Contagious

by rabid_behemoth

Summary

Konoha's citizens are being controlled by a virus, and it falls on Sakura's shoulders to save them. A double agent among the most hostile, unrepentant criminals in the world, she finds herself navigating between competing loyalties in a sea of moral uncertainty. But that's impossible for a faithful Leaf nin like Sakura. Loyalties aren't contagious...right? [Eventual ItaSaku]

Notes

-Reposted from fanfiction.net/~rabidbehemoth

Hi everybody! This is an original twist on the "Sakura defects and joins the Akatsuki" plotline that we all know and love. There will be lots of plot, plenty of action, and a strong Sakura. She starts off ordinary but continues to get stronger throughout the fic, so if you like your Sakura wimpy and useless this one is not for you. It will be eventual ItaSaku, but it will take a long while to get there, and things will not be easy between them. We're going for plausibility here. This is not strictly a shipfic either; it takes some of the deeper moral questions of the Narutoverse and explores them further.

Being that this is fanfiction, some liberties have been taken with canon. It is generally compliant with the manga up to chapter 350, with the exception of Tobi, who is just Tobi, not you-know-who. There will be a few OCs because they are necessary for the plot, but
they will not be obnoxious, nor overly-important in the long run.

Be forewarned: this fic will contain violence, character death, naughty language, smut, and fashion faux-paus. And maybe some character bashing, depending on whether you like my interpretations of a few select ones...
Sometimes we become the masks we wear.

Sometimes we must shed them.

"Another shochu, please."

The bartender raised a brow at her. That was her third one in the last half hour. His weathered face suggested that if she didn't slow down, someone was going to have to carry her out later. Judging by the thuggish appearance of the bar's patrons, they wouldn't be doing it out of the kindness of their hearts, either. But that was Mist village for you.

"Another," the kunoichi insisted. She needed it too; this kind of mission was tough for her to stomach when sober. It also paid the most, so her liver usually ended up taking one for the team.

"Suit yourself," the bartender growled, refilling the dirty glass.

The young woman downed it in three gulps and sighed. She glanced across the bar at her target once again. He was probably in his late thirties to mid-forties — on the youngish side for a target, and easier on the eyes than most. Her mission report stated he was from Cloud country, and you could tell; his face was a little too soft for Kirigakure. He looked out-of-place. She bit back the sympathetic thoughts. Don't be so naïve. He wouldn't be on a hit list if he was really all that nice to begin with.

She'd studied him long enough; she had a job to do.

Lowering her hood to expose her long blonde hair, the kunoichi shrugged out of her heavy cloak. She wore a low-cut top with matching red miniskirt. Completely impractical clothing for such a humid place, but she needed to look the part.

Ignoring the leers of the men beside her, the shinobi caught her target's eye across the room. She let her gaze linger for a moment before standing and weaving her way over to him, not having to work too hard to exaggerate her drunkenness. She let a hand fall on his shoulder and leaned over, giving him a nice view down her shirt.
"Hey. This seat taken?" she breathed, indicating the empty chair next to him.

"N-no, feel free. Please," he gulped, adjusting his glasses.

She sank into the chair and crossed one leather boot casually over the other. "My name's Ino. You're not from around here, are you?"

"Ah, no, I'm just here for the week on business. I'm Hideki. It's nice to meet you, Ino-chan."

It was an obvious alias — his real name was Nobuhiro Usui — but she pretended to fall for it.

"Ooh, a tourist!" she gushed. "May I buy you another beer, Hideki-san?" She fingered the little packet of powder tucked discreetly into the waistband of her skirt.

"Ah, no thank you, that was my last one...I was actually on my way out," he said. "I'd be happy to buy you another round before I go though."

The young woman shook her head, letting her hair swish back and forth. "No way, I've had too much already!" she giggled, switching tactics. "Do you have any plans for tonight?"

"Um, well, I was supposed to meet someone soon..." he hedged.

"A girl?" She peered up at him from beneath long lashes.

Nobuhiro blushed. "Uh, no, nothing like that," he coughed. "Just a colleague...for business stuff."

The shinobi let her shoulders relax. "Oh good, then you can blow him off and hang out with me instead. I have a business transaction of my own that I'd like to propose...and I'm sure it's more fun than what you were planning..." she trailed off with a smile.

Nobuhiro's jaw fell open. It took him a moment to come to his senses. "Oh. Uh. Tempting as that sounds, I probably shouldn't. I'm new here and this village kind of has a reputation. I checked out of my room already, I wasn't even planning to push my luck by staying another night, you see..."

She bit her lip, winding a strand of pale hair around her finger. "That's a shame. I don't often get to enjoy my job, but I was looking forward to you."

His eyes widened. He stole a glance at her lips, then her fingers, still twirling the lock of hair delicately. He swallowed, looking torn.

"I promise to make it worth your while. A generous discount for being so chivalrous...and cute," she added, winking.

That did the trick.

"Well, if you put it that way...yes, why not?..." he mumbled to the table.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed, allowing him to help her up. Well that was easier than I expected. Either I'm more drunk than I thought, or I'm getting rather good at this.

"But not to your place. A public hotel," he amended firmly.

"Whatever you want. I know of a nice place near the edge of town, not far from here. Follow me." She brushed her fingers against his arm and led the way out.
Outside, the fog was dense and the air cool. She wished she hadn't accidentally left her cloak behind. It had been worth it though — this mission was turning out to be a cinch. Only a tourist would be stupid enough to trust a pretty girl in this town, no matter how young or what profession.

The kunoichi made sure to stumble a bit as they strolled down the empty, cobbled street together through the dimness (street lamps were a rarity in Kirigakure). The pointed heels of her boots echoed off the damp pavement. They both made small talk, each giving their own fake information, as she led the way to the edge of town.

She knew where she was going but had a brief attack of doubt. She'd used the same general area for her last two missions. The abandoned warehouses near the fishing wharf were convenient, but it was dangerous to use the same place more than once. The kunoichi supposed it didn't matter; she had lingered in Kiri too long anyway without making progress towards her goal. This would be her last mission here before she moved on.

"So, Ino-chan," Nobuhiro asked. "Where did you say you were from again?"

"Oh, here and there..." she answered evasively. "My line of work requires me to move around a lot, you know?" She giggled. It was actually true.

"There's really a hotel all the way out here? Are we close?" Nobuhiro eyed the dilapidated buildings and boarded-up windows, wringing his hands.

"It's a discreet place, good for business. Unfortunately the surrounding area is a dump. But fear not! We can take a shortcut through here." She stopped in front of an alley between two warehouses. She knew of an unlocked side door she could shove him through quickly.

"I don't like the look of this place..." he trailed off, taking a step back. "Maybe this was a bad idea."

The kunoichi fought down her annoyance and plastered on a charming smile. "It's perfectly safe as long as you're here to protect me, right Hideki-san?" she purred.

Nobuhiro took another step back, glancing around. It wasn't going to work. She hated doing things out in the open even if no one was around (clients didn't like it), but it looked like she wouldn't have a choice. He was a runner if she ever saw one.

"Hideki-san?" She took a step towards him and tripped over herself.

"Ow!" she cried, clutching her foot and looking up at him from the ground.

"Are you okay?" He asked, stepping forward. She slipped a hand down her boot.

"I don't know...what if it's broken? Can you come look at it? Please?" Nobuhiro edged closer, looking uncomfortable.

She struck. The kunai sliced through the fog and landed with deadly precision right between his eyes.

He disappeared in a puff of smoke.

The kunoichi had a quarter of a second to process the situation. She came to one conclusion.

Oh fuck!

The girl bolted. She dropped her henge and directed the extra chakra to her legs, increasing her
speed. She flew across the river and bounded up the wall of a nearby building, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, long pink hair streaming out behind her in the moonlight.

The bunshin's presence indicated only one thing: the mission had been a trap. Sakura had stayed in Kiri too long and they had found her.

A senbon whizzed past her ear, slicing her cheek open. Sakura chanced a glimpse over her shoulder to find no less than six white-masked ninja hot on her trail. *Shit!*

She leapt from the building back into the street, cut down an alley, smashed through a fence, and ran into...a dead end. Sakura gathered her chakra to her fist, preparing to punch through the brick wall, but four bodies suddenly appeared in her path. Sakura could feel the other two ANBU behind her. She crouched in her stance, chakra flaring. She prayed that none of those masks belonged to people she knew.

"Haruno Sakura," spoke a voice. "By order of the Hokage, you are under arrest for treason against Konoha."

*Not again,* was the missing-nin's last thought before she charged.
Two years earlier...

"Something weird is going on."

Sakura lifted her heavy head from the table, peering through half-lidded eyes. "Huh?" she articulated thickly.

"Good lord, somebody get this girl some coffee," a bossy voice commanded.

A moment later a steaming mug appeared in front of Sakura's face. "Here you are, senpai," a different voice chirped. She blinked and sat up a bit, taking a sip of the bitter liquid. It helped.

"Thanks Eri-chan," she managed to smile at the new intern with the short blonde curls.

"You're welcome Sakura-senpai, but you really should take better care of yourself." Her childlike voice sapped most of the bite from the rebuke.

"Yeah Sakura-san, quit getting conned into doubles or you'll work yourself to death. More importantly, you're making the rest of us look bad," agreed Daisuke.

"I know," Sakura grunted. "Either that or beg Shizune for a budget increase to install a pull-out futon in the break room..." Now that was a nice fantasy. What a shame the older nin was as stingy about the hospital budget as the Hokage was about her sake supply. There are some things medical-ninja just learn not to touch...ever.

"Sure, but then we'd have to move everything else out to make room for your stuff, Forehead. 'Cause if you could sleep here we'd never get rid of you," snipped Ino.

Sakura suppressed a snort. "Anyway, what's weird, Ino-pig?" She asked, steering the conversation away from her workaholic habits. This is a lunch break people, not an intervention.

"It's Shizune," Ino responded, low tone promising something juicy. "Earlier today I was looking for the pile of recent intakes to finish them...and she said not to bother! Said she'd be happy to do them herself!"

"Wow, the tyrant volunteered to do paperwork for you? For free?" Daisuke exclaimed. "Who did you have to lay around here to get that kind of favor?"
"That's just it! There's only one possible explanation," Ino continued, stabbing a fork into her salad with relish. "Shizune must have a boyfriend!"

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Don't listen to this nonsense, Eri-chan. Shizune is married to her work."

"Says the pot to the kettle," Ino quipped. Eri hid a giggle behind her hand.

"Still, you have to admit that's pretty out of character for her, Sakura-san," Daisuke pointed out.

"Hn. I can try to probe Tsunade-shishou for information later...assuming anyone ever sees her again." Sakura stared into her coffee thoughtfully. Just how long had her mentor been MIA for? Five days?

"Did Tsunade-sama go somewhere?" Eri asked, confused.

"No, but her birthday was last week. She's probably still lying around her office in an alcohol-induced coma," Ino drawled, popping a cherry tomato into her mouth.

"Or maybe she's got that bug that's been going around," Daisuke offered between bites of his sandwich. "It's in this season."

"The flu is so not fashionable," Ino objected. "Shizune already got it last week, and so did Fuu and Kimiko from medical records, not to mention both my teammates! If I'm next, I just know it'll be Shikamaru's fault —"

Sakura stood, cutting off the impending rant. "I've got patients to see. Coming, Eri-chan?"

"Y-yes, senpai!" the girl squeaked, gathering up her papers and following Sakura out the door.

"ACHOO!"

Ever the professional, Sakura ducked just in time.

"S-sorry, Sakura!" Hinata sniffled.

"It's okay Hinata, you didn't get me," Sakura laughed. "Half of Konoha's been in here, sneezing and hacking and puking on me all week; I'm used to it."

"Oh Sakura, that's awful! Um, a-aren't you worried you'll get it too?"

"Not really, I can always use my chakra to boost my immune system if I have to," Sakura replied, shining a light down Hinata's left ear.

"Wow, that's amazing! Can all medic-nin do that?" Hinata asked, opening her mouth so Sakura could examine her throat.

"Um, probably not...it only takes a minute amount of chakra to boost immunity, so you have to be able to redirect a tiny bit of it over a long period — as long as you want to be protected for. Most people would probably use too much without realizing it and end up exhausting themselves."

"Um...b-but Sakura, if you can do something like that, I wish you would, I'd hate to be the one to get you...get you...a...ACHOO!"

Sakura danced out of the way. "You know Hinata, the way things are going, I just may," she laughed. "Unfortunately you've got the same virus as everyone else, so antibiotics are useless, sorry."
She jotted down a prescription for an herbal tea to soothe congestion. "Make this as often as you like, though I can't promise it'll bring much relief. If symptoms change or you get any worse, please let me know." She tore off the paper and offered it to Hinata.

"Th-thank you, Sakura, I will," Hinata sniffed, accepting the prescription gratefully. A soft knock came from the door.

"Yes?" Sakura called.

A head of blonde curls peeked in. "Excuse me, Sakura-senpai."

"Oh there you are, Eri-chan. Come in," Sakura beckoned from her stool, where she sat putting the finishing touches on Hinata's chart. "What's up?"

Eri flounced over to her side, clutching her ever-present clipboard to her chest. "Shizune-senpai wants to see you in her office."

"Ah. Probably to foist the reports she offered to do for Ino back onto me," Sakura muttered. Eri hid her smile behind her clipboard. "Please tell her I'll be over in a moment."

"Yes, Sakura-senpai," Eri sang.

Sakura knocked on the door with her left hand, gripping a fresh cup of coffee in her right. *If only they made a coffee IV drip...hey, now that could be your next big research project. Nobel Prize for the addict, please...*

"Come in!" Shizune's muffled voice called from beyond the door.

Sakura opened it and stepped inside. She nearly dropped her drink in surprise. Shizune's office was incredibly...*neat*. Gone were the usual stacks of folders piled on top of folders, the rows of filing cabinets dominating the walls; there was not a loose paper in sight. Even the desk was visible. Sakura picked her jaw up off the (spotless) floor.

"Shizune-senpai...what the heck did you do to your office?"

"Hmm? Oh, I just did a bit of organizing. It's no big deal." She smiled serenely at Sakura.

Sakura stared. *Could Ino be right?*

"Uh. Okay. Well then. What did you want to talk to me about?" Sakura helped herself to a seat and blew on her coffee.

Shizune flipped through a report absently. "Oh, nothing...I just wanted to check on you, make sure you're doing okay...I know you're seeing a lot of patients with that virus that's been going around. Are you feeling well?"

Sakura raised an eyebrow. Shizune was a busy woman; it was a bit unusual for her to take such an interest in her subordinate's personal health. "Um, no, I feel fine actually. I'm thinking of boosting my immune system with a little extra chakra just in case, though."

"Oh, there's really no need for all that now!" Shizune said lightly. "You don't want to accidentally deplete your chakra; if you haven't caught it yet I'm sure you won't. It can't be all that contagious, right? Cookie, Sakura?" Shizune offered the tin.

Sakura stared. "Uh, no thanks," she declined. "Was there anything else you wanted?"
"Not really. Feel free to take off early today though. I'll see you tomorrow!" Shizune dismissed her with a friendly wave.

Sakura closed the door behind herself and stared down the hallway.

Yeah, Ino was definitely right, something's up with her.

Sakura walked past Tsunade's office on her way out, but there was only darkness in the crack under the door.

"Sakura-chaaaan! You made it!" Naruto grinned up at Sakura over his bowl of ramen.

"Yeah, Shizune let me off early...it was weird," Sakura replied, pulling up a stool to Ichiraku's bar.

"Oi, oi! A miso ramen for Sakura-chan! And another pork ramen for me!" Naruto called to the owner.

"One miso ramen! One pork ramen!" Teuchi called back.

"Naruto, I can order for myself. What if I wanted something else?"

"But you love the miso ramen!" Naruto protested. 'Love' was a stronger word than Sakura would've used, but her teammate did know her tastes.

"Eh, I guess," Sakura admitted with a sheepish smile as Teuchi set a hot bowl in front of her. "Thank you, Teuchi-san. How is Ayame-san?"

"She's sick," Teuchi replied brusquely, turning back to the kitchen.

Sakura raised an eyebrow and leaned over to whisper to Naruto. "Hey, what's with Teuchi tonight?"

"I don't know. He won't speak unless spoken to, and even then he barely talks. But he smiles the whole time like nothing's wrong, it's weird."

"Maybe he's upset his daughter's sick?"

"Everybody's getting sick, it's not a big deal, just a cold. They get better in a few days. Something else must be bothering him." Naruto slurped his noodles noisily.

Sakura picked at her vegetables with her chopsticks. "Shizune was acting weird too today. She was offering to do paperwork for people...and she organized her office."

Naruto's feeding frenzy slowed. "Yanno, Shikamaru's been funny lately too. All cheerful. Yesterday I asked him if he wanted to skive off and get some ramen with me, and he turned me down. Said he had a lot of work to do. Only he actually seemed to be doing it...and not complaining..."

Sakura stared into her bowl, unsettled.

Naruto frowned. "We're not imagining it, right? Should we talk to someone about this?"

"And say what? That people are acting funny and it must be from some kind of weird enemy jutsu...that makes people act funny? We don't have any proof; we're not even sure anything's really happening," Sakura reasoned. "I guess if we see more weird stuff, we should tell someone...but not before then or we'll look like idiots. Which we probably are."
Naruto nodded. "Hey Sakura-chan, how 'bout we meet up, same time next week? If we see anything else strange by then we'll report it, and if we don't, we forget about it."

"Deal," Sakura agreed. She stood up and stretched her stiff back, leaving money on the counter. Naruto looked at her half-finished bowl with longing. Sakura rolled her eyes.

"You can have the rest."

"Yeeeees! You're the best, Sakura-chan!" he cheered, diving in.

"Goodnight, Naruto."

"'ight, Shakula-cham!" he answered, a long noodle dangling out of the corner of his mouth.

Sakura grinned on her way out.

For the next few days, everywhere Sakura went people were sneezing and coughing — a disproportionate amount of which seemed to be directed at her.

*Now that's an alarming thought. Maybe you're losing it. Can caffeine withdrawal cause paranoia?*

Sakura, ever the cautious type, decided some extra immune system support would be worth the edge of fatigue that came with continual low-level chakra use. She'd been protecting herself ever since an incident four days ago when a child patient of hers literally held his breath and waited until she came within range to cough on her. She'd barely escaped that one with her life and would rather be safe than sorry.

One by one, her co-workers were dropping out sick. She hadn't seen Ino in several days. Shizune should have been manic, trying to fill shifts with a constantly dwindling supply of staff, but all she did was smile and offer cookies to everyone. Sakura couldn't figure it out.

And still nobody had seen Tsunade.

Sakura sighed and pulled out yet another folder from the dusty filing cabinet. *November, December, January, February, March...here it is, April.* Just as she opened the thick file, the medical records door creaked. Blonde curls popped into view.

"Sakura-senpai? What are you doing down here?" Eri asked.

"Eri-chan, you're still here! I didn't think we had any other staff left," Sakura said, only half-joking. "I'm looking up the admission records for this month, I want to find out how many people have gotten sick exactly. This is looking like a full-blown epidemic."

"What's it say?" The small girl peeked over her shoulder.

Sakura glanced down at the figures. "It says...it says...oh god...this has to be half of Konoha's entire population!" The color drained from Sakura's face. It was far worse than she imagined. And this was just the number of *reported* cases...

Sakura snapped the file shut. "I need to get this photocopied. And I need to speak with Shizune immediately. And I *really* need a cup of coffee." She could feel the headache coming on already.

"I'll get it!" chirped Eri.

"It's okay, Eri-chan, the break room is on my way," Sakura said, setting off at a brisk pace. *With so...*
A few minutes later, armed with cup in one hand, photocopied file in the other, Sakura marched straight to Shizune's office and rapped on her door.

"Come in!"

Sakura let herself in and sat down with a businesslike thump, wasting no time getting to the point. "Senpai, I think we have an emergency situation."

Shizune, sitting at her desk, looked up from her paperwork.

"What do you mean?" She sat back and picked up Tonton, scratching the pig behind her ears.

"I mean an epidemic. This virus is out of control, about half the population has been admitted here in the last few weeks," Sakura replied, using her no-nonsense voice. Shizune fed Tonton some cookie crumbs.

"Oh Sakura, you worry too much. It's not a deadly outbreak or anything, just an unusually contagious cold. Everyone's fine, right?"

"Everyone is not fine, senpai! I don't think you're taking this seriously enough. We are horrifically understaffed, and if the disease is really that infectious things are only going to get worse before they get better." Sakura came close to shouting at her superior.

"But there's nothing we can do. Let the epidemic run its course, everyone will get sick for a short while, then things will go back to normal. It's not such a big deal."

Sakura stared. "Shizune-senpai. The people who get sick...we don't even know what this virus is. What if they don't go back to normal?" Sakura looked at Shizune. Shizune's eyes narrowed imperceptibly.

"I will speak to Tsunade-sama about it," she acquiesced, still stroking Tonton.

Sakura seethed and bit her tongue.

"Was there anything else you wanted?"

"No, senpai."

Shizune held up a tin. "Care for a cookie?" She smiled sweetly.

Sakura glared and left without another word.

The pale solution in the test tube glimmered under the flourescent lights. Sakura added the protease carefully, followed by the RNase to remove solids from the cell (a skin sample she discreetly scraped off a sick patient).

Sakura was not one to sit on her butt and do nothing if a situation needed fixing. If Shizune didn't want to take this threat seriously, Sakura would find out what this virus was and make her take it seriously.

Now to precipitate the DNA with alcohol. Her gloved hands picked up the flask of freezing ethanol and poured it into the test tube. She placed the sample in the centrifuge sitting on the lab's counter next to her workspace. After taking it for a spin, a tangled mass of white strands clumped together at
Bingo.

Sakura helped herself to another cup of coffee as the pellet air-dried. A few minutes later she had the extracted DNA suspended in water and mounted under a powerful microscope. She pressed her eye to the lens eagerly.

The virus’ DNA was quite normal.

What gives? It looks like any ordinary cold. Why is it spreading so aggressively?

Sakura studied the specimen for over an hour, taking meticulous notes. She compared several chromosomal locations with a database containing information on common viral strains, but found nothing too unusual. Sure, there were a few mutations here and there, but that was only to be expected.

There was one location that piqued her curiosity. The nucleotides were arranged in such a way that they looked nonfunctional, like a piece missing from a puzzle. It was probably a useless mutation that had no evolutionary value and was in the process of slowly disappearing from the strain. At this chromosomal location, Sakura conjectured that maybe it once contained instructions for the host cell that controlled either protein production or reproduction. Obviously there were no reference books for each of the billions of variations of viruses found in humans, so Sakura just didn't know for sure.

Yet.

Growling in frustration, she put her lab coat away and packed up her stuff. She had a sick friend to check in on, and who knew? Maybe Ino would have some ideas about more tests she could run on the DNA sample. Sure! Just picture it, you and Ino sitting around her living room, chatting about men, hospital gossip, that stupid new zombie movie...and molecular biology.

Sakura burst into peals of laughter as she marched down the hallway on her way out. Eri stared after her in bewilderment.

"Ino-pig!"

Sakura rapped on the door again, shifting the grocery bag onto her hip.

"Hey, open up! I've got soup and stuff for you!"

"Who is it?” a muffled voice called from inside the little apartment.

"It's Sakura of course! Who else calls you 'pig' with such affection?"

The door cracked open, revealing Ino's smiling face.

"Hi, Sakura! How are you?"

Sakura stared. "What did you do with Ino?"

"Huh?"

"You know, Ino. Long blonde hair, about yay high, looks just like you...except much bitchier."

"You're a riot, Sakura," Ino giggled. Was that...sarcastic or not?
Sakura blinked. "You must really be sick. I, uh, brought you soup. And magazines. And stuff."

"Thank you Sakura, but I'm actually feeling much better now."

"Oh. Really?" Sakura blinked in surprise.

"Yep. I think I'm over it. I was just about to go to bed actually. But thanks anyway."

"Ah. Okay. You're welcome...I guess, uh...I'll see you at work tomorrow then?"

"Sure thing. Goodnight, Sakura...a...a-CHOO!"

Sakura swerved to the right, narrowly avoiding the blast and making intimate friends with a nearby flowering hedge. She was still boosting her immune system with chakra, but that didn't mean a point-blank hit like that would've been safe.

"Are you sure you're better? You seem off to me," Sakura pointed out incredulously, plucking a twig from her short, pink hair.

"Everything's fine, I promise! 'Night!" The door clicked shut on Ino's smile.

The setting sun dyed the streets of Konoha a rich ochre. Sakura hurried to Ichiraku. She was already late, and she didn't want to miss Naruto; she was dying to hear his reaction to her news of more strange behavior. She wondered what their next move would be.

As if Ino's weirdness yesterday wasn't enough, it seemed to be spreading through all the medical staff at the hospital. They carried on as normal, making small talk and doing their jobs, but something was off. Everyone was just a tad too *smiley*, a bit too *polite*. The change was almost imperceptible, but once she noticed it, it was unnerving.

Sakura pulled aside the curtain and stepped into the cozy restaurant. She spotted Naruto on his usual stool in the middle of the polished wooden counter.

"Naruto! I'm so glad you're still here, I have so much to tell you," Sakura gushed, taking a seat next to him.

"Sakura-chan. It's nice to see you. What's on your mind?" Naruto smiled and picked up some noodles with his chopsticks.

"I found more people acting weird besides Shizune. Ino, and the people at work...they're all being too *nice*." Naruto laughed. "That doesn't sound so terrible. Why are you complaining about people being nice?"

Sakura blushed, feeling a bit foolish. "That's not the point! The point is that it's *weird*. It's an unusual change, and we agreed last week that if we saw anything else strange, we'd talk to someone about it...right?"

"What strange things? Who would we talk to about people being too nice? The Hokage?" he chuckled into his soup.

Sakura grew distressed. "What happened to what you said last week? Why aren't you taking this seriously anymore?"
"Relax, Sakura, it's not a big deal."

Sakura was getting real tired of people telling her to relax. She was about to tell him so when a bowl of steaming ramen appeared in front of her.

"Have some miso ramen on the house, Sakura-san," Teuchi interrupted. Sakura stared at his smiling face, then at Naruto's identical one.

"I already ate." She got up and left.

Major alarm bells were ringing in Sakura's head now. Something was wrong in Konoha. On a hunch, Sakura went home and browsed through her pilfered copy of the hospital admission records. She didn't think it was a coincidence that people started acting weird shortly after an unidentified virus began infecting everyone in sight. She couldn't possibly imagine what one had to do with the other, but she couldn't ignore the facts either.

After a cursory examination, Sakura could see she was onto something. Many of the names on the list were people she'd observed acting oddly. Shizune's name was on there...Ayame, the ramen chef's daughter, as well as Teuchi himself...and Ino...and as of a few days ago, Naruto...

Sakura needed to talk directly to Tsunade, but no one had seen the woman in two and a half weeks. Going through her aides to make an appointment was no good, she couldn't trust any of the medical staff anymore. She needed to talk to some figure of authority, though, and she needed to do it now. But who?

Sakura smacked her palm into her forehead at her own shortsightedness. Of course! Kakashi-sensei. His name wasn't on the admission records, he'll know what to do!

Sighing in relief, Sakura bounded off for her sensei's place on the other side of town.

Sakura climbed the rickety wooden staircase to her sensei's second floor apartment eagerly. She knocked on the door and waited.

And waited.


Determined, she decided to use the more personal, teammates-only entrance. She descended the staircase and shimmed up the drain pipe to her sensei's bedroom window. Grabbing hold of the potted plant holder beneath it for support (empty, save for a single dying cactus...Sensei must have worked hard to neglect Mr. Ukki. How do you even manage to kill a cactus?) she thrust her head to the side to peer into the window.

Her knuckles were poised in the air about to tap on the glass when she froze. Kakashi was home alright, not to mention naked and dripping wet. His back was to her as he toweled off his hair. Sakura's eyes fixed on his rear first (you can't blame the girl), before traveling up his back to a patch of dark color between toned shoulder blades.

Is that a tattoo? When the hell would sensei have gotten that? Or maybe it's just a rash?

Sakura squinted and leaned forward trying to get a better look. The drain pipe supporting her let out a groan.
Kakashi whirled and locked eyes on her through the window, expression thunderous. Sakura started.

"What do you think you're doing?" Kakashi snapped, throwing his window open. Sakura stared in shock at the tone of voice of her normally easy-going sensei.

"N-nothing! I didn't see anything, I swear!" Sakura insisted, shaking her head. "I just wanted to see if you were home, I'm sorry!"

Kakashi eyed her, mouth a hard line. "You didn't see anything?"

"N-no! Nothing good, promise!" Sakura replied, forcing a smile.

Kakashi relaxed, frown melting into a grin. "That's okay, Sakura. It's nothing you haven't caught a glimpse of before on missions anyway, eh?" He chuckled. "You might as well come in, I'll meet you at the door."

Unnerved, Sakura slid down the drain pipe.

"So what you brings you here out of the blue? Wanted to pay your respects to your favorite teacher?" Kakashi quipped, indicating Sakura should have a seat on the sofa. She plopped down on the worn gray leather, shaking her head.

"Uh, not this time, sensei. I need to talk to you about something important."

"Go for it. I'll make tea." He drifted away into the tiny kitchen.

This gave Sakura pause. "Since when do you drink tea, Kakashi-sensei?"

"Since recently. It's good for your health, you know," Kakashi called over the creak of cupboards opening and closing.

Since when does Kakashi-sensei take care of his health?

Shrugging off an unidentifiable feeling, Sakura continued, "Well health is kind of what I wanted to talk to you about. You must have noticed something weird is going on in the village lately."

The sound of boiling water floated from the kitchen.

"Sensei?" Sakura prompted.

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Just that for the last few weeks, more and more people have been acting...funny. You haven't noticed?"

"Funny like how?" Kakashi asked, appearing in the doorway to the living room. He had a peaceful expression on his face and held out a tray with two steaming mugs on it. "Tea, Sakura?"

Sakura couldn't help but stare. "Um, no thanks."

"No really, I insist." Kakashi flashed her a smile beneath the mask. He held out the tray obstinately. Sakura took a mug and stared into its murky contents.

"Funny like...not themselves. Off, somehow. It's hard to explain." She snuck a glance at her sensei.
"Hmm. I'm afraid I don't really know what you mean. Everyone seems normal to me," Kakashi responded smoothly, taking a sip of his own chipped mug.

Sakura was getting a very bad feeling. *But his name wasn't on the admission records! Why is he acting this way? Oh no —*

"Sensei, you haven't been...sick lately, have you?"

"Hmm?" Kakashi paused, thinking. "Well now that you mention it, I did have that bug that's been going around. Don't worry Sakura, I'm sure it's not contagious." Smile. He glanced at Sakura's unmoving hands. "Drink your tea before it gets cold."

The hair stood up on the back of Sakura's neck. How could she have made such an oversight? Kakashi-sensei *NEVER* goes to the doctor's no matter how sick he is! *Of course he's not listed on the records!*

"...I'm not thirsty," Sakura replied with a dry throat, setting down her mug.

Kakashi looked at her. "Then can I get you something to eat?" he asked, just a bit too casually.

"Since when do you offer anyone free food?" Sakura shot back, eyes narrowing. She was beginning to sweat.

Kakashi said nothing. He put down his own mug before locking eyes with her for a long moment. Sakura's stomach flipped-flopped.

"Is there...something else I can get you?" Kakashi asked, voice low. There was a peculiar gleam in his eye. Suddenly he was close enough she could smell him. Sakura froze as his face inched nearer. Before she understood what was happening, Kakashi had pulled his mask down. She could count his eyelashes, felt his warm breath fanning across her lips...

Sakura yelped and leapt off the couch as though burned.

"Kakashi-sensei, *what the hell!*"

A dark look clouded Kakashi's face for an instant. It was utterly foreign on him; Sakura glanced at the door, taking an automatic step back.

"Sakura," he said, tone gentle, that relaxing smile painted on his lips again. He raised his hands in a supplicating gesture. "Wait...it's okay, I just want to..."

Kakashi lunged, but Sakura was already out the door. She flew down the staircase. She stomped her chakra-laden feet into the wood, turning it into splinters in an attempt to slow him down. Fortunately he didn't seem to be following; she knew she couldn't outrun the infamous Copy-nin if he *really* wanted to catch her.

This was an emergency. She had to see the Hokage immediately. Heart pounding, Sakura set off for her shishou's house at a sprint, trying to ignore the chills running down her spine.

It was past midnight by the time she reached the northernmost section of the village. Sakura had been to Tsunade's house only once before and was struggling to remember where exactly it was.

She darted up a street that looked vaguely familiar, eyes roving over the manicured lawns and front porches for a spark of recognition. She got nothing. She was beginning to worry she'd never find the
place when she spotted an empty cardboard box next to a trash can full of equally empty bottles on
the curb. The side of the box read 'Junmai Daiginjo Sake.'

_Bingo. Why am I not surprised she buys in bulk?_

Sakura dashed up the lawn to the front door and knocked wildly for at least five minutes. A sleep-
tousled Tsunade opened the door, flooding the patio with light.

"Sakura? Is that you? Do you have any idea what time it is?" The Hokage yawned, rubbing her
eyes.

"Shishou!" Sakura shouted, unable to remember the last time she'd been so glad to see her mentor. "I
need to talk to you! It's an emergency!"

"Sakura, unless the village is on fire it can wait until morning. Come back then." She started to close
the door.

Sakura stuck her foot in the jamb.

"I'm serious, shishou! Something really bad is going on in the village! There's this virus...and I think
it's making everyone act bizarrely! Kakashi-sensei tried to attack me! Something's very wrong!"

Sakura sucked in a breath and stared hard at Tsunade.

Tsunade stared back, cogs turning in her head. Finally she said, "I think you'd better come inside."

Sakura heaved a sigh of relief and followed Tsunade into her tastefully decorated (courtesy of
Shizune) living room. She collapsed onto the wide couch.

"Thank you for believing me, shishou! Nobody else has taken me seriously, but I think it's because
they're all infected. What should we do?" She dragged her fingers through her hair.

Tsunade stood facing the wall near the staircase, hands crossed behind her back in thought. "Are you
sure about all this, Sakura?"

"Yes! Absolutely!"

"How did you find out?"

"First I noticed people behaving oddly...and then I checked the admission records of the hospital
because of the epidemic and I realized there was a correlation. The people who are acting weird are
the same people who were admitted recently to be treated for that virus."

Tsunade studied a painted scroll hanging on the wall next to her collection of modern and ancient
ninja weapons. "You're a smart girl, Sakura. Have you told anybody else about this yet?"

"Nobody who believes me. Everyone I've talked to about it has been sick at some point."

"Well, you were right to come to me. Thank you, Sakura."

Tsunade turned around slowly. She had a benign smile on her face.

Sakura's heart stopped. She saw Tsunade's eyes flicker to the decorative ninjatou hanging on the
wall. She had a fraction of a millisecond to make her decision.

Sakura's fist cracked Tsunade squarely in the jaw just before the Fifth moved. She fell to the floor in
a heap, unconscious.
Sakura stared at her own hand in mute horror, as though it belonged to somebody else.

*Oh my god, oh my god...I just knocked out my shishou. I just attacked the Hokage!*

Panic flooded Sakura's veins. She had to get it together and make a plan. She couldn't tell who was infected and who wasn't. Maybe everyone was infected! And after this...after attacking the Hokage...

Sakura made the only decision she could.

Before leaving Tsunade's house, she straightened her mentor's unconscious form, lifting her onto the couch and flipped her onto her stomach.

"Sorry about this, Tsunade-shishou..."

Sakura ripped open the collar of Tsunade's robe, exposing her upper back. There, right between her shoulder blades in the same place as the one on Kakashi's back, was a rash. A deep red rash in the shape of a serpent eating its own tail.

Sakura memorized it. She pulled the ninjatou off the wall. It had white satin cloth wrapped around the handle, and an emerald green sheath flecked with gold. She used the blade to carefully scrape some skin cells off Tsunade's back.

"When I figure out what's going on, I promise I'll return this."

Sakura gave one last look to her unconscious mentor before slipping out the back door.

"Haruno Sakura!"

The four-man ANBU team burst through Sakura's front door and spilled into her living room.

"Haruno Sakura, you are under arrest for treason, by order of the Hokage!" The shout echoed off the walls of the empty apartment.

The squad searched the place from top to bottom, ransacking every drawer and cupboard, dumping Sakura's things onto her once-tidy carpet. But they found no weapons, scrolls, money, nor medical supplies. The figures finished their search and looked at each other, expressions hidden beneath their frozen white masks.

Haruno Sakura, missing-nin, was nowhere to be found.
Chapter Two: Not What It Looks Like

The glass bottle clinked as she ran. It contained the invaluable skin sample from the infected Hokage. Though tiny, it weighed heavily in the kunoichi's hip pouch.

Sakura stopped at a stream to refill her water bottle. This could be the last chance she'd get to do so; the thinning trees and dry heat in the air indicated that she was leaving River Country for Wind.

With nowhere else to go, Sunagakure was the obvious destination for a kunoichi stuck in Sakura's predicament. She needed help. She needed a lab to analyze the virus in, a safe haven to sleep in, and allies to protect her from Konoha's ANBU.

ANBU. What a terrifying thought. Sakura held no illusions about her strength. She might be able to take on one alone (she beat S-class Akatsuki member Sasori some time ago, but she had major help, and it had still been a close one), but an entire team was inconceivable. She'd be slaughtered, simple as that. She suppressed a shudder and sped up.

Gaara would help her. Between his friendship with Naruto, Konoha's alliance with Suna, and the help Sakura personally provided for he and his village in the past, the Sand's Kazekage was exactly who she needed to talk to.

The sun beat down mercilessly on Sakura's back as the soil turned to sand beneath her feet.

By the time Suna's looming gates and peach-colored clay spires became visible in the distance, Sakura was exhausted. She had run through the desert for days, stopping only briefly to rest or eat, driven by her desire to save her village and her haunting fear of ANBU. She didn't know how much of a head start she had, but she refused to squander it by sleeping.

There was a gust of dry wind and suddenly Sakura found herself surrounded by four figures in black. Her heart stopped for a moment, but they were not Konoha ANBU. They wore long, hooded black cloaks and cloths covering their faces, leaving only slits for their eyes. The gold and red insignia for Suna was emblazoned on their right sleeves.

Before she could speak or even understand what was happening, she found herself on her stomach, pinned face-down in the burning sand. Her hands and feet were bound tightly with some kind of thick woven rope.
"Haruno Sakura, you are under arrest for treason against our ally, Konoha," one of the cloaked figures above her spoke.

"WHAT!" Sakura exploded. "You don't understand, something's going on in Konoha! I came to warn the Kazekage about it!"

They said nothing. Sakura struggled desperately against her bonds, but they were blocking her chakra somehow.

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed in panic. "I have to talk to the Kazekage, bring me to Gaara! I can explain everything!"

Her pleas went unanswered as one of them threw a burlap bag over her head and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of rice flour.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" Sakura cursed. She would have punched the stone wall of her cell if her hands weren't tied in front of her.

How could you be so stupid?! Konoha's messenger birds fly faster than you can run, of course they'd be anticipating you! Did you really think they'd let a missing-nin just waltz into their village and have a chat with their Kage like old friends?

Well, we ARE old friends...

Shut up, you! Not helpful right now!

Sakura needed to think. Konoha's ANBU could be here at any time to retrieve her. She didn't know where she was, but she had never seen stone structures like this cell in Suna before; most buildings were made of clay. There were no windows, so she didn't know what time of day it was, or even if she was at ground-level. It was so dark she couldn't see her hands in front of her face. Also, she was physically exhausted from running for the last three days.

On the plus side, she seemed to be in a medium-security prison. There were only physical barricades (stone walls and steel bars) preventing her escape — barriers she could easily smash, if only she had access to her chakra. Which she didn't. Her bound hands and feet didn't hinder her nearly as much as whatever the ropes were made out of, which was clogging her chakra highways; otherwise she could have simply destroyed her prison by directing energy to her head or hip or something. They didn't seem to be taking her very seriously, but they knew enough about her enhanced strength to take away her primary weapon.

Okay, so the situation looked bleak.

If you can't escape with your body, you'll have to use your brain. So THINK!

Sakura concentrated until she thought she would burst a blood vessel, but no magic stroke of genius came to her. She collapsed onto her knees and hung her head.

Some time later, a light flooding across the stone floor made her look up. A guard entered carrying a lantern. Wordlessly, he approached the bars of her cell and slid a jug of water through the food slot. He turned to leave.

Sakura stared into the dancing flame of the lantern.

"Hey," she called. The guard glanced over his shoulder reflexively.
Sakura swallowed. She had to make this good.

"Look, I'm a medical-nin. Thanks to your people, I've sustained serious trauma to my occipital bone." When the guard only looked blank, she added, "Uh, the back of my head."

Awareness lit in his eyes. Even non-medical shinobi had enough training to understand that blows to the head — especially the back of the head — could be fatal.

Sakura continued, "I have nine of the twelve symptoms of brain swelling: headache, neck pain, dizziness, nausea, irregular breathing, vision problems, memory loss, poor coordination, and I think I just had a seizure."

The guard stared at her for a moment through narrowed eyes. "Where's your wound then?"

"It's under my hair. Come check for yourself, but if I don't receive medical attention immediately I could die within the hour." Please, please, please let them want to hand me over to Konoha alive...

The guard's mouth was a hard line. "Akira-san, get in here!" he called over his shoulder.

Ugh! What are the chances I get stuck with the intelligent guard?

The first guard turned to the newcomer. "The prisoner claims she's fatally injured. We're under orders to give Konoha back their missing-nin intact so they can deal with her. What should we do? Should we get Baki-sama?"

The guard called Akira paled. "Are you crazy? Baki-sama's daughter was just born an hour ago, there's no way we can pester him unless the village is under siege or something, he'll eat us alive! What if she's lying?"

The first guard bit his lip. "She's only a B-rank chuunin. I'll go check her, you back me up."

Using his key to unlock the cell door, he entered cautiously. He shut the door behind himself with a clunk.

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall."

"They're bound," Sakura protested, lifting her wrists.

"I said do it!" the guard barked. Sakura swiveled around on her knees and complied.

The guard approached her slowly from behind, holding up his lantern to get a good look at her head.

"Where is it?" he snapped.

"Just above my neck, you have to lift my hair."

She heard the rustle of fabric as the guard bent down. She sensed the heat from the lantern just behind her right ear. The second she felt the brush of fingertips against her nape, she jerked her head backwards into the lantern. It crashed to the ground and shattered, plunging the prison into darkness.

Sakura was on the startled guard in an instant, knocking him over. She rolled them sideways and pinned him with her body. She pressed the rope binding her wrists tight across his throat, cutting off his air.

She heard the other guard groping for the cell door in the dark. "Fuck! Kazuki-san! Where are you?! Answer me!"
Sakura bore down with all her weight. Her captive couldn't even make a peep. She felt his body start to go limp beneath her. Out of time, Sakura released her hold on the unmoving guard below her. She didn't know if he was dead or unconscious, and she had no time to wonder about it. She groped around his body in the dark. Her hands stumbled across the cold steel of a kunai strapped to his thigh; she slid her bonds against it to cut her hands free, slicing her wrist open in her haste.

"KAZUKI-SAN!" The other guard got the door open and began blindly charging through the cell, hoping to run into them.

She grabbed the kunai and freed her feet next. She felt her chakra control return in a rush as the ropes fell away.

The remaining guard slammed into her; they both tumbled head over heels. Her head cracked against the stone floor. She landed under him on her back, something sharp piercing her side. He tried to grab her throat, but Sakura directed chakra to her legs. She pulled her knees back and propelled him off with her feet, flinging him into the opposite wall. He smashed into it with a thunderous crack. Sakura heard chunks of stone rain onto the floor.

Light flooded the cell as two more guards appeared carrying lanterns. They took in the scene: opened cell door, decimated wall, blood and glass everywhere, and three Sand guards lying on the floor either injured or dead. One particularly bloodied one raised his head and choked out, "The prisoner escaped! Hurry, get Baki-sama NOW!"

Both guards went white and bolted at top speed out of the room. Sakura dropped the henge and stood. Oh god, oh god, did I just kill two Sand nin? She waited a moment for the guards to get a head start, then cautiously peered through the doorway.

The next room was an empty guard-room. Sakura spotted her pack and hip pouch underneath a stone desk, Tsunade's ninjatou propped next to them. She hastily slung her pack on, attached her hip pouch and rearranged her weapons. Retrieving a piece of broken glass from her cell, she leaned back against the wall next to the open entrance of the guard-room. She carefully angled the glass shard in her hand, examining the stone hallway in its reflection. There were Sand shinobi everywhere, running back and forth and shouting.

Crap.

Sakura dropped the glass and regrouped, looking around the room. Though stone as well, it looked less like a dungeon than the prison: there were two chairs, a fake potted plant, a fold-up card table with dirty magazines spread across it, lanterns hanging from the ceiling...the ceiling!

Sakura nearly wept with joy when she spotted the air vent. She pushed the card table under it, punched through the metal grate and clambered up. It was pitch dark except for the light shining from the occasional grate. She crawled hurriedly, suppressing her chakra and listening to the sound of chaos below her. She turned corner after corner, trying to navigate away from the noise. She went on for what seemed like hours, though it was probably only a few minutes or so. Eventually it grew quiet. Sakura chanced a peek through the next grate.

It was an empty stone stairwell, damp walls lined with flickering torches. She crouched and waited for a long time, healing her wrist and side wound to the point where they no longer bled. No one appeared.

Sakura opened the grate as silently as she could and dropped down to the ground. The landing jarred her; as her adrenaline rush faded she was starting to feel her injuries. Exhaustion was creeping in on her as well, fogging her mind. She needed to get somewhere safe, fast. She sacrificed some precious chakra to henge into a Sand guard again. She made her way up the stairs, silent as a shadow. At the top there was a plain wooden trapdoor, somewhat dusty. Sakura listened hard. She lifted it, peeking
Light blinded her. She was outside at street level; the stone prison must have been underground. She saw a guard sitting in a chair facing away from her, reading a newspaper. Another was nodding in an adjacent chair, about to fall asleep. They were surrounded by buildings, and Sakura could hear the sounds of the street nearby, but no one else was around. Sakura hurled two senbon. Each landed squarely in the back of the guards’ necks, hitting the C3 cervical spinal nerve and paralyzing them. The newspaper slowly slid out of the first's grip and fell to the floor.

*Four. Four Sand ninja. I'm an enemy of Suna now, too...in earnest.*

Sakura scrambled out of the trapdoor and stripped one of the guards. She pulled his baggy robes over her own, doing her best to wipe the blood and dirt from her henged features. Satisfied, she stifled her limp and turned a few corners, following the street sounds. She walked out into a market and tried to blend in.

She recognized the area from previous trips. The Kazekage's tower was to the west, and the side gates were just northeast of here. She walked down the sand-dusted street, keeping to the shadows of the great beige buildings as best she could, traveling under colorful tarps and awnings and avoiding eye contact with passersby.

The guard tower drew near. Sakura tried to seem as normal as possible as she passed through the gates. She left her hood down; her henged form didn't need it and it might draw suspicion. One of the tower guards glanced up as she passed. She nodded politely. The guard went back to his conversation with the other.

Sakura remembered how to breathe. She kept her head down and continued walking across the blinding desert sand. She walked and walked until she could no longer feel her feet and Sunagakure was long out of sight. She held it together until she reached the side of a great cliff. Her eyes scanned along the bottom until spying a crack big enough for her to slip inside. She staggered in as deep as she could and collapsed into a heap.

She was out cold before she hit the ground.

Sakura woke slowly, blood pounding in her head. It was dark out, but she had no idea how long she'd been unconscious for. She sat up, squinting her eyes against the too-bright light seeping in the entrance of her little cavern. Dragging a hand through her tangled pink locks, she probed her body with chakra, assessing her injuries.

She felt like she got into a fight with an oncoming train and lost. She had a probable concussion from where her head hit the stone floor, a poorly healed stab wound from an unknown weapon in her side, and her cut wrist was bleeding again. She felt two broken ribs, plus a hairline fracture on her shin that she didn't even remember getting. She was covered from head to toe with large purple and yellow bruises, as well as microscopic lesions from rolling around in broken glass.

*You're a mess.* Sakura sighed and got to work healing herself. She couldn't stay long, she wanted to get as far away from both Fire and Wind Country as possible.

But she had no idea where to go.

Sakura put her head in her hands. *North of Fire and Wind are smaller countries...that's good, I should steer clear of the five great nations whenever possible — it's not feasible to keep up a henge 24/7. I need a place where I can take missions or do medical work for a living without worrying*
Amegakure: a village shrouded in mystery due to a strict isolationist policy since the Third Shinobi World War. No one in the five great shinobi nations knew exactly what was going on in its unnamed country at any given moment. She could disappear there completely...

But it was a dangerous village. Sakura had heard rumors of a ruthless, mistrustful leader in Ame called Hanzou. He was supposedly hostile to outsiders, cruel to his own people, and literally venomous. But these were just rumors; no one really knew what went on behind Ame's closed borders. Was it worth the risk? Sakura weighed the chances of being captured by either Konoha or Suna's ANBU against a mysterious figure who may or may not still be in power. She knew what she had to do.

Sakura rested and healed herself about seventy percent of the way. She could finish the rest on the road, no need to deplete her chakra reserves all in one go. She stood unsteadily, stretching her aching muscles and cracking sore joints. She performed a quick henge. Her now dark brown hair up in two Chinese-style buns, Sakura decided that traveling as Tenten would be nicely inconspicuous. She packed up her things and strapped Tsunade's ninjatou to her back. She made sure her shishou's precious skin sample was secure in her hip pouch. Glancing outside to check that she was still alone, Sakura left the cave and set off towards the treeline in the distance.

She had a long run north ahead of her.

True to its name, the Village Hidden in the Rain had the stormiest sky Sakura had ever seen. The village rose out of the barren rock bed like a great mechanical beast, all steel towers and pipes and electrical wires. Its coloring seemed to imitate the sky above it: both a cold gray.

When Sakura reached its borders, it was raining heavily.

That's odd...where are the gates? The guards? Ame's defenses are rumored to be impenetrable...

Sakura was wary. Though daytime, the clouded sky cast a surreal twilit dimness over the village that made it feel like perpetual evening. She walked through the wet concrete streets, gazing up at steel buildings of staggering height in various shades of navy, gray, and rust. Thick black wires snaked overhead from pole to pole, carrying electricity to power the many glowing neon signs that hung above shops and shady businesses. Mysterious pipes spilled out of walls like metallic intestines, burrowing into the concrete and heading off to unknown destinations. The gutters dripped constantly in the background. Through the dimness, Sakura observed the people of Ame. Many wore hooded cloaks like hers, in somber colors; others wore masks to hide their faces. Sakura was using her Tenten henge again; she didn't want to take any chances.

She hadn't even gone 500 feet when a figure appeared before her to block her way. It was a young woman with an origami rose in her blue hair...wearing an Akatsuki cloak.

Crap! Sakura jumped into her fighting stance. The woman did not follow suit. Sakura looked around wildly, sure she was about to be attacked from a blind spot. Where is her partner? Akatsuki always travel in pairs!

"I'm not here to fight you," the woman said in a flat voice.

"Then what do you want with me?" Sakura snapped, hackled raised.

"I'm here to ask you some questions for our village's protection. All intruders must state their name,
Sakura raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Then you're not here on Akatsuki business? Who are you working for? Hanzou?"

"No. Hanzou is dead. I am here on behalf of Pain-sama."

Sakura hardly could trust the woman, but she did not want to pick a fight with an S-class criminal in an unfamiliar place either. She was debating whether to run when a group of passersby suddenly noticed the blue-haired woman.

"Tenshi-sama! Tenshi-sama!"

"What a blessing to meet you!"

"Please, Tenshi-sama, would you bring this to Pain-sama for me? Consider it an offering," an old woman croaked. She held out a bag of rice.

Angel? Sakura thought, taken aback by the villagers' affection for a member of a criminal organization.

"Pain-sama would wish you to keep your goods," the young woman replied coolly. "But I will bear your well wishes to him." She turned toward Sakura. "Follow me. We will continue our conversation in private."

The woman leapt up the side of the nearest skyscraper. Sakura hesitated. She could try to run, but even if she got away (which she likely wouldn't) she had nowhere better to go. Amegakure was the safest place for her now. Steeling her resolve, she ran up the tower and took to the rooftops, following the black cloak with the red clouds.

The blue-haired woman reached a hollow alcove atop a very tall steel tower in the heart of the village. She stopped and waited for Sakura to catch up. Sakura joined her, arms crossed over her chest. "Who are you? What do you want with me?"

"Release your henge."

Sakura hid her surprise at having been caught. "Why?"

"I need to verify your real identity before you can be allowed into the village."

Sakura didn't see how revealing her identity to another criminal could cause much damage. It's not like the Akatsuki would rat her out to ANBU. She dropped her henge.

"Your name?"

"Haruno Sakura."

"Your purpose for coming to Ame?"

"I'm...a missing-nin." Sakura didn't want to let Konoha's enemies know anything strange was going on in her village. She hoped the woman wouldn't demand further details.

"How long do you plan to stay?"

Sakura had no idea how long it would take her to find a lab and analyze the virus. "I'm not sure. A month or two at most," she guessed.
"Thank you for your cooperation. I will relay your information to Pain-sama, who will make the final decision about whether you may remain. In the meantime you may do as you like, though all residents are forbidden from disguising themselves within our borders. If we need you we will find you." The woman turned to leave.

"Wait! Who are you? Who is Pain?"

"I am called Tenshi by the villagers; I am Pain-sama's envoy. Pain-sama is Ame's leader, savior, and guardian." The blue-haired shinobi turned on her heel and vaulted to the next rooftop.

"How did you know I was here?" Sakura called out.

The woman paused. She turned her head and spoke over her shoulder to Sakura. "The rain is Pain-sama's eyes and ears. He is the heart of Amegakure, and the heart always knows who bears good or ill will..." She dissolved into thousands of tiny white origami papers.

Sakura stared in bewilderment.

"Pain-sama" must have decided to let her stay, because Sakura didn't hear from the blue-haired nin again. She checked herself into a run-down inn until she could find a more permanent residence. She needed funds first, meaning work.

Sakura soon discovered that, bizarrely, there were no hospitals in Amegakure. That left her the option of doing missions for a living. After asking around for half a day with no luck, someone informed her that there was no ninja registration system in Ame. To take missions, one had to either be approached directly by clients after earning a reputation, or check the many bulletin boards posted around town (in places of varying sketchiness, often bars). Needless to say, all the good missions were the word-of-mouth kind. Sakura resigned herself to working her way up the ladder.

It didn't take long. In a village with no hospitals, Sakura's medical skills proved invaluable. After doing a few basic reconnaissance missions, a smattering of guard missions, and even some document transportation assignments, Sakura started to earn some notoriety for having saved several important people with her medical jutsu.

She was in a bar nursing a bowl of cold soba, bent over a napkin calculating how many ryou she'd need to move into a one-bedroom apartment when a stranger approached her. He had brown skin and snow white hair, which he wore in a long braid down his back. He was dressed in loose-fitting dark green clothes with a black sash tied around his waist. Sakura noted that his youthful, even features were fairly handsome.

"Excuse me...you're that new pink-haired medic, aren't you?"

Sakura raised an auspicious eyebrow. "Maybe. Who's asking?"

The man studied her for a moment, arms crossed over his chest. "My name is Haji. I have a proposition you may be interested in."

Sakura's eyebrows disappeared into her hairline. "Well then, please have a seat, Haji-san. I'm Sakura."

Haji joined her. He leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands folded together. He appeared to consider something a moment before he spoke.

"My partner and I are scheduled to embark on a mission of...rather significant import next month.
Normally I would never invite a newcomer to join us, but for this particular mission we are badly in need of a medic-nin. Medical-ninja are hard to find around here, and your name has been floating around the city of late. You are rumored to be rather proficient. Is this true?"

Sakura was the personal apprentice of the best medic-nin the ninja world had ever seen, but he didn't need to know that. "I know what I'm doing," she shrugged.

His shrewd brown eyes seemed to call her bluff. Nodding to himself, he continued, "Well, Sakura-san, I would like to formally extend an offer to you. Unfortunately, you can only be debriefed on the mission's details if you accept."

"What's the pay?"

"One million up front, another million upon completion."

Sakura picked her jaw up off the floor. Only S-rank missions went for over a million ryou. She held up a hand. "Whoa there. You're offering two million ryou for a job you can't tell me anything about, because you specifically need a medic-nin? Do I look like I was born yesterday? This mission must be big. Very big. And exceptionally dangerous, no doubt."

"I see your powers of inductive reasoning are not too shabby either," Haji quipped.

Sakura bit her lip in thought. The money would be a huge relief (her savings were almost depleted), but even more than that, she needed something else...

"I will accept on one condition."

"Name it."

"I need help finding a laboratory I can conduct medical research in. In private."

"Done." Haji held out his hand. Sakura grasped it and shook. He smiled and stood. "Let me take you to meet my partner, who will be acting as our team captain. Sora will explain everything to you."

Thoughts whirling with curiosity, Sakura followed him out of the bar.

Haji lead her to a rocky training field on the outskirts of town situated next to an abandoned factory. It was empty, save for one small woman tossing senbon at a target on the far side of the lot.

"Where's your partner?" Sakura asked, looking around.

"Right there. HEY SORA!" Haji shouted to the girl, who turned and trotted over.

*Oh. A kunoichi.* Sakura thought in surprise. It was unusual for a woman to be a team captain.

She had straight, waist-length black hair that she wore braided down her back like Haji, and clever blue eyes. She wore loose clothes similar to her partner's, but a deep shade of blue tied with a white sash. She assessed Sakura with a frown before proceeding to frisk her wordlessly.

"Hey!" Sakura protested at the sudden violation of personal space, but she was roundly ignored.

"You found our medic-nin, I take it?" Sora asked Haji when she finished, nodding to herself in approval. "No bugs. Well done, Haji."

"Thanks. Sakura-san, this is our captain, Sora of the Crimson Tide," Haji replied, leaning in to give
the girl a quick kiss on the cheek. "I just call her 'wife.' Or 'ma'am.'"

Sakura nearly fell over. *Ooh, I see. No wonder they want a medic-nin on their mission — to help protect each other.*

"Uh, nice to meet you, Taichou," Sakura said, extending her hand to shake. Sora crushed it with her tiny one.

"I dunno. She's got a weak grip." The kunoichi raised a critical black eyebrow. Sakura put some chakra into it.

"Ah, much better," Sora grinned, pumping Sakura's hand with enthusiasm. She slung an arm around Sakura's shoulders. "We should get along just fine. Now Sakura-chan, dear, you should know that once I explain the mission to you, there is no backing out. It's highly classified information, so should you choose to no longer participate, or misrepresent yourself or your abilities, you are also choosing to no longer exist. You understand, right?" She offered a charming smile.

Perturbed, Sakura swallowed. "Got it."

"Wonderful!" Sora gushed, death threats forgotten. She patted Sakura on the back. "This is going to be so much fun!"

Sakura coughed. "So, uh, what is the mission exactly?" she asked, hoping she made the right decision in accepting.

Sora flashed her a dazzling, dimpled grin.

"We're going to assassinate the daimyou of Lightning Country."
Sakura crumpled to her knees, panting in exhaustion. She wiped an afternoon's worth of sweat and dirt from her brow. Sora was a true slavedriver.

Kakashi-sensei never pushed me this hard. Then again, I never had to prepare to assassinate one of the most important political figures in the world before...

Sakura rolled over just in time to avoid a senbon to the face.

"You can't quit yet, Sakura!" Sora sneered, arms crossed in front of her chest. "Your ninjutsu is shameful. How dare you call yourself a ninja if you can't even master a few lousy water techniques?"

Sakura grit her teeth. "I've used a water technique in my poison-extraction jutsu for years," she ground out.

"Yes, we've established that you're capable of supplementary techniques, but a shinobi who can't kick ass is useless at the end of the day," Sora shot back with disdain.

Sakura growled. She leapt to her feet and sent a rain of kunai hurtling towards Sora, who ducked aside. Sakura made her seals with lightning speed:

Ox-tiger-monkey-boar-snake-bird!

The gutter behind them gurgled. A basketball-sized mass of water began gathering in the air like a balloon. It writhed, roiling, shrinking and expanding as millions of tiny bubbles appeared within its depths. Steam escaped from its surface with an ominous hissing. The bubble exploded with a bang, flinging boiling water in all directions.

Sora absorbed the hot liquid with her own water shield technique. "Better. Not bad for a few weeks of training. Just imagine how much more effective it'll be at the hot spring in Kinosaki," she nodded.

Sakura fell to her knees and stared up at the gray Ame sky, which threatened a less deadly form of rain soon.
"I can think of a way to make it even better, Sora-taichou."

"Good. Save it for the battle. We leave in three days." Sora began to pack up her weapons.

"You guys haven't forgotten your promise, right?"

"Of course not. As soon as we get back, we'll help you find that lab for sure," Sora smiled. "Later, Sakura-chan!" She made three hand signs and disappeared in a swirl of red water.

Satisfied, Sakura sat up and began to gather her own things. She made the long trek back from their training grounds through Ame's crowded marketplace to her new apartment. Once home, she put fresh grounds into the coffee pot and flicked it on. She gazed out her dirty kitchen window, watching the rain fall outside. She needed to start packing; in three days' time she'd be at a hot spring in Lightning Country waiting for the daimyou. If all went well, it would be his last vacation.

_It's good for Konoha, too. Kumogakure never demilitarizes, not even in times of peace. Lightning Country is unnecessarily powerful, it's a threat to everyone, Sakura's guilty conscience tried to assure her. That's why Iwagakure commissioned you in the first place. There's no need to bring morality into it."

_Still...sometimes it's hard to recognize what your life is turning into..._

The pot bubbled. Sakura put her thoughts away and poured herself some coffee.

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"There it is!"

"Hallelujah," Sakura grumbled under her breath. They had been running for the better part of a week, and she was beat. Lightning Country sported mountains that made Fire Country's look like pimples. She’d been forced to use muscles in her legs that Sakura didn't even know she had.

The ryokan looked very traditional from a distance: a large two-story wooden structure with a gracefully sloping tiled roof. It was surrounded by red-gold fall foliage and bamboo thickets, built directly into the mountainside (Sakura was privately impressed with whatever architect pulled _that_ off). A glassy pond curved around the front gardens, and steam from the hot spring curled invitingly into the air from somewhere towards the rear of the building. Sakura could see why this remote little spot would suit a daimyou needing to get away — the view was breathtaking.

Sakura reluctantly pulled her head out of the clouds to address her teammates. "Shall I scout the area for vantage points or set up camp?"

Much to her surprise, her teammates made a beeline for the inn.

"No need, Sakura-chan. You remember the plan, Haji?" Sora asked as they strolled along the stone path meandering through the bamboo garden.

"Of course, love." Haji led the way up the front steps and swept the red curtain bearing the character for hot water aside. He slid open the lacquered front door and the two kunoichi followed him inside.

"Welcome!" chorused several serving girls in classy pink and cream kimono.

"Ah, thank you, but we're not guests," Haji explained. He faced the kindly-looking middle aged woman behind the desk. "I'm the new cook, and these are the two maids that Okami* Ichigawa
Satsu-san requested..."

_We're going to be undercover housekeepers?!_

The benevolent expression of the lady behind the desk melted off her face like hot wax. It was replaced by a scowl of frightening intensity.

"You're late! All extra help was supposed to have arrived yesterday! The daimyou is due less than a week from today," she growled, stepping out from behind the reception area. She was a short woman in a regal dark blue kimono. She had graying hair and eyes that could go from philanthropic to fierce faster than you could blink.

"Ah, please forgive us! We got lost in the mountains...you must be Okami-san." Haji bowed deeply.

"Indeed, I have been the mistress of Oishiya for the last 40 years. You are?" she asked stiffly.

"Motosuwa Kazuo," Haji answered without missing a beat.

"Takahata Sachiko," piped Sora.

Everyone stared at Sakura. "Er...I'm Hana...Nakamura Hana."

"Lovely. The last thing I need right now is slow help." Ichigawa stared them down critically, hands on her hips. "Well, what are you waiting for? The servants' quarters are in the back behind the onsen. Get into your uniforms quickly, we still have so much preparation to do!" she barked.

"Yes ma'am!"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Uh..."

Sora suppressed an eyeroll and grabbed Sakura by the wrist, dragging her down the hallway.

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The servants' quarters were two spartan, simply furnished rooms, one for men and a larger one for women.

Sakura stared at the pink and cream kimono laying across a newly made futon. Her futon. She turned on Sora, incredulous.

"You have got to be kidding me. _That's_ the big plan? Disguise ourselves as housekeepers?" she hissed.

"What's wrong with it?" Sora asked, already shrugging out of her traveling clothes.

"Oh yeah. Nobody's ever thought of that one before. I'm sure they'll never see it coming."

Sora erupted into giggles. "Sakura-chan, you need to relax. The only thing on the daimyou's mind will be whether the sulphur or mineral spring will better suit his complexion. Trust me, you'll be fine. As long as you don't have to do any more improvising anyway. 'Nakamura Hana'? That has to be the fakest alias I've ever heard...!"

Sakura blushed scarlet. "I just don't understand how you can be so blase about this," she muttered, unzipping her shirt.
"Well, it's hardly my first time assassinating a major political figure."

Sakura blinked at her.

Sora snickered, "How do you think I earned my moniker 'Sora of the Crimson Tide'? I've taken down a minor Grass Country lord and the son of a River Country daimyou (along with three elite bodyguards), but my crowning glory was two successive Water Country daimyou. Boy was I unpopular with the Mizukage!"

Sakura tried not to gape. She wasn't very successful.

Sora laughed again. "Don't stress Sakura-chan, you're with Haji and me now. The two of us are more than enough to accomplish the mission ourselves. Just hang tight and if things get messy, that's why you're here. I just want my husband back in one piece. But I'm not too worried." Sora flashed Sakura a thousand-watt smile as she straightened her new kimono and headed towards the door.
"Last one out has to do the toilets!" She bolted.

Sakura made a face and put on her kimono.

_It could be worse. At least it's an easy job. You got this._

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"I DON'T GOT IT!" Sakura screamed, but it was too late. The last vase, balanced precariously on top of Sakura's armload of vases, tipped. It crashed to the tatami mat and shattered into a thousand expensive pieces. Sakura braced herself.

"YOU IDIOT! THAT VASE WAS WORTH MORE THAN YOU ARE!"

Ichigawa was off again, chewing Sakura out for the fourteenth time that day. Sakura hung her head and did her best to look repentant until the tirade was finished. Then it was back to work without so much as a pause to collect herself.

Sakura had no idea running a ryokan could be so taxing. She had already unpacked new dishes, washed them, repacked them, scrubbed the halls, scrubbed the private tubs, scrubbed the toilets, changed the towels, and now she was supposed to arrange flowers. Flower arranging had been her worst class in kunoichi school. Somewhere far away, Ino was laughing at her...or she would be, if she hadn't been taken over by the Stepford Virus. Now Sakura was truly grumpy.

At least she and Sora were getting a feel for the layout of the place, which could come in handy when it came time to tackle their mission. It had a main lobby and reception area with floors of gleaming wood (polished to a shine by the hardworking housekeepers) and beautiful wall hangings depicting bamboo and pine forests. Two hallways led out of the lobby, one to the ground floor rooms, the other to a large communal dining room and the kitchens. A winding staircase led to the second floor rooms and upstairs balcony, which included a spectacular view of the mountainside all decked out in fall colors. Taking the staircase in the other direction, however, led to the luxurious indoor baths in the basement. The lobby's side door opened onto a wraparound porch, from which a stone path snaked around the edge of the ryokan. From there guests could access the back gardens and outdoor hot springs. They could also reach the servants quarters, outhouses and laundry areas that way, but of course guests weren't supposed to see such things. The daimyou, who'd be staying in their best, most deluxe suite (complete with private bath and steam room), certainly wouldn't.

One other positive aspect of maids' work was that it gave Sakura the opportunity to practice her water jutsu discreetly. Vases needed filling, tubs needed scouring...Sakura was just contemplating finding Sora to ask for tips on how to materialize new water (which was harder than just using what's
already there) when a familiar face appeared from around the corner.

"Haji-san! Shouldn't you be in the kitchens?" Sakura whispered, looking around for the Okami.

"I snuck away to deliver a top-secret message to you and the missus," he whispered conspiratorially.

Sakura's heart skipped a beat. "Yes?..."

"The outdoor hot springs close at one am tonight, so if we make sure no guests see us...the busboy said we could totally use it." He flashed a thumbs up with his lopsided grin.

Sakura slapped her forehead. "Am I the only one taking this mission seriously?"

"Probably."

"And that's why it was a rhetorical question," she mumbled.

"So anyway, meet us in the mixed baths at half past one. And don't get caught!"

"Am I a ninja or what?!" Sakura hissed to his retreating back.

_Honestly. No respect at all._ Frowning, Sakura turned to the empty vase in guest room 12. She made four hand signals.

_Fill with water, dammit!_

There was a gurgling sound, and a moment later a small amount of liquid appeared in the vase. Sakura punched a fist into the air in victory.

_Yes! Now only about a hundred more to go..._

She smiled to herself and rolled up her sleeves.

The path to the onsen was lit by a row of stone lanterns. They cast long shadows over Sakura, who tiptoed through the garden like a criminal.

_Oh, get over yourself. Considering the way they treat the help around here, these people deserve to have a few house rules broken. This is nothing. For example, imagine how bad they'll feel when you kill their guest of honor next week..._

That line of thinking wasn't going to do anybody any good. Sakura swallowed her guilt and slipped inside the changing room.

She spotted two wicker baskets full of clothes in cubby holes along the wall. An empty crate of saké lay on its side on the tatami floor. _Hoooo boy._

Sakura stripped off her own clothes and added them to an adjacent empty basket. She entered the shower area and sat on the wooden stool, proceeding to wash her hair and body. She noted with delight that the ryokan's fancy shampoo left her hair smelling of lavender. Once finished, she wrapped one of the pink towels provided around herself (it was so small it barely covered the essentials) and bit her lip apprehensively. Mixed bathing was rare in Konoha (possibly due exclusively to Jiraiya's legacy) and she was unsure of the etiquette. Should she keep her towel on? Normally it's rude to let your towel touch the water...

_Oh whatever. I'm sure they're too drunk by now to notice you anyway._ Sakura slid the back door
open and stepped out into the chilly night air.

"Wooooo, Sakura-chan!" Sora called. Haji wolf whistled.

*Or too drunk NOT to notice.* Sakura was glad the dim light of the lanterns hid her blush at least, if nothing else. She scooted to the edge of the spring, dropped her towel and took the plunge in a hurry.

The water felt heavenly. It was almost too hot to handle at first, but her tired body quickly adjusted. Within seconds it was working wonders on her sore joints, dissolving knots in her back muscles. Sakura sank to her shoulders and let out a sigh. Even in the dim lighting the area was beautiful. Smooth, multi-colored stones paved the water's edge, and a little natural waterfall trickled down a rocky ledge at the far end of the pool. Mist rose off the water's hot surface, adding to the allure of the scene. The scent of night-blooming jasmine wafted through the air and went straight to Sakura's head. She suddenly wished she was on vacation instead of an S-rank assassination mission. Naruto and Kakashi would have loved this place...she sighed again and closed her eyes.

"Hard day, housekeeper-san?" Haji asked, laughing at her sedated expression.

"Yeah, actually...how were the kitchens?"

"Easy as pie. Which I got to eat plenty of."

"I hate you," Sakura answered with zero venom. The water felt too good. "But I'll forgive you because this is amazing."

"Told you it was a good idea, Sakura-san. As my wife says, you should always listen to Haji," he nodded to himself.

"I never say that," Sora snorted.

"You do when I suggest more sake. More sake, love?"

"Yes, please," she replied immediately. She turned to Sakura. "He always has the best ideas. You should listen to him."

Sakura chuckled. Haji vaulted himself out of the water and walked to the overhang where several bottles of chilled sake sat on ice. She got an eyeful of naked skin...her chuckles turned to a coughing fit.

Sora poked her in the ribs. "See something you like, Sakura-chan?" she teased.

"Ah, n-no!" Sakura stammered, blushing furiously *(Nope! It's just the heat from the water!)*. She averted her eyes as Haji climbed back into the onsen with another bottle, which he offered to her. Sakura was still underaged, but she supposed nobody cared about stuff like that when you were a missing-nin. Compared to the crimes she'd already committed, drinking seemed like the least impressive. She accepted and took a rather large swig before passing it to Sora. "It's just that mixed baths are uncommon in my country."

"Really? How boring," Sora giggled, taking a sip and passing the bottle.

"My village is not boring," Sakura replied, somewhat miffed. "We just have too many perverts for that kind of thing."

Sora held up her hands, laughing. "Sorry, didn't mean to offend! You seem kinda attached to your village for a missing-nin though. Where are you from again?"
Sakura bit her cheek in thought before answering. Her identity was not exactly a secret; that blue-haired Akatsuki had made sure of it. With her real name, anyone could find out where she was from if they wanted to. Besides, Sakura liked these two. That warm glowy feeling wasn't strictly from the sake or the heat...they were pretty good company. She wanted to trust them.

"I'm from Konohagakure," she admitted. "How about you guys?"

"We've been all over, but I'm originally from Kiri, and Haji here is from Kumo."

Sakura blinked in surprise at Haji. "You're assassinating your own daimyou?"

He gave her a strange look. "Sakura-san...I'm a missing-nin. He's not my daimyou anymore, I abandoned my village years ago."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry." Sakura grabbed the sake and chugged the rest of it.

"I'll get more," Sora offered, climbing out. Haji was still eyeing Sakura curiously.

"Are you really a missing-nin? What brought you to Ame?"

"Er — it's kinda complicated." Sakura sank into the water a little more.

"Try us," Sora said, slipping back into the spring with yet another glass bottle — *is that the third or fourth one?* Sakura thought, brain fuzzy.

"She doesn't have to tell us anything she doesn't want to," Haji interjected. "Don't make the new girl uncomfortable, love."

"I'm not uncomfortable," Sakura said. "It's just kind of sensitive information. I'm actually trying to protect my village."

"After defecting? This ought to be good," Sora interjected.

"Tell me why you left first," Sakura pouted, stubborn.

"Easy. I was after some forbidden water jutsu scrolls, and the Yondaime Mizukage didn't care to just hand them over to me. So I took them the hard way," she flashed a surprisingly evil grin despite the dimples, and took another sip.

"Wow. Were they worth it?"

"Are you kidding? Way better to become a missing-nin and make off with some badass techniques than have to undergo the death matches required to graduate from the Academy at that time. I don't like to be manipulated." Sora made a face.

Sakura was caught somewhere between horror and awe. Then she thought of Naruto and laughed. "My teammate back home stole a forbidden scroll before graduating from the Academy too. I didn't think anybody else could be that strong so young...or that dumb," she snorted.

"My lovely dumb wife has left out the best part of her defection: meeting me," Haji added with exaggerated injury.

Sora pinched his thigh. "Tell her what happened."

"Well, I was a chuunin in Kumo, eating curried soba at my favorite noodle stand when my team captain found me and started harassing me as usual. I was honestly about to lose my cool when this
teenage girl with these long, slender legs appeared out of nowhere. She landed on the tabletop, beautiful left foot right in my soba. She raised a gorgeous leg, and let fly the most glorious kick I've ever seen at my captain's head. From that moment on I knew I was in love."

Sakura's jaw dropped. "She assaulted your team captain, so you dated her?" she asked, scandalized.

"Oh no. She was actually on a mission to kill him, it just didn't work out. Shame, that guy was an asshole. I ran away with her instead. Never looked back since," he smiled at Sora.

Sakura had a giggle fit that she blamed the sake for.

How strange! They're legit missing nin, but they're not so different from you. Once upon a time, you pondered defecting for somebody you loved too...

"Okay, you heard our epic romance, now spill," Sora demanded, draining her sake bottle. "And I believe it's your turn to get the sake, Sakura-chaaan," she drawled, blue eyes glinting.

Sakura chugged her own bottle and made several hand signs under the water. As she rose, so did the water around her teammates. A wave crashed over them. By the time they recovered, Sakura was back in the onsen with three more bottles.

"That was sneaky!" Sora griped, rubbing water from her eyes.

"Totally cheating!" Haji coughed.

Sakura just laughed and passed the sake.

"My story's a little different. I didn't defect willingly. Something weird was going on in Konoha. An epidemic — a virus I've never seen before, infecting people and making them behave strangely. Nothing overtly bad, just not themselves. I was attacked by my own team leader, then my mentor, so I had to go," she summarized. It felt odd to tell her tale aloud, like it happened to somebody else.

"Ooh, so that's why you're looking for a lab. I thought you were just a science geek," Haji chortled.

"Well, I won't deny that, but I really am trying to find a way to save my village. There was this weird mark on the victims...I'm sure some enemy is behind it, though I don't understand how. But no way is this a natural phenomenon."

"Wow Sakura-chan. That must be hard on you...I want to help! Haji! Husband! We should help her find a lab!" Sora declared, slurring a bit.

"We already agreed to do that, love..."

"Oh yeah," Sora laughed. "Well we didn't make it official. Let's pinky swear! Sakura-chan, we promise not to abandon you until your lab is found!" She held out her pinky finger.

Feeling like an idiot but too tipsy to care, Sakura caught it in her own. Haji hooked his large pinky around the two of theirs.

"Promise!" They chorused. Sakura smiled broadly and sank back into the water.

She'd forgotten how much she missed having friends.

Sakura woke with an incredible hangover. She'd been too drunk to remember to speed up her metabolism before bed, and now her head felt like she'd stuck it in a meat processor.
"Up up up! Everybody up! We've got so much to do!" Ichigawa bellowed, ringing a horrendous gong.

Sakura groaned into her pillow and covered her ears, but sat up. On futons all around her, groggy serving girls did the same.

Sora was the only one not grumpy. "Morning, Hana-chan!"

Sakura glared. "Looks like somebody can hold her liquor. I should introduce you to my shishou," she murmured under her breath, shedding her yukata. She'd have to wait for the others to leave the room to heal her pounding headache.

Breakfast was an uneventful affair, plain rice with egg and some pickles. Ichigawa didn't give them much time to eat, and ruined their enjoyment of the food with her squawking about the day's to-do list anyway. A small comfort came unexpectedly when Haji snuck Sakura and Sora some blueberry pie from the kitchen...and black coffee.

Coffee! Sakura danced with joy internally.

"I could kiss you," she gushed, draining her cup out of sight behind a potted plant in the corner.

"Please don't," Haji responded with a bemused glance at Sora. "I like living."

"So do I," Sakura deadpanned. "But coffee might be better."

Sakura spent the day cleaning, harassed by the Okami. She learned a special way to fold a futon, how to get sheets really white, and why cleaning the shoe rack is far, far worse than scrubbing toilets.

Unbeknownst to her boss, Sakura was getting a good deal of elemental ninjutsu training in as well. She made a whirlpool to do the laundry, refilled teapots on the sly, scrubbed the floor without a bucket, and made it rain outside to wash dirt off the stone pathways while watering the gardens at the same time. Even Ichigawa was surprised by Sakura's unexpected speed. She rewarded her with more work.

By the time evening fell, Sakura was exhausted and sore again, though satisfied with her performance. Her water jutsu had improved markedly. She was in the dining area with Haji, serving a handful of guests their supper. He passed her a steaming dish of beef hot pot when loud voices echoed from the hallway.

"But daimyou-sama, the meal is already under way, I'm afraid the chefs haven't had time to prepare for you properly..."

The door slid open, revealing a party of nine: Ichigawa, her most angelic expression belying the tense grip of one hand on her robe; six bodyguards dressed in standard Kumogakure one-shouldered white flak jackets; a tall, dark-skinned man with a mop of shaggy white hair, tattoos on both his arms, and a bored expression; and the daimyou of Lightning Country himself, dressed splendidly in traditional headgear.

Somehow Sakura did not drop the hot pot on her guest, but it was a close call.

"It matters not, Okami-san. I'm quite weary; I'll partake of whatever you have now," the daimyou insisted, waving his hand in dismissal. Two bodyguards adjusted a cushion and he sat down at the
Sakura caught Haji's eye. She backed into the kitchen. Haji waited a moment before following casually.

After a thorough scan of the area to ensure they were alone, Sakura whirled on Haji.

"What gives!? I thought he wasn't supposed to arrive for five days?"

Haji crossed his arms over his chest grimly. "They know. Or they at least suspect. So they came early hoping to thwart any attempts on the daimyou's life..."

"But why would they feel the need for that? I thought no one knew he was even coming here at all!"

"That's true, they deliberately put the word out that he was vacationing in a coastal village this year, but Iwa knew the truth and commissioned us, right? Kumo was correct to suspect a last-minute information leak."

Sakura took a deep breath. "Okay, so they took us by surprise. No big deal. We'll just regroup with Sora and — "

"That wasn't their only precaution, Sakura. I recognize the man with tattoos — anybody from Lightning Country would. He's one of the most powerful jounin in the village, the Raikage's right-hand man and personal bodyguard, Darui of Kumogakure."

Sakura paled. "We have to find Sora."

"We do," Haji nodded. "But against someone like him, even Sora..." he trailed off, gazing at the doorway into the dining area with an unreadable expression.

Sakura's stomach churned.

Chapter End Notes

*Okami is the title for the manager of a ryokan (traditional Japanese-style inn). She is usually the wife of the owner.
Get the bingo book," Sora ordered as soon as the doors to the women's servant's quarters closed behind them. Haji wasn't supposed to be in here at all, but this was hardly a time for decorum.

Sora paced as Haji rummaged through her pack. He pulled out a small black book and tossed it to his wife.

She caught it and skimmed through its pages. Sakura tried to calm her heartbeat.

"Here he is!" she exclaimed. The other two gathered round and hunched over the page.

**Darui (da-ru-ee)**

**Description:** Tall, white hair, dark skin, tattoos on right and left shoulders

**Affiliation:** Kumogakure

**Status:** Active jounin, S-rank

**Nature Type:** Water release, Lightning release, Storm release (kekkei genkai)

**Weapon(s):** Two-piece longsword imbued with lightning

**Notes:** The right-hand-man of the Fourth Raikage. One of the strongest ninja currently in Kumogakure and Lightning Country. Combines Lightning and Water release ninjutsu into a unique bloodline limit known as 'Storm Release,' making each exponentially more powerful. He has mastered the use of the Third Raikage's signature black lightning technique. On the 'highly wanted' list of Iwagakure. Extremely dangerous.

"Well. Now I'm reassured," Sakura joked weakly. No one laughed.

Sora snapped the book shut. "We absolutely cannot bail on a mission of this level. Forget the money — Iwagakure would be after our heads. And I don't know about you guys, but if any more money gets added to the weight of my bounty, I'm going to collapse underneath it."

Sakura thought of the ANBU troops from both Konoha and Suna already after her, and agreed that adding a third may not be in the best interest of her plan to live to see next month.

"So what should we do? Stick with the original plan?" Haji asked.
Sora considered. "We could...Darui seems to be the only real problem, the other guards are probably just no-name chuunin, if you and Sakura —"

"Um," Sakura interrupted with a squeak. "I am a no-name chuunin."

They stared. Sakura felt her face grow hot.

"What. The. Fuck. Sakura, you CANNOT be a chuunin!" Sora exploded.

Sakura fidgeted. "Most of my training has been medical ninjutsu, in my village I'm only —"

"Did you or did you not just learn a bunch of water release techniques?"

"Well, yes, but —"

"And did you not say you thought of some original techniques too?"

"Sort of, but I haven't really had a chance to —"

"How could a missing-nin of chuunin level escape captured by their village for five months?"

"Er — Suna is after me too, actually, but —"

"Then shut the hell up. Most chuunin suck at nature manipulation, they do not have original techniques, and they definitely do not evade ANBU. As your team captain, I am officially promoting you." Sora's black glare just dared Sakura to argue.

"Um, love," Haji interrupted gently. "If Sakura isn't quite comfortable with a hand-to-hand free for all, why don't we change the plan a little? She knows medical ninjutsu exceptionally well, maybe she could just whip up a poison or something. Much safer." He placed a hand on Sora's shoulder.

Sora breathed out through her teeth and turned to Sakura. "Well? Could you manage that?"

"I learned poison-making from the best in the world," she said in a small voice. "It's autumn, and Lightning Country is known for certain fall herbs and mushrooms...I could probably make one that's colorless, odorless, and tasteless even without much equipment."

"Now doesn't that sound safer, love? Why take chances?" Haji asked. Sora studied him for a long moment with an unreadable expression.

"Yeah," she breathed. "Yeah, let's do that. How long do you need, Sakura?"

"It could take awhile to find what I'm looking for since I've never been to this region before, but the actual chemistry should be quick enough."

Sora crossed her arms and frowned in thought. "Okay. We can't blow our cover, so we will continue the evening as normal. Come nightfall, we'll sneak out and gather whatever Sakura needs. She'll mix it overnight, and we'll have it ready for the daimyou's breakfast tomorrow morning. Sounds good, team?"

They nodded.

"Alright. We better get back to work before that lunatic Okami-san finds us loitering."

Sakura tried not to sweat into the miso soup. The autumn breeze came wafting through the windows
of the kitchen, but to Sakura it felt like the seventh circle of hell. She looked around and listened to make sure no one else was nearby. She slipped a tiny vial of clear liquid out of her sleeve, uncorked it and emptied it into the daimyou's soup. The formula was not quite perfect — they'd been unable to find any lotus root to help mask the taste, but even if the daimyou chanced to notice anything unusual it would be too late for him anyway.

Lacquered bowl in hand, she took a deep breath to steady herself and pulled back the curtain to the dining area.

The daimyou was seated at the head of the table again, on the plushest cushion. To his right sat Darui, the other six guards spaced evenly around the table. Sora and Haji kneeled off to the side with the other servers, ready to spring into action should the esteemed party require anything.

Sakura quashed the butterflies in her stomach and put on her game face.

She walked over to the head of the table. Kneeling between Darui and the daimyou, she placed the deadly bowl in front of the victim with barely a clink.

"Miso soup, daimyou-sama," she said with a simple bow.

She was just pulling her hand back when Darui caught her wrist. Sakura froze. He flipped her hand over.

For one tense moment, no one breathed.

"Why," Darui drawled, looking Sakura dead in the eye, "does housekeeper-san here have calluses from throwing kunai?"

The silence was deafening.

The bodyguard across from Sora glanced down at his chest. There was a senbon protruding from his heart. The man was dead before he, or anyone else, even realized it had been thrown.

Sora stood. "Fuck 'safer."

Pandemonium ensued.

All the ninja leapt to their feet as one, unsheathing their weapons. The maids screamed and ran in all directions, scrambling over each other to reach the exits. Ichigawa bellowed orders that were drowned in the cacophony. Sakura took advantage of the chaos and used her chakra to wrench her arm free.

Sora was hurling dozens of senbon at the daimyou and Darui was deflecting them automatically.

"Run!" Darui barked at the daimyou. The man didn't need to be told twice, he bolted from the room in blind terror.

Sora directed the rain of senbon to Darui. "Haji, Sakura, after him! I got this!"

Darui unsheathed his sword, crackling with black lightning. He pointed it at Sora.

"You!" he bellowed. "I recognize you now, you're in the bingo book!"

Sakura never heard Sora's response. There was a thunderous explosion and she and Haji found themselves propelled from the room. They clambered over broken hunks of wood, roof tiles, and crumpled tatami mats down the hallway after the daimyou, the five remaining bodyguards in hot
pursuit. They reached the lobby when the guards caught up, cutting off their chase by surrounding them in a semicircle.

These guards were not no-name chuunin.

As Sakura and Haji danced around a flurry of kunai thrown by the two at the semicircle's edges, the other three guards began their own rapid-fire series of hand signs. Sakura punched the floor with a chakra-infused fist, cracking the slate under the foundation and sending shock waves in all directions. Two of the guards lost their footing, but the third had already finished summoning a panther made of lightning.

The huge beast writhed with electricity. Too big for the room, it thrashed its tail and destroyed the entire right wall in one blow; it yanked its head from the hole it made in the upper floor when it materialized, scattering shredded tatami mats everywhere. It focused bright eyes on Sakura and Haji and swung a giant clawed fist right at them —

Haji performed three quick seals and a shield of lightning appeared, absorbing the attack.

"Take out as many as you can, Sakura! I'll deal with the kitty!" Haji called, making more signs.

Sakura didn't have time to pick an opponent; two found her first. Together they charged, one slashing at her with a short wakizashi, the other lashing a whip made of lightning. Sakura backflipped out of the way and through a paper wall into a guest room. She ducked and dodged around their attacks, but was having difficulty because one wielded a short-range weapon and the other a mid-range one. The wakizashi slashed her arm open. Blood splattered the wall. Sakura groaned and pressed a glowing palm to the wound as she darted away from the whip. She needed to get some space and try a long distance counterattack of her own.

She hurled a fistful of kunai at them. When they dodged, Sakura grabbed a log-sized support beam along one wall and ripped it out of the floor and ceiling. She felt the scorch of the lightning whip curl around her ankle and pull; white-hot pain lanced up her calf. She toppled backwards, throwing the wooden beam horizontally out in front of her as she went. It hit both nin squarely across their chests, knocking them back into a table and smashing a vase. Sakura rolled to her feet and performed a series of quick seals.

Both nin had just leapt back to their feet when water from the shattered vase collected into a bullet. It shot through one's ear canal and came out the other's, carving a path through both their brains. They fell down dead.

Sakura raced back to the lobby just in time to see a Kumo nin stab Haji in the thigh with a two-pronged katana and twist. There was the wet popping sound of a tendon snapping. Scarlet blossomed across his uniform so fast Sakura was sure an artery was severed. The chakra panther was long gone, but the remaining three nin were on him like dogs.

Sakura stomped a foot into the ground, creating a minor earthquake to throw them off-balance. She hurried to Haji's aid, but the ground continued to shake and rumble. The floor shifted, support beams all along the walls splintered and snapped, insulation rained from above and the ceiling began to cave —

Crap!

Sakura barreled over two enemies and yanked her comrade up by the arm. Supporting him with her shoulder, she put chakra into her steps to propel them faster out the front door. They flew under the awning just as the ryokan gave a great shudder and collapsed on itself like a house of cards.
"Sora!" Haji called desperately, looking back at the dust cloud that was once an inn as they fled.

"No time!" Sakura yelled back. Two of the Kumo nin had made it out of the rubble alive and were hot on their heels. Sakura made another series of seals as they darted around the back towards the onsen.

The steam from the hot spring increased as it came into view. Sakura crashed through the gardens with Haji in tow, and focused her chakra. The water vapor concentrated and condensed into a huge sphere of liquid in the air. Sakura compressed it until it boiled. She dug in her sleeve with one hand for a glass vial identical to the one she tried to kill the daimyou with — the extra batch of poison she'd made in case something happened to the first. She flung it with all her might into the heart of the bubble. It took on a sickly purple hue. Sakura turned up the heat until it couldn't take the pressure any longer; they ducked under a large chunk of debris just as it exploded with a deafening bang. Toxic water went flying in all directions, dissolving everything it landed on like acid rain.

Sakura heard the pursuing ninja shriek in agony. One of them managed to duck under cover only to be electrocuted by a lightning bolt Haji summoned. Sakura smelled human hair burning. She panted with exertion — her jutsu had taken a major toll on her.

She was healing Haji's bleeding thigh when they spotted a figure in torn robes crawl past their shelter, dragging a broken leg and whimpering.

"The daimyou!" Haji urged. "Leave me, get him!"

Nodding, Sakura burst out of the rubble. She hurtled towards the man, but was blocked by the sudden appearance of a blood-splattered white flak jacket in her path. Darui's sword, sizzling with black electricity, ripped into her side.

Stars exploded in front of her face. Sakura gasped and went down. Fire raced up and down her nerve endings. She groaned and barely managed to roll out of the way to avoid being impaled by the second blow. She struggled to her feet, clutching her side, forcing chakra haphazardly into the gaping wound. Blood ran freely through her fingers. Darui yanked his sword out of the ground and whirled on her, blade descending faster than she could see.

Sakura twisted painfully sideways but the tip of his sword glanced off her shoulder. Her muscles seized with the electric shock. She crashed to her knees again and looked up at him. Darui raised his katana to finish her off when a figure streaked past them, making a beeline for the daimyou in the distance. It was the injured Haji, giving it everything he's got.

"Damn!" Darui swore, abandoning Sakura to giving chase. But the wounded Haji was no match for Darui's legendary speed. He cut him off and was poised to cleave him in two when a howl ruptured the air:

"HAJI!!"

Sora, bloody and battered, black braid singed, charged. The earth rumbled beneath her feet. An impossibly huge, crimson tidal wave loomed on the horizon, six stories high and moving at incredible speed down the mountainside. It swallowed boulders and forest, anything in its path of destruction. It crashed over them with a deafening roar, sweeping the remains of the ryokan away.

Sakura could neither breathe nor see through the churning blood-red waves; the water was burning her alive like acid. Its currents tossed her like a flea caught in the spin cycle of a washing machine. She managed four hand seals and mercifully the raging water parted. She emerged into a vertical tunnel of air gasping and spluttering, a 60 foot swirling vortex of red surrounding her on all sides.
She pushed whatever chakra she had left to her feet and leapt as high as she could.

Grabbing a branch of a huge, ancient pine tree protruding from a cliffside, Sakura hauled herself up and scanned the receding flood below. On a nearby cliff, Darui stood near the daimyou; 40 yards away, Sora crouched over the limp body of Haji. Darui leveled his sword at them and flew.

Sakura launched herself through the air to intercept him, terror numbing her mind. She was out of chakra, could do no more ninjutsu; her massive strength was useless now. She reached for the weight strapped to her back under her kimono.

She freed Tsunade's ninjatou from its emerald sheath just as she reached Darui. Sakura thrust the blade straight through his lower back.

Blood burst out of his front along with the tip of her sword, halting Darui dead in his tracks. He sank to his knees, clutching the blade with both hands until Sakura withdrew it with a wet slosh. He gripped his wound in wide-eyed shock, somehow still conscious.

Sakura wasted no time. She bounded towards the simpering figure of the daimyou, Sora right behind her, clutching Haji's unresponsive form. Sakura hesitated for a split second at the sight of the daimyou's terror-stricken face.

"Do it now, Sakura!" Sora urged, holding Haji close.

"NO!" roared Darui, who, incredibly, was climbing to his feet. But it was too late. In one arc Sakura's blade, slick with blood, sliced through the air. Its edge slid through the daimyou's neck like butter. His head sailed over them and landed on the rocky ground, where it rolled a few feet before coming to a stop.

Darui howled and began to make seals with one hand, clutching his gaping wound with the other while blood pooled around his feet. The air crackled with energy from an impending hurricane. Menacing black clouds gathered, thunder crashed and black lightning streaked across the sky, building momentum.

"Sora, get us out of here NOW!" Sakura hollered over the terrifying sound.

Sora barely managed the three hand signs needed for her body flicker jutsu before the heavens erupted. Light blinded Sakura; dazzling white swallowed her whole. She felt the hot buzz of electricity race down her spine as they disappeared in a swirl of crimson water, Darui's scream of rage echoing through her head.

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**FLASH**

Sakura stood on a boulder facing a great valley. She gazed at a mountainside obscured by a giant dust cloud as a black tempest raged in the sky.

**FLASH**

Sakura stood by a clear river flowing down a different mountainside. Sunlight filtered in through thick branches, and a bird sang from some treetop nearby. Sora let out a low grunt of effort.

**FLASH**

Sakura stood in a clearing in the middle of a bamboo forest. The green stalks around her were packed so densely together almost no light reached the ground. A little stone shrine for travelers
rested in the center of the clearing, around which a leaf-strewn path wound through the thicket and out of sight. Sora uttered a groan of pain and collapsed on top of the unmoving Haji.

Sakura, shaking, fell to her knees. She lifted Haji's limp wrist first. Good, he had a pulse and was still breathing, just unconscious. She grabbed Sora's wrist. She too was still alive, though doubtlessly suffering from chakra exhaustion. Neither of them was bleeding out from their injuries, thank god.

Sakura tried to stand. She got one wobbly foot under herself for a second before it slipped right out again, sliding across slick blood and leaves. Sakura looked down.

Oh.

Her side wound was far more serious than she'd thought. The blood was running down her legs and collecting in a dark pool around her knees. Dazed, she ripped off the lower half of her ruined kimono and wrapped it around her midsection as tightly as she could.

She tried to summon chakra to her fingertips. Nothing happened. She tried again, straining with the effort. A tiny trickle of green glowed in her palm. She pressed it to the gaping hole in her side and held it for a second...two seconds...three...until the skin just barely began to knit together...

Pain shot up her arm, ran down her spine and along her nerves as the chakra flow halted. A wave of vertigo washed over her. She collapsed next to her teammates, turned her head and vomited. Everything faded to black.

There was something soft and warm cradling her. It felt so lovely against her skin. There was pain, and she was so tired, and the softness at her back made her want to sleep again...she shifted.

"Look!"

"Sakura, are you awake?"

Consciousness came back like bits and pieces from a puzzle. Someone was calling her.

"Kakashi-sensei?" Sakura murmured.

She opened her eyes. The light hurt her head. She squinted and blinked, eyes watering as they adjusted.

She was lying on her back on a futon in a small, undecorated room. Three figures surrounded her.

"How do you feel?" asked Haji.

"Who is Kakashi-sensei?" Sora questioned at the same time.

"Please, you shouldn't overwhelm her..." spoke a female voice Sakura didn't recognize. It was a miko, dressed in traditional white haori and red hakama. She had long black hair and calm, dark eyes.

Sakura struggled to sit up as her memory of the battle returned.

"Where...?"

"We ended up at a Shinto shrine on the border between Lightning and Earth Country," Sora responded. "Kaoru-san found us."
"Sora and I just woke up this morning. Kaoru-san says we all slept for three days."

"I didn't know if you’d ever wake again," the miko added, a delicate wrinkle in her brow.

Sakura slumped in shame. The medic should never pass out from chakra exhaustion. It was shinobi rule #1: keep the healer safe. If Kaoru-san hadn't found them, who knew what may have happened to the three injured, unconscious ninja? Sakura gritted her teeth.

Sora seemed to read her mind. She whacked her on the shoulder.

"Ouch!" Sakura hissed in pain.

"Don't you bother feeling guilty, Sakura. You still have an eight-inch slice in your abdomen. If you hadn't at least stopped the bleeding, you wouldn't be sitting here right now," she pointed out.

Sakura nodded absentely, rubbing her tender shoulder. She probed her body with chakra. Her superficial injuries had healed by themselves fairly well during the three day period, but there was still a lot of work to do internally...fortunately, the rest had restored her chakra to maximum levels.

"I should start healing you guys now," she said, trying to climb to her feet. The miko gently pushed her down again.

"Their wounds are not life threatening. You should eat first."

Sakura looked around at the three set faces. "An examination at least," she insisted.

"Okay," Kaoru replied with a smile. "I'll get your breakfast."

Two days later, a fully-healed and well rested Sakura and team waved goodbye to Kaoru.

"Where is the rendezvous point with Iwa?" Sakura queried. They were owed a serious lump of cash for their troubles.

"Er, in Iwa," Sora answered.

"What!? We have to go all the way to Earth country? Why couldn't we agree on more neutral territory?"

"The Tsuchikage is a stubborn old man, and he's cautious," replied Sora. "If we want the money, we have to do the mission his way — including the fee collection."

"He probably doesn't want to put his subordinates in danger by sending them to meet with the likes of us. Plus, the extra travel time will allow word to get out about whether we really completed the mission," Haji added.

Sakura groaned.

It took over a week before they reached the outskirts of Iwagakure. There were no gates, given that the entire village was literally carved out of the stone mountainside. All guests would have to approach from below, where they could be easily spotted (or killed as necessary).

Two figures appeared on a rocky outcrop to meet them: one tall and fat, one small and lithe. They waited for them to approach.
"You must be the special mission team," the small girl greeted coldly, arms crossed. "We expected you four days ago."

"We were severely injured. Your Tsuchikage never warned us that we'd have to deal with Darui of Kumogakure," Sora answered with a frown. "We ought to be given more compensation for that."

"Eheh, sorry about the extra trouble..." the big round guy apologized. "Maybe we should take them to your grandfather to talk about it, Kurotsuchi."

"Akatsuchi!" the girl scolded, reaching up to thump him on the head. Their height difference was so great that she comically only reached his shoulder. "Don't tell these people more than they need to know!"

"Sorry, Kurotsuchi..." he apologized again, sheepish.

"He's right. We would like to see your Kage," Haji interjected.

The one called Kurotsuchi tapped her foot and glared. "I guess it can't be helped. Come along, and don't fall behind." She bound away without a word, leaping from rock to rock towards the gray village.

_Geez, what a rude reception. It's not like you're their enemy. I guess nobody trusts a missing-nin_, Sakura thought to herself as her team took off after the girl and her partner.

She led them through an underground stone passage, doubtlessly to keep them from learning the layout of Iwa or from seeing its people. Eventually they climbed a set of steep steps, emerging into a stone corridor lit by the many windows opening through the rock walls. The corridor sloped upwards to a set of large, wooden doors ornately carved with elemental symbols that Sakura could make nothing of. Kurotsuchi knocked in a special pattern.

"Come in!" growled a voice behind the door.

They entered the Tsuchikage's office, a circular room with stone furniture, decorated with the same elemental symbols and patterns on the doors. Sakura guessed that some probably indicated earth, fire and wind, plus a fourth she couldn't identify.

The Tsuchikage looked up from his paperwork. The familiar action reminded Sakura of Tsunade in her office back home. But this man was older than her shishou, and looked even grumpier.

"Grandfather, this is the team that just got back from the special mission. They want more money," Kurotsuchi announced flatly.

"Oh ho! Extortionists!" The Tsuchikage leapt out from behind his desk. Sakura saw he was so short he only came up to her shoulder. "I'm too old to be taken for a fool!"

"We're not extortionists," Sora shot back. "We ran into a lot more trouble than you indicated in the mission brief. It's only fair that we should receive more compensation for it."

"Bah!" The old man harrumphed, pacing his office. "How much are you trying to wring out of me exactly?"

"Another million each."

"I've already given you six million, you criminals!" He shouted, hopping up and down in fury. He landed wrong. "OUCH! MY BACK!"
Sakura rolled her eyes. "Take it easy, Onoki-sama," Akatsuchi soothed.

"Yeah, maybe it's time for retirement, Grandfather," Kurotsuchi chimed in.

"Such insolence!" Onoki bellowed, waving a hand in dismissal. "I may be old, but I've still got one over all you youngsters yet. And I wasn't born yesterday." He directed his shrewd eyes back to Sakura's team. "I'll agree to your swindling on one condition: you must accept another mission. There is...an artifact I want, and since you're such good thieves..." he trailed off, eyes gleaming.

Sora sighed. "We have to discuss it in private."

"Very well. Akatsuchi, show them to the antechamber."

Once alone, Sora turned to her teammates. "Well?"

Haji groaned. "We just finished risking our lives for the last one. How about some downtime? We could use some nice, simple missions for a change."

Sakura bit her lip. "What about finding a lab for me? I've been a missing-nin for months now, and haven't made any progress towards helping my village."

"You both make good points," Sora replied. "I think I have a solution."

Back in the Tsuchikage's office, Sora addressed Onoki. "We will accept your mission, on three conditions of our own. We need a break, so we'd like to decide when to undertake it at our leisure. Naturally we require full compensation separately from that of the last mission. Also, we'd like the use of any laboratory you have here granted to our medic-nin."

Onoki balked. "The last condition is unacceptable. Our labs contain information highly sensitive to our village. They are not for outsiders' eyes."

"What about the first two?"

"Those conditions I can agree to," Onoki grumbled reluctantly.

Sora caught Sakura's eye. "It's your call."

Sakura shifted. She didn't want to hold back her teammates. If they didn't have to take the mission immediately, maybe they could return to Amegakure and continue the search for a lab there.

"Let's do it," she nodded.

"I'm glad even you youngsters can see reason occasionally," Onoki huffed, climbing back into his oversized chair. "Shall I send the mission details to the same place in Amegakure?"

"That would be fine," Sora answered.

"Right then. You're all dismissed. And don't let me catch you making trouble in my village on your way out," he warned, wagging a finger.

The three ninja were promptly escorted out the way they came and abandoned on the village outskirts without so much as a "goodbye."

Sakura sighed. They had a long trek back to Ame.
It was amazing how much Amegakure now felt like home to Sakura, after having traveled all over the ninja world the last few months. She was glad to be back in her shabby apartment with the dirty windows. She enjoyed the familiar sound of rain splattering the metal roofs and concrete streets outside.

But she missed Konoha.

This place still isn't home, she thought, scratching off another sector of the city from her list. The fruitless search for a laboratory continued, but at least she wasn't in it alone.

"Don't you have anything here besides coffee?" Sora complained, shutting another cupboard.

"Think about who you're talking to, love," laughed Haji.

"If my accommodations are less than satisfactory, feel free to mooch somewhere else," Sakura commented, mouth twitching up at the corner.

"Can you blame me for being grumpy? We haven't found anything despite looking for weeks," Sora huffed, joining them at Sakura's rickety kitchen table.

"I'm starting to wonder if there are any labs in Ame. I mean, there aren't even any hospitals...this place is not exactly a mecca of science and technology." Sakura chewed the end of her pen.

"Ladies, please. Now is not the time to get discouraged," chided Haji. "We just need to keep looking."

"But we've checked everywhere," Sora protested with a frown. "Soon we won't have anywhere else to keep looking in."

No one answered.

The sound of Sakura's pen scratching off another failed possibility broke the silence.

Sakura sat at the Aoiya, nursing a beer and sulking. The last mission had been boring. It was a
simple guard assignment for some foreign diplomat. The only trouble they ran into had been a handful of jounin from Waterfall Country.

At least the pay was good. In fact, it was better than it should've been for such a simple mission. After the Lightning daimyou's assassination, Sakura had gained a reputation to rival her teammates'. There was a request list for her now, which allowed her to pick out solo or group missions at her leisure. Whenever she went to the bar, strangers approached her with various offers for 'Sakura the Cherry Thorn' (so nicknamed in honor of Tsunade's green-sheathed ninjatou).

Too bad being famous doesn't get you any closer to solving Konoha's problem. Sakura sighed and took another sip of her beer.

A slim figure in a white traveling cloak with red trim watched her from across the bar. The tall woman stood, left some money on the counter for her bowl of curried rice, and started to weave her way across the crowded room.

Oh boy, here comes another one. Sakura finished her beer and armed herself with excuses.

"Sakura-san?" the woman asked with a soft voice. Calm eyes peered out at her from beneath the white hood.

"Oh, it's you, Kaoru-san." Sakura blinked in surprise, recognizing the miko who rescued her team after the assassination mission. "How've you been? What brings you to Amegakure?"

"I'm here to see you and your team, actually," she replied. "The Tsuchikage sent me about your mission."

Old geezer couldn't hold his horses, huh? Aloud she said, "Oh. That's quite a coincidence — I didn't realize you were in touch with the Tsuchikage. Please, sit down."

Kaoru sat gracefully, pushing her white hood back to reveal her dark hair. "It's not a coincidence at all actually. As you'll see in the mission brief I've brought along —" she removed a sealed scroll from her cloak, " — I was specially chosen for this mission for my ability to work with sacred objects. Iwa is after one, you see..." She offered Sakura the scroll.

Sakura accepted it. "Well, I guess we'd better go find my teammates and discuss it." She helped Kaoru up and they left the bar together.

Some time later, four people were seated on cushions around the coffee table in Sora and Haji's living room.

"So let me get this straight. The Tsuchikage will pay us millions of ryou to hike halfway across the world to a place I've never heard of called Lava Country, just so we can steal a plant?" Sora crossed her arms. "I don't like it."

"It's not just any plant," Kaoru responded patiently. "It's the sacred Blue Rose of Kurobako. It has lost holy power, specifically the ability to —"

"I don't particularly care what it does," Sora interrupted. "I just think something doesn't feel right."

"Love, you are being so rude," Haji admonished. "We owe Kaoru-san our lives, she comes here asking us to do this mission that we've already agreed to, and you won't even listen to her." He frowned.
Sora blushed. "Er — you're right. I'm sorry Kaoru-san, it's not you that I'm upset with, I just don't trust that old man —"

"That old man is her Kage," Haji interjected. "And he's given you no reason to be so suspicious. Need I remind you that once you accept a mission of this caliber and are entrusted with the details, there is no backing out? Unless you want to deal with Iwa on your back...and disappoint your friend Kaoru."

Sora shrank in her seat. "Um, sorry." She looked down, abashed.

"Oh, it's perfectly understandable. Onoki-sama is not the...friendliest person to foreigners. I'm sorry if he was rude to you." Kaoru smiled apologetically.

"No, that's quite all right," Sora responded in a small voice. She cleared her throat. "Sakura, what do you think of all this?"

Sakura sighed. In truth, she didn't particularly care one way or another. It wouldn't help her cause to save Konoha if she went, but it wouldn't help her cause to stay, either. There simply was no place in Ame for her to study the virus. Sakura was depressed. She drew circles on Sora's coffee table absently.

"Sounds alright to me."

Sora smacked her upside the head.

"Ow!" exclaimed Sakura, rubbing her abused skull.

"Quit moping! If we can't find any labs here, we'll just have to look elsewhere when we get back."

"You mean that?" Sakura peered up from beneath her bangs. They were getting rather long.

"Of course! We promised not to abandon you until you found what you're looking for. No matter where that might be." Sora offered an encouraging smile.

Cheered, Sakura put her mind back on the mission at hand. "I guess my only question then is, why do you need to come with us, Kaoru-san? Won't it be dangerous for you?"

"I may not be a ninja, but I have holy powers unique to miko. I can take care of myself just fine, but thank you for considering my safety," Kaoru smiled. "As for why I must accompany you, the Blue Rose of Kurobako is housed in an ancient shrine. Only miko have the ability to get past some of the obstacles to reach it."

"I see," Sakura nodded. She looked to the others. "When do you want to leave?"

"The sooner, the better, so we can get back to helping you search," Haji said.

"Yeah, let's get this over with," Sora agreed. "I was getting tired of the rain here anyway."

Sakura couldn't help but smile.

One week later, the party of four reached the coast (they had to travel slowly so Kaoru could keep up). They passed south through Fire Country (making Sakura nervous as hell) until they found a seaport town at the edge of the ocean near Wave Country, where Sakura's old team had their first serious battle back in their genin days. From there, they hired a ferry to take them to Nanyouzai, a tropical island in a volcanic chain a few miles offshore.
Though it was nearly winter, the heat was sweltering this far south. The breeze did little to alleviate Sakura's sweating, but the sights on Nanyouzai took her breath away. The water was such a clear, crystal blue you could see to the bottom. Tropical fish darted in and out of coral reefs. On shore, the sand on the beach was fine and white as snow, untouched by a single footprint. Palm trees dotted the shoreline, and rainforest thrived further inland.

"Can we live here?" Haji blurted out as they set foot on the soft sand, turning pleading eyes to his wife.

"I know I should say no, but..." Sora trailed off, marveling at a rainbow-colored bird soaring through the sky overhead. It drifted towards the volcano on the distant horizon.

"It does seem like the perfect place to retire to," Sakura murmured in awestruck agreement. "And just think of how many unique medicinal herbs you could discover in a place like this..."

"According to the map Onoki-sama included with the mission scroll, the shrine should be about five miles inland to the southeast," Kaoru said, studying a creased piece of parchment.

They set off through the rainforest at a leisurely pace, taking in the sights and sounds and smells as they went. An hour and a half later, the brush began to thin. The group spied a clearing up ahead; a bamboo gate was just visible through the trees.

"The Rose is in a secret chamber deep underneath the compound; we have to break in to get to it. There should be ninja guards posted outside the shrine, be careful," cautioned Kaoru.

"We'll handle it," Sora replied with confidence. "Haji, you stay here and guard Kaoru."

The two kunoichi left Haji and the miko under the safety of the trees and pressed forward. Beyond the bamboo fence a long, grassy path led to a large red torii gate. Water troughs for purification lay to the right, and several small buildings were scattered along the path to the main shrine. It was simple and wooden, with traditional red-painted accents and moss growing on the thatched roof. Two guards were chatting by the torii gate, two more were stationed on either side of the main shrine's entrance.

"Dibs on the first two," Sora muttered before waltzing recklessly into sight. Sakura rolled her eyes as a cry of alarm rang out and the guards drew their weapons.

"Halt! Identify yourself!" One of them called, brandishing a chakra-enhanced spear.

"The name's Sora, but I'll forgive you if you don't remember it," she called back, making rapid signs with her hands.

Sakura let Sora do her thing and took advantage of the guards' distraction to slip around the side. She incapacitated one of the front door guards with a senbon to the spinal nerve. When the other whirled around and charged, Sakura merely sidestepped his lunge and clocked him in the occipital bone. Both lay unconscious in a heap. Sakura dragged them out of the way of the entrance.

Sora jogged up to her, having finished with her two as well. "I guess the tough guys are inside?" she asked, eyes bright. Sakura shrugged.

Haji and Kaoru made their way over across the grass. "Actually, there are only priests inside. The real obstacles lay under the earth," Kaoru said.

The party entered the shrine. Upon spotting the intruders, the three priests started chanting in a foreign language and gesturing. Sakura could feel a strange energy building in the air around them,
but it wasn't chakra. Unidentifiable symbols began glowing in blue along the walls. Sakura didn't wait to find out what they were for; she chose a target and charged, sending a flying kick at his head. Her teammates quickly dispatched the other two.

"Onoki-sama was wise to select you three. Those priests must have trained their holy powers for decades to be at that level..." Kaoru remarked in awe.

Sakura laughed awkwardly and looked around. The shrine was even smaller than it looked from outside. Thick, woven shimenawa ropes hung along the ceiling to purify the area. A cord from a bell hung down in the center of the room. There were cushions scattered on the floor for the priests, along with a smattering of paper prayer slips and rosaries. In a recessed alcove in the far wall lay an altar with a shining mirror atop it.

"How do we get to the Rose?" Haji asked.

Kaoru smiled and pushed back her long white sleeves. "Leave that to me."

She rang the bell three times and began chanting in the same foreign tongue the priests used. It sounded smooth and flowing to Sakura's ears, like water. Red symbols appeared along the walls this time, and the mirror began to glow. The holy energy built in the room as the mirror grew brighter and brighter until they had to shut their eyes against the light —

Suddenly the glare switched off. Sakura opened her eyes. In front of the alcove lay a set of steep steps, descending into blackness. Sakura peered down the crevice.

"The Rose is...down there?" she asked in a small voice. She couldn't begin to see the bottom.

"Yes," Kaoru replied. She grabbed a torch off the wall and lit it with a prayer. "Follow me," she said, descending the stairs.

Sakura gulped and climbed down after the others.

They walked for miles. Was it hours or days? The further they went, the more Sakura felt like she was entering a dream. Time flowed around her in erratic stop and go motions. The stairs stretched out monotonously before her, endless, each one identical to the last. 'This afternoon' felt like years ago, ages...Had she always been walking this journey? Though the stone around them was cool, the temperature rose steadily the farther down they traveled. Sakura wondered if she would walk these steps until her life ended, if she would just keel over one day midstep. Or worse, she could keep walking forever, in a kind of torturous purgatory, feeling the heat from Hell but never reaching it...

By the time the steps finally leveled out, Sakura was sweating, exhausted, and disoriented. She had no idea how much time had passed. She felt like she must be in the bowels of the earth, trapped in some kind of genjutsu.

"Kai!" Sakura shouted. Nothing happened. The others turned to look at her.

"Er — just checking," she said, sheepish.

They were in a spacious corridor of black rock, the likes of which Sakura had never seen before. She touched a wall. It was porous, the color of burnt charcoal...is that basalt?

"Hey, guys...is it just me, or do the walls look like hardened lava?"

"We are beneath the sacred volcano," Kaoru replied, nonplussed.
Sakura picked her jaw up off the floor and continued to sweat. She wished she'd had the foresight to bring something to drink. As if in answer to her prayers, the corridor opened into a vast cavern, covered floor-to-ceiling in blue-black stalactites and stalagmites. A dark underground river rushed past in front of them.

"Water!" Sakura exclaimed in delight, kneeling on the bank. She dug in her hip pouch for a spare flask and reached towards the stream.

"DON'T!" Kaoru grabbed her wrist. The flask fell from Sakura's hand into the black water, where it dissolved with an ominous hiss. Sakura stared. *That could have been your hand...what IS this place?*

"This is a sacred area made of spiritual illusion. Little is as it seems," Kaoru said. "I advise you to be very careful."

Sakura gulped and stood shakily. "How do we get across?"

Sora made four seals, staring intently at the water. Nothing happened.

"Chakra works in unpredictable ways down here as well...it will affect some things but not others," Kaoru commented.

"I guess we're jumping it," Haji mused. "Kaoru-san, if you'd climb onto my back, I'll give you a lift."

The three nin backed out into the corridor and took running leaps. Haji stumbled on the far bank due to his extra weight; Sora caught his elbow and steadied him.

"Thanks," he said, lowering Kaoru to the ground. They continued on into another long corridor, this one lined with torches that never seemed to burn out. They walked for god-knows-how-long again, sweat dripping off their backs to leave a trail. Eventually they reached a set of open basalt doors. They entered cautiously, walking slowly into the large round space. It was very tall, extending into the infinite black abyss above, and completely empty, save for the row of torches lining the oval perimeter.

"Where is the exit?" Sakura questioned, stepping forward. A wire, invisible in the low light, glinted as it snapped in two across her shin. The basalt doors shut behind them with a heavy groan. All the torches went out.

"Oops," Sakura squeaked.

Their clothes stirred in a breeze, swirling faster and faster around them. It was soon powerful enough to sweep them sideways into each other and the circular wall. A deafening roar came from above as the tail of humongous tornado touched down.

*Holy shit!* Sakura screamed as she was thrust into the whirling vortex, dragging her up and up through the air. The winds banged her against the wall and stole the breath from her lungs. She couldn't see her teammates in the dark but she could feel them as they crashed into each other. Sora spied a light coming from a hole in the wall about a mile overhead.

"Up there! Sakura, your sword!" she shouted. Sakura handed the sheath off to Sora during their next collision. Someone grabbed a handful of Sakura's clothes and pushed off the opposite wall. Just 20 feet from the light, Sora unsheathed the ninjatou and stabbed it into the rock next to the hole, using chakra to just barely hold her grip. She flung Haji into the light, who dragged Sakura and Kaoru in after him, swinging herself in behind them. The winds from the cyclone tore past, but inside the tunnel the air was still. Sora fell to her hands and knees, panting.
Kaoru, Haji and Sakura lay in a heap together, limbs entangled.

"Let's not ride that one again," Haji exhaled, extricating himself from the pile.

Sakura listened to the roar of wind disappearing far above. She chanced a glimpse out of the tunnel to yank her ninjatou from the wall.

"I'm just glad my chakra worked," Sora said. "Everything's so unpredictable down here, I can't figure out what the rules are."

The group climbed unsteadily to their feet and pressed on through the downward slope of the torchlit passage. Eventually the narrow tunnel widened at the edges; it opened up ahead into another chamber. This time the group hung back.

"I'll go check it," Sora volunteered, cautiously approaching the next cavern. It was a long rectangle with black basalt pillars supporting a low roof. A gap in the stone wall opposite them indicated another tunnel. She tossed a kunai out onto the empty floor. Blue electricity zapped through it, sparking the air.

"Haji, I think we need you for this," Sora called reluctantly.

"Lightning is my affinity. My body can handle crossing it, but what about you guys?" Haji asked dubiously, peering through the entrance. He noticed a metal rod at the far end near the exit. "Hey, does that look like a chakra-absorption device to you?"

Sora squinted at it. "Could be. Try zapping it."

Haji made three seals and a bolt of lightning crashed from the heavens into the rod. It smoked slightly, but nothing happened. Sora tossed another kunai out onto the floor. It sizzled.

"I probably have to neutralize the charge with direct contact," Haji said.

"Be careful," Sora warned, tense.

Haji stepped carefully out onto the floor. Electricity lit up his body immediately. He grimaced in pain, but kept walking. Sora closed her eyes. Eventually he reached the opposite wall. He stretched out a hand and gripped the metal rod tightly, sending chakra into it. A great blue spark lit up the room as Haji's body spasmed. The floors and walls darkened. Haji fell to the floor, stiff.

"Haji!" Sora yelped, dashing across the neutralized stone to his side, trailed by Sakura and Kaoru. She knelt next to him and put her hand over his heart. Sakura grabbed his wrist.

"He's fine, just got a big shock," Sakura announced. She pumped chakra into his nerve endings, soothing their frayed edges. She stimulated his adrenal gland to wake him up.

Haji's eyes snapped open. He sat up, holding his forehead. He looked at his wife's anxious face.

"I'm fine! Sorry to worry you, love." He offered a guilty smile. "Thanks, Sakura." They helped him to his feet and left the cavern.

"I think I'm picking up on a theme here," Sakura remarked as they squeezed through a narrow gap in the tunnel. It continued leading downwards; the heated air felt stifling as an oven. Sakura briefly considered taking her sweat-soaked clothes off, but then she'd just have to carry them...

The next chamber they encountered was wide, the stone floor full of little dips and hills. Sora tossed
a senbon out again. It was a bad move. The earth shook, a low rumble echoed from the tunnel behind them as it began to collapse.

"Run!" Sakura shouted as they sprinted forward into the large cavern, narrowly avoiding being crushed by the tunnel. Sakura didn't even want to think about how they were going to get back out of this place.

Maybe you won't.

She didn't have time to ponder the matter further however, as the quaking increased. Sakura's teeth and bones rattled together as the group formed a tight circle in the middle of the cavern, facing out, ready for whatever might be next.

No one was prepared when the ground beneath their feet began to heave. It swelled and thrust upwards, cracking open and knocking them over. They scooted to the edges of the room just as a massive shape burst forth from the dark earth.

It looked like a rhinoceros, only far too big, and made of black stone. It had rolling red eyes and feet the size of pillars. Smoke rose from its nostrils and the ground shook where it stepped.

Oh shit.

It snorted steam and turned its beady eyes on Kaoru. It charged. Sora slid into a dive just in front of the monster, grabbing a fistful of Kaoru's white sleeve as she passed. The beast crashed into the wall with a thunderous bang. Debris rained from the ceiling.

Sora was badly burned from sliding on the rock but had no time to deal with it. She leapt to her feet, dragging Kaoru with her, and tossed her to Haji. Sakura whirled on the rhinoceros as it tried to unwedge itself from the wall. She powered up a fist and let fly a massive chakra-filled punch to its flank.

The blow did nothing. The animal was made of such dense rock that not even Sakura's superhuman strength could harm it. Sora began making furious water jutsu seals. She summoned a killer whale made of water which crashed into the rhino and flooded the whole cavern up to their knees. But the creature didn't even feel it. It turned and charged towards Haji, who flopped into the water with Kaoru and rolled out of its way. As it passed overhead, he caught a glimpse of a patch of white stone on its underbelly, crumbly like ash.

He stood and shouted to Sakura, who was raining blows down on the beast fruitlessly.

"It has a weak spot on its stomach! Attack it!"

Haji glanced at Sora. The two of them yelled to get the monster's attention, then promptly split off and ran in opposite directions. It paused for a split second to think about which way to go.

Sakura seized the opportunity and performed a running slide through the water under its belly. She put chakra into her right foot, and flung it upward into the beast with all her might.

A crack resounded throughout the chamber. The animal froze. Sakura rolled out from underneath it. Chunks of rock began falling off it piece by piece, slowly at first, then quickly, until it crumbled into a pile of stones.

Panting, Sakura climbed to her feet and tried to heal her raw skin. She couldn't. She had access to her chakra, but whatever mysterious holy energy surrounded the room just wouldn't let her use her it to heal herself right now.
Great, she thought, wincing at the stinging across her left side. *Chakra is unpredictable down here. You'll just have to deal with it.*

Sora stared into the huge crack where the rhinoceros had emerged. A faint orange light flickered up through the blackness from far away. "I guess the only way left to go is down."

Faces grim, they took the plunge blindly. It was a long fall. The orange glow grew steadily brighter.

_This HAS to be the last obstacle, _Sakura thought desperately. _The only element we haven't encountered yet is —_

"FIRE!"

A sea of writhing orange flame came into view below them, approaching at terrifying speed. Sora's hands blurred as she made seven seals in a row.

An enormous tidal wave crashed into the flames beneath them, dowsing them. A massive cloud of steam rose and washed over them as they fell, scalding their skin and lungs. When they hit the water they were going so fast it was like smashing into concrete. Sakura directed chakra to the bones in her legs to keep them from snapping like toothpicks. The impact forced water into her nose and lungs. Gasping in pain, she struggled to find the surface.

She broke, coughing out sheaves of water and sucking air in big gulps. It was painful against her raw throat. She looked around for the others as Sora slowly began to drain the pool.

All three had multiple broken bones and injuries that Sakura paused to heal. They rested for a moment. They would have been grateful for the water to cool them off, except that the heat down here was so intense that it just made them feel like they were being steam cooked alive instead.

"Through there," Kaoru nodded to a doorway off to their left. The basalt surrounding it was engraved with ornate elemental symbols that glowed a soft blue. "That's the final room."

The exhausted party approached the doors. Kaoru placed a slim white hand on the black rock.

"You must infuse it with elemental chakra to get through," she said, withdrawing her arm.

Sora and Haji exchanged a glance. They approached together and each put one hand on the door. It glowed a myriad of shifting colors — pale pink to deep purple to sky blue — the air hummed with anticipation. There was a bright flash of white light, and the doors parted.

They found themselves in a medium-sized room shaped like a rose. The curving, bright azure walls were made entirely of sparkling sapphire and reflected each other like a prism. Ceilingless, the room extended infinitely upwards into blackness. In the middle of the room sat a stone altar, above which a single glowing blue rose floated, ethereal, suspended in the hot air.

Sora stepped forward. Hesitating at its beauty, she reached a hand out and plucked it from the air.

"Ouch!" Sora gasped. The Rose fell to the floor along with a drop of red blood. "It pricked me," she said, holding her finger.

Suddenly the bowels of the earth began to rumble. Cracks opened up beneath them, the stony ground swallowing their feet.

"I can't move!" Haji shouted, yanking his legs uselessly against the rock.
"What's going on?" Sakura could feel her chakra, but she couldn't access the monstrous strength needed to free herself.

Kaoru floated across the stone over to the Rose. She bent gracefully and picked it up.

"I forgot to mention...once the Blue Rose of Kurobako is removed, anyone in the room with chakra will not be allowed to leave. A precaution for its protection against thieving shinobi, you see...but I thank you for removing it for me." She smiled at them, bemused laughter in her dark eyes.

The three ninja could do nothing but stare in open-mouthed shock.

"My orders from Onoki-sama are to eliminate you three upon completion of the objective. I'm sure you understand, it's nothing personal. Just service to my country," she smiled demurely and began a low chant, red light collecting in her palm. She turned to Sora.

"Though you're all equally helpless, prudence dictates I should take out the strongest first." Her eyes gleamed. The red beam of light shot from her palm, directly at Sora's face.

The light made a sickening noise as it contacted human skin. A figure fell down dead.

But it wasn't Sora.

Haji lay prostrate on the charcoal ground, body contorted into an unnatural position. He had broken both his own ankles in his lunge, but he had somehow managed to twist his body in front of Sora's.

Sora stared at him with no expression. Her eyes could not comprehend what they were seeing. She just blinked, saying nothing, mouth closed.

"How pointless. You'll all get your turn," Kaoru shrugged. She raised her glowing red fist again.

"SORA, NO!" Sakura screamed, but it was too late. With a soft thump, Sora's corpse slid to the floor. Even in death, her face was oddly blank.

"WHAT DID YOU DO!?" Sakura raged at Kaoru, who merely laughed at her display of emotion.

Sakura's fury knew no bounds. Heat coursed through her blood; it felt like her eyes would boil out of her head. Kaoru was going to die, and Sakura would be the one to do it, with or without moving from that spot.

She flung two kunai. They each pierced one of Kaoru's feet, pinning them to the stone. The miko screamed in agony.

"You broke the contract," Sakura growled, voice low and hoarse. "You changed the rules." She might not be able to use her super strength, but maybe ninjutsu would work. She began a series of seals.

Kaoru's expression melted into terror. She began to sweat as the water in her blood heated to a boiling point. Her skin was rapidly changing from pink to lobster red. Purple bruises appeared when her veins burst. Red droplets of blood condensed all over her skin, evaporating into a fine pink mist. When her internal organs ruptured, Kaoru screamed and writhed in agony.

"There is nothing more despicable than betraying one's teammates!"

The fluid in Kaoru's brain was the last to boil. Her eyes rolled back into her head. Her mouth foamed. She let out a bloodcurdling shriek before collapsing to the ground, convulsing. She stiffened
Sakura's anger and shock over her friends' deaths drowned out all other emotion, including the revulsion she should've felt towards herself over the miko's gruesome end. There was no time for her to worry about whether such a horrible jutsu could justifiably be used on anyone, because the earth began to rumble. It shook and shook. The quaking continued to increase until chunks of sapphire splintered from the walls and stones rained from somewhere far above. The ground pitched and shudder beneath Sakura. Cracks spidered across the rock floor, freeing her feet. The whole place was about to collapse.

Sakura kneeled to close the eyes of her friends. She laid them side by side, and tucked Sora's still-warm hand into Haji's. Sakura spotted the Blue Rose of Kurobako lying on the ground a few feet away, forgotten. She bent to pick it up.

*Your friends lost their lives for this, and you don't even know what it does.*

She tucked it into her hip pouch. Large boulders were coming down fast now. Sakura didn't see any way out of this situation; going back the way they'd come was impossible.

*Are you going to die down here, too?* she thought, gazing at the limp bodies of her friends.

The shaking intensified. Sakura dodged the rocks that were falling like black hailstones. The stone beneath her feet rolled and heaved. A fissure appeared down the middle of the room, dividing it in half. As the two halves began to part, a shimmer of heat rose from the crack between them. Suddenly, a spray of flames roared out, leaping high into the air and consuming the bodies of Sora and Haji. Sakura clung to the wall as bright yellow-orange molten rock began to seep up from the ground astoundingly fast.

*The volcano is erupting,* Sakura realized with numb shock. As if by their own will, her hands made a series of nine seals.

Armor made of water encased her whole body. The earth shuddered and swelled again, and with a thunderous sound like the bursting of a dam, two-thousand-degree molten rock spewed into the chamber. The heat was so intense Sakura could feel blisters popping all over her raw, red skin. Her hair sizzled. Steam hissed and the magma turned hard and black where the liquid surrounding Sakura's foot touched it. The magma seethed and rose like a tidal wave, impossibly fast, propelling Sakura along its crest towards the earth's surface. Sakura punched her way through falling boulders and other obstacles as she crashed through chamber after chamber of the underground labyrinth, fire spitting all around her in the chaos.

Finally, she reached the light of day. Sakura narrowly darted out of the way as the volcano erupted, shooting a spectacular font of lava, ash, and debris 500 feet into the atmosphere. Sakura galloped down the side of the mountain at full speed. She called another water barrier to shield her head from the rain of fire and molten rock. The lava bubbled and poured down the volcano's sides on her heels. Sakura pumped chakra to her legs and shot through the rainforest towards the beach.

She nearly wept in relief at the welcome sight of the vast, blue sea. There was no time to rest, Sakura wanted to get as far away from the pursuing lava and the island that killed her teammates as fast as possible. She charged down the sand and over the water's surface, sprinting towards the mainland.

Some time later the coast came into view. Sakura breathed in relief, but she couldn't keep her eyes open any longer. Her head nodded, and her foot sank into the waves. She saw the smiling faces of Sora and Haji as she crashed into the ocean, consciousness escaping her like sand running through her fingers.
Sakura sighed. The ground was pretty soft for sleeping outside, and she was warm. She could hear Kakashi-sensei rustling around the tent, probably looking for his pack. There was a gentle tugging on her skirt. Sakura swatted it away and rolled over.

"Naruto, leave me alone. Go back to sleep," she mumbled, eyes still closed. The tugging persisted. Sakura swatted it away again.

"Stop or I'll tell Hinata you were molesting me in your sleep again..." she trailed off, snoring. Something warm and wet touched her cheek.

"Eww, Naruto! What the hell!" Sakura's eyes snapped open, blinking into the bright light. A white furry shape licked her nose.

She sat up, looking around and rubbing her eyes. She was on a beach. A small dog barked excitedly and spun in circles.

Oh. You were dreaming...

Her memory returned full-force. It knocked the breath from her lungs.

Sora...Haji...

She turned her head and emptied her stomach into the sand. The dog ran away. Wiping her mouth, she crawled to the edge of the ocean to wash out the taste. She hurt everywhere. Her shiny red skin was blistered and peeling from third degree burns, ash-covered clothes singed and torn, hair askance. Other than the burns, she didn't seem to have any major physical injuries. She was just exhausted.

Sakura sat up and stretched. She began the long process of healing her damaged skin. By the time she finished, the sun was setting. Sakura stared at the red-gold light playing off the waves. Spontaneously, she remembered the Blue Rose of Kurobako in her hip pouch and pulled it out. Though still beautiful, it looked smaller and less ethereal in the dimming light. Her team had died for this flower, and Sakura had no idea what it was even for. She was seized with the irrational urge to hurl it into the sea.

But that wouldn't bring her friends back.
She tucked the Rose back into her pouch. Maybe she’d find a use for it someday, maybe not. But she would keep it as a reminder of what she’d lost.

Sakura combed her tangled, scorched hair with her fingers. It really was getting long, past her shoulders now. Gazing at the water absently, she braided it down her back.

The familiar sound of rain on her roof was of little comfort to Sakura. She had returned to Amegakure to gather her things, collect her funds, turn in the key to her apartment...there was nothing left for her here. No way to research the virus that had ravaged her true home, and no friends to welcome her back to this false one. Sakura was weary of pretending.

She walked down the damp concrete streets towards the border, saying her silent goodbyes. Her pink braid fluttered in the breeze behind her.

Sakura spent a long, cold winter alone in Water Country. Followed by spring, then summer, then fall. Her second winter in Water County found her in Kirigakure.

After everything she’d learned from her experiences in Ame and abroad, infiltrating and surviving in the Village Hidden in the Mist had been easy. She took missions to pay the bills — mostly the underhanded, double-crossing, back-stabbing kind common to the area. She learned new jutsu and grew stronger.

She pored over the village (and surrounding towns) in search of labs and research equipment. She found two abandoned buildings that looked like they were once used to house some kind of mad, Orochimaru-esque genetic-experiments-gone-wrong, but nothing with the kind of modern equipment she needed. It was the same problem that Ame had — few people in a largely criminal village had need for legitimate scientific research.

So Sakura took missions, rubbed elbows with the underbelly of the ninja world, and picked up some creative new language along the way. When lonely, she found a friend in alcohol, and kept to herself.

One day soon after the last snows of the season had melted, Sakura realized she’d been gone from Konoha for almost two years. All this time in and around Kiri had turned up nothing. It was time to move on. She couldn’t show her face in any of the other four great nations for obvious reasons (had she really committed crimes against all their governments?), so their labs were off limits. But she didn’t know where else to look. Sakura resolved to leave anyway after this next mission — an assassination of some foreign businessman named Nobuhiro. She didn’t know where to go, but hopefully she’d know it when she got there.

Sakura henged into Ino, tucked a poison packet into the waist of her 'working girl' red leather skirt, and walked into the bar.

"Haruno Sakura, by order of the Hokage you are under arrest for treason against Konoha."

Sakura snorted under her breath as she eyed the Konoha ANBU squad surrounding her.

*Only six?*

Still, they presented a problem: how to get away without killing any of them? For who knew what infected friend's face could lie behind any of those frozen white masks...
The only solution is to incapacitate them. Very. Carefully. And don't you dare mess up.

She briefly considered boosting her metabolism to burn off the alcohol in her blood, but there was no time. It mattered little; she'd improved so much over the course of a year that she knew the situation was under control, intoxicated or not.

"Surely you don't expect me to come quietly?" she asked, crouching in her stance.

"Not really," one responded. He sounded an awful lot like Yamato. Sakura's stomach twisted.

Without warning, she pounded the spiked heel of one red knee-high boot into the pavement. The ground exploded upwards, gravel flying. Sakura took advantage of her pursuers' imbalance to backflip. She thrust two senbon into that sweet spot in the necks of both ANBU behind her. They collapsed stiffly, paralyzed.

An ANBU in a rabbit mask recovered first. He cast a fireball straight at Sakura. She ducked, but the ball turned around and came back for her like a heat-seeking missile.

Clever, she thought, calling forth a water shield to catch the burning mass. It dissolved with a splash into a cloud of steam. She spun, launching a carefully-controlled roundhouse kick at the ANBU's head. He smashed into the brick wall of the alley with just enough force to knock him out cold.

Two more were on her in an instant as the third made seals. Sakura danced around a flurry of blows, blocking hand over foot. They were fast — none of her chakra-enhanced punches were connecting, but neither were theirs. Sakura almost didn't see the flash of steel from a tanto until it was too late; she sidestepped, feeling the rush of wind on her cheek as the blade swept past her face. Some strands of pink fell to the floor.

"I've been growing that out, you asshole!" she hissed, unsheathing her ninjatou to block another strike from the tanto. She took a few wild swipes, forcing them to give her space. Caught up in the fight, Sakura didn't notice the third ANBU complete his seals. Suddenly, dozens — no, hundreds — more masked ANBU poured into the alley from all directions, a sea of white flak jackets. A splotch of bright blonde hair was among them.

"Give up, Sakura-chan! Come home! We miss you!" Naruto begged.

"Please Sakura, don't do this," Kakashi pleaded.

"Try again," Sakura sneered, parrying blows from half a dozen weapons furiously. She put her hands together. "KAI!"

The masses of ANBU disappeared, along with Naruto and Kakashi. All that remained in the alley were three still-standing ANBU, three unconscious ones, and one pissed-off teenage girl.

"I've had enough of this!" she burst out, hands blurring through eight seals.

The ANBU were regrouping for a joint attack when they froze. The water in their cerebral fluid had suddenly increased in volume, creating a pressure in their skulls that shut down their brains. They wavered and collapsed, outwardly uninjured.

Sakura sighed and turned on her heel. She took a few steps back towards the street when she heard the sound of...applause?

"Impressive," growled a low voice. "What did you do to them?"
A tall shadow stepped out from the darkness around the corner. A figure with blue-gray skin wearing a red and black cloak...

"You!" Sakura spat, drawing her sword. Now she truly wished she hadn't been drinking.

"Easy there," the shark-man laughed. "I came to thank you for eliminating my workload for the night, and you want to fight? Do you have any idea who you're messing with, Pinkie?" He sneered, leaning against a building.

"You're Kisame of Akatsuki," Sakura spat. "And my name isn't 'Pinkie.'" She made a face, taking a wobbly step back. She wasn't surprised that he didn't remember her — she had changed a great deal since they had met all those years ago.

Kisame leaned forward, taking a long whiff of the air around her. His eyes widened in realization. He let out a huge belly laugh. "And she's drunk! Oh, that's rich!" Guffaws subsiding into chuckles, he began to approach Sakura with a predatory grin. "Say sweetheart, why not come have some fun with me tonight?"

A kunai whizzed past his face, slicing open the collar of his cloak. A thin trickle of red dribbled down the side of his neck. The grin disappeared from his face.

"You're either very brave, or very stupid," he said slowly. "I was going to have a little fun with you, but now all I want to do is see what color your blood is underneath that pretty skin." He smirked, showing off rows of pointed white teeth. He took a menacing step forward.

Sakura should have been terrified, but she was distracted. She squinted at his neck through the newly-made gap in his collar. She dropped her fighting stance without realizing it. "What's that on your neck?" she demanded, pointing an accusatory finger.

Kisame was taken aback. "What?"

"That dark mark! On your neck, right there!" Sakura took a step forward, incredulous.

*That's the mark! The same one that Kakashi-sensei and Tsunade-shishou had on their backs! I'm sure of it!*

Kisame covered his neck with his hand. "You really are stupid if you think I'm going to tell you anything," he growled.

"Have you been sick recently? Any cold or flu-like symptoms? Were you anywhere near Fire Country in the last two years or so? What's your temperature?"

Kisame was baffled. He was unused to his dinner drilling him for his medical history. It was kind of a turn off.

"You're an odd one, little girl, but you've killed the mood so I'm letting you off the hook...this time." He shrugged, turning to leave. He could find a less chatty prize elsewhere.

"Wait!" Sakura shouted. The shark-nin looked back over his shoulder, brow raised.

Sakura blurted out the only thing she could think of. "I want to join Akatsuki!"

*Good lord, what the hell are you saying!?*

*It's the only way you can get close enough to investigate that mark! You have no other leads!*
You're insane. And inebriated. You'll kick yourself tomorrow...if you live that long.

Kisame stared, open-mouthed. "Are you joking? What makes you even think you're good enough for something like that?"

"Wanna try me?" Sakura asked, much more boldly than she felt. Kisame looked her up and down, assessing; he shook his head in amused disbelief.

"Well, I could take you to Leader-sama if you really want me to. I'd get a good kick out of it, but you should know that you're probably going to die. My co-workers are not all as friendly as I am." He flashed that pointy-toothed smirk again.

"We'll see," Sakura replied, arms crossed. "What do I have to do?"

"Follow me, Pinkie," Kisame answered with a menacing laugh that echoed down the empty street.

He led her through a maze of buildings into the heart of Kirigakure in silence. Sakura boosted chakra into her metabolism like crazy to burn off the alcohol as she followed. Unfortunately, the more she sobered up, the more she felt like she was marching to her death, a mouse entering the lion's den of her own idiotic volition.

Should you gift wrap yourself as well?

Shut up! Now is not the time. You're out of options. If you want to investigate that mark and save Konoha, you have to do this. Unless you'd rather spend your life as a missing-nin searching for labs that don't exist. You've risked your life for your village countless times before. Better to die early than alone!

Sakura swallowed and steeled her nerves as Kisame led her up the wide steps of a surprisingly respectable-looking inn. He slid the front door open and bowed to her.

"After you, Pinkie," he mocked. Sakura suppressed an eyeroll and entered the cozy lobby.

"Saitou-san, welcome back," a portly old man said from behind the front desk. He bowed deeply.

"Thank you, Takahata-san." Kisame smiled genially as they crossed the lobby to the stairs in the back. Sakura nodded politely to the innkeeper as she passed the desk, trying not to display her anxiety. Dressed as she was, he probably assumed she was a whore the shark-nin had picked up for the evening.

Speaking of which, why is he taking you to his room? You'd do anything to save Konoha, but what does 'anything' entail, exactly?

They climbed the polished wooden staircase to the second floor and turned down a long hallway. Kisame led her to room 11. Rapping his knuckles on the door once, he turned his key in the lock and opened it wide without waiting for an answer.

"Itachi-san, I've brought company!"

Sakura's brain froze. Sitting cross-legged on a futon on the other side of the room was Uchiha Itachi. He glanced up from his book and met her eyes.

Dressed in loose, casual clothes and without the Sharingan activated, he looked uncannily like
Sasuke. No — Sakura was deeply disturbed to find he was more attractive, in a terrifying kind of way. He had the same bottomless black eyes (framed by thicker lashes) and inky hair, only straighter and longer. Slightly damp from a recent shower, it splayed across his shoulders, released from his usual ponytail. The contrast between its raven color and his pale skin was highlighted where his long bangs brushed his face. For one unguarded second, his expression was caught somewhere between relaxation and nothingness. Then something unreadable flickered to life in his eyes. Black bled into scarlet as he climbed gracefully to his feet, his blank face somehow several degrees cooler.

"What is she doing here?" he asked. His voice was lower than Sasuke's, and — though smooth — had an edge to it that Sakura couldn't identify.

"She's our new recruit. Says she wants to join Akatsuki," Kisame replied with a chuckle.

Itachi took one long, wordless look at Sakura. Her body tensed under his scrutiny. His deadly Sharingan gaze seemed to sweep past her clothes, underneath her very skin. She flushed, wishing she'd worn a less revealing outfit. He focused red eyes back on Kisame.

"No."

Kisame huffed. "Now just wait a minute, Itachi-san. I wasn't asking for your permission. Any of us have the right to recruit new members as we see fit."

Itachi walked over to the table pushed into the corner. He lifted a pack and rummaged through its contents, extracting a little black book. He flipped through its pages leisurely until he found the one he wanted. He turned the book outward for Kisame.

"She is an A-rank jounin-level shinobi, technically still a chuunin. She is not S-rank."

"But look here, she's the one who killed that Lightning daimyō a while ago," Kisame pointed out with interest, studying the page.

"I'm...in the bingo book?" Sakura thought to herself, dazed. This felt so unreal.

"Yes, but that is her only significant accomplishment. She cannot even use multiple elemental techniques —"

"Yeah, well neither could Hidan or Sasori."

"They had other unique jutsu to compensate for that."

"She's a medic-nin for crying out loud! And those guys were pussies but they still got in. Listen, I just saw her take out six ANBU using some kind of weird jutsu that —"

"Um, hi," Sakura interrupted. "I'm still here, you know. And killing that daimyō was hardly my 'only significant accomplishment,'" she added, miffed. "I defeated your comrade Sasori, too. Among other things."

Itachi seemed to not even hear her. "No," he reiterated to Kisame, snapping the book shut.

"If I give her a recommendation, Leader-sama is obligated to meet with her whether you like it or not."

Something indecipherable flitted across Itachi's features. "Why are you doing this, Kisame?"

Kisame grinned. "Because I enjoy winding you up so much, Itachi-san," he admitted brazenly.
"What I can't figure out is why you even care."

"I don't," Itachi responded, turning his back to them. He left the room without a word.

Kisame let out a low whistle. "That was his version of a hissy-fit, Pinkie. I was right, you are entertaining. Now I kinda hope we get to keep you."

"Er, thanks...I think." Suddenly the whole day's worth of exhaustion caught up to her at once. She put her head in her hand.

Kisame seemed to read her mind. "You can share my futon if you want, girlie. I promise I won't bite." He flashed her a toothy grin.

Sakura made a repulsed face. "No thanks, Jaws. I'll go check myself into a room."

She shut the door on Kisame's throaty laughter and headed downstairs.

The next morning dawned blood red. Sakura sat watching the sun peek over the horizon from the window of her room. She had slept fitfully last night, one thought turning over and over in her mind like a song on repeat:

What the hell are you getting yourself into?

A sharp knock on her door broke the silence. "Oi! Pinkie! Up and at 'em!"

Sakura climbed to her feet and opened the door reluctantly. Kisame's smirking face was not the first thing she wanted to see in the morning.

"Well, don't you look chipper today, sunshine," the shark-nin quipped. "How 'bout some breakfast before you meet the boss?"

You could totally use a cup of coffee right now. Or several.

Shrugging, Sakura closed the door and followed him downstairs.

Three cups and a croissant later, Sakura felt much better. She looked across the table at the shark-nin attacking his plate of whitefish.

So. Breakfast with the Akatsuki. This is...awkward.

She cleared her throat. "So. Uh, where is...your partner today?" Given her knowledge of his history and what he did to her former teammate, Sakura was having trouble saying his name. The whole situation felt surreal, like meeting someone you saw on television at the grocery store.

"Itachi-san wasn't hungry this morning. I can't imagine why." His eyes sparkled with amusement.

"What's his problem?" Sakura asked, brow furrowed. She wasn't the one who slaughtered her entire clan, betrayed her village, and mind-fucked her little brother into insanity. If anyone should be treated like a pariah around here, it was him.

"Beats me. I've never seen him act this way before. It's funny as fuck though," Kisame smiled jovially, diving into his third bowl of rice.

Sakura observed the culinary massacre distantly, sipping her coffee. Maybe Uchihas weren't meant to make sense.
"Well, here we are," Kisame announced, setting Samehada down against a boulder.

Sakura looked around. There was nothing but trees and rocks in all directions. "But this is the middle of nowhere."

"Exactly. We don't want anyone to stumble across our bodies while we're using the astral projection jutsu." Seeing her face, he added, "What? You didn't think the whole organization meets in person on a regular basis, did you?" He chuckled. "You have a lot to learn, Pinkie. Hold onto your panties!"

Kisame performed a very long series of complicated seals, so fast that Sakura couldn't catch most of them. Suddenly, the landscape around her seemed to dim. Flashes of different places zipped by her field of vision at the speed of light: grassy plain, snow-capped mountain, shallow lake, sweltering desert...the scenes sped past her dizzyingly until one came to an abrupt standstill.

She and Kisame were standing next to each other on two adjacent fingers of a great stone hand. They were perched atop a huge humanoid statue inside a dark cave. Six other shadowy figures, each standing on a fingertip, flickered into being around them.

"Kisame, would you like to introduce our new guest?" spoke a tall figure. Against his silhouette, only his light-purple eyes with concentric circles emanating from his pupils were visible.

"This is Haruno Sakura. I am recommending her to our organization, like I mentioned earlier," he replied. Sakura was mildly surprised to learn he did know her real name after all. Must've picked it up from the bingo book.

The purple eyes observed her briefly before flitting to a woman's figure. "Konan?"

"Yes, Pain-sama. I can confirm her visual appearance matches her chakra signature. She is indeed the same girl from Ame," the figure spoke. Sakura recognized that voice.

"Tenshi-sama? Is that you?" she asked, incredulous. And Ame's revered "Pain-sama"...is the leader of Akatsuki? What?

"Tenshi-sama?" Kisame questioned in bewilderment. "Do you know Konan somehow?"

"She lived in Amegakure for a year or so," the one called Pain supplied. "She gained quite a reputation in the area...but she is not strong enough to be Akatsuki."

Sakura's heart sank. If she couldn't join, how would she ever find out where that mark on Kisame had come from? Or whether any other members had one like it?

"However," Pain continued, "based on Konan's reports during that period — coupled with her information in the bingo book — I understand that she has potential. I hereby grant one Haruno Sakura permission to become an apprentice."

"Yes!" Kisame cheered.

"Ugh!" spat a male figure with only one eye visible, the other hidden by long bangs. "Not another apprentice! Tobi was bad enough, yeah!"

"You can't mean that, Deidara-senpai!" cried a silhouette who appeared to be wearing a one-eyed mask on his face. He sounded close to tears.
"You bet your ass I mean it, mm! I'm through babysitting! You better not stick her with me, Leader-sama, I'll turn her into art with a *bang*, yeah!" Deidara snapped.

*Okay...not exactly what you were expecting from the most notorious group of S-rank criminals in the world,* Sakura thought.

"Enough," Pain said coolly. "I can sense that she is primarily a genjutsu type. Itachi, I am making you her mentor."

Kisame cracked up so hard Sakura thought he'd bust a gut. The red eyes of Itachi's silhouette didn't waver.

"Yes, Leader," he answered smoothly.

'Primarily a genjutsu type'? Sakura thought, brow furrowed. *Come to think of it, didn't Kakashi-sensei mention something about that way back when you were a genin?*

...was your training really neglected that badly?

"You, Kisame and Sakura are to return to the base in Mineral Country. You will train there with Deidara and Tobi until it is time for your next mission. That is all. Dismissed."

One by one the silhouettes flickered and vanished until only Kisame and Sakura were left.

"Not bad, girlie. Welcome to the club." Sakura couldn't see it through the shadows, but she could hear the smirk in his words.

"Thanks." Sakura allowed herself a tiny, victorious smile.

*Now, to make a plan...*

Mineral Country was all flat, grassy plains and meandering rivers, with mountains to the far north rising out of the horizon. The trees were sparse, the azure sky overhead cloudless. Veins of rich ore which served as the country's main export ran just under the earth's surface, meaning the motley group of three passed quite a few rock quarries and mining towns along their journey.

They were indeed an odd-looking assortment: a towering, bulky giant, a handsome young man, and a teenage girl. She walked between them, escorted like a prisoner or a child; her red vest, white skort and low-heeled boots looked out of place among their red and blacks cloaks. Her long pink braid, now almost to her backside, whipped in the wind that rippled the grasses across the plain.

"Almost there, Pinkie. Think you can make it?" Kisame taunted.

"So long as I don't have to carry you I'll be fine. Don't exhaust yourself on my behalf, big guy," Sakura quipped. She was used to walking for long periods of time without stopping to eat or sleep by now.

Kisame laughed. "You've got a smart mouth, girlie. If you want to keep that tongue of yours intact, you better watch it when you speak to the others. Right, Itachi-san?"

Itachi said nothing.

It had been a very quiet three-day journey on his end. Sakura stole a glance at the distant man out of the corner of her eye.
Is he always that reticent, or is this a special occasion just for you?

Really, she didn't give a crap what crazy mass murderers thought of her, but if she was going to be living with him for an extended period of time, it would make things easier on everyone if they could at least speak to each other civilly.

Hopefully she wouldn't have to deal with him for too long—Sakura wanted to get her intel and go as soon as possible. Fortunately, Kisame seemed surprisingly unguarded. Sakura had a few ideas about how she might wheedle information out of him (some of which she liked less than others). She just had to be careful not to accidentally tip him off that something funny was going down in Konoha. Checking for marks on the other members, however, would be a different story entirely. Sakura pictured herself sneaking into Itachi's room at night to peek under his blanket.

Yeah...not happening. I'd like to live to see my eighteenth birthday.

They continued walking for another hour or so in silence before Kisame stopped at a random tree. Like the few others in the area, it was short and ordinary-looking, with a slim trunk and pointy, light-green leaves. Sakura looked around, but there was nothing but a sea of grass interrupted by the occasional rock as far as the eye could see.

"Here?" Sakura asked Kisame in confusion.

"It's hidden under a genjutsu."

Oh, Sakura thought in surprise. It must be an amazing one — she hadn't felt a thing out of place.

"Itachi-san, would you like to do the honors?"

Wordlessly, Itachi made a long, complicated series of seals that Sakura tried to follow in vain. With a sound like wind whistling through grasses, a building suddenly came into view a few meters away.

It looked relatively new, like it had been built within the last decade. It was two stories, large, and made of wood and colored stones. A smattering of smaller outbuildings were scattered across the yard: a well, two sheds, what looked like an outhouse, and a large windowless building that Sakura couldn't identify. A fenceless training field stretched around back.

They approached the heavy wooden front doors. Kisame performed some kind of reverse-sealing jutsu to unlock them, and the group entered. Itachi promptly disappeared down a hallway to the right of the foyer, leaving Sakura alone in the spacious front entrance hall with Kisame. She looked around; the place was classically furnished in warm browns and russets. The furniture was elegant but masculine and looked to be on the expensive side. The whole room looked more like a hunting lodge than a secret hideout. Sakura raised an impressed eyebrow despite herself.

"Give yourself the grand tour, I'm starving," Kisame said bluntly. "You can go outside but I wouldn't bother trying to leave the compound if I were you. You'll make Tobi cry if he has to clean up one more bloody mess this week." He hung his cloak up on a stylish rack along the wall and strode off down another hallway, abandoning Sakura.

She went from room to room, peeking around corners and tiptoeing, feeling like an intruder sneaking into the 'authorized personnel only' section of a concert or something. She half-expected a security officer to jump out at her at any moment and demand to see some ID. Luckily, she met no one.

Infiltrating an Akatsuki base...definitely not something you expected to be doing in this lifetime. This could be an amazing opportunity to get useful inside intel for Konoha...assuming you ever manage to put things back to normal.
The layout of the place was simple: two hallways led off from the foyer. The short one directly in front lead to a spacious living area with a fireplace. Adjacent to it was the kitchen, complete with large fridge and wood-burning stove. The right hallway lead to several closed doors that Sakura discovered were either empty bedrooms or bathrooms, save for one that appeared to be a weapons room. Several of them were locked — Sakura assumed that those were occupied by Akatsuki members. At the end of the hall was a flight of wooden stairs. Going up, they led to a library on the second story (Sakura pumped her fist in secret joy at this jackpot), to which a wide balcony was attached via glass doors. A short hall lead to another few locked doors, probably more bedrooms. Going down, the stairs lead to what could only be a prison in the basement. Steel bars lined the walls, and the floor was made of cement and indented towards a drain; Sakura didn't want to think about what it was for.

Back in the kitchen on the first floor, Sakura peeked her head out of the spotless sliding glass doors (Who do they get to clean this place? Don't tell me Akatsuki employs a maid service...). In the backyard, a small cooking garden thrived alongside the main house. A dirt path lead to a tin-roofed shed, which was locked. Sakura passed another small wooden structure which turned out to be an outhouse. Moving on, she discovered a laundry area complete with someone's underwear hanging on the line (she made a mental note to find a more private spot to hang her undergarments). Passing through a large training field with several targets and dummies full of kunai, she reached the last building at the far end of the compound.

It was surprisingly large and made of concrete instead of wood. She tried the metal door's handle; it was unlocked. Slowly, she opened it and peeked her head in.

It was dark, so she fumbled along the wall for a lightswitch. Hand finding purchase, she flicked it on with a click. She froze, her jaw dropping to the floor.

In front of Sakura's disbelieving eyes lay the most beautiful laboratory she had ever seen.

"Oh no, not another one, mm. I heard that's the exact face that bastard Orochimaru made when he saw what Leader-sama had built for him, too," a voice sneered. Sakura turned her head.

Approaching her from behind was a man with blonde hair and blue eyes, one of which was hidden beneath his long bangs. He wore typical ninja attire without his Akatsuki cloak, and exuded an air of haughtiness. Once he caught a closer glimpse of her face, he raised a mistrustful blonde brow at her, a frown marring his features.

"Hey, you look kinda familiar, yeah? Where have I seen you before?"

Sakura tried to swallow, but her mouth was suddenly dry as the desert she'd killed his partner in.
Chapter Seven: Explosive Tempers

Sakura's gaze shifted to the ground, as if she could somehow avoid being identified if she didn't make eye contact.

"Um, I don't think we've met...I'm Sakura," she said. She didn't offer her hand.

He squinted at her, arms crossed in thought. "No, I'm sure I've seen your face somewhere before, yeah. And that unaesthetic pink dye job would be hard to forget."

Sakura flushed. "This is my natural hair color! I'm not here to be visually appealing to you," she snapped. "Besides, you're one to talk. With that blonde mop on your head I couldn't even tell you were a guy."

The silence that descended was icy. Sakura stood her ground, secretly wondering if she should start running for her life about now.

"DEIDARA-SENPAAAAAAAAAI!" A childish voice broke the tension. A figure covered head to toe in black with a spiral orange mask hiding his face jogged towards them.

"Aw shit," Deidara grumbled. "Now my headache is bound to get better. TOBI! THERE'S NO WAY YOU FINISHED CLEANING EVERYTHING ALREADY!" he shouted.

The masked man skidded to a halt. "But senpai, I did! Tobi did the windows, the laundry, the floors, the kitchen, the bathrooms...I'm just not sure what you meant by 'everything.'"

"By 'clean everything' I mean everything, you idiot!" Deidara snapped. "Did you even do the basement — ?"

"Oh, it's the new girl, hi!" Tobi cut his senpai off cheerfully, causing the other man to fume. "My name is Tobi, nice to meet you!"

"Er, hello. I'm Sakura," she said, somewhat thrown by his friendliness. "It's nice to meet you, too. Is he really an Akatsuki member? He seems more like a bullying victim..."

"Enough with the pleasantries," Deidara cut in. "Tobi, did you change all the sheets in the spare bedrooms yet?"
"But senpai, no one sleeps in those..."

"That's why we have to keep 'em clean, yeah! In case we have guests who need to sleep there."

"Senpai...why would we have guests at our secret hideout?"

"It's not for you to question my orders, mm! It sounds to me like you still have a lot of work to do, so you'd better — "

Sakura took advantage of the impending rant to slip away unnoticed. She hurried back towards the main house and let herself into the kitchen.

*This is a looney bin, not an axis of evil,* she thought shaking her head. *If I'm going to survive around here, I'm going to need to watch my step better. But there's a LAB! Orochimaru left a lab for me! I never thought I'd see the day I'd be grateful to that snake bastard...*

Sakura was so lost in her musings that she failed to notice the large body in front of her, which she collided into.

"Sorry, I was..." she trailed off, caught in the crimson glare of Uchiha Itachi. The red and white cloud of his too-close Akatsuki cloak was inches from her nose, his black bangs nearly brushing her face. Sakura froze, eyes wide and round.

Slowly, he reached out a hand towards her. He pressed her shoulder, pushing her stiffly to the side. He bent to open the fridge she had been blocking.

Sakura could only stare.

Itachi dug through one of the drawers and emerged with a red apple in hand. Without a sound or a glance in her direction, he turned and headed towards the living room. When he reached the doorway, he paused. Sakura tensed, but he did not turn around.

"Meet me at sunset in the yard." He left without another word.

Sakura tried to ignore the chills running down her spine.

No one had told her where she was to sleep, so Sakura made the executive decision to move into one of the empty bedrooms on the first floor. She picked one near the stairs at the end of the hall. It had a comfy double bed complete with green duvet (in need of dusting), and a matching rug on the hardwood floor. An antique wooden desk with a reading lamp was pushed into the corner, a chest of drawers sat against the wall opposite the bed, and a little curtainless window overlooked the backyard. She didn't regret the lack of a closet; she didn't plan to be here long enough to amass enough clothes to fill it.

Sakura dumped her pack on the bed and hid her weapons away. Anxious as she was to get down to the lab to start analyzing Tsunade's skin sample, she would have to wait until the others went to bed if she wanted to avoid unnecessary attention. She definitely didn't want prying eyes asking questions about *that* particular project.

Once unpacked, Sakura headed upstairs to explore the library. She found Kisame sitting at a table in the corner alone, staring at a half-full go board. He glanced up at her as she entered.

"Pfft. I don't even know why I bother, Pinkie. Strategy games are useless in real battle," he grumbled.
Sakura studied the board for a moment. She reached a hand into the jar of white stones and placed one near the star point in a crowded corner. "If white plays here, you can make two eyes and save this whole group," she said. "Black will probably respond here or here, though...both of which are trouble for white."

Kisame made a face at her. "I'll leave you to it, then. Feel free to take over in the future, I'm tired of getting talked into boring shit like this anyway." He ambled out of the room.

Sakura browsed the shelves of the library. It wasn't a very big collection, but she found some interesting-looking medical tomes, along with many taijutsu and genjutsu reference books. She even stumbled across random books on cooking and gardening, and quite a few novels.

*What, no romances?* she thought dryly. *No wonder these boys are all so cranky. Kisame in particular could use a nice fictional girlfriend, that lecher...*

Sakura gathered up an armful of books and headed downstairs to her room. She sat around reading for an hour or so before her eyes began to droop. All the traveling without sleep was beginning to catch up to her. Sakura closed her heavy lids and laid back against the fluffy pillow, thinking a catnap would be nice before she had to meet Itachi. He was too intimidating to deal with without sleep...

By the time Sakura woke the sun had disappeared from her window.

*Shit! You overslept!*

She pulled on her boots and ran her fingers quickly through her tangled tresses; there was no time for a braid. Her stomach growled in protest, but she hustled out the door, ignoring hunger pangs.

When she stepped out onto the back porch in the cool night air, she was unsurprised to see Itachi already standing there, his back to her, still wearing his cloak (*Seriously? Does he sleep in that thing?*).

"You're late," he said by way of a greeting, without bothering to turn around.

Sakura fought down her irritation; she could hardly complain about his rudeness after oversleeping.

"Er, sorry, I took a nap and lost track of time..." Her stomach growled loudly.

Itachi turned, face expressionless. "You should eat."

"I'm fine," Sakura insisted, embarrassed by her belly's betrayal.

"You will not be able to keep up with this level of training unless you're fed. Go eat."

Sakura bristled at his bossiness but decided it wasn't worth the fight. And she *was* really hungry. She made her way into the kitchen, where she found some leftover donburi in the fridge consisting of vegetables and tofu over rice. It smelled delicious and was surprisingly tasty. Sakura briefly wondered who did the cooking around here. She wolfed it down along with a glass of water and headed back outside.

Itachi was sitting on the porch swing staring out at the yard. His scarlet eyes flickered to her when the door slid open, but he did not meet her gaze. He stood.

"From now on you will come to training well-rested and fed. I don't care how you neglect yourself at other times."
Sakura bit her tongue and said nothing. *Play nice...he may be an asshole, but once you hand over all the intel you collect on him to Tsunade-shishou, he'll get what's coming to him.*

"We will begin with taijutsu," he continued.

"I thought you were supposed to be training me in genjutsu," she objected. "My taijutsu is fine."

Itachi's expression didn't waver. "I need to see what your current fighting style is like in order to understand how genjutsu can best complement it."

*Oh. Well that makes sense.* Sakura shrugged and followed him out to the flat training field.

Once they reached the middle, Itachi turned and finally locked eyes on her. The lethal weapons seemed to assess her dispassionately. She was mesmerized by the slow swirl of them for a moment before shaking herself out of it.

*Why does his Sharingan look so much more terrifying than Sasuke's ever did?*

Without warning, he charged.

*Crap — !*

Sakura backpedaled, throwing up her arms to block a kick. He was so fast she almost hadn't seen him move. She ducked a roundhouse kick from the other direction, crouching low to strike out with her own chakra-powered feet. He simply jumped the blow with perfect timing.

Sakura charged her fists and hammered upwards, but he was already gone. She felt a rush of wind behind her and rolled out of the way just in time; his foot landed where her face had been. She didn't have time to think about counterattacking before she was dodging as many kicks to the head as an entire ANBU team could've thrown at her.

*He isn't even using his hands!* she thought angrily.

Flipping over him, she attacked from behind with a flurry of chakra-enhances punches, each one powerful enough to collapse a house. But it didn't matter how strong they were; she just couldn't land a hit. They went back and forth like that for twenty minutes without Sakura even getting close to doing damage.

Growling in frustration, Sakura punched the ground. Itachi leapt gracefully over the splitting earth. Sakura took advantage of his airborne flight to make a few hand seals. She directed water into the cerebral fluid in his skull. In two seconds his swollen brain would shut down and he would pass out —

Suddenly the world shattered, and Sakura found herself standing on her feet in exactly the place she had begun. She wobbled and sank to one knee.

*That was...a genjutsu?*

"The point of this exercise was for me to observe your taijutsu, as I said," Itachi spoke. Something hard glinted in his eyes. "Ninjutsu was to come tomorrow."

"Why aren't you taking me seriously?" Sakura burst out, embarrassed that she'd been had. "Fight me for real!"

Itachi just looked at her. Sakura got the feeling he thought she was incredibly stupid. *I was taking you seriously,* he said slowly. "Any one of your chakra-enhanced blows could kill if it lands, hence
the use of genjutsu."

Sakura blushed. *Okay, maybe that should've been obvious.*

"Yeah, well, it should hardly be a problem for a genius..." she muttered. Itachi's handsome features seemed frozen on his face. "Or I could turn it down," she amended, uncomfortable.

"No need," he answered coolly, slipping one hand out of his coat sleeve, then the other. "Since you're obviously looking for a senseless brawl instead of actual training, allow me to oblige your excessive aggression." His cloak dropped to the floor, revealing a lean, muscular figure clad in a black mesh shirt and loose pants.

Itachi coiled his body like a panther preparing to spring. Sakura swallowed, taking an unconscious step back.

He was on her before she could blink. A flurry of blows rained over her body; she couldn't tell whether he used his hands or feet. The barrage seemed to come from all directions, impossibly fast. She was helpless to block anything. Stars danced across her vision; she saw close-up flashes of black hair and red eyes and dark purple-painted fingernails as his fists connected with her face. She couldn't tell which way was up or down through the furious assault; she just took it, grunting with pain.

It ended shortly. Sakura blinked up at the stars; she didn't even know how she ended up on her back. She could feel her eye swelling up and watering. Blood dribbled into her mouth from her nose, and it felt like her cheek was broken. Her jaw was definitely dislocated. Itachi looked down at her as she struggled to sit up.

"I won't go so easy on you next time. I expect you back out here tomorrow at dawn—with a better attitude." He turned on his heel, gathered his cloak, and went inside.

Sakura was limping down the hall to her room when Kisame caught sight of her on his way past. He burst into peals of laughter.

"What did you do to him this time? Whatever it is, I don't know how you keep doing it, girlie. Never seen anything like it," he chuckled as she squeezed by, shaking his head. He made sure to jostle her injured ribs as she passed. Sakura hissed in pain and glared, resulting in another round of laughter from the shark-nin.

Back in her room, Sakura healed herself sullenly. She was shocked to find her hands trembled.

_He could have annihilated you in an eyeblink. It's easy to see why he's one of the most feared shinobi of all time; for all your progress over the last year you are still utterly outclassed by that monster, make no mistake. Worst of all, he may he have a point, she admitted bitterly. Perhaps you're being too aggressive because you've viewed Akatsuki as enemies for so long. You'd better back off or you'll blow your cover. Or worse, you'll piss someone off to the point where they REALLY want to hurt you. He wasn't kidding about going easy on you. Next time it could mean your life._

Once healed, but still sore all over (particularly her pride), Sakura gathered a change of clothes and made her way down the hall to the bathroom. A long, hot bath while she waited for the others to go to bed was just what the doctor ordered.

Later that night, when all the lights were off in the house save for the ones emanating from a handful of bedroom windows, Sakura grabbed her hip pouch and slunk down the stairs, through the kitchen,
and out into the empty yard. She walked in silence, looking over her shoulder every few seconds to make sure she wasn't followed.

*Quit being so paranoid. They don’t consider you their enemy; it's none of their business what you get up to in your free time, lab or not.*

Still, once she slipped inside the lab she padlocked the door after her and sealed it with chakra.

*Perfect,* she thought, surveying the area once again. It had all the modern equipment she needed: glass flasks and test tubes hung from the wall in neat rows; a centrifuge, Bunsen burner, and several microscopes of varying strengths sat on the workspace next to a deep sink; there were cabinets full of all other kinds of equipment imaginable; reference books and a computer sat on a shelf at the far end; there were even several white coats and aprons hanging from hooks next to them. Sakura helped herself to one and got to work.

Three hours later, Sakura had filled an entire notebook with her indecipherable handwriting, but she had made little progress. This sample was as ordinary-looking as the last had been, save for that same mutation on the chromosomal location DL4056. Without any other leads, she might as well start running tests to at least determine what genes that location controlled. To do that, she needed to culture herself some more viral cells. She set up several test tubes, each with a monolayer of living skin cells she scraped off herself. She injected some viral DNA into the layers. After checking carefully to make sure each sample was bathed in media, she set the test tubes on a roller rack to incubate.

Now to play the waiting game. She'd have to check the samples every day for the next few weeks for any cytopathic effect (some kind of cellular change that would show the virus had indeed taken hold and multiplied). Since this was her first time ever studying this virus, all she could do was hope she'd recognize the signs when (or if) they appeared. Sakura didn't even want to think about the possibility that this virus may not be the kind that could grow in a culture at all.

*And for the love of god, make sure you don't accidentally let it out!* she thought. *If you get sick, Konoha is finished. Maybe when you're done here you can intentionally infect the Akatsuki as a parting gift...assuming they aren't already infected. Kisame does have that mark after all, but he's hardly overly polite like the victims in Konoha had been.*

Sakura grabbed an empty notebook off the shelf and started taking notes on Kisame’s behavior thus far. She glanced at the clock on the wall once she finished; it was nearly midnight already. She’d better get to bed, there was no way she was going to be anything but early for tomorrow's training session. Sakura packed up her supplies and notes and left, locking the door behind herself with a sealing jutsu she had learned in Kirigakure.

Sakura woke the next morning before the sun did. She dressed, braided her hair, brushed her teeth and made her way downstairs for breakfast.

She found instant oatmeal in the pantry and helped herself while waiting for the coffee to brew. *Thank god they have a machine. I just need to get one of my own for the lab now...*

She downed three cups, wanting to be extra awake for the sparring session. She was twenty minutes early. She smirked when she imagined the look on the stoic Uchiha's face once he realized she beat him to the punch.

Taking her last mug to go, Sakura opened the sliding glass door and made her way out into the predawn darkness.
A seated figure in an Akatsuki cloak was already waiting for her.

Sakura suppressed an exasperated groan. *So he's THAT kind of guy, huh? Fifteen minutes early is 'on time' and on time is 'late'. Wonderful.*

Itachi turned to look at her without meeting her eyes. That habit was getting really annoying.

"You came," he observed.

Sakura didn't know what to make of that. "Of course," she replied. "Actually, I thought about what you said last night. My approach was too confrontational. But I am a good student, and I'm going to prove it today."

Itachi regarded her for a long time in silence. Sakura grew uncomfortable, wondering if he was ever going to respond. Just as she opened her mouth again, he spoke up:

"I need to study your ninjutsu. You specialize in water techniques, I believe?"

Okay, that wasn't exactly an apology for beating the crap out of you yesterday, but whatever.

"Yes," she answered.

"Why?"

Sakura was thrown. "Because...that's what I was taught? What's wrong with water techniques?"

"Nothing. I myself am a water user. I just thought it was somewhat odd, given you have a natural affinity for earth."

Sakura gaped. You have an affinity for earth? How could you not know something like that?!

"I—er—never realized," she admitted.

Itachi gave her a queer look. "No one in your village ever mentioned it?"

Sakura blushed scarlet. "My training was a bit...neglected. My teammates were both kind of geniuses. They got a lot of attention," she confessed. *You should understand, one of them was your little brother after all,* she added silently.

Itachi gave her an unreadable look.

"I can only teach you so much about earth release. You're better off asking Deidara about that if you want to learn."

*Oh yeah, I'm sure he'll be dying to help once he remembers I killed Sasori.* Aloud she said, "Uh, thanks, I'll keep that in mind."

Itachi nodded. "In the meantime I need to see all the jutsu you have, elemental or otherwise."

"All my jutsu?" she asked, reeling. They'd be here all day.

Itachi just gave her a flat look. Sakura sighed and got started.

Four hours later, Sakura finished the final one, exhausted and almost out of chakra. Kisame had come out at one point to jeer at her, six pack of beer in hand despite it only being mid-morning, before he eventually grew bored of the lack of Sakura-getting-her-ass-handed-to-her and went back
"Thats all, folks," she panted, looking up at Itachi expectantly.

He simply nodded and turned to leave.

"Wait, that's it?" she asked, incredulous. "I don't even get a 'good job,' a 'goodbye' or anything?"

"My orders are to train you, not coddle you." He turned to leave again.

That does it, Sakura seethed. "Excuse me, but what the hell is your problem?"

Itachi stopped and glanced over his shoulder. "What do you mean?"

"I mean with me. What is your issue with me?" she bit out in frustration.

"I do not have an 'issue' with you. My job is to train you in genjutsu; that's all."

"Well, you don't have to be such a huge jerk about it!"

Itachi stared.

"Oh come on. Seriously, can't you at least try for 'coldly polite?' Or even 'indifferent,' instead of actively rude? What the hell do you have against me in the first place?"

Itachi hesitated, like he wasn't sure how to answer. Sakura waited with bated breath. He took a long time to respond.

"You don't belong here." He walked inside without a backward glance.

Sakura stared after him in shock. She knew it shouldn't, but for some reason the blatant rejection kind of stung.

The sweat rolled off Sakura's back as she beat the stuffing out of yet another practice dummy. Even without chakra, she reduced it to shreds far too soon for her liking. Training without chakra was somewhat dissatisfying. Frowning, Sakura balled her gloved fist and obliterated an innocent rock.

Why did you let him under your skin?

Because he may be a twisted, inhuman monster incapable of feeling, but he's still one of the most genius shinobi who ever lived. So his opinion kind of matters.

And he thinks you're not worth shit.

Sakura lifted a boulder and balanced it carefully atop another one.

Okay, so you're frustrated. That's understandable. He's unreadable, and despite being emotionless seems to harbor a peculiar dislike specially for you. That would frustrate anyone. Just don't lose sight of the mission. You're here to rescue your village, not earn Uchiha Itachi's respect.

The top boulder toppled off and hit the ground with a crash, making a large crater. She restacked it.

"Oi, oi! STOP!" A voice called out as the sliding glass door opened. "Whenever the training terrain gets fucked up, I'm the one who has to fix it, so just — "

Sakura was busy swinging the training field's only tree at the boulder, T-ball style. The rock
launched through the air like a comically oversized baseball. She turned around at the sound of the
voice.

Deidara stood frozen on the porch, mouth agape. His pale face slowly turned red.

"YOU!" he bellowed. "I remember you now, yeah! You're the overpowered bitch who killed Sasori-
danna!"

Sakura winced inwardly. Oh crap. You knew this was coming eventually...

Deidara stormed over. "Sasori-danna was wrong about a lot of things, but at least he cared about art,
mm! And you, just some nasty little girl with the help of an old lady..." he trailed off, fuming. "You
may be older and uglier, yeah, but I remember. It was definitely you!"

"What's it to you if it was me?" Sakura asked defensively, admitting nothing.

Deidara paused. "He...he was my partner! And you killed him, and I got stuck with Tobi!"

Something dangerously volatile glinted in his blue eyes.

Sakura tried redirection. "So what? You only care he died because you ended up with an annoying
partner?"

Deidara was taken aback. A mix of emotions played across his face, like he couldn't quite sort them
out. Finally anger won. "That's not the point, yeah! You — you just stay the fuck away from me,
you useless brat!" he spat. He spun and stormed towards the house.

Before she knew what she was doing, Sakura launched a kunai at the back of his head. He caught it
between two fingers without looking. He turned slowly, murderous intent disfiguring his features.

Sakura's returning glare was no less furious.

"I am not useless," she hissed.

"Not completely," Deidara agreed, mouth twisting into a feral grin as his hand dug in his clay pouch.
"I'm sure your insides will make a beautiful pink splatter on the ground when you explode!"

He threw the clay at her, ironically shaped like a cherry. Sakura watched the tiny, deadly bomb
descending with alarm — she knew the kind of devastation the explosives master could wreak. She
began making seals for a water bomb of her own, hoping to counteract his explosion, though the
force of the two would probably destroy the house and might annihilate them both —

Itachi appeared from nowhere. With a graceful, perfectly aimed roundhouse kick, he knocked the
explosive clear out of the yard, over the house and far into the grassy field in the distance. With an
earth shattering boom the tiny bomb exploded into a mushroom cloud on the horizon.

"Oh for fuck's sake, Uchiha! Why are you always interfering with my business, yeah?!" Deidara
spat. He looked like he wanted to rip Itachi a new one.

Itachi's jaw tightened imperceptibly. "Not only were you about to execute someone whom Leader
specifically entrusted to our care, but you were going to blow up a base that took a significant
amount of Akatsuki's time and resources to construct. You should be grateful I don't report you
immediately."

Uncertainty passed over Deidara's expression like a shadow before vanishing, replaced by righteous
indignation. He opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut again. He shot Sakura one last
vengeful glare before turning on his heel and marching back into the house. He slammed the glass door so hard it rattled, threatening to shatter.

Sakura remembered how to breathe. She looked at Itachi, who was staring after Deidara's award-winning exit.

"Um, thanks..." she mumbled. She realized belatedly that if that bomb had detonated any closer, her lab — and the virus samples growing inside it — would have been obliterated, along with any hope of saving Konoha.

Itachi slowly turned his regard on her. Her blood turned to ice in her veins.

"Don't thank me. Leave, and never show your face to Akatsuki again." He disappeared into the house.

Sakura suppressed a shiver.

Sakura gazed out at the dying sun on the horizon. The balcony afforded a spectacular view, but she wasn't really seeing it. She took another swig of the beer she had pilfered from the kitchen (probably Kisame's).

First he detests you for no reason. Then he comes to your rescue. He's deliberately trying to get rid of you, but why? Why tell you to leave, when you know where their base is? If he really wants you out of the picture so badly, why not just kill you himself? Pain might complain, but he sure as shit isn't going to dismiss a ninja like Itachi over the loss of some apprentice.

She sighed and finished her beer. She tossed the empty bottles into the nearby bin and turned to go inside, still confused as ever. She caught sight of the go board on her way through the library; someone had responded to her move.

Ahah! I knew black would attack there, Sakura thought. She sat down in the chair and stared at the board for a long time before making her next move. She picked up a white stone and set it on the board with a soft click. There. Chew on that for a while, mystery opponent.

Sakura was just getting to her feet again when the door to the library opened. Kisame came in, holding the empty beer carton.

"Pardon me, girlie, but have you been naughty?"

"Er — yeah," Sakura admitted, guilty. "Sorry, I'll replace it."

Kisame huffed. "You can't replace it. You're forbidden from leaving the compound alone until we're sure you're not a spy or something."

Sakura tried not to fidget. "Uh, sorry," she reiterated. "Is there anything else I can do for you instead? Chores or something?"

Kisame tilted his head in consideration. Sakura was just beginning to worry he was getting the wrong idea when his answer took her by surprise: "I suppose you could take my turn making dinner on Wednesday."

Sakura blinked. "You guys take turns making dinner?"

"Yeah, but only Tobi and Itachi are any good at cooking," he said. "I hate it, so if you do me that
favor I'll let you off with a warning this time."

"I'm not very good either," Sakura confessed.

"It's the others who care. I don't. I'll eat anything."

"I believe that."

"...did you just call me fat, Pinkie?"

Sakura cracked a smile. "Defensive, much?"

Kisame laughed. "Next time you go on a drinking binge, be sure to invite me," he added, closing the door behind him on the way out.

Feeling better, Sakura turned to the bookshelves behind her to find that cookbook again. She was going to make the best dinner ever.
“This is the worst dinner ever, yeah.”

“I like it.”

“Is that... pork or squid?”

Sakura sighed. "Tofu, actually. It's all I could find in the fridge. I did my best, guys."

“What's the point of having a girl around if she can't even cook?” Deidara grumbled, stabbing at an unidentifiable translucent lump with his chopsticks. "She's even worse than Kisame, yeah."

"Konan can't cook either," Kisame pointed out between mouthfuls.

"Konan doesn't count as a girl," Deidara shot back. He frowned at his bowl before pushing his chair out and leaving the table. "I can't stomach this." He stalked out of the kitchen. Sakura was left wondering if he referred to the food or herself.

"It's not all _that_ bad, Sakura-san," Tobi reassured politely.

Sakura smiled ruefully. "Thanks Tobi... but it kinda is," she laughed. Even she was having trouble choking it down.

"I like it," the shark-nin repeated. Truly his tastes were indiscriminate. "What do you think, Itachi-san?"

Itachi, surprisingly, was halfway through his bowl. "It's fine," he said, continuing his meal in silence. Sakura tried not to stare in disbelief.

*Maybe it's a militant Uchiha thing. 'Eat for sustenance, not pleasure'...* Sakura resolved to finish her bowl, no matter how awful.

It had been a week since the incident, and Deidara hadn't spoken a word to her. Sakura supposed she should consider herself lucky that he was finally willing to be in the same room (albeit however briefly). He was still an arrogant jerk, but her ire towards him had cooled somewhat when she considered how she would feel about somebody who killed one of _her_ teammates.
Don't bother feeling sorry for him. Sasori was an evil man who deserved to die. The image of him holding the puppets he'd built to resemble his dead parents came to mind just then, but she refused to dwell on it.

To Deidara, he was just a partner...

Sakura sighed and took another bite of her trainwreck of a culinary experiment. She grimaced.

It's funny how living with the enemy makes them seem so much more...human, she thought, observing Kisame gobbling down the disgusting concoction like a starving man. Tobi took tentative bites, forcing himself out of politeness.

Well, not all of them, she amended, peeking at Itachi. He ate slowly but mechanically, as though he had no feelings about the quality of the food whatsoever. He had not said one word to her since protecting her from Deidara last week. She caught him watching her train sometimes, either by herself or with Kisame, but he never commented or offered any advice. Sakura was beginning to wonder if she blew it with the genjutsu training. Maybe he would just refuse to teach her at all now.

The four ninja ate their meal with varying degrees of enthusiasm in silence. Eventually Kisame smacked his lips and stood.

"That was pretty good, Pinkie. Feel free to steal my booze anytime so I can make you take my turn cooking again." He laughed hoarsely to himself and left the kitchen. Sakura blushed as Tobi looked at her with something akin to awe. Eventually even Tobi couldn't choke down anymore. He bid them goodnight, leaving Itachi alone with Sakura, who was determined to complete her objective and eat the mess she made.

The silence grew awkward. Sakura couldn't stop sneaking glances at Itachi. He held his chopsticks in his long fingers, taking delicate bites and chewing slowly. It would've seemed like he was savoring (or at least really concentrating on) his food if not for his completely blank expression. He was so unreadable, Sakura found herself studying his face over and over again for a hint as to what he was thinking, like a cryptographer obsessively searching for a hidden message where there was none. She couldn't help herself, though she knew he was aware of her glances.

Finally, he finished his bowl and stood. He gathered the others' bowls as well and carried them to the kitchen sink, where he began to methodically rinse and scrub them. Once done, he set them on the rack to dry.

Sakura stared at the red cloud on his back as he departed the room. Once he reached the doorway, he stilled. He turned his head slightly, allowing her a glimpse of his jawline and cheekbone, but he did not face her.

"Meet me out back at dusk tomorrow." He vanished down the hall.

Sakura was up early the next morning. She had gone straight to bed after checking the viral samples. A week was long enough for plenty of viruses to cultivate, but obviously not long enough for this one. She'd just have to be more patient.

Sakura opened the cupboard in the kitchen in search of the coffee grounds only to discover it practically empty. A cup of instant ramen sat on the lower shelf, looking lonely. A cobweb clung to it for company.
This is an emergency. You have genjutsu training tonight! Now is not the time for caffeine withdrawal!

Sakura made up her mind to go into town. There was stuff she needed besides coffee — new clothes, more underwear, deodorant...and a cursory examination of the fridge revealed they were almost out of fresh food, too. She'd have to get Kisame to take her.

Sakura marched over to the first floor room next to the armament and rapped loudly. A disheveled, sleepy-eyed Kisame opened the door. Sakura stared.

"Are those...goldfish pajamas?"

"Got a problem with it, missy?" Kisame grunted irritably. "I know you didn't wake me up just to comment on my sleepwear."

I guess even the Akatsuki need to sleep in something, Sakura thought, bemused. "Yeah, actually, I need to go into town for some things. Plus we're out of food."

Kisame groaned. "Fine. Let me get dressed first."

A moment later he emerged, wearing his usual loose shinobi underclothes and looking decidedly more awake.

"C'mon, let's go get Itachi-san," the shark-nin grumbled, starting up the stairs.

"Itachi?" Sakura asked in alarm. "What for?"

"We use the buddy system around here, Pinkie. Leader-sama wouldn't want you overpowering little ol' me and making off with all our secrets, now, would he?" Kisame's eyes sparkled with amusement at the thought.

Sakura groaned inwardly, imagining what could otherwise have been an exciting venture ruined by the stoic Uchiha's attitude. Kisame stopped at the door immediately next to the library and knocked loudly. A moment later Itachi answered, fully dressed — complete with Akatsuki cloak (good lord, he MUST sleep in it!).

Kisame jumped in without preamble. "Morning, Itachi-san. The little lady needs to get to town, so if you'd accompany us — "

"No." The door shut in their faces.

Kisame sighed in irritation. "Yanno, that guy used to be friendly towards me until you showed up," he said. Sakura privately doubted that. "Whatever you keep doing to make him mad, would you just stop it? It was funny at first but now it's getting old." Kisame turned and began making his way back downstairs.

"But I'm not doing anything!" Sakura insisted, following. "He just dislikes me. It looks to me like he dislikes pretty much everything, but especially me."

"That's not true. I've been Itachi-san's partner for many years, so I know him pretty well. He doesn't display emotion often, not even dislike — unless it's something to do with his brother. You must be doing something that bothers him."

Sakura chewed on this in silence for a while as they reached the first floor hallway. Could I be doing something without realizing it? What about my presence could make somebody so stoic act
Kisame stopped in front of the door next to Sakura's room and knocked. Sakura's eyebrows lifted in surprise; she hadn't thought she picked a room next to an occupied one. Her jaw dropped when she saw who her neighbor was.

"What is it, yeah?" A puffy-faced Deidara rubbed his eyes. His bright orange pajamas and sleep-mussed blonde hair reminded her disconcertingly of Naruto.

"I need someone to come with me to escort Pinkie here into town."

Deidara's glare flitted to Sakura. He opened his mouth but Kisame cut him off.

"Tobi is away delivering a message to Leader-sama and Itachi-san already declined, so you're elected. If you want to eat this week, I suggest you suck it up and join us. Unless you'd rather persuade Itachi-san to go in your stead..."

Deidara's face contorted into a grimace. Then he sighed, frowning in resignation. "Fine, mm. Go away so I can get ready." The door clicked shut.

So much for a fun trip to town, Sakura thought as she and Kisame headed to the foyer to wait.

Deidara took half an hour. By the time he appeared, Kisame was pacing.

"Damn, you're slow as fuck. How much primping can a person's hair take?"

Deidara ignored him supremely, grabbing his Akatsuki cloak off the peg on the wall. Kisame did the same. Sakura stuffed her hands in her pockets and shuffled out the door after them.

Kisame eyed her. "You don't get a cloak till after you've proven your trustworthiness. And skill."

Deidara snorted.

Oh yeah, cause I was totally dying for one anyway, she thought, suppressing an eyeroll. Aloud she asked, "And how will I know when that happens?"

"Leader-sama will let us know if or when your promotion from apprentice is approved."

"What happens if it's not approved?"

Kisame's answering glance suggested she was an idiot for even asking. Sakura swallowed.

"What determines whether I'm accepted or not?"

"He'll probably base the decision on reports from Itachi, since he's the one instructing you," Kisame explained.

"Theoretically," Sakura mumbled under her breath.

Kisame arched an eyebrow. "Is the training not going well?"

"We haven't even started genjutsu yet. He made me show him all my taijutsu and ninjutsu first." Sakura fought to keep the pout out of her words but wasn't entirely successful.

Kisame hummed. "You should be more patient, little girlie. Whatever his feelings for you personally,
Itachi will do the best job possible at teaching you. That's why Leader-sama selected him; he's extremely efficient."

"I believe it," Sakura grudgingly admitted. "He made me demonstrate every single one of my jutsu, water-based or otherwise."

"And how did that go?"

"It was...surprising. He told me my natural affinity isn't for water at all, but for earth."

Deidara glanced up at this despite himself. "You're an earth user?"

Sakura bit back her surprise at being addressed directly by him. "Er — no. Earth is my affinity, but I've never been taught any earth jutsu."

"Well don't come crying to me for help," he huffed.

"Wasn't planning on it," Sakura retorted.

The three ninja walked along the grassy path together. The silence that descended wasn't uncomfortable. Sakura enjoyed the view as they went, though it was pretty monotonous: the same sea of long green grass interspersed with the occasional tree or boulder. They had to jump across a stream a few times. An hour or so later, they reached the outskirts of a little town.

It wasn't a very big place, just a market and a collection of buildings made of rectangular stones cut from some kind of pinkish rock that glittered slightly in the sunlight. Colorful tarps hung from stands around the main square, reminding Sakura of Suna a little — without all the sand of course. Or the heat. The spring weather was actually quite a pleasant seventy degrees, and the air was crisp and fresh in Sakura's lungs. She caught a whiff of some kind of delicious-smelling meat cooking and inhaled appreciatively, stomach rumbling.

"It's never a good idea to grocery shop on an empty stomach," she pointed out. "You always end up buying too much..."

Deidara snorted at the thinly disguised ploy, but Kisame shrugged.

"I'm always down for food."

They found a little open-air Korean barbeque place and sat down. They took turns skewering red meat and vegetables and searing them quickly over the hot tabletop grill. They chatted amiably as they ate — or rather, Kisame and Sakura chatted, Deidara mostly responded with 'yes' or 'no' grunts. After he'd served himself a third helping, his full belly seemed to finally loosen him up a bit.

"So where are we going first, mm?" he asked Kisame as they left money on the table and exited the stall.

"Food and essentials first," the shark-nin replied. "Then whatever else miss midget here needs."

They meandered past various shops and stalls, pointing out things that looked good and marveling at exotics they couldn't identify. Deidara stared at an oval, spiky fruit with sharp green leaves as though he had no idea what to make of it.

"It's a pineapple," Sakura offered, remembering her travels on the southern coast. Deidara lifted it delicately.
"It looks like an exploding hedgehog with a green tumor, yeah."

Sakura was frankly bewildered by this description but she nodded politely.

"Do we need any toilet paper?" Kisame asked, appearing with a box of rolls.

"Yeah, Tobi used it all for god-knows-what," Deidara replied.

Sakura eyed a stall dedicated to alcohol. She picked up a crate of dark beer and balanced it on her index finger, wagging her eyebrows at Kisame.

"I don't like that kind," he objected. "You owe me beer so you should at least pick something I want."

"I already paid you back for that by cooking!" Sakura exclaimed. "Don't you try to pull one over on me. I'm onto you. Since you picked the last brand I want to pick this one."

Kisame laughed. "Fine. If it's alcoholic I'll drink it eventually."

"In that case, you can have the mouthwash and I'll drink the beer," Sakura quipped, eliciting a chuckle.

They continued on until they passed a coffee stand. The other two ninja stared as Sakura loaded up her basket with half the store. They stopped her when she tried to grab a machine off the display.

"We already have one of those, mm," grunted Deidara.

"But I need my own!" she insisted, clutching it to her chest. She was overruled.

In the meat section, Deidara intervened again as she tried to add a second package of pork to the basket.

"Don't get too much meat, yeah," he warned.

"Why not?"

"Because it'll go bad before we can finish it. Uchiha is a vegetarian so we eat meatless a lot."

Sakura was so stunned she had to stop walking to process this piece of information. It was so incongruous with her image of the bloodthirsty murderer of the Uchiha clan that her mouth hung open.

Deidara raised an amused brow. "Mmm. Surprised me too at first. But he's actually a fairly peaceful guy for an S-class criminal." He scrunched up his face. "Pretty boring, yeah."

Shaking her head in disbelief, Sakura followed the two of them to the main square to pay.

"Charge everything to Saitou's tab," Kisame instructed the clerk. "Except the coffee...Pinkie here will pay for that herself. Our organization is not going broke to support her addiction," he tacked on with a wry glance in Sakura's direction. She rolled her eyes.

Kisame sealed the pile of goods into a scroll and pocketed it somewhere beneath his cloak. He turned to Sakura.

"Now then, what else did you need?"

She turned red under the others' dumbfounded stares.

"What? I've been training so hard there are holes in mine," she said defensively. Geez, you'd think these guys had never heard of a pair of panties before.

Looking resigned, they followed her to a clothing stand. Deidara watched her idly as she picked up a pair of retina-burning rainbow panties in silent awe.

"You cannot seriously be considering those," he said flatly.

Sakura blushed and put them back. She continued browsing until she found some less garish specimens that suited his finicky tastes. Can't believe you just got fashion advice from Akatsuki, she thought, shaking her head. She grabbed her armload of clothes and headed for the fitting room curtain. Kisame followed innocently.

Sakura glared and held up a hand. "No. Fucking. Way," she said sternly. "I don't care what Leader-sama says, you are not following me into that dressing room."

Kisame sighed. "Alright, I'll let it slide this time. Just don't you dare go running off or anything or I'll have to kill you. And then who will finish that nasty beer?"

Sakura rolled her eyes. You'd never think I was voluntarily joining this hostile organization...

As she pulled the curtain closed she could've sworn she heard Kisame chuckle, "...worth a try..."

Five minutes later she emerged. She put back the things that hadn't fit on a rack and went to pay for the rest. She discreetly picked up the rainbow panties again and slipped them into her pile, hoping Deidara didn't notice. Once finished paying, she sealed up her new clothes in a scroll of her own and tucked it into her pack. She wandered back towards Kisame and Deidara by the entrance.

" Anything else?" Kisame inquired. Sakura shook her head. "Well then, we're off."

The three shinobi left the town side by side, starting down the dirt road. The afternoon sun shone overhead, and Sakura soaked up its rays. They made idle conversation as they plodded along, not in any particular hurry to get back to the stuffy base.

About halfway through their return journey they crossed a shallow stream. Sakura stooped to fill her canteen when Kisame suddenly stiffened, hand gripping Samehada's handle. "Do you smell something?" He sniffed. "Smells like..soil..."

Sakura felt the tingle of hostile chakra and snapped to attention, gloves out, just as a group of a dozen ninja appeared. They wore tight red bodysuits from head to toe, except for a missing right sleeve. Their chests were covered by brown flak jackets, and they wore red masks adorned with angular patterns of brown lines over their faces. The insignia for Iwagakure was emblazoned on their right shoulders in rust red ink.

"ANBU," Deidara growled in excitement, his fists in his clay pouch.

"You're all under arrest for criminal acts against Iwagakure," one of the masked shinobi spoke.

"Alright Pinkie, time to show us what you got. We each get four; don't make me have to pick up your slack," Kisame warned, unwrapping Samehada with a menacing grin, small eyes bright.
Sakura huffed. "You just worry about yourself," she retorted. She lunged forward, taking a nasty swipe at the nearest ANBU, and the battle was on. Sakura fought viciously. She had a grudge against Earth Country shinobi ever since the Tsuchikage had betrayed her and slaughtered Sora and Haji. Normally she tried to avoid killing when not necessary, but to Iwa ninja she was inclined to give no such mercy.

She battered two with her fists while keeping two more at bay through a series of agile defensive maneuvers. They were as fast as Konoha ANBU; one on one Sakura's punches would have decimated her opponents by now, but with four of them attacking at once it was hard to land a hit. Sakura growled and stomped her boot into the grass.

The earth exploded, a huge crater gaping open in the once-flat ground. Sakura grabbed the wrist of one falling ANBU and swung him with all her might into another; they crashed together with the sound of soft tissue tearing and the snap of shattering bones.

Sakura performed a quick series of seals. She couldn't use her acid rain jutsu for fear of hitting her allies, so she chose one that would get the job done right but was unfortunately messy.

The bodies of the two remaining ANBU swelled and bloated to three times their natural size, then kept going. Their stretched features were grotesquely distorted. They whined in pain, the keening sound coming out unnaturally high due to their elongated vocal cords, before their bodies couldn't handle the massive increase in water anymore. With a spectacular bang, they exploded into a million chunks of red, wet flesh.

Blood rained everywhere, but Sakura was prepared with an automatic water shield above her head. She glanced around the battlefield. Kisame and Deidara sat nearby, obviously having finished off their opponents already. They were watching her, Kisame smiling and dry, the remains of his own water shield disappearing overhead. Deidara was spattered with gore, but for once he didn't even seem to notice his own appearance.

"That was...kind of pretty, yeah," he said, impressed despite himself. "Next time make them all blow up at once...and go bigger."

"Uh, thanks," Sakura said, startled by the compliment. "Sorry about your clothes..."

Deidara looked down. "Aw fuck!" he swore. "It's in my hair, yeah!"

Kisame, master of schadenfreude, burst into laughter at Deidara's expense. He made two seals and suddenly the explosives master was drenched.

"There. Better, princess?" he taunted.

Deidara dripped and glared, lifting a soggy middle finger. "You both better sleep with one eye open tonight," he threatened, but there was no real bite behind the words. He took off his sopping cloak, wrung it out and threw it over his shoulder. "Lets go, yeah."

They resumed their trail, walking quietly, each lost in their own thoughts. Eventually Deidara broke the silence.

"Watching you fight, I can see what you mean about an earth affinity, yeah. You really should do something about learning to control it; the effect would be much more powerful when channeled through a jutsu. Earth jutsu would compliment your style, so it'd be a shame to waste a gift like that, mm."

"I would certainly like to," Sakura replied, brow raised, "but I don't exactly have people lining up to
teach me earth release. Unless you're volunteering?..." she trailed off, dubious.

Deidara frowned. "I wouldn't say no, but my services aren't free, yeah. You'd have to do something for me."

"Like what?" Sakura asked, suspicious yet hopeful.

"For the love of god, learn to cook. I don't want to starve every fifth day of the week, yeah."

Sakura laughed. "It's a deal."

Back at the base, Sakura helped the other two unload and put away groceries. They squabbled over who's turn it was to make dinner tonight before unanimously (and unsurprisingly) agreeing it was Tobi's. While Kisame and Deidara wandered off to locate the orange-masked man and rope him into it, Sakura went to her room to unpack her clothes (stashing the rainbow panties in the very bottom of her drawer), bathe, and change.

She sat in the tub for some time, relaxing in the pleasantly warm water.

*Today was a surprisingly good day,* she thought. *Maybe these people aren't so bad, once you get to know them. Even Deidara is tolerable when in a good mood.*

Itachi's cold, handsome face flitted into her mind's eye. She amended her previous thought: *Well, ALMOST all of them.*

Sakura sat up in the tub. *Did you just catch yourself thinking about the Akatsuki as...'not so bad?'* She whipped her head back and forth, trying to shake herself out of whatever delusion she had fallen into.

*These people are not your friends. They're not merely missing-nin like Sora and Haji were. Not all internationally wanted criminals are bad people, but this group is hell bent on destroying the ninja world. Or did you forget that they'd like nothing more than to capture and kill your best friend?*

Sakura's reality check hit her hard. She'd grown too complacent because they didn't seem overtly evil on a day to day basis. But that didn't mean their organization wasn't ultimately at cross purposes with her village. Just because she found some of them to be amiable on a personal level (or even likeable, if she was really honest with herself) shouldn't matter. When push came to shove, there was no question who Sakura would side with. There were no shades of gray. Her loyalty would always lie with her real friends in Konoha: Naruto, Kakashi-sensei, Tsunade-shishou, Ino-pig, Shizune-senpai, Hinata, Sai, Yamato-taichou...everyone, even down to Eri-chan the intern. *They* were Sakura's family, and while they were stuck in Konoha living like automatons without their free will, Sakura was off cavorting with the Akatsuki, grocery shopping!

Sakura flushed with shame and crawled out of the bath. She'd been both negligent and unprofessional. She toweled off, leaving her long hair down to drip dry. She avoided her reflection in the foggy mirror. Suddenly she didn't want to go down to dinner. She didn't want to see the others, but there was really no way out of it. Itachi would know if she showed up to training unfed again, and she remembered how he reacted last time. She'd hurt no one but herself by driving him away from making her a better shinobi.

Sighing, Sakura got dressed and tugged a brush through her damp hair quickly. She wrapped a fluffy yellow towel around herself and opened the bathroom door.

Itachi froze mid-stride. His eyes flickered to Sakura's face first, then down at her towel. Sakura
flushed so deeply her cheeks matched her hair, but Itachi didn't even seem to notice. He resumed his pace down the hallway towards the kitchen without a backward glance.

*You idiot! That's just what you deserve, waltzing around an Akatsuki base in nothing but a towel! This isn't your goddamn living room!*

Sakura tightened the towel around herself and resolved to always bring her clothes *with her* into the bathroom in the future.

"Oi, Pinkie! Snap out of it and pass the soy sauce."

"Oh, sorry," Sakura replied automatically, handing the glass container off to Tobi, who passed it to Kisame. He tossed her a beer in return.

"Better get rid of that shit fast so we can buy the good stuff next time," he smirked. Sakura didn't reply, she just shrugged and popped the cap off, taking a gulp. "Hey, what's the matter with you tonight? How's the weather in la-la land?"

"Yeah Sakura-san, is everything okay? You're pretty quiet," Tobi added with concern.

"Ah — yeah, everything's fine!" she answered with a somewhat forced laugh, embarrassed that she was so easy to read. "Tobi, this is delicious, by the way." She took another bite of the fried tempeh and veggie mix. It was covered in some kind of sweet and spicy sauce.

"Why thank you, Sakura-san! I could teach you the recipe sometime if you'd like."

Suddenly Deidara's palm slammed into the table. He leaned forward with an intent gleam in his eyes. "Seriously, Tobi. You have to teach it to her, yeah," he urged, face deadly serious.

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Hey now, I haven't forgotten our deal. Tobi, would you really be willing to teach me to cook?"

"Of course!" he chirped, smiling behind the mask. "I'd be glad to."

Sakura couldn't help but smile back. How could this childlike person possibly want to harm her friends? Her smile grew somewhat pained at the dissonance as she surveyed the faces around the table enjoying a normal meal together. Her gaze lingered on Itachi.

*Well, 'enjoying' may be the wrong word for that guy. He was his usual inscrutable self — or was that the slightest frown marring his attractive lips?*

*If you could imagine anyone here wanting to murder your friends in cold blood, it'd be him.*

Sakura couldn't take her eyes off him for the rest of supper.

Sakura slipped outside into the amber light. The sun was fading fast, and it cast a burgundy glow across the training grounds. Itachi stood stiffly at the other end, facing away from her, his shadow stretching out long and black behind him on the dusty earth. Sakura felt a tingle run down her spine as she approached him, but it was probably just the chill in the air.

"Why are you here?"

The sudden question broke the stillness, making Sakura start. "Uh, you told me to meet you here for genjutsu training...?" she trailed off, bewildered.
"That's not what I meant."

Sakura crossed her arms. "Well, what did you mean then?"

Itachi didn't reply. Instead he turned to face her, regarding her with unfathomable red eyes. "Do you insist on continuing this charade?" His smooth voice was thick with some unspoken meaning.

Sakura's eyes hardened. She ignored the fear prickling at her. He doesn't know anything. He's just trying to get rid of you again.

"Of course I want to do this," she snapped. Let him try. You're made of stronger stuff than that.

Itachi regarded her for a long moment. He slipped off his cloak, leaving it in a heap in the dirt. He wore nothing but his loose pants, riding dangerously low on his hips, a white martial artists' bandage wrapped around his lower abdomen. Sakura swallowed audibly.

His crimson eyes swirled into their Mangekyou Sharingan form. "You've been warned."

He cast Tsukuyomi on her.

White blurred into black and black became white as the world inverted around Sakura.

"What are you doing?" she asked, disoriented. Does he want me to experience a master genjutsu for myself?

Itachi stepped forward, his pale skin glinting in the artificial moonlight. He caught her admiring it. "Do you want me, kunoichi?"

Sakura couldn't hide her shock. She spluttered and flushed, tearing her eyes from him. "W-what?!"

Itachi took another step forward, intent.

"You can't lie to me. I can hear your pulse quicken. My Sharingan can see the sweat on your skin, your dilated pupils."

Sakura stepped back, grass crunching underfoot. A fine tremor ran down her spine.

"Do you fear me, Sakura-san?"

It was the first time he'd ever used her real name. Sakura fidgeted in extreme discomfort. She could not meet his gaze, terrified of what she'd see there. She knew she was caught in an inescapable genjutsu, but the urge to flee was overwhelming.

As if he read her thoughts, Itachi moved. One quick slash of his ninjatou severed her Achilles' tendons. She dropped to her knees in shock and pain, gaping up at him open-mouthed.

"W-what the hell are you doing?!" She dragged her useless legs backward through the dirt reflexively. Her fingernails dug into the soil. Try as she might to summon chakra, in his illusory world, she couldn't. "Stop! That's enough. End the genjutsu!"

Itachi burst into a murder of crows and rematerialized in front of her, crouched. Something sharp gleamed in his hand. He leaned closer.

"I'll show you what I really am," he breathed. His kunai slipped through her left hand as if it were wet tissue paper.

Sakura screamed.
Pain lanced up her arm, radiating down her fingers. She resisted the urge to yank her impaled palm back; even the slightest movement was excruciating.

"We are not your playthings, Sakura-san," he said softly, penetrating her right hand with another kunai. Sakura let out a guttural moan, squeezing her eyes against the tears.

"We are not your friends." She felt the tip of his ninjatou tug at her clothes as he dragged it gently to her navel.

"Look at me, Sakura-san."

Sakura's eyelids peeled back against her will and she locked eyes with him. Itachi gazed at her with clear red irises, purposeful and deliberate. His long lashes made his pupils seem larger and blacker than they were.

"We are Akatsuki." His blade slid into her belly.

Sakura gasped and froze, unable to cry out or even writhe in agony. A thin red line trickled out of the corner of her mouth. The faint stretching of her midriff as she exhaled was unbearable. She felt hot blood running down her sides. It soaked her clothes, pooling stickily beneath her.

Itachi's gentle fingers tilted her chin back, pressing a kunai to her throat. His breath fluttered against her cheek. His face was pale against the night sky, features handsome and cruel. Strands of fine black silk caressed her cheek like fingertips.

"When you wake, leave."

His Sharingan flashed as he slashed her throat. Sakura relived her own death over and over again for what felt like an eternity. Just when she was sure she couldn't take another second of the agony, she sank into merciful oblivion.
Sakura heard voices floating from the hall. She wasn't sure if she was dreaming.

"— been out cold for a week now. What did you do to her?"

"As I told you, that's none of your concern."

A sigh. "Look, Itachi-san. We've been partners for a long time now. I know you look out for me, and I look out for you too. But you can't bullshit me into thinking this is normal training. If you can't resolve whatever issue you're having with her, it's a problem for everyone. You of all people should know we can't run an efficient organization like this. Eventually Leader-sama will step in, and then shit will really hit the fan. Why don't you try to work it out?"

"You care for her."

"That's irrelevant. Look at your own reactions."

"What are you implying?"

"I think you know exactly what I'm implying. You can fool everybody else with that emotionless bullcrap of yours, but I know you too well. We've been partners for too damn long for you to pull one over on me, Itachi-san. You have to control yourself, or we're all gonna feel the consequences."

There was a creak, and the sound of footsteps on wood. Sakura cracked her eyes open.

Kisame put a tray of food on the desk. "Oh, you're finally up. Nice nap?"

Sakura recoiled. Her sheets tangled around her feet when she jerked sideways. She crashed to the floor.

Kisame knelt to help her up. "Damn, it's nice to see you too." He reached for her elbow. She yanked it away.

"Don't touch me!"

Kisame looked at her evenly. Sakura's eyes avoided his face. He stood.
"Okay, I get the picture. I'll give you some space, but you should eat. You haven't had anything in
days." The door shut behind him with a click.

Sakura tried to stand, only to find she couldn't. She used chakra to haul herself back into bed. Sakura
rolled over onto her side. She stared at the wall, forgotten food growing cold on the desk in the
corner.

Days passed. Sakura slept fitfully. Trays of food appeared on her desk every time she woke, and
slowly she began to eat more of them.

Eventually she couldn't stand the smell of herself any longer. In the middle of the night she dragged
herself out of bed, gathered a change of clothes, and pottered down the hallway to the bathroom. She
stood under the hot water of the shower for over an hour, scrubbing her skin until it was red and raw,
but she still didn't feel clean. She gave up and shut the water off.

Sakura was barely holding it together. She wanted nothing more than to leave and never look back,
ever to see those faces ever again. She wanted to go home. She wanted to talk to Naruto and
Kakashi-sensei, to hug Tsunade-shishou. More than she ever wanted anything in her life, she wanted
Konoha.

But that Konoha didn't exist anymore. She had no such home.

Sakura cried quietly, knowing that she didn't have a choice. Her tears mingled with the droplets on
her face. She would stay. Against all rationality, against her will, against her better judgement;
Sakura thought of the precious viral samples incubating in the lab out back and knew she would stay.

She wiped her tears on her towel and got dressed.

Sakura peered into the microscope. Sure enough, she had been incapacitated long enough for the
virus to be flourishing. Moving as if in a dream, Sakura opened her notebook and began taking
notes. The familiar action quieted her turbulent thoughts as she concentrated on her work.

*If only I could do this without ever having to see the others again...*

Two hours later she snapped the notebook shut. She had plenty of samples, now she had to devise a
way of testing that chromosomal mutation to see what genes it controls. Sakura sighed and looked at
the clock on the wall. It read 3:23 am. Her brain was fried; she'd be better off coming back
tomorrow. She gathered her things and left, sealing the door behind herself with chakra as usual.

She was nearing the house when a movement from the porch swing startled her. Itachi's ethereal eyes
watched her, almost seeming to glow in the dark.

Sakura shuddered involuntarily and dropped her things. She fought down the urge to run. Avoiding
his gaze, she knelt to pick her notes up instead. Her face burned beneath his stare — she felt naked.
Against her will, her eyes welled with tears. Sakura prayed his Sharingan couldn't see them through
the blackness.

As she rose to her feet, she was surprised to see Itachi hunched over on the swing, elbows on his
knees, dark bangs obscuring his face. He wasn't wearing his cloak.

"Why are you still here?" There was the faintest edge of strain in his voice.

Sakura was caught off guard. He was the last person on the planet she wanted to talk to. She made
her way towards the sliding glass doors, giving the swing as wide a berth as possible.

"They'll kill you if they find out."

Sakura's hand froze on the handle.

_He knows_, came the horrified thought.

_No. He can't know. Even if he broke into your lab, there's nothing in there but a bunch of research on a virus. You purposefully left nothing incriminating behind. He can't know what's wrong in Konoha._

_But he knows you're up to something._

"Please, Sakura-san. Go back to Konoha."

Sakura's jaw dropped. She spun around.

"You know I'm from Konoha? You remember me?" she asked in stunned disbelief.

An indecipherable emotion flitted across Itachi's face. "You were my brother's teammate," he said, as if that explained everything.

"I can't leave." The truth burst from her throat, spoken by someone else.

Itachi closed his eyes. "I clearly cannot force you, so I am asking you to go. I don't know what you're doing here, but I know where your loyalty lies. This lifestyle...my lifestyle...you don't want it." The infamous murderer of the Uchiha clan looked so small all of a sudden. Sakura realized for the first time how young he really was.

_He knows where your loyalty lies? Is he bluffing? Sakura looked at him and knew he wasn't. But then why would he keep your secret? Maybe he doesn't have any proof? As if Akatsuki would require proof before lynching you..._

_But why does he look so tormented...?_

"I'm not here because I want to be."

Itachi whipped his head up to stare at her. In a rare unguarded moment, Sakura thought she saw surprise on his features, and...recognition? She didn't know what to make of it.

"I'm here because I have to be. And I will stay, because I need to." Sakura slid the door open and stepped inside, closing it behind herself. She shivered.

Itachi stared after her as if she was something he'd never seen before in his life.

Sakura lay in her bed, exhausted beyond reason but unable to sleep. The face of Uchiha Itachi danced in her head, but even in her mind's eye his expression was obscured by shadow.

_There is more to him than meets the eye. If he knows you're loyal to Konoha, why hasn't he reported you?_

Sakura had no doubt they'd kill her in an instant if they had any reason to suspect she had an ulterior motive for joining Akatsuki.
On top of keeping silent about your secret, why did he go so far to deliberately scare you away? Someone like him surely isn’t concerned for your well-being, so why?

Sakura remembered what Kisame remarked some time ago: Itachi rarely shows emotion unless it’s something to do with his brother. And he knew she was Sasuke’s former teammate all along.

Could this have something to do with your past relationship with Sasuke?

If so, he was sadly misinformed. She hadn’t seen Sasuke for three years, not since he had tried to kill her with his own hands. After he defeated Orochimaru, he disappeared without a trace; she’d heard not a whisper of his doings since. Not that it would’ve mattered if she had; painful as it was to admit, if Itachi thought Sasuke cared one bit about her safety he was quite mistaken. The only thing Sasuke cared about was his obsessive quest for revenge against Itachi — it was consuming his soul and corrupting his mind. The last time she had seen him, Sakura couldn’t even recognize the boy she had once loved. That boy was dead, replaced by a stranger with coal for eyes.

Sakura blinked back tears in the dark. Thinking about her failures regarding Sasuke stirred up old wounds, scars that refused to fade. With the new scars she had acquired courtesy of yet another Uchiha, Sakura wondered how she would ever heal.

She rolled over and gritted her teeth until sleep took her.

Sakura woke late the next morning, reluctantly. She knew she couldn’t lie around in bed another day. Her muscles were weak from lack of activity, and if she wanted to keep her apprenticeship and lab access she needed to pull herself together.

She found Kisame and Deidara in the kitchen, eating oatmeal and picking at a bowl of fruit. They looked up at her when she entered.

"I thought I heard you stirring around in your room, mm," Deidara grunted. He flicked his head towards the coffee machine. "There’s coffee."

Sakura cracked a tentative smile. It felt awkward and stiff on her lips. "Thanks." She pottered over and poured herself a mug. It wasn’t until she’d finished her first cup and was starting on her second that she managed to force herself to look at Kisame.

It’s not his fault. It’s not fair to blame them for what Itachi did to you, she reminded herself as he glanced up from his newspaper.

"Yeah?" he asked, wary. Sakura swallowed her guilt over the way she last treated him.

"Um, thank you for bringing me food. And for taking care of me."

"Hnn. Your welcome for the room service, but don’t thank me for tucking you in. That was courtesy of Itachi-san."

Sakura was torn between revulsion and confusion. What? The inhuman monster has a conscious? He mind rapes you, then thinks he can ease his guilt afterwards by applying a band aid? Crocodile tears are disgusting!

But something about that explanation didn’t quite fit. Sakura moved past her discomfort.

"Well, thanks for the meals then. You’re actually a pretty good cook," she said, trying her hand at a smile again. It was almost passable.
Kisame flipped a page in the paper casually. "It was Itachi-san's cooking."

Now Sakura was getting mad. She didn't know what Itachi was playing at, pretending to dote on her unconscious form when he was the one who put her in a coma to begin with. She wasn't buying it. Remorse just didn't make sense from someone like him. She reached for the bowl of fruit and nibbled a peach in silence, trying not to look too sullen. It tasted like dust in her mouth, but she ate it anyway.

Deidara cleared his throat. "Leader-sama gave me and Tobi a minor fundraising mission, yeah. He was hoping you'd join us so you can start getting a feel for the kind of work we do. If you're up to it."

Sakura wondered if the 'optional' aspect of the mission was really Leader-sama's will, or if Deidara was softer than he looked. Either way, Sakura could use some time away from the base — and a certain Uchiha — in addition to the exercise. She wasn't up to it emotionally, in truth, but if she let that stop her now she'd never get on with life.

"I'll go. What kind of mission is it?" She helped herself to a refill of coffee.

The relief in Deidara's face confirmed Sakura's suspicions: no Akatsuki mission was 'optional.'

"It's just a simple recon mission," he said. "Kumogakure hired us to spy on one of their enemies. No fighting or anything fun." He sounded like he regretted it, too.

Sakura wondered how Kumo would react if they realized they'd hired the same person who assassinated their daimyou last fall to spy on their enemies. Then again, after all Sakura had learned about the ninja world beyond the sanitized version presented in Konoha, she suspected they wouldn't even care.

"Alright. When do we leave?"

"As soon as you and Tobi finish packing. We'll be gone a few days, so make sure you bring enough underwear." He smirked.

Sakura's answering smile was a little more heartfelt than before.

Two hours later, a group of three shinobi in black cloaks adorned with red clouds streaked south. Sakura had tried to hide her surprise when Deidara tossed her a too-big cloak on their way out the door. He explained that since she was on official Akatsuki business with them, the uniform was mandatory. He made sure to remind her that she was merely borrowing the cloak until she earned one for herself.

Sakura was not entirely comfortable in it (it was an Akatsuki cloak, for crying out loud), but at least it didn't hinder her ability to run. The fabric was surprisingly breathable and lightweight. It smelled good too: earthy, like pine needles and tea leaves, with a hint of something unidentifiable that reminded her of winter. Sakura idly wondered if its owner would let her borrow their body wash.

Sakura was pensive, and even the clueless Tobi picked up on the mood and kept quiet. They traveled in near-silence for the first two days, watching as the grassy plains of Mineral Country gradually gave way to trees and foliage. That night as the sun set through the branches, Deidara suggested they make camp.

"We'll be reaching our destination tomorrow afternoon, so we should rest up, yeah."
"Tobi will get firewood!" the masked man suggested, running off. Sakura helped Deidara clear a space to lay out the bedrolls and gather fallen logs to sit on. In a short while, a fire crackled in the clearing while the three ninja sat around and waited for a pot of beans to heat up.

Sakura was gazing at the flames absently when Deidara's gruff voice broke through her thoughts.

"So. Uh, you can talk about it, if you want," he grunted. He didn't sound very enthusiastic.

"It's okay," Sakura shrugged. "You don't have to play therapist. I'll be fine."

Deidara looked uncomfortable. "No, seriously, speaking from experience, you should probably air it out, yeah. He used Tsukuyomi on you, didn't he?"

Sakura winced. "Yeah."

"That bastard. Someday I'll kill him."

Sakura raised a brow. That was a pretty strong reaction; she doubted it was for her benefit. "What did he do to you?"

"Recruited me, mm."

Sakura blinked. "You mean you didn't join of your own will?"

"Fuck no. I lost a bet to him. His Sharingan beat my bombs, so I had to join. I hate losing more than anything, but against a doujutsu like that, it couldn't be helped. It pisses me off to admit it, but his Sharingan is pretty artistic. And I can't lie about art, yeah."

Sakura couldn't hide her amazement. "You really joined just because you lost a bet? What about Akatsuki's goals? Don't you care about them?"

"Not particularly," Deidara shrugged. "I care about my art. And Akatsuki gives me reasons to use my explosives, so it's not so bad. I'll still beat that Uchiha one day though, to prove my art is the best. I've been training my left eye to counter genjutsu, yeah."

Sakura took a moment to digest this new information. She turned to Tobi, who was idly tracing patterns in the dirt with a stick. "What about you, Tobi? Why did you join?"

"Zetsu-senpai said that Tobi is a good boy, and strong, and that he should join Akatsuki to become stronger," Tobi replied brightly.

"Zetsu...you mean that black and white guy?" Sakura asked.

"Yes! Tobi used to work as Zetsu-senpai's subordinate before he joined Akatsuki to replace Sasori-senpai."

Sakura snuck a guilty glance at Deidara, but he just rolled his eyes at the masked man's typical callousness. She turned back to Tobi. "But what about Akatsuki's goal to capture all the bijuu? Don't you want to accomplish it?"

"Of course! Tobi wants to work hard so his senpai and Leader-sama will be proud of him, and know he is a good boy."

Sakura leaned back against the log, at a loss for words.

These people are just doing their jobs. They're just following orders, like we do in Konoha — only
it's the other side of the fence. Deidara has a penchant for violence, but even he isn't actively malicious. This is a farce, she realized in awe. Who in this evil organization actually gives a crap about destroying society? Leader-sama? But even he was revered as some great benefactor in Amegakure...

Sakura was torn. She wasn't sure if the funny feeling in her stomach was due to confusion or relief. Maybe it was just indigestion.

"What about you, Sakura-san?" Tobi piped up. "Why did you want to join?"

Sakura was shocked to find the truth spilling from her lips. "Things were...difficult when I became a missing-nin. After some friends of mine got killed, I wandered around a lot, and got tired of being chased by ANBU. On top of that, I'd been looking for a lab to conduct some medical research in, and you guys have an excellent one."

They seemed to accept her answer without any suspicion — probably because it was true.

"You can thank Orochimaru for that, yeah. He made Leader-sama build one at every major base as a condition of his membership," Deidara said.

"You won't find me writing any thank-you notes to that guy, even if he were still alive," Sakura muttered darkly.

Deidara snorted. "Yeah, I was his replacement so I never met him, but it's pretty obvious he wasn't the most popular guy. I heard he was pretty sick."

Sakura nodded in enthusiastic agreement, privately thinking that was the understatement of the century. Still, apparently evil has standards.

This is way less black and white than you expected, she thought wryly. She wasn't sure how to feel about this news.

Once the beans were done, they ate heartily and continued chatting. The evening progressed without much excitement, save for when Deidara burned himself reaching across the fire to thump Tobi for one thoughtless comment or another. Sakura ended up having to heal it, rolling her eyes at them both.

That night as Sakura stared up at the stars, she was no longer surprised by how at ease she felt sleeping on her bedroll next to two men she once considered irredeemably evil. If fate had worked out a little differently, they could have been born in Konoha too, and been raised as shinobi of the Leaf. Maybe in an alternate universe they were even her teammates. Stranger things could happen...

Sakura drifted off, thinking about the difference between friends and enemies, and marveling at how the world suddenly seemed so full of shades of gray.

They woke before dawn, ate quickly and spent the rest of the morning running southeast. Sakura tuned out Tobi and Deidara’s bickering, choosing to observe the scenery instead. It had been a long time since she'd been surrounded by forest this thick; it was making her nostalgic for home. Around midday Sakura realized she wasn't just feeling nostalgic — something about the trees in this area was acutely familiar.

With a sinking sensation in her stomach, Sakura caught up to Deidara.

"Hey, Deidara...who did Kumo hire us to get intel on again?"
"Konohagakure." Seeing the look on Sakura's face, he tacked on, "Why? Something wrong?"

"It's nothing," she replied a little too casually, insides numb with foreboding. Deidara arched a skeptical blonde brow but dropped it.

*Remember, this is just reconnaissance,* Sakura tried to soothe her frantic nerves. *You shouldn't have to fight anyone, and if you do your job right you shouldn't even be seen. Akatsuki are professionals. More importantly, you have to act normal! It's much better to complete your mission successfully and hand over whatever information Kumo wants than to try to sabotage it and blow your cover. If that happens, it's all over for Konoha for good.*

But Sakura could not quite quash the ball of fear lodged in her gut. She injected chakra into her immune system, just in case.

Out of sight of where Sakura instinctively knew Konoha's main gates to be, Deidara came to an abrupt halt.

"Alright listen up, yeah — especially you, Tobi, 'cause I'm only going to say this once — our orders are to infiltrate the village and find their file on Kumogakure. It should be in the Hokage's office somewhere. Obviously we're going to have to henge into people who have access to the area so as not to rouse suspicion. Kumo gave us these ninja info cards — " He held up three blank cards with the character for 'shinobi' on the back. Sakura hadn't seen these since her first time taking the chuunin exams, back when Kabuto still seemed nice and her team never would've guessed he was working for Orochimaru...

Deidara infused chakra into them and suddenly their blank fronts filled with information and pictures. Naturally one was of Shizune, who was Tsunade's personal assistant; the other two were Shiranui Genma and Namiashi Raido, elite bodyguards to the Hokage. Sakura was disturbed by the accuracy of Kumo's intel — none of them would look even remotely suspicious hanging around the Hokage's office (though Genma and Raido were certainly not authorized to go through Tsunade's paperwork...).

"Sakura, you take this chick and we'll take these two, yeah," Deidara said, handing her Shizune's card.

"What, don't want to henge into a girl?" Sakura quipped, hiding her discomfort at the thought of incapacitating her senpai.

Deidara rolled his eyes. "Something like that. Just take the damn card already."

A few minutes later, Shizune, Genma and Raido casually strolled up to the front gates. Izumo glanced up from his conversation with Kotetsu and smiled at them. "Hey there, Shizune-san, Genma-san, Raido-san. I didn't even realize you guys had left."

"Me neither. Who's guarding the Godaime? Her new intern?" Kotetsu joked.

*Geez, the virus has made them complacent as hell. We're lucky the place hasn't been infiltrated by enemies yet! Er — I guess it has now, actually...*

"I just stepped out to pick up some herbs from the medical center in Oimachi. These guys insisted on accompanying me the whole dangerous two miles," Sakura responded lightly as they opened the gates. She could feel the surprised stares of Deidara and Tobi boring into her back; she had said too much.
Izumo and Kotetsu laughed. "Well, we know Genma-san has to look out for his lady friends," Izumo teased. "Have a good one."

They went back to their conversation, looking entirely untroubled. Sakura led the way into the village.

Konoha had a peaceful, contented air about it. As they walked the streets towards the back of the village, they could hear children laughing, adults chatting, market vendors shouting their sales at the passing crowds. Citizens held doors open for each other and carried grocery bags for old ladies. Children took turns pushing each other on swings. The line at Ichiraku's to-go window had never been more orderly, each person waiting patiently for their turn. Any outsiders would have no idea anything was remotely out of place — Konoha just seemed like an usually happy and prosperous village.

Sakura was weirded out. To her, the change was uncanny. In her mind, an Ichiraku line during the crowded lunch rush that didn't break out in at least one fistfight was no Ichiraku line at all; similarly, this serene, perfect village was not Konoha. Sakura shivered.

Her group continued the long walk in silence. The Hokage's office was located in the administrative section of the same building that housed the Academy, all the way in the back beneath Hokage Mountain. Sakura almost fancied she could feel the imposing stone carving of her mentor's face in the cliffside glaring down at her as she approached.

"Hey there, Shizune-san. Hey Genma, hey Raido," a familiar voice drawled from behind. Sakura whipped her head around to meet the one-eyed gaze of Kakashi. "Heading to Administration as well?" He fell into step beside them.

"Uh, yep," Sakura squeaked. "Tsunade-sama got behind on her paperwork again..."

"Oh really?" Kakashi asked, tilting his head in thought. "That's odd, I could've sworn I saw her at the bar just a little while ago..."

"Haha, that's exactly why she needs help. Too drunk to write and all," Sakura laughed nervously.

"Oh, of course. She's lucky to have such a hard-working assistant like you, Shizune-san." Kakashi's eye crinkled at her in a smile. Sakura tried not to squirm.

"Thank you, sen — Kakashi-san. What business do you have at Administration?"

"I left *Icha Icha Warfare* in the Jounin Standby Station yesterday. Thought I'd pick it up and hang out for a bit."

*Oh great,* Sakura cursed inwardly. She did not relish the thought of Kakashi being next door while they broke into the Hokage's office. *At least Tsunade-shishou will be occupied at the bar. We lucked out there, no doubt she'll be a while.*

The four ninja continued their path past the Academy playground and up the wide front steps of the Administration building. Kakashi turned down the corridor to the right. "Later," he waved. Sakura lead the way through the lobby, nodding to the small blonde girl sitting at the receptionists' desk.

"Hello, Shizune-senpai!" Eri piped. "Tsunade-sama is still out. I'm watching the desk while Kouya-san takes her break, but I promise to have that proposal you asked for proofread before three."

Sakura hid her surprise. _I guess Eri-chan replaced me as their assistant._ She tried not to feel hurt by that — she was a missing-nin after all, it was only natural for her to be replaced — but it still stung.
She forced a smile at Eri. "Thanks, I appreciate it."

They left the lobby and made their way past the empty mission assignment desk. Sakura made a right after the cafeteria and paused just out of sight of the corridor to the Hokage's office.

"Okay guys, the originals of your henges should be stationed down this hall. Wait here and let me handle it," she instructed her surprised teammates under her breath. Deidara was about to open his mouth to ask a question (or make an accusation), but Sakura cut him off. "Later," she said. He huffed, but kept silent.

Sakura turned the corner and strode toward the real Genma and Raido. They looked up in surprise. Gemma wagged the tip of his senbon at her.

"'Scuse me, Shizune, but what are you doing back from your break so early? You work too hard."

Sakura couldn't believe the virus had Gemma saying, "excuse me."

"Oh, you know me, I just had to come back to check on something..." She made the three signs for her brain-swelling jutsu behind her back.

Raido laughed. "You worry too much, Shizune-san. Everything's fine, right?" He offered a reassuring grin before passing out unceremoniously alongside his partner.

Sakura stared at the unconscious bodies of the Hokage's elite guards in disbelief.

Like sitting ducks. Konoha is even more vulnerable than you feared.

She glanced up as Deidara and Tobi rounded the corner. "Quick, let's get rid of them. We don't have much time," she cautioned, lifting Genma and propping him up carefully in a janitorial closet. Tobi followed suit with Raido, and Sakura opened the doors to the Hokage's office, ushering her teammates in quickly.

She would have been hit with a wave of nostalgia for the familiar oval room, except it was nearly unrecognizable. It had undergone a transformation similar to Shizune's office in the hospital: the piles of paperwork had disappeared, filed away neatly in cabinets along the walls. The desk was cleared, and there wasn't an empty sake bottle in sight. Sakura was surprised to learn the carpet was actually a deep green.

"Tobi, you check the cabinets on the left. Deidara you start from the right. I'll search the desk."

Deidara grunted, looking like he wanted to say something again, but held it in and complied. They rifled through hundreds of folders and files, making sure to put everything back in place afterwards. Sakura checked every hidden drawer in the desk that she knew of. She was really beginning to stress about how long they'd been searching when Tobi announced that he found a compartment in the wall sealed with chakra.

"Tobi is good with sealing jutsu," he boasted. "I can open it."

Sakura and Deidara gathered round as Tobi made a series of signs. A square space of the empty wall began glowing, and a drawer popped into existence with a cloud of smoke. Sakura crushed the iron lock with her hand and pulled it open. Several thick folders lay inside, one for each village.

"There it is, yeah," Deidara said, picking up the gray one with the Kumo cloud symbol on the front. He flipped through its pages quickly. "This is it."
"Hey Sakura-san," Tobi spoke up, pointing over her shoulder. "Isn't that you?"

Sakura whirled around and came face to face with Shizune.

_Oh shit._

Shizune screamed.
"There it is, yeah," Deidara said, picking up the gray folder with the Kumo cloud symbol on the front. He flipped through its pages quickly. "This is it."

"Hey Sakura-san," Tobi spoke up, pointing over her shoulder. "Isn't that you?"

Sakura whirled around and came face to face with Shizune.

Oh shit.

Shizune screamed. "ENEMIES!" Poisoned needles spat out of the device she wore on her wrist, concealed beneath her sleeve. Tobi knocked over a bookcase to intercept them. "And — did you say Sakura?!!"

Oh hell, Sakura thought in despair. She dropped her henge to conserve chakra and the other two followed suit, dancing around the rain of needles.

"AKATSUKI!" Shizune shrieked loudly enough for the entire administration building to hear. The poisons specialist turned purple, about to exhale a cloud of toxins in their faces. Deidara's hand shot towards his pouch.

"Don't!" Sakura shouted, yanking his wrist free. "Let's just get out of here!" She lifted the desk and threw it at her senpai, trying to use non-lethal force. The desk shattered into splinters and pinned Shizune to the doors, blocking them. Sakura hoped it would buy them some time; she could hear the shouts and footsteps of nearby jounin from the standby station running to investigate the commotion.

Tobi kicked out the glass from the big window overlooking Konoha. The three ninja darted out onto the rooftops of the village and hurtled towards the border.

But Konoha shinobi were no slouches, infected or not. In a flash, Neji, Ino's dad Inoichi, and Kakashi caught up to them.

Oh shitshitshit, Sakura thought in panic. Neji and Inoichi were bad enough, but her sensei was the legendary Kakashi of the Sharingan, master of over a thousand copied jutsu. He was the last person in the village she wanted to fight. Sakura could no longer afford to worry about her Akatsuki
comrades injuring her friends; she needed to figure out how they could escape with their lives.

"Sakura? Is that you?" Kakashi asked, stance aggressive. "You're Akatsuki now?"

Sakura didn't answer. She couldn't even look at him.

"Dibs on the Copy-nin," Deidara sneered. "I'd like to return the favor he did me last time we fought, when he dismembered my arms, yeah." He slipped his hands into his clay pouch.

All hell broke loose.

Chidori crackled to life in Kakashi's fist as Deidara flung a clay bomb at him. One huge explosion later, their ensuing fray was obscured by a mushroom cloud of dust. Inoichi backflipped to gain distance while Neji charged down Tobi, engaging him in a battle of furious taijutsu. Tobi kept blinking in and out of existence, dodging Neji's gentle palm technique.

"Watch his hands!" Sakura called to Tobi as she chased after her best girlfriend's father, a man she'd known most of her life. She had to close the gap the long-distance fighter favored. "He'll close your chakra pathways!"

But she didn't have time to worry about the others anymore, as Inoichi opened a scroll and a myriad of weapons began hurling themselves at her. Sakura danced and ducked and spun, evading the deadly instruments. Inoichi was considerably weakened without the support of his Ino-Shika-Cho comrades, but the older nin was one of the most experienced jounin in Konoha and should not be taken lightly. Sakura performed four seals.

A stallion made of water materialized and charged down Inoichi, hooves thundering across the rooftops, leaving a trail of water in its wake. Sakura hydroplaned after it, intent on closing that troublesome distance. She couldn't use her superhuman strength on the landscape for fear of collapsing a building and accidentally killing someone (though she knew Deidara would have no such compunctions about structural damage, there was no need to make it worse); she'd have to hit him directly.

Inoichi somersaulted over the charging mustang and destroyed it with a well-placed roundhouse kick. Sakura took the opportunity to launch her fist, powered with just enough chakra to knock him out, at his face. Inoichi ducked and took a swipe at her legs, intending to topple her over. She jumped his kick but came down with more force than she intended; cracks spidered across the rooftop beneath her boots.

Careful! she scolded herself, hoping it would hold. Inoichi took advantage of her hesitation to backflip away again, making a series of short hand seals.

Sakura's vision blurred. She could feel a vague presence in her mind, disconnecting the neural pathways in her cerebrum and rewiring them. Suddenly sight was sound, and movement felt like taste. None of her muscles knew how to work correctly. Sakura tried to take a step forward, only to be blinded by the color yellow and assaulted with the smell of vomit. She suspected her foot didn't move at all — was that her neck twisting around, or her eyelids blinking? It was impossible to tell through the distortion. Sakura focused her chakra into her brain. Her medical studies had afforded her unusual knowledge of neuroanatomy, but she wasted precious minutes trying to disentangle the sensory mess. By the time she got it sorted out, she noticed to her dismay that Inoichi had flagged down a young member of the Nara clan who must have heard the sound of fighting. Sakura's shadow was already ensnared in his jutsu, paralyzing her.

"Take care of my body!" Inoichi shouted to the boy, putting his thumbs and forefingers together.
"Shintenshin no jutsu!"

The mind-body switch technique took hold immediately. Sakura felt the interrogation specialist's full mental presence in her head, controlling her limbs. She charged towards Tobi, who appeared to have lost the use of his left arm to Neji's attacks. Her ninjatou made a deadly ringing sound as she unsheathed it.

_Hell fucking no!_ Inner Sakura roared, enraged. _You did not defeat this technique when you were a genin only to lose to it now!_

She directed her will against the invading presence in her mind, pouring her determination into her limbs. _These muscles are MINE!_

She felt Inoichi's will slip against her own as she barreled towards Tobi. Her control returned in the nick of time; she dropped her weapon and swerved, colliding with Neji instead. They rolled together, his hand brushed her left shoulder as her right palm connected with his eyes. His optic nerve was damaged in an instant — Sakura prayed she hadn't overdone it and blinded him permanently by mistake. Her left arm hung uselessly by her side.

Wasting no time, Sakura sheathed her weapon and used one hand to form signs.

She called forth a huge wave — not nearly as big as Sora's signature tsunami had been, but it burned just as badly due to the packet of hydrochloric acid she hurled into its depths. It crashed over everyone, halting the battles as the ninja were swept off their feet. Sakura directed the churning currents with her chakra, causing Inoichi to slam into Neji, then carrying both into the second story of a building. A wall collapsed, burying them in debris. Sakura sincerely hoped no one was home.

Sakura whirled to check on her partners. Tobi was drenched, cloak partially dissolved by her acid wave, injured arm dangling. Deidara had fared much worse against Kakashi; blood from an unknown injury covered the front of his tattered cloak and poured out of his mouth. He cradled his right hand, which was missing three fingers. Kakashi looked no worse for the wear other than singed hair and broken ribs, judging by the way he clutched his side. His forehead protector was pulled up, his Mangekyou Sharingan swirling dangerously.

"We have to get out of here!" Sakura called to her partners. Deidara looked perilously low on chakra.

Deidara performed two seals with his good hand and a giant clay bird appeared. He and Tobi clambered up, Sakura grabbing hold of its tail at the last second as it shot into the sky. She had just hoisted herself onto its back with a sigh of relief when the bird rocked violently and began to fall.

A black-and-orange body fell alongside them, Rasengan disappearing in his fist. They all hurtled towards the village park together, crashing into a tree. Naruto staggered to his feet first.

"Sakura-chan, how could you?!" he shouted, pointing an accusing finger at her. A clone balled his fist with another Rasengan. He charged.

_Naruto wouldn't hurt me, no matter what_, Sakura thought to herself, frozen in horror. But this wasn't her Naruto — this was a stranger controlled by a virus. Deidara slammed into her, bowling them over out of harm's way.

Naruto whirled, an unfamiliar look of deep disgust on his face. The whisker markings etched into his cheeks elongated. Red chakra seeped and bubbled up from beneath his skin just as Kakashi arrived. Shikaku, Shikamaru and Chouji had been in the park already and were now sprinting towards the
chaos. Shouts echoed across town. Gai and Lee ran over from the marketplace, Anko following. They were surrounded.

"Tobi, get us out of here now!" Deidara barked.

Tobi grabbed Deidara's wrist, then hers while the group of Konoha ninja converged on them. Sakura felt a great pull from her middle as the world began to cartwheel around her. They were sucked into the swirling vortex of the left eye hole in Tobi's mask.

The three shinobi popped into existence in the middle of a grass field. There was nothing around for miles.

Sakura sank to her knees slowly, in a daze. Deidara collapsed in a heap. Tobi sat down.

Sakura scooted over to Deidara and opened his cloak. He was sweating profusely, and through the freely flowing blood she could make out a large, fist-sized hole. It barely missed the sealed mouth on the left side of his chest. Sakura stopped the bleeding hurriedly with her good hand; she could reopen the chakra points in her dead shoulder once that was under control. "I hope you saved those fingers," she grumbled.

She turned to Tobi as she worked. "Tobi, what the hell was that technique?"

"A space-time ninjutsu," he supplied casually.

*Space-time...are you freaking kidding me?"* "If you could do something like that, why didn't you do it sooner?" she ground out, trying to keep the anger out of her voice.

"It uses up a lot of chakra to teleport three people. Tobi's supply is almost exhausted."

But Tobi didn't look exhausted. He wasn't even breathing hard. Sakura's eyes narrowed. There was more to this masked man than mere childishness — he was a more formidable fighter than she could have guessed. Still, she couldn't help but feel grateful. If not for his asspull back there, they probably couldn't have escaped with their lives.

Deidara stirred under her glowing palm, eyes cracking open. "Is the folder there, yeah?"

Sakura rummaged around in his cloak. "Excuse the intrusion..." she said. Deidara managed a blood-smeared smirk at her. She withdrew a gray file; the folder was wet and badly stained, but the pages inside were legible.

"At least we completed the objective, even if my rematch didn't go as planned," he wheezed. "Fucking Sharingans. Why'd you have to drop your cover and pick a fight anyway?"

"Tobi said my name. It doesn't matter; Konoha has no way of knowing which village hired us to begin with. That's the advantage of using Akatsuki, right? Everyone does it, so no one can be traced."

"Sorry, Sakura-san. Tobi wasn't thinking."

"It's okay, Tobi," she replied with a sigh. He sounded repentant. She paused to heal the chakra points in her own shoulder before putting her other arm to good use on Deidara's hand.

Deidara grunted. "And just when were you gonna tell us you're a missing-nin from Konoha? That would've been pretty useful information ahead of time, yeah."
Now it was Sakura's turn to feel guilty. "Er — sorry."

Deidara's face suddenly darkened in realization. "That bastard! No wonder he told Leader-sama we'd be fine if you came on the mission. That damn Uchiha could've mentioned it too, yeah!" he huffed. "And why'd you stop me from killing that kunoichi?"

Sakura tried not to sweat. "Boy, you sure ask a lot of questions for a person with a gaping hole in his chest," she scowled.

Deidara scoffed. "You're just like that stupid Uchiha after all. Never hurting anyone more than necessary. It's unartistic, mm."

Sakura blanched. "Don't compare me to him," she spat, flustered. The bite in her words was muted by her surprise, however.

So now he's a pacifist murderer? What bull!

Sakura's brow furrowed in confusion, but she moved on to heal Tobi. The three ninja lapsed into silence as she worked. Some time later they were mostly healed, though tired and filthy. Sakura's wet socks squelched in her boots.

"How far are we from the base?" she asked. "I'll need to reattach Deidara's fingers as soon as possible."

"We're here already," Tobi answered brightly. He performed a long series of complicated seals and suddenly the house came into view a dozen meters away.

Sakura looked on in wonder, amazed at how far they'd traveled in the space of a single second. "That space-time jutsu is something else, Tobi."

"Aww, why thank you, Sakura-san! Tobi is a good boy, yes?"

Sakura nodded, smiling faintly. They walked in together.

An hour later, Deidara flexed his fingers experimentally.

"Better?" Sakura asked, clearing the bloody towel off the kitchen table.

"They're perfect, thanks," he answered, looking impressed. "You did a much better job than Kakuzu. There aren't even any stitches, mm."

Sakura smiled and exhaled. Her chakra supply was running low. She could use a bath, some dry clothes, and a nap. She pushed her chair out and stood, peeling the sopping cloak off her body.

"Um, what should I do with this?" she asked. She picked up on movement in the periphery of her vision and turned her head.

Itachi entered the kitchen, wearing his casual workout clothes and mesh shirt. He slowed to a standstill when he caught sight of her.

"Give it back to him, yeah," Deidara replied, nodding to Itachi.

Oh god, that was HIS cloak? I thought it was a spare!

Sakura glanced down at the soaked, bloodstained bundle of fabric. "Uh, sorry," she apologized
Itachi averted his eyes to the floor. "It's fine," he said.

Why won't he look at you? Sakura thought in confusion as Itachi reached out a slim hand to take the cloak from her. She felt a jolt where their skin brushed. She jerked her hand back and was surprised to see Itachi do the same. Her skin crawled, but it wasn't with disgust, exactly. He turned and left the kitchen in silence, Sakura staring at his back.

Okay, that was awkward.

She glanced at Deidara, who had a bemused expression on his face.

"What?" she ground out irritably.

"Hnn," he replied. Sakura felt her face twitch. She strode down the hall to go shower.

Sakura sighed and tugged on her braid in frustration. She'd been working on it nonstop for the last week since returning from that mission, but no matter what tests she ran on her viral samples, she never seemed to get any closer to figuring out what functions that chromosomal mutation controlled. It wasn't reproduction, it wasn't for making protein, it wasn't for breaking down waste. Sakura knew it had to be something to do with energy; it was smack dab in between two other locations that Sakura's tests determined were related to energy collection and storage. But there were so many complicated facets regarding how a cell uses energy! It could be responsible for a myriad of different functions.

Sakura huffed and packed up her things. She really needed a cup of coffee. Why couldn't they just let me buy my own machine? she grumbled to herself, closing the door as she left the lab.

Maybe you need to try a different approach. Take a break from focusing on the lab for a while. Isn't there something else you've been meaning to do that would be equally productive to solving Konoha's mystery?

Sakura groaned as she jumped to the second story balcony and let herself into the library. She had no idea how she would interrogate Kisame about the mark on his neck. Well, that wasn't entirely true. She could start by getting him drunk, and then...what? Peek under his shirt collar?

You are NOT seducing him, she thought flatly. He knows you too well to fall for that by now anyway. You'll just have to improvise.

Delaying the inevitable, she browsed the shelves, absently pulling off titles that looked relevant to semiotics, mythology, history...anything that might contain information about the mark. The idea that she might find anything useful in such a small library was a hopeless long shot, but there was no harm in trying.

She curled up into an armchair and spent the next few hours reading. She found loads of information on dragons and serpents as symbols, including some representations of them in a medical context that she hadn't been aware of. It wasn't until she opened an old leather-bound book titled An Index of Philosophical Tattoos that Sakura sat up straight in her chair. There, under the 'mythical creatures' section, was a listing for 'Ouroborus.'

The Ouroborus or Uroboros is an ancient symbol depicting a serpent or dragon eating its own tail. It often represents self-reflexivity or cyclicality, especially in the sense of something constantly re-creating itself, the eternal return, and other things perceived as cycles that begin anew as soon as
they end (see also: phoenix). It has been described as a self-eating, circular being — the first living thing in the universe — with a meaning of infinity or wholeness. It may represent the formless disorder that surrounds the orderly world and is involved in that world's periodic renewal. Certain ancient cultures considered it a symbol of the eternal unity of all things, the cycle of birth and death from which some sought release and liberation.

Sakura sat back in the armchair, deep in thought.

Now why the hell would a virus create a rash in the shape of something like that?

Something bizarre was going on. Sakura already knew that this was no natural virus, but reading that had her even more unnerved. Somebody was behind this whole thing, but what could they possibly want?

She put the other books back, tucking the *Index of Philosophical Tattoos* under her arm. She idly wondered if she was really lucky to find such a book just laying around here, or if she should give up on believing in coincidences entirely.

Perturbed, she made her way towards the exit but was distracted by the go board sitting in the corner. She hadn't been in the library for some time now, but another black stone had appeared in her absence.

*Ooh. That looks really bad for white. I'm not sure you can make up for the damage that Kisame has already done after all...*

She studied the game for a few moments, frowning. There was no choice but to take a more aggressive risk. There wasn't enough territory left on the board for her to make up the point difference by simply defending. If she couldn't trick her opponent into making a mistake she would lose. Sakura placed a white stone inside one of black's territories with a clack. Invading was difficult with limited space, but if she could just manage to make her group live...

Sakura wandered out of the library, heading downstairs to find Kisame. And some beer.

"Move over, yeah!"

"But senpai, Tobi will fall off!"

"For all your sakes, I sure hope that was Pinkie's hand on my ass just now."

"Boys! You're all too big. NO DON'T — !"

With a crash, the swing collapsed onto the porch, dragging the four ninja down with it.

Sakura wriggled helplessly beneath several large bodies, trying to disentangle her limbs. "Can't...breathe...!"

"The fuck? Just use your super strength to push us off, yeah," Deidara growled from somewhere underneath Kisame.

"Oh. Right." She directed chakra to her hands and shoved. The alcohol in her system made it hard to control; she ended up launching them across the porch out into the yard.

"Ouch!"

"What the hell!"
"Eheh, sorry," she said, sitting up dizzily.

Sakura hadn't meant to get all of Akatsuki drunk, but when Deidara and Tobi had found her and Kisame working their way through the crate of beer in the kitchen, someone had magically produced shochu from their secret stash.

Well, I guess it's not ALL of Akatsuki, Sakura amended, watching as Tobi tried repeatedly to stand. He ended up crashing into Deidara and knocking them both over again. Uchiha has been missing for how long now?

"Tobi is a good boy!" the masked nin shouted as he staggered to a standing position, completely unaware of Deidara's hand beneath his shoe. "Tobi will amaze his senpai with...the best. Jutsu. EVERRRRR!" Tobi made a series of seals, tripped on his own feet, and keeled over face-first into the dirt, unconscious.

"Spectacular!" Deidara drawled, rubbing his wrist. "Binge-drinking-blackout-no-jutsu, yeah!" He swayed and made his way over to the edge of the porch to sit down. Sakura sensed another one about to bite the dust.

"Shots!" she called, passing the shochu. Kisame laughed in delight and Deidara groaned, accepting his with reluctance.

"Here's to...taking over the world?" she hiccuped. The others stared at her in bewilderment. "Okay nevermind, here's to badass secret techniques!" She lifted her glass.

"Yeeeesss! Badass secret techniques — I love those!" Kisame roared, throwing his back. Deidara too drained his in one gulp. He went cross eyed, swayed, and slumped over.

"Pffft. Lightweights," Kisame sneered, wiping his mouth with his arm. "Let's do another!"

"Alright, alright," Sakura acquiesced, pouring shochu onto the porch. It took her a moment to realize she was missing the shot glasses entirely and correct herself. She was struggling desperately to burn off the alcohol in her blood, but she just couldn't get her metabolism to cooperate...

Kisame knocked another one back and cracked up. "Pinkie, you're hammered!"

"So're you," she slurred, laying back on the porch to keep the world from spinning. There was something she should be doing...a reason why she was only supposed to pretend to get drunk...what was it?

Kisame laughed and laid back next to her. It would've made for a nicer view if they scooted off the porch and laid under the stars, but neither of them was in any condition to move anymore. So they contemplated the rafters together instead.

Suddenly, Sakura remembered her objective.

"Oh shit...hey Kisame."

"What?"

"What would happen if I tried to seduce you?"

He paused to think about it. "I would probably be very entertained."

Sakura scoffed. "Is that, like, your default response to everything?"
"Pretty much. Why, are you planning on it? Should I prepare myself mentally?"

Sakura grinned despite herself. Suddenly, she had the most brilliant idea ever. She sat bolt upright and turned to Kisame excitedly. "Hey...why don't you just show me that mark on your neck instead?" she blurted. Why didn't you ever think to just ask nicely before? It's genius!

Kisame rolled his eyes. "Good lord, are you still on about that?" he growled, slapping a palm over the side of his neck as though swatting a fly.

"Yes! It is of medical interest to meeeee..."

"Bah. It's that bastard Orochimaru's fault."

"Orochimaru!? He gave you that mark?" Sakura asked, wide-eyed. Sasuke killed Orochimaru years ago! He can't be the one infecting Konoha!

Kisame chuckled. "He didn't give it to me. You make it sound like a hickey or something." He snorted when he saw the open revulsion on Sakura's face. "Naw, it's embarrassing to admit it, but he was doing some kind of weird experiment and managed to get the jump on me in my sleep one night after I drank too much."

"Now who's making things sound dirty," Sakura sniggered. Kisame balked. "So what was the experiment about?"

"Fuck if I know. I went to bed with clear skin, woke up the next morning with a damn serpent on my neck. When I confronted him about it, he went off about how it was 'for science!' or some shit."

"But you didn't have any symptoms? You didn't get sick or anything?"

Kisame gave her a queer look. "No. Why would you think that?"

Sakura frowned. "Just wondering...hey, can I see it?" Her green eyes gleamed with interest.

Kisame sized her up. "Only if you do something for me."

"Always the deal-making with you."

"You wanna see or not?"

Sakura knew she'd give her coffee-drinking arm for a chance to verify whether it was the same mark as the ones on Tsunade and Kakashi. "Of course."

"Then you have to promise to be nicer to Itachi-san."

Sakura recoiled violently. "What! How can you even ask something like that after what he did to me?!"

Kisame sighed. "I'm not asking you to be his bestest-best-friend. Just be a little nicer to him is all."

"Still! I'm, like, traumatized! He's an asshole who doesn't deserve 'nice'! Do you have any idea what I've been going through?"

"No. Do you have any idea what he's been going through?" Kisame retorted.

Sakura stopped short, eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?"
"Are you telling me you haven't noticed he's been missing for a week now? Don't play dumb."

"What's that got to do with me?"

"It's kinda like last time, when he used Tsukuyomi on his little brother — only not as bad. That time, he was gone for over a month. No one could find him, not even Leader-sama." Kisame shook his head.

"What? So I'm supposed to feel bad for him because he chooses to torture people, then gets emo about it afterwards? Fat chance."

Kisame gave her a hard look. Sakura squirmed. "It's not all about you, or what you're supposed to feel. Fact is, whatever reasons Itachi-san has for doing what he does — and I assure you, Itachi-san has reasons for everything — he has feelings about it too. Maybe he suffered as much as you."

The concepts of 'Itachi' and 'feelings' didn't make sense in the same sentence. "I have a hard time believing that," Sakura bit out.

"You don't have to. Just be nicer to him."

Sakura chewed her lower lip in thought. "If I agree, will you show me the mark?"

"Yes."

"How do you know I won't just promise anything to get what I want and then forget it tomorrow?" she burst out without thinking.

Kisame looked at her evenly. "I trust you."

Guilt crashed over Sakura like a wave. She took a moment to collect herself.

"Okay. I promise." She couldn't help but remember how much it had hurt when the last pinkie promise she accepted from two friends had been broken — and that hadn't even been their fault.

Kisame sat up and shifted his collar. "There. You see?"

Sakura leaned in. The overhead porch light was dim, but the mark was clear: the same serpent eating its own tail. The ouroboros. The shape was the same, but the color was different — the ones in Konoha had been dark red rashes, nearly black with pigment. This one was only a faded, light pink. And obviously the placement was different too — on the neck instead of mid-back...and then there was the lack of symptoms...

"Was it always this color?" Sakura asked, craning her head to see from another angle.

"Yeah. This is the way it looked the day he put it there."

"Do any of the other Akatsuki have one?"

"Not that I know of. Deidara and Tobi hadn't joined yet when Orochimaru was here; Sasori, Hidan, and Kakuzu are dead, and I doubt that snake was bold enough to try to experiment on Leader-sama or Konan. Itachi-san wouldn't have been careless enough to let him anywhere near his neck."

Sakura frowned. "Are you sure about that?"

"Feel free to check him out for yourself. Good luck with that," Kisame chortled. Sakura wrinkled her nose and sat back on her haunches.
"Well, thanks for letting me see."

"No problem, Pinkie. Thanks for honoring my request to join you next time you went on a bender. It's been fun." He laid back again, sprawled across the porch and closed his eyes. "I do love me some alcohol..."

Sakura stared out into the dark yard past the blissfully unconscious forms of Deidara and Tobi. The moon hung unusually low in the night sky; it was large and yellow, and appeared closer than it should be. Sakura nudged Kisame with her foot.

"Hey, Jaws...look at that moon." When she received no response, she prodded him again. "Kisame?" He let out a soft snore.

Sakura smiled and curled up on the porch near her friend. She drifted off after him.

"Quit your bitching and focus, yeah."

"No seriously, I'm way too hungover to concentrate."

"Akatsuki don't whine," Deidara snapped.

Sakura raised a brow. "That's...probably the biggest lie I'll hear today. Is he even aware of what comes out of his own mouth half the time?"

Deidara huffed. "Just hurry up and heal yourself so we can get on with it."

Sakura rolled her eyes. She increased her metabolism to burn off the remaining toxins faster, pumped chakra into her head and optic nerve, and performed a quick water jutsu to rehydrate her system. "That's about all I can do. I just have to wait out the rest. How come you don't have a hangover?"

"I do. But real shinobi learn to work it off."

"Alright, Mr. Real Shinobi. Can you show me the seals again, please?"

Deidara performed a quick succession: boar, tiger, monkey, horse, snake. "But elemental affinities aren't just about seals. You have to be sturdy and stubborn and immovable, like rock. It shouldn't be difficult for someone as hardheaded as you, yeah."

Sakura ignored the gibe and focused her energy on making the seals. "Doton: Moguragakure no jutsu!"

She closed her eyes and concentrated on the feeling of the earth beneath her boots, pressing back against gravity. She imagined what it would be like to be a thick, sturdy tree, with roots that sank deep into the soil, connected to it...the ground around her boots felt softer, loose like sand.

Let me in, she thought. She felt the sand sliding against her skin as she sank underground. It was pitch black, but Sakura found she didn't need her eyes to see; she could sense exactly where Deidara was on the surface, because she was the earth he was standing on. She swam through the dirt, which turned to sand around her to allow her motion. She positioned herself right under Deidara and thrust her hand up, catching his foot.

"Not bad," he nodded as Sakura popped her pink head up.

She rose from the ground and brushed sand off her shoulders. "That was easier than I expected." She remembered how many hundreds of vases she needed to fill before she got the hang of water jutsu.
"That was a very basic one, but that's what they mean by 'natural affinity,' yeah," Deidara smirked. "I think that's enough for today. Just practice the jutsu I showed you, and when you get the hang of those I'll teach you more."

Sakura wiped sweat of her brow; summer was approaching quickly and they were all feeling the heat. "Thanks," she said as they headed into the cool kitchen together.

"It's no big deal," Deidara replied, making his way towards the living room to claim the couch for a nap. "Just make sure you get Tobi's help with dinner again tonight." Sakura supposed that was as close to a 'you're welcome,' as she'd ever get from the guy.

Sakura followed him into the living room and sat down in the big squishy armchair near the hearth, gathering her notes off the coffee table. She wasn't even bothering to hide them in her room anymore (except for the ones on Kisame's behavior — those would be awkward to explain). There wasn't much point; they were just boring medical analyses of a virus. Nobody here would particularly care about such things. As if to punctuate her thoughts, Deidara's soft snoring filled the room.

She opened her notebook and was going over her last fruitless experiment when the front door creaked. She laid eyes on Itachi for the first time in nearly two weeks. He wore his cloak and was carrying a paper bag of groceries under one arm.

Well, look who's finally back.

His eyes slid past her on his way to the kitchen as if she wasn't there at all.

Sakura remembered her promise to Kisame. She didn't have to like him to be polite. Her mother had taught her manners, after all.

"Um, hi," she offered. Itachi paused in the doorway to the kitchen, turning his head to look at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Are those...for dinner tonight?" she prompted, trying not to show her discomfort with his silence.

"Yes," he replied, so quietly she almost missed it.

"Er, thanks. You can leave them on the counter since I'm cooking. Don't worry, Tobi's helping me," she tacked on with an awkward laugh.

Itachi blinked at her before turning his gaze downward. "Okay," he said to the floor. He disappeared into the kitchen.

Sakura shook her head. That man is giving you mood whiplash. First he ignores you, then he hates you, and now he's afraid of you.

She sighed and stood up, concentration broken. She wandered off to locate Tobi.

"This is even better than last time," Kisame mumbled appreciatively between mouthfuls.

"You mean it's actually not as bad, yeah. Don't get ahead of yourself Sakura, there's still room for improvement. But Tobi helped you make something edible, so congratulations."

"Yes!" Tobi cheered, pumping a fist into the air. "Tobi is a good teacher!"

Sakura laughed and almost inhaled her noodles by accident. "What do you think, Itachi-san?" she questioned casually.

Everyone stopped eating. Sakura's mortified face heated up under their scrutiny; she locked eyes on her food, afraid to look up in case he didn't answer.
"...it's fine."

Tension defused, the table resumed their meals. Sakura exhaled and chanced a glimpse up. Itachi was methodically lifting vegetables to his lips in his usual slow, deliberate way. His eyes darted up to her face once before returning to his bowl.

"I like the ginger," he added softly.

Sakura choked. Kisame reached over to thump her on the back with excessive force. "Uh, thanks," she coughed.

"You're welcome," both Itachi and Kisame replied simultaneously. Sakura flushed.

Will things ever not be awkward when he's around? she wondered, stirring her noodles with her chopsticks.

One by one the faster eaters finished. Kisame was the first to leave, followed by Deidara, then Tobi. If Sakura didn't know any better, she'd say Itachi rushed the last portion of his bowl a bit. He stood and gathered the others' empty dishes just as Sakura swallowed her last bite.

Sakura watched him make his way over to the sink and turn the hot water on.

"Why do you always end up doing the dishes?" she blurted without thinking. Itachi's hands froze momentarily on the first bowl.

"Because they need to be done." He resumed scrubbing.

Sakura stood and took her own bowl over to the sink. She stacked it on the others and grabbed a dish towel off the countertop. "I mean, why is it only you? Why not ask for help from the others?" She held out her palm for the wet bowl.

Itachi stared at her hand for a moment before pressing the dish into it. He returned to scrubbing the next one as Sakura dried the first. "I don't mind doing it alone."

"No one should have to do it all alone. That's not fair." Sakura opened the cabinet above the sink to stack the dry bowl on the clean ones.

"Hnn," was all Itachi managed in response. They worked together in silence until the last dish was put away.

Finished, Sakura wiped her wet hands on her shorts and turned to leave. Itachi's quiet voice halted her in the doorway.

"Thank you, Sakura-san."

Sakura couldn't help it when her eyebrows lifted into her hairline. So his mother taught him manners too. Presumably before he killed her. She wasn't sure what his gratitude was in reference to, but she tried her best to manage a smile.

"You're welcome, Itachi-san."

She shuffled off down the hall towards her room. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the feeling of eyes boring into her back.
The truce between Sakura and Itachi was surprisingly easy to maintain. Sakura discovered that he was actually a rather courteous roommate once he stopped trying to get rid of her. He spoke politely, never left a mess, and did chores without complaint — unlike some of the others. Sakura marveled at how a little decreased hostility on her end could change his demeanor so much. Or was that all there was to it...?

She strode into the living room, notebooks clutched under her arm, intent on brainstorming up another brilliantly futile experiment. She made a beeline for the overstuffed armchair only to find her spot already occupied.

Itachi’s red eyes glanced up at her from his book when she entered, framed by those long lashes.

"Uh, hi," she offered tentatively, scooting over to plop herself on the couch instead.

"Hello, Sakura-san," he replied simply. His gaze returned to his book. Sakura focused her own eyes down at her notes.

They settled into a not-uncomfortable silence, each lost in their own thoughts. The occasional turn of a page or scratch of a pen punctuated the quiet. When Sakura heard clothes rustle, she looked up.

Itachi had his fingers pressed delicately to his temple as he read. The gesture was subtle and would probably have been unremarkable on anyone else, but Sakura knew better. It was not the first time she'd seen a Sharingan user hide a headache.

He felt her eyes on his face and looked up, brows raised slightly in a silent question. Sakura blushed lightly and cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry if this seems like an intrusive question, but are your eyes okay, Itachi-san?"

Surprise flitted across his smooth features so fast she almost missed it. Almost. The hard edges of his Sharingan softened.

"I'm used to it. Please don't bother yourself over it, Sakura-san."

Mentally shrugging, Sakura went back to her work. Itachi's low voice broke through her thoughts again.
"Thank you for asking."

She blushed in earnest now. Keeping her eyes glued to the page, she coughed slightly. "It's no big deal. Medic's nature and all."

He hummed under his breath. They read in silence for a few moments before Sakura chanced a peek up at his face. His eyes met hers. They looked away quickly. Sakura briefly thought about relocating to a less-distracting area, but she was no coward. She could handle a little awkward tension just fine. And Itachi wasn't retreating, either.

They sat like that for the rest of the afternoon. The clock on the wall ticked to mark the passage of time.

"Up up up!" Sakura called as she ran down the first floor hallway, banging loudly on all the doors as she went. "I've got a surprise for everybody!"

She heard shuffling and groaning behind closed doors. "Do you know what fucking time it is, yeah?" Deidara's muffled voice called.

"Where's the fire?" Kisame grumbled, sticking his mussed head out his bedroom door.

"Out back!" Sakura shouted over her shoulder as she raced to the kitchen and threw open the glass door. She surveyed her handiwork with her hands on her hips as Deidara appeared from behind. Still in his pajamas, he rubbed his eyes. His jaw dropped.

"Sakura, what the fuck did you do to the backyard, yeah?"

A swimming pool sat in the center of the training field, water sparkling invitingly.

"I had to harden the dirt to the consistency of rock to keep it from getting muddy," Sakura proclaimed. "It took forever to figure out."

Deidara shook his head. "I teach you earth jutsu and you use it to make a freaking swimming pool?"

"We've been training eleven hours a day, every day, for like forever! I need a break. And don't act like you're not grateful. It's been so hot out I know you're suffering too. Go change!" She put both hands on his shoulders and propelled him back into the house.

"Alright, alright, not so pushy, mm." Deidara complained, rubbing his shoulder. Kisame appeared just as the blonde was leaving.

"Oh fuck yeah, a pool!" He shouted. He ran towards it, stripping off his shirt as he went. He jumped in headfirst, pants and socks and all. The huge splash soaked Sakura.

She laughed, wiping water from her eyes. "I knew you'd appreciate it, at least."

Sakura jogged over to the edge and dove in. Unfortunately, she hadn't thought to pack a bathing suit before moving to an Akatsuki base. She had been forced to improvise with a stained t-shirt over an old sports bra and a pair of boyshorts in an unflattering shade of gray.

Deidara appeared a moment later, clad in stylish boardshorts adorned with an abstract black and white pattern. Good thing this isn't a fashion contest, she thought to herself in amusement, or you would've just lost to him again. The artist stuck a toe in the water.

"It's cold," he grumbled.
"It's perfect," Kisame disagreed, floating on his back blissfully. "You'll be grateful for the temperature by noon."

"Hnn," Deidara grunted, sitting down at the water's edge.

Some time later Tobi emerged from the house in black swim trunks, carrying a bundle of firewood under one arm. "I saw it from my window, Sakura-san!" he exclaimed in excitement. "Tobi will barbecue!"

Sakura and Kisame relaxed in the pool while Tobi built a fire pit and began grilling black bean burgers. Deidara issued corrective orders to him from the sidelines, his feet dangling in the water lazily. The burgers were just starting to smell heavenly when Kisame glanced up. "Oi, Itachi-san! Come join us!" he yelled.

Itachi was leaning against the railing of the second story balcony, watching them in silence. His ubiquitous cloak was absent.

"Tobi's making burgers," Sakura pointed out, trying to be friendly.

"They're vegetarian, Itachi-senpai!" Tobi added.

Itachi paused for a moment before he disappeared into the house without a word.

So much for that, Sakura thought to herself. At least you tried.

A few minutes later Tobi announced that the burgers were almost done. "I'm going to go make iced tea," Sakura offered, climbing out of the pool. The sun was shining overhead and the air was really starting to heat up. She dashed towards the kitchen, long hair dripping onto the porch behind her.

She smacked into a hard body. Itachi's eyes swept down her figure to her bare legs. Sakura blushed crimson.

"Ah, sorry, I really need to stop running into you like that, huh?" she laughed, edging around him towards the sliding glass door. Though his head remained perfectly still, Itachi's eyes followed her as she went.

Did he just — ? She thought to herself incredulously as she pulled a glass pitcher from the cabinet. No way. You're losing your mind. You're wearing something different, so it's natural for him to notice. It doesn't mean anything.

For some inexplicable reason, Sakura wished she had worn a nicer shirt. She added teabags to the water and heated it with chakra.

Now that's a stupid thing to think, she admonished herself. You're just self-conscious because he's good-looking. Like Sasuke. And you probably look like a drowned rat in this outfit. Sakura frowned and filled the pitcher with ice, speeding up the cooling process by absorbing the heat with her chakra. She shrugged off her unease and carried the iced tea outside. The four Akatsuki sat around the pool, eating burgers and talking. The heat was sweltering, and all of them were shirtless except Itachi, who wore a simple dark blue t-shirt and loose pants.

"I hope you didn't get the kitchen all wet, mm," Deidara warned.

"Er — whoops," Sakura said, setting down the pitcher and stack of glasses near the pool. "I'll clean it up later." She helped herself to the food.
"Tobi will help!"

"Why don't you ever volunteer when I need chores done, yeah?"

"Because Deidara-senpai always tells Tobi to do them eventually anyway," Tobi replied, taking a bite of his burger. Sakura and Kisame laughed.

Itachi unstacked the glasses and poured iced tea. He passed one to each of them. Sakura tried to accept hers without really looking at him and almost spilled it in her lap.

"Thank you for cooking, Tobi," Itachi said. Sakura did a double-take.

"You're welcome, senpai! You always appreciate my cooking the most," Tobi replied.

Kisame snorted. "I eat the most of it. I'd say I appreciate it more."

"But it's Itachi-senpai who bothers to compliments Tobi regularly."

"Yeah, well, he was the one who first taught you to cook, so that sounds kind of self-serving, eh?" Deidara sneered.

"Tobi is naturally the better chef," Itachi said in a tone of voice that Sakura hadn't heard from him before.

"Hnn," the explosives master grunted.

Sakura was bewildered. Itachi rarely said more than two words at a time to anyone except Kisame since she moved in, and now he was talking voluntarily. As if that wasn't weird enough, nobody else seemed to think this was abnormal.

Maybe it's not? You've only been around for a short time compared to the rest of them. Kisame has complained on more than one occasion that Itachi has not been himself since you arrived.

Sakura looked at Itachi sitting crossed-legged on a towel next to Kisame, sipping iced tea. He wasn't smiling (that would be crazy), but he had a relaxed air about him. He looked so ordinary, aside from the eerie red Sharingan. Not for the first time, Sakura wondered if there might not be more to him than she'd previously assumed.

Deidara set down his glass and stood. "Alright, I can't take it anymore, yeah. It's too hot." He made his way over to the pool.

Kisame chuckled, following suit. "Told you so."

Sakura privately agreed. The sun had already dried her hair during the time it took to eat, and now she could feel the sweat rolling down her back. She glanced at Itachi in his dark clothes.

He must be dying. He took another sip of iced tea. Condensation from the glass gathered in the corner of his lips. She watched as a droplet rolled down his chin, over the Adam's apple of his throat and disappeared beneath his shirt collar. When she looked up again he was staring at her. Sakura turned scarlet and ran for the water.

What the hell was that?! she demanded, but Inner Sakura only laughed. Obviously it's those pesky teenage hormones. They warned you about those in medic-nin classes. You should have listened. I mean, he kind of looks like Sasuke, so it's not so surprising. Right?

Kisame guffawed when her splash hit him. Deidara spluttered and looked indignant. Kissame swam
to the wall and leaned his elbows on the edge of the pool.

"You coming in, Itachi-san?"

Itachi paused for a moment, considering. Sakura snorted, sure he would decline.

She was completely unprepared when he reached up to wriggle his shirt over his head.

A shirtless Itachi was just not something she needed to see today. There were only so many half-naked men a girl could handle at one time, and Sakura had reached her limit. She ducked her head under the water to escape, staying under for a good two minutes in hiding. Sakura broke the surface and took a big gulp of air. Itachi was already in the pool, on the far side near Kisame. Kisame looked at her dubiously.

"If that was a suicide attempt, Pinkie, I'd give it a zero out of ten."

"I was just trying to see how long I could hold my breath," she fabricated.

Deidara quirked an eyebrow at her. "That seems like a kinda pointless exercise for a water user, yeah."

"I guess," she laughed. She made her way over to the side of the pool and clambered out, trying to keep her butt tucked in self-consciously. She secured a towel around her midsection and wrung out her hair before turning to the group.

"I've got some research I want to get done, but I'll see you all at dinner," she said lightly, avoiding Itachi's gaze.

"Later," Kisame replied with a sharky grin. Deidara tossed her a dismissive wave. Tobi snored from the towel he was sprawled out on. She thought Itachi was studying her with those unreadable eyes of his, but she couldn't tell because she refused to look in his direction.

Sakura turned on her heel and retreated into the house.

Sakura frowned, studying the go board. Her opponent was no tactical dummy — black's response was exactly the one she was hoping to avoid. Things didn't look good for her invasion, but if she couldn't make it work it was game over.

She slung her wet braid over her shoulder with a sigh, picking up a white stone. She placed it on the opposite side of the board, hoping to fool her opponent into answering her ko threat instead of black's real vulnerability.

"Interesting," a low voice murmured from across the library.

Sakura whirled. Itachi approached her cautiously. He moved so silently she hadn't even heard him come in.

"I wondered how Kisame suddenly became skilled at go mid-game." Sakura was startled to see a glint of some unidentifiable emotion in his clear red irises. She shifted uncomfortably.

"I'm not surprised it was you all along," she thought aloud.

"Why is that?"

"Deidara and Tobi are smarter than they act, but neither of them has the patience to play the same
strategy game for so many months on end."

Itachi hummed. "May I sit?" He indicated the chair opposite hers at the table.

Sakura blinked in surprise. "Um, sure."

Itachi sank elegantly into the cushion. Sakura wondered if he should've been born a dancer instead of a ninja. He cupped his chin in his hand and studied the board in silence for a long moment.

"You played admirably, but it's over for white. The point margin was probably too great to make up by the time you took over."

Sakura nodded, arms crossed over her front. "I thought so. Since you're obviously not going to fall for my ploy, I have no choice but to resign."

"Thank you for the game, Sakura-san. I wonder if things would have gone differently, had I been playing you from the beginning."

Sakura's eyebrows lifted. "Is that your way of asking for a rematch, Itachi-san?"

"If you like."

Sakura's eyes narrowed. "You're on," she replied, competitive nature getting the better of her once again. *Now that I know his playing style, this should be interesting.*

Itachi leaned back in his chair, considering her. He looked like he was on the verge of saying something, but he remained silent. Sakura cleared the board, her face growing hot under his scrutiny.

"What?" she finally asked.

"Your research...is not related to board games." It wasn't a question.

"Er — no," Sakura admitted with an embarrassed laugh. "You've caught me procrastinating, actually."

"I see. It's not going well," he inferred.

Sakura let out a depressing little chuckle. "Ah, no. I've kind of hit a dead end, experimentally speaking."

"Surely that shouldn't be a problem for a medical genius like yourself," he said coolly, echoing her own words from what seemed like a million years ago. Sakura realized for the first time how rude they really sounded.

"Ouch. I guess I kind of deserve that. No wonder you beat me up."

"No, I was wrong," he said, eyes downcast. "I apologize."

"It's okay. It was probably my fault. I wasn't taking your training seriously," Sakura said, surprised to find she meant it. She noted that he had not brought up the elephant in the room, however.

*Heeey, can we get an apology for the whole traumatic Tsukuyomi-genjutsu-torture debacle?*

But given this was the first time they'd had a genuine conversation, Sakura was disinclined to be the one to ruin the moment. Itachi must not have been thinking along the same lines, because he pushed his chair back and stood.
"Do you have any interest in continuing your training?" he asked without quite meeting her gaze.

"That depends on whether it involves any more torture," Sakura returned evenly.

Itachi actually flinched. The tiny movement was the biggest reaction she had seen from him yet. He
opened his mouth —

"Please don't," Sakura cut him off. So far as she was concerned, there was no viable explanation for
something like that. "I would, however, consider accepting your apology."

Itachi stared at her as if she had two heads.

"No, really. Give it a try," she added dryly.

He exhaled. "I can't ask for forgiveness. I regret that choice more than I can explain. I'm a man of
many regrets, actually, Sakura-san." His low tone was thick with meaning, but Sakura couldn't
decipher it. She was sure she wasn't intended to.

"I will try to forgive you."

"You shouldn't. I didn't ask you to."

"Please don't tell me what to do, Itachi-san. My forgiveness is mine to give to who I want. And I've
never gained back something lost just by holding a grudge," she added, thinking of Kaoru the miko
and the Iwa ANBU she slaughtered in the name of revenge for Sora and Haji. Both of whom were
still quite dead.

Itachi looked at her with some emotion she hadn't seen on him before. He lifted a white stone
between two purple-painted fingernails and placed it on a star point in the corner of the board.

"If you would still like to learn genjutsu, you can find me on the practice field at dusk tonight." He
turned to go.

"Always the flair for the dramatic," Sakura observed, brow arched. "Or do you just like sunrises and
sunsets, Itachi-san?"

His hand stilled on the door handle. "It is easiest to fool the mind during the twilight hours, making
dusk and dawn convenient for genjutsu," he answered. "But it's also possible I enjoy sunsets just the
same as anyone else."

Sakura's eyes widened.

He inclined his head towards her. "Sakura-san." He turned the handle and left as silently as he had
come.

Sakura gazed at the lone white go stone on the empty board, lost in thought.

Dinner was a pretty uneventful affair. Itachi joined the conversation occasionally. He was naturally a
quiet person, but now he did more than only respond when questioned directly. He even made a
comment or two that could've been taken as a dry joke, if Sakura didn't know better. And perhaps
she didn't know better. She was once again surprised by how easily the others accepted Itachi's
change of behavior, as though it was nothing unexpected for them. Sakura began to feel like she was
missing something.

Sakura herself was almost as reticent as Itachi, suffering through Kisame's cooking without
complaint. At one point Deidara — in a fit of enthusiasm over the latest masterpiece he was describing — blew up his bowl, flinging chunks of potato everywhere. Sakura had plenty to complain about then. She'd have to wash her hair for the second time that day.

After dinner, she helped Itachi do the dishes before heading down the hall to shower quickly. She dressed in her workout clothes, left her hair down to dry, and made her way downstairs to the backyard just as the sun was setting.

Itachi was standing on the porch with his back to her, as usual. She realized he was watching the sunset when he did that. He wore his usual mesh undershirt and black pants. She hadn't seen his cloak in some time.

"Good evening, Sakura-san."

"Er, hello." She shifted.

He turned to look at her. "Your hair is quite long."

"Ah, thank you?" She laughed awkwardly, not knowing what to make of that.

Itachi's brow twitched. "I meant it's bound to get in the way. You should probably cut it."

"Oh," Sakura said, embarrassed. "I can't, actually. I leave it long as a memorial to some friends who died."

Itachi's piercing gaze was unreadable. He considered her for a long moment. "I'm sure it will be sufficient if you simply restrain it, then." He reached into his pocket and tossed something small at her.

Sakura caught it and opened her fist. It was a black hair tie. "So the notorious Uchiha Itachi carries extra hair ties everywhere on his person?" She smirked despite herself, reaching back to wrestle her pink locks into a ponytail. "I'm curious as to whether you have any colors besides black. Purple, maybe?"

"It's good to be prepared," he dodged her question smoothly. She wondered what the look in his eye meant. He strode out to the center of the training field, Sakura following. "I'd like to warm up with taijutsu — if you'd agree to abstain from enhancing your strength with chakra. And promise not to sneak in any ninjutsu this time."

There's no way that was joke. Itachi doesn't kid. Sakura shook her head, perplexed. "I promise."

They began. Itachi was even faster than Sakura remembered. He flowed around her, effortlessly dodging her blows without ever laying a finger on her. Sakura continued to pour more power and speed into her attacks to no avail. She couldn't touch him. She had worked up a light sweat when Itachi backflipped out of range and held up a hand.

"I think that's enough for now. Please have a seat, and focus your chakra."

Sakura sat down cross-legged as Itachi did the same opposite her. "Focus my chakra on what?"

"Nothing. Just focus on it. Feel it. Close your eyes, if it helps."

Sakura shut her eyes. She listened to the faint thrumming of energy in her blood, felt her life force flow through her chakra highways. She just sat for a moment, concentrating on her breathing and circulation.
"Now then," Itachi said after a moment of silence. "Genjutsu is a Yin release technique. Unlike the bright physical energy of Yang release, Yin release is dark. It is based on the spiritual energy that governs the imagination. You must direct your chakra flow into my cerebral nervous system to control my five senses. If you overlook one, the illusion will be incomplete. The key to genjutsu is attention to detail."

"Should I make any seals?" Sakura asked, eyes still closed. Without her sight, she was even more aware of the rich, understated timbre of Itachi's voice.

"No need. You won't be able to do much on your first try, maybe control one sense. I just want you to get a feel for another person's mind. I will leave my defenses down for you."

Sakura concentrated. She knew what it felt like to have another person in her mind, both from genjutsu and the Yamanakas' Shintenshin, but she'd never felt the mind of another before. She couldn't sense anything.

"I can't find you," she ground out after about twenty minutes of frustration. She heard the rustle of fabric as Itachi moved. Suddenly, she felt cool fingers wrap around her wrist. He placed her palm against his temple. Sakura marveled at how soft his hair was, like a girl's. Not like Sasuke's at all.

"Try it now. The direct contact should help. It is similar to sensing another's chakra, but more abstract."

Sakura hummed in concentration, radiating her chakra out from her hand. She felt a fluttering sensation. It was so subtle she almost missed it, but this kind of intangible feedback wasn't from her physical senses. It reminded her of dense green forests, and winter. It was the flavor of Itachi's mind. Hesitantly, she slipped her chakra into it.

She felt things twice, similarly to the way a person with double vision sees. She was aware of her body with all its normal touch, sound and scent feedback. But in addition she felt another sense of touch. She felt the cool air on her broad chest through the mesh of her shirt. She felt something warm and soft touching her head. She realized with a start that it was her own hand.

"Try not to get distracted by sensation," Itachi said, almost breaking Sakura's concentration. She could feel the vibration of his vocal chords in her own throat. "You don't want to sense what I sense, you want to dictate what I sense."

Sakura frowned. She'd have to get creative for this. Since she was picking up on his sense of touch more easily than the other senses, she decided to concentrate on that one. She imagined the feeling of rain on her skin: wet, cold, hitting her in tiny pinpricks. She directed her chakra into Itachi's brain, carrying that message.

She felt a plop on her arm. Then more, as the cold droplets splattered her skin and clothes. It was odd without sound, but it was still rain. She felt her long arm reach up and touch the softness at her forehead, delicately removing the warmth. Sakura's hand returned to her lap as the mental connection broke. She opened her eyes.

"You did well," Itachi said. The skin around his eyes and mouth was relaxed.

"Thank you," she said. The world seemed oddly one dimensional without the extra sense of touch.

"I'd like you to gradually add more senses until you can control all five, then work on making your illusions convincing. It will take a great amount of practice, but you're a genjutsu type. You will manage eventually."
Sakura sat back on her haunches in thought. "I didn't realize it would feel so..."

"Empathetic?"

"Yeah. I wasn't expecting to feel what you feel."

"That's how it is in the beginning. Eventually you'll be able to tune out unwanted sensation, which is vital. Genjutsu is rarely used to inflict pleasurable sensations on an enemy. While learning, however, you must also experience whatever you choose to inflict."

Sakura thought about this. "Do different minds...taste differently?"

Itachi gave her a knowing look. "That is an interesting way to describe it, but yes. Some are...unpleasant."

"Yours wasn't," Sakura said without thinking. Itachi's eyebrows lifted imperceptibly.

"I expect that's enough for tonight." He shuffled his legs around in preparation to stand.

Sakura caught his wrist. "Wait," she said. "I'd like to try again." Itachi glanced down at her hand. She withdrew it hastily as though burned.

He studied her for a moment. "As you wish," he agreed, settling back down. "This time, try to control a different sense. Without physical contact."

Sakura nodded, sitting back. She closed her eyes and opened her mind. Her chakra sniffed at the air, searching for the flavor of Itachi's mind again. She found it a little easier this time, now that she was able to recognize it for what it was. She sank her chakra into it, like a body slipping underwater.

Water. Water is what she smelled, clean and refreshing. An earthy scent was layered beneath it, and something floral. It smelled exciting, both familiar and exotic somehow. What was that scent...?

Sakura realized with a jolt that she was smelling herself. Itachi's voice broke through her reverie.

"Remember, try not to be distracted by sensation."

Sakura nodded and concentrated. She tuned out the aroma and instead imagined the scent of cookies baking. Chocolate chip cookies, to be precise. The mouthwatering smell of the dough as it browned, wafting through her mother's kitchen; the rich scent of the chocolate softening in the oven. It was a warm, nostalgic smell, reminding her of home.

"Mmm," Itachi hummed as Sakura dropped the illusion and opened her eyes.

The sound was innocent enough, but it made Sakura squirm. She exhaled and climbed to her feet unsteadily. She had used up a surprising amount of chakra on such simple illusions.

"Okay, now I think I'm done for tonight."

Itachi inclined his head to her. "It will take time and effort to learn, but most of it is simply practice. If we train you every day with the same intensity as you've been practicing earth jutsu, you'll improve sooner than you expect."

They made their way towards the house together. Itachi held the door open for her. Sakura slipped past his body with as wide a berth as possible given the narrow space. She exhaled to clear the fuzziness from her head.
"Goodnight, Sakura-san," Itachi's low voice murmured from behind. She turned her head to offer him a strained smile.

"Goodnight, Itachi-san."

Unmoving, he watched her cross the kitchen. She knew his eyes followed her form as she made her way down the hall to her bedroom.

One thought nagged at Sakura that night as sleep escaped her, but she refused to explore it further.

*What is going on?*

"Where do you think you're going?"

Kisame turned to face the sound of the voice, Akatsuki cloak in hand from where he pulled it off the peg by the door. Sakura was frozen in the hallway on her way out of the kitchen, coffee in one hand, newspaper in the other, piece of burnt toast dangling out of her mouth.

"Out."

She spat out the toast and caught it with her newspaper hand. Kisame wondered if she still planned to eat it after it touched the newsprint like that. If she didn't want it, he'd take it.

"You can't go out. Deidara and Tobi already left for a mission this morning."

"So?" Kisame crossed his arms, smirking.

"If you leave, then only me and Itachi will be here."

"...I fail to see your point." He actually understood her objection perfectly, but he liked to watch her squirm as she thought up an excuse.

"Aren't I supposed to be guarded by two people at all times? You know, to make sure I don't get into trouble?"

"Sure. When you're out and about, and can actually get into trouble. Why? Are you planning to invite ANBU into the base while I'm gone?"

Sakura flushed. "Of course not."

"Gonna contact all the Kages and tell them there's a slumber party at our secret hideout?"

"No," she scowled.

"Shame. If it was a slumber party with the Hokage, I'd be aaaaall over that," Kisame said, making exaggerated round gestures in front of his chest. A muscle twitched in Sakura's face. Kisame laughed. "Don't be jealous. I'd take the Mizukage too, but I'd be sure to leave the Tsuchikage for you. Unless you'd prefer to share mine?" He waggled his eyebrows.

Sakura threw up her hands, almost spilling her coffee. "You're impossible!"

Kisame chuckled. "I'm also leaving. I have important business to attend to in Otafuku Gai."

Sakura narrowed her eyes skeptically. "What business? Akatsuki business?"
"Yes." He wasn't lying, because he was Akatsuki and it was his business. "But further information is for official members only. Hurry up and get in already and next time I'll take you with me." He left out that she would never in a million years go with him, because Otafuku Gai was known for one thing and one thing only: excellent brothels. And Kisame was past due for his bi-annual Forgotten Weekend trip — so called because he never remembered anything about them afterwards, except that they were awesome.

Sakura looked like she still wanted to object, but was out of good reasons. Kisame finally took pity on her.

"You'll be fine, Pinkie. You're both adults. You've been getting along better, I'm sure you can stand to be alone for one day. Tobi and Deidara will be back tomorrow morning at the latest, don't sweat it."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she sniffed. Kisame chuckled at the obvious lie and shrugged his cloak on.

"Alright then. I'm off. And try not to burn the house down while I'm gone."

"If I do, I'll make sure to get your room first!" Sakura called as the front door swung shut. She bit her lip.

It was going to be a long day.
"Where is everyone?"

Sakura's head whipped up from her notebook. Itachi stood in the doorway of the living room, looking at her expectantly. She shifted uncomfortably. The squishy armchair creaked beneath her.

"Er, hello, Itachi-san," she said. "Deidara and Tobi left for a mission earlier this morning, and Kisame just took off too."

Itachi stared at her blankly. Sakura felt her cheeks heat up. "He — ah — didn't mention his important business trip to you?"

The cogs were visibly turning in Itachi's head. "Is this business trip to Otafuku Gai, by chance?"

"That's what he said, yes," Sakura nodded, wondering what the look in his eye meant.

Itachi stared at her blankly. Sakura felt her cheeks heat up. "He — ah — didn't mention his important business trip to you?"

The cogs were visibly turning in Itachi's head. "Is this business trip to Otafuku Gai, by chance?"

"That's what he said, yes," Sakura nodded, wondering what the look in his eye meant.

Itachi's brow twitched. "I see. Thank you for the information, Sakura-san." He turned and left. She went back to her notes with a shrug.

Hours later, Sakura stood, stretching her stiff limbs and cracking her joints. She'd been sitting in one place for too long. Now would be the perfect time to get some exercise, but she seemed to be fresh out of sparring partners. She gathered up her notes off the coffee table just as Itachi entered the living room, book tucked under his arm. He noticed her and moved to take the couch.

"Uh, I'm done with the armchair now. If you want it," Sakura offered, scooting out of the way. Itachi paused briefly before walking over.

"Thank you," he said, sitting. He opened his book and began to read.

Sakura hesitated in the entry to the hallway. Here was a potential sparring partner, sitting right in front of her. She'd trained with him before plenty of times. But somehow, without anyone else around, the idea of just the two of them sparring made her nervous.
Itachi glanced up, eyes questioning. Sakura blushed. She hurried out of the room down the hall.

Sakura was already bored to tears without human contact, though the day had barely begun. She could go down to the lab and try that new experiment, but she had worked on her notes all morning and wanted a change of pace. Exercise would be nice, but she was way too intimidated to ask Itachi. She tried training alone, but that got old quickly. There was really only one thing left to do in a situation like this:

Clean.

Sakura cleaned the whole house from top to bottom. The last time she had cleaned so thoroughly she was at a ryokan in Lightning Country with Haji and Sora, being tortured by an overzealous manager. She smiled at the memory. She swept and scrubbed the floors, washed the windows, dusted the furniture. She pulled everything out of the refrigerator, wiped down all the surfaces, and put everything back — except a block of cheese so fuzzy with mold she was sure it was at least partially sentient.

Sakura went from bathroom to bathroom, attacking dirt like a warrior. The bathroom she shared with Deidara was usually pretty clean (aside from his scattered hair-care products), but Kisame's was a disaster area. There were black hand prints on the wall, and a ball of fur plugged the drain of the tub. Sakura didn't even want to guess how it got there. Tobi and Itachi's bathroom, by contrast, was so spotless that she didn't need to do anything. She noted with amusement that one of them had left the toilet seat up, and entertained herself briefly speculating which one it could be.

She dusted the library, put back missing books, and cleared beer bottles off the balcony. She avoided all the bedrooms but her own — she didn't expect anybody would appreciate her peeking into all their private things, even if it meant they got a clean room in exchange. She didn't run into Itachi the whole time and began to wonder if he stepped out for something.

Eventually there was nothing left to do but her own laundry. She loaded up her clothes, sheets, and towels into a pile and made her way outside with the armful. The laundry shed was the same odd mix of old-fashioned and modern as the rest of the house, with a gas-powered washing machine. Sakura had just swung open the heavy wooden door and managed to lug her bundle in through the narrow opening when she met with resistance. She pushed, but couldn't enter further.

"That's my hip, Sakura-san."

Eyes wide, Sakura got up on tiptoe to peek over top of the heap. Itachi was squashed between her clothes and the wall.

"Sorry!" she squeaked. "I didn't know you were here!" She backed out of the doorway in a hurry. Itachi followed her out, his own wet clothes neatly arranged in a small hamper. He began to hang them up on the line outside to dry. Sakura went back into the laundry shed and started stuffing her things into the too-small washing machine.

"So, it's laundry day for you as well?" she surmised after shoving the last garment in and forcing the lid closed with death threats and willpower (and maybe a little chakra).

Itachi nodded absently. "There is little else to do today." He clipped a clothespin to a pair of pants.

Sakura's eyebrows lifted in surprise. Could Itachi be as bored as she was without the others around? He never spoke to them all that much, but even quiet people got used to the company of others. Maybe he was missing his usual sparring sessions with Kisame? Sakura bit her lip. She opened her
"I'm going out for a short while."

"Oh," Sakura blinked. "Okay."

He turned and walked back into the house. Sakura watched him go with a pensive expression on her face.

Sakura pattered about the lab, feeling restless. After hanging her laundry out to dry, she'd been cooped up in here for the last three hours. The latest experiment had failed to turn up any interesting information, and this one would probably be the same. She told herself sternly that was no reason not to try. A scientist's worst enemy was discouragement. Always keep testing. Even failures give you information.

She added the catalyst to the solution carefully. Just a drop was all she needed...one tiny drop...

It blew up in her face.

Sakura shrieked and ran to the eye wash station next to the sink. She totally deserved this for foregoing eye protection. If Tsunade had seen a misstep like this she would have gotten an earful even worse than her eyeful.

A knock on the door made Sakura start. No one had ever been to her lab before. She wiped her dripping face on her lab coat and tentatively crept to the door. She cracked it open.

She should not have been surprised to see Itachi standing there, but she was. He was the only one home today, who else would it have been?

Itachi took in her singed eyebrows and mussed, wet bangs. "I heard a shout."

"Ah — I'm fine! Minor explosion, no biggie." She blocked his view of the lab with her body, which was silly because there really wasn't anything in there he shouldn't see. He noticed her tense body language, eyes flickering over her shoulder. Sakura closed the door further protectively.

"I appreciate your concern," she managed, moving to shut him out.

"Actually, I came to warn you your laundry is blowing away."

"What!" Sakura burst out, flinging the door open as she rushed to the laundry shed, Itachi following. Sure enough, her clothes had been blown clean off the line and were scattered all over the yard.

"Shit!" she swore, scrambling to collect her undergarments before Itachi could get too familiar with them. To her surprise, he bent to help collect her things. They worked together for a few minutes in silence, gathering items. Eventually Itachi handed her the last of her bras. She flushed as she accepted it, but he acted as though it was nothing more exciting than a pair of overalls.

"Clothespins," he said.

"W-what?" Sakuras stuttered, in the middle of re-hanging a wet pair of socks.

Itachi offered her a box of clothespins. "Clothespins would prevent this."

"I know that," she bit out, embarrassed. But she accepted the box and starting pinning her clothes to the line all the same. "Um, thanks. For helping me."
"You're welcome," Itachi replied coolly. He watched her pin up a few more items. Sakura's face turned red under his gaze.

"Yes?" she finally asked, turning to him.

Itachi blinked. "I picked up a few things from the market for dinner."

"Oh," Sakura said in surprise. "You didn't have to do that. It's my turn to cook tonight."

"I don't mind cooking."

"No, no, that's not fair. It's my turn," Sakura protested, shaking her head. "Thank you for offering, though."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I'll cook."

Itachi inclined his head. "I'll see you at dinner then, Sakura-san." He walked off towards the house.

Sakura stared after him, perplexed. On second thought...maybe he was offering for his own sake? Perhaps it would have been politer to accept...

Grimacing, she trotted off to the kitchen to do her best.

"Eeek!" Sakura squealed, singing her eyebrows for the second time that day as the flames jumped out of the pan at her face. At the rate she was going, she'd be lucky to have any facial hair left by nightfall.

She moved the pan off the gas burner in a hurry, but the fire continued to lick higher. She remembered Kisame's words with irony: "Try not to burn the house down when I'm gone." Forget the trouble she'd be in with Leader-sama for destroying an Akatsuki base in a cooking accident — Sakura knew Kisame would never let her live it down. Not knowing what else to do, she made three seals for a water jutsu.

"Wait," a voice warned from behind. A hand grabbed her wrist to stop the final seal.

Itachi yanked the burning pan from her grip and moved it over to the sink. He grabbed a dry dish towel off the counter and beat the flames with it. The fire spit and died.

"You should never throw water on a grease fire," he intoned, watching the pan smoke.

Sakura paled. "Sorry, Itachi-san. I'm, uh, kind of out of my element here."

He quirked an eyebrow at her like she had said something painfully obvious. Sakura turned red and scuffed a toe on the tile. She eyed the black lump of charcoal in the pan with a frown. "I guess I screwed that up pretty good. Now we don't have anything to eat."

"I have an idea." Before Sakura could say a word, he turned tail and disappeared into the backyard. A moment later he slid open the sliding glass door, carrying an armload of vegetables.

Sakura's eyes widened. "Where'd you get those?"

"The garden." He moved to the sink and turned the water on, beginning to rinse the vegetables. Sakura removed the ruined pan and did her best to scrub it clean as he worked.
"I forgot all about that. Good thinking," she said honestly. Itachi's eyes flitted to her face once before returning to the vegetables.

"Hnn," he replied. They worked together in silence until the pan was returned to some semblance of normalcy and the vegetables were all rinsed off. Itachi pulled a cutting board and knife out from the cabinet under the sink.

"Would you chop them up?"

"Sure," Sakura nodded, accepting the knife and beginning on some zucchini. As a ninja, she was much more confident in her ability to cut food rather than cook it. Itachi took out a fresh wok, and several other supplies. In no time at all, Sakura had diced up the veggies. She watched Itachi put a pot of water on the burner to boil.

"Do you want me to speed it up?" she asked.

"That would be helpful."

She made two seals and the water boiled quickly. Itachi began tossing vegetables into the water, leaving them in for only a few seconds before scooping them out into a bowl of ice water.

"What are you doing?" Sakura asked curiously.

"Blanching the vegetables before a stir-fry will help them maintain their color and flavor," he replied. He turned on the stove and let the wok heat for a moment before adding oil, then garlic and onions. He turned to Sakura.

"Here," he said, handing her a wooden spoon. "Just add the vegetables according to how firm they are. Carrots should go next, while spinach should be last."

"Wait, but —" Sakura protested, before the feeling of a hand on her back silenced her. He nudged her gently to the stove.

"Just stir," he said. "It's easy." He tossed in chopped carrots and celery.

Feeling warm all over — from the stove, no doubt — Sakura stuck the spoon into the sizzling wok and poked at it tentatively.

"Like this," Itachi said, stepping behind her and covering her hand with his own. He showed her how to scrape the vegetables along the sides back towards the middle with the spoon so they cooked evenly. Sakura's heart thumped in her chest. Itachi must have sensed her discomfort, because he quickly moved away again. She breathed in a sigh of relief, trying to concentrate on imitating his actions.

"There. You're getting it," he said from the sidelines, observing as she tossed in bell peppers and zucchini.

Sakura offered him a small smile while he seasoned it with soy sauce and ginger before taking the wok off the heat. "That actually smells really good. Looks pretty, too," she said. He was right, the colors really popped. "Where'd you learn to cook, anyway?"

"My mother." The words hung in the air. Sakura coughed uncomfortably.

They served two portions into bowls and made their way to the table. They sat in their usual seats, but it felt awkward to Sakura with all the empty chairs between them. The whole situation felt
awkward to her, really. As they ate in silence, she couldn't help but long for the company of the others to ease the tension. Itachi was not the world's greatest dinner conversationalist. He didn't seem to mind the quiet, but Sakura was not the kind of person who could stand uncomfortable silences. After several painfully long minutes, she cracked.

"So. Nice weather today, huh?"

It was lame. It was so lame, she winced even as she said it. Itachi just raised his eyebrows in what could have been amusement. Maybe he found her desperate attempt at conversation funny.

"Indeed."

Sakura squinted at him in thought. To her, the word sounded almost...entertained. She wasn't sure if she was just getting used to him or if he was letting his guard down more, but lately it seemed she could guess at what he was thinking or feeling a bit more easily. His mask of stoicism made him unreadable most of the time, but occasionally it slipped out of place just enough for Sakura to read between the lines. Almost. If she squinted.

Then again, she could just be making it up.

She picked up a piece of red pepper with her chopsticks and popped it into her mouth, chewing slowly. She swallowed and made another valiant stab at small talk. "So, uh, what were you reading earlier today?"

His chopsticks paused as he lifted a carrot. His eyes flickered to her face before returning to his meal. "A book on fire jutsu theory." He slipped the carrot between his lips and chewed.

Sakura raised a dubious brow. "Do you really need to read something like that?"

Itachi swallowed. "There is always room for improvement."

Sakura thought that sounded very much like his personality. She went back to her food.

"It was not my first choice of reading material, however."

Sakura coughed out a piece of celery. "Oh?" she asked between hacks. Itachi's brow lifted in possible-amusement again.

"I seem to have misplaced the book I'd been reading last week, so I picked up that one instead."

"And what was the first one about?" Sakura asked, genuinely curious.

Itachi hesitated. "It was a mystery novel."

Sakura's jaw dropped. She didn't even bother to hide her shock. "You like mystery novels?"

Itachi nodded curtly. "I enjoy many kinds of books. Mystery novels require one to make inferences and deductions. The good ones are challenging."

Sakura couldn't believe Itachi read mystery novels for pleasure. Hell, she couldn't believe he did anything for pleasure. As soon as the thought was out, however, she wanted to smack herself for how stupid it was. *Itachi is a human being, not a machine. Of course there are activities and things he enjoys. Just because he's too reserved to show his feelings doesn't mean he lacks them entirely.* She cleared her throat. "I like mystery novels too. I just finished a really good one the other day, in fact."
Itachi paused to take a sip of water. "Is that so?"

Sakura nodded, resuming her meal. "Yeah. It was about a detective who goes to clean up this city that's been corrupted by competing gangs. At first you assume he's a good guy because he's the hero. Then he does some underhanded things that make you wonder, but it's hard to tell since he's an unreliable narrator. Finally he ends up a suspect in the crime, but it turns out he was framed. All the bad guys die, but the detective only wins by blackmail, so I'm still not sure if he was really a good guy after all."

Itachi's chopsticks stilled halfway to his mouth. "Sakura-san, did you happen to find this novel on the empty shelf in the library near the go table?"

Sakura blinked in surprise. "Well, yeah. How did you — oh no." She covered her mouth in horror. "I thought that was a weird place for a book to be laying around! I'm so sorry, I totally ruined the ending!"

Itachi's lips quirked, but he didn't smile. Which was a good thing, because Sakura was certain she would've fallen out of her chair if he had. "It's fine."

Sakura apologized repeatedly (to her, spoilers were a mortal sin, deserving of nothing less than tarring, feathering, and public humiliation), but Itachi just brushed her off, humor written in his eyes. Or at least that's what Sakura thought that glint meant. She was pretty sure it wasn't anger, at least.

They finished dinner and did the dishes together. Itachi politely thanked her for helping him cook and clean up afterwards before turning to go. Just as he reached the doorway to the hall, Sakura finally plucked up the courage to ask him what she'd wanted to ask him all day.

"Um, Itachi-san?"

He paused, turning to look at her with inquiring eyes. She shifted.

"Would you...do you want to spar with me a little?"

His eyebrows lifted. "That might be a good idea. I haven't gotten much exercise today."

Sakura exhaled in relief. "Yeah, exactly. Me neither."

Wordlessly, he turned and headed out into the darkness of the training yard. Sakura followed. He stopped in the middle of the yard and turned to look at her. "What would you like to practice?" he asked.

"Taijutsu would be the best workout, I suppose."

Itachi nodded. "That sounds fine."

They began. They sparred for a few minutes, until Sakura had worked up a light sweat. Itachi, as usual, was so fast she couldn't touch him. He just dodged, never laying a finger on her. Eventually Sakura back flipped away and straightened. Seeing her stop, he paused. "What's wrong?"

"Itachi-san, maybe...do you think you could slow down a little? If I could keep up, I'd have a chance to see your technique, and you'd have a chance to attack. I could use some practice defending, and I'm sure you'd rather have a less boring workout than just dodging..."

Itachi inclined his head in thought. "That sounds fine."
Sakura sucked in a breath, nodding. She set her jaw and charged.

Itachi adjusted to her level expertly, slowing just enough to where he had to block her hits instead of dodge them. He threw out a few experimental kicks of his own. He didn't strike hard, but he was very fast. Sakura had to put forth all her concentration to avoid his attacks. She breathed heavily as they traded blows in an intricate dance, sweat running down her back from the warm summer night.

Her fist shot out to strike at his solar plexus, but he caught it in his own. She jabbed her free hand towards the crook of his elbow, intent on breaking his hold. He merely curled his fingers around her other fist as well. They stood deadlocked for half a second, sizing each other up. Itachi raised a brow that seemed to ask: "Now what, Sakura-san?"

Her right leg whizzed past his ear. He had predicted the kick, but then again, Sakura had expected him to. Her real attack came immediately after, before he had time to regroup.

She headbutted him.

Itachi, however, was fast enough to dodge even this unconventional attack. He twisted to the side as her head shot past his abdomen. He managed to hook his elbow around her neck in a headlock without releasing her hands. Swearing, Sakura struggled against him, but even without chakra his fingers were like vices.

"That was a good try, Sakura-san," he said, voice barely showing any strain. "Do you concede?"

"Hell no," she growled, pushing off the ground to launch him backward. She knew it was a stupid stunt, and indeed got rewarded for her daring with a split lip when her face — still trapped beneath his arm — broke their fall. But it also broke his hold around her neck momentarily. She wrenched her head free and swung her captive fists across his body, trying to twist his arms aside while pinning him with her weight. He merely followed her momentum, allowing her to pull. His unexpected lack of resistance caused her to overdo it; he kept rolling until she was the one pinned beneath him. Fortunately, Sakura had tucked up her knees the second she felt herself losing control of the situation. With a grunt, she pushed her feet into his hard stomach, catapulting him into the air. He flipped, landing lightly on his toes behind her. Sakura scrambled to a standing position, panting. Itachi's shoulders rose and fell with his breathing, a light flush on his skin from the activity. His eyes were bright as he stared her down, unblinking.

He moved. Sakura wouldn't have seen it, if not for the blades of grass that stirred in the sudden vacuum where his body had been. She instinctively arched backward, nearly bending in half as his fist sailed over her head. She brought one leg up to clock him under the chin, but he caught her ankle. He twirled her around like a dance partner, face down.

She ate dirt. Her body hit the ground hard, his warm weight settling atop her back. He gripped each of her wrists in his strong hands, pinning her body with his own.

"Do you concede?" he asked again. His breath stirred the hair on the back of her neck, and Sakura was suddenly painfully aware of the closeness of their position. Her heart thudded in her chest, and she could feel his beat against her rib cage. She froze, afraid to even move or speak. Above her, Itachi stilled. She heard him swallow. For one second, the tension hung in the air like the world was holding its breath.

CLANG CLANG CLANG

An alarm rang out across the field, shattering the moment. Itachi's weight disappeared above her.
"There's an intruder on the property. Follow me." He vanished around the side of the house.

Sakura scrambled to her feet, adrenaline pumping. From what, she wasn't sure. She sprinted after him, thoughts racing a mile a minute.

*What the fuck was that, body?!* she asked herself incredulously. *Okay, fine, he's kind of attractive, but there's no need to react like that! I mean, he's just a man. You like men. You'd be a liar if you said you never got a little titillated when Kakashi-sensei pins you during practice, and he's just your sensei. Biology doesn't mean anything. But you can't react like that with HIM, for god's sake! No matter how much he looks like Sasuke!*

But a tiny voice in the back of her head reminded her helpfully that, trapped face down on her belly, she couldn't actually see what he looked like.

Sakura groaned and skidded around the vegetable garden. Itachi stood in front of the house, watching a figure in the distance. Sakura joined him, quashing the flutter of anxiety in her stomach. They had more pressing matters to deal with right now. She peered through the dark night, lit only by a sliver of crescent moon.

It was a female figure, a young girl probably no older than fourteen or fifteen. She clutched a scroll in one hand — probably a Chunin on a simple message-delivery mission. She wandered back and forth in front of the house, squinting at a paper in the dark and looking lost, not in the least bit aware of the Akatsuki base hidden under genjutsu a mere fifty feet from her path (not that her intentions would matter to the Akatsuki — Sakura was pretty sure they had a 'kill first, ask questions later' kind of policy). She had short reddish hair pulled into gravity-defying pigtails. Distinctly recognizable pigtails, actually. Sakura's blood ran cold.

Konohamaru's teammate Moegi was intruding on Akatsuki territory.

Itachi was not one to miss Sakura's sharp intake of breath. "You know her."

Sakura didn't answer, but she didn't have to. The look of transfixed horror on her face gave her away. Itachi's Sharingan flashed blood red in the moonlight as he leveled his gaze at the innocent girl. Realization crashed over Sakura like a wave.

*Oh my god. He's going to kill her. He's going to kill her, and if you stop him, your cover is blown. Forget your own life. With you dead, the lives of virtually everyone in Konoha are forfeit.*

Sakura faced an impossible choice: the life of the village against the life of one ninja. The answer was as obvious as it was sickening. She closed her eyes, fists clenched so tightly at her sides that her nails drew blood. She waited, suspended in time. She heard Itachi's sleeve rustle as he lifted his arm to make a seal.

Her iron resolve crumbled to dust.

"DON'T!" she shouted, eyes flying open as her hand shot out to catch his wrist. But it was too late. The small figure of Moegi crumpled in the distance, and Sakura lost her head.

"NO!" she screamed, hurtling through the grass towards the girl's unmoving body. She couldn't breathe. It was ruined, everything was ruined, she had given herself away and Moegi was dead regardless and any second now Itachi's kunai would find the back of her skull and everyone in Konoha was doomed —

Sakura froze. Moegi lay folded in the dirt, limp, chest still rising and falling with breath. Delayed tears trickled down Sakura's unmoving face as she stared in disbelief. She heard Itachi approach from
"Why?" she whispered without turning to look at him, toneless.

There was a great hesitation before he answered. "Killing her would cause more trouble later if the Leaf sent an investigation squad."

Sakura knew it was a lie. Konoha would have no way of knowing where Moegi disappeared along her journey. Message-delivery missions could take weeks sometimes. She could have gotten lost or killed virtually anywhere. The base was safe from discovery by Konoha, investigation team or not.

"You didn't want me to kill her."

Sakura's heart stopped beating. Her actions just now were treasonous to Akatsuki. She chose to protect the girl with the Leaf forehead protector instead of Akatsuki's interests. If Itachi claimed to know where her loyalties were before, now he could be certain. She had demonstrated it in full. She couldn't respond. Would he kill her? Sakura tried to swallow but could not remember how. She shook, waiting.

Itachi paused for a moment that felt like an eternity. Then he turned away to approach Moegi. Sakura was stunned. He wasn't going to make her explain herself? That action in itself was borderline treasonous to Akatsuki as well. Where did his loyalty lie? Why had he really spared Moegi?

Itachi's loyalty did not belong solely to Akatsuki either, it seemed. He had his own agenda, and now she knew it for certain. And he knew she knew it. Why wasn't she dead?

"I'm going to relocate her to another area. Go back to the base." His low voice broke through Sakura's turbulent thoughts, startling her. He picked up Moegi bridal-style. "Sakura-san. This incident never happened."

Sakura could only nod her head mutely.

Itachi's Sharingan gave her one last lingering look before he vanished into a murder of crows, scattering black feathers in the grass. Gooseflesh prickled Sakura's arms.

There was definitely more to Itachi than meets the eye.

Who is the man behind the mask...?

Back at the base, Sakura was in the kitchen making a sandwich mechanically. She was still somewhat numb. On autopilot, her fingers spread mayo on the bread when the front door creaked open. Her breath caught.

"We're hoooomee!" Tobi's cheerful voice rang through the foyer. Sakura sagged in relief as the masked man appeared in the kitchen, a ball of exuberance. "We finished early, it was an easy mission!"

Sakura managed a smile for him. "That's great, Tobi."

"Sakura-san! You should come see the scar Deidara-senpai got from some chuunin. If you don't heal it senpai will have to look at it in the mirror every day and he'll probably be really embarrassed —"

"TOBI! You better not be saying anything unnecessary in there, yeah!" a voice barked from the living room.
Sakura's smile became a little less forced.

Sakura and Itachi feigned normalcy well. In a few days' time, they stopped having to fake it. With the other two around, any lingering tension between them was defused pretty quickly. They tentatively continued to train and spar together. Their everyday interactions remained polite, but perhaps less distant than before. Maybe it was because they knew each other a little better, or maybe it was because of the fact that they were now keeping secrets for one another. Either way, by the time Kisame returned from his 'important business trip,' Sakura had done her best to put the incident out of her mind, as per their unspoken agreement. She had more pressing matters to deal with — such as healing some red lesions on Kisame's back that looked suspiciously like whip marks. And some wrist burns than could only be from shackles. He claimed to have no memory of the injuries.

One fall morning a few weeks later, Sakura joined Kisame in the kitchen for breakfast.

"You know, actually being friends with Itachi-san wasn't part of our original agreement, right?" Kisame crunched into his cereal deliberately.

Sakura's brow twitched in annoyance as she drained her mug of coffee. "What are you yammering about, fishbreath? We're not friends." She rinsed her empty mug in the sink and slid the glass door open. Kisame dumped his bowl and followed her outside.

"Is that so? It's just that a while ago, you and Itachi-san kind of hated each other, but now you train together a lot. And you play go. And you talk sometimes. I just thought it was...interesting." She could feel his sharky grin at her back.

Sakura marched over to the practice dummy in the training field and started warming up her legs with a series of kicks. "Isn't that what you wanted? Is there a point you're trying to make, or do you just want to annoy me?" She leapt up and landed a roundhouse kick to the dummy's face.

Kisame hurled five kunai backwards into five bulls-eyes without looking. He studied her face instead. "Maybe both. Is it working?"

"Nope," she lied, changing course mid-kick to aim at his head. He blocked her foot with his forearm.

"Touchy, touchy! Wanna play, girlie?" he sneered, cracking his knuckles.

They sparred for a few hours or so, taijutsu and water jutsu only. By the time they finished, Sakura was bruised, sweaty and drenched, but feeling better. She sat back on the edge of the porch and exhaled contentedly. "We should spar together more often."

Kisame rolled his eyes. "You're insatiable. What do you want, six times a week?"

"Seven would be nice."

He guffawed. "Greedy little thing."

Sakura shot him a charming grin. Kisame gazed at the grassy horizon in the distance. "Well, you're gonna have to hold your horses. Leader-sama assigned another mission to Itachi-san and me. It's in Otogakure, so we'll be gone for a few days."

*Hidden Sound Village? That's where Orochimaru's lab was based!...I want to go with you.*

Kisame's eyebrows shot up so fast Sakura feared they'd jump off his face. "Oh really?"
Sakura blushed. "It's not what you're thinking. I need to get to Oto to research something."

"Oh? And what exactly were you worried I was thinking?"

"Er — nothing," Sakura lied, backpedaling. "I'm aware you don't think much at all, in fact."

Kisame smirked at her. "It's a two-man mission, but I will speak to Leader-sama about it. Since
you're dying to go so badly and all."

Sakura's cheeks brightened. "I would appreciate that," she said stiffly. Kisame laughed and climbed
to his feet.

"I'll let you know later tonight, *Sa-ku-ra.*" He closed the sliding glass door on his grin.

Sakura spent the rest of the day poring over her notes in her lab. A trip to Otogakure was exactly
what she needed to get out of this very extended research rut. After what Kisame had told her about
the mark on his neck a few weeks ago, coupled with the information she found on the ouroboros in a
library Orochimaru once had access to, Sakura no longer doubted the snake-nin had something to do
with the virus.

*The only problem is, he's dead.*

Dead men don't do research. It was entirely possible that Orochimaru created the virus some time
ago, but it obviously wasn't he who implemented it in Konoha over two years earlier. Moreover, the
notable differences Sakura observed between the marks left on Konoha nin and the one Orochimaru
left on Kisame led her to believe that the virus had been intentionally *developed.* Someone made it
better, stronger, helped it evolve the specific set of symptoms she had seen in Konoha. But did
Orochimaru progress that far while he was alive, leaving someone else to set it loose on the village
long after his death? Or was someone acting independently? But who could have taken up the snake-
nin's experiment? An assistant, or someone completely different? And why would they target
Konoha?

Sakura's head spun, but she could do nothing other than speculate. Only the Village Hidden by
Sound could hold answers. If she found evidence of Orochimaru's original research (maybe even the
research itself!), or at least clues that it had been taken, she would be able to piece together what
happened so much more easily.

Sakura rubbed the back of her tense neck and closed her notebook. Sitting here any longer would get
her nowhere. She packed up her things, hung up her lab coat and went to dinner.

"Urgh, I am *so hungry,*" Sakura moaned, diving into her plate of vegetable curry before Tobi had
even set it down. He pulled his hand away in a hurry.

"Sakura-san! Tobi's arm is not food!"

Sakura laughed around a mouthful of eggplant. "Sorry, I've been studying my notes so hard today I
worked up a huge appetite."

"Let the girl eat," Kisame interjected. "She needs her strength for all the traveling she'll be doing
tomorrow."

Sakura knocked her water into Deidara's lap.
"Oh come on!" he swore, standing up. He stormed out of the kitchen to go change pants.

"Leader-sama said I could go with you?" she asked in shock. It was almost too good to be true.


"You might have mentioned this to me before, Kisame," Itachi remarked coldly.

"Sorry, Itachi-san. Must have slipped my mind," the shark-nin replied innocently.

Sakura was a bit dismayed by Itachi's reaction. What's his problem? He doesn't want you to go with him? She tried not to let her feelings show as she turned to Kisame. "Why don't I need two babysitters this time?"

"For one thing, Leader-sama trusts you more by now. But that's a moot point, because Itachi-san alone is a sufficient replacement for both Deidara and me. You're sure as shit not escaping if he's trying to catch you."

"Tobi is glad Deidara-senpai was not here to hear that..." Tobi muttered delicately under his breath.

Sakura mentally pumped her fist in victory. What luck! This was working out exactly in her favor. Well, almost exactly, she thought with a surreptitious glance at Itachi. The only indication of his displeasure was a kind of tightness around his eyes.

The rest of dinner was uneventful. Sakura joined Itachi at the sink to do dishes afterward as usual.

"Please meet me in the foyer at dawn tomorrow," he instructed. He didn't look at her.

"Itachi-san...is something wrong? You don't mind my going with you, right?"

"Of course not," he replied smoothly. There should have been tension in his grip on the dish if he was lying, but with someone like Itachi, who could tell?

Sakura fidgeted and put away another plate.

Later that night, Sakura packed about a week's worth of clothes (to be on the safe side), sealed copies of her medical notes in a scroll, and packed a few small pieces of lab equipment (including a spare viral sample or two) into her bag. You know, just in case.

She went to bed early, but she tossed and turned, unable to sleep. She was too excited. Just think — in a day or two you might finally get some answers to questions that have been plaguing you for years. And all you have to do is convince Itachi you need to make a pit stop at Orochimaru's lab.

Sakura frowned up at the ceiling through the darkness. That might be easier said than done.

Chapter End Notes

The mystery novel Sakura spoiled for Itachi is based on a real book, "Red Harvest." It's a hardboiled detective novel written by Dashiell Hammett in 1929 that remains popular.
to this day. It inspired a lot of movies, including Kurosawa's "Yojimbo," and Sergio Leone's "A Fistful of Dollars." It fit well with some of the tropes in this fic so I included it, which was fun for me because I do recommend it heartily. :D
"So, what kind of mission is this? Why are we going to Oto?" Sakura asked, trying to ease the tense silence.

Itachi was quiet for so long she feared he wouldn't bother to answer. She was just contemplating opening her mouth to say something she might regret when he spoke up.

"Kirigakure has enlisted us to retrieve a forbidden jutsu scroll from the remains of Orochimaru's compound."

Orochimaru's compound? Seriously? Looks like you won't have to persuade Itachi to stop by the lab after all. Then again, that's not so surprising. What the hell else is in Otogakure besides that snake bastard's compound?

Sakura lept over a boulder, black cloak billowing out behind her. They had been running together since dawn, but Itachi hadn't said much to her all day. Sakura was doing her best not to feel hurt by his sudden regression to chilliness, but it was hard. Particularly since it occurred the second he heard they'd be doing a mission together. But Sakura didn't know why.

Honestly, he must be the most frustrating man you've ever met, she thought, sneaking a glance at his handsome, distant features. You could give yourself a brain hemorrhage trying to read that closed book of a human being.

Itachi's eyes met hers. She looked away, embarrassed at having been caught staring...again. It was becoming a bad ongoing joke at this point.

"Night will fall soon. I'd like to stop at the town up ahead."

Sakura's eyebrows lifted. "We're not camping?"

Itachi stared ahead, waiting a long moment to answer. "I thought you would be more comfortable at an inn."

"Uh — it's fine, Itachi-san. I'm a shinobi. I've been roughing it since I was twelve," she replied dubiously.
"I was referring to your personal space. I assume you'd find it uncomfortable to sleep and change in such close proximity to a male."

Sakura was bewildered. "I've lived in close quarters with men while on missions for years. I've pretty much seen it all."

He gave her a look. Sakura belatedly realized the innuendo in her words. "You know what I mean," she tacked on with an eyeroll, blushing.

Itachi hesitated. "...every situation is different. I'd like to stop at an inn tonight," he reiterated with finality. Sakura shrugged and followed him past the village borders.

They arrived at an unfortunate time. There was some kind of festival going on all week, and every hotel was fully booked. They were turned away from inn after inn until they finally resorted to trying the most luxurious Western-style hotel in town.

"Excuse me, what is the price for two rooms for tonight?" Itachi asked the elegantly-dressed receptionist.

*Two rooms? Didn't Itachi and Kisame share one when I met them back in Kiri? I assumed that was standard policy...*

"250,000 ryou each, sir," the young lady replied. Itachi's mouth tightened. Sakura balked.

"Itachi-san, you cannot seriously be considering blowing all of our budget — plus a sizable chunk of our reward — for the sake of one night's privacy," she said flatly.

Itachi ignored her. "How many beds are in one room?"

"We have one with two double beds available, and one with a single king-sized bed."

Sakura couldn't understand how this was even a debate. "Separate beds are fine," she insisted.

"We can provide a complimentary privacy screen if you so desire," the receptionist offered delicately.

Itachi hesitated again. "I would appreciate that," he answered stiffly. "Two double beds, please."

The receptionist handed them two sets of keys with a deep bow. "Second floor, down the hallway on your right. Thank you for choosing Yamatoya, please enjoy the festival!"

Sakura couldn't believe the lengths to which Itachi was almost willing to go to avoid sharing a room with her. So she wouldn't have to look at his back, she lead the way up the ornate stairs to their room in offended silence.

Their suite was lavish and modern, with feather beds, a whirlpool tub and a private balcony. However, it was hardly worth the astronomical price the festival had jacked it up to. Somehow this just made Sakura angrier. They could be sleeping outside for free. She claimed the bed nearest the door and unpacked her essentials in silence, avoiding Itachi's gaze. Her empty belly was probably not helping her mood. "I'm going to go find dinner," she announced, slipping out the door without waiting for a response.

Sakura shuffled her way through the crowded streets until she spotted a noodle stand. The line was long, but after eating her fill of curried soba and knocking back a beer or two, she felt much better.
The festival atmosphere was somewhat infectious; children zigzagged through the forest of legs with balloons in hand, drunken adults laughed and stumbled into people, and everyone generally seemed to be having a good time pigging out on street food. Sakura nursed her beer from her stool and wished Kisame was there with her. Being at a festival by yourself was kind of lonely.

She was beginning to regret blowing off Itachi. Whatever the reasons for his erratic behavior, she was fairly sure he wasn't trying to offend her on purpose. And though his company might not be her first choice right now, she knew from the time they spent alone at the base that he wasn't as terrible to hang out with as she'd thought. They had some things in common, actually. And Sakura had wasted an awful lot of good festivals during her days of isolation after Sora and Haji passed away. Resolving to let it go, Sakura finished her beer and ordered a carton of noodles to-go.

She made her way through the throng of bodies back to her hotel. She knocked once before turning her key in the lock and entering.

Itachi was in the process of pulling his pants up. Sakura caught the briefest glimpse of a naked hip before it disappeared beneath loose black fabric. Her eyes lingered on his bare chest for a moment before she remembered she was supposed to be averting them hastily.

*Good lord — Itachi goes commando? I would have guessed him to be a briefs kind of guy for sure! Extra tight ones...*

"S-sorry! I should have waited for you to answer before barging in," she squeaked, turning red. She definitely didn't sneak another peek when Itachi pulled a clean shirt over his head, gathering his damp hair into its typical loose ponytail. Definitely not.

"It's fine."

Sakura shook her head free of unwanted mental images and placed the carton of hot noodles on the table. "I brought you some supper." She offered a small conciliatory smile.

Itachi blinked. "You didn't have to do that."

"'Thank you,' is the conventional response, but I guess that works too."

Itachi's mouth twitched. "Thank you, Sakura-san." He sat down and picked up his chopsticks.

"Er — I'll just hop in the shower then," Sakura said, grabbing clean clothes from her pack and escaping into the bathroom. She locked the door behind her. The room was damp and filled with steam from its previous occupant; as she washed, Sakura did not think about how Itachi had stood naked in the same spot not five minutes ago. Stupid biology again. Perhaps this was the reason he didn't want to share a room or camp with her? If so, she probably shouldn't have been so quick to get angry about it...he had a point.

By the time she emerged, fully dressed, hair dripping, Itachi had finished his meal. He sat cross-legged on the far bed, a book open in his lap. Sakura was almost reminded of the casual, unguarded state in which she had first found him back in Kirigakure. The red gleam of his Sharingan told her otherwise. Still, having seen him in an unguarded state even once, she knew it was possible for him. She idly wondered what it would take to get a guy like him to open up. Suddenly, a crazy idea hit her. She knew it would never work, but there was no harm in trying...

"Um, Itachi-san?" she began tentatively. He looked up from his book, face blank. "Since we're here for the night anyway, I was wondering if...do you want to go down to check out the festival with me?"
Something akin to surprise flitted across his blank mask.

"It's just that festivals are more fun in groups, and they're definitely more fun than sitting in a hotel room all night," she elaborated, fidgeting.

Itachi tilted his head for a moment in consideration, a far-off look in his eye. Then, to her intense shock, he snapped his book shut. "I suppose that would be fine. I've read this one, anyway." He rose and headed for the door. Sakura accompanied him down the stairs in a state of suspended disbelief.

"What were you re-reading?" she asked curiously as they wandered into the jam-packed street.

"I grabbed the wrong book by mistake from the library before we left. It's one about perennials."

"You read books about gardening?" Sakura couldn't hide the surprise in her voice.

"I tend the vegetable garden back at the base, actually. Tobi helps me sometimes."

Sakura blinked. "Oh. I wondered who took care of that..." she trailed off in thought. The more she actually got him to talk, the more she discovered Itachi was just full of unexpected revelations.

"Maybe you could add some medicinal herbs for me?"

"So long as they're appropriate for the current growing season and soil conditions, it's certainly possible."

Sakura smiled. *He reads, he cooks, he gardens...this guy should've been a housewife instead of an S-class criminal.* She couldn't help but burst into laughter at the mental picture of Itachi in a frilled apron, broom in hand.

Itachi gave her an odd look. "What?"

"Nothing!" she lied, trying to stifle her snickers.

"...you're an unusual girl, Sakura-san."

Sakura glanced at him, surprised he would speak his mind about her like that — even if the comment wasn't exactly complimentary. Maybe she should just stop bothering to be surprised altogether when it comes to him. "...did you just call me weird, Itachi-san?" *How bizarre. He's the oddest person you've ever met and he thinks YOU'RE the weird one.*

"No. I called you unusual."

Sakura studied his face to try to figure out what he meant by that, but his expression revealed nothing. She sighed. Some mysteries would never be solved. She returned her gaze to the milling crowd around them, spotting a sake stall just off to their right. "Do you drink, Itachi-san?" she motioned.

"Not usually," he replied with hesitation.

"Why not?"

"I like to be fully in control of myself."

Sakura certainly believed that. "All the time, though? Don't you ever want to relax?"

"No."
Sakura reeled. "Oh, please!" Itachi blinked at her. She felt her face redden. "I mean, a person can't live like that, no matter who you are. Everybody needs to relax sometimes."

"...I can't afford to relax, Sakura-san."

"Then why'd you come with me to this festival? Surely you're not allergic to a little fun?"

Itachi opened his mouth, then shut it. He looked like he didn't quite know what to say.

"Don't answer that, it was rhetorical," she grumbled. In a fit of boldness, she grabbed his wrist before she could chicken out. A little jolt of excitement shot up her arm at the contact, but she ignored it. She tugged him towards the sake stand. To her surprise, he allowed her to tow him. "Two, please," she told the old man working the counter, passing him a coin. She forcibly handed Itachi a bamboo carafe of cold sake.

For once, Itachi looked unsure of himself. "Sakura-san, I don't think —"

"That's your problem, Itachi. You think too much. Just stop it and drink the sake I bought you, or you'll risk offending me again."

Itachi stared at her.

"Crap! Sorry, I meant 'Itachi-san!' Now who's being offensive?" she laughed awkwardly, secretly mortified.

Sakura's eyes widened when the corner of Itachi's mouth curled upwards in what could only be described as a half-smile. Sakura almost dropped her cup at the sight of the unfamiliar expression. If a mere half-smile from the stoic man was so impressive, she couldn't imagine what a real one would look like.

"It's fine," he said. Tentatively, he sniffed the sake and took a sip.

"Well? How is it?" Sakura asked with bated breath.

"Strong," Itachi answered with the slightest wrinkle in his brow. Sakura laughed and took a sip of her own.

"It's an acquired taste," she said. "You'll get used to it."

They squeezed through the masses together, sipping their drinks (or pretending to, in Itachi's case) and talking. They passed by a band of taiko drummers, a group of dancers clad in elaborate kimono, and street musicians. They saw white-painted geisha here and there in front of teahouses, playing shamisen or entertaining groups of enraptured gentlemen.

"I wonder what this festival is for?" Itachi pondered aloud as they broke away from the throng near the banks of a river to take a breather. That distant look in his eyes again made Sakura wonder if he was remembering something. She tried to imagine him at some of Konoha's festivals as a child. Surely he wasn't quite so introverted then. Children love festivals. Did he smile and play back then like a normal boy? Maybe he even laughed...comparing the child she imagined he once was to the man he grew to be made her sad, somehow. She dropped that line of thinking. She had no way of knowing what Itachi's childhood had been like. Maybe he was born this way.

An attractive, if seriously inebriated, young man stumbled past just then. Sakura tapped his shoulder. "Excuse me, but what is everybody celebrating?"
He looked her up and down, grinning. "The five year anniversary of the introduction of gunpowder to the area, of course! There'll be a show in a few minutes. You wanna come watch with me? Or are you with him?" he slurred, jerking a thumb towards Itachi.

"She is," Itachi responded tersely.

"Oh. Have a g'night then!" He weaved his way back into the crowd.

Sakura raised amused eyebrows at Itachi. "How do you know I didn't want to go with him?"

Itachi blinked. "I'm sorry, Sakura-san, I assumed —"

She chuckled. "I was just kidding. You're so serious, Itachi-san. And you can call me Sakura."

He shifted. "Likewise."

"I dunno. Things might get confusing if I have to call you 'Sakura,' too," she joked.

Itachi almost-smiled again. Sakura liked the look on his face. "You should do that more often."

"What?"

"Smile."

It was immediately replaced by an expression of mild confusion. Sakura regretted saying anything. Suddenly, there was a tremendous explosion and the sky lit up. They tensed automatically, crouching into defensive positions — until they noticed the colors. Sakura laughed, relaxing. Itachi straightened beside her.

"Fireworks," he murmured.

"Deidara's gonna be so jealous," Sakura mused, gazing at the multicolored pinwheels of light in awe. They stood side by side on the grassy riverbank, watching the show together in silence for several minutes. Sakura's thoughts kept wandering back to Itachi. "Do you like fireworks, Itachi?"

"Doesn't everyone?" he replied, gaze fixed upward. Sakura watched the different colors play across his skin.

"What do they look like with the Sharingan?" she asked curiously. Itachi's eyes locked onto hers, and Sakura forgot all about the fireworks.

"Amazing."

His tone stirred something in Sakura. Her eyes slid to his mouth, and suddenly all she could see were two pale, pink lips, parted just slightly. His face was so close. For the briefest instant she was overcome with the ludicrous desire to lean in and touch them, to see if they felt as soft as they looked —

Then they were gone. Itachi had turned his back to her. She couldn't see the expression on his face, but she could hear the trepidation in his tone.

"...I can't." He disappeared into the crowd.

Sakura stood alone on the riverbank, frozen in time as fireworks zipped off to their colorful deaths in the black void overhead. Her heart sank to her knees.
"What the hell were you thinking?"

He was right, Sakura thought in agitation as she climbed the steps to the second floor in the posh hotel. We should have gotten separate rooms.

She couldn't believe how stupid she was. Staring at Uchiha Itachi's mouth — Itachi, of all people! Her physical attraction for him was out of control, not even she could deny it any longer. But she'd be a filthy liar if she pretended that was all there was to it. She couldn't blame this one on biology. Now that she was finally getting to know him, she discovered with dismay that he was not at all the person she once thought he was. If anything, he was rather likable — he was gentle and polite, though too formal and stiff. He was intellectual, multitalented, and she was beginning to suspect he had a (very) subtle sense of humor. When he actually lightened up a bit, that rare half-smile of his was so attractive —

— and she was really, really an idiot.

Developing affection for a mass-murderer was the last thing a young, healthy girl should do. There was no way Itachi would be interested in something like a 'relationship' (she cringed inwardly at the word — what exactly did she want from him? Sex? Companionship? Both?). But even if he was theoretically interested in such things (yeah, right!), he obviously wasn't interested in her. But all of that hardly mattered, because the crux of the problem was that Itachi was Akatsuki. An enemy of her village. Where could it possibly go? This was emotional masochism at its best.

If that's true, then you're in major trouble. Because literally ALL of the relationships you have right now are with Akatsuki members.

Sakura put her head in her hand and knocked on the door, wishing she could be anywhere but here. This time, she waited for an answer.

"Come in," Itachi's muffled voice called.

Sakura turned her key and entered. The privacy screen greeted her, separating her half of the room from his in a neat, impenetrable boundary. She heard the turn of a page from somewhere behind the screen.

Wordlessly, Sakura undressed and climbed into bed. She turned off her light and squeezed her eyes shut. She tried to think of anything in the world besides the body of Itachi lying four feet and a million miles away from hers, but it was like struggling to swim upriver.

Sakura felt like she was drowning.

The next morning was one of the most awkward of Sakura's young life. They woke before dawn and dressed on either side of the privacy screen. They left the room without looking at each other and checked out. They ran for most of the day without speaking. Sakura's canteen was empty and she was dying of thirst, but she just couldn't bring herself to talk to him. Eventually they passed a stream and Sakura couldn't take it anymore.

"Itachi."

He started in surprise, but slowed to a stop once he noticed she had paused. He looked at her with guarded eyes.

"I just need a drink," she said, bending to refill her canteen.
Itachi turned away and waited. Sakura stood and took a long gulp. She wiped her mouth with the sleeve of her cloak. "How much further?" she asked, pocketing her water and resuming her run. After enduring the awkwardness of breaking the silence, she might as well find out.

"Another hour or so and we'll be in Oto," he replied without inflection. He touched his temple.

What, so just talking to you gives him migraines now? she thought bitterly, though she suspected it was actually something else. She'd seen that gesture before.

"Is your head okay?" Sakura questioned aloud, trying to keep the irritation out of her voice.

"It's fine."

"I've heard that one before," she remarked dryly, slowing to a halt. "Let me examine it."

Something flashed across Itachi's face that could have been annoyance, but he stopped running. "It's nothing. I'm used to it."

Sakura arched a brow. "If it's a chronic problem you definitely better let me have a look. It could interfere with your ability to perform optimally on the mission. We have no idea what kind of traps we'll find in Orochimaru's compound, so we have to be in peak condition."

An efficient person like Itachi couldn't really argue with that. He let out a restrained breath and sat down cross-legged under a pine tree. Sakura knelt next to him and gathered chakra to her fingertips. She tried not to look at his face as she pressed her palm to his temple. She trickled chakra into his system.

Her lips parted in shock. His optic nerves felt exactly like Kakashi's, only a million times worse. The residual buildup from chronic chakra use was so bad Sakura was amazed that he could see at all. Every nerve ending was shredded and inflamed. She shook her head in wonder. "Itachi, your eyes are so damaged by all rights you should have been blind some time ago. I can heal your headache temporarily for now, but it will always come back if you insist on keeping your Sharingan activated constantly. The only way to fix it permanently is for me to heal your eyes."

Itachi went very still. "You're able to do that?"

Sakura nodded. "Not completely, but if you cooperate with a treatment plan I could probably improve your condition significantly. I would've been able to heal another Sharingan user almost fully, if not for his physical inability to turn it off. I used to clear the residue from his chakra pathways regularly instead."

"You mean Kakashi-san?"

Sakura swallowed and nodded. "Yes." She closed her eyes in concentration and did her best to flush out his optic nerves, pushing her chakra deep into his system. About halfway through her work, she caught a whiff of something...off. It was elsewhere in his body, so it was very faint, though unmistakable. Sickness.

Her eyes snapped open. "What's wrong with you?"

Itachi shut down. "Nothing."

She looked at him squarely. "Why are you lying? I can help you."

"It's none of your concern."
"Itachi —"

He cut her off. "Please, Sakura. We have a mission to complete."

Sakura's mouth was a hard line, but she backed off. She finished clearing his chakra pathways and soothed his inflamed nerves before standing. "That should help for now, but it's only a temporary fix," she warned. "If you continue to abuse your Sharingan, eventually you'll cause irreparable damage. I won't be able to help you then."

Itachi blinked and stood slowly. He looked at the trees around him like he'd never seen a forest before. His eyes landed on her face. His stared. Sakura flushed. "Better?"

"...astounding." Itachi appeared to be memorizing the color of her hair. Sakura cleared her throat.

"We should go."

Nodding, Itachi followed her south.

Orochimaru's central base was hidden deep underground. They located its entrance: a hole beneath a tree with two markings on it, a snake and a snake's skull. They descended a very long set of stairs that reminded Sakura unnervingly of the shrine in Lava Country.

Everything was dark and damp. The place was as labyrinthine as the last of the snake-nin's hideouts Sakura had broken into, but the walls were crumbling to ruin. It had clearly been abandoned for some time, but that didn't make it safe. Itachi broke off a root growing through a dilapidated wall and lit the end of it with a katon. They made their way down the hall, wary of boobytraps.

"Do we have any idea where the scroll is?" Sakura asked, stepping gingerly over what might have been a body, once. It certainly smelled bad enough.

"The mission brief indicated it should be in Orochimaru's main office."

"Where's that?"

"I don't know."

They spent the next few hours combing through the place, kicking in rusty metal doors, checking cellars, climbing stairs that led to yet more corridors. On more than one occasion they followed a passage to literally nowhere, greeted by the sight of a blank wall.

"What mad archaeologist built this place?" Sakura asked in annoyance.

"It's probably designed to confuse intruders," Itachi pointed out.

"Well, it's more effective at irritating them," she mumbled.

They wandered around for another hour or so. Sakura was bewildered that they hadn't run into a single trap or bit of trouble. *Maybe this place has been dead for so long that even the security system's down?*

Sakura used her chakra to smash open a pair of heavy, locked steel doors. Her jaw dropped. Inside she found a massive laboratory, about the size of an entire floor of Konoha's hospital. The equipment was state-of-the-art, though breaking down from disuse.

"If his lab is here, his office is nearby," Itachi deduced, walking out the door. Sakura followed with
painful reluctance. She jogged up to him.

"Itachi, I want to go back and see something —"

She was cut off by the sound of Itachi opening doors engraved with entwined serpents. Orochimaru's office loomed before them, dark and foreboding with a large desk situated in front of an intimidating throne-like chair. Sakura followed Itachi in, tense. She rifled through the desk while Itachi probed the walls with chakra.

"There's a genjutsu along the far wall," he announced. She felt it too. They exchanged a silent look and mentally shattered the illusion, prepared to be attacked.

The wall disappeared to reveal a recessed alcove, but nothing untoward leaped out at them. The stillness and silence were suffocating as they searched through hundreds of scrolls in rows of shelves that spanned from floor to ceiling. Sakura found some truly gruesome specimens, but not the forbidden scroll on genetically modifying humans into amphibians that Mist was after.

Finally, after what felt like a small eternity to the anxious Sakura, Itachi pulled a particularly thick one from the wall.

"This is it," he said, examining it.

"Thank god." Sakura exhaled in relief. They exited the office without incident. Sakura cleared her throat as they walked down the hall.

"Itachi. There's something I need to see before we go," she said as firmly as possible.

He gave her an inscrutable look. "What?"

"Just let me pop into the lab real quick and —"

"Alone?"

Sakura huffed. "Fine, come with me if you must, but I really have to look at something..." she trailed off, ducking into the lab. She made a beeline for the large filing cabinet at the back of the room, rifling through its alphabetical index until she found a section entitled 'Pathogens and Contagions.' The corresponding drawer was unlocked and looked empty, but Sakura knew better. She dispelled the genjutsu.

"What are you looking for, Sakura? We shouldn't be lingering after a mission like this."

"It's just some medical research Orochimaru was doing that I'm interested in," she explained absently, pulling a thick file from the top of the stack with Konoha's leaf insignia on the front. She flipped through it.

"Pertaining to what?" Itachi asked, peering over her shoulder.

Now it was Sakura's turn to be secretive. "Nothing, just an unusual virus," she brushed the inquiry off. Her eyes lit up in excitement as she read. *This is it! This is about the ouroboros!*

Suddenly, they could hear the electric humming of a machine. The lights flicked on overhead, blinding them. Sakura stuffed the file into her coat, assuming a defensive posture alongside Itachi. An alarm screeched as the broken doors to the lab slammed shut. They ran towards the exit. Sakura peeled open the metal doors just in time to have to duck a hail of kunai. She sensed heat at her back and glanced over her shoulder to see a raging purple inferno swallowing the lab behind them.
"What did you take?" Itachi demanded.

"Later!" she shouted, summoning a wave to put out the fire. These were no normal flames, however; the water seemed only to add fuel to them. They moved terrifying fast, engulfing the area in seconds. Itachi grabbed her wrist and dragged her through the doorway down the hall.

"Why was the Leaf symbol on that folder? Is something happening in Konoha?" he yelled as they raced down the hall, pursued by the unnatural purple fire.

Sakura didn't have time to wonder why he cared. "Now is not really the time to be having this discussion, Itachi!" she cried shrilly, launching water bombs behind her. The flames just swallowed them and loomed higher.

"You're making it worse," he warned as they hurtled around a corner.

"Well, I'm open to suggestions!"

Itachi grabbed her hand and curled her fist into the fabric of his cloak. "Keep me away from walls, please," he requested, spinning around to run backwards without even slowing down. His red irises bled into the deadly pinwheels of his Mangekyou Sharingan. Black flames appeared, consuming the purple ones — along with everything else they contacted.

"Why are you using Amaterasu when we're still inside!?" Sakura hissed.

"I'm open to suggestions," Itachi returned dryly, blood trickling from his eye. The purple flames disappeared beneath Amaterasu, but now they had to contend with the unstoppable black hellfire. It burned much slower, giving them some time, but Sakura was disinclined to linger. She ducked around a random corner.

"I have no freaking clue where the hell the exit —"

She was stopped dead in her tracks by the sight of the biggest snake she'd ever seen. Its coiled black and purple body barely fit into the stadium-sized room. Before she even understood what was happening, a fang twice as long as her whole body was descending on her.

A rib cage of solid black smoke encircled her, deflecting the deadly jaws. A thin red line ran from Itachi's other eye down his white cheek. His body was tensed in pain. "Manda," he said, glaring up at the snake.

"Itachi-san," the snake hissed. "Long time no see." It thrashed its tail once, destroying half the compound. "You seem rather low on chakra. Are you sure using Susanou was wise?"

Sakura didn't know how Itachi and this behemoth knew each other, but she didn't want to stick around and find out. Poison, obviously, was useless. The snake's colossal body was too big for her to begin to damage physically, super strength or not. It was even too large to use her blood-boiling or swelling jutsu on; she just didn't have the chakra to alter that amount of fluid. She'd have to try a crapshoot to buy time for Itachi to recover. She made one seal.

"Iwa bunshin no jutsu!"

Sakura spit out a hunk of rock, which quickly formed into her mirror image. Her doppelganger darted left while she went right, hoping to distract it. "Who the hell gave you permission to be so ugly?" her clone jeered at the monster while Sakura made seals.

"Oh?" the serpent laughed in wicked amusement; a rumble shook the compound. "Your woman
talks, Itachi-san. I wouldn't let her do that, if I were you."

It struck like lightning; Sakura was astounded that such bulk could move so fast. It snapped up her rock clone in its massive jaws and swallowed her whole. Sakura had a weird moment of dissociation as she watched herself get eaten by a giant snake, but she refused to let it distract her from the task at hand. She reached out for the snake's mind with her chakra.

It was disgusting. The flavor made her sick, like congealed blood, but Sakura pressed her chakra into its primitive cerebral neural system anyway. It felt different from a human mind; the sense of smell was inconceivably powerful, with taste and touch vying for a close second. The other senses were negligible. This was fortunate for Sakura, who still couldn't control more than one or two senses at a time. She was unfortunately familiar with the smell of corpses in her line of work; she multiplied her memory of it times a thousand, assaulting the huge serpent's sensitive nostrils.

Manda thrashed; Sakura could hear the compound collapsing around them, but she was too busy fighting the backlash of the genjutsu to worry about it; some of the unbearable stench of death was leaking through to her own senses. She concentrated harder and imagined great redwood-sized steel beams bursting through the purple scales, impaling the endless body against the rock floor like a grotesque insect pinned to a display. The snake screamed. Sakura gasped in pain and fell to her knees as she felt echoes of the illusion throughout her own body. She could do no more.

"Finish it, Itachi!" she yelled in a strained voice. Itachi winced as his Mangekyou began to swirl...

Suddenly, the serpent hissed with laughter. The walls shook as great chunks of stone and steel rained down alarmingly fast. "Foolish child," Manda spat. "You think your genjutsu can stop me? I am King of the Snake Summons!" The creature opened jaws the size of a house and struck.

Itachi threw himself into her. They rolled together, but one of Manda's huge fangs impaled Itachi's leg, pinning him. He didn't cry out, but fresh blood poured from his strained eyes as he focused on the enormous mouth.

Amaterasu's black flames burst forth, consuming the serpent's muzzle. It screamed in earnest, thrashing wildly, turning the surrounding stone to rubble in seconds. Gums dissolved in the fire, it reared its head back, leaving Itachi pinned to the ground by an enormous tooth. The black flames licked down the fang towards his leg. He swayed dangerously, blinking blood out of his eyes. Sakura lurched to her feet and yanked the fang free of his thigh, tossing it as far away as possible. Meanwhile, Manda's whole head was now consumed by black fire, eating the snake alive. It shrieked and rolled, coming perilously close to crushing them both. Sakura lifted Itachi to his feet. Impossibly, he stood, face white and taut with pain. A normal person wouldn't have been able to stand, let alone move, yet Itachi managed to follow her down the corridor back the way they came, trailing blood.

They ran into a sea of Amaterasu's fire. It had spread unchecked, consuming the entire hall before them. They were trapped on both sides, the compound coming down around them. Sakura grabbed Itachi's hand and pushed chakra to her feet, dragging them both up the wall towards the high ceiling of the corridor. Once upside-down, she made six seals and slammed her palm into the stone.

The ceiling cracked in two. The halves parted just enough for the two ninja to squeeze through. They dashed up the rock walls of the chasm and burst out into the light of day together. Even far above the chaos, the ground shook. Sakura pressed her palms to the earth and closed the gap behind them. She sat back and panted as the quaking subsided. She turned to Itachi.

His mangled leg had stained the grass a deep crimson. The fang had definitely hit his femoral artery.
His face was pale and wan, breath coming in shallow pants, sweat dampening his hair. Sakura dashed over in alarm.

"Fucking hell, you're poisoned and bleeding out," she swore. She had no idea how powerful Manda's venom might be, but if she didn't attend to the bleeding first he would die within minutes for sure. The scarlet pool was already spreading uncontrollably beneath him.

Sakura unzipped his cloak and examined his leg. An enormous hole gaped open on his thigh. She summoned chakra to her palms and pressed them into his bloody flesh, applying physical pressure to assist the healing chakra.

The damage was bad, going all the way through his leg. It took much longer than she'd hoped to do the bare minimum. Precious seconds ticked by as she knit his epidermis back together and repaired his artery. She had no time to worry about healing the myriad of other broken veins, nor the hole in his muscles or shattered femur. The skin around his wound was rapidly swelling and turning black. Itachi looked barely conscious. If the poison had already reached his heart, he was done.

Sakura formed a chakra scalpel in her palm and made an incision just above his wound. She didn't have the proper medicinal fluid on hand, and there was hardly any time to make some, so she would have to make do with water. She summoned a sphere of liquid to her side and began pushing the fluid into the incision, carefully separating the toxin from the blood and re-suspending it in the water to flush it out.

Sakura lost track of how long she worked. There was an astonishing amount of poison in Itachi's system — easily enough to kill a boss summon like Katsuyu. The sphere of water turned black with the toxic substance as Sakura extracted it.

By the time she was satisfied that Itachi was in the clear, the sun had long sunk over the horizon. Sakura was completely out of chakra and too exhausted to move, and Itachi had finally drifted off to sleep. She collected a sample of Manda's venom from the sphere in a glass vial before floating the rest of it several feet away and bursting the bubble. The grass touched by the deadly substance smoked and turned brown, dead.

Her own injuries were comparatively minor (thanks to Itachi), which was lucky because she didn't even have enough chakra to finish healing his thigh. She peeled off his blood-soaked cloak and tossed her own somewhat drier one over him. She curled up in the grass and passed out beside him the second her head hit the dirt.
Sakura awoke the next day to the smell of potatoes frying. Something warm and soft covered her, though the surface at her back her was hard and damp. It took her a moment to figure out her Akatsuki cloak blanketed her. Didn’t you give this to…? She reluctantly opened her eyes. A lean figure sat by a fire, stirring a sizzling pan.

"Good afternoon, Sakura,” Itachi greeted, eyes soft and black. She almost mistook him for Sasuke without the Sharingan. She blinked in surprise.

"Afternoon? What time is it?" she yawned, sitting up. The sun was already high in the sky.

"Around one."

"What? Why didn't you wake me? Your leg still needs work." Sakura frowned, crawling out from under the warm cloak.

Itachi offered her a small smile that froze her in her tracks. She was right, a real smile was even more impressive on him. "Thank you for helping me yesterday. There are still a few things I must do before I die."

Sakura shook her head, recovering herself. "Well, I would imagine so,” she quipped, kneeling next to him to examine his thigh. She caught sight of his face. "You're serious?" she asked, aghast.

Itachi nodded. "Usually."

Ninja (especially medic-nin) were no strangers to the concept of their own mortality, but to speak of one's death so casually...it was disconcerting. However, she had more pressing matters to deal with at the moment. "Leg, please," she demanded, holding out a palm. Itachi obediently stretched out his limb. Sakura pressed chakra to the wound for the next hour until he made her stop to eat breakfast. She gobbled it down and was back to work repairing the bone and muscular tissue, healing the tendons and nerves. She knit each vein together again and soothed the inflammation. Once finished, she held his ankle and flexed his leg at the knee experimentally. Itachi’s breath hitched, but he didn't flinch.

"How's it feel?"

"Much better than it did yesterday," he mused, black eyes glinting.
Sakura popped a cold slice of leftover fried potato into her mouth. "I'm glad to see you turned your Sharingan off. I'd get pissed if you undid all the work I did on your eyes already."

"Then I probably shouldn't mention that using Mangekyou thrice in the same hour has already undone it."

Sakura balked. "You're kidding!"

Itachi's stony expression distinctly asked, 'do I look like I'm kidding?'

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "As soon as we get back I want to start a more permanent fix. If we work in sessions and you keep your Sharingan off for a sufficient period every day — not just after you use crazy techniques that make your eyes bleed — I should be able to reverse a significant portion of the damage. Eventually."

Itachi seemed to be at a loss for words.

Sakura's mouth twisted. "Cat got your tongue?"

He looked at her with what could only be gratitude. "Thank you, Sakura."

She blushed. Oh, so THAT'S all it takes to get Itachi to open up a little. You just have to save his life a time or two. Good thing his standards of trust aren't ridiculous or anything.

"Don't thank me yet. We'll have to stop in the next town for reading glasses. I know how much you like books, and the last thing we need is you straining your eyes while I'm trying to heal them."

Itachi blinked.

Sakura couldn't help but grin, knowing she'd pick out the geekiest glasses she could find.

The following day, Sakura and Itachi opened the door to the hideout together. She had been unable to talk him into a pair of bright purple horn-rimmed glasses, unfortunately. He'd opted for understated ones with simple, square black frames instead. She couldn't bring herself to be too disappointed, however, considering the rather elegant way they perched on his straight nose, making him appear even more intellectual. Part of her even considered telling him he should wear them all the time, but that would be unethical...if amusing.

They had forgone sleeping at an inn that night, choosing to camp instead. They enjoyed a quiet evening talking by the fire — without embarrassing incidents for a change. Today, they returned to the base feeling refreshed and lighthearted, though badly in need of showers.

Kisame greeted them as he passed by the foyer. "Well, look who's finally back! What happened, you enjoy each other's company so much you didn't feel like coming home?" he chuckled. He noticed Sakura's blush and stopped. His eyebrows threatened to disappear into his hairline when he picked up on the changed atmosphere between them. "Oookay then." He wandered off down the hall, shaking his head in bewilderment.

Sakura shot Itachi a sheepish grin as she removed her cloak. "Where should I put this?"

"Hold onto it for now. Leader may want you to keep it."

Now it was Sakura's turn to look stunned. Leader-sama may make you official? She had mixed feelings about the idea of becoming Akatsuki. She wasn't sure what to think anymore.
'Would you meet me in an hour on the porch?' he asked.

'Sure,' she said, though she desperately wanted to run to her lab and bury herself in Orochimaru's notes as soon as possible. Itachi disappeared down the hall towards the stairs.

Sakura made her way to her own room. She unpacked her things (being particularly careful with Manda's venom), grabbed a change of clothes, and headed to the bathroom. The warm water had never been more welcome. She took a long shower, got dressed and braided her hair. Squeaky clean, she made it to the porch with five minutes to spare. Itachi was already waiting. His face changed imperceptibly when he saw her.

'Are his expression easier to read without the Sharingan, or are you just finally getting used to them?'

'Hello, Sakura.'

'Hey.' She smiled.

'We should wait a few minutes for the others to join us. We're to use the astral projection jutsu to meet with Leader.'

Sakura bit her lip in apprehension. For what, she didn't know. 'Okay.'

Some time later, Kisame and Tobi filed out, followed by Deidara.

'Let's make this quick, yeah,' Deidara grumbled. 'I've got cooking duty tonight.'

Sakura made a face and copied the long series of seals the others made. She saw the landscape fly by like last time, until without warning she found herself in the same dark cavern perched atop a huge stone fingertip. The shadowy figure of Pain greeted them. 'Today we are here to discuss Sakura.'

Sakura was glad only her silhouette was showing, lest the others see her expression.

'She has behaved loyally in the months since becoming an apprentice. She has assisted our members of her own volition in emergency situations, followed orders without question, completed tasks assigned to her, and offered her medical skills freely and without prompting outside of a battle context.'

Sakura was stunned to realize that everything Pain said was true. But Akatsuki was not the organization she once thought it was. Nothing was black and white, after she got to know its members. Sakura would always be unfailingly loyal to Konoha because it was her home, and where her loved ones were. But over the course of the last few seasons, she'd also developed new friendships here. It seemed unnatural to only care for friends from her birthplace, and not her current ones. But was it really possible to feel loyalty to two parties on opposing sides of a conflict?

Pain broke her musings by directing his next words to her personally. 'Haruno Sakura, based upon the others' reports of improvement in your skills, and in light of your successful mission history, Akatsuki would like to formally extend an invitation to you to join our ranks.'

Sakura could do nothing but blink. 'I — I accept,' she stammered, hardly able to believe her own ears. She would never agree with Akatsuki's ultimate goals, but somewhere inside Inner Sakura was proud. Having her strength acknowledged like this had always been sort of a distant dream of hers. Not every ninja was qualified to be Akatsuki. If they were themselves, no one from Konoha would have believed it of her. Oh, to see Ino's face right now...

'Fucking finally, Pinkie!' Kisame jeered.
"Took you long enough, yeah."

"Hooray, Sakura-san!"

"Well done." Sakura was doubly surprised to hear praise from Konan.

"Er — thanks, guys," she said, smiling despite herself.

Itachi's shadow regarded her in silence. Sakura wished she could see his expression right now.

Pain spoke up. "Please keep the spare cloak. It's yours now. You will wear Kakuzu's green ring on your left middle finger, bearing the character for 'north.' You may adopt his dark red nail color if you wish, or choose another color."

"Red is fine," Sakura said, somewhat unable to believe she was having a serious discussion with the leader of Akatsuki about nail polish.

"Any questions?"

She shook her head. This is totally surreal. "No, Leader-sama."

"Then you're all dismissed. Congratulations." He flitted out of sight. One by one, the others followed, until Sakura was alone with Itachi. She remembered how hard he tried to prevent this day from happening so long ago, but his attitude was different now. Something had changed. Perhaps he finally accepted her?

"Congratulations, Sakura." His voice was soft.

Sakura's smile morphed into a grin. You didn't come here to earn Uchiha Itachi's respect, no. But all the same, actually having it...is really, really nice.

When that little niggling voice in the back of her head asked if there wasn't anything else she wanted from Itachi, Sakura sat on it. That was just greedy, really.

A few hours (and much drunken celebration) later, Sakura finally made it to her lab. She nearly ripped the cover off the file in her eagerness to tackle Orochimaru's notes. It took her two hours, cover to cover. Sakura shut the folder with mixed feelings about what she read. On one hand was disappointment; the notes were purely scientific in nature and said nothing about possible motives for creating the virus, nor what Orochimaru had planned to do with it.

On the other hand, they contained a wealth of information about the virus itself.

It was originally bred from a particularly communicable strain of influenza. Orochimaru had modified its genetics to allow the virus to program host cells to obtain energy from chakra instead of protein. That explained the chromosomal anomaly related to energy production.

There was bad news, as well. The chakra virus was based on a flu strain unheard of in Fire Country. Virtually no one in Konoha had immunity to it — which also explained why well-traveled foreigners like Deidara and Tobi escaped from the village without getting sick. It reproduced at an amazing rate, and could spread easily through the air, food, water, and contact. It caused little physical damage to the host after the initial period of infection ended. Because it didn't kill (or even particularly weaken) its victims, it could probably survive in the human body indefinitely — so long as there was chakra around to feed it.
But the puzzle was not yet complete. The last page cut off mid-sentence. Sakura was sure she was missing out on vital information about the virus' symptoms that could lead to clues about its purpose. The only symptoms she was aware of were the ones she observed in Konoha; victims generally retained their normal personalities, just altered slightly. The increased politeness and relaxation were minor changes, but the truly disturbing one was how everybody had deliberately tried to infect her — gradually escalating their attempts until outright attacking her. Such a specific behavior suggested they were being controlled, but a virus doesn't have the kind of intelligence needed to direct such high-functioning behavior. Sakura could only infer that a person (or group of persons) was controlling the virus, and by extension, its victims. But who, and why? Perhaps whomever removed the last section from Orochimaru's notes? And curiously, how did they manage to smuggle the notes out without setting off the alarm system as Sakura had?

Sakura sighed. She was no nearer to solving certain mysteries, but the acquisition of the notes would still allow her to do one very, very important thing.

It was time to start working on a cure.

Not much about daily life at the base changed after Sakura became official, except that now she was privy to group meetings. She learned that Akatsuki was preparing to capture the five-tails soon. Truth be told, she was rather nervous about how she'd handle the situation when she inevitably got sent on a mission to assist in the capture of a bijuu. There was a dangerously fine line she'd have to walk between appearing to do her job and not actually accomplishing much — she did not look forward to the task. In the meantime, she still trained with the others every day, and worked on improving her genjutsu at night with Itachi. She also spent many long hours by his side, healing his eyes in sessions. They were making good progress. Kisame, predictably, was sure to tease her about her unexpected friendship with the reserved man at every opportunity.

"You and Itachi-san are closer now," he mused, eyes glittering. "Did something happen?"

"Of course not," Sakura replied, trying to blanch vegetables for a stir fry the way Itachi had shown her. She put too many in at once and couldn't get them out fast enough to keep them from getting soggy, unfortunately. "We're not close. What are you talking about?"

"Oh," Kisame hummed. "My mistake. I guess it won't be a problem that he's leaving for four weeks on a solo mission, then."

Sakura dropped the wok with a clatter. Kisame's eyebrows shot up. She went red. "Oil on my hands."

"Of course," Kisame allowed, smirking.

"I'm just worried about his eyes. He gets sessions every few days, four weeks is a long time to —"

"Such a diligent medic." He was barely containing his laughter. Sakura glared, tossing some garlic and onions into the oil.

"Why so long?"

"It's necessary. That's how long reconnaissance for something as big as an attempt to capture a bijuu takes."

Sakura paled. She kept her back to Kisame carefully as she worked so he wouldn't see her expression. However, he knew her far too well by now for that to matter. "He'll be back before you know it. Don't worry about it."
"I'm not worried about anything," Sakura lied, stirring. The wok hissed.

It was a long four weeks.

She was fine for the first week, but midway through the second the restlessness kicked in.

Sakura couldn't get the image of Itachi's face as he left out of her mind. He'd had the Sharingan turned off, and looked at her with those black eyes in a way that seemed as if he saw more than just her face. Though his expression was burned into her mind, she could once again make nothing of it.

She just wished she could stop thinking about it.

Sakura ran into a surprising number of problems trying to occupy herself. She couldn't play go without a partner, nor could she learn new genjutsu. When she tried to read a novel he lent her, she found herself thinking about him instead of the words on the page. She followed Kisame around for days, until he told her to scram ('your clinginess is a buzzkill, Pinkie'). She tried to do the same to Deidara next, but he threatened to turn her lab into art if she didn't let him concentrate on his work. Tobi didn't mind her hanging about, but he spent most of his time carrying out whatever menial tasks Deidara had assigned him. Eventually there was only so much window-washing Sakura could stand.

Her only remaining options were to work on the cure for the virus, and train like a maniac. Both of which she did. Over and over and over.

Sakura told herself her restlessness was due to nerves. Itachi was out there doing something that could only spell bad news for Konoha and the ninja world. And while this was undoubtedly true, it was only part of the story.

She told herself that the medic in her was worried for his safety. But this was Itachi we were talking about, and jinchuuriki or not, it was only a reconnaissance mission. She couldn't even fool herself into buying a reason that dumb.

Somewhere deep down, Sakura knew that her discontent had more to do with the sudden absence of a presence in her life she'd grown used to. Far more used to than she should've been.

And that was really, really scary.

You're attached.

No, I'm not!

Yes, you are. You miss him, you dumbass. Sakura attacked her scalp with the shampoo, not caring if she got it in her eyes. Why the hell do you miss him? How stupid are you? You warned yourself not to get attached after what happened at that festival, and then you went and ignored your own advice!

It just...happened! I got to know him better, and I like spending time with him, and he's actually really interesting, and smart, and —

And totally not attached to you like that.

Sakura shut the water off with a groan. She toweled off with unnecessary force and reached for her clothes, only to realize she'd left them in her room in her distraction. Resisting the urge to bang her forehead into the wall, she wrapped the towel around herself and opened the door. She stepped into
the hallway and promptly stubbed her toe on the door jamb.

"Ow! Dammit!" She hissed, letting go of her towel to grab the abused digit and hopping in pain. She felt her towel slip off her backside and whirled around to catch it, still holding her foot in one hand and swearing. Itachi stood frozen at the end of the hall. She snatched up her towel to cover herself quickly, blushing so hard she was sure even her toes were red.

_Are you fucking kidding me!? AGAIN!?_

If Sakura didn't know it was impossible, she would've said his eyes lingered on her legs for a fraction of a second longer than necessary.

"...we really must stop meeting like this, Sakura," he said, gaze carefully fixed on the wall off to her right.

"It's not like I'm doing it on purpose," she protested. Itachi just quirked an eyebrow, eyes still averted. "I'm not! I didn't even know you were back yet!" she insisted, clutching the towel around herself tighter.

"I was just coming to find you, actually. Leader wants me to talk to you about your next mission." He reached up to scratch his nose.

"Oh," Sakura said, blinking. "Well, let me put some clothes on first."

"I think that would be wise," Itachi returned wryly, making her flush again. She zipped off to her room at high speed.

A few minutes later, Sakura emerged fully dressed, having regained some semblance of composure. She found Itachi sitting on the balcony, a book in his lap. He wore his reading glasses. Sakura's heart gave a tiny stutter at the sight. He looked up as she slid the door to the library shut, closing his book and removing the glasses.

"Please, have a seat," he gestured to the chair next to his. Sakura sat down hesitantly.

"Leader-sama has a mission for me?"

"Yes, it's related to the one I just finished, so I was told to brief you. He'll be contacting you later to confirm your understanding. It's your first solo mission as Akatsuki."

Sakura's eyes widened. Normally, that might have been a rather exciting prospect, but a tendril of unease curled in her belly. "It's related to your mission, so...the bijuu?"

Itachi nodded. Her stomach plummeted to somewhere roughly around her knees. "Yes, the five-tails."

"I can't capture it alone!" Sakura squeaked. Itachi looked amused.

"You're not expected to. Your assignment is merely a follow-up to mine. You're to prepare the area for a capture attempt."

"Why couldn't you do that yourself when you were gathering information there?"

Itachi looked at her squarely. "You seem hesitant."

Sakura swallowed. "Not at all. It's a legitimate question. It just seems like a waste of resources to me," she fired back as boldly as she could muster.
He paused. "I could have, but I expect Leader wants to give you the chance to get your feet wet without the burden of too much responsibility too soon."

Sakura fought back a grimace. Oh great. Leader-sama's TESTING you. How are you gonna sabotage this without looking incompetent?

Itachi studied her expression carefully. He seemed to notice her reservation, despite her poker face. "Is that acceptable?"

"Of course. I'll take any mission Leader-sama assigns to me," she returned smoothly. Itachi's eyes didn't waver. Sakura feared she would sweat under his scrutiny.

Itachi removed a scroll from his pocket and handed it to her. "This scroll contains all my intel on the jinchuuriki, Han. Akatsuki no longer has contacts in Iwagakure, so your job is to infiltrate the village ahead of time and assist when the team arrives to dispatch him. You'll be responsible for getting them in undetected and making sure they have whatever is necessary to capture the five-tails with minimal interference from the village. You're to leave tomorrow."

As she accepted the scroll, her hesitation turned to determination. She had to steel herself. She would just have to figure out a way to fail without being obvious about it. How hard could that be? Sakura was a capable kunoichi.

Sakura was a ball of anxiety. Everything was perfect, too perfect. Itachi's intel on the area surrounding the village was flawless, of course. There was no way she could fail to get in with such thorough and detailed information without rousing suspicion. She'd have to improvise once inside.

Sakura gritted her teeth and pulled her white haori tighter around her shoulders, straight black hair blowing in the wind. Pain had left the method of infiltration entirely up to her. Sakura had chosen to stick with what she knew, and she knew miko had an honored place in Iwa from her fateful mission with the traitorous Kaoru over two years ago. Her red hakama was bright against the dull gray rock as she approached the stone spires of Iwagakure for the second time in her life.

"Halt!" A voice called from above, up the steep incline. Two guards in rust red uniform appeared. Sakura stopped obediently. "There are no visitors permitted into the village at this time. Please turn around."

Sakura put on her best grief-stricken face. "I can't accept that! I just found out my sister was killed two years ago in the service of your Kage, but no one can tell me why or how! I demand an explanation!"

Uncertainty flickered across the face of one of the guards. "I'm sorry to hear that, miko-san, but we don't know anything about that. We can't let you in."

Sakura concentrated on how she felt after Kaoru and the Tsuchikage betrayed her teammates. She remembered her pain and held onto it. Angry tears welled in her eyes. "My sister is dead, sir! She was sent south on a mission under your Kage's orders with three missing-nin and was never seen again. I want to know what happened!"

"I'm sorry, but we have our orders, miko-san, but we don't know anything about that. We can't let you in."

Sakura concentrated on how she felt after Kaoru and the Tsuchikage betrayed her teammates. She remembered her pain and held onto it. Angry tears welled in her eyes. "My sister is dead, sir! She was sent south on a mission under your Kage's orders with three missing-nin and was never seen again. I want to know what happened!"

"I'm sorry, but we have our orders, miko-san. If you come back when we're accepting visitors again —"

"I'm not leaving until I know why my sister is dead!"

"Let her in." The small figure of a girl appeared behind the guards. She stared at Sakura shrewdly.
"But Kurotsuchi-sama, your grandfather said —"

"I know, but no one is supposed to know about that mission at all. Let her in before she makes a fuss." The two guards looked at each other with a shrug, but stepped aside. Sakura breezed past them, chin held high.

"Thank you," she said stiffly.

Kurotsuchi blocked her path. "What else have you heard about that mission?"

"Nothing, obviously, which is why I'm here," Sakura growled. "I need to see the Tsuchikage immediately."

Kurotsuchi raised a dark eyebrow, but allowed her to pass. Together they approached the village outskirts. "You'll have to make an appointment."

"And how long will that take?"

"At least three weeks."

Good. My teammates will be here in two. She didn't know what she would do if she ever had to see that old man's face again. Aloud she grumbled, "That's ridiculous."

Kurotsuchi shrugged. "You'll have to take it up with Grandfather. In three weeks' time, of course." She turned to go as they reached the first stone buildings.

"Wait, what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" Sakura asked.

Kurotsuchi shrugged. "There are a few inns near the market. Try one of those. Just remember, there'll be trouble if you go blabbing about things you're not supposed to know. I'm telling you for your own good, miko-san. Wait to talk about it with Grandfather, okay?"

Sakura nodded. Kurotsuchi disappeared down an alley.

Sakura spent the next week familiarizing herself with the village. It reminded her somewhat of an anthill — full of tunnels and stone passages instead of streets. Having been built directly into the mountainside, much of it was more vertical than Sakura was used to. She found herself climbing steps and ladders more often than simply walking from point a to point b. She also discovered the reason Iwa was so cautious about visitors; they were preparing for an upcoming festival, and had apparently relocated some defense research into somewhat conspicuous areas. More than once, she was surprised to stumble upon what could only be experimental jutsu testing being conducted in publicly accessible buildings. In Konoha, such things were always performed in special research and development bunkers under the archive library. She took mental notes, but didn't learn anything too interesting or sensitive, unfortunately.

Besides memorizing the layout of the village, Sakura spent long hours inconspicuously tailing the five-tails jinchuuriki, a very large man named Han. He was covered from head to toe in red armor that the occasional hiss of steam issued from. Only his eyes were visible through the steel plating — he made a rather intimidating picture indeed. She found Itachi's intel regarding him to be perfect, of course, from the average number of missions he took a week down to the free time he spent in the village park feeding the sparrows.

That activity surprised Sakura, actually. The huge man kept to himself, and was thoroughly ignored by the villagers. He lived alone and didn't seem to have any friends. He went about his business in
silence, and if Sakura hadn't seen his gentle interaction with the birds she would've assumed he was a
gruff and threatening person. But if there was one thing her experience had taught her, it was that
people were rarely what they seemed to be. She found herself sympathizing with the man. Sakura
remembered only too well what it was like to be truly alone in the world. She was unexpectedly
grateful that she had people to return to after this mission...assuming she was able to navigate the
situation in a way that saved both their skins. Which was looking like an increasingly unlikely dream.

According to Itachi's notes, Han left the village on the new moon of every month for several days.
Her teammates' arrival was coordinated to coincide with his next departure so they could nab him on
the way out. Sakura had to figure out a way to prevent his capture before they arrived in a week, but
she still had no idea how to do that. She needed more information.

The first time Sakura approached Han, he had just returned from a mission and was feeding the
sparrows from his usual stone bench. The "park" was nothing more than a little alcove tucked away
in the mountainside with a few forcibly planted trees, but it was about as green as Iwa got. Sakura sat
down on another bench nearby and tossed the sparrows some corn. "Hello."

Han looked at her with mistrust, silent. Sakura tried again.

"They're awfully friendly for wild birds, aren't they?" she said, noting how close the sparrows came
to Han. He could reach out and touch one easily, if he wanted to.

"...they trust me," he replied. His voice was surprisingly soft, not at all the deep boom one would've
expected of a man even bulkier than Kisame.

Sakura offered him a smile. "They're wiser than the villagers then."

Han stared at her in suspicion. "What do you mean?"

"I'm a miko, jinchuuriki-san. I know what you are."

He looked uncomfortable. "Then why are you speaking to me?"

Sakura tossed another handful of kernels to the birds before replying. "I once had a friend like you.
His village didn't much appreciate his condition, either. It took them years to realize he wasn't the
scary monster they thought he was. He worked very hard for their respect."

Han blinked at her in surprise. She couldn't see his expression through his mask, but she felt a shift in
his demeanor. "Who are you, may I ask?"

"My name is Kaori. I'm a miko from the small, neutral Country of Flowers. I traveled here upon
learning of the death of my sister. She was on a special mission from the Tsuchikage, and I want to
know what happened."

Han was quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry to hear about your sister, miko-san. I'm sure she died
performing a noble service for our country."

Sakura's smile became strained at his naivety, but she hid it well. Then again, she found it hard to
believe that anyone so shunned could still have much faith in his village...besides Naruto. So maybe
he was just being polite. "Please, call me Kaori. Do you have any family, jinchuuriki-san?"

"Han' is fine for me, Kaori-san. And no, I don't. Well, except her...but she's not really family," he
tacked on quickly.

Sakura's curiosity was piqued. "Who?"
"There is one person who doesn't care that I'm a jinchuuriki. A girl. But she lives in another village."

"Do you ever see her?"

Han nodded. "Only once a month. Though I think about her all the time between visits."

Sakura put two and two together. She could tell from the look in his eye how much the girl meant to him. A pang of sympathy went through her. "Well, I'm glad you have a friend, Ha-san. If you'd like another, I'll be here for a few weeks."

He looked at her in surprise. His eyes softened. "Thank you, Kaori-san. I would enjoy that."

From then on, Sakura visited with Han every day. She was very careful not to appear with him in public, whenever possible. She didn't want to draw too much attention to herself by hanging around with the village pariah, though she knew her status as an ignorant foreigner lent her some leeway. Mostly they spent time in his tiny one-bedroom house, talking. She learned that Han liked to carve stone sculptures, and that his ninjutsu was uniquely steam-based. She also learned to her misfortune that he was just as terrible a cook as she was. They ordered take-out a lot.

Sakura was in a terrible conundrum. The more she got to know Han, the worse her situation seemed to be. He was such a nice, misunderstood person, she felt even more compelled to somehow save him from his fate. He didn't deserve what Akatsuki was planning for him. She had to rescue him, but how to do it without blowing her cover? As the days passed, Sakura became more and more anxious.

She sat by herself at a ramen shop (it was inferior to Ichiraku, but she could use the comfort food right now), sipping sake and thinking. The sake left a bad taste in her mouth.

She couldn't persuade him to leave the village early for any reason without him becoming suspicious. Nice as he was, if he knew her true identity he would very possibly turn her over to Onoki. Though his village was unkind to him, he could still be loyal.

She couldn't physically incapacitate and hide him away either, though his guard was down enough around her that with the element of surprise, she was fairly certain it was possible. Jinchuuriki may not be well liked, but they were vital weapons to their village, and his disappearance would hardly go unremarked. The last thing she needed was to cause a stir about him being kidnapped when she was there specifically to prevent that kind of thing from happening. Akatsuki no longer had eyes and ears in Iwa, but that didn't mean common knowledge wouldn't get back to them eventually. Especially an event as big or as relevant to their interests as a missing jinchuuriki.

Sakura sighed and put her head in her hands. She could warn him as a last resort, but that would blow her cover completely. If she did that, she'd have to pray he believed her enough to follow her advice. If he didn't, and chose to hand her over to his village instead, Sakura was screwed seven ways from Sunday. Not only would she have to fight her way out of Iwa alone, but that would be it for her Akatsuki membership. She couldn't go back, would be forced to abandon her lab. Konoha would be doomed, and she'd be relegated to a life on the run, never staying in one place too long and sleeping with one eye open, always looking over her shoulder for the familiar black cloaks with red clouds.

The thought pained Sakura in the most personal of ways. To never hear Tobi's cheerful voice, to never laugh at Deidara's outbursts, or drink with Kisame again would be hard enough. Sakura couldn't stand the thought of betraying her friends, of them coming after her with killing intent. It twisted her heart and made her sick to her stomach.
And Itachi...

Yet still, she couldn't simply allow the Akatsuki to kidnap and kill an innocent man. Sakura pushed away the rest of her ramen. There was no room for food in a belly full of fear.

Sakura was balanced on a tightrope suspended high in the sky between two cliffs. No matter which way she leaned, if she fell off, she was dead.
Chapter Fifteen: Hot and Cold

"Did you ever think about leaving? Maybe going to live with your friend?" Sakura asked tentatively, looking up from her book. Han's chisel froze over the lump of stone. He blinked.

"I never really thought about it," he admitted, resuming his work.

"It just seems like the obvious thing to do, given the hostility of the villagers..." Sakura trailed off delicately.

Han's brow furrowed. "I suppose there's really nothing tying me to Iwa, other than the fact that I was born here. But..." he slowed down, chipping a piece off the corner and gazing distractedly past the sculpture-in-progress. "I don't know if she'd want me to do something like that."

Sakura cleared her throat. "Forgive me for my bluntness, Ha-san, but you seem to have feelings for her." It was hard to tell through the armor, but Sakura thought he was blushing. She pressed on. "I have known many shinobi in my time. Their lives are fleeting and difficult. Don't you think life is too short to not seize what you want from it?"

The soft ping of Han's chisel was the only thing breaking the silence for several long moments. "I've never really thought about it that way before, Kaori-san. But I think I agree. I just...I have to think about it further."

She smiled at him over the page. She hoped she did a good job hiding the strain of it. "I'm glad."

Sakura was becoming desperate. The day after tomorrow, her teammates would arrive to kill this man. She had to make up her mind about what to do fast, but she didn't dare push him into anything more specific than the suggestion she just made. She was sorely tempted to tell him to leave early — tomorrow — but if he left for no reason before Itachi's intel indicated he would, Akatsuki would know she tipped him off. Everything would be ruined.

As Sakura bid Han goodnight, her stomach churned in fear for them both.

The next day, Sakura was up before the sun. She hadn't slept a wink last night, turning and tossing and debating. She paced her hotel room in agitation. The same question ran through her head on repeat, the words burned into the backs of her tired eyelids:
Should you warn him?

Would he hand her in? She'd only known him for a week. Their friendship was not nearly solid enough for her to trust him not to give her away. And even if he didn't, could she explain his disappearance to Leader-sama? That thought was immediately met with a derisive snort from Inner Sakura. What a fantasy. Even if she managed to come up with some lame excuse, she couldn't possibly try it out. There was far too much at stake to risk failure, least of all her own life. She would have no choice but to disappear and abandon Akatsuki.

The loss of the cure she'd been working on would be a major blow, but at least she'd be alive to possibly recreate it in another lab in the future, right? Assuming she would even have a future if she defected, and they didn't track her down immediately. Outrunning Akatsuki would be very different from outrunning ANBU. Especially since they knew her so well...

Oh god. You can't just leave them like that. What would they think? That they meant nothing to you the whole time?

What would Itachi think?

Sakura's heart squeezed in her chest. The life of a double agent was an acutely painful one, rife with impossible decisions. Navigating between competing loyalties in a sea of moral uncertainty was more difficult than anyone else could hope to understand. The unfortunate fact was, though Sakura believed (she stopped pretending to 'know' things like this some time ago) what Akatsuki was planning was wrong, she just couldn't blow her cover yet. No matter what. The life of one ninja was never as important as the life of the village, and Konoha's very existence was over if she was discovered. There was no choice. Sakura would have to let things happen as they may. Han's romantic endeavors were all for naught. Tomorrow, he would die.

The guilt swallowed her whole. Sakura ran to the bathroom to lose the breakfast she hadn't eaten.

Feeling like she was moving in a dream, Sakura made her preparations. She had rediscovered the tunnel she, Sora and Haji had been escorted through on her first trip to Iwagakure. She could use it to meet her team outside the village and guide them in easily enough. But surely those were someone else's hands making those seals. It couldn't be her using an earth jutsu to create a small, private exit along the tunnel wall near Han's house...

Sakura finished her task and returned to the surface, numb all over. There was nothing left to do but go back to her room and wait for tomorrow. She couldn't risk seeing his face one last time, for fear of her resolve crumbling. Feeling like she was marching to the gallows of her own execution instead of another's (and maybe, in a way, she was), Sakura set off through the narrow, sloping street, dodging the busy Iwa nin preparing for the upcoming festival.

As though fate couldn't bear to cut her a break, Sakura caught a glimpse of the last person in the world she wanted to see through the crowd. She tried to duck around a corner, but it was too late. His eyes lit with recognition when he spotted her and made his way through the throng, which parted for him as though they didn't want to get too close. Sakura took one look at him and knew.

She couldn't do it.

She was too weak, too emotional; she just couldn't let this innocent man die. She had been completely fooling herself to think she could go through with a plan so cruel, no matter how necessary. She opened her mouth to deliver the warning that would save him and damn herself, but he cut her off.
"Kaori-san, I was just looking for you," Han said with relief. Sakura blinked in surprise.

"What for?" It was then that she noticed the pack slung over his armored shoulder.

"I'm leaving to visit my friend now, and I just wanted to say goodbye."

Sakura froze, mind whirling. "Now? But the new moon isn't until tomorrow..."

Han looked mildly confused. "Oh. I didn't realize I told you when I usually go. Yes, I normally leave then, but no one is allowed out of the village tomorrow because of the festival, so I decided to take off a day early."

Sakura was stunned. Itachi's intel had been wrong. In his flawlessly accurate research, he had somehow overlooked the festival. There was no way she could be expected to stop him now, by herself, surrounded by so many people when he was already on his way out. If she tried to capture him and failed, Akatsuki would have a hell of a time trying again with everyone expecting an attack. Sakura's jaw fell open. Her body sagged like a balloon someone had popped.

She was off the hook.

She must be the luckiest kunoichi alive. Her eyes welled with tears of relief so deep her whole body shook with the feeling.

"Kaori-san? What's wrong?"

Sakura shook her head, fighting down slightly hysterical laughter. "Nothing, Ha-san. I'm just glad you're going. It was wonderful to know you. Good luck romancing your friend."

Han fidgeted. Sakura thought he was blushing again. "Thank you, Kaori-san. It was wonderful to know you too, even if we never meet again. Thank you especially for the advice."

"So you think you'll take it?"

Han nodded. "If she'll have me, I won't be coming back here again," he murmured, too low for the ears around them to hear.

Sakura beamed.

"Kaori-san, if you ever wanted to visit me, she lives in —"

She held up a palm to cut him off. "It's better if I don't know, Ha-san. Trust me. In fact, maybe you shouldn't tell anyone. Then you can disappear, and start a new life where no one knows you're a jinchuuriki."

Han gazed at her in thought for a moment before nodding slowly. "You're very wise, Kaori-san. I'm lucky to have met you."

No, I'M lucky Itachi is capable of mistakes after all. Aloud, Sakura said, "No, thank you, Ha-san. And good luck."

He waved at her as he left. Underneath the red mask, Sakura knew he was smiling.

Much to Deidara and Tobi's surprise, Sakura intercepted them a day early on their way to Iwagakure. Deidara swore when he saw her.
"Oh fuck. What happened, yeah?"

Sakura just shook her head. "He's gone already."

Deidara pinched the bridge of his nose. "Aww shit. We're gonna have to speak with Leader-sama immediately. He'll be unhappy, mm..."

A few minutes later, the three of them were perched on the stone fingertips of the statue that Sakura had recently learned was the empty vessel of the ten-tails, to be revived once all the bijuu were collected. She tried to ignore this uncomfortable fact, straightening under Pain's heavy gaze.

"Explain," he said simply. Rinnengan boring into her. Sakura swallowed and put on a brave face. She had to handle this carefully.

"The intel was bad. The five-tail's vessel usually leaves the village every month on the night of the new moon, but this month he went a day early. I wanted to stop him, but we were surrounded by a crowd — he was already on his way out when I discovered the inaccuracy. I chose not to interfere knowing that if I failed, it would have made any possibility of a second attempt exponentially more difficult."

The words hung in the air, tension thick as the silence. "How was such an oversight made regarding the timing?"

"It wasn't Itachi's fault," Sakura said quickly. "There was a festival planned for this week. If it had been any other month, his intel would have been perfectly accurate. He left before he had any way of knowing about it." That last part was not strictly true — Sakura didn't honestly know if Itachi would have caught wind of the festival during his time there or not. But she thought not, because there's no way Itachi would've been careless enough to overlook such important information if he knew it.

There was a long pause before Pain spoke. Sakura held her breath. "Your judgement was correct." Only extreme force of will kept her body from sagging in relief. "It is better to try later rather than botch an unplanned attempt and tip off Iwa. We will try again next month."

She met Pain's eyes dead-on. Much as she wanted to keep her mouth shut, if she didn't confess what she knew now, there could be consequences later. "I don't know if that's possible, Leader-sama. During my time in Iwa, I learned the reason the container leaves each month is to visit a girl, whom I deduced he is likely romantically involved with. He may or may not return to Iwa again."

Pain's jaw was tight. "Then our plans may be prolonged. Do you know where he went?"

Sakura shook her head in regret. "I apologize. I don't know, Leader-sama," she said truthfully. He studied her for a long moment. When the sincerity in her eyes didn't waver, he seemed to accept her story.

"We must begin searching anew. We will wait to see if he reappears in Iwa. In the meantime we will regroup and focus our efforts on the seven-tails. This was not entirely your fault, but next time I expect more favorable results, Sakura."

Sakura bowed her head. "Of course, Leader-sama."

"Dismissed."

Back in their bodies in Earth Country, Sakura remembered how to breathe and collapsed where she stood. She lay on her back and gazed up at the sky, blinking. She was rather glad to be seeing it again.
"Nervous, much?" Deidara snickered.

"It's okay, Sakura-san! Capturing bijuu is hard. Deidara-senpai and Tobi fail at our missions all the time —"

"Shut up, Tobi, yeah."

Their bickering was music to her ears. Sakura closed her eyes and smiled.

Back at the base, life settled back into normalcy while Pain reworked his plans. After such a close call, Sakura was intensely grateful to be back among Akatsuki. She found herself enjoying their company even more than before she’d left, having been forced to consider what life would be like alone, without them. It was stupid to worry about having people in her life to miss when the reality of not having anyone at all could come true so easily.

"Are you sure that's wise?" Itachi asked.

"Quite," Sakura replied, setting down her black stone firmly.

Itachi did a double-take at the board, a tiny wrinkle in his brow. His Sharingan swirled to life in his black irises.

"I see," he said quietly as he dispelled the illusion. "Your genjutsu was well done, but I believe that's known as 'cheating.'"

Sakura wrinkled her nose. "It's not cheating if you don't get caught."

"But you got caught," Itachi pointed out. "So by your own definition, it was cheating."

"Your bloodline limit is cheating!" Sakura protested. "No genjutsu can get past that thing, no matter how well thought out."

Itachi quirked his lips at her. "Using one's natural gifts to uncover deception is certainly not cheating." He turned his Sharingan off, wincing imperceptibly.

Sakura noticed. "Your eyes still hurt that much? It's been a few days since we last had a healing session. Let's finish the game later." She pushed her chair out and stood, Itachi following suit. She exited the library, hanging a left towards the staircase automatically. To her surprise, Itachi went right.

"My room is closer," he explained, opening the door next to the library and disappearing inside. Sakura peered in.

Itachi's room was very neat. It was minimally decorated, but there was a zen-like elegance to it. The hardwood floor was covered by a thin, dark green rug. A well-stocked bookshelf was attached to the wall above the tidy desk. The window shade was rolled up, and Sakura noticed a potted bamboo plant on the sill. She was surprised to see a decorative fan bearing the Uchiha clan symbol hanging on the wall above the bed. And perched upon a plain, off-white bedspread was Itachi himself.

Sakura hesitated in the doorway, suddenly nervous. Itachi looked so relaxed in his own room, one foot hanging off the bed, back leaning against the headboard. Sakura's eye was drawn to a patch of bare skin peeking out from where his shirt had ridden up.

Itachi tugged the fabric down, eyebrow arching. "I'll be impressed if you can heal me from the
doorway."

Sakura blushed and entered, unsure whether to close the door behind herself. She settled for leaving it open just a crack and approached the bed with caution, reaching for the chair next to the desk automatically.

"You'll probably be more comfortable on the bed. You won't be able to reach me from the chair," Itachi pointed out, something akin to amusement in his tone. Sakura knew he was right, but all her foggy mind could process was the word 'bed.' They usually took over the neutral couch in the living room for healing sessions; something about being in his bedroom felt rather...intimate.

"Er — lay down, please," she instructed.

Itachi's eyes lingered on her face for a fraction of a second. Silently, he pulled up his leg and scooted over, resting his head on the pillow, eyes closed.

Sakura gulped and sat, trying to keep the bed from creaking. She studied Itachi's face, relaxed and expressionless as if he were sleeping. Her eyes roved across the smooth planes of his cheeks, skimmed over his long lashes and soft-looking lips, drinking in the details. Her hand twitched at her side.

One black eye cracked open. "Is there something else you need before you begin?"

"Um, no," Sakura admitted, embarrassed. She hovered over him and gently pressed glowing fingertips to his temples. She couldn't help but notice how warm his skin was. Or how he smelled like pine trees and snow...or what a nice view he'd have of her breasts in this position if his eyes were open. Shaking her head free of distractions, she steeled her nerves and slipped her chakra into his system.

Itachi hummed.

Sakura cut off the flow. "What?"

"Nothing," he murmured, eyes still closed. "That feels nice."

Sakura took a deep breath, trying to slow her pulse. She was afraid Itachi would notice it racing, and she didn't want to scare him away again. She could control herself. She just wished he'd picked a less-distracting place for this...he obviously didn't know how their proximity in the small, enclosed room would affect her. She closed her own eyes and tried to concentrate.

She cleared away the chakra buildup for about an hour, healing his inflamed nerves as she went. She noticed with approval that his eyes were in better condition than they were last week. He must be following her instructions to turn off his Sharingan at least six hours a day, plus sleep. She worked her way unusually deep into his brain, massaging the visual cortex in his occipital lobe. For the first time since their mission to Oto, she felt it again: that faint flavor of illness. Sakura knew she shouldn't pry, but she was worried it could be serious by the way it felt. While confining her chakra to his brain, she shouldn't be able to sense anything from the rest of his body unless it was rather pervasive. Curious, Sakura uncurled a tendril of chakra downwards.

She was immediately overwhelmed by the sense of sickness. It was concentrated in his chest — perhaps his heart, or lungs. Sakura's eyes flew open in shock. Itachi wasn't merely ill.

Itachi was dying.

Sakura pulled her hands back from his temples as though burned. "Itachi — " she choked.
He opened his eyes. One look at her expression and his whole face shut down. "I told you it's none of your concern," he said coldly, sitting up and backing away from her.

Sakura scrambled off the bed. "What the hell does that mean? It concerns everyone in Akatsuki if you're that sick!"

Itachi glared, activating his Sharingan defensively.

"Why haven't you asked me for help? Do you want to die?" she bit out.

Itachi said nothing.

Sakura's eyes widened in realization. His secrecy, his refusal to seek help, his nonchalant attitude towards his own death...everything added up. Her jaw fell open. "You can't be serious! How could you possibly be so selfish?! What about what happens to the rest of us without you?"

"...it won't matter if I die."

She balked. "Yeah, I'm sure Kisame will be fine with that!"

He averted his eyes. "Kisame will survive."

Sakura was furious. "Well, maybe I'm not fine with that!" she shouted.

Itachi stared at her. Sakura resisted the urge to cover her own mouth in horror. She clenched and unclenched her fists instead, recovering herself. "Please, Itachi. I know it looks bad — really bad — but if you let me look at you there might be something I can do — "

"No."

"Why not?" Sakura exploded. "Are you suicidal?"

Itachi glared. "Of course not. There are just certain — events — that need to happen in a certain way."

Sakura was floored. "What the fuck are you planning that involves your own demise? What are you hiding, Itachi?"

Itachi's eyes were crimson chips of ice. "Do not pry into a person's secrets, Sakura, unless you wish to reveal your own. What did you steal from Orochimaru's lab? How does it involve Konoha? What's the real reason you joined Akatsuki?"

Sakura backed up a step automatically. "...I can't answer that."

"Then neither can I."

She fumed in silence. Itachi stared hard at her, mouth a tight line. "Please, Sakura. Don't tell anyone."

Sakura managed a very stiff nod. She inhaled a ragged breath, spun on her heel and left.

Sakura ran from the base, craters forming where her boots slammed into the ground. When she got tired of running she smacked her palm to the earth and created a small mountain, just so she could have the pleasure of putting her fist through it.
What the hell is he thinking?! He makes no sense!

She hurled a boulder against the rock.

What could possibly make him want to let himself die?

Sakura was missing a big piece of the puzzle that was Uchiha Itachi, and she had a feeling it had to do with his mysterious past. She was aware he massacred his own clan — supposedly for no reason — but the Itachi she knew wasn't like that. She couldn't imagine him doing something so unspeakably awful just because. Not for the first time, she wondered how he really felt about his family.

Why did he let Sasuke live? Why is he so interested in what I'm up to regarding Konoha? Why spare Moegi? And why keep the crest of the family he slaughtered on his wall, where he'll see it every day?

Something wasn't adding up. Sakura put her hands together and blew her mountain to smithereens. She sat down hard in the grass, panting. She wiped sweat and dirt from her face. I just want to see the man behind the mask. I want him to let me in.

That obnoxious voice of reason reminded her that she wasn't letting him in, either.

I want to, but I can't! It's for Konoha's protection! He's an enemy of my village, there's no way I can trust him with such sensitive information!

But Sakura had her doubts. For some reason, she found it hard to believe that the first thing Itachi would do with the information is attack Konoha. He'd been aware that she had a secret agenda in joining Akatsuki since the beginning, but he had yet to rat her out to Leader-sama. Quite the opposite, actually — in an act that was certainly treasonous, he was covering for her. But why did he even want to know her secrets in the first place?

Sakura put her head in her hands. She just didn't know what to do.

Time passed. Autumn turned to winter. Sakura went on missions with various partners (except Itachi, whom she was mysteriously never assigned to work with). She earned money for Akatsuki and attended the occasional group meeting, during which she learned they finally located the seven-tails in Takigakure, the Village Hidden by Waterfalls. At least the five-tails was nowhere to be found (for now), for which Sakura was eternally grateful. Every time she was dispatched to track down information on any bijuu, she walked that careful tightrope between succeeding and failing her assignment. With practice, and no small amount of luck, she managed to squeak by without either accomplishing too much or raising suspicions, though often she was forced to be more successful than she'd like. Her position as the newest (and therefore least reliable) member of Akatsuki helped her out tremendously in this regard, so she was sure no one noticed.

Except maybe Itachi.

Sakura spent long days locked in her lab, running experiments and tests. With the help of Orochimaru's notes, she was on the cusp of finding a cure. She even began testing possibilities out on an unhappy Kisame. Whenever possible, she practiced genjutsu and trained with the others like a woman possessed. She grew confident in her improved abilities, nearly able to hold her own against each of them. Tobi continued teaching her to cook, but she never really got better at that. The go board was abandoned.

Several times Kisame asked her if she had a falling out with Itachi. She responded with Itachi's favorite lie each time:
"It's fine."

But it wasn't fine at all. Like it or not, Sakura had grown more attached to Itachi than she wanted to admit. The thought of him inching towards death with each passing day without so much as an examination from her kept her up at night.

And she might have missed his company.

"Stop squirming or I'll hit a vein!"

"I don't like needles."

"Just be grateful I don't have to give it to you in your ass."

"I didn't know that was an option. I might prefer that, actually..."

Sakura rolled her eyes and jabbed her syringe none-too-carefully into Kisame's arm. He glared. "You did that on purpose. Is this really going to get rid of my mark? Or do you just like torturing me, Pinkie?"

"Yes." Sakura packed up her injection kit.

"'Yes' to which question?" Kisame's lip curled as he rubbed his abused bicep.

"Both." She left his bedroom, making her way down the hall to her own. Kisame followed, grumbling.

"Well, it had better work this time, 'cause I ain't doing this again. You're a terrible nurse. You've never once offered me a band aid, or even a lollipop."

Sakura rifled through her desk drawer and withdrew a long cylindrical object. "Suck on this," she said, tossing the sealed scroll to Kisame. "Leader-sama wants to meet with us in five. I'm guessing it's a new mission."

"Oh?" Kisame's brows shot up. "It's about time, it's been boring as hell around here with everyone so pissy all the time."

"I'm not pissy," Sakura objected irritably. Kisame looked amused. She glared. "Well, Itachi's pissier." She grabbed her cloak off her bed and shrugged it on, walking out of her room.

Kisame followed her down the hall. "I don't get it. You don't speak to each other anymore, but you're still on a first name basis. I wish you two would just decide if you're gonna kill each other or kiss and make up already."

Sakura's cheeks caught fire. "It's none of your concern." She opened the sliding glass door and stepped out onto the porch.

Kisame closed the door behind them, rolling his eyes. "Now you sound like him. It's weird. If you ask me, I don't think you guys hate each other at all. Actually, I think you two rather like —"

"Alright, enough chit chat about my personal life," she cut him off. He might be right about her feelings, but he was even dumber than he looked if he thought that applied to Itachi as well. "You're worse than my girlfriend Ino. We have business to attend to." She began a long series of complicated seals. Kisame just shook his head, doing the same. A moment later, their shadows joined two more silhouettes. Sakura was dismayed to see Itachi there.
"Kisame. Sakura," Pain said by way of greeting. "I was just discussing your next mission with Itachi. I was originally going to assign it only to you two, but Itachi has been specially requested by our client. I trust that's not a problem." It wasn't a question. His Rinnengan flicked to Itachi.

Itachi's eyes didn't waver in the slightest. "No, Leader."

"Good. We've been requested by Kusagakure to assassinate the leader of Takigakure. Your real mission, however, is to capture the seven-tails. I don't care about their leader, but Kusa has provided a convenient sleeper agent to help you to infiltrate the village, so we don't need reconnaissance this time. You'll find further details in the mission scroll. You are to leave as soon as possible. Understood?"

Sakura felt the too-familiar weight of anxiety in her belly that appeared every time she was confronted with a bijuu-related mission. She was used to the queasiness by now.

"Yes, Leader-sama," chorused Kisame and Sakura. Itachi nodded.

"Dismissed."

Back on the porch, Sakura pinched the bridge of her nose. Kisame snorted. "I don't see what you look so fussed about, Pinkie. I'm the one stuck in the middle between you two."

Sakura sighed. It was almost too much to ask, to have to deal with both Itachi and the stress of deliberately failing a mission at once. "Let's go pack. I'm sure Itachi will want to leave at daybreak."

Snow fell like dust outside as the three weary Akatsuki checked into an inn for the night. It had been a long day of tense travel. They were attacked by an excessively large band of Suna ANBU along the way — a battle which nobody enjoyed, particularly when a moody Sakura failed to offer to heal anyone afterwards. Kisame had to limp the rest of the way in order to preserve his machismo. The painfully awkward silence was by far the worst part of the journey, however. Itachi spoke to no one, and Sakura barely had two words even for Kisame. The ringing quiet was nearly unbearable for the shark-nin.

"Two rooms, please," Itachi told the receptionist. Sakura immediately knew how the room assignments would be divided up. She had no complaints. The old man behind the desk handed them three sets of keys.

She was in her room alone, unpacking her things and trying not to worry about how she'd worm her way out of this one when she heard a shout from next door.

"Motherfucker!"

Sakura knocked and waited for permission to enter. She opened the door and stuck her head inside. "What happened?"

Kisame was rifling through his pack in a frenzy, tossing objects onto the tatami floor. Itachi looked on stone-faced from the sidelines.

"I can't find our fucking identification papers," Kisame growled, turning the whole pack upside down and dumping its contents. He examined them before standing up and dragging a hand through his short hair. "They're not here. Fuck. I must've left them back at the base. We need them to prove who we are when we meet the contact. She's expecting two people, not three."

Nobody said anything. Kisame looked from Sakura to Itachi, then back again.
"Screw this. First thing tomorrow I'm going back home to get our shit, and you two can cold shoulder the fuck out of each other all you want by yourselves. I'll catch up with you outside Taki later. Unless anybody wants to break the silent treatment with any objections?"

The answering silence was predictably thick. Finally, Sakura opened her mouth. "Kisame — "

He cut her off. "Don't you even try pleading with me not to abandon you. I only help people who I know will help me out," he said pointedly, wiggling his injured leg for emphasis.

Sakura was somewhat cowed. "You didn't ask — "

"I don't want to hear it. I'm gonna go find some booze — alone. Goodnight, you bunch of babies."

With a dismissive wave, Kisame left. Sakura backed out the door without a word and retreated to her own room.

She fell asleep filled with shame, but not quite enough to make her want to forgive Itachi.

The next morning, Sakura managed to apologize to Kisame and heal his leg before seeing him off. She even healed the headache from his hangover as a freebie. Kisame accepted her apology with a grunt and set off they way they'd come without a backward glance.

Sakura and Itachi traveled in silence for the entire next day and a half. Sakura's incessant worry about the seven-tails was the only thing that could drown out the awkwardness of traveling with him. At least with Kisame gone, she'd only have one other person who could manage to turn the mission into a success despite her best attempts at sabotage. Unless Kisame showed up sooner than Sakura could make them fail (assuming she could manage that at all. Too often, she couldn't). Her head whirled with half-finished notions, but it was impossible to make a plan until they got there and she could examine the situation in detail.

On the third day, the small, snow-covered gates of Takigakure came into view through the trees. Sakura henged into her old Academy teacher Iruka, Itachi into a blonde-haired man she'd never seen before. As they approached the gates, a hooded figure stepped out from behind a tree.

"You're late," spoke a girl's voice.

Sakura raised a brow in surprise. This must be the sleeper agent. "How did you know it was us?"

The girl adjusted her glasses. "I'm a sensor type. I was expecting two henged people to show up here around this time, and here you are."

"Don't you need to see the identification papers you sent us with the mission brief?" Itachi asked suspiciously.

She shrugged. "That's just a formality. I've been informed of what you look like, so dropping your henges should be proof enough for me."

Sakura raised a dubious brow at the unprofessionalism, but dropped her disguise. It didn't matter since she and Itachi were more than enough to handle...pretty much any kind of attack, really. Itachi did the same. The girl peered at Sakura from beneath her hood. "Him I was expecting, but who are you? Where's the shark guy?"

"He's unavailable," Sakura said, covering up their blunder. "I assure you I am more than adequate for the requirements of this mission, or I wouldn't be wearing this cloak right now."
The girl wrinkled her nose for a moment before shrugging. "Well, it's no skin off my back. Follow me, I'll take you to my peripheral hideout. I want to brief you before we go in." She lead them through the thick snow to the mouth of a cave tucked into a hillside. She climbed in, Sakura and Itachi following after her.

They looked around. The cave was narrow, about as wide as a hallway, extending deep into the hill. Sakura heard the sound of water dripping from somewhere towards the back. There wasn't much light other than what came from the opening; just a lantern hanging from the low ceiling. A pile of blankets lay folded in the corner next to a tray of cold food, but other than that it was basically empty.

"Not much of a hideout, huh?" Sakura remarked, turning to the girl. She was gone.

Sakura spun to face the entrance. The girl stood outside the cave, arms crossed, looking in on them. She lowered her hood and freed a mop of bright red hair, half of it mussed, the other half neatly straight. She pushed her glasses up her nose and grinned widely at them. "Well, that was easy. I thought Akatsuki were supposed to be smart."

Sakura noticed a faint glimmer in the air across the mouth of cave. She summoned her chakra only to find she couldn't access it. Her stomach sank to her knees.

It was a trap. And they'd waltzed right into it.

Sakura swore.
"Well, that was easy. I thought Akatsuki were supposed to be smart."

Sakura noticed a faint glimmer in the air across the mouth of cave. She summoned her chakra only to find she couldn't access it. Her stomach sank to her knees.

It was a trap. And they'd waltzed right into it.

Sakura swore.

"Who are you?" Itachi glared at the girl, eyes black.

"That's none of your business, but just for the record, the name's Karin," she sneered. "I can't believe you guys took the smallest bait of all the mission requests we put in. Boy, is my boss gonna be mad when I message him that he has to come all the way out here for you. And that bastard Suigetsu will be so jealous when I get all the glory..."

Sakura was furious. "Who do you work for? What do you want?"

The redhead laughed. "If you think I'm obligated to answer any of your questions, ugly, you've got another thing coming." She turned to go, glancing back at them over her shoulder. "Feel free to try and escape, but you should know that I used to be a professional prison guard for Orochimaru, so breaking out is impossible. Neither of you has access to chakra, and he can't use his Sharingan. Have fun! I'll be back to feed you tomorrow morning...if I remember." Giggling to herself, she walked away.
Sakura ran to the cave's entrance. She reached out a finger to touch the shimmering barrier. A shock went through her. Sakura withdrew her hand, letting it fall to her side to hang limply. She stared outside as snow began to fall.

Eventually, she turned to face Itachi. He sat cross legged on a blanket, back against the wall.

"Now what?" she asked in a small voice.

"We wait."

"For what?"

"Kisame will find us."

"Itachi...we're in a random hill, buried under a pile of snow. Kisame's not a sensor type, he's some distance behind us, and will probably think to look for us in the village itself. What if he doesn't find us before her boss does?"

"...Kisame will find us," Itachi reiterated.

Sakura walked over to the pile of blankets and dragged one to the opposite side of the narrow cave from him. She sat down and stared at the wall.

They didn't talk much. Sakura ate half the bowl of cold porridge Karin had left out god-knows-how-long for them. She offered Itachi the other half but he declined. She saved it for him anyway, in case he changed his mind later.

Plink. Plink. Plink.

Sakura tossed pebbles at the wall. It had only been a few hours or so, but she was incredibly bored. She looked up at Itachi across the cavern. He sat there, listless, gazing at nothing. Sakura had never seen the powerful man look so exhausted before. She remembered that somewhere deep within his chest lay a disease that was slowly killing him. Or maybe that girl's boss would take him out before the illness could — and her as well. This was not at all the way she wanted things to end between them. She doubted it would come to that — even without chakra they were hardly defenseless, but Sakura's experience showed her life had a way of throwing curveballs when you least expect it. You never knew what tomorrow would bring, so it was better to live for today without regrets. She took a breath.

"I'm sorry, Itachi."

He looked up from beneath black bangs. "You have nothing to apologize for. We both were overconfident."

Sakura fidgeted. "No, I mean...I'm sorry for the way I've been treating you. For what's happened between us." They both paused to consider the elephant in the room, so thoroughly ignored for too long.

"Please don't apologize — it's my fault," Itachi finally said. "It's unreasonable for me to expect you just accept my impending death without explanation. I've had years to prepare for it, but you haven't. And you're a healer by nature."

Sakura was silent.
"I never meant to hurt anyone, Sakura. But this is the way things must be," he added.

She focused on a crack in the floor, looking down to hide her expression. "Maybe it doesn't have to be like this. Maybe I could help you," she tried.

Itachi shook his head. "This is my destiny for good reason."

Sakura glanced up. "Seriously?"

He said nothing.

"Itachi..." Unable to stop herself, Sakura scooted over to his side of the narrow cave. She wanted to reach out a hand to touch him but thought better of it. "I'm sure you've done things you regret — we all have — but there's more to someone than their past actions. I've seen you be kind, and talented, and thoughtful. You have people who care about you because...because I think you're secretly a worthwhile human being. When you're not pretending to be something else."

He stared at her as though she were an alien. "How could you possibly know something like that?"

Sakura blushed, though she noticed he didn't deny it. She couldn't believe she was admitting these thoughts aloud, but he really needed to hear them. "It's your actions. They don't always make sense with your words. Like that time you saved me from Deidara, when letting him kill me would've solved whatever problem you had with me joining Akatsuki. Or when you spared M — that Leaf nin who wandered onto the base. And the little things too, like how you speak respectfully to innkeepers and workers even when you're angry. And how you're always nice to Tobi, who gets kicked around a lot..." She trailed off, realizing she said much more than she intended to.

Itachi had the strangest expression on his face, but he didn't speak. Sakura's blush crept down her neck.

"Don't look at me like that! You'll see I'm telling the truth if you really think about it. Besides, aren't there things in your life worth living for? Aren't there people you care about? I don't understand anything about your past, but your present life...it doesn't seem so bad to me. Are you really ready to just give it up?"

Itachi focused on her face for a long moment. The tired lines under his eyes grew more pronounced the longer he looked. "...I don't know anymore. It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Sakura let out a strained sigh. "Itachi, the world is not your go board. Stuff happens all the time that 'wasn't supposed to be like this.' But then it's there, and you deal with it and move forward." And I should know. This entire Akatsuki 'infiltration' thing turned out drastically different than I expected. Sometimes we become the masks we wear, but other times we need to shed them.

Itachi tilted his head. "I have to think about that."

Sakura offered him a tiny smile and patted him on the knee. He started slightly at the contact. She ignored the fluttering in her own stomach and plowed on. "Good! That's all I ask. Well, that, and I'd like to be friends again. If that's okay with you," she tacked on quickly.

Itachi hesitated. "I'd appreciate that. Kisame is a good companion, but his book recommendations leave something to be desired."

Sakura laughed. His lips quirked. She stood. "I'm pretty thirsty, so I'm gonna go check out that dripping in the back of this place."
Itachi nodded, already lost in thought.

*He took that pretty well,* she mused to herself as she headed towards the back. *He's a good listener, and more sensitive to your feelings than you guessed. It just takes being trapped in a cave with a questionable chance of survival to get him to communicate. No big deal.* She chuckled to herself. *Maybe with patience and persistence you can get through to him after all. He already trusts you enough to share some of his thoughts. If you can just get him to explain why he wants to let himself die, you can show him how stupid he's being...because obviously he's being stupid. There cannot possibly be a good reason for something like that, period.*

*Right?*

Quashing the tiny doubt before it could lodge in her brain and waver her resolve, Sakura wandered down the narrow length of the cavern, a hand on the wall to guide her. The dim light from the overhead lantern didn't reach back here at all. As a result, she never saw it coming. She stepped right off the edge into a deep pool of freezing water.

Sakura spluttered and surfaced, coughing. She scrambled out onto the rock as fast as possible. She'd gotten the drink she wanted, but now she was drenched. She dripped her way back towards Itachi. He stared.

"You were thirsty."

Sakura cracked a smile despite herself. "Nothing gets past you, huh?" She unzipped her cloak and spread it out on the ground under the lantern in a laughable attempt to dry it. She sat down on the hard rock to avoid soaking any blankets. She unbraid her hair, hoping at least that would dry in the frigid air. The time crawled by, and she watched with growing concern as the sunlight slowly disappeared from outside. The cave grew darker, and the already chilly temperature plummeted. She shivered. She knew what she had to do, but the thought of how awkward and uncomfortable it would be held her back. Eventually, she had to bite the bullet.

"Um, Itachi. Could you, uh, turn around please?"

He raised an eyebrow at her.

She blushed, picking up a blanket. "I really need to get out of these wet clothes. It's dangerous, in weather like this, and I don't have my chakra to heat my blood with..."

Itachi's other eyebrow joined the first somewhere above his hairline. He spun around to face the wall. Feeling extremely self-conscious, Sakura unzipped her sopping top. The sound echoed in the small chamber, too loud. "And no peeking," she added sternly. Itachi's shoulders twitched in what she assumed was silent amusement.

She stripped her clothes off, leaving them in a pile and wrapped herself in the thick blanket as fast as possible, wet body soaking it immediately. She had goosebumps everywhere. He wasn't looking, but she almost fancied he had eyes in the back of his head. She couldn't shake off the weird feeling of being nearly naked in such a small, enclosed space with him. "All done," she squeaked. Itachi turned around.

"Colorful," he remarked with a surreptitious glance at the pile of discarded clothes. Sakura's rainbow panties sat boldly on top for all to see.

Mortified, she stuck a hand out of her cocoon and quickly stuffed them underneath the pile. Itachi chuckled. The unfamiliar sound almost gave Sakura a heart attack. *Figures that the first time you get*
a laugh out of him, it's at the expense of your taste in undergarments. Should've listened to Deidara...

"Well, at least I wear underwear," she shot back. Itachi stopped laughing.

Sakura smirked and shivered.

In another hour or so the inside of the cave was completely dark, save for the flickering light from the lantern. Sakura desperately wished for a fire. "How stupid of us to not pack matches, thinking you could do a katon anytime you want," she laughed humorlessly. Her teeth chattered.

Itachi looked at her with concern. "Why don't you switch blankets? That one can't be dry anymore."

Sakura bit her lip. "Then wh-what will you use to sleep under?"

"I'll be fine."

"No you won't, Itachi. It's cold. T-trust me."

He looked at her evenly. "You're going to get hypothermia."

Sakura winced at the h-word. She'd been secretly quite worried about that possibility ever since stepping into the water — a worry that only grew with the passage of time. "Okay, fine." She shuddered, too frozen to argue. Itachi tossed her the blanket he was sitting on.

Sakura caught it and looked at him expectantly. Itachi raised a questioning brow.

"S-so are you gonna turn around or what? Show's not free."

Itachi's lips twitched, but he turned. Sakura abandoned the soggy blanket and burrowed into the dry one. It wasn't as warm from his body heat as she had hoped.

"Your ass is t-too cold," she complained while he spun to face her. "I want my money back."

Itachi's eyes narrowed. "That was...vaguely nonsensical. How is your pulse?"

Oh yeah...you should be checking yourself for signs of hypothermia...what are they again? Oh right...Sakura pulled out a hand from beneath the blanket. Her fingers were turning blue. That can't be good. They're usually a different color.

"I look like Kisame," she laughed weakly.

A wrinkle appeared in Itachi's brow. "Your pulse?" he prompted again.

"Oh, right..." Sakura grabbed her wrist and started counting. She lost track and started over again.

"Sakura?"

Itachi's voice seemed far away, like he was at the end of a long tunnel. She wanted to reach him, but he was so far, and the tunnel stretched on and on. She walked, counting each step. She forgot about her pulse and got lost counting...she counted to a thousand, or was it a hundred? A hundred thousand? It was hard to tell which was the bigger number. But it must have been the bigger one, because she felt like she was counting sheep forever...she drifted in and out of sleep.

Sometime later, Sakura woke up much warmer and clear-headed. The familiar scent of pine trees in
winter engulfed her. Her eyes widened in recognition, breath halting in her lungs. She was acutely aware of her nude body under the blanket, pressed against a warm one. An arm curled over her hip. She froze, afraid to even blink.

"Itachi?" she whispered, voice cracking.

The only reply was the gentle rise and fall of the soft fabric of his shirt against her bare back. She felt his breath stir the hairs at the nape of her neck. All her nerve endings were alive, hyperaware of his presence. The brush of his hair along her shoulder as he shifted was electric. Her breath hitched. When a thumbnail dragged gently across the skin above her navel, Sakura thought her heart would stop. It traced faint circles around her bellybutton. She bit back a gasp. She couldn't believe this was happening.

_Is he awake or asleep?_

Terrified of the answer either way, Sakura shifted. She craned her head back, twisting her upper body to see his face.

A single black eye bored into hers. Heat pooled in Sakura's belly. She stilled, paralyzed by the sight of him, unable to even swallow. His handsome face was much closer to hers than she expected; she could count his eyelashes. His breath fanned across her cheek.

"I'm sorry," he whispered in a low rumble. She could feel the vibration of his voice against her back. "You were going to freeze."

Sakura couldn't speak.

Itachi's thumb continued to draw light, slow circles against her flushed skin. He tore his gaze from hers. She felt his eyes caress her body like fingers, tracing along her throat, roving across her shoulder, sliding down to the curve of her breast peeking out from beneath the blanket.

_He wants me_, she thought in numbed awe. The realization hit her with the force of an oncoming train. It was preposterous and impossible that a man like Itachi could _want_. And yet there was no mistaking the heat in his dark eyes. At the end of the day, he was still just a man, despite all his reservations. A man pressed flush against a naked girl under a blanket, completely alone.

A thrill shot down her spine. She shuddered under his scrutiny, heart thudding in her ears.

"Sakura."

He breathed her name so softly she almost didn't hear it, though his mouth was right next to her earlobe. His tongue darted out to wet dry lips. He swallowed, thumbnail still grazing her skin. "Tell me to stop."

Sakura opened her mouth, but nothing came out. There were so many reasons not to do this, not to become physically involved with a dying man, enemy or not. It would change the nature of their relationship in a way that couldn't be undone. It would alter group dynamics. Would it threaten her cover? Her mission? She didn't just want his body, what if he didn't feel the same? Would he regret it tomorrow? Surely there were hundreds of reasons...but she just couldn't focus on them through the haze of desire, the reckless pulse of blood coursing through her veins. She was enraptured by the sight of his lips, overpowered by the feel of that single fingertip stroking a burning trail across her belly. The entire universe was distilled down to that one point of contact. He was right there, finally within her reach. Not distant, not removed, not hiding —_right there_, close enough to touch, literally and figuratively. All she had to do was reach out —
Suddenly, Sakura remembered her own words to Han, the lonely jinchuuriki. Life was so short. Itachi wouldn't be here long. There was no telling how long even she would last, in this lifestyle. For once, maybe it was time to take her own advice. Perhaps she had made the decision some time ago.

Sakura would seize what she wanted before it was gone.

Her eyes locked with his as her hand moved of its own accord. Trembling fingers skimmed across his clothes, sliding upward from his waist. Unbelievably, he shivered at her touch. A flash of skin peeked out when her nails caught the edge of his shirt, and Sakura's greedy eyes drank it in. Her palm slid down the arm wound about her hip, past his elbow, over his slim wrist. She grasped his cool hand in her own and dragged it, inch by inch, across the plane of her stomach, unable to tear her eyes from his. Deliberately, she enclosed it around her breast.

Itachi's eyes slipped closed. Sakura's breath caught in her throat when the tiniest moan she'd ever heard escaped his lips.

The sound hung in the air. If he moved now, there would be no going back. Or maybe it was already too late to stop the momentum between them.

He looked at her with eyes that saw too much. She felt more vulnerable than ever before, body thrumming with the need for him to touch her, to make a move, to do something. She poured all her repressed longing into her eyes, fixed on his as if trying to burn their image into her mind.

Please.

He cracked. Sakura saw his true face when his mask finally, finally shattered.

His lips descended on her. They pressed together shyly, testing, but with increasing boldness. Sakura hummed with pleasure at the soft sensation, tingles rolling down her spine. She was kissing Uchiha Itachi...and he was kissing back. The thought sapped the air from her lungs. He was stiff and awkward at first — unsure of where to put his hands — but little by little he seemed to open up and trust his instincts. He settled for wrapping his arms around her waist, and her lips parted with a sigh. A jolt shot through her when he hesitantly accepted her invitation, their tongues brushing. Sakura took his lower lip into her mouth and gave a light nip, eliciting another tiny moan. She threaded her fingers through his silky hair, making his breath hitch when her nails scraped his scalp. Sakura groaned and broke the kiss for air.

His mouth attacked her. She felt the velvet of his lips everywhere, pressed against her feverish neck, trailing wet kisses behind her ears, buried in her hair. He positioned himself above her, thumbs stroking her sides, bangs tickling her throat. She pressed herself against him, their bare feet tangling together beneath the blanket.

She ran her hands across his taut shoulders, reveling in the feel of his weight over her. Sakura was overwhelmed with the need to touch and taste. She yanked his shirt over his head to reveal the dips and ridges of his abdomen, tearing the fabric slightly in her haste. "Sorry!" she squeaked.

"It's fine," he murmured, lowering himself onto her. The shock of bare skin-to-skin contact electrified her. She arched beneath him, pressing her chest against his. When her fingers reached for the drawstring of his pants, Itachi grabbed her wrist.

"Wait," he exhaled. "We should think about —"

Sakura was done with that. She covered his mouth with her hand, making him start. Her teeth sank into his shoulder to taste the salt on his skin. Itachi sucked in a sharp breath through her fingers, his
grip tightening almost painfully around her hip.

"Itachi, you think too much," she ground out, rolling them over.

His dilated pupils were glued to her modest breasts when she straddled him. She yanked on the drawstring at his waist and freed him from his pants.

His hardness brushed the inside of her thigh, oddly soft and firm at once. Itachi caressed the undersides of her breasts with his thumbs, stroking the calloused pads across her nipples. She reached a hand between her legs to wrap around his length, eliciting a hiss. She felt his blood pulsing beneath her fingers.

Sakura stroked him up and down, twisting her wrist experimentally. She savored the heady feeling of control, watching his pleasured grimaces in fascination. Itachi shut his eyes with a grunt. Sakura wondered what it would take to make him squirm in earnest. She sank lower, nipping at his skin sharply as she went. When she reached his hips, she hesitated a moment before carefully taking him into her mouth.

"Ah — " he broke off. Sakura swirled her tongue around the tip once, working her way down his shaft. When she gave a gentle suck, she could feel his composure unraveling. He twisted his hips, so she held them in place, lips sliding along his hard flesh. The rocky surface of the cave bruised her knees even through the blanket, but she didn't care because Itachi's normally steady breath was coming in ragged pants. The erotic sound filled the cavern, making moisture gather between her legs. He tensed beneath her, eyes snapping open.

"Stop." The unexpected command gave her pause. Itachi sat up and looked at her with slightly wild, lust-darkened eyes. Adrenaline spiked through her at the unfamiliar sight, mouth going dry as she popped off him. He moved.

Before she understood what had happened she was upright, back pinned against the cold rock of the cavern wall, Itachi pressed against her front. Her jaw dropped in surprise. Sakura herself had experimented in the bedroom here and there during her travels as a missing-nin, but she was fairly certain Itachi had no such practice. She was startled by his assertiveness, and began to wonder if maybe she'd underestimated what he may have gotten up to as a young man —

Her thoughts ceased when his mouth captured her nipple. Sakura keened. His tongue made moist circles around her areola before flicking the stiff pink peak. He bit down. His palms kneaded the small mounds while his jaw worked, and Sakura's nails scraped his back reflexively. She pushed her hips into his, trying to relieve some of the unbearable pressure as he slid his mouth down her rib cage. Sakura watched him slip lower down her abdomen, head of black hair wandering further and further south. Her eyes widened in disbelief, heart caught in her throat at the thought of this man on his knees before her, mouth heading...

His nose slid along the inside of her thigh, either teasing or hesitating. His hair tickled her legs. Sakura forgot how to breath.

"Itachi — " she managed, tugging her fingers through his tresses. He trailed butterfly kisses towards her center, leaving wet marks along her spreading thighs. Sakura felt his cool breath on her damp skin, raising goosebumps. He looked up, eyes locked with hers. Almost shyly, his tongue peeked out to taste her. She arched against the wall, tilting her head back. When the wet muscle dipped inside to explore her core, she shivered. His nose pressed against her folds. He held her bucking hips in place with both hands, stroking them. Sakura squirmed helplessly against his face, unable to quite believe what he was doing to her.
"You've done this before," she gasped out.

Itachi hummed against her, making her writhe. "Not this."

"Oh my god, you really are a genius then —"

She cut off when he moved one hand from her hip to her mouth, slipping a finger past her lips. Sakura accepted it obediently. He massaged her tongue briefly before removing the digit with a slick pop. He pressed it between her legs to her entrance, sliding it deep inside to replace his tongue. Sakura groaned at the unexpected feeling of being penetrated as he pumped her with his finger in a deliciously slow rhythm. His mouth moved to enclose the bundle of nerves above her core. He flicked it with his tongue, once, twice. Gently, he sucked. Sakura twisted, flinging her limbs out to scrabble at the stone behind her so she wouldn't tear his hair out. She panted and trembled, feeling the delirious pressure mounting, knees buckling —

Itachi withdrew, catching her before she collapsed. He wiped his mouth in a way that made her wet. A whimpered protest escaped her lips, head spinning.

"Your heart rate was abnormally high, so I thought it best if I —" he began.

Her eyes bulged. "Don't you mess with me, Itachi," she growled before flinging herself at him. She tried to reverse their positions so his back was to the wall, but he was having none of it. He dodged her attack smoothly, grabbing her arm and spinning her around. Her knees hit the hard floor as he lowered her to the ground, sharp pebbles digging into her palms. She looked over her shoulder at him with wide eyes when she felt his swollen tip at her entrance.

His voice wavered with barely-controlled restraint. "Sakura, can I — ?"

"Fucking yes already!" she interrupted, grinding against him with impatience.

"Thank god," he bit out, grabbing her hips and sinking into her in one slow, smooth motion.

Their dual moans echoed off the walls when their bodies mashed together. The tight, wet friction was almost too much, too raw — she felt full with him. Sakura met Itachi thrust for thrust with escalating need. His fingernails dug into her hips, leaving tiny crescent marks on her skin. The stone scraped her knees, but she barely noticed. Her tangled hair fell about her in waves as they rocked together, driving relentlessly forward. Sakura's fingers clawed at the floor as her hips swiveled of their own accord, body doing things she didn't even know it knew how to do. But she needed something more.

"Itachi," she huffed through the fog of pleasure. "I want — I want to see your face."

"Nngh," he grunted incoherently, but he complied. He pulled out, and Sakura ached with the loss, but she let him flip her over. The almost feral gleam in his eyes made the bottom drop out of her stomach. He ran the tip of his length along her slit before diving back in without warning.

Her toes curled when Itachi hit a sweet spot deep within her, making her cry out. He paused at the sound before adjusting his angle to hit the sensitive area again and again. She stretched her body out below him, pulling him down to burrow her face in his neck. Itachi was everywhere: above her, inside her, possessing her; Itachi with his dancer's grace, skilled fingers and sharp mind; Itachi, beautiful and whole — without walls — maskless and naked, the way she'd always dreamed of him. She sped up, consumed with both the idea of him and the feel of him around her. When his hot breath ghosted across her ear, all semblance of control slipped through her fingers.

"Sakura," he pleaded, bucking against her. She couldn't respond. She felt her orgasm coiling in her
belly, legs stiffening as her body began to curl inward. Itachi tensed over her, even closer.

"Sakura, I —"

He cut off, biting his tongue when he climaxed into her with a shudder. His eyes squeezed shut as his face spasmed. One look at the stoic man's rapturous expression left Sakura teetering on the edge.

"Itachi," she whimpered, hanging by a thread. She ground on his softening length in desperation. He reached deft fingers between her legs, groping for the throbbing button at the apex of her thighs.

Sakura lost it. The ringing in her ears drowned out everything, her vision blurring at the edges. She trembled, clinging to him as she rode out the waves. One word appeared in dark ink on the blank canvas of her mind:

Itachi.

Sakura floated back to her senses. Her whole body buzzed with pleasure, numb. They lay together for a few moments before he rolled off her to grab the blanket. Her limbs were heavy and sluggish, but she managed to wrap it around them to ward off the chill their previous activity had been keeping at bay. Hesitantly, Itachi draped a tired arm over her waist. Sakura liked the feel of it there. She turned her face into his chest, inhaling the faint scent of sweat and sex and her on his skin. They basked in the hazy afterglow together in silence.

It was over. Sakura braced for the crushing regret, but it was a long time in coming. In fact, she felt nothing other than the deep, supreme contentment of a neglected need met, an itch finally scratched. Maybe this would feel like the mistake it probably was in the morning, but right now they fit together like puzzle pieces. Right now, it felt so right.

Eventually Sakura gathered the energy to speak. "You don't know how long I've wanted that," she sighed bonelessly, tracing the ridges of his abdomen with her fingernail.

"Me too," Itachi agreed, studying her face sleepily. She would have been more surprised by the admission if she only had the energy. Apparently this wasn't just an opportunistic impulse for him either, then? It would never have happened if the situation hadn't been what it was, but maybe the potential had been there the whole time, lurking just under the conflict between them. Underneath the underneath. She smiled at him in contentment. His lips curved in response, eyes half-lidded. He allowed her to tuck a strand of damp hair behind his ear.

They drifted off to sleep together, bodies intertwined like the fingers of two people holding hands.

"Ooh. So it's like that, is it?"

Karin's sneering voice jolted them apart the next morning. Sakura cracked her eyes open, pulling the blanket up around her nudity. Itachi glared at the redhead in silence, scooting over and sitting up.

"Sasuke will be really interested to hear about this. I don't think he believes you to be capable of feeling anything, much less lust."

Sakura's eyes widened in terrible realization. Itachi froze.

"You work for Sasuke? Sasuke is coming here?" he asked tonelessly. Sakura looked at him in alarm — Itachi never asked obvious questions. He stared at Karin, unblinking.
"Yep. To make you suffer. So I hope your last lay was a good one." She turned to Sakura, lip curling. "How does it feel to fuck a monster? Desperate, much?"

Sakura tried to burn a hole through Karin's head with her eyes. It didn't work. Karin laughed, sliding a tray of food through the barrier with her toe.

"Eat up kiddies, we want you in tip-top shape before Sasuke gets here later. God forbid he should think I've been neglecting his beloved older brother." She disappeared into the morning snowfall, chuckling to herself.

Sakura spun to face Itachi. His face was a closed book. "I won't let him. If we work together, I'm sure we can stop him without hurting him — " she began.

"Let him come," Itachi interrupted, pulling his torn shirt on over his head. "Please don't involve yourself, Sakura. There's no need for you to get hurt. If he is strong enough to defeat me, it's my time; this is the way I want it."

Sakura's jaw dropped. "Itachi, what does that mean? Surely you don't intend to — to let Sasuke..." she trailed off, unable to finish the horrible thought.

Itachi didn't look at her. He crawled out from under the blanket, retying the drawstring on his pants. "Your clothes are icy. You should probably stay under the blanket or you'll catch a cold."

Sakura balked. "Itachi! Don't shut me out, not after you just let me in! This is about your clan, isn't it?"

"It's none of your concern. You wouldn't understand."

"So we're back to that, are we?" Sakura raged. "Don't try and push me away with that bullshit, I know better. I saw you last night, Itachi! I finally saw the real you, but I don't understand because you never explain anything to me!" She scrambled to her feet, hair a wreck, clutching the oversized blanket comically around herself. "I know this has something to do with your past, and I want you to tell me what it is so I can help you!"

Her chest heaved, green eyes bright with anger. Itachi's eyes were fixed on a spot just below her shoulder. Sakura looked down, following his line of sight to reveal a pert breast exposed through a gap in the blanket. Blushing furiously, she covered herself and looked up.

Itachi gazed at her, his mask cracked once more.

"You're...kind of a mess right now," he observed, cheek twitching. Sakura's fury began to dissipate against her will. *Nothing like a wardrobe malfunction to break the tension. Geez.*

"Yeah, well your hair isn't exactly perfectly coiffed either. And you've been wearing the same clothes for two days," she sniffed.

"At least I'm *wearing* clothes," he pointed out, lifting an eyebrow.

"...are you smirking at me, Uchiha?"

"No." It was such an blatant lie that now it was Sakura's lips threatening to betray her. "But you're smirking at me," he added.

"No I'm not!" she objected. "This is just how my face looks when I'm angry." Itachi looked unimpressed. "I think you need your eyes checked. In fact, I *know* you need your eyes checked," she
Itachi shook his head and sat down. Sakura joined him, careful to keep the blanket covering all necessary areas. He exhaled and leaned back against the wall. "Why do you want to know about my past so badly?"

"I want to help."

"You can't help."

"I don't know that until you tell me," Sakura pointed out. Itachi looked at her squarely.

"You won't drop it."

"Who do you think you're talking to?"

He exhaled stiffly. "I'll only explain on one condition."

Sakura's heart leaped into her throat. "Anything."

"You have to be honest with me about whether you're loyal to Konoha or not."

*Anything but that!*

Itachi read the torment in her face. "If you don't want to answer, that's fine. We don't have to discuss this."

Sakura glared. She was boxed into a corner. She knew Itachi suspected her loyalty to Konoha already, but actually admitting it was another story. It's not that she didn't trust him — she certainly didn't expect him to run off and out her to Leader-sama after everything — it's just that it was such a big secret. No living person knew her true loyalty besides herself. And how would her confession look to Itachi? She didn't want him to assume she cared nothing for her teammates in Akatsuki...

Sakura bit her lip. If she wanted to hear Itachi's story, she'd just have to take her chances. Maybe it was time she took off her own mask and really trusted someone again. She took a deep breath and steeled herself. "I am still loyal to Konoha."

Itachi didn't even blink. "And can you guarantee you'll *always* be loyal to Konoha?"

Sakura was confused. *He wasn't even remotely surprised by your answer. Nor does he seem at all concerned about possible disloyalty to Akatsuki. Why is he asking this?* "Yes. I will always be loyal to Konoha," she confirmed.

Itachi nodded. "I thought so. Konoha shinobi love our village more than anyone else in the ninja world. Even if we are forced to hide it for one reason or another."

Sakura's eyebrows shot up. "'We'?"

Itachi explained.

By the time he finished talking, it was afternoon. Sakura stared at the slash mark in Itachi's forehead protector in numbed shock. She was lost in thought for a long time. She turned to him with eyes that saw him for the first time.

"You know, if you had told me any of this before I became a missing-nin, I wouldn't have believed..."
you. Even now, after seeing for myself how corrupt and underhanded the world really is, I have a hard time accepting that the council could issue orders quite that despicable. To ask you to slaughter your own family to prevent a civil war — no human being should have to make such a decision. And you were a child," she spat in disgust.

"I was thirteen, but I was not a child," Itachi disagreed. "There were no true children in the Uchiha compound...except Sasuke."

Sakura gazed at the wall. "Sasuke is the only piece of the puzzle I don't get. I understand why you couldn't tell him the truth at the time, when he was only a kid and you didn't want to ruin his faith in Konoha, but he's an adult now. He's not loyal to our village, and he didn't grow up the way you planned. Why can't you just explain everything to him so he can forget about his revenge?"

"Sasuke can't forget — not now. He's traveled too far down this path in pursuit of me. We both need him to kill me to end this cycle of hatred."

Sakura recoiled. "But you're the victim here, Itachi! You're a hero of the Leaf! You're the last person who deserves to die!"

He shook his head. "It might be easy to see it that way when separated by time and space, but you weren't there. The Uchiha clan were strict and militant, obsessed with clan pride and reclaiming power. They were too blind to see what was really important even when it was right under their noses, and they were wrong to think violence was the answer to anything. But they were my family. I killed every one of them in cold blood, with my own hands — even the elderly and the children. I slaughtered people I grew up with like animals. I ran my sword through the two people who brought me into this world. They were wrong, but they were still human beings — of my blood, no less — and they deserve to be avenged. Sakura, it's right for me to die by Sasuke's hand."

She averted her eyes. "Itachi — I can't possibly understand what that was like. Not in a million years. But I can speak from experience regarding one thing: more death isn't going to bring them back. Your death can't right any wrongs, because it's all in the past. It may free you from your guilt (not that you'll be able to enjoy it, since you'll be dead), but you'll leave behind people who need you. Kisame needs you. Konoha needs you." Her own needs were left unspoken. She didn't know what they were, other than that they involved him. So that was neither here nor there.

Itachi looked lost. "Sasuke must complete his revenge or he'll never find peace."

Sakura shook her head, eyes moist. "I love Sasuke too, so it pains me to admit it, but his revenge was never going to bring him peace. Everybody seems to know that but Sasuke — and apparently, you. Even if he killed you today it wouldn't bring his family back, which is what he's really grieved for all these years. My guess is his heart would become even hollower if his only goal in life disappeared. I'm so afraid that he's too far gone, that peace is permanently out of Sasuke's reach by now."

Sakura could tell from looking at Itachi that her words hit home. He stared at the floor, face obscured by his long bangs.

"You've been worried about that too, huh?" she asked weakly. He could only nod. "You really must love him more than anything." Not even Naruto is as dedicated to Sasuke as this man is. Everything he's done has been for either Konoha's sake, or Sasuke's — with Sasuke taking priority.

Sakura tugged on the hem of Itachi's shirt. He glanced up at her. "Itachi...can we agree that you'll put off dying by Sasuke's hand, at least for today? So you can think about this stuff more? There's something very, very important I imagine you'll want to do before you throw in the towel."
Itachi looked at her curiously.

Sakura took a deep breath. "We have to save Konoha."

Itachi paced the narrow cavern. Sakura could tell he was agitated by the tension in his downturned mouth.

"You should have told me sooner."

Sakura scoffed. "How the hell was I supposed to know you've been playing double agent for the last decade?"

"This explains why Jiraiya-sama has been communicating oddly for so long."

"Wait, you're his secret connection to Akatsuki?" Sakura's eyes went round.

He gave her a look. "Who else would it be?"

She blushed. "Okay, I guess that should've been obvious..."

Itachi shut his eyes. "How long did you say it's been compromised for?"

Sakura fideted. "Er — just under three years, by now."

A muscle in Itachi's face twitched.

"The virus is like nothing I've ever seen before! It's taken forever, but I almost have a cure. I think," Sakura said defensively.

His expression softened. "I wasn't blaming you. I'm sorry, it's quite the opposite; I shudder to imagine what the situation would be like now if you hadn't managed to escape the infection. You're a hero too, Sakura."

She flushed. "Don't count your chickens yet. We still have to figure out who's behind all this. And before we do anything, we have to get out of here."

Itachi sighed and sat down. Sakura pulled the blanket around herself a little more tightly. It still smelled like him.

They waited.

The light was beginning to fade from the mouth of the prison when Sakura and Itachi heard voices.

"He's there?"

"Yes, and his Akatsuki partner. But it's not the shark guy, like I told you."

Sakura leaped to her feet, clutching the blanket around her. She wished for clothes right now more than anything. Itachi stared at the entrance to the cave with an intensity on his face that Sakura hadn't seen before. It chilled her to the bone.

Snow-muffled footsteps approached. She gulped.

Sasuke appeared, a dark mark against the white landscape. He wore a grey cloak, and his hair was
slightly longer than Sakura remembered — more disarrayed as well. The planes of his face had hardened with age, but his expression was more cold and controlled than any Sakura had ever seen, including Itachi's. His eyes were red steel.

Sasuke's Sharingan locked on his brother. His gaze flitted to Sakura once before focusing back on Itachi.

"What's this?" he asked in a dead voice.

Itachi and Sakura were silent. Karin's voice shattered the most awkward moment of Sakura's life. "Whoever she is, she seems to be his partner now. In more ways than one," the redhead jeered. Sasuke said nothing.

"They're fucking." She clarified the obvious.

Sakura broke into a cold sweat, shifting from one foot to the other. Itachi was motionless.

"Disgusting," Sasuke said, in an apathetic tone one might use to comment on the weather. His face was devoid of a shred of emotion. His Sharingan burned into Itachi. "Karin," he commanded.

Two darts hit them in the neck. Sakura felt foreign chakra invading her system. She yanked the dart out. "What did you do?" she growled at the smirking kunoichi.

Sasuke acted as though she hadn't even spoken. "Their chakra is under your control?"

"Affirmative."

"Release the barrier."

Sakura felt her suppressed chakra return in a rush as the barrier dropped from the mouth of the cave. But try as she might, she had no control over it. She couldn't even control her own limbs.

"Bring them outside."

To Sakura's extreme distress, she found her muscles working on their own accord. She followed Itachi out into the snowy clearing. The freezing air nipped at her bare skin where Karin had allowed the blanket to fall off her shoulder, no doubt deliberately. She flushed in angry humiliation, unable to cover her exposed skin.

Sasuke studied them with cruel indifference. "The reverse-summoning scroll should be in place by now. I'm going to move him. You and the others are not to be involved in the final stage. Stay here and dispose of the girl for me."

Sakura would have opened her eyes wide with panic if she could. Her throat tightened as she tried to shout in alarm. She struggled against the presence controlling her body, but it was clearly from some kind of homemade drug she'd never encountered before. She didn't know how to fight it.

Sasuke unfurled a scroll and took a deliberate step towards Itachi.

A kunai came from nowhere, shaving off some of Sasuke's hair. Kisame sauntered out of the forest. "Sorry I'm late, Itachi-san, Sakura. I couldn't scent your trail well through all this snow, which is amazing because you both reek." He grinned.

Karin coughed. Sakura found she could turn her head towards the sound. Blood trickled out of the kunoichi's mouth, one hand wrapped around the kunai protruding from her heart. She slumped to the
ground, staining the white snow scarlet.

"Sasuke," she wheezed. "Help me." Sakura could tell her lung was pierced as well as her heart.

Sasuke glanced at the dying girl with no expression. He flung a kunai at her, casually burying it between her eyes. Karin went cross-eyed as she looked at it. She fell over, dead.

Sakura recoiled. "Sasuke! She was your comrade! How could you?!" she gasped out in revulsion. Her stomach heaved.

She may as well have not existed. Sasuke had eyes only for Itachi. Without warning, he moved. Sakura charged, but Kisame got there first. He swung Samehada, forcing Sasuke to withdraw or lose his hand.

"I think now would be a good time to go, Itachi-san."

Itachi nodded reluctantly. Sakura grabbed his hand. Something flickered to life in Sasuke's dead eyes at the action. He shot forward, unsheathing his ninjatou with a deadly ring.

The three shinobi dissolved into a murder of crows as Sasuke's blade passed through empty air.

Chapter End Notes

Heeey, if you're here from ff.net for the sex, please don't forget to run back to http://www.fanfiction.net/s/8915728/17/Contagious and leave a review! There may be a few more opportunities for lemons, but they are unwritten as of now. They're hard work, so if you guys liked this one let me know and I will certainly consider writing more. Thanks!
The three Akatsuki took turns performing body flicker jutsu until they were deposited directly in front of the base, which was lucky for Sakura. She didn't relish the thought of traveling long distances wearing only a blanket.

"Thank you, Kisame," Itachi said as he opened the front door. The three shinobi filed in one after the other. "Your timing is impeccable, as usual."

"Eh, no problem, Itachi-san. You know I've always got your back."

Itachi nodded. "I need to go think." He disappeared down the hallway. Sakura watched his retreating figure in dismay.

When she turned back to Kisame, she noticed the shark-nin was studying her with an unreadable expression. She blushed. "Go on, get it over with. Why am I naked, right?"

Kisame raised an eyebrow. "Pinkie, if two people are trapped together for two days with nothing to do, and one of them emerges naked...there's usually only one reason for that."

Sakura had a coughing fit. "Sorry — s-something — in my throat," she hacked.

"I'm sure there was." Kisame patted her on the back so hard she almost lost her blanket in addition to her dignity.

"Okay, well, I'm — er — I'm gonna go change," she squeaked, making a hasty retreat. She was sure to cover her ass on the way out.

Now that the immediate threat of Sasuke was handled and they were back home, Sakura was nervous. Itachi had gone to think. What would his conclusion be? All the walls were down between
them and Sakura felt apprehensive and vulnerable. Would he reject her and go back to hiding behind the mask? Or was what they shared, both physically and non-physically, strong enough to forge a bond between them? Sakura remembered with a twist in her gut how fleeting their time together might be. If Itachi also realized it, would it spur him into action? He obviously wanted her, at least physically...but now that he'd shared some of his deepest secrets, Sakura couldn't help but wonder if he wanted more than that. Why else would he trust her like that? They'd both been alone with their burdens for so long...In the cave it felt like they had really connected once they understood they were in essentially the same position with respect to their loyalties, but would that change here, back within the realm of normalcy?

Needless to say, when an exhausted but freshly scrubbed Sakura made her way into the kitchen for dinner later that night, her stomach was in knots. She paused in the doorway upon noticing a change in their usual seating arrangements. Kisame was in her spot, chatting with an animated Tobi. Itachi's chair was vacant. Sakura eyed Kisame with suspicion but he didn't turn to acknowledge her. Shrugging, she helped herself to a heaping bowl of vegetarian sukiyaki and sat down in the shark-nin's place.

She had just started shoveling food into her mouth when familiar footsteps pricked at her ears. Her chopsticks stilled momentarily but she didn't turn. The air stirred as he sat down next to her. Her spine stiffened. She ignored the butterflies in her stomach and resumed her meal in silence.

Deidara was watching her with narrowed eyes. His gaze flitted to Itachi then back to her face. "So I heard it was a rough mission, mm?"

Itachi took a delicate bite, chewed, and swallowed before responding. "We were unable to accomplish the goal Leader asked of us."

Deidara tsked. "Sounds like you guys were sloppy, yeah."

Embarrassed, Sakura opened her mouth to retort only to be interrupted by Kisame. "It wasn't their fault. You wouldn't have been able to do much either, trapped in a cave for 48 hours," he smirked around his food at Sakura. Itachi's leg accidentally brushed hers under the table. She jumped. Deidara's blonde brows shot up. "You were trapped in a cave for two days? Together?"

Sakura's eyes darted towards Itachi like magnets. He took another bite, wearing a total poker face. Sakura hurriedly gulped down more food. She started again when she felt Itachi's instep graze her ankle as he leaned forward to reach the soy sauce. Is he doing that on purpose? she wondered, incredulous. It took her a moment too long to remember Deidara had asked her a question. "Yeah. What of it?" She tried for nonchalant.

"It looks like the experience made you and Itachi-senpai best friends again. Tobi is happy for you!" the masked man declared.

Deidara looked at him curiously. "What makes you say that, mm?"

"Just the way they keep touching under the table."

Sakura choked. Everyone stared. Itachi stood. He leaned down to collect his half-finished bowl. "I'll be on the porch," he muttered in Sakura's ear, so quietly she was sure no one caught it. She nodded imperceptibly. "Excuse me," he said to the group at large before slipping out the sliding glass door.

A noodle dangled out of Deidara's open mouth. It fell to the floor unnoticed. He stared at her, dumbfounded and slack-jawed. "You're not seriously hitting that, yeah?"
Tobi looked confused. "But they used to spar all the time, senpai! Of course she hits him."

Kisame roared with laughter.

Mortified, Sakura flushed and stood. She snatched up her bowl and retreated outside after Itachi without a word. She found him sitting on the porch swing with bowl in hand, chewing slowly, watching the snow drift to the ground. Sakura sank down next to him. His lips twitched when he saw her face. "That bad?"

Sakura nodded in mute horror.

Itachi hummed. "A wise tactician knows when to flee a lost battle."

"Yeah, well, so do cowards," she countered half-heartedly.

"Yes, I suppose I'm one of those too," he mused, solemn. He took a contemplative bite before continuing. "Perhaps dying by Sasuke's hand is the easy way out. Maybe I'm trying to escape."

Sakura's chest twinged. "A coward could never have sacrificed all you have for Konoha. If you chose to live, I know you'd find the resolve to do so."

Itachi gave her a small, ironic smile. "But I don't have a choice, Sakura. I'm going to die of my disease soon enough; I feel it creeping closer every day. It's better if Sasuke does it."

"What if it's not terminal though? What if I could fix it? That would change everything!"

He shook his head. "I've been sick in secret for a very long time, Sakura. In the beginning, I sought out help. It's incurable. Virtually everyone who tried to heal me failed. I accepted my fate some time ago."

"But I'm the apprentice of the best medic-nin in history! And I haven't tried!"

Itachi looked at her tiredly. "Your persistent hope is making this more difficult for me, Sakura."

She swallowed her guilt. "But what if I'm not wrong? Please Itachi, just give me a chance."

He saw the need in her eyes and exhaled. "You're not going to drop it. It wasn't a question.

Sakura shook her head fervently.

Itachi closed his eyes. "If you must."

Sakura's grin was blinding. She leaped off the swing, tugging on his sleeve to pull him to his feet. "Thank you! Let's go up to your room so you can be comfortable. I'll do whatever it takes to fix you — you'll see I'm right!" She all but dragged him up to the second story balcony, through the library and into his bedroom.

Four hours later, Sakura's knees hit the floor, her hands covering her face. Tears leaked between her fingers.

She was wrong.

"I've never seen anything so bad in my entire life. No human being can fix that. I don't even know how you're still breathing."
Itachi knelt on the thin rug next to her. He hesitated a moment, then placed an unsure hand on her shoulder. She paused briefly before leaning over to press her face into his chest, dampening his shirt. *He could disappear any day now. Why do I keep losing everyone I care for?*

He allowed her to lean on him in silence until her tears ran dry. He looked at her with some inscrutable emotion before bringing his free hand to her other shoulder, trapping her gaze. Sakura's breath hitched.

"Sakura. I did a lot of thinking. You asked me if there wasn't anything in my present life worth living for. You were right. My family always wanted more, never appreciating what was in front of them. I refuse to follow that path. I want to cherish what I have today while it lasts. I'd like — I think I'd like to enjoy my remaining time here on this earth with you...if you'll have me."

Her eyes welled up. Itachi's face fell. "Not again, please, Sakura —"

She cut him off with a kiss. Itachi's mouth pressed back tentatively, tasting the salt on her lips. She kissed him like she'd never kissed anyone before, putting all her convoluted feelings into this simple act of nonverbal communication. She kissed him until she had to break away for breath, lips bruised.

"Of course," she mumbled into the corner of his mouth, kissing him again. "Of course I'll have you."

Itachi gently pushed her back onto the rug.

Sakura woke the next morning in bed, her limbs entangled around Itachi's. She inhaled the wintry scent of his covers, trying to burrow into him. Itachi's eyes blinked opened and he cracked a tiny smile at her.

"What are you doing?" he hummed in amusement as she wriggled closer.

"Your skin is in the way."

Itachi chuckled. The rumble of his chest against her made Sakura shiver. "My apologies."

She smiled back at him lopsidedly, though it hurt her face. *His smile seems even more valuable now that I know it could be gone tomorrow.*

Itachi noticed the conflict in her eyes. "Would you like to do something different today? Together?"

Sakura's eyes went round. "Like a date?"

His mouth twitched. "If you like."

"Itachi...surely you're not cured of your allergy to fun?"

"...I am more open to the idea," he hedged.

Sakura grinned. "I would like to test this hypothesis."

"Okay. Shower first, then we'll plan something over breakfast?"

"Sure."

Itachi rolled out of bed, pulling on a pair of pants. Sakura tried not to ogle the process *too* obviously, though she was pretty sure she failed miserably. He strode over to the door and pulled it open, clean change of clothes tucked under his arm. He paused in the doorway, glancing over his shoulder at her.
"Aren't you coming?"

Sakura blinked, cogs turning in her mind. *Wait. Could he mean...?*

Her eyes widened. She leaped out of bed and hurriedly pulled on last night's clothes, chasing after him to the bathroom, giddy.

Two figures in black and scarlet flitted across the snow-dusted grassland side by side. For once, they did not run, but strolled.

"Is this really okay?" Sakura asked Itachi a little guiltily. "We should probably be working on Konoha's problem right now..."

"Konoha has been compromised for nearly three years already, but I've never been on a date. Realistically, another two hours or so shouldn't make a difference."

Sakura could scarcely believe her ears. She glanced at Itachi's bare hand, dangling enticingly from his sleeve. She tucked her own hands firmly into her cloak pockets.

He cleared his throat awkwardly, shooting her a furtive glance. "Forgive me if this is intrusive, but regarding birth control..."

Sakura rolled her eyes heavenward, blushing. "It's fine. If I can use my chakra to keep out a virus you bet I can use it to control...other things."

"But in the cave, our chakra —"

She cut him off, the pink in her cheeks now matching her hair. "It is standard practice for kunoichi to possess morning-after pills."

Itachi looked incrementally relieved. "Ah. My apologies, I'm somewhat...ignorant of matters like this."

Sakura coughed slightly, rearranging her face into a smile. "I understand." They walked in silence for another few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts before she spoke up again. "Can I ask you something, Itachi?"

He tilted his head. "Of course."

Sakura sucked in her cheek. "When I first showed up wanting to join Akatsuki...why were you so mean to me?"

Itachi chuckled. "I thought that would've been obvious."

She snorted. "*Nothing* about you is 'obvious,' Itachi."

He looked at her evenly. "Well, imagine how I felt. My brother's former teammate — an innocent, loyal girl — appears in that...outfit...asking to join Akatsuki, but hiding her true motive. I feared you would compromise my position, to say the least. I tried to drive you off to save you from physical danger, but I was also concerned about emotional harm. There are...consequences of living alongside an enemy which I'm sure you are aware of by now. It is human nature to form attachment."

Sakura cast her eyes down. "I know. Things are kind of complicated." Her eyes glazed over as she thought back to that night. "I forgot about that outfit, though."
Itachi raised an eyebrow. "I didn't."

Well that's revealing, Sakura thought in surprise. So he thought you were attractive from the beginning? No wonder he wanted you gone. But then... "So you were just trying to get rid of me? I was convinced you disliked me personally."

"I did. I thought you were a poor listener, aggressive, stubborn, and rude."

Sakura's jaw gaped. She opened her mouth to argue before realizing she'd only incriminate herself. She ended up laughing instead. "Fine. But for the record, I thought you were rude as hell too. Not to mention violent, anti-social, and crazy."

He offered her a small smile. Sakura warmed at the sight.

They enjoyed what little sunshine peeked through the thick clouds, and each other's company. They walked together, sometimes in silence, sometimes engaged in conversation. On more than one occasion their subdued laughter rang out across the empty plain.

He's completely different, Sakura thought in awe, watching the mild expression on Itachi's face as he took in the scenery. He's more open, and relaxed, and he laughs sometimes... was he always like this beneath the mask? How long has this man been shouldering the burdens of the world by himself, holding everyone at arm's length? Nothing is solved yet, but if I feel such immense relief at the thought of a little help, I can't imagine how he must be feeling right now. He was utterly alone for so long... am I the first person he's been able to truly confide in?

By the time they reached a tiny village, Sakura was contented. Given the lack of trees nearby, the town's round buildings were mostly built of sun-baked bricks of mud. The domed roofs of dried grass were blanketed with snow, like white frosting on cupcakes. They meandered along the frozen mud path that lead through the village market. A few stalls dotted the pathway, displaying leather and furs rather than textiles at this time of year. Small fires burned in some of them to keep their patrons warm. Sakura and Itachi were the only foreigners in the primitive village; they attracted more than a few stares as they passed.

Itachi spotted a stall displaying several wicker baskets full of winter seeds. "Which ones did you want for the garden?"

Sakura grinned. She couldn't read the labels on the baskets, but she recognized several medicinal ones by sight. She pointed them out to the shop's owner, who asked her a question in a foreign tongue. They gestured back and forth until he had bagged up more or less the quantities she needed. As Itachi guessed the amount of money owed (aware that they'd probably end up overpaying due to the language barrier), Sakura examined a row of dried herbs in handmade clay pots behind the seeds. She thought of buying some to mix up a concoction to help ease Itachi's chest discomfort, but it would be like trying to stop someone from hemorrhaging with a band aid...

Itachi followed the line of Sakura's gaze and put two and two together. "I already take medicine that a healer from River Country taught me to make long ago. It doesn't help my illness, but it does allow me to hide my symptoms more easily."

In all her time in Akatsuki, Sakura had never once seen Itachi take medication, or even cough. She marveled at his self control. He really was an intensely private person. She felt lucky to be allowed to know this vulnerable side of him.

They window-shopped around the other stalls but there wasn't very much to see. Itachi attempted to persuade her to purchase a fur-lined fundoshi-like undergarment to replace her rainbow panties with
(forever lost to the cave in Waterfall for some unfortunate explorer to perhaps stumble upon one day). Sakura was having none of it.

They bought lunch from a bearded vendor and ate it around the fire in front of his stall. There was only meat or stew to choose from. Sakura munched on what was probably chunks of rabbit skewered on a stick and roasted over an open flame while Itachi sipped his thick, brown soup dubiously. Sakura sincerely doubted it was vegetarian, but she reassured him that of course it tasted like mushrooms. The vendor came by and wordlessly offered them hot sake from his personal stash. Sakura accepted eagerly.

"How is it?" she asked Itachi, taking a sip.

The corner of his mouth curled upward. "Better than last time."

"I told you it was an acquired taste." She beamed.

They waved goodbye to the vendor and made their way back towards the village entrance. Sakura felt warm and full from the sake. She noticed Itachi's hand peeking out of his long sleeve again. She had finally gathered the courage to reach for it when it slid out of her grasp. He sank to the ground, coughing and hacking uncontrollably.

Sakura knelt, steadying his heaving shoulders. "Are you okay?" she asked in alarm.

Itachi could only nod, waiting for the fit to pass. It seemed to last forever. Finally, he rose and wiped blood from his mouth. "Sorry," he wheezed. "I didn't take my medicine this morning."

Sakura remembered their routine-disrupting shower and bit her lip. Itachi caught her expression. "No, it's fine. I was careless. Next time I'll remember," he smiled tightly at her. Sakura tried to smile back, but it didn't meet her eyes.

Suddenly a woman's voice called out to them. An old lady dressed in many layers of furs and beads pointed at Itachi, muttering in another language. Sakura looked on in bewilderment as the woman gestured with her crooked staff.

"We can't understand you," she said. To her surprise, the woman opened her toothless mouth to speak the common tongue.

"Sickness there." She gestured to Itachi with her stick. "Death approaches."

Sakura edged in front of him. "We know."

"Come sit. Read bones." She waved her cane towards the cushions in front of her fire. Sakura rolled her eyes and turned to go.

Itachi caught her shoulder. "She's a shaman."

"You don't seriously believe in that kind of nonsense, do you?" she asked. Monks and miko were one thing, she'd seen them in action her whole life, but a shaman from some backwater village...her inner scientist bristled.

"No. But it can't hurt to listen to her."

Unable to argue with that, Sakura shrugged and sat down beside him. The old woman rattled a tortoiseshell full of bleached bones, chanting. Sakura genuinely hoped the bones belonged to
animals. The shaman picked them up one by one with wrinkled hands and threw them into the fire. Her clouded eyes watched the patterns of smoke swirling above the flames as they crumbled to ash. Sakura was unconvinced she could see anything with such bad cataracts.

"The illness takes you one day, no doubt. Bones cannot lie. No cure." Sakura glared. The woman ignored her, chanting and studying the charred shapes. "There is one thing. An ancient holy power, lost for many generations. Not cure, but delay death."

Sakura crossed her arms. "And where can we find such a power?"

"Not find. Lost long ago, beyond memory. Outside of time."

"Then why bother even mentioning it?" Sakura snapped. She stood to leave.

"Because we asked her to," Itachi said, dropping a coin in the woman's outstretched hand. "She needs to eat too, Sakura. It's not her fault I'm sick."

Sakura knew he was right. She sighed, turning to bow stiffly to the shaman. The old woman inclined her wispy white head to Sakura. "Go well," she croaked. "Beware the mad-eyed child. Remember the fallen, and happiness may yet grow for you."

Bewildered, Sakura and Itachi left the village together.

"I know it's insulated under the tarp and all, but will these really grow in winter?" Sakura asked as they put the finishing touches on the newly-planted medicinal herbs in the garden.

"Only these few. We will have to wait for spring to plant any more."

Sakura looked at the barren garden. It was missing something. A splash of color, something to liven up the semi-frosted soil in this difficult season. She suddenly remembered the old woman's words.

"I'll be right back," she said to Itachi, bounding around the side of the house and through the glass doors. She jogged down the hall to her room and unraveled a scroll. She summoned a small chest of sentimental items she'd collected throughout her travels and proceeded to dig through it, pulling out a carved wooden box.

Sakura reappeared a few minutes later at the vegetable garden with the box. Itachi looked at it curiously. She lifted the lid and removed the Blue Rose of Kurobako, unchanged after all this time.

"What's that?" Itachi asked, taken by its unusual beauty.

"Do you remember the friends I mentioned losing when you advised me to cut my hair?"

Itachi nodded. Sakura continued, "Well, they died for this. It never withers or fades. I'd like to plant it in the garden as a gift to you and in memory of them."

His eyes were soft. "I'm sure they would have been honored. I certainly am."

A few minutes later, the Rose stood proudly in the center of the little garden, perfect petals in full bloom like always. Sakura admired it, bittersweet, knowing that it would last if nothing else in this world would.

Itachi's hand touched the small of her back. "Thank you, Sakura."

She wanted so badly to wrap her arms around his neck, but she restrained herself. She offered him a
Sakura cooked supper that night with Itachi's help (though perhaps the event would be described more accurately the other way around). Kisame has once more invaded her chair, so they sat next to each other again at the table. Deidara grunted into his stew in approval.

"I guess some good can come out of even the strangest relationships after all, yeah."

Sakura blushed.

After dinner, Sakura did the dishes with Itachi. "I should go find Kisame and check the cure I've been working on." Itachi raised an eyebrow. "Er — long story short, he's my anti-virus guinea pig," she shrugged.

Itachi shook his head, chuckling under his breath. "Will you meet me in my room afterwards?"

Sakura sucked in her lip hopefully. "Should I bring my pajamas?"

"You may sleep over, but there will be no need for pajamas."

She broke into a grin and ran out of the kitchen, impulsively smacking him with her dish towel as she passed. Itachi rubbed his rear, baffled, unsure what to think of such behavior. A minute later she knocked on Kisame's door.

"Come in," the shark-nin called. She slipped inside.

"Hey there, Pinkie." Kisame looked up from his bed, where he sat sharpening his kunai. "You are aware that this is not Itachi-san's room, right?"

Sakura rolled her eyes. "Will the teasing never end?"

Kisame chuckled. "Only when it gets boring."

She suppressed a sigh. "I'm here to examine you."

"Well then, examine away." He smirked.

Sakura rolled her eyes again. She peered into Kisame's pupils with her pocket flashlight. "Any side effects or symptoms? Nausea, fever?"

"Nope," he said, mouth open so she could check out his throat.

"Good," she replied, grabbing his wrist to measure his pulse. Everything was normal. "Neck, please."

Kisame turned his head and lowered his collar. The mark was gone.

"Oh my god," Sakura exclaimed, dropping her flashlight. "I did it!"

Kisame turned to the mirror above his bureau. "Wow. Hey, thanks Pinkie. I didn't really think you could pull it off."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," she remarked dryly. "No need to go on about what a genius I am or anything."
He laughed. "Well, good luck on whatever project you've been working so hard on, genius. Now scram, I've got z's to catch. And I believe you have some celebrating to do anyway."

Sakura blushed and closed the door behind herself.

"Itachi! It worked!" she burst into his room.

Itachi looked up from his book. He sat cross-legged on the bed, shoulders relaxed, eyes soft and black behind his glasses. Sakura was reminded of the first time she had seen him back in Kirigakure, when he was so unguarded. This time, he smiled when he saw her. She ran to the bed.

His eyes widened slightly. "You mean...?"

"Yes! I can't be sure it will work on the more evolved strain, but based on the evidence I have it certainly seems to work on the primitive one!"

Itachi mulled this over. "We'll need to test it, then."

Sakura nodded, exuberance fading a bit. "Not sure how we're gonna pull that off, actually..."

He cupped his chin in thought. "I have an idea, but you won't like it."

"Why's that?"

"Because we'll need to add yet another offense to your lengthy list of criminal activities."

"I'm in this far already," she half-shrugged in resignation. "But if this is a contest of criminal misbehavior I believe I lost to you long ago, Uchiha."

He chuckled quietly. "I'm not bad at competitions."

"And so humble, too," Sakura quipped, reaching forward to slide the band from his hair. Inky locks spilled loosely across his shoulders. Itachi raised his eyebrows at the bold action, but he didn't protest.

Sakura sat back to admire him. "I kinda like it down."

Itachi looked amused. "What if I said I prefer short hair on women? Would you cut yours?"

"No way!"

He snatched the hairband back before Sakura realized it was gone. He began tying his hair into a ponytail again. "Then mine can stay up."

Her eyes widened. "Tease!"

"No, Sakura," he replied, voice low. "If I was teasing you, you'd know it."

A tremor rolled down her spine. "I don't do well with teasing, Itachi." She tried hard not to stare at his mouth.

His hand shot out and unzipped her shirt in a flash. Her jaw dropped.

"I think you can handle it."
"If we have to kidnap a test subject, why can't it be Naruto or Kakashi-sensei or someone else who could at least help us fight later?" Sakura asked unhappily as she flew through the trees beside Itachi the following day.

"They're too conspicuous. The others would notice if the village's best jounin disappeared, and they'd definitely take note if the kyuubi went missing. Besides, would you really care to explain to your old teammates why we're working together?"

Sakura chewed her lip. "Naruto would understand if I just explained your history — "

Itachi shook his head. "I don't want my past explained. He wouldn't believe you anyway, Sakura. Confined to the village under the virus' control, he has not seen the same shinobi world as you have in these last few years; he would assume you were brainwashed by me."

Sakura's brow furrowed. This was more complicated than she thought. "Still. I feel terrible. I wish it could be anyone but her. She's so sweet, and she always looked up to me. I feel responsible for her."

"That's why it must be her. From what you've told me, she's naive, still relatively new to the village, and could disappear for some time without drawing too much suspicion."

Sakura sighed. She knew his points were valid, but she didn't like it. "Poor Eri-chan," she muttered.

Itachi gave her a sympathetic look. "We won't hurt her. We need her to save the others. I'm sure if she was herself she'd be proud to play such an important role in rescuing Konoha."

Sakura nodded and shook off the feeling of foreboding.

The following afternoon Sakura and Itachi arrived at the gates of Konoha, henged as Ino and Daisuke (the male nurse from Sakura's section of the hospital) respectively. Sakura dug in her hip pouch and pulled out two green pills. Itachi raised an eyebrow at her.

"They're to inoculate us against the virus. I know you've been all over, but that doesn't necessarily mean you've picked up an immunity somewhere. You're still from Fire Country originally, and you're already ill to boot. I don't want to take any chances with you," she said sternly. Itachi accepted the pill from her with thanks and swallowed.

They approached the front gates together. Izumo and Kotetsu glanced up. They jumped down from the guard platform immediately, weapons drawn.

"Ino and Daisuke are both working at the hospital now. Who are you?" Izumo demanded, making seals, while Kotetsu reached for the emergency bell. Sakura made one hand seal and they both froze. Their glazed eyes stared out at the forest behind them, caught in her genjutsu. Itachi opened the gates and walked through, Sakura following.

"You're getting better at that," he commented in approval.

"Coming from my teacher, I'm going to say that compliment was self-serving." Itachi looked unimpressed. Sakura hid a snicker as they set off for the hospital.

They passed through the busy streets together, keeping their heads down but looking casual. Sakura caught the familiar scent of yakiniku wafted through the air when they passed Chouji's favorite barbecue place. She inhaled, wishing they could stop for lunch. "When was the last time you've visited Konoha?" she asked curiously.

"Years ago, when Kisame and I were tasked with kidnapping Naruto-kun." He looked around
"Yeah," Sakura said, answering his unspoken thought. "I miss it too."

"It feels very different from how I remember it. It's too quiet."

Sakura nodded. "That's the virus working. We'll get this place back to normal for sure, don't worry."

She smiled at him with determination.

Once they reached the large white building of their destination, Sakura opened the double doors and lead the way into the antiseptic lobby. She went straight to the receptionist's desk. "Hey, Akane-san. Have you seen Eri-chan around?"

Akane blinked at her in surprise. "Oh, Ino-san. I thought you were in surgery with her already."

"I'm running late," Sakura replied without missing a beat. "Which section is it?"

"Operating room B on the second floor."

"Thanks, Akane-san!" Sakura called over her shoulder, already striding towards the elevator with Itachi in tow.

Once inside the enclosed space, she turned to Itachi and shook her head in bewilderment. "I can't believe she's doing surgery now! I'm afraid my intern is going to surpass me." Itachi merely looked amused. "You'll have to lure her out since I'm disguised as Ino," she continued. "I know Daisuke's not in surgery with them, that lazy slouch."

Itachi nodded. "We should wait for them to finish their operation so as not to jeopardize the life of the patient."

"Good thinking," Sakura agreed as the elevator doors opened with a ping. She glanced up and down the empty hallway. She pointed to operating room B.

"They're in there. Why don't you wait here for them to come out? I'll be in the empty exam room next door. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

Sakura slipped into the dark room and flicked on the fluorescent light overhead. She sat on the stool, spinning in idle circles, trying not to remember how the last time she'd been in this room Hinata had nearly sneezed on her. That sneeze could've been the downfall of Konoha. Time passed, maybe a half hour or so — she hadn't thought to look at the clock on the wall when she first got in, she was so used to telling time by the sun. Finally, Sakura heard voices drifting in from the hall.

"Sorry about this Eri-chan, but the patient requested you specifically."

"It's okay, Daisuke-senpai. I'd be happy to take a look."

"She's right in here —"

Sakura stood, just enough chakra summoned to her fist to knock the petite girl out with one blow. The door creaked open to reveal Eri's round face next to Daisuke's. Something unexpected glimmered in her blue eyes when they landed on Sakura. Sakura swung her fist —

It swiped through empty air, cracking into the plaster doorframe. Sakura spun around. Her jaw opened in shock.
On the far side of the room, leaning casually against the wall, was the figure of Yakushi Kabuto.

"The Yamanaka girl doesn't hit like that. I was wondering when you'd show your face here again, Sakura-san." He flashed her a smile full of white teeth.

Sakura's mind whirled. What?! Kabuto's still alive? He seemed so much the type to follow his master to the grave...but he's a medic-nin, and a researcher to boot. He naturally had access to Orochimaru's notes as his main assistant...he could easily have engineered the virus! She swore inwardly, snapping into a defensive posture and releasing her henge.

"What have you done with Eri-chan?" she spat.

Kabuto laughed genially, hands in his pockets. "You still haven't figured it out? And I thought you were clever, Sakura-san." His glasses glinted.

Her heart sank. "It can't be — "

"Eri-chan never existed. I infiltrated your village three years ago." He offered an apologetic smile.

Sakura was thunderstruck. How long has his plan been in the works?

Itachi recovered first, dropping his henge as well. "What are your plans for Konoha?"

Kabuto frowned at him. "Yes, a minor snag...I was not expecting you to bring reinforcements. Especially not one so unforeseeable as Itachi-san. I had Sakura-san pegged as a loyal Konoha shinobi till the very end. I wonder what brought you two together? One can only speculate..." he trailed off.

Sakura flushed. "There's a hell of a lot you don't understand, Kabuto."

His polite expression hardened around the edges. "That's rather rich, coming from someone who still hasn't realized why I'm here."

"I'm about to find out!" Sakura shouted, charging. Kabuto ducked as Sakura's fist swung into the wall behind him, collapsing it into rubble. Itachi's eyes swirled into the Mangekyou.

"Yes, I'm afraid I'm outmatched here, and that Sharingan is a significant problem. I'll just have to take care of both of you at once," Kabuto remarked coolly, adjusting his glasses. "Suiton: Suiryūdan no Jutsu!"

A huge water dragon burst to life. Too big for the room, its liquid body took out two walls and the ceiling when it appeared. It destroyed the west wing of the hospital with a thrash of it's tail. Sakura scoffed at the gigantic monster. "If you think a few water tricks are enough to stop me and Itachi — " she began, only to see the blonde curls of Eri disappearing out of sight around the corner.

"Intruders! Akatsuki!" Eri's childlike voice rang through what remained of the halls.

"Fucking hell," Sakura growled, making seals. She smashed her palms to the ground, calling forth the steel and stone built into the hospital's foundations. A rock wall descended like a guillotine, shaking the building and splitting the dragon in two. The separate halves writhed independently, the dragon still very much alive.

"Leave it to me," Itachi instructed, Sharingan whirling.

"But your fire jutsu is weak against it!" Sakura pointed out, wondering what he was planning. Itachi
shot her a patronizing look.

"I've been doing this a lot longer than you, Sakura." He stood straight and looked the water dragon dead in the eye. The beast seized up. The front half turned to attack its own back half with a deafening roar. It opened massive jaws and swallowed its own backside before hunkering down to gaze at Itachi, docile as a lamb.

Sakura stared at him in awe. "I had no idea you could cast genjutsu on a ninjutsu technique!" She exclaimed, vaulting over the debris towards the east wing. Itachi followed close on her heels, half a water dragon floating passively after them.

Itachi brushed it off. "I can cast genjutsu on anything that has chakra and enough of a brain to be capable of movement."

Sakura's admiring grin was shattered upon reaching the next corridor. The far end opened up into a lobby area, where they were greeted with the sight of the entire hospital population packed in front of them. Even the patients were out of bed, prepared to fight and die. Sakura saw more than a few familiar faces: Shizune and Ino in their medic uniforms, Gai-sensei in a hospital gown, Rock Lee and Tenten brandishing get-well-soon bouquets threateningly. Kiba vaulted onto Akamaru's back. The cogs were visibly turning in Shikamaru's brain as Chouji blew himself up to disproportionate size, towering over the others. A dozen white ANBU masks were interspersed throughout the sea of faces. Sakura could hear shouts of alarm go through the crowd, repeating her and Itachi's names in fear.

_Not again_, she groaned inwardly. She'd have to trust Konoha citizens to fend for themselves; there was no way they were getting out of this enclosed space without doing some serious structural damage. The crowd began to surge down the narrow hall toward them. Itachi unleashed the water dragon at the same time Sakura leaped straight up into the air. Rock shield encasing the toe of her boot, she smashed it into the ceiling with a thunderous crack.

A shockwave rippled along the ceiling, bursting rows of fluorescent lights and raining sparks. Windows shattered as the corridor's walls bulged and shrank. The force zoomed towards the crowd, water dragon barreling along beneath it.

The duo attacks swept the wall of people aside, scattering them in all directions. The earth shook, plaster spilling from above as the support structure caved. The hospital's three upper stories began to fold in on the first floor. Sakura called forth a rock barrier to shield herself, Itachi, and as many villagers as she could reach as they fell.

It was chaos. Ninja swarmed like ants over the decimated hospital. They came from nowhere. Some dug comrades out of the debris, but most descended on Sakura and Itachi in droves. It seemed every chuunin, jounin and ANBU member was there. The entire village attacked as one.

Kabuto was nowhere to be seen.

"Itachi, we have to get out of here or we'll destroy the whole village!" Sakura shouted over the roar, beating back the tide of human beings with her fists. Beside her, Itachi nodded. His Mangekyou stirred to life in his red eyes.

Suddenly, the battlefield stilled. Like rows of dominoes, every shinobi within a mile collapsed where they stood. Itachi bent double, clutching his eye. Blood ran through his fingers. "A genjutsu of that scale won't hold long," he breathed, straining.

"Then let's get out of here!" Sakura exclaimed, preparing her body flicker technique. Itachi bent to
lift an unconscious body over his shoulder and grabbed Sakura's outstretched hand just as they dissolved into hundreds of pink cherry blossom petals, scattered by the wind.
Chapter Nineteen: Crescendo

Sakura opened her eyes with a pounding headache. She looked around. They were standing in the middle of a shallow stream, wetlands all around as far as the eye could see. In three jumps her body flicker jutsu had taken them clear across Fire Country into River Country, but she just didn't have the chakra reserves to get them all the way to the base without risking exhaustion. She extricated her boots from the muddy riverbed with a wet squelch, turning to Itachi.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." He blinked blood from his eyes. Sakura caught a red rivulet running down his cheek and wiped it with her sleeve.

"Your genjutsu was amazing back there," she gushed. "I had no idea you could —" she cut off upon noticing a pair of long, slender legs dangling from Itachi's shoulder. "Oh, wow, when did you have time to grab a test subject?" Her heart stopped when she caught sight of the kunoichi's long blonde hair. Her mouth opened at the sight of the young woman's face.

"You fucking kidnapped Ino-pig!" she yelled in panic.

Itachi shifted guiltily. "You know her?"

"Know her? She's my best non-teammate friend!" Sakura groaned.

"Sorry. I didn't mean — she was just...there."

Sakura tugged on her braid in distress, sucking in a breath. "No, it's not your fault. We need her. I just wish we could've stolen someone I had a less...personal relationship with."

"It'll be fine, Sakura," he tried to reassure her. "I'll help you explain the situation when she wakes if you'd like."

Oh yeah, that'll go over big. Sakura forced a smile. She glanced at her unconscious friend uncomfortably. "I suppose we should tie her up before she wakes from that genjutsu."

"There's chakra-suppressing rope in my pack. I intend to keep her subdued until we reach the compound."

"Good," Sakura said, mouth tight. If the cure worked, Ino would be so furious when she woke that
Sakura wanted her surrounded by four sturdy walls. The thicker the better.

She shuddered.

"Who the fuck is that, yeah?" Deidara asked, pouring tea onto the kitchen counter next to his glass. He noticed his mistake and swore, grabbing a dish towel.

"It's a long story," Sakura grumbled. She raised a questioning eyebrow at Itachi. "What do you want to do with her?"

"Eww, don't tell me you two are into that kind of thing," Deidara scoffed. Sakura's jaw dropped. Even Itachi looked appalled.

"What exactly are you implying?" she bit out.

"Dead chicks don't do it for me, yeah."

Sakura turned tomato red. "She's not dead! Just unconscious!"

"Same difference. I like them awake, thanks."

"She's not here for that, okay?" she said, resisting the urge to strangle the snarky bastard. "I just need to keep her for a while to run some tests."

"All prisoners go in the basement," he replied imperiously.

Sakura was fairly sure steam was issuing from her ears. "She's not a prisoner!"

Deidara eyed her the way you'd eye a homeless person in a tinfoil hat. "Okay then. All bound, unconscious 'house guests' go in the basement too, yeah."

Sakura turned to Itachi. He inclined his head. "That is generally the policy. If you're not comfortable with it, perhaps we could — "

She interrupted with a deflated sigh. "No, it's fine. I guess we don't really have a choice. I'd prefer to keep her in my room, but we'd have no way to contain her for a long period of time without using a jutsu or something."

Itachi thought. "In that case, we could at least move some furniture into the prison to make her more comfortable."

"...you mean the basement," Sakura corrected flatly.

Itachi didn't blink. "Of course. The basement."

Sakura chewed her lip. "Alright. You hold her, I'll go move my bed."

She turned and left the kitchen. She caught the tail end of Deidara's snide remark as she walked down the hall.

"...see the day the infamous Uchiha Itachi got bossed around by a girl, mm."

Sakura's eye twitched.
An hour later, Sakura had showered, changed, and stuffed her double bed into the cramped cell in the basement. She'd had to rip off the headboard to fit it through the narrow doorway. She reasoned it was worth it, if only to cover the horrible drain in the middle of the sloping cement floor. She would have liked to move her desk down too but there simply wasn't enough space. She went back upstairs. Itachi was in his room, Ino on the bed, blonde hair splayed across the pillow. A tray of food sat on the desk.

"I made a sandwich and fruit for her. I assume she'll be hungry when she wakes; it's a common side effect of this genjutsu."

Sakura couldn't help but smile. "Thank you, Itachi."

He quirked the corner of his mouth at her. "Shall I move her now?"

"Sure. I'll meet you downstairs, I just have to grab my medical supplies."

A few minutes later, Itachi laid Ino carefully across Sakura's bed while she prepped the injection. Sakura swabbed her arm with an alcohol pad and slipped the needle in. "I really hope this works."

"Me too."

They left the cell and slid the bars shut. Sakura winced at the heavy sound of Itachi bolting the door behind them. He noticed, of course. "It's necessary until we know how she'll react to this situation."

"Yeah, I know." Sakura sat down on the basement steps to wait.

"I'm dispelling the genjutsu now. It might take some time for her to wake. I'll be upstairs — I fear my presence may disturb her at first. Call me if you need anything."

"Okay."

Itachi disappeared up the stairs. Sakura twiddled her thumbs for a half hour or so, fighting down her nerves until she saw Ino's form stir. She stood up and gripped the bars, peering in. "Ino-pig? Ino?"

Ino blinked. She sat up and touched her head tentatively. "Wha — ?"

"Ino-pig! Are you okay?"

"I-is that you, Forehead?" she squinted, wincing.

Sakura almost wept with joy when she heard the familiar nickname for the first time in nearly three years. When Ino was infected, she never used it. "Yes, it's me! How do you feel? Any nausea or pain?"

"I feel like I had the best party of my life last night that I'll never remember. My head is killing me."

She rubbed her fingers against her temple gingerly, looking around in earnest. "Oh, Sage of the Six Paths on a pogo stick — we're captured, aren't we?"

"Erm — not exactly," Sakura began, shifting guiltily. Ino's eyes widened.

"Did some enemy drug us? My memory is weird. Wait — wait. I remember, it was Akatsuki! Two of them invaded out of nowhere... it was... it was..." she trailed off, realization creeping across her face. It came slowly at first, as though she couldn't quite believe herself, but gathered momentum like a wave driving towards shore. She jerked forward as though hit with a physical blow before turning piercing blue eyes on Sakura. Her jaw dropped in horror.
"What the fuck! Sakura, you — you're Akatsuki! And...and you've been Akatsuki for like a year now! But how the hell is that possible? My memory makes no sense, you can't be a missing-nin! Sakura, what the fuck is going on!?"

Sakura's whole body was made of lead. Ino was reacting in the worst way possible; she had to defuse the situation before it spiraled further out of control. "Calm down Ino, it's a little complicated — "

"That was not the right answer to that question!" Ino scrambled off the bed and hit the floor with a thud, scooting backwards as far away from Sakura as physically possible until her back was pinned against the stone wall. Her knees pulled up to her chin in an unconscious defensive posture. "Oh my god, look at you! Your hands are free! You're not even in a cell! You're — wait. Holy shit. Wait, wait. Did you fucking kidnap me, Sakura?! How could you? I'm your best friend!" Her tied arms flailed. Sakura was genuinely afraid the blonde would have an aneurysm.

"Ino, you seriously need to get a hold of yourself — "

"Oh my god. Wait. No. This doesn't add up. You're the absolute last person who would ever defect. There's no way someone like you could survive as a missing-nin. You'd be caught by ANBU immediately."

Sakura rolled her eyes reflexively. "ANBU aren't so great," she retorted before mentally kicking herself. "Way to dig a hole at the bottom of your grave, idiot!"

Ino stared at her as if she had two heads, one of which was shaped like Rock Lee.

Sakura slid her hands down her face, trying to ignore the feeling of her stomach attempting to eat itself. "Look, Ino, this is hard to explain, but — "

"Wait, I got it!" Ino leaped unsteadily to her feet, expression dawning in sudden understanding. "You've been brainwashed by Akatsuki! It's the only plausible explanation, classic Stockholm Syndrome!"

Sakura resisted the urge to bang her head against the bars. "Ino. I have not been brainwashed by Akatsuki. Nor anyone."

"That's exactly what a brainwashed person would say!"

"Ino, shut up and listen for a change!" Sakura gripped the cell bars so hard her fingers left indentations. Ino gawked.

Sakura took a deep breath. She had to make her understand. "Everyone in Konoha has been overrun by a virus designed by Kabuto. That's why your memory is funny — you've been controlled for the last three years. I left to escape infection and find a cure. Which I just discovered, and used on you. So you're welcome."

Ino stared at her, cogs turning. Finally, she spoke. "Sakura...that has to be the biggest load of bull — "

"It is not bullshit!" Sakura responded shrilly. "It's the truth!"

Ino scoffed. "Why the hell would Kabuto even do something like that? Orochimaru is dead! And even if he did, why would you need to randomly join Akatsuki to rescue us?"

Sakura fidgeted. "Okay, I can't answer the first question yet, because I don't know, and the second
Sakura? Is everything okay?" A low voice floated from above.

"It's fine, Itachi," she ground out, pinching the bridge of her nose. Ino stared at her in utter shock, frozen.

Heavy footsteps echoed off the walls as the hem of Itachi's red and black cloak appeared on the stairs. The rest of the man came into view slowly as he descended one step at a time, tray of food in hand. He studied Ino with an unreadable expression. She gazed back at him, paralyzed with silent terror, looking for all the world like a girl about to die of a heart attack. He leaned over fractionally to whisper out of the corner of his mouth to Sakura. "I can hear her screaming from upstairs. Do you need me to restrain her?"

Sakura shook her head frantically.

Without another word, Itachi slipped the tray of food through the slot in the bars. He slowly retreated up the steps, glancing back at Ino once over his shoulder, stone-faced. The door closed behind him with a heavy thud.

Ino looked at Sakura with open revulsion.

Cold sweat trickled down Sakura's back. She cleared her throat. "Ino —"

"Go to hell," the venomous blonde spat. She crawled back onto the bed and curled into a tight ball, her back to Sakura.

The words sliced Sakura open. She clutched an arm across her abdomen, taking a moment to steady herself. Unable to bear looking at Ino not-looked at her, she turned and left.

Since her bed was now in Ino's possession, her legs carried her to Itachi's room on autopilot. She moved like she was floating through a dream, a horrible nightmare of a dream. She needed to lie down. She swung his door open, forgetting to knock.

Itachi stood as soon as he saw her face. "Sakura?"

"That...could have gone better." Her voice cracked. She fell onto Itachi's bed stiffly and curled into her own version of Ino's ball, facing the wall. She felt the bed shift as Itachi sat down behind her.

"Did the drug work?"

"Yes," Sakura managed, going into clinical so she didn't have to think anymore. "She has her memory from during the time she was controlled, but it doesn't quite make sense to her...probably because she never got to respond emotionally to various events as she naturally would. She thinks I've been brainwashed by Akatsuki."

There was heavy pause. "...sorry," he murmured.

Sakura closed her eyes, a kind of fog numbing the pain in her head. Her turbulent thoughts switched gears. "She brought up a good point. Why is Kabuto doing all this when his master is dead? It was Orochimaru who hated Konoha."

Itachi hesitated. "Sakura, I don't think Kabuto is working alone. He is the type who exists for others."
Sakura opened her eyes at this and sat up, twisting to look at Itachi. "What do you mean? Who else could he be working for?" Her eyes widened as a horrible, horrible thought occurred to her. "Orochimaru is dead, right? Surely some witness somewhere has seen his body?"

Itachi just shook his head. "I don't know."

Sakura groaned and gripped her head in her hands, turning away again. She was so overwhelmed that she was sure she would explode into a million tiny bits of stress, if not for the human presence behind her keeping her grounded. She felt Itachi slowly undoing the plaits in her hair, her muscles relaxing incrementally as his hands worked their way up her back. She closed her eyes and let the exhaustion take her.

Sakura slept for the rest of the evening and on into the night. She woke before dawn the next day. Her boots and pants were gone; the blanket covering her rose and fell with Itachi's breathing. Moving quietly so as not to wake him, she slipped out of bed and groped for her pants in the dark. Unable to find them, she rummaged through Itachi's drawer and tugged on a pair of his instead, hoping he wouldn't mind. She made her way downstairs.

In the predawn darkness of the kitchen, Sakura made breakfast for herself and Ino while the coffee pot brewed. She poured two mugs full and carried the tray down the steps to the basement, a kind of resigned fear pooling in her belly uncomfortably.

Ino stirred at the sound of the door creaking open. Sakura slid the tray under the food slot.

"I brought you breakfast. And coffee. I know you're not a huge oatmeal fan, but it's all we have right now. Sorry."

Silence answered her.

"You really should eat," Sakura said, frowning with worry. She scuffed her bare foot awkwardly against the cold floor.

Ino refused to even look at her.

Sakura ignored the twist in her gut and sank down onto the floor with a sigh. She sipped her coffee in silence for a moment, gathering the will to speak.

"Look, Ino. I understand this must seem incomprehensible to you. You've been my best friend for forever, and though I can't force you to believe me, I wish you'd just trust me. If you won't, you give me no choice but to keep you in here until I get things sorted out with Konoha. And to do that I'll need to examine you for a period of time. I can't just go running off to inject every man, woman and child with an untested drug, no matter how well it appears to work. There could be unforeseen negative consequences."

Ino finally turned to glare at her with eyes that could burn a hole in a person. "Is that why I'm here? Akatsuki needs a lab rat for some nefarious scheme? Just what are you planning to do to my village, Sakura?"

"I'm going to save our village, like I said," she strained through gritted teeth.

Ino scowled. Beyond the aggressive expression, Sakura could see the betrayal in her eyes.

She's never going to understand your relationship with Akatsuki, Sakura finally admitted, crestfallen. No one will. And can you even blame them? Would you have understood such a situation
**before you found yourself up to your neck in it?**

Sakura's stomach plummeted. Even if she and Itachi saved Konoha and restored everyone, she could never truly tell anyone about her experiences here. Not even Naruto. They couldn't understand. Suddenly, Sakura felt more alienated from the village than she had during her entire time as a missing-nin. When (if?) this ordeal ended, how was she supposed to go home? Where was her home now? Would she be welcomed after all the crimes she committed? Not all of them were directly in service to Konoha...and even if they did accept her back, what about her friends in Akatsuki? How could she leave them, just like that? And Itachi...

Sakura's breath hitched, brain rejecting the thought automatically. It was pointless to worry about that. He might not even be alive long enough to miss. A kind of heaviness settled in her stomach, like she swallowed blocks of ice.

Her feelings must have been written on her face, because Ino's hostile expression softened imperceptibly. Against her will, Sakura sucked in a hopeful breath.

"So...are you willing to cooperate in an examination?"

Ino's eyebrow twitched. "You'll just restrain me if I say no, won't you?"

Sakura nodded tightly.

Ino scoffed. "That's hardly a choice then."

"So you'll cooperate? I don't want to use force on you, Ino," Sakura pleaded.

Ino paused, looking Sakura dead in the eye. She nodded stiffly.

Sakura breathed a sigh of relief. She removed the key from her pocket. "Could you put your hands against the far wall please? I'm coming in."

Looking bitter, Ino turned and pressed her bound wrists to the stone. Sakura unsealed, unlocked the door and entered, closing it behind herself. She approached Ino with caution. "Could you put your hands against the far wall please? I'm coming in."

Looking bitter, Ino turned and pressed her bound wrists to the stone. Sakura unsealed, unlocked the door and entered, closing it behind herself. She approached Ino with caution. "You can turn around now. If you'd just have a seat —"

Ino's heel flew at her face. Sakura ducked just in time, feeling the rush of wind as her sandal whizzed past her ear. Sakura's own foot darted out at Ino's legs, intending to swipe her feet out from under her. Ino jumped her attack and threw herself at Sakura, trying to headbutt her —

"Goddammit, Ino!" Sakura swore, screwing up her face in concentration. The blonde collapsed to the ground, caught in her genjutsu.

Sakura lifted her unconscious friend bridal-style and placed her on the bed.

"Why do you have to be so damn difficult, Pig?" she muttered, tearing her hair in frustration, though she wasn't really surprised

She got to work with a long-suffering sigh, measuring and recording Ino's vitals. She probed her system with chakra. Everything felt normal except for inflammation around the skull, which was probably the source of the migraine Ino complained about. Sakura healed it. She would have to come back every day to repeat the process for a significant amount of time to be sure there were no other side effects.
Over a month crawled by. Sakura planned their infiltration by day, started production on an obscene amount of antiviral medication, and slept in Itachi's room at night. After the last two bijuu debacles, Leader-sama was laying low for a while, restricting them to fundraising missions — a lucky break for which Sakura was extremely grateful. During downtime, she and Itachi trained like lunatics, played go, and worked on the garden together. She couldn't bring herself to really enjoy any of these things though, with thoughts of Ino and Konoha always at the back of her mind. They weighed her down like a physical burden, creating a kind of heaviness in every movement. If it weren't for Itachi's support Sakura supposed she would have collapsed under the weight of the world already.

Occasionally Deidara and Kisame would grumble about the prisoner in the basement. No one was comfortable with her being there, but they respected Sakura's business enough to drop it in the end. Sakura supposed that if any of them ever wanted to hold someone hostage in the future she'd be unable to complain — until she realized that if her mission was successful she'd never have to worry about it, because she wouldn't even be around. She grew more depressed. Ino, too, became increasingly listless as the days passed, eating little and speaking less. Sakura was really beginning to worry about her friend's mental health, but she knew better than to trust her enough to risk taking her out for fresh air.

One day Sakura sat with Itachi in the library. She had just lost her third game in a row against him and was grumbling under her breath. He looked at her in that too-observant way of his.

"How long do you intend to wait, Sakura?"

She was startled by the question. "What do you mean?"

"You haven't seen any changes in your friend's health for weeks. Are you still truly unsure of the drug's safety, or are you delaying the inevitable for other reasons?"

Sakura looked down, unable to meet his gaze. She knew this conversation was long past due. "I suppose you're right. I guess I'm just afraid."

"Of?"

"Everything. Failure...and success as well."

Itachi shot her a knowing look. "I understand. I feel the same way. But we both know it must be done."

Sakura picked at the wood of the go board with her thumbnail. "Yeah. I know," she sighed, slumping. "When do you want to do it?"

Itachi gave her a careful glance. "Is tomorrow too soon? I fear Leader will want to make another attempt to capture the seven tails shortly. We should act before then."

Too soon! Too soon! her inner self screamed. But his logic was difficult to refute. She gulped. "I guess sooner is better. We might as well get it over with. I think it's the waiting that's killing me."

Itachi nodded. "I think that's a wise decision." But Sakura knew him well enough by now to recognize the glimmer of unease in his black eyes for what it was.

That night they tumbled into bed together with equal parts passion and desperation, the threat of the coming dawn hanging over their heads. But Sakura couldn't fool herself into believing that she could stay here with Itachi forever, no matter how prolonged the night. As they moved together, for an instant their pleasure was heart wrenchingly beautiful, perfect — then the moment passed, and it was gone as though it had never been.
The next day dawned bright and cold in spite of Sakura's wishes. She held Itachi close for a long time beneath the covers, reluctant to let go.

They dressed and got ready in silence. Sakura made her way downstairs to fetch Ino, growing colder with each descending step.

"We're going to save Konoha today. I'll need to take you with us at least part of the way. I don't want to leave you here in case I'm unsuccessful for some reason and can't return to get you. Since I don't trust you to walk with us, I have to knock you out for the journey. I promise not to leave you anywhere near the danger zone, however."

Ino looked at her, sullen and silent. Sakura could tell she still didn't believe her, but was too depressed to care much about what Sakura may be up to anymore. She took a deep breath and cast her genjutsu.

She swung Ino's limp body over her shoulder and made her way upstairs, depositing her on the couch. She gathered all her packed belongings, weapons and personal items and sealed them away in scrolls. She cleared out her lab and her did one last sweep of her empty bedroom before she went to say goodbye to each of the Akatsuki, having informed them casually at dinner last night that she was leaving to take care of some personal business.

Kisame gave her a wary look when she leaned in for a hug. "Why so sentimental, Pinkie?" he asked. "You'll be back...right?"

Sakura forced a smile at him. "Of course. I might be gone for a little while, but I could never abandon you guys. What would you do without me?" she lied, tacking on a laugh. It sounded hollow even to her own ears.

Kisame gave her an unreadable look. "If you'll be a while, maybe we should cover up your absence from Leader-sama?"

Sakura smiled tightly. "Sure, couldn't hurt." She didn't really expect it would matter; once she was gone for long enough Pain would figure it out anyway.

Even Deidara and Tobi were perturbed by the atypical exchange. Tobi, for once, was tactful enough to stay quiet. She couldn't resist giving each of them one last hug in the foyer as she and Itachi grabbed their cloaks off the wall by the door. Sakura briefly thought about leaving hers behind, but couldn't bear it. It was *her* cloak now, for better or worse. She'd keep it as a memento at the very least.

"We'll miss you while you're gone, Sakura-san," Tobi piped up. Deidara nodded in rare agreement.

"Take care of yourself, yeah." The explosives master scratched his neck awkwardly.

"I can't promise you'll always be welcome back here, depending on...circumstances," Kisame added gruffly. "But I will say there's a very good chance of it as long as you bring beer."

Sakura's laughter was more genuine this time. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind. I hope to see you all again soon."

They watched from the doorway as Sakura followed Itachi (carrying the unconscious Ino) out into the melting snow, probably the last snow of the season. She hid her face from view. She reasoned that it must be raining, because her cheeks were wet.
Sakura turned to look over her shoulder at the base that had been her home for the last strange, awful and unexpectedly enriching year of her life. She wondered if it would really be the last time she'd ever see it.

Sakura and Itachi dropped Ino off a few miles outside Konoha, where they knew she could find her way back to the village easily upon waking. It was early spring and the air was warming up already, but Sakura left her friend covered in a thin blanket just in case. She and Itachi continued on towards their final destination in silence.

Though the huge quantity of antiviral drug was sealed in a scroll, Sakura's pack felt like it weighed a thousand tons. She shifted it uncomfortably. "Itachi, can we stop for a break?"

He turned at the sound of her voice and slowed to a standstill. "Is everything okay?"

Sakura sat down where she stood, cracking her neck. She removed her canteen to take a drink. "I guess."

Itachi shot her a look.

Sakura grimaced. "Okay, not really."

He exhaled, joining her among the leaves. "Tell me."

She picked at a loose thread on her sleeve. "I'm worried about the amount of syringes. I only have a few, and sharing needles is out the question —"

"Sakura, the hospital will have plenty of medical supplies for everyone."

"We destroyed it!"

He raised a brow. "More than a month ago; they've doubtlessly rebuilt. And you know as well as I do that emergency medical equipment is stored in bomb-proof bunkers underground. Konoha is a ninja village."

"Er — good point." She fiddled with the cap on her canteen.

"But that's not what you're really worried about," Itachi deduced. "We can't begin to think of curing the villagers until Kabuto is taken care of, as we discussed."

Sakura bit her lip. "I have this weird feeling that something awful is going to happen. I just wish we knew who he's working with, who we're up against! I keep getting this bad feeling that it's Oro —"

"Orochimaru is dead."

"But you can't be sure of that! Not without a corpse. And that bastard was so obsessed with immortality, what if —"

"Sakura, speculation will get us nowhere. You'll turn yourself into a ball of stress and be unable to function. Please calm down."

She blinked at him in surprise. Then she cracked a smile.

"What?" Itachi asked, wary.

"Nothing. You sound like Tsunade-shishou is all," she snickered.
He relaxed. "Don't you want to see her normal again? Along with all your teammates, and the rest of our village?"

Sakura's heart squeezed in her chest. "Yes, more than anything. I've missed them terribly."

"Then be brave, Sakura," he said, climbing to his feet and offering her a hand. "I'm here for you."
Sakura took it, allowing him to help her up. She studied his face for a long moment, lost in thought.
Itachi canted his head. "Yes?"

A smile broke across her face. "Did you know you're the nicest S-class criminal I've ever met, Itachi?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "You're my preferred S-class kunoichi as well."

She snorted. "Yeah, 'cause you know so many of us. So I beat Konan then? Hey, the best of two ain't bad."

"It's because you're the better kisser."

Sakura's eyes bulged. "Don't even joke!"

"On second thought, maybe not. My memory is —"

Sakura reached up to grab Itachi's collar with both hands. She pulled him to her lips. They stood there for an indeterminate moment, lost to each other.

Itachi broke off for breath. "It seems I was correct the first time."

Sakura chuckled, swatting him. "Come on, O' Infallible One. We have a village to save."

His lips curved at her. Sakura couldn't help but grin back — his smile was contagious.

Sakura and Itachi approached the gates of Konoha without bothering to henge this time. She prepared for a genjutsu before noticing something strange — the usual chatter of Izumo and Kotetsu was absent. Upon looking around, Sakura didn't see them anywhere.

"Itachi. The guards are gone. Something's up."

"Perhaps Kabuto sent scouts to patrol the area to inform him we were coming."

"Surely we would have noticed their presence. And why not redouble the effort to guard the front gates in that case? Leaving them unwatched is like inviting us in."

Itachi nodded tersely. "Yes, it's suspicious. Be careful."

Sakura took a deep breath and swung open the gates.

It looked like a scene from a children's picture book. There were happy faces everywhere; two old ladies sat on a park bench off to the right, one gesturing elaborately while the other made a surprised face. A group of children huddled around a magazine, pointing, mouths open in delighted chatter. A vendor in front of a stall selling carpets was in the middle of hanging his "back in five minutes" sign on the register. Everything looked utterly normal.
Except nobody moved.

Sakura went from person to person in alarm, studying their frozen faces. She recognized a few. She reached out to grab the wrist of a young girl who was bending to place a bowl of dog food on the ground. The girl had a faint pulse. Sakura put her hand in front of her nose. She was breathing.

Sakura turned to Itachi, dumbstruck. "They're statues. They're alive, but they're like mannequins. What the hell is Kabuto thinking?"

"We had better find him fast," Itachi answered, unease evident on his features.

They walked through the crowded, motionless streets, feeling like they had stepped into a still-life painting. The air was thick with unnatural silence; their footsteps echoed. The more Sakura looked, the creepier the frozen expressions became. The whole situation was uncanny, and more than a little surreal. Fear prickled at her spine.

They scoured the village for hours but saw no sign of Kabuto, nor anyone. The only movement was a black cat they startled out of hiding. It disappeared into the bushes at the foot of the Hokage Monument.

"We should check up there while we're here," Itachi said, glancing up at the mountain. Sakura bit her lip, inexplicably apprehensive. They climbed the long set of stairs carved into the rock beside the face of the First Hokage. She tried to swallow but her mouth was dry as sandpaper. The ascent took forever, but they finally reached the top. The viewing platform overlooking the village jutted out to their right. A rocky path on their left lead to the emergency safehouses. A few meters in front of them stood the imposing building of the Konoha Archive Library. No one was around.

Sakura had just turned to make her way back down the endless steps when Itachi caught her elbow. She felt the tension in his grip as he spun her around. Kabuto's glasses glinted from the darkness of the Archive Library's entrance.

"You're late," he said, stepping into the sunlight. The hair on the back of Sakura's neck stood up.

"What did you do to the villagers?" she growled.

Kabuto raised his slender eyebrows. "Why, nothing. They're all perfectly unharmed. For now." His smile was sharp enough to cut glass.

Sakura took a menacing step forward, but Itachi held his arm in front of her. Kabuto laughed.

"Patience, patience. I'm just holding them in place until our honored guest arrives." He glanced at his watch in amusement. "I summoned him as soon as you got here, so you won't have to wait long. He should be along any second."

As if on cue, slow footsteps echoed across the rock. Kabuto smirked, looking past them.

"Speak of the devil and he shall appear."

Sakura and Itachi exchanged a glance before dashing to the edge of the viewing platform. Sakura gripped the railing as she peered over the cliffside.

Striding purposefully up the side of the mountain across the Godaime's face was Uchiha Sasuke.
Chapter Twenty: Loyalty

As if on cue, footsteps echoed across the rock. Kabuto smirked, looking past them to the monument. "Speak of the devil and he shall appear."

Sakura and Itachi dashed to the edge of the viewing platform. Sakura gripped the railing as she peered over the cliffside.

Striding purposefully up the side of the mountain across the Godaime's face was Uchiha Sasuke.

"Sasuke." Itachi sucked in a breath as his brother lightly jumped the railing. "You...you're responsible for this?"

Sasuke wore a snow white cloak that contrasted with his inky hair. His face was stone, but there was a glimmer of life in his dead eyes when he considered them. Chills shot down Sakura's spine. He brushed the question aside.

"Kabuto."

In a flash, chakra-suppressing ropes shot out from under Kabuto's sleeves. They twisted around Sakura's body, binding her from the neck down.

"Sakura!" Itachi whipped his head around. Sakura shot him a meaningful look. She still had chakra in her head, and that was all she needed. She didn't struggle.

Something dark spasmed across Sasuke's face before he mastered himself. He stepped between them. "This is between you and I."

"Then why are you involving Konoha?"

Sasuke laughed, the sound high and false. "Don't bother acting like you're concerned for this pathetic village. You can't fool me. I know what you are."

Itachi's mouth was a tight line.

"You die today. But first you will know torment like none other. It's time to face your sins, brother. Today is the day I restore the clan. Are you excited? I'm sure they're dying to see you again."
The blood drained from Itachi's face. "Impossible."

Sasuke's lips twisted into a parody of a grin. If he had been recognizable as the boy Sakura once knew years ago, now he was a different being entirely. An unstable, deadly air hung about his person, like a man teetering on the edge of the abyss. She wondered just what had finally unhinged him so, fearing she knew the answer deep down. His vaguely manic smile snapped in two when his lips opened wide: "You still underestimate me! This is the last time, Itachi! I will show you my capacity! I will make you acknowledge me! Witness the faces of the family you killed, and suffer!"

He spun, white cloak whirling behind him.

"Kabuto! Begin the sacrifices for Edo Tensei!"

Time stood still. Sakura was horror-struck. He's mad...Sasuke took control of the village to attain enough human sacrifices to...oh my god, he plans to use Orochimaru's Impure World Resurrection to reanimate the Uchiha clan!

The pieces of the puzzle began to fall into place, a visual illusion that appears to be one thing until you tilt your head and realize its also something else entirely. Something grotesque. The virus didn't have any negative effects because Sasuke's only goal was control over the citizenry in preparation for this moment. Everything had to appear normal to prevent outside interference from both Konoha's enemies and allies alike, so of course Kabuto deliberately avoided infecting other villages. After gaining control three years ago, had he spent the rest of the time hunting for Itachi? Gathering samples from Uchiha corpses? But Edo Tensei wouldn't truly revive the Uchiha clan...Sasuke must have chosen it as a kind of karmic justice, to force Itachi to face down the family he killed, and be killed by them in turn...at Sasuke's will.

Kabuto began a series of seals. Snapping out of her stupor, Sakura twisted in her bonds and locked gazes with him. He didn't collapse, but he sagged where he stood, eyes glazed behind his glasses.

Sasuke appeared from nowhere, knocking Sakura over. Itachi caught her before she hit the ground and slit the ropes with a kunai to free her. Sasuke pressed his palm to Kabuto and released a pulse of chakra strong enough to shatter Sakura's illusion.

Kabuto blinked, shaking his head. Sasuke turned icy eyes to him. "She can perform genjutsu without seals now. You're careless, don't get caught again. I will deal with my brother. Kill her quickly so you can start the jutsu."


Sakura didn't have time to interfere; Kabuto was on her like a senbon to a bullseye. She narrowly spun out of the way of his chakra scalpel. His leg rushed at her face. She caught it in her hand, injecting chakra to sever his Achilles' tendon with a wet pop. Kabuto backflipped on one foot.

"Those tricks won't work against me. You're not the only medic-nin in the world, Sakura-san." He smiled as his ankle glowed green, repairing itself automatically. Sakura charged, chakra-enhanced fists flying at his head with enough power to bring down a building.

"Why are you helping him? What is his revenge to you?" she growled between blows.

Kabuto laughed, dancing around her attacks. "I care nothing for his vengeance. As a scientist, however, I would be remiss to pass up the opportunity to acquire hundreds of copies of the Sharingan from throughout history. Just think of studying its evolution." He dodged a particularly vicious swipe. "The clan is so old, it took years to locate all the corpses and collect their DNA...but
I'd say it was well worth it in the end. Aren't you interested in the theory behind it?"

Sakura balked. "That's not science, that's perversion!" Kabuto's laughter cut off when her knuckle glanced off his solar plexus, shattering it. He backpedaled to give it a chance to heal.

"And you know nothing of perversion? You're no innocent kunoichi, Sakura-san."

"That may be true, but at least I'm not a tool for madmen! I'm ruled by my bonds with others! That's what it means to be loyal, Kabuto, but you wouldn't understand!" she cried, hurling a rain of kunai at him.

"Ignorance," he hissed, deflecting her barrage easily. "I was loyal too, once. But what happens when death severs those bonds? What then, Sakura-san? Would you be so different from myself? Or even Sasuke?"

"I am not the same as you!" Sakura roared, taking advantage of the distance to make seals. "I have many loyalties — complicated ones — because I make bonds easily! I will fight to the death for them, but should I lose one, I will always make more! My bonds aren't a curse of dependency, they're my strength as a shinobi!" The rocky ground reared up to swallow his legs, distracting him while she heated the water in his blood to a boiling point.

Kabuto scoffed, making seals of his own. The earth released his feet while heat escaped his body as steam. It evaporated off his skin with a hiss, leaving white salt deposits all over him like freckles.

"You forget I'm a water and earth user like yourself. You'll have to be more creative than that." He bit his thumb and pressed it to the rock. "Kuchiyose no jutsu!"

A giant two-headed snake appeared. One head lunged at Sakura, deadlier than a lightning strike. She rolled out of the way, but the other head came after her even faster. Foot encased in stone armor, she smashed it against the descending fang, knocking it out of the creature's mouth. The rock shield dissolved where it contacted the venom. The snake hissed in pain. Sakura was caught off-guard when its tail swung around from behind, crashing into her back. The blow launched her through the air; she slammed into the side of the library, ribs shattering on impact. Blood poured from the back of her skull. She didn't have time to heal it, for the serpent struck again.

Sakura barely ducked in time. The fangs of both heads sank deep in the wall above her; venom dripped down the plaster and burned a hole in her cloak. Sakura didn't hesitate. She unsheathed her ninjatou from the holster strapped to her back and swung, lopping off both heads where they joined the main body. Blood spurted from the serpent's neck like water from a firehose.

She back-flipped out of the way of the falling body, broken ribs crunching together like glass. She reached out to heal herself but was interrupted by Kabuto's chakra scalpel swinging past her ear. She swerved, punching through the wall of the library. It teetered, collapsing on him.

Sakura took advantage of the break to heal the worst of the damage while he extricated himself from the rubble. He was bruised and bleeding, but his skin glowed with healing chakra, and in no time at all he was intact again.

"Don't you get it? You can't hurt me. I'll just regenerate indefinitely as long as I have chakra." He flung poisoned scalpels at her.

Sakura called forth a rock shield to catch the deadly instruments. She hurled the boulder in Kabuto's direction, forcing him to leap out of the way. She used the opportunity to lift the snake summon's
corpse by its tail and swung the massive body at him. He was crushed under its coils.

Sakura dug through her hip pouch, knowing she had little time. His regenerative powers were like none she'd ever seen before. She had to do something that would damage him in a way he couldn't repair quickly. Her hand closed around a tiny glass vial just as Kabuto reappeared. He frowned at her, adjusting his glasses.

"This is getting boring, Sakura-san. I thought you might have some talent, but even I can be wrong occasionally." He hurled graphene-reinforced steel wires at her, so thin and sharp they were nearly invisible. One wire wrapped around Sakura's legs, another her wrists, and a third her neck. She fell to her knees as Kabuto approached.

"Not even your super strength can break those. Struggle and you'll behead yourself," he mused. He looked down at her, grabbing her neck and pressing the wire into her throat, drawing blood. He leaned over. "What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?"

Sakura spat. The glass vial hidden in her mouth shattered across Kabuto's glasses. Manda's purple venom seeped into his eyes, burning his skin and making its way into his bloodstream.

Kabuto shrieked and recoiled, clutching his face. He pumped chakra into his eyes furiously, trying to extract the poison. Sakura wiggled, dislodging a kunai from her pouch. She picked it up in her teeth and cut her wrists free, then her neck and knees.

She looked around for Itachi. He and Sasuke were engaged in a ferocious mix of taijutsu and genjutsu. Itachi fought with the scorching ferocity of fire, but Sasuke's flames burned cold with hatred. Blood ran down Itachi's cheeks like tears, though Sasuke looked worse for the wear. He was favoring his left side, and probably had cracked ribs. If he wasn't careful, he could puncture his lungs. His eyes glittered as he launched a Katon at Itachi the size of a house.

Sakura doused it with a tidal wave, unable to hold her tongue any longer despite Itachi's wishes. The situation was careening out of control. "Stop this insanity, Sasuke! Itachi is not the man you think he is!" she cried, sprinting towards them.

Sasuke whirled on her, blazing eyes beyond the reach of reason. "I said stay out of my way." He was on her faster than she could blink, sword poised over her head.

Itachi shoved her aside, taking the blade himself. It bit deep into his shoulder, but he didn't cry out.

"How dare you?!" Sasuke exploded, sawing the blade back and forth in Itachi's wound. Itachi grimaced, grabbing the sword with both hands to try to dislodge it, though he only succeeded in splitting his palms open. "How dare you protect this worthless girl! How, why?! HOW DARE YOU CARE FOR HER WHEN YOU FEEL NOTHING FOR YOUR OWN FLESH AND BLOOD!" He twisted the blade. A shout ripped from Itachi's throat as his knees buckled before Sasuke's rage.

The whole world stopped spinning when Sakura's worst fears were confirmed: the final nail in Sasuke's coffin had been her relationship with Itachi. That day he found them in the cave together — what had that looked like to him? The emotionless killer he'd assumed his brother to be for the last eleven hellish years, in bed with the former teammate who once professed to love him unconditionally. They had pushed him over the edge. She knew better than to imagine Sasuke was jealous of her affections, but she didn't put it past him to be possessive of tools, or those he considered his. No, his every action screamed with the agony of rejection by the one person who's bond he could not sever. Whether in love or in hatred, Itachi had always been Sasuke's most important person. He misunderstood everything, and it was all their fault. The weight in her belly growing heavy with determination, Sakura realized it was their responsibility to deal with the demon
their actions had created.

Sakura's rock-encased boot connected with the side of Sasuke's face. He arced through the air. She knelt and tore the sword from Itachi's shoulder, pressing her palms against the bleeding, trying to hold his ragged flesh together. She had just gotten the skin knit together again when a blow knocked her away. Cold fingers bit into her scalp as she was yanked to her feet by her hair.

Sasuke's open palm met her cheek. Her head snapped around, face stinging. She stared in open-mouthed shock, unable to comprehend his action. He slapped her again. He grabbed her throat and spun them around to face Itachi, who was climbing laboriously to his feet.

"If she's so important to you, let's see how you fare against her. Suffer as I have suffered!"

Sasuke turned the black pinwheels of the Sharingan on Sakura. She felt her body go numb as she lost control of her muscles. To her horror, her hand reached for the ninjatou strapped to her back of its own accord. She unsheathed it with the deadly ring of steel against metal.

She flew at Itachi. He ducked, narrowly avoiding a beheading. Trapped in her own body, Sakura could only watch in gut-wrenching turmoil as she attacked the very person she wanted to protect the most. Inner Sakura bellowed a scream of fury the likes of which Sakura had never heard before, but Sasuke's Sharingan was no Shintenshin; as with Itachi's Tsukuyomi, she could do nothing against it. Her knee connected with Itachi's vulnerable stomach, her fist smashed the collarbone she had kissed that morning. Her sword swiped at his pale, blood-spattered throat. Itachi deflected and dodged, slowed from his injuries. But he couldn't fight back properly without the fear of hurting her.

Sasuke laughed. He threw his head back and clutched his sides as his whole body shook with mirth, tears leaking from his eyes to mingle with the blood on his cheeks. "How does it feel, brother? Maybe you should just kill her. Think of what she's going through right now — if you care about her so much, why not end her torment?"

The sole of Sakura's boot smashed into Itachi's face. She felt his nose crunch sickeningly under her foot. He flew back a dozen meters, skidding across the rocky ground. His skull cracked against a boulder, bringing him to a stop.

Panicked adrenaline flooded Sakura's veins as she dashed over, straddling his limp body. Against the will of every fiber of her being, she gripped her sword handle with both hands and positioned the blade high above Itachi. She thrust.

The tip skewered him right through the stomach, sliding through his intestines like jello. Tears pooled in Sakura's unblinking eyes as she twisted the handle viciously, but her frozen expression could not reflect her anguish. Itachi coughed, blood dribbling down his chin as it poured out of his belly by the bucketful.

Sasuke's hysterical laughter rang in her ears. Her whole body burned. She pulled the ninjatou from Itachi's stomach with a squelch. To her astonishment, she raised the handle once more, positioning it above his neck. His eyes locked onto hers, expression soft.

NO! Sakura's entire being screamed, rejecting the very thought. The sword streaked through the air towards his throat —

It pierced Sakura's foot, right next to Itachi's neck. Two of her toes were sliced clean off. She shrieked, genjutsu broken by the agony.

There was no time to waste. Through the haze of pain and panic, Sakura made two seals and the
earth swallowed her and Itachi, hiding them underground. She worked frantically to quell his bleeding in the dark. She had just managed to heal the worst of his life-threatening injuries when a hand reached through the rocky soil and grabbed her braid.

Sasuke yanked her out into the light of day and tossed her aside like a ragdoll. He reached in for Itachi next, only to cry out in pain. He snatched his arm back, limp wrist dangling at an awkward angle. Itachi shot from the ground and sent Sasuke sailing with one kick. He darted after him and proceeded to pummel him senseless. Sasuke's good hand hooked Itachi's jaw, sending the older man flying off him.

Sakura could only watch as the two brothers engaged in the most furious battle she had ever witnessed. Sasuke fought like an animal, biting and tearing, using his fingernails like claws. But Itachi never ceded control. They streaked from one corner of the mountaintop to the other, clanging weapons, hurling fire and lightning at each other, leaving a path of destruction in their wake. But Itachi was more experienced and newly-healed. Bit by bit, Sasuke was losing.

"You can't defeat me!" he thundered, any humanity in his black eyes long gone. He swung his sword erratically with his left hand, clutching his broken wrist to his cracked ribs. Sakura could tell by his labored breathing that he had finally punctured a lung. He had lost his Sharingan, so he must be almost out of chakra as well. He looked around deliriously, groping for something — anything — that could help him. He spotted Kabuto's form limping towards them, finally rid of Sakura's poison. Sasuke shoved Itachi back and dashed over to him.

He muttered something to his partner too low for Sakura to hear. Kabuto nodded, wiping fluid from his scarred eyes. Sasuke hacked a lock of dark hair off his own head with a kunai, handing it to Kabuto.

Sasuke spun to face Itachi, butchered hair askance, one pupil more dilated than the other. He summoned Chidori to his fingertips. The blue lightning sparked with deadly intent. He brought his fist down—

— into his own heart.

Sakura and Itachi looked on in numbed shock as a deranged smile broke across Sasuke's bleeding lips. He fell to his knees, an ocean of scarlet cascading around him, staining his white cloak. His bottomless eyes bored into Itachi's. "I will die for the clan. I will die for your sins, Itachi. I will die to defeat you! Kabuto, DO IT!" He coughed, bile spilling from his blue lips. His body crumpled. Uchiha Sasuke fell to the floor, dead.

Sakura and Itachi were rooted to the earth. Neither could so much as blink. They stared at Sasuke's lifeless body, uncomprehending. His pale, broken form looked so small in death, like a child's.

Kabuto didn't hesitate. He unraveled a scroll and smeared Sasuke's bloody clump of hair across it. He made four seals and clapped his hands. Somewhere down in Konoha, a chakra signature snuffed out like a candle in the wind.

The corpse stirred. Sakura's blood turned to ice. She took a step back in horror. When she saw Sasuke lift his head and look at her with dead, grey eyes, she retched. Itachi convulsed beside her.

"Sasuke...what have you done?" he croaked, barely audible.

The cold body that was once Sasuke rose to his feet. He opened and closed his fists, cracking his perfect joints. All his injuries were gone. "What have I done?" he chuckled, gray eyes locked on Itachi. "I've finally surpassed you, Itachi. My chakra is limitless, I cannot be killed. I said I'd do
anything for my revenge, and I will have it!"

He hurtled towards Itachi with unholy speed. His lightning-enhanced fist tore into Itachi's side, spraying a glittering jet of crimson into the air. Sakura could smell the sizzle of flesh.

Half-blind with terror, she sprang at Kabuto, sword drawn. **Kill the source, and the ninjutsu should die as well!**

"DON'T!" Itachi's voice stopped her mid-attack. "Kill him and Sasuke will remain like this forever," he shouted as he dodged blows, clutching his side. "I'm familiar with Orochimaru's technique, the only way to counter it is to force the summoner to make the proper seals —" He was cut off when Sasuke's blade caught him in the thigh. He spun away, gasping.

"What are the seals?" Sakura called, frantic.

"Rat," Itachi bit out, parrying Sasuke's furious attacks with a kunai. "Ox, Monkey, Tiger, Dragon, and —" Sasuke grabbed Itachi by the ponytail and hurled him over the edge of the cliff, laughing. Itachi caught the ledge with his fingers, clinging with chakra. Sakura heard a crunch as Sasuke stepped on them deliberately.

Sakura whirled on Kabuto. She sought out his mind, forcing chakra into his brain. She imagined his hands moving, forming the seal for rat. He put his fists together.

"Kai!"

Sakura felt her illusion dispel with a snap. Kabuto chuckled. "Your genjutsu won't work on me anymore. I won't be caught off guard twice." His disfigured face hardened as he looked at her. "Though I owe you some payback for my torment earlier..."

Before she could blink, Kabuto was behind her, arm locked around her throat in a chokehold. His other held the pressure points in her wrists, forcibly suppressing her chakra system with his own. Sakura gagged, turning purple. She watched helplessly as Sasuke toyed with Itachi, refusing to let him climb back onto the mountaintop. A deranged lion playing with its food...Her vision darkened around the edges, and a wave of sleepiness washed over her. Her eyelids drifted shut. She wondered if this was really how things would end for them, after everything...

Suddenly, Kabuto released her. She fell to the ground, sucking air into her lungs painfully. She sat up.

She was shocked to see Kabuto looking down at her with a hand on his hip in a familiar pose. He opened his mouth to speak.

"I owe you an apology, Forehead," he said. Sakura's eyes widened. She whipped her head around. Ino's unconscious form lay on the ground a few meters away, her soul projected into Kabuto through her mind-body switch technique.

"Ino!" Sakura coughed, head spinning.

"You can thank me later. What are the seals to end this thing?"

Sakura's jaw went slack in disbelief, but somehow she found her words. "Rat, Ox, Monkey, Tiger, Dragon, and..." she glanced at Itachi, who was having his face repeatedly pounded into the cliffside by Sasuke's heel. She leaped to her feet and rocketed towards them, blade drawn. Her sword ran through Sasuke's back, the tip bursting out of his chest. She swung it around, flinging him off it and into the air. He hit the ground and skidded to a stop. She hauled Itachi back up onto level ground. He
was barely conscious, bleeding out rapidly. She gripped the sides of his face with her hands.

"Itachi! What's the final seal?"

He blinked up at her with glazed, unfocused eyes. "...boar," he wheezed, eyes closing.

"NO!" Sasuke roared, Chidori spreading across his entire body. He crackled with blue energy, a raging, human electrical storm. He hurled towards them an unholy hurricane.

"Boar. Should've guessed," Ino said with Kabuto's lips. She made the seal. "KAI!"

Sasuke froze mid-stride. An aura of light surrounded him. His grey eyes widened as he looked through them like they were no longer there. Sakura watched his expression morph as his body dissolved, bit by bit. The light grew brighter as his feet and legs disappeared, then his arms, hips, torso... For a moment, surrounded by that painful brilliance, Sakura thought she saw a flash of pure clarity cross his face —

And Sasuke was gone.

Sakura worked desperately to save Itachi. He was in more critical condition than she'd ever seen him before — he could die within a minute. She tried to repair the injuries he was bleeding out from, but it was like trying to plug the holes in swiss cheese. There were too many of them.

"Itachi! Itachi, please!" She gripped his cloak with white knuckles, tears of fear and exhaustion running down her cheeks. "Don't leave me! Not like this! Itachi!"

Ino knelt on Itachi's other side and began applying chakra to his wounds. "I'll take care of this area, you make sure he doesn't go into cardiac arrest."

Sakura gaped.

Ino glanced at her face, rolling her eyes. "Look Forehead, I don't understand why he helped Konoha, and I definitely don't understand your relationship with him or Akatsuki, but I was wrong to doubt your loyalty to our village. What's his blood type?"

She blinked in awe. "Um...AB..."

"Good," Ino said, slicing her arm open with a kunai to begin a transfusion.

Wrestling her hysteria back under control, Sakura pressed a hand to Itachi's heart, shocking it with chakra. "What made you change your mind?"

"The parade of statues that greeted me at the door was kind of a clue that something was off."

Suddenly, Itachi gasped, eyes flying open.

"Itachi!" Sakura exclaimed, heart soaring. He coughed and tried to sit up. Sakura pushed him back. "Stay the fuck down, you idiot! Do you want to die?" she barked.

"I believe you asked me that once before," Itachi slurred.

"Well, I hope your answer has changed since then."

"It has." He looked at her, eyes half-lidded. "But even so, I fear this body is not much longer for this world." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes.
"...you say the dumbest shit sometimes," Sakura bit out hoarsely, wiping her eyes with her forearm. Ino looked away. They worked in silence.

Hours later, a stabilized Itachi helped a thoroughly exhausted Sakura to her feet. She noticed the look on his face and caught his arm.

"Sasuke..." he trailed off, eyes averted. Sakura gripped his hand and pressed her forehead to his shoulder. She was shocked to see moisture running down Itachi's cheek. She reached up to wipe the tears away but only succeeded in smearing more grime across his face.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, her own tears falling to mingle with his on the dusty earth. He let her hold him in silence for a moment before finally leaning into the embrace, curling his hands into her cloak. He pressed his tear-stained face into her shoulder. Through her own haze of pain, Sakura could scarcely imagine the intensity of his. They took comfort in knowing it was at least shared.

Eventually Ino cleared her throat awkwardly. "Let's go find Tsunade-sama. The first person you revive should be the Hokage."

The unlikely trio made their way over to the Godaime's office at the Academy. They passed through the motionless streets of people along the way, but now that Sakura knew they would be walking and talking again shortly the scene wasn't so bleak...until they found Konohamaru's body. It was a miracle that Sasuke's scheme had only cost Konoha one life in the end, but at the moment Sakura found it hard to be grateful for that fact. Fresh tears welled in her eyes, but they marched on.

They found Tsunade slumped in her chair, hunched over her desk in the middle of paperwork. 

_How out of character_. Sakura shook her head. She prepped the injection site and slipped the needle into Tsunade's arm, applying the last of her chakra to speed up her circulation. A moment later, Tsunade blinked.

"Who put this paperwork here? What happened to my sake?"

She looked around at the three bloodied, battered ninja, but the Godaime Hokage did not lose her cool. She raised a dubious blonde brow.

"Why is Akatsuki in my office?"

Sakura cracked a bloody smile. "It's nice to see you again too, shishou. I'm glad you're sitting; I have a story for you that might take a while."

Sakura began.

Tsunade pinched the bridge of her nose. "Ino, I have a special assignment for you. Take Sakura's antiviral drug and go wake up the medical team. Debrief them and get them started giving injections to the village. And when you revive Eri-chan have her bring me as much alcohol as she can find."

"Uh — Eri-chan was Kabuto in disguise, actually..." Sakura pointed out.

Tsunade sighed. "Figures. She was a damn good intern." She turned to Ino. "Get Daisuke to do it, then. He never pulls his weight around here."

"Yes, Tsunade-sama." Ino took Sakura's pack and left.
"Oh," Sakura said, pulling Tsunade's ninjatou from her back. "I almost forgot, I promised to give this back to you when I took it the night I left Konoha. I know you didn't technically grant me permission to borrow it...sorry..." she trailed off, sheepish.

Tsunade crossed her arms. "Keep it. A sword belongs to the person who accomplishes things with it. All it ever did for me was collect dust on my wall."

"Thank you, shishou. I admit I've grown rather attached to it."

"I'm the one who should be thanking you. You're a hero, Sakura."

Sakura flushed. She edged closer to Itachi. "So is he."

Tsunade nodded. "Yes, Itachi has done more service to this village than should ever be requested of a human being...twice now, in fact."

Sakura's eyes widened. "So you knew?"

Tsunade scoffed. "Of course! I'm the Hokage. Do you think I'd sit here and let him stand around my office if I didn't know where his loyalty lies? The same goes for you, for that matter."

Sakura was abashed. Tsunade turned to Itachi. "What would you like to do from here? Would you be willing to continue your undercover mission?"

Itachi looked at her distantly. "Since I am unexpectedly still alive, I suppose that's the only thing left for me to do, Hokage-sama. I will dedicate the remainder of my life to Konoha by slowing Akatsuki's progress from the inside. It's the only way I know of to atone for the mistakes I've made."

Tsunade nodded. "If that's what you want, I'm all for it. Your work is invaluable to the village."

Sakura balked. She tugged discreetly on Itachi's cloak. "Itachi! You don't have to do that. Why don't you stay in Konoha with me?" she urged in a low voice.

Tsunade caught sight of Sakura's hand gripping Itachi's cloak and stood. "I can't wait any longer for that sake. I'll be back." She closed the door behind herself.

Itachi turned to Sakura with trepidation in his eyes. "Much as I would like to stay with you, Sakura, I'm afraid I can't. My place is not here."

"What? Why? Because people misunderstand you? We can fix that, if we explain the truth behind the Uchiha clan I'm sure everyone will —"

Itachi shook his head. "That is not my desire. I have no wish for the memory of my clan to be tarnished by their reality."

"But that's stupid," Sakura blurted out. "You said yourself they were power-hungry warmongers who couldn't see what was really important —"

"They were my family, Sakura." Itachi's face cowed Sakura. He exhaled, entwining his fingers in her hand. Her stomach sank to her knees at the gesture. "It's just like with Sasuke. He was wrong, but it's still my fault he's dead."

"Don't say that!" Sakura blanched. "He chose his own path, he never followed the one you wanted him to —"

Itachi just shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I still loved him. He was my little brother, and I will
mourn him forever. I think you of all people can understand."

Sakura lowered her eyes. She didn't even have the energy for more tears, and in too many ways she now felt she shared part of the burden for Sasuke's tragic fate. "He was my teammate. Of course I'll always grieve." She bit her lip and raised her eyes to Itachi's face. "But preserving their memories won't bring your clan back. If Tsunade-shishou just made an announcement —"

"Even if I wished for the villagers to know the truth, many of them wouldn't believe it. And fewer still would accept me back after so long. I have no wish to endure fearful stares in my own home." He fiddled with the Akatsuki ring on Sakura's finger. "But the biggest obstacle would be my own mentality. I have lived as a missing-nin for twelve years, Sakura. I am no longer suited to village life."

Something soft inside her shattered. "So...you're leaving?"

Itachi hesitantly wrapped his arms around her. Sakura buried her face in his chest, not caring how much blood or dirt he was covered in.

"I know I'll see you again someday. Thank you for everything, Sakura." He kissed the top of her head. "If you would, please erect a monument to Sasuke's memory. Visit it for me from time to time." Sakura was too frozen to nod, but he knew she understood.

Itachi let go of her with great reluctance. Sakura just stood there, numb, mind completely blank.

"Goodbye."

He dissolved into a thousand black crows. A feather drifted to the floor. Sakura bent to pick it up, clutching it to her chest in wide-eyed silence.

Time passed. Kabuto was tried and executed. Naruto and Kakashi were crushed when they heard the news about Sasuke. Kakashi didn't leave the cemetery for days, and Naruto disappeared for over a week. By the time Sakura and Kakashi found him sprawled atop the Hokage monument, it was clear he hadn't eaten or moved in all that time. There was crying and shouting, slapping and shaking. They reminded him that he had to keep living to become Hokage, if only to prevent the kind of hatred that led to Sasuke's tragedy from ever happening again. None of them could have done it alone, but together they mourned. The set up a memorial for Sasuke in the Uchiha compound. Ino recommended planting irises around it, because they were said to bloom most beautifully in the rain. Together, they held each other up and moved on, though they were irrevocably changed in fundamental ways.

The village was restored to normal, and Sakura should have been happy. Tsunade warned her that her crimes against other countries couldn't be erased. She had slaughtered ninja from other villages, including Konoha's allies — the innocent and guilty alike. Whether against her will or not, she had plotted and assisted in attempts to capture bijuu. She protected and healed S-class missing-nin of her own volition. She was an international criminal with enemies throughout the ninja world. In so many ways, she truly had been Akatsuki. For her protection as well as Konoha's, her days of taking missions outside the village were basically over. In fact, her shishou was doing her best to hide Sakura's existence from the world at all, declaring it a grade five crime to speak of Sakura or the virus to outsiders. And the punishment for high treason would not be pretty.

Sakura was lauded as a hero by many, though a select few never quite believed the tale. Some continued to regard her with suspicion of being undercover Akatsuki; there was more than one rumor floating around that she was the notorious murderer Uchiha Itachi's 'girlfriend.' Sakura ignored them,
choosing to enjoy her time with her reunited friends and teammates instead.

Naruto, for one, was very impressed with the changes Sakura had undergone. He marveled at her entry in the bingo book ("Sakura the Cherry Thorn? You have a nickname? Kakashi-sensei, I want a nickname too!") "How about 'Naruto the Ramen-Hungry'?" "No!"). His own training had stagnated during his time under Kabuto's control, so he was continually surprised by her power to give him what-for during sparring sessions. Kakashi too would frequently underestimated her, not knowing any of the abilities she'd acquired over the last three years. They'd taken to sparring two to one against her to compensate for any surprises she may pull...just until they learned her new style, of course. But Sakura knew she'd never feel like the useless one in the group again. On the contrary, she was one of the most powerful shinobi in Konoha now.

Sakura's relationship with Ino was unique. The blonde girl was the only person who had any idea what her time in Akatsuki had been like — and what the true nature of her relationship with Itachi had been. The bond brought them closer together (though it didn't fix Ino's bitchiness problem, nor Sakura's short temper). Ino's loyalty to her friend kept her big mouth shut for a change.

Sakura returned to work at the hospital. She still enjoyed helping others, but she was rather bored sometimes. After life as a missing-nin, paperwork and kids with colds seemed kind of mundane.

Though she was happy to be part of the village again, Sakura found herself missing the freedom and power than had come with being Akatsuki, despite the inherent ethical difficulties involved in that lifestyle. She missed Kisame's snark, and Tobi's antics, and even Deidara's rants. But most of all, she missed Itachi. Somewhere across the world, she knew he was out there, dying a little more every day...without her. The thought gnawed at the place in her heart where happiness and contentment should have been, creating an Uchiha-shaped hole.

One ordinary spring day three months later, Sakura shuffled into Tsunade's office, stack of admission forms in hand.

"Sorry I'm late shishou, I was having lunch at Ichiraku with Naruto. He was on about that new technique he invented. Wants to match it to my jutsu. You know how he gets, I couldn't escape." She rolled her eyes, hiding a smile.

Tsunade waved a hand dismissively. "It's alright. Finding a way out of a pissing contest with Naruto is like finding a blue rose in the desert."

Sakura tilted her head at her shishou, setting the papers on the desk. "I don't get it."

Tsunade raised an eyebrow at her student. "The point of the joke is that blue roses don't exist, much less in the desert, but it ruins it if I have to explain."

Sakura's forehead wrinkled. "But blue roses do exist, shishou. I used to have one."

Tsunade dropped her sake glass. It rolled across the carpet, forgotten. "And where the hell would you have gotten something like that from?"

Sakura blinked. "It was an awful ordeal, actually. Two teammates and I were hired by the Tsuchikage to steal it from a shrine in Lava Country, on this island way down south. They didn't survive the mission."

Tsunade sucked in a breath and sat down with a thump. "Wow. But...there's no way..."

Sakura's eyes narrowed. "Shishou, what?"
"Back when I was young and first learning the medical trade, I visited several tiny no-name villages in some country up north. There was a group of shamans there who spoke of a holy artifact — a Blue Rose — with incredible healing powers. It may not cure a person, depending on how sick they are, but it could potentially prolong the lifespan of even the terminally ill for five, ten, twenty years...who knows. They said it was lost centuries ago, though...what did you say happened to that rose, Sakura?"

Sakura didn't hear the question. She stared out the window of the Hokage's office. "Shishou...I have to go."

Tsunade shot her a sharp look. "Will you be back?"

Sakura glanced at her mentor in surprise. "Of course."

"Let me rephrase: are you sure you want to come back?"

Sakura gaped. "What are you saying, shishou?"

Tsunade looked at her evenly. "I may look young, but I'm an old woman, Sakura. I've seen some things in my time. I recognize a face that needs more. If Konoha can no longer offer what you're looking for, maybe you should seek elsewhere."

Sakura shifted. "But I could never abandon Konoha! What about my friends? What about you?"

Tsunade rummaged through the mess of her desk drawers for a scroll. She handed it to Sakura. "I wasn't suggesting you do. I've been thinking about this for some time now. Jiraiya could always use another Akatsuki informant, and Itachi would be safer with some backup. And since you've already infiltrated them once..."

Sakura opened the scroll, eyes skimming over the page. They grew round as saucers. "I don't understand."

"It's a top-secret, long-term, S-rank solo mission. You'd be away from the village for long stretches of time, making periodic reports on Akatsuki's activities."

"Gathering information by — ?"

"However you see fit."

"I could come back to the village — ?"

"Whenever you can get away, so long as you don't blow your cover. Jiraiya certainly comes back to pester me for dates regularly enough."

Sakura took a deep breath, hardly daring to believe. "Tsunade-shishou, I don't think I can accept this mission. I'm sure you need high quality intel, and given my personal history with Akatsuki, I don't think I could — "

Tsunade rolled her eyes. "Sakura, I am offering you this mission as a favor because you are like a daughter to me." Sakura went red. Tsunade continued without pause. "You hardly need to explain your position. Only young people think the world is black and white. Us old ladies know better." A wistful expression crossed her face. Sakura was abruptly reminded that Orochimaru had once been Tsunade's teammate — and friend. But surely Tsunade wasn't implying she understood...?

Sakura opened her mouth. Tsunade cut her off. "Don't get me wrong. As the Godaime Hokage of
Konohagakure, I am obligated to go after our enemies to the fullest extent of my resources and power. Which I do every day. Akatsuki in particular."

Sakura paled.

"But I don't necessarily require the full help and cooperation of one Haruno Sakura to do so — at least not officially. You've done enough for our village for one lifetime, I expect. Konoha shinobi have been battling their enemies since long before you were born, and will continue to do so long after you and I are both gone. Do you understand my meaning?"

Sakura swallowed, eyes shining. "Yes, shishou," she croaked, throat dry.

Tsunade stood. "Now don't cry on me Sakura. I expect you back soon enough. Go pack your things and say goodbye to your friends. Just tell them the mission is long-term and classified. Don't draw the goodbyes out for too long, you'll be seeing them whenever you can get away. Stop by the library on your way out to have Shiho brief you on our highest level encryption system."

Tsunade gathered Sakura to her chest in a hug. "Good luck, Sakura. Go find what you're looking for."

Sakura broke away, wiping her eyes. "Thank you, shishou."

"Thank me by sending Daisuke up with my sake, he's late again. Now scram, I have paperwork to avoid." Underneath the stern words, she smiled at her student.

Sakura beamed, taking the window exit.

"Honey, I'm hoooome!" Sakura called into the empty foyer of the Akatsuki base a week later.

"Sakura-san, is that you?!" Tobi bounded around the corner, sweeping her up in a bear hug.

"Tobi — air —!" She coughed. He released her with a laugh.

"It's about time, yeah. It's been boring as just a sausage-fest around here, mm," Deidara remarked in his usual bad temper. His smirk told another story, however.

"Oi! Pinkie!" Kisame called, ushering her into the living room. "Did you remember — ?"

Sakura held up a carton of beer wordlessly. Kisame thumped her on the back. "I knew we could count on you," he growled, grinning. He turned to Deidara. "I told you we were right to keep covering for her. I knew she'd be back."

Deidara rolled his eyes and grunted, but even he looked unexpectedly pleased. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Still, you're gonna have a hell of a time explaining to Leader-sama how you came down with mono, yeah. Not to mention why you couldn't cure yourself," he warned.

Her jaw dropped. "You told Leader-sama I have mononucleosis? The herpes-based kissing disease?"

"Tobi once had that for four months!"

Deidara smacked his palm to his face. "That's not the kind of thing you should brag about, you idiot."

Kisame just shrugged at her. "Well, it was either that or keep telling him you're on the rag every two
or three weeks. But we thought even Leader-sama might figure out that's not normal after a while."

Sakura's eyes bulged. She spent the next few minutes cheerfully hurling beer bottles at their heads until a rustle from behind made her turn. Her breath stopped short when she caught sight of a lean figure descending the stairs at the end of the hall.

"Sakura?" a smooth voice asked, with just a hint of incredulity.

The others scattered, grumbling, not wanting to witness the mushy reunion.

Sakura ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. She buried her face in his shirt, inhaling deeply. "I missed you," she mumbled.

Itachi held her by the small of her back. "Sakura, what are you doing here?" he murmured into her hair.

She pulled back to study his face. "I'm the new informant," she whispered conspiratorially, offering him a scroll sealed with an official Leaf insignia.

Itachi stared at her for a long moment, eyes widening. Then a smile slowly broke across his lips like dawn. Sakura's heart sang at the sight of it. "Clever," he said, pulling her close again.

Sakura luxuriated in the glowy feeling for several long moments before she remembered something critical. "Itachi, there's something we have to do — " She grabbed him by the hand and pulled him outside towards the garden.

The Blue Rose of Kurobako sat among the spring vegetables, as beautiful and perfect as it had been the day she first laid eyes on it. Carefully, she dug up the black soil and removed it, cautious of its thorns. She plucked a blue petal and pressed it to Itachi's lips.

"Swallow, please."

Bewildered, Itachi took the soft petal into his mouth and swallowed. One by one, Sakura fed him the rose petals, until there was nothing left but thorns and stem. She looked at Itachi's face.

"How do you feel?"

He stared unseeing into the distance, one hand over his heart. His lips parted in awe.

"Sakura, what was that?..." He met her eyes, not daring to hope.

Sakura broke into a million-watt grin. "Tsunade-shishou said it won't cure you, and that shaman said you'd die of your disease one day...but it should prolong your life. By how much, I don't know. But anything is better than nothing, right?"

Itachi was at a loss for words. "Sakura...how can I ever thank you?"

"Thank me by staying alive long enough to retire someday. I know of this little island in the south that is basically paradise..."

Itachi considered her. "Paradise...I never imagined there was room for me in such a place."

He kissed her.

Sakura slipped into Tsunade's office through the window. She stubbed her toes on the sill.
"Oh fuck!" She grabbed her foot, pressing chakra to her throbbing digits. At least the missing ones didn't hurt.

Tsunade shook her head, looking up from her paperwork. "Smooth move, miss S-class criminal. I'll never get used to you swearing like a sailor. You're meeting bad influences out there, Sakura."

Sakura rolled her eyes, tossing her pink braid over her shoulder. It was so long by now that she had to lift it to avoiding sitting on it. "That one I picked up long ago. I'm here to drop off the latest mission report, not get lectured, shishou."

"Saying 'hi' to your old mentor could've been included in that excuse," Tsunade said, feigning injury.

"'Hi,' shishou," Sakura smirked.

"Stop calling me that," Tsunade bristled, unrolling Sakura's scroll. "I haven't been your shishou in some time."

"You'll always be my shishou, shishou."

Tsunade tsked under her breath, eyes skimming the scroll's contents. "Hmph. Even shorter than last time. Funny how you never seem to report much intelligence on Akatsuki despite spying on them for over a year now."

"Funny how unreliable Konoha's messenger birds are when I'm trying to send the really lengthy scrolls. Maybe we should upgrade the system." Sakura raised her eyebrows.

"Sometimes I wonder whose side you're really on." Tsunade put the scroll away, hiding a smile.

Sakura grinned. "Some questions are better left unasked, shishou. Loyalties can be contagious."

— FIN —
Epilogue

The bird drifted in and about the clouds lazily. It was one of those green and yellow ones she saw every winter, when they showed up to escape whatever cold area they come from. She idly wondered if Itachi would know what species it was. Who knew where he obtained his seemingly infinite knowledge about such trivial details from, but she was grateful for it. She shifted her weight, soft sand reshuffling itself around her body to accommodate the change in her position. She should probably be getting ready soon, and she’d have a hell of a time extracting the grains from her hair, but the sun felt so good on her face that she didn’t want to move.

“Sakura.”

Her eyelids had just slipped closed when a familiar voice resonated in her ears. She blinked up into the face of her husband.

“If you fall asleep, you’ll miss him.” Amusement crinkled the corners of his black eyes, already beginning to grow fine lines from the years. The ghost of a smile tugged at his lips.

Sakura offered him a drowsy grin in return — a reflex upon seeing his face. She coaxed her uncooperative limbs into a sitting position. “Caught me again, huh?”

He chuckled, offering a hand to help her to her feet. He tried to brush the sand from her shoulders, but it was a rather hopeless endeavour. “For a shinobi, you’re not very stealthy. A blind man could spot you napping in the middle of the beach.”

Sakura rolled her eyes, bare feet beginning their trek across the white sand towards the bamboo house at the edge of the rainforest. “I’m a what, now?”

He hummed, strolling by her side. “My apologies. Former shinobi.”

Sakura laughed and grabbed his hand, leaning up to capture his lips with hers. The kiss was slow and languid. They mapped each other’s mouths with the kind of comfortable familiarity that only tens of thousands of kisses can bring. They’d shared passionate ones, bored ones, perfunctory ones, angry ones. Sakura thought the best kind, however, were the lazy ones. Like this. She sighed into his mouth.

“Eww!” A high voice broke into their private moment. They jumped apart like criminals, caught red-handed.

A small boy of five darted across the beach like an over-exuberant whirlwind with legs. He attached himself to his mother’s knee and glared up at her with the trademark black eyes of the Uchiha clan. “Why are you guys so gross?”

Itachi suppressed a chuckle, not wanting to encourage the bad behavior. His son may have inherited his looks, but he claimed no responsibility for that spitfire of a personality. Sakura, however, had no such reservations and promptly bonked her son on the head.

“Hey, no disrespecting the parents, Itsuki. No matter how gross we are.”

The boy frowned, a challenging glint creeping into his eyes. “Or what?”

She peeled him from her leg and started back towards the house again, Itachi following. “I’m sure Uncle Naruto didn’t really want to see you after all,” she commented lightly, eliciting a gasp.
“We’re gonna visit Uncle Naru today?! Is he coming here, or are we going to Wave Country again?”

"Your mother and I are meeting him near the Great Naruto Bridge, but only well-behaved boys are allowed to visit with the Hokage,” Itachi replied seriously.

Itsuki rolled his eyes but put on his best angelic expression. “Will Aunt Hinata and Sasumi be there? How ‘bout Uncle Kaka or Auntie Pig?”

Sakura shook her head, long braid swishing behind her as she passed the iris-lined vegetable and herb gardens. She slid open the front door and stepped inside, her family trailing like oversized ducklings. And indeed, Itsuki’s short hair stuck up in back much like that of the uncle he’d never meet. Sakura ruffled her fingers through it, making him jerk away in embarrassment. He tried to flatten it out with his small palms, but it sprang right back into place as though glued there, making his parents laugh. “Just Uncle Naruto this time. Your best buddy has a mission and the others have to watch Konoha while the Rokudaime is away.”

Itsuki scowled. “Sasumi isn’t my friend! We’re rivals,” he said pointedly. He scuffed his foot against the hardwood floor of the hall, tracking sand into the house as he followed his parents into the master bedroom. Sand was an inevitable part of living on an island: it was in your food, your clothes, your shoes. Sakura stopped bothering to chastise the boy for bringing half the beach inside with him long ago; they just swept up a lot. He climbed up on the bed and started pestering the cat while he watched them get ready. “I wanna take missions too,” he grumbled.

Sakura paused in the middle of tugging a brush through her sandy hair. She and her husband exchanged a glance.

“When you’re older,” Itachi evaded with the usual excuse. In actuality, after all the difficulties he and Sakura had been through, they were unconvinced that the shinobi lifestyle was really the ideal choice for their only child — or any child, at that. Ultimately they could never interfere with his dreams and career decisions, but they still hoped to put it off for as long as possible.

“You always say that,” he grumbled. Sakura tossed a pillow at him.

“No whining. Go change into something nicer for your uncle,” she admonished with a disapproving glance at the holes in his favorite baggy shirt.

Muttering about the unfairness of the world under his breath, Itsuki scrambled off the bed and down the hall to his room. Sakura turned to Itachi with a frown, but he answered her thoughts before she spoke.

“We will cross that bridge if or when we come to it,” he reminded her. Sakura’s frown deeped. Suddenly a warm arm snaked around her waist from behind, a pair of lips brushing her curtain of hair aside to kiss the crook of her neck. His mouth trailed along her shoulder, then back up to nibble at her earlobe. Sakura hummed, partly in pleasure and partly in warning.

“Keep that up and Naruto will have eaten all the food in the restaurant by the time we get there,” she intoned, making no move to step away.

“I wasn’t really hungry anyway,” Itachi mused, sliding his hands up her shirt. “Were you?”

“Maybe not for ramen,” she replied archly, grasping his arms around her and guiding him to the bed with a smirk.

They were late, of course. By the time they stepped through the crowded dining room of Ichiraku II
(the newest branch in Wave Country, built partly to accommodate a certain infamous fan’s request),
the Rokudaime was halfway through his second bowl of pork ramen.

“Uncle Naru!” Itsuki burst out, a black-haired blur shooting through the waitresses’ legs in his haste
to get to his favorite uncle.

“Itsuki!” Naruto chuckled, dropping his busy chopsticks to open his arms wide for his godchild.
Itsuki scrambled into them without pause. Naruto shot a knowing look over the boy’s shoulder at his
tardy parents. “And look who’s finally here. Honestly Sakura-chan, ever since you retired you’re
nothing like your old punctual self.” He offered a similarly amused glance at her husband. “You too,
Itachi-san. Which of you is rubbing off on the other?”

Itachi raised his eyebrows slightly. “Naruto-kun, I believe it was Kakashi-san who first ingrained that
particular habit into my wife, who then passed it onto me,” he intoned with his serious face, earning
himself a playful swat.

Though Naruto and Itachi had been like family for years, the blonde never quite managed to drop the
honorific. Itachi too seemed only able to think of the other man as ‘Naruto-kun.’ Once upon a time,
their friendship would have seemed like an utter impossibility to Sakura. But after she and Itachi left
Akatsuki twelve years ago and quit service to Konoha, Itachi had eventually relented in his wish to
be close-mouthed about the true nature of the Uchiha massacre (at least with a select few of her
friends, anyway). It had taken lots of yelling, major shifts in perspective, and time, but eventually
Sakura’s closest friends had come to accept Itachi — and her relationship with him. It wouldn’t have
been possible at all without Tsunade’s support and patient explanations.

Now Sakura and Itachi met with Naruto (or a clone, or one of his trustworthy envoys...if anyone
could call Kakashi ‘trustworthy’) once or twice a month to have lunch and act as unofficial advisors
to the Hokage. As per the usual, they ordered (miso ramen for Sakura, vegetarian for Itachi. Itsuki
wanted pork ramen like Uncle Naruto of course) and dove straight into business right away so they
could enjoy the remainder of the day together. They discussed the upcoming chuunin exams, and the
tension with Lightning Country. Secluded as they were on their island home, Sakura and Itachi were
ill-informed of the goings-on in the world outside of their private bubble. But as a diligent Hokage,
that never stopped Naruto from asking. They gave him all the news from the coastal area and the
south that they could, and stuck with subjects they were familiar with, like what genjutsu to test the
chuunin with.

“Any word on Akatsuki’s movement?” Naruto inquired between bites, a little too casually. They
shot him two identical flat looks.

“Hey, hey, it never hurts to ask!” he backtracked with a laugh.

Truth be told, they hadn’t really known what was going on in Akatsuki for a long time now (not that
they necessarily would’ve told Naruto about it even if they had). Before leaving, they took personal
side missions for a few years to accumulate enough wealth to live comfortably on for a good long
time. Eventually they decided they’d had enough of the tenuous moral difficulties of that lifestyle.
They’d spent years trying to pay for their sins against Sasuke and the innocent lives they’d taken
through service to Konoha and the ninja world, working to slow Akatsuki and prolong peace. That
mission was never-ending, but after bearing the hardship of the world on their shoulders for so long,
even they concluded it was time to pursue some personal happiness. They disappeared one day with
the blessings of Kisame, Tobi, and Deidara.

Even if they hadn’t been experts at vanishing into shadow by then, Akatsuki never seemed to pursue
them terribly hard. With their friends still responsible for the majority of the organization’s footwork,
it wasn’t surprising that they conveniently never picked up their trail. When it became clear that Itachi
and Sakura were not going to spill any major secrets and just wanted to be uninvolved with politics, Leader-sama must have decided to leave well enough alone, like he had when Orochimaru defected before them. A few years later, after Itsuki had been born, they received a surprise message on the back of a shark from Water Country. Ever since then they’d met periodically with their old comrades to catch up on things, though they never talked business. Kisame in particular was enamoured with Itsuki, christening him ‘little hellion,’ (and earning himself a warning look from Itachi each time he used it).

Sakura was jolted out of her thoughts by a tug on her sleeve. “Mommy, I’m sleepy,” Itsuki mumbled, rubbing his eyes. She laughed, scooping the boneless child off his uncle’s lap and into her own. He rested a heavy head on her shoulder.

“That’s just because you ate all that ramen. Take a nap now so you have energy to play with Uncle Naruto later.” She really needn’t have said anything though, because within moments he was drooling on her shirt. The soft looks the other two men gave her son warmed her heart.

The three old friends continued their meals and conversation, sharing a few carafes of sake between them (though it was Naruto and Sakura who did most of the drinking; some things never changed). By the time they finished there were contented smiles all around. Itachi cradled the limp body of his son as Sakura and Naruto squabbled over who would pay the bill, neither realizing Itachi had already left a generous amount on the table until he began walking out. They hurried after him, happy bickering shifting to another topic.

Itsuki woke up halfway home, full of energy and demanding his uncle race him the rest of the way. Still competitive as ever, Naruto complied, sparing no mercy on the boy just because he was a child with legs a quarter of the length of his own.

Itachi and Sakura took their time on the return trip, strolling across the waves towards the island hand in hand. Their boat was still docked at the mainland, so they could only assume Naruto had piggybacked his godson across. The sun was sinking over the water in a glorious blaze of red and gold, and as Sakura gazed at it she reflected that there was little else she wanted from life at this point. Itachi was still sick, and she knew he’d disappear some day. In reality, the same could be said of anyone’s husband; with Itachi the immediate truth of it was just a little more certain. In some ways it was a good thing, because it allowed them to appreciate today with an intensity couples rarely got to enjoy. For now, his hand was warm and strong in hers, and that was all that mattered.

They arrived home just as the stars were beginning to come out, faint pinpricks of light against the velvet backdrop. Naruto had managed to teach Itsuki to walk on water in the space of half an hour. His parents just shook their heads, because of course Naruto wouldn’t be the one who’d have to deal with a ridiculously advanced five year old now free to get into mischief off their island in addition to on it. Sakura conked both troublemakers on their heads, earning a laugh from the big one and an indignant hiss from the small one. They chatted until it was long past Itsuki’s bedtime. Eventually Naruto said he had to be getting back home to Hinata and Sasumi. They hugged goodbye, and Naruto disappeared in a grinning puff of smoke.

Itsuki knew he was in trouble. “I’m not sleeeeeepy!” he declared, taking off down the beach at a run. His father appeared in his path and promptly slung the protesting boy over his shoulder. “Bed,” he stated in no uncertain terms.

That night Sakura lay under the sheets in that hazy twilight state halfway between sleep and wakefulness. Itsuki was snoring peacefully in his room down the hall, the cat was curled up at her feet, and the familiar body of her husband lay beside hers. A feeling of deep tranquility settled over the ex-kunoichi. She rolled onto her side and wrapped an arm around Itachi, who unconsciously
pulled her closer. The comforting sound of waves washing onto shore drifted in through the open window, mixing with his quiet breathing and lulling her towards sleep. She’d like nothing more than to wake up tomorrow to another day like today. Just another day in paradise...

She drifted off.

-fin-

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