."

She clambered on top of him to straddle his hips, covering his new seal with her body. She unbuttoned half of her shirt to expose her prodigious henge'd breasts and gently placed a hand on his bare chest, playing with his necklace with the other.

Itachi's eyes were wider than she had ever seen them, but before he could protest her actions Kisame had swung the door open with a murderous look on his face. "Yo, Itachi, that idiot wasn't-"

He did a double take as Sakura looked back at him with an annoyed look on her face and said, "I don't do doubles." She was hoping that Itachi would somehow forget that she was technically supposed to be eleven right now, because the situation was already awkward enough.

Kisame gave her a fierce grin and looked around at Itachi's blank face. "About time, kid! I'll take myself out again for a little while. You two have fun." He gave them a lascivious wink and shut the door firmly. Sakura could feel his chakra receding further away until it was moving out of the inn.

As soon as she was sure it was safe, Sakura nearly flew off Itachi, not meeting his eyes. "Sorry,
Itachi-san. I figured he would know someone was in here with you and I didn't want to make him suspicious of a hurried exit."

He was still laying on the bed, looking vaguely flabbergasted. "It was … a workable plan, Misaki-san. Though I must admit surprise that you thought of it."

She winced. "It was the best I could do."

"Hmm, not what I meant, but I think you know that."

She busied herself with doing up her buttons again and sitting down on her abandoned chair. "About time, huh? Kisame is that concerned about your sex life?"

Sakura could see a whisper of a grimace on his face when he replied. "I am not about to discuss this with the eleven year old teammate of my little brother."

"Just pretend I'm the same age as I appear, Itachi-san." Mostly because it's true. "Unless you somehow encounter my team while with Akatsuki, you're never going to see me as anything but Misaki. It would be useful to use this guise as an on-again, off-again mutual relationship should Kisame ever catch us together again."

He gave her a decidedly unimpressed look. "So we should pretend as if you're a traveling prostitute and I'm a delighted customer."

Sakura shrugged, unbothered. "Like you said, a workable plan. My very infrequent visits to see Jiraiya would only cement the image. It's not like he's a paragon of virtue."

"I am uncomfortable with this idea." The way he said it did not actually indicate any sort of emotion whatsoever.

She squinted at him. "Because of my age or because of how it will appear to others?"

He sat up and grabbed his fishnet shirt and tunic, sliding them over his head without mussing his long hair somehow. "The former, though you certainly act more like Misaki's age."

"Eventually you'll see that I am who I am despite my paltry years."

"So you say." He tapped the seal on his hipbone thoughtfully. "We should determine a code now."

Sakura had already planned one out while she was creating the seal. She explained the amount of chakra needed to communicate via seal and what each tap would mean. He made suggestions and changes to her proposed code, which she tried to accept with grace.

"So like this-" he pulsed chakra through the seal for three seconds, stopped, one second, stopped, three seconds, stopped, "would indicate to you that I need extraction? Is this your last resort scenario?"

"Basically. Just use a single three second burst to indicate that you are alone and can report. I will answer back like this," she tapped her wrist for five seconds, "if I can come right away and like this," she tapped her wrist for a single second, "if I have to wait an extended period of time and will contact you again later to make sure it's still safe."

"Simple enough." He watched as she rolled up her coded notes and put them back into her storage scroll. "Is that scroll secure enough for such information?"
Sakura did her best not to be offended. Itachi was taking a great risk in trusting her with his secret when he could have easily killed her once she admitted her knowledge. "It's sealed to only open with my blood and chakra. You can kill me and drain my body over it, but unless I am willing, it will just remain an inert thing."

"That is a gruesome reassurance, Misaki-san."

"Just be comforted by the fact that I've made sure to close up any loopholes." She stood from the chair and he looked as if he wanted to do the same, but she gently put a hand on his shoulder and he stiffened. "Since Kisame assumes we're … busy, I think now is the perfect time for me to take a look at your lungs again."

He closed his eyes for a moment and sighed. "I'm not sure what you can do, Misaki-san. I have many medications for this illness."

She wiggled her fingers at him. "I'm a pretty good medic, Itachi-san and I doubt you've seen a real one since Konoha."

She prodded him to lay down on the bed and pulled out her travel medkit quickly. Laying her equipment out in easy reach, Sakura put her hands on his chest, surprised at how easily her chakra was able to connect to his pathways this time.

Must be the seal's properties.

Sakura closed her eyes and allowed herself to become immersed, looking for damage to fix. She was determined to find the root cause of his problems, even if she couldn't heal it immediately. She murmured, "Has there been any hemoptysis?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Please remember that I am not a medic, Misaki-san."

She apologized distractedly. "Coughing up blood, Itachi-san."

"Ah," he said uncomfortably. "Perhaps some."

She sighed as her chakra moved through his body, realizing that Itachi was just as bad as Kakashi when it came to medics and hospitals. Stupid men and their stubborn pride.

Through her diagnostics, Sakura realized one of his kidneys was in the process of shutting down so she shunted her attention to that area. Her chakra was enough to slow the renal failure, but it would start again if she weren't able to get to the source. She was close enough to hear his stuttered breath and pressed her ear to his chest to verify the pleural effusion she had suspected. "Itachi-san, this is going to be a very uncomfortable few minutes."

He looked at her levelly. "I will trust in your abilities."

No pressure or anything. Damn Uchiha.

Inspired by her poison removal technique, Sakura started to pull the fluid from around his lungs out slowly through his skin. Itachi was as tense as a wire beneath her hands as she carefully manipulated her chakra. After a few moments she was able to determine that she had gotten everything and dumped the murky fluid into a pan next to her leg. He breathed quickly after she detached from his pathways, but it slowed to a normal, even rate. "Better?"

He quirked a slight smile. "Much. I did not realize how impaired my breathing was until now."
She tried not to preen, but her medical skills were something she was very proud of. Still, he wasn't healed yet. He was probably not going to like the next question she had to ask. "Itachi-san … this illness you have, I can't fix it right now."

His eyebrows knitted together. "I did not even expect this much, Misaki-san. There is no shame in not being able to cure me."

She frowned angrily. "I can cure you, but I'll need more information than I can get from a chakra diagnostic right now. I need a blood sample."

He stared at her face searchingly and Sakura did her best to project the image of someone who was totally trustworthy and wouldn't do weird things with his blood. "We have more important things to worry about. There's no need for you to spend time on this."

She got up to dump her pan out the window and started packing her medkit back up moodily. "We can't get anything done if you die of an illness that I can fix before I can punch the rest of Akatsuki in the balls."

Itachi said with some amusement, "That might only stop Hidan."

"Ugh, that man." She sat on the bed opposite of Itachi. "He's far too crazy to be that good looking."

Itachi gave her a sharp look. "You have met him?"

"He met me, but not this me." She indicated her Misaki henge. "I was simply minding my own business when he decided that I would do for the night and tried to convince me he was definitely worth it."

"May I ask why you were in yet another henge form?"

She shrugged and decided a vaguely truthful answer was better than a lie. "Meeting my summons in an unfamiliar place. My original coloring stands out and I felt safer appearing as an older woman. I felt more like myself, really. There were plenty of reasons a woman would be even less safe from some men than a child, after all. "So, blood?"

Itachi sighed. "Only if this will not interfere with our original mission."

"I am plenty capable of juggling responsibilities, Itachi-san."

He looked at her for a moment and nodded. "I believe it."

Sakura quickly drew his blood into one of the vials she had with her before he changed his mind and packed it away, mind whirling on how she would be able to get into the hospital's labs. Tsunade was fond of her, maybe she could make something up about genealogical research? She was a million miles away planning for her return trip when she felt Itachi's hand on her shoulder and startled.

"Misaki-san, it might be best if you were to leave the inn the traditional way." His nose wrinkled in a patina of disgust. "If we are to maintain the illusion that you wanted to create."

She agreed readily. "Where are we?"
"Earth Country, near the border of Grass."

Sakura made a face. No wonder she had landed here already drained, with the sealing tattoo and healing not making it any better. She would have to jump multiple times rather than pulling on her hiraishin seal in her bedroom if she wanted to make it to Konoha without drawing on her yin seal. "I suppose I will be seeing you, Itachi-san."

He inclined his head and said, "We will have much to discuss next time, Misaki-san. Kisame's mission directly involved recruitment, but it seems to have gone amiss."

"Contact me when you can." It seemed better to leave without saying goodbye, so she just waved and made her way out of the inn, ignoring the ogles from the local men and walked to the outskirts of town in a casual stroll. She caught a glimpse of silver hair as she walked and her heart stuttered, though her stride didn't pause.

*Itachi only ever mentioned Orochimaru.*

Sakura shakily came to a grove a mile outside of the town and leaned against the rough bark of an elm.

*There's nothing I can do right now. Itachi can take care of himself.*

She reached into her own pathways to pull on the seal in Tanzaki Gai, her mind ablaze with the implications of Kabuto's survival. He was too intelligent to take on Itachi himself, especially with Kisame around so often. She had not seen the false-genin in the Konoha for weeks, which meant he was likely floating around much like he had been in her own timeline.

She came out of the hiraishin with clenched fists and a sinking feeling in her stomach. Things were about to change dramatically and Sakura wasn't sure if they were all for the best.

Chapter End Notes

this story is gen. despite other people's attentions or apparent interest, sakura has way more things on her mind than romantic endeavors. i'm sorry if i haven't made this clear enough for any reviewers who are hoping for a shikasaku, itasaku, kakashaku, etc.

endgame. maybe there will be an epilogue if i ever finish figuring out the actual plot.
Never Use A Big Word When A Filthy Little One Will Do

Chapter Notes

so i lied about that whole traditional timeline thing. this little ditty happened sometime between the sakura's chunin exams and the most recent chapter. i just really wanted to throw some hidan into the mix, even though it's not at all important to the overall plot. consider it an omake. also, warning for hidan's dirty mouth.

Sakura had been running low on imagination, so she chose to pull characteristics from someone she knew. After a quick henge, a sister to Ayame was soon enjoying her beer at the back of the pub when he swaggered in, cloak swirling about his feet. She just barely managed not to choke and cursed her terrible, horrible luck. All she wanted to do was enjoy looking and feeling like an adult again after a relatively uneventful meeting with her summons. Gintoki hadn't taken the time out of his busy schedule to show up.

Outwardly, she just sipped her microbrew and looked like she was contemplating dinner. Pretending with all her might that Hidan had not taken a seat at the bar with his giant scythe, she looked around casually to see if Kakuzu was around.

She thought of her words to Jiraiya years ago, the lie she had told to get him to believe her information about Akatsuki that she had brought with her to the past.

Is this karma coming back to bite me in the ass? At least I'm still in Fire Country.

She had her hiraishin to fall back on if things got really terrible, though she wasn't eager to show off her skills to a pub full of unknowns. She'd just as soon finish her drink and try to slink out of the room unnoticed.

"Hey beautiful."

Oh my god, my life is over.

She gave Hidan a bored look, allowing her henge'd hair to fall into her eyes. "Not interested."

He smirked cockily and Sakura was annoyed that he was so handsome. He murdered Asuma-sensei in her timeline and here she was cataloguing his attractive points. There was something wrong with her brain.

He put a hand on her table and leaned forward into her space. "Oh, I like a little fight."

I bet you do, you weirdo masochist.

Before she could stop herself, Sakura said, "That's fucking creepy."

I'm going to get killed in a hyped up barfight because I can't control my mouth.
Instead of being offended, Hidan threw his head back and laughed richly. "You're saying all the right things to keep me here, sweetheart."

After a moment of realization that she had not been killed, Sakura wondered if maybe she could use this chance meeting to her advantage. Hidan seemed to be the type who enjoyed bragging about his exploits. Maybe she could make her fib years ago come true? If she dug around carefully enough, she might be able to get some useful intel without dying.

Hidan seemed to respond favorably to crass language, so Sakura decided to put on a little show just for him. "If you're gonna stay, sit down and stop looming over me like some sort of fucking grim reaper."

He laughed again, grabbing a chair and brandishing his weapon. "I've even got the parts for it. You into a little role play?"

She rolled her eyes. "Try again, asshole."

Hidan leaned his scythe back against the table behind him and stared at her intently. "So what's a gorgeous woman like you doing in a place like this?" He stroked her skin on the back of her wrist.

She pulled his fingers back forcefully, a blank expression on her face as his grin became sharper through the pain. "You don't really expect that line to work, do you?"

"Picky woman." Hidan shook out his hand and Sakura bit back a wince as she heard the bones crack together. His extremely quick regeneration was an annoyance, though she knew that Shikamaru had incapacitated him by decapitation. She wondered how long it would take him to come back if she completely obliterated his skull with a punch. Brain matter was a tricky thing, surely he wouldn't come back the same exact person?

_Murder as behavioral therapy, a viable option only for the Akatsuki. I'll be their psychologist._

She sniffed derisively. "I just have standards and they do not include nameless men wearing cloaks."

"Don't you know who I am?" He was looking tetchy now.

She sat back in her chair. "No, because you're so fucking rude that you didn't even introduce yourself."

Hidan looked surprised for a quick moment, but recovered his cocky smile. "Tch, bitch. You win this one. My name is Hidan."

"Fucking charmed, I'm sure." She drank the last of her beer and wondered if she should get another one. She didn't seem to be getting anywhere with this conversation, other than to realize Hidan had very shiny, white teeth.

_Akatsuki must have good dental._ Sakura was going a little crazy just in his presence. Maybe it had something to do with his insane religion or that creepy weapon.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "And? Don't keep me in suspense, woman."

_Ah, what the hell._

Sakura pushed her empty bottle toward Hidan and said, "Buy me another beer and I might deign to give you my name."
To her surprise he just snatched it up and stalked toward the bar, waving his hands theatrically at the terrified bartender. He returned with a frosted bottle that he slammed down on the table in front of her with a smug look on his face. "All yours, sweetheart. Now tell me about yourself."

Sakura discretely checked it for poisons before taking a long swig. In a monotone, she said, "My name is Reiko. I like long walks on the beach and dark-haired men."

He snorted. "That is a load of shit, Reiko-chan. At least I gave you my real name."

Sakura shrugged, looking supremely unconcerned. "Reiko is the name I go by, asshole. I don't have to explain anything to you."

He nearly whined at her. "I just bought you a drink, that means you owe me!"

"I don't owe you jackshit. I told you I might give you my name. Not much of a shinobi if you can't read underneath the fucking underneath."

"Shut up, bitch."

They sat there in silence as Hidan crossed his arms and fumed angrily while Sakura enjoyed her beer, continually squashing down her petrified flight instinct to see what this situation was going to net her as far as information. So far, all she had learned was that Hidan was terrible at picking up women who weren't taken in immediately by his pretty face.

She looked at him curiously, carefully bringing her eyes half-lidded as if she were closer to tipsy. "Why are you still here?"

He fondled his scythe suggestively. "Look around, gorgeous. Not much pickin' in such a backwater place."

Sakura snorted in a decidedly unladylike fashion. "Are you trying to insult me into your bed now? Unusual strategy."

Hidan wiggled his eyebrows at her. "Is it working?"

"Fuck off. I'm not interested in sleeping with the Akatsuki."

*Come little fly, into my web.*

Sakura was sure she was starting to crack, but if she was able to get through this meeting unscathed, she would take a little mental instability.

Hidan preened at her tone, if not her words. "I deserve to get some ass for being such hot shit, y'know."

Deadpan she said, "That man over there is making eyes at you, Hidan. Maybe you'll have better luck with him."

He whipped around to look and she laughed into her beer which made him grin through his irritation. "I knew you liked having me around."

"I'm still not having sex with someone who wears a cloak with no shirt."

Hidan blew a kiss in her direction, waving the bartender over for his own drink. "We'll see about that, sweetheart."
Sakura was sure now that her gambit had failed and she was wasting her precious time away from Konoha. After too many bottles of sake, Hidan was mildly tipsy, but he had not revealed anything she didn't already know. His regeneration meant his alcohol tolerance rivaled Tsunade's so she was trying to subtly ply him with stronger liquor and evade his wandering hands at the same time.

"-and then that fuckin' Uchiha looked me dead in the eyes and tortured me for three days! It was great!" He grinned sloppily at her and slid his hand on her thigh. Hidan licked his lips lasciviously when she plucked it off and pinned it to the table with a kunai, digging it into his flesh messily. "Reiko-chan sure does know how to treat a man right."

"There is something wrong with your head, shitbag." She nonchalantly watched him lick his own blood off the rapidly healing wound. It was easier to act around strangers than her boys, who knew her far too well.

"Jashin-sama demands sacrifice and blood." He dangled his necklace in front of her face and she squinted at the strangely delicate jewelry. "Mine will do when I have no prey in front of me."

'Yeah," she said with no inflection, "That doesn't actually dispute anything I said. Jashin-sama is clearly a crazy god."

He laughed loudly and drank the rest of the bottle in his hand. Sakura was glad she wasn't paying for all this booze. She could no longer see the table for all the empty bottles that were around. "Jashin-sama would love you, Reiko-chan. You would be a beautiful sacrifice."

"Oh golly gee, I'm so flattered." Sakura was not interested in where this conversation was going. "Too bad I've already got my ritual suicide planned. I just can't back out of that."

His eyes lit up and his other hand was thrown around her shoulders, pulling her closer to him than she had ever wanted to be. "Getting me all worked up over here. Does this place have rooms?"

She pushed him away brusquely, no longer afraid to use her chakra control to leave the imprint of bruises on his bare chest. "You are fucking impossible. I'm not going to sleep with you. I don't even know why I'm still here." Sakura was nursing her sixth beer, having metabolized the alcohol the moment it hit her bloodstream. She made Hidan pay for those too.

Might as well get some use out of the idiot, since he's not giving me anything but a new appreciation for how crowded Sasuke must have felt in our original childhood.

Hidan grunted as her elbow met his solar plexus, momentarily knocking the breath out of him. "You're still here because I'm fuckin' irresistible to everyone." He smiled toothily as he rubbed at the spot Sakura had slammed into him. "You hit hard for such a small little woman. I bet you're a real tiger in bed."

He never stops. Unbelievable.

"I would stab myself before I would willingly sleep with you, Hidan."

He shuddered and closed his eyes with a smile on his face. "Tell me more, Reiko-chan. Would there be lots of blood?"

She was about to show him lots of blood when a heavy hand came down on Hidan's shoulder. Sakura followed it up to see Kakuzu standing there imposingly and held back a shudder when she met his unnerving green eyes. "Please tell me you're here to take this asshole away."

He looked vaguely discomfited and just nodded. "We have work to do, Hidan."
Hidan grumbled and jerked his shoulder out from underneath Kakuzu's hand. "You're such a fucking cockblock! I almost had her."

Sakura raised an eyebrow and Kakuzu just gave her a long-suffering look that spoke of more patience than she thought him capable. "I'm sure the lady would beg to differ."

Hidan snorted as Kakuzu pulled him out of his chair bodily. "That ain't no fuckin' lady. You heard what she called me."

"I can't say that I blame her, Hidan. Get out of the chair, let's go."

Hidan thrashed around and finally allowed his partner to drag him away, calling out to her. "I'll find you again, Reiko-chan! We'll get busy next time, you better fuckin' believe it!"

Sakura sipped the last of her beer and wondered if Naruto and Sasuke would notice if she spent the entire day in the shower.
Kakashi looked at his kids with an exasperated fondness. It had been over a year since Team 7 was formed, a year since he had reluctantly fallen into their orbit. It had also been the most fulfilling year he’d had since the war, which privately Kakashi had considered a little pathetic. He was sure Obito was laughing at him, wherever he was. At least Minato-sensei would be pleased to see what a good person his son had grown into, despite his less than stellar beginnings.

However, no matter how close Kakashi had gotten to them, there was just no good way to approach this upcoming conversation. With Sasuke being constantly mistaken for a very pretty girl and Sakura spiritually married to a djinn (something he tried very, very hard not to think about), Kakashi knew it was time. It had been time for months, but he put it off, allowing them to take mission after mission without a single peep. The sex talk was not something he had ever imagined himself giving to anyone, let alone a trio of precocious eleven year olds.

Kakashi had told them to gather at Sakura's house and they all convened in their usually meeting spot in the sunroom. Not for the first time he was glad of Sakura's paranoid sealing abilities; he did not need any potential witnesses for the world's most awkward lecture. Kakashi cleared his throat and said, "So, I have some things to go over with you today."

Naruto perked up immediately. "Is it about the Chunin Exams? Are we gonna go again?"

Sasuke cuffed him in the head absently, as if it was only muscle memory to commit violence on his teammate every time he spoke. Naruto pouted and rubbed his head. "I just wanted to know, jerk."

"Ah, no. Unfortunately, nothing that exciting."

Sakura was lounging on an enormous pillow that had shown up one day after they had returned from Suna. That was another thing Kakashi did his best not to think about. Thoughts of the murderous son of the Kazekage only spelt nightmares and doom. "Did you drag us here for a lecture about telling believable lies again, Kakashi-sensei?"

He squinted at her. "Drag? You all live here."

She shrugged, inspecting her nails. "You could too, if you just stopped being so bothersome about having your own apartment and pretending to be an adult."

Kakashi was developing a headache already and he hadn't even gotten to the topic at hand. "I am an adult."

Naruto and Sasuke snorted in unison and Sakura offered him a sharp grin. "Of course. My mistake, sensei."

He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Regardless, I have to talk to you guys about something pretty delicate. I'd appreciate it if you would listen, please."

"Because of your age, you three missed a fairly vital class in the Academy."
Kakashi did not miss how Sakura's eyes were suddenly gleeful, but he was too busy fending off Naruto and Sasuke's annoyed protests about missing anything, they already knew the Academy basics inside and out. "Maa, it has nothing to do with chakra or jutsus. This is all strictly … theory."

Naruto frowned. "Ugh, do we hafta take notes?"

Kakashi muttered to himself, "Someone help me." Louder, he said, "This is about sex, Naruto. You decide if you want to take notes."

The boys were frozen in place while Sakura was silently cackling on her pillow, her shoulders shaking in mirth. That is … not at all what I expected. When Minato-sensei had given them a similar talk, Rin's clan tattoos had disappeared in the red of her blush and Obito had refused to look at any of them for a week afterwards. Kakashi remembered feeling mortified while attempting to maintain strict control over his emotions like a proper shinobi. He was probably less successful than he remembered, now that he thought about it.

Then again, Sakura was nothing like Rin. Her reactions to things, even after being in close company for so long, were occasionally off from what he would have predicted. Admittedly, his interactions with children were limited, but Sakura seemed more like a tiny, overly eccentric adult.

Surprisingly, Sasuke was the first one to break the relatively awkward silence. "Kakashi-sensei, is it really necessary to …" he trailed off, not willing to speak the words aloud. His sweet little genin were so innocent, so pure.

He sighed heavily. "Unfortunately. Sex is a tool in our career that can be used to our advantage or something that could be used against us. It's my responsibility to make sure you're aware of the dangers."

Sakura propped her chin on her hands, eyes sparkling. "Do tell us everything you know about dangerous sex, Kakashi-sensei."

He sputtered. "Don't make it sound so dirty, Sakura-chan! This is a very clinical thing. I even have notes from the Academy!" He waved a scroll at her to prove his point and opened it up, rushing through the basics of what sex was, much to Naruto's confusion and Sasuke's red-faced embarrassment. Sakura was just watching them all with a detached sense of amusement, something Kakashi found to be highly disturbing. As the lone kunoichi on their team, it was important that she understood where she fit into these dynamics.

"Sakura-chan, do you have any questions?"

"Hmm?" She looked away from where the boys were whispering something about Tsunade's breasts that he was pretending not to hear. Sometimes it was better for everyone if he played ignorant. "Oh, yeah. Have you ever had a honeypot mission, Kakashi-sensei?"

He grit his teeth and thought very hard about how much he loved these kids, because they were usually so talented and fun and would grow up to be some amazing people. It was just very difficult to remember that when Sakura was asking horrible questions with such delight. "I meant about your role?"

She snorted. "My role? Are you expecting me to seduce anyone sometime soon?"

He felt panicked at the very idea of Sakura being even remotely romantic around anyone before she turned thirty, let alone go on a seduction mission. Or maybe she can wait until after I'm dead. Fifty years sounds about right.
"Don't be silly, Sakura-chan! ANBU are the only ones who are set up to do that."

"Yeah," there was that horrible grin again, "And you were ANBU before you were our sensei, right?"

The boys were looking at them now and Naruto was intrigued. "Didja have to do any of those things you mentioned, Kakashi-sensei?" His face screwed up in disgust. "I hope you got paid real good for that."

*Where have I gone so wrong in my life that this is happening to me?*

Sasuke and Sakura both looked entirely too interested in his answer. Kakashi shook his head and took the easy way out. "All my ANBU missions are classified above your level."

The boys looked disappointed, but Sakura laughed. "I think that means yes, Naruto. Underneath the underneath, you know?" She leaned toward them and whispered loudly, not at all looking as if she cared that Kakashi could hear her perfectly well. "I bet that's why he's always walking around with those books. Gotta stay prepared."

Sasuke gave Kakashi a considering look and nodded, apparently accepting Sakura's idea as truth while Naruto excitedly asked her questions about what she had seen in his Icha Icha when she had stolen it. Kakashi groaned inwardly. *This girl is more trouble than anyone I have ever met. Worse than Gai. Worse than Anko.* He considered that for a moment. *Almost worse than Anko.*

"Sakura-chan, you seem very well-educated on this subject." He was suspicious of his cute little Chunin, mostly because she was always up to something. They had a shared hobby of paranoia, after all. It was why she was his favorite, though he would never tell the girl that.

She affected her most innocent face, something that fooled him not at all. He was wise to all her tricks by now. "Kakashi-sensei, whatever are you implying?"

He narrowed his exposed eye at her. "Whatever will give me the truth, I suppose."

"Well," she hedged, "I do have a passing familiarity with your favorite series."

"How? I never let you near my books!"

She snorted. "Sensei, I've been able to create and maintain a perfect henge since I was eight. I'm sure you can connect the dots."

He could. Kakashi could connect all the dots and he didn't like what the picture made. "Sakura-chan, are you telling me …?"

Sakura gave him a pointed look before twitching her head toward the boys, who were again distracted by their own conversation. This time it was about what other kind of ANBU missions he could be telling them about if he wasn't so stuck on those pesky rules and regulations about security clearance. "I'm a shinobi, Kakashi-sensei. We use all resources available to complete our missions."

"I get the feeling these missions weren't sanctioned by the Hokage," he said dryly.

Sakura grinned at him. "What can I say? I just have a thirst for knowledge."

"Please stop." He pushed his hitai-ate up and rubbed at both eyes. "You should be monitored all hours of the day."
"You're no fun, Kakashi-sensei. None at all." She lounged on her pillow as if she hadn't just admitted to buying age-restricted material to her sensei. "Boys, do you have any questions for Kakashi-sensei?"

He was no longer surprised by the authoritarian tone she took toward Naruto and Sasuke, especially since they responded to it so well. Sasuke shrugged while Naruto opened his mouth once and then closed it. Sakura raised an eyebrow at him and he blushed. "You know my sexy no jutsu … they're not gonna make me use that in a mission, are they?"

Sakura bit her lip and pressed her face into the pillow, shoulders shaking while Kakashi struggled to answer. "Ah, Naruto. I don't think you have the right temperament for seduction missions. You don't have to worry. I just want you to be aware of these things just in case."

The boy screwed his face up mulishly. "I bet I could do it if I wanted to." Sasuke slapped him in the back of the head again and he whined piteously.

"No one worth getting information out of would fall for that ugly jutsu, idiot."

Kakashi exchanged a knowing glance with Sakura, wearily accepting that she was far more mature in these things than the other two. "Sasuke, not everyone will have your … exacting standards."

"Hn." There was a slight flush high on his cheekbones, but Kakashi just pretended not to notice.

Sakura snorted and threw a smaller throw pillow at the boys, yelling at them to go to the market for her like they had promised to do earlier that day. There was only the smallest amount of grumbling before they dashed out the door to do her bidding. She watched them go fondly. "So well trained. Like puppies."

Kakashi eyed her narrowly. "No wonder you and Pakkun get along so well. You're both just tiny tyrants."

"Yup." She rolled off the pillow and got to her feet, stretching and looking out the window at her small herb garden. "We're buds now." She led the way into the kitchen and tied on her hideous orange apron. "Don't worry, sensei. I won't steal your summons. I get the feeling I'm meant for a different kind of contract."
"Sakura."

She looked up from her filing and attempted to modulate her voice into something other than contempt. "Yes, Hokage-sama?"

Danzo eyed her for a long, tense moment before he tapped the scroll that had just been delivered. "Preliminary field reports say that Uchiha Itachi is dead, killed by your former teammate."

Her breath caught in her throat and she struggled to respond. "Sir?"

"Where do you think he'll go now?"

Her mind whirled, wondering the same thing. She knew Danzo's question was a trick, a trap, he never asked her questions without a hidden meaning, or several of them all at once. "I'm not sure, Hokage-sama. I haven't see Sasuke-kun in a long time."

He rubbed hischin with his good hand. "This is true." He said it as if he knew, like he kept tabs on her life before he had stolen Tsunade's place, like he still did it now that she was stuck in a position she hated. "But you're the only one who knew him well enough to give us some speculation."

Knew him? Sakura tried out the words and they felt like dust on her tongue. "To be frank, Hokage-sama, I never really knew Sasuke-kun. Kakashi-sensei would be a better source."

"Hatake is on a mission."

Of course he is. When is he not on a mission or bleeding half to death on my couch?

"So indulge me, Sakura. Tell me what you think of the last Uchiha."

She hid a grimace at the title and pretended to pull together her thoughts on ... the former love of her life? After everything she'd been through, it seemed small and petty to hold onto shallow feelings for someone who was little more than a stranger for all that she knew about him. She'd sooner sleep with Shikamaru at this point. "When we were genin ... he had two goals. I don't know if he'll keep to the other now that he's attained one, however."

"Oh?" Sakura could tell that he was interested, though his voice said otherwise. Hypervigilance had all but forced her to memorize and analyze every piece of his body language.

She swallowed slightly and then tossed away her doubts. She didn't particularly want Sasuke dead, but it was more important for her to continue to gain Danzo's trust, or whatever he had that resembled such a thing. It was no longer her business if Sasuke could not handle what Konoha threw at him. "He wanted to revive his clan, Hokage-sama."
He didn't visibly react, just leaned back into his chair. "Hmm, interesting." Danzo looked out the window at something she couldn't place. "Why don't you take the rest of the afternoon off, Sakura? You've been working too hard lately."

Butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Sakura just stood and bowed her way out the door and made her way back to her apartment. It was a late enough for her to start drinking in earnest.

The next day, she brought herself back into the Hokage tower on steady feet, as if she hadn't been shaken to the core by the news she had downed three bottles of sake to forget the night before. Sakura came to a rest in front of Danzo's desk. "Hokage-sama. Shall I continue the filing the reports today …?"

"No." He didn't bother to look up from the scroll he was perusing. "I want you to search the Uchiha compound. Bring back anything of interest."

She was certain this was a trap. Surely ANBU had swept it after the massacre and then ROOT once more after Danzo had ascended to his ill-gotten position? What could he gain from sending her on a wild-goose chase? "Yes, Hokage-sama. Is there something specific I'm looking for …?"

Her leading question only got her a derisive snort. "That clan had secrets on top of secrets. If there's something there, I want you to find it. You knew Uchiha the best."

Sakura just bowed her head and agreed, not letting him see her clenched jaw. She quickly shunshined out of the tower to the rooftops, her feet taking her on a long-forgotten journey to the compound. She had once followed (read: stalked) Sasuke to this place, using every ounce of stealth the Academy teachers had attempted to pour into her. Years later, she still was unsure if she had succeeded undetected or if her former teammate had just decided it wasn't worth the bother to confront her about the behavior.

She opened the gate and looked at the worn houses, the overgrown shrubbery, the grey stains of blood that weren't worn away by time and weather and decided that it didn't matter in the long run. Sasuke wasn't here now and he never would be.

Sakura half-heartedly poked through a half-dozen empty houses, thoroughly creeped out by the traces of life that were just left hanging. It was as if the owners were only out but a minute, if it weren't for the thick layer of dust that coated everything, even the clothing that was piled carelessly in a hamper or a single mug left in the sink.

Her empty search made her hopeful that she wouldn't be used as a tool to further denigrate a dead clan, but once she stepped over the threshold of the house immediately adjacent to the main one, Sakura knew she had been overly optimistic.

She was dismayed to find herself unerringly drawn to a large chest in one of the bedrooms. There was something odd about it, something that set her teeth on edge. She couldn't possibly believe that ROOT had missed such an obvious thrumming in the air.

There were no obvious traps set around it and she approached it with trepidation, finally gathering the shred of courage around her like a security blanket and shoved the chest open quickly. It was filled with … linens?

Sakura huffed a laugh, realizing she had made herself terrified of a set of lacy bed sheets. She was about to stand when she realized that the thrumming in the air hadn't stopped when she was confronted by the open trunk. Delicately removing the fabric in piles onto the dusty floor, she felt around the edges of the inside of the trunk an inch at a time, looking for the source until she saw a
small seal carved into the underside of the lid. She squinted at it in the poor lighting, trying to parse the intention.

*Storage? But not just unlocked with chakra …*

She snorted. Of course it wasn't, she was in the Uchiha compound. No doubt she needed the Sharingan to open it somehow. Danzo would have to wait to see if Kakashi would come back from his newest suicide mission to try. Her fingertips brushed the worn ink, fingertips tingling. Her eyes widened. *Could she?*

She had spent so much time healing Kakashi’s orbital passageways since he had rejoined ANBU, the enthusiastic overuse of his borrowed eye destroying his natural healing rates. Sakura could say, without any sense of pride, that she knew more about how the Sharingan functioned biologically than anyone alive. She wondered if that knowledge would be enough to create a functional illusion, enough to open the seal.

Sakura pictured the chakra Kakashi used, the intricacy of the work that resulted in the successful implantation and how it remained activated despite being covered. She allowed her own chakra to gather on the palms of her hand as she wove the image in mind, drawing on everything she had learned about genjutsu in the Academy, everything she had managed to glean from her few missions with Kurenai, her stilted talks with Kakashi when he was tired and drugged enough to let himself be unguarded for the slightest of moments.

As a medic, Sakura knew that experimental jutsu often resulted in serious injuries. As someone who had little left to lose on chance, Sakura knew she was going to do it anyway. With only a moment’s hesitation, she clapped both of her chakra laden hands over her eyes, forcing herself to willfully control the illusion while staring straight at the seal.

After one heart-stopping moment of complete silence, there was a small cloud of smoke and a carved wooden scroll fell out of the seal and toppled loudly into the bottom of the empty trunk. She let her chakra dissipate and sagged, panting at the effort it cost to maintain such a powerful jutsu for even such a short time.

*Kurenai really doesn’t get enough credit.*

With trembling hands, she picked up the scroll and unrolled it, eyes widening. It was the Uchiha’s summons contract, thought to be lost after Uchiha Kagami died on a mission shortly after the First Shinobi War. Sakura felt a strong urge not to let Danzo know about it, despite the fact Sakura didn't think it was particularly dangerous. She just … didn't want him to have something that, in all rights, belonged to Sasuke. She thought Naruto would have understood. He would have protected it too.

Sakura tucked the scroll into her pack, noting that the uncomfortable feeling in the air had ceased. She hesitated and wondered if this trunk had been left as something to lure her in. No doubt ROOT would not have been able to make it past the seal, not with the requirements necessary, but they could not have missed this feeling. Did Danzo set this up to gauge her abilities? She knew being chakra sensitive wasn't in her dossier, because she wasn't, not any more than the next shinobi. This had an entirely specific type of chakra, one that she was intimately familiar with. There's no way he could have predicted this skill of hers, something she had just triggered out a strange sense of need and curiosity.

With that thought in mind, Sakura quickly formed a plan. She pulled up her false Sharingan illusion once more and sealed an age yellowed lace pillowcase into it, piling the rest of the linens into the trunk and slamming the lid. When she felt the familiar power again, she nodded, satisfied.
with her work.

*Now to find something totally innocuous to bring back to Danzo …*

Sakura took in a deep breath, relishing the fresh air of the forest. She had waited a month after finding the summoning contract to find an opportunity to get away from Konoha, when an opportunity to go to Suna as a diplomatic envoy arrived. Danzo was too paranoid to leave the village, but he was interested in capitalizing on one of Gaara's very few weaknesses, Naruto's precious people.

In the back of her mind, she was worried Danzo would someday seize some unknown ancient authority as her village leader to force her into a marriage with the Kazekage, cementing the alliance in a way that would likely give Konoha the upper hand politically.

She was on the second night of her journey to Wind Country, the scroll feeling metaphorically heavy in her pack. First things first …

"Kuchiyose no jutsu!"

Katsuyu's musical voice was cautiously joyous as she appeared in a cloud of smoke, in a much smaller form than usual - Sakura didn't want to waste so much chakra for a conversation. "Sakura-chan. It's been so long."

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "It's true, Katsuyu-sama. Things have not been the same with Tsunade-shishou gone."

The slug hummed in thought. "What can I do for you? I do not see anyone in need of poisoning or healing."

Sakura barked a laugh and dragged a hand down her face wearily. "No, I have a question for you. Or a request? I'm not sure."

"I will do what I can, Sakura-chan."

She tapped her fingers against her thigh for a moment. "I have … come into possession of another summoning contract. I'm interested. I do not want to disrespect what we have built over the years, but …"

The slug gave her something that resembled a sad smile. "You are no longer the girl who Tsunade-sama introduced. Maybe something new …" Katsuyu trailed off and gave a breathy sigh. "Maybe something new will bring balance to your state of mind."

Sakura was surprised by the surge of relief she felt at the words. Katsuyu was one of the few things she had left of her mentor. It would have been painful if the slug had turned away from her in light of Sakura's request. "Thank you, Katsuyu-sama."

Her antennae wiggled. "You need not break our contract to sign another, Sakura-chan. But I understand your feelings."

After a few more heartfelt thank yous, Katsuyu dismissed herself and Sakura readied herself for the next step. She carefully signed her name in blood under the list of Uchihas and took a calming breath before performing the summoning jutsu once more. She tensed when a form appeared in the familiar burst of smoke.
A haughty Siamese cat sat in the summoning seal, looking both bored and annoyed. "Who are you?"

Sakura started and then bowed. "My name is Haruno Sakura. I just completed the summoning contract with your clan."

He eyed her with contempt. "We work with the Uchihas exclusively. There's no way they would have let you sign it, despite their chakra's long absence from our realm."

She sighed. "Do you not know …?"

The cat stared at her unblinkingly and so she was forced to recount the massacre and subsequent actions of the last two scions of the once great Uchiha lineage. Sakura wasn't sure, but she thought she saw a slight amount of hurt flicker across his luminous eyes when the cat realized that Sasuke had no intention of becoming a cat summoner like his family before them.

"… and then I found the scroll through a convoluted mess of politics, dangerous genjutsu and sheer stupidity, I guess."

"Hmph," the cat said, "Passable effort on your part."

She snorted. "You are just the prickly type of summons I would have expected from the Uchiha. I should have known."

He eyed her with something like barely concealed hope. "Looks like we're stuck with each other now, though."

She rolled her eyes, already fond of the silly creature. "Obviously. It would be nice to learn your name eventually."

The cat washed his paw with an affected air. "Yasutomo. Don't shorten it."

Sakura grinned. "I'm honored to meet you, Yasu."

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**PAST-PRESENT**

"Don't keep me in suspense, Misaki-chan."

Yasutomo waited on a large tree stump where he had been summoned, having watched her pace back and forth for several moments.

"Yasu-chan …" she ignored his hiss at the hated diminutive, "I have made contact with Itachi. He's amenable to passing me information."

"Oh," Yasutomo flopped down gracefully, his tail lashing about wickedly. "Isn't that a good thing? We knew he wasn't actually a ruthless killer. Or at least, not one for the same reasons everyone else believed."

"It's just," she looked at him nervously and his blank expression told her nothing, "Now that I can talk to him and Sasuke isn't out for his blood, would you like to meet him?"

"I …"

She rushed into her words, speech already prepared. "I know that I basically stole this contract from the Uchihas and while I don't regret getting to you know, any of you, I know you had a
special connection with them. Maybe I could introduce you?"

"Sakura." She stopped pacing and looked at him in surprise that he would address her so seriously when she was in her Misaki guise. "You didn't steal anything. The contract would have dissolved if the clan found you unworthy through blood and deeds." He scratched his nails absently against the shredded bark. "And you would have too, actually."

"What?!" She was thrown by that. "You didn't tell me that when I met Gintoki for the first time!"

He scoffed at her. "Of course I didn't. Do you take me for an idiot? You would have done something much worse than just accidentally insult his stripes."

Sakura flushed. That meeting had been a humiliating example of cultural differences. She still wondered how Gintoki felt about taking orders from her when it was clear he was more interested in doing nearly anything other than skulking around after missing-nin. Like eating the missing-nin. "We're getting off topic. Do you want to meet Itachi?"

Yasutomo's tail was ominously bristled and his voice was just as annoyed. "Does he want to meet me? He's never indicated an interest in our contract before now." She was silent and he hissed. "Or at all, am I correct? You haven't even mentioned us to him."

She shrugged helplessly. "Only in the vaguest sense, in that I have a summoning contract. He doesn't know any details. Only Jiraiya knows Misaki has you, with no other indications of the rest of your clan to put it all together."

Yasutomo sat on his haunches and gave her a superior look. "If he desires a meeting with me, I won't say no. But I also won't be kind about it."

Sakura snorted. "When are you ever kind? The last time I met you without wearing makeup, you called me a horrifying ghoul."

He sniffed imperiously. "You looked goddamn terrible. I would be remiss in my duties if I did not inform you of such a thing."

Sakura pointed a finger at him angrily. "I was recovering from a twelve step poisoning!"

He waved off her protests. "How are you going to explain having the contract? Sasuke is not likely to leave the village this time to give you the excuse of digging."

Her heart twinged at the reminder, but only slightly. She had come to know this Sasuke far better than she had ever known her original one and it had been a painfully rewarding experience. He and Naruto were like the bickering little brothers she never knew she always wanted. "I'd hate to lie to him. He has so few people he can trust."

"He has you, Misaki-chan. That's about it, you know."

Sakura sighed. "Yeah, yeah. I'll tell him I found it in the compound while helping Sasuke deal with the aftermath of the massacre, which is true in the vaguest sort of sense. He doesn't need to know when I found it."

"And why you didn't give it to Sasuke?"

She shrugged. "Itachi knows how impulsive his little brother can be. That, more than any lie I could concoct, might serve better to convince him that it was a wise choice."
Yasutomo grumbled, but didn't reply. He only knew her teammates through her stories of them and likely had a very biased view on Sasuke based on his knowledge of their alternate future. "It's your funeral." He hopped down from the stump and jumped onto her shoulders in a few quick movements. "Now where's my tuna?"

Before she could respond, Sakura felt a tug on her chakra and Keiji appeared in a swirl of leaves, panting. "Sakura! Suna's being attacked! What do should I do?"

She stiffened in shock before a sense of grim determination overtook her. Gaara's fragile emotional state would never hold if his father chose to use him as a weapon in such a situation. It was too much like war, too broad of a battlefield. There was no other choice. Yasutomo leapt from her shoulders and the two cats looked at her for orders. "Well, boys. Looks like we're due for a field trip."

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